

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

PROXY WAR

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **PROXY WAR**

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Piracy threatens to engulf shipping close to the Romulan Neutral Zone when pirate vessels are found to be equipping themselves with advanced weaponry that they should not have access to. It falls to the crew of the *USS Nightfall* to track these weapons back to their supplier and cut off the flow of arms to criminals...

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2. Fleet of Ghosts
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4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
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i.

Stardate 67749.7. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol along the Romulan Neutral Zone.

When Lieutenant Jenna West, chief operations manager of the *USS Nightfall* entered the officers' lounge she spotted the commanders of the two companies of ground troops sat near the forward windows and waved at them.

"Gary. Shry." she called out and the two officers, a MACO and an Andorian Imperial guardsman looked toward her and beckoned her to their table.

"Jenna." MACO Captain Gary Heart said as she arrived at their table and sat down, "I didn't think the current duty shift ended for another hour yet."

"It doesn't." West replied and Shry smiled.

"You took the test again didn't you?" he asked and West nodded. For a long time she had been attempting to pass the Starfleet Bridge Officer's Test. This would see her promoted to lieutenant commander and qualified to take command of a starship. However, though she had taken the test repeatedly she had failed to pass it, no matter how well prepared she had considered herself.

"So how did it go?" Heart said, "Do you think Commander Cole's coaching paid off?"

Lieutenant Commander Cole was the *Nightfall's* chief of security and also its second officer. After West's last failure to pass the test the *Nightfall's* commanding officer, Captain Edwards, had instructed Cole to coach her as he had done for the ship's Vulcan science officer T'Lan.

"I don't know." West answered, "I think I did okay but I've felt this way before. Everything seems fine and then it turns out that I messed up on something or even missed out a whole chunk of the test."

What West did not mention was that she now believed her failures to be the result of an alien intelligence residing within her. This ancient example of the Iconian species had repeatedly taken control of her body while she slept, leaving her still heavily fatigued while awake and at other times had compelled her or attempt to compel her to act against the rest of the crew. The existence of this alien intelligence was something that West had kept secret from her crew mates, despite the friction its activities had caused between her and them at times.

"So if you do pass does it mean that T'Lan gets to tell you that you only managed it because Cole helped you cheat?" Shry commented and West winced, remembering her encounter with T'Lan following the Vulcan's promotion in which she effectively accused her of cheating at the test because of her romantic relationship with Cole. However, before she could respond the table was approached by a white haired man wearing a Starfleet science division uniform with the rank pins of a full commander on his collar.

"Where is he?" Doctor Henry King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer said suddenly and it was obvious that the doctor was not in a very good mood at all.

"It might help if you told us who you were-" Heart began.

"Who else?" King interrupted, "That utter cretin of a ship's counsellor. Lieutenant Mackey. Have any of you seen him? West?"

Lieutenant Mackey was not popular with the rest of the *Nightfall's* crew and with West in particular. Having come aboard the ship after being rescued from a Cardassian prison facility she had been ordered to see the counsellor regularly to make sure that there was no lasting psychological damage. However, Lieutenant Mackey had constantly refused to end the counselling sessions even after several years.

"Don't look at me." West replied, holding up her hands, "It's bad enough he makes me see him twice a week still. I stay as far away from him as I can apart from that."

"What's he done now?" Shry asked.

"It's what he hasn't done that's the problem." King said, "The idiot can't even run a Turing Test it seems."

"Emma." West said and King nodded.

"Exactly. When T'Lan and Max built our EMH a physical body out of that synthetic flesh I knew this was going to happen eventually. The captain ordered Mackey to put her through a Turing Test regularly to check whether she had expanded beyond her basic programming and become self aware. Well just decided to take a look at the results of these tests to see how close she is to passing them and it turns out she's been legally self aware for the past four months. Mackey however, marked her as failing every test." the doctor explained.

"So what does this mean?" West asked.

"It means we might a new EMH." King told her, "Emma now has to be classified as a living being and she decides to quit she's allowed to. Oh it also means that if I get my hands on Mackey we might need a new ship's counsellor because I'll have skinned our current excuse for one alive."

Before West or either of the military officers could respond to King's threat against the counsellor the voice of a young woman was heard over the intercom.

"Yellow alert. All crew to emergency stations."

"Looks like Nikki's got your job down to fine art lieutenant." Heart commented as he picked up his glass and then quickly gulped down the remains of his drink.

"Well she did have a good teacher." West replied, smiling as she stood up to leave, "Me."

"I better go and get sickbay ready." King said, "Though if any of you find out where Mackey is hiding then let me know."

When she arrived on the bridge West made her way straight to her position at ops. While she had been gone her place had been covered by Nikki Carr, the daughter of the *Nightfall's* first officer Commander Grace Carr. Though she was not a true Starfleet officer Nikki had undertaken an internship aboard the *Nightfall* and was currently in her operations rotation. However, with West now available to resume her duties Nikki got up to allow the woman to take her place. As she sat down West donned a headset that provided her with a heads up display in addition to her console and also allowed her to interact with the *Nightfall's* controls using hand gestures even when away from her station. Such headsets were worn by all of the cruiser's command staff.

"Target vessel ahead captain. Distance point five of a light year." Lieutenant Commander Hamilton, the ship's helmsman announced just as West was studying her console to bring herself up to speed with the reason for the yellow alert.

It took only a few seconds for West to see that the *Nightfall's* sensors had picked up another vessel in the area. This appeared to have limited power and was adrift.

"Lieutenant West, is the ship still putting out the distress signal we picked up earlier?" Captain Edwards asked, confirming the reason for the yellow alert. This status would enable the crew of the *Nightfall* to undertake rescue operations rapidly if the stricken vessel needed to be evacuated.

"Negative captain." West replied, "I'm not picking up any significant emissions. In fact they don't appear to have mains power at all. They aren't broadcasting an identification signal either."

"I am picking up lifeforms aboard the ship captain." T'Lan said from the science station.

"How many?" Edwards asked.

"It is difficult to tell." T'Lan replied, "The ship's hull appears to be made of a unusually dense material."

"I think it's an asteroid mining ship captain." Hamilton said, "It's hull will be armoured against impacts."

"That would explain my readings captain." T'Lan added.

"Try hailing them." Carr said.

"Yes commander." West replied as she reached out to activate the *Nightfall's* communications, "Attention unidentified vessel, this is the Federation starship *USS Nightfall*. Respond." she then waited a few seconds for a reply before signalling again, "This is the *USS Nightfall*. Respond." but again there was no reply from the mining ship.

"They either can't or won't respond." Cole said from the tactical station located behind Edwards and Carr.

"In either case we need to be ready to put an away team aboard." Edwards said and he looked at Carr,

"Commander put your team together. Be prepared to supply technical and medical assistance if you need it. You have about two hours before we get there."

"Yes captain." Carr said, nodding and then she got up to leave the bridge.

As the *Nightfall* closed in on the mining ship it dropped out of warp and held position almost a million kilometres away. On the bridge an image of the mining ship filled the main view screen but this offered a view from one side only and rather than take the cruiser closer without having the best possible information available Captain Edwards' plan was to use a fighter patrol to circle around the ship at close range so that the far side could be inspected as well.

"In position now captain. Range nine hundred and eight four thousand kilometres." Hamilton reported and Edwards nodded.

"Lieutenant West, give the order." the captain said.

"Bridge to Snowman." West said over the intercom, using the call sign of the leader of the fighter squadron attached to the *Nightfall*, "Scramble. Scramble. Scramble."

"Confirmed *Nightfall*. Launching now." Lieutenant Commander William White, also known as Snowman responded and seconds later a pair of Peregrine-class attack fighters sped out of the Akira-class cruiser's forward hangar door, "Okay Drummer, stay close to me." White transmitted to his wingman, "This is a simple observation run."

"Confirmed Snowman, sensors prepped for recording." the other pilot responded as the two fighters raced towards the mining ship.

As the two tiny craft neared the mining ship it became visible to the pilots through their canopies in addition to the massively magnified image on their targeting displays. The mining ship was just over half the approximately five hundred metre length of the *Nightfall* and consisted of a central core that mounted a phaser array designed to break apart large asteroids to permit the miners to more easily reach the ores deep inside while refining equipment and storage modules were located in detachable pods along each side. An

impulse engine at the very rear of the ship and a pair of warp nacelles mounted on the upper hull provided propulsion for the mining ship but all of these were dark and cold according to the fighters' scans of the ship. From the side of the mining ship facing the *Nightfall* and the two fighters as they flew towards it the mining ship appeared undamaged. However, as the fighters circled around the drifting vessel they saw a hole in the hull towards the rear of the central core that exposed the engineering section.

"*Nightfall* are you seeing this?" White asked, knowing that the feed from his sensors was being transmitted straight back to the *Nightfall*.

"Confirmed Snowman." Edwards replied, "Can you see any signs of life?"

"Hang on *Nightfall*, I'm just getting to the prow." White said and then he smiled as he saw a view port located between two of the storage modules that was illuminated and through this he saw the shape of a person moving, "*Nightfall* I have signs of life aboard the ship. I'm going to try making contact."

Bringing his fighter to a halt relative to the mining ship, white turned it directly towards the viewport and then triggered the powerful spotlight array that was mounted beneath the nose of his fighter, pulsing it at regular intervals so that the light from it shone directly through the viewport. Exactly what effect this had White could not be certain but he saw the figure he had seen through the viewport rush away. Then a few seconds later his communication system came to life.

"Starfleet vessel, this is the mining ship *Latinum Heart* out of Draken Four. We have suffered an explosion on our engine room."

"Understood *Latinum Heart*, this is Lieutenant Commander White of the *USS Nightfall*. We picked up your distress beacon. Stand by to receive an away team."

"Err, we have everything in hand commander. We require no assistance." the voice from the mining ship said and White switched his communications so that he had a private channel to the *Nightfall*.

"*Nightfall* did you hear that?" he asked, "What sort of commercial vessel gets disabled out here and doesn't want a tow from a Starfleet vessel?"

"Yes we heard it." Edwards responded, "Doesn't sound too promising does it? Tell them the team is on its way."

"Yes captain." White said before switching back to the channel the disabled mining ship was using, "Negative *Latinum Heart*. Your vessel is a hazard to navigation. Prepare to be boarded."



Aboard the *Nightfall*, Carr and her away team were preparing to beam over to the *Latinum Heart*. In addition to herself, Carr had selected Doctor King, T'Lan and one of the *Nightfall's* engineers, a junior lieutenant named Carstairs to join her to provide medical and technical support. In addition to the primary team members a pair of security guards would also be beaming over with them as an added precaution. There was no specific evidence that the crew of the mining ship would be hostile but their attempt to refuse help was suspicious and having security staff escort senior officers was not unusual. The away team made its way onto the transporter pad while a Borg watched them from the control console. Freed from the collective many years earlier Lieutenant Maximillian, known more commonly as Max, was now the *Nightfall's* chief engineer and was responsible for the development of many of the technologies used in the unconventional ship.

"I can join you as soon as you wish Commander Carr." Max said and Carr smiled at him.

"Thanks for the offer Max, but you know how people react when they see a Borg. Even an ex-Borg." she said.

"Quite." Max replied before he looked down at the console in front of him and added, "I have a lock on the *Latinum Heart's* transporter room." and Carr nodded.

"Energise." she said.

Without replying Max reached out and activated the *Nightfall's* transporter.

The transporter room aboard the *Latinum Heart* had a much cruder appearance than the one aboard the *Nightfall*. On the mining ship many of the access panels always kept closed aboard the Starfleet cruiser had been left open so that the crew could easily get to the circuitry behind them and this looked as if it had been repeatedly repaired using non-standard parts, giving it a heavily improvised appearance.

"I am Commander Carr. First officer of the *USS Nightfall*." Carr said as she stepped off the transporter pad, looking at the three miners standing beside the control console that looked as crudely maintained as the other components in the transporter room, "Who is your captain?"

"I am." one of the miners, a muscular man who looked as if he normally shaved his head but at the moment had a few days worth of stubble covering both his jaw and the top of his head, "My name is Jon Tall."

"Captain Tall," T'Lan said as she followed Carr from the transporter pad, "I can count five violations of transporter safety practices with the equipment in this room just from a visual inspection."

"Yes well we don't use it." Tall replied, "We use airlocks to get workers outside and ore inside. Then when we offload the refined ore we just detach the storage pods and swap them for empty ones. It's only now that you've shown up to stick your noses in that we've activated this unit."

"I'm surprised you aren't more appreciative of our help captain. Most people wouldn't want to break down this close to the Neutral Zone." Doctor King commented, "There's been a massive rise in pirate activity in this area of space. Now do you have any injured?"

"We do." Tall said, answering King's question but ignoring the rest of his statement. Then he looked at one of the other two miners present, a tall man who, unlike the ship's captain, had a head full of hair that came down to his shoulders, "Olaf, show him to sickbay."

"Harper go with them." Carr said and one of the two security guards from the *Nightfall* nodded before following King and the miner out of the room. Then Carr looked at Captain Tall again, "Captain, perhaps you could show the rest of us to your engine room and we can take a look at the damage."

"Of course. Come this way." Tall replied.

The captain of the mining ship then led the rest of the *Nightfall's* away team towards the back of the damaged vessel. The transporter room was located roughly midway along the ship's central core and a large primary corridor running for the entire length of this made getting to the engineering section easy. Along the way the Starfleet officers noticed more open access covers and seemingly improvised repairs rather than the use of the ideal replacement parts.

"Why have you not replicated the correct parts to keep your systems operating Captain Tall?" T'Lan asked.

"Replicators are complicated machines." Tall replied, "Ours failed a long time ago and it's always been easier to adapt what parts we could get hold of for essential systems than fix luxuries like replicators. Here's engineering."

Tall had to manually open the door to engineering rather than it opening automatically upon the group's approach. Entering the room on the other side they found themselves in a compartment that was filled with machinery that, like everything else they had seen aboard the ship so far appeared to be a motley collection of different technologies all rigged to work together.

"That's my chief of engineering." Tall said, pointing to where a man was being helped into a bulky space suit by two others, "He'll explain what's gone wrong. Now I need to be going. We're behind schedule and I need

to contact our backers.”

Tall and the other miner to have accompanied the Starfleet team to engineering then turned and left the room, with Tall closing the door behind them. As soon as the door was shut the other miner looked back towards it briefly before looking at Tall.

“I don't like leaving them in there.” he said, “Starfleet shouldn't be anywhere near this ship.”

“Calm down.” Tall told him, “Chase will keep them occupied. All of the damage was confined to that section so none of them have any reason to go wandering elsewhere and poking their noses into things that don't concern them.”

“What about the doctor?” the miner asked and Tall snorted.

“That old man?” he responded, “I'm sure he'll be kept busy enough in sickbay. Besides, what do you think a doctor would know about running a starship?”

“The name's Chase.” the *Latinum Heart's* chief engineer said, staring at Carr, “I keep this ship running.”

“Then it seems that you have been remiss in your duties.” T'Lan commented and she unfolded her tricorder and began to scan the room.

“Hey, what's she doing?” Chase demanded, “I haven't given you permission to conduct any scans in here.”

“Mister Chase there's no need to be alarmed.” Carr said, “Lieutenant Commander T'Lan is just trying to figure out the extent of the damage to your ship. Now if you could just explain to us what happened then I'm sure we can get you moving again.”

Chase snorted, still staring at T'Lan before he turned to look at Carr.

“A plasma conduit burst in that compartment over there.” he replied, pointing towards a closed door that had bright yellow tape across it to indicate that there was hard vacuum on the other side, “I had two people inside at the time and they both got blown out into space. If we hadn't been able to beam them back in then they'd be dead by now. The blast extended into here as well and injured another half dozen of my people.”

“I thought your ship's transporter was not considered usable.” T'Lan said when she heard this and Chase hesitated before he responded.

“It isn't usually.” he said, “But it was a matter of life and death so we took the chance.”

“That's a big chance to take.” Carr said, “An unstable transporter can do terrible things to people.”

“You do things how you want on your fancy ship. But here we'll do things our way.” Chase said.

“Strange.” T'Lan said suddenly, “The power conduits over here are significantly over specified. In fact all of the power distribution system seems to be capable of channelling significantly greater power than a ship of this class normally requires.”

“Yeah, we got hold of parts meant for a larger ship so we upgraded the system for extra redundancy.” Chase said.

“The material content is unusual as well. I do not believe that the parts are of Federation manufacture.” T'Lan added as she walked towards the mining ship's impulse drive housing, “It would appear that they are Romulan.”

“So what?” Chase asked.

“So the Romulans aren't known for exporting starship parts.” Carr pointed out.

“Well with that civil war of theirs going on I guess someone decided to break the habit of a lifetime.” Chase said, “Because the supply depot we got this stuff from had loads of this kit.”

“It's Romulan alright.” Lieutenant Carstairs added as he examined a nearby plasma conduit, “I can see the maker's marks right here and the script is Romulan.”

Carr nodded.

“Do you think this ship can be fixed or do we need to take it in tow?” Carr asked.

“Oh it's fixable commander.” Carstairs replied, “We'll need more than a few new parts mind you and some of them may need physically fabricating rather than replicating. I doubt we've got the Romulan patterns we need in our database.”

“Okay then.” Carr replied, “Start compiling a list of everything you need and get it sent back to Max. He'll be able to take care of the manufacturing side of things.”

“Come with me.” Chase told the Starfleet engineer, “I'll show you what we already have.” and the two men then began to walk away. Watching this, Carr noticed Chase look back over his shoulder and glare at her for a moment.

“T'Lan none of this feels right.” Carr said softly to the Vulcan woman.

“I concur commander.” she replied, “Though I do not base my assessment on potentially misleading feelings. There are significant gaps in the logic of this situation.”

“Such as?” Carr asked.

“Firstly this vessel is in a poor state of repair and the level of improvisation I have seen in its repairs would seem to preclude obtaining an operating licence from the Federation.” T'Lan began.

“Perhaps. But we both know that there are a lot of ships operating out here on the fringes of Federation space that don't have proper licences.” Carr pointed out.

"Quite." T'Lan replied, "However, as engineer Chase confirmed my tricorder scans have indicated that the power distribution system of this ship has been greatly enhanced."

"So what?" Carr said.

"If the cause of the accident was a plasma conduit failing then it must have been exposed to a greater amount of power than it was capable of handling. Something that should not have been possible given the enhanced capacity unless—"

"Unless there's something on this ship that draws a lot more power than anything here is supposed to." Carr interrupted.

"Precisely commander. I suggest that we conduct a search of this vessel." T'Lan said.

"That could be tricky." Carr said, "What excuse do we use?"

"We need no excuse commander. Might I remind you that there is still a trade embargo between the United Federation of Planets and all worlds within what was known as the Romulan Star Empire? The components used in this ship are prohibited."

Carr sighed.

"That's not good enough T'Lan." she said, "I don't want to make the crew suspicious. They need to think that they've got us completely fooled."

There were eight injured miners in sickbay. Six of them had suffered blast damage and burns from the explosion in engineering while the final two had been exposed to the vacuum of space for a short time and needed urgent treatment to repair their damaged lungs.

"This equipment is useless!" King exclaimed as he searched through the *Latinum Heart's* medical supplies and he turned to the woman who had been introduced to him as the mining ship's sole medical officer, "what do you normally do here? Stick leeches to people or are you still just drilling holes in skulls to let the demons out?"

"We make do with what we've got." the ship's medical officer replied, frowning at Doctor King, "I'm not a licensed doctor so I can't just requisition any medicines I need. I can only get the sots of drugs that any person can get over the counter. Administering pain killers is all I can do for them until we can move them to a more advance facility with proper staff."

"Then it's a good job I'm here to do your job for you or those two men with decompression injuries would have drowned in their own blood before you get back to port. Plus I expect that all of the others would be hopelessly addicted to the painkillers you're flooding their bodies with." King said sternly and then he tapped his combadge, "King to *Nightfall*." he said.

"*Nightfall* here doctor. Go ahead." Edwards' voice responded.

"Captain the medical situation here is pretty bad. There are barely any supplies and no professional medical staff." King said, glancing at the ship's medical officer who then scowled at him, "I need some equipment beaming over to me. I'm afraid this does mean that I won't be able to help you out with that other matter for a while though."

"Very well doctor. Send us a list of everything you need and I'll see to it that it gets beamed straight over to you. I'll also handle the other matter. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said before closing the channel. Then he looked across the bridge at West and added, "Lieutenant, make sure that when that list of supplies arrives from Doctor King it's taken care of. There's something else I need to see to in sickbay. Commander Cole, you have the bridge."

Cole frowned for a moment.

"Captain, is something wrong?" he asked.

"Yes commander." Edwards replied as he walked towards the nearest turbolift, "Max and your wife have left a mess I need to clean up. Have Max meet me in my ready room in five minutes."

3.

When Edwards reached sickbay there were two of the nursing staff on duty, both loading a container with medicines to be sent over to the Latinum Heart.

"Captain, may we help you?" one of them asked when they saw him enter.

"No." Edwards replied, "I have business with the EMH." and then he walked to a doorway at the far side of sickbay that slid open for him automatically. The room on the other side of this was lined with drawers and was noticeably colder than the main sickbay treatment area. Edwards walked up to a particular one of the drawers and pulled it open to reveal the inanimate body of a woman in a Starfleet science division uniform. "Computer," he said, "activate the emergency medical hologram in its physical body."

Immediately the eyes of the woman's body opened.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." she said before sitting up and looking at Edwards, "You have activated my physical form." she said to him and then she smiled before adding, "Does this mean I'll be going on an away mission?"

"Not just yet Emma." Edwards said, using the nickname that had originally been coined for the EMH by Nikki when she was younger, "But we need to talk, come with me."

"Of course captain." Emma said as she got up off the morgue slab and then she followed him from the room, "Where are we going captain?" she asked as she left sickbay and Edwards turned towards the nearest turbolift.

"My ready room. Max will meet us there. We have something important to discuss." Edwards told her at the same time as the turbolift doors slid open.

Max was already in Edwards' ready room when he and Emma arrived there. The former Borg drone had no need to sit down so instead he was standing in front of the captain's desk as they entered.

"Captain." he said.

"Max. Thanks for joining us. Emma please take a seat." Edwards said, walking around his desk and sitting down.

"Of course captain." Emma said as she sat down as well.

"So how are you Emma?" Edwards asked.

"I am fine." she answered and Edwards and Max looked at one another, "What's wrong?" Emma said, looking at each in turn when she saw this.

"That is a question that should have no meaning to you." Max told her.

"Emma you have been meeting regularly with Lieutenant Mackey, correct?" Edwards said.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"And why do you think that is?"

"He did not say. To begin with he just sat me down at a computer and then left me while it asked a lot of pointless questions I had to type answers to. Later on he started asking me questions in person as well but he never explained why."

"Emma do you know what a Turing test is?" Edwards asked.

"No captain."

"It is designed to determine when an artificial intelligence has become self aware." Max told her, "The ship's counsellor has been performing the test on you ever since Lieutenant Commander T'Lan and I created your physical body."

"Emma the result show that the experiences you have had outside those ordinarily required of an EMH mark seven have caused your program to expand to the point where Federation law considers you a sentient being." Edwards added.

"I'm not sure I understand. What does this mean?" Emma asked.

"It means we can no longer keep you as part of the *Nightfall's* equipment." Edward told her.

"I have to leave? How? My program is contained within the ship's computer." Emma pointed out.

"Whether or not you chose to leave will be entirely up to you." Edwards answered, "If you do wish to leave then your program will be downloaded as soon as we reach port to a planetary network. On the other hand you may opt to stay aboard the *Nightfall*. In which case you will be commissioned with the rank of lieutenant and from now on you will considered a Starfleet officer like any other aboard the ship."

Emma hesitated.

"Everyone I know is here captain." Emma said, "I'd like to stay."

Edwards smiled.

"Excellent. In that case I'll have Max modify your program so that you control when it is active yourself and Lieutenant West will arrange for quarters."

"Quarters?" Emma commented when she heard this.

"Well we can hardly leave you sleeping in the morgue now can we?" Edwards replied.

In the *Latinum Heart's* sickbay King had been able to sedate all of the patients properly, removing the need for the constant stream of painkillers. Like everything else aboard the mining ship, the *Latinum Heart's* biobeds were not as sophisticated as those aboard the *USS Nightfall* but they were adequate to allow King to monitor the effects that the treatment he was administering was having on his patients while keeping his hands free to work with. He had just returned to one of the burn victims to see how the dermal regeneration was progressing when his combadge activated.

"Doctor can we have a discrete word?" Carr's voice said and King looked around to where the *Latinum Heart's* medical officer was checking on another patient.

"Hold on," he said and he turned towards the woman, "I'll be back shortly. Keep an eye on these patients while I'm gone would you?" and the *Latinum Heart's* medical officer nodded while King headed for the doorway that he knew led to a bathroom and once inside he closed the door behind him. King then snarled as he looked at the poor state of the bathroom before speaking again, "Go ahead, I'm as alone as it's possible for a man to get."

"Doctor King what's your opinion of this ship?" Carr asked.

"It's a dump that should be towing garbage. No wait, I didn't mean that. I meant that it should be towed away as garbage." King answered.

"What Commander Carr means is have you noticed anything unusual about this ship? In particular any irregularities about its power distribution system." T'Lan added and King sighed.

"I've been rather busy treating the wounded lieutenant commander," he said, "Besides which I'm a doctor not an engineer."

"Perhaps doctor," Carr said, "But you are qualified to command a starship. That alone makes you capable of assessing whether or not something as major as the power distribution system is out of spec."

"Very well, I'll see what I can find. King out." King replied before tapping his combadge to deactivate it.

Opening the door, King returned to the mining ship's sickbay and made his way to the patient he had been treating. King had left his medical instruments beside the biobed and he picked up his tricorder from on top of the larger medical kit and opened it. Before starting to use the tricorder King double checked that the mining ship's medical officer was not watching him. Once he was sure of this he modified the settings on the tricorder, adjusting it so that it would pick up electrical energy rather than scanning body tissue. The modification was crude, a medical tricorder was not designed with such scans in mind but it would be enough to tell King where nearby power plasma conduits ran to and how much power was flowing through them. The readings that King took stood out instantly as not matching the profile he expected of a civilian mining vessel. He had already been aware of the extensive modifications made to the mining ship's power distribution system but the readings indicated much more than that. With the warp core off line the ship was operating on auxiliary power only and so there was only a minimal amount being sent around the ship, just enough to keep life support and artificial gravity operating. However, King's tricorder was picking up several energy hotspots in the forward sections of the vessel. These suggested the presence of high capacity storage cells used to power starship systems that required a great deal of power for short periods of time. While the system was not in use the storage cell would be recharged from the ship's mains until they were needed again. The worrying aspect of this to King was that he knew of only one sort of system that required such a boost to the main distribution system.

Weapons.

All mining ships carried at least one phaser or other particle weapon to break open mineral rich asteroids and it was not uncommon for them to improve their armament with other defensive weapons but all of these tended to have a relatively low output, good for cracking rocks and making attempting to steal the contents of the ship's hold more trouble than it was worth to pirates but not the serious modern military-grade weapons that would require the level of power that King was seeing in his readings.

"Is something wrong Doctor King?" the *Latinum Heart's* medical officer asked and King looked over his shoulder again to see her waling towards him.

"Should there be?" he asked in response.

"You were staring at that tricorder but your medical probe isn't active," the woman said as she came closer.

"It doesn't appear to be connecting," King said as he placed the tricorder's separate probe back in its connector at the top of the device before folding it up. Rather than put the tricorder back on top of his medical kit he then held it out towards the security guard that had accompanied him here from the transporter room, "Crewman, take this to Lieutenant Commander T'Lan. Tell her it's just constantly spitting out the same numbers over and over again. If she checks the most recent readings she'll see everything she needs to."

"Yes doctor," the guard replied and after taking the tricorder from him he headed out of sickbay into the main corridor outside.

"I'm not sure that Captain Tall would like him wandering the ship alone," the *Latinum Heart's* medical officer said as she watched the security guard leave.

"Then feel free to call you captain and get someone to escort him." King suggested as he opened up his medical kit and as he subtly removed a hypospray and started to load it with a capsule of the strongest anaesthetic he had to hand he added, "Or I suppose you could consider how by the time anyone caught up with him he'd already be in engineering with the rest of the away team."

"Here goes nothing." Carstairs said, looking up at the *Latinum Heart's* warp core as he prepared to restart it. Even after the warp core was brought back on line there was still a considerable amount of work to do in making sure that the power from it could be distributed around the ship in a proper and safe fashion but at least having mains power back on line in engineering would be a significant step forwards.

"Actually lieutenant this is far from nothing." T'Lan commented but before she could continue the door to engineering slid open and the security guard who had been protecting King entered.

"What are you doing here crewman?" Carr asked, concerned that King was now alone on the ship.

"Doctor King asked me to deliver this to Lieutenant Commander T'Lan." the guard replied and he held out the tricorder to the Vulcan woman, "He wants you to take a look at the final set of readings."

"Let there be light!" Carstairs sudden called out as he pulled the lever to jump start the containment field around the warp core before anti-matter flooded in from the *Latinum Heart's* storage tanks and engineering was flooded with the pale light from the core.

Meanwhile T'Lan took the tricorder from the security guard and opened it up to examine what Doctor King had sent her.

"This confirms our suspicions commander." she said when she saw the results of King's scan, "I do not believe that the enhanced power distribution network that this ship has been fitted with is an accident. The power is needed to supply weapons that I suspect have yields that make them illegal in the Federation." Carr glanced in the direction of Carstairs and saw that the *Latinum Heart's* own engineering crew were now all stood around him.

"Weapons that we didn't pick up from the *Nightfall*." Carr pointed out.

"That is true. I scanned this vessel thoroughly." T'Lan said, "The only weapon system I detected was a single phaser bank mounted ventrally towards the prow of the ship for mining purposes. However, if these scans are accurate then additional weaponry would appear to be located in the areas of the ship normally taken up by refining equipment."

"Somehow I doubt that the crew will be willing to let us inspect them." Carr said.

"I agree commander. However, they will not be able to refuse a more general inspection of the forward sections of the ship." T'Lan replied.

On the *Latinum Heart's* bridge the command crew were monitoring the progress of the repairs closely.

"The warp core is back on line captain and we have mains power but propulsion other than thrusters is still down." the ship's helmsman told Captain Tall and the vessel's commanding officer nodded.

"Hey you can't just go barging in there!" a voice cried out as the bridge door slid open and when Tall looked around he saw T'Lan walking through the doorway while one of his crew attempting in vain to hold her back.

"Captain I must inspect the forward sections of your vessel." T'Lan told him.

"What for?" Tall demanded.

"Before engineer Carstairs can certify this vessel space worthy enough for warp speed I must confirm that your deflector array is functioning."

"My deflector array? What nonsense. The explosion was confined to engineering, the deflector wasn't even remotely close enough to have been damaged." Tall said.

"Then there is no logical reason for you to prevent me from carrying out my duties." T'Lan said, "Unless you would rather the *Nightfall* towed your vessel back to Starbase Ten."

Tall scowled at T'Lan before looking at the crewman who had failed to keep her out of the bridge.

"Show her to deflector control." he said.

"Yes sir." the crewman replied and he led T'Lan from the bridge. Then as soon as the doors slid shut behind them Captain Tall looked at one of his bridge officers.

"Mister O'Neill. Take two men and follow them discretely. If she looks like she's about to enter the refinery then shoot her. Stun setting only mind you. I'd rather have hostages that will stop that Starfleet cruiser from firing on us than bodies that would encourage it."



"It's in here." the crewman guiding T'Lan said when they reached a door located on one of the mining ship's lower levels and when he opened it T'Lan saw the ship's main deflector assembly inside. Stepping through the open doorway she took out her tricorder and began to conduct a scan.

To begin with T'Lan scanned just the deflector control room like she had claimed she intended to do but even with just this mundane scan she detected something out of the ordinary.

"This is not a standard deflector array for this class of vessel." she said.

"No. Err, I think the captain got something more powerful." the crewman said, "He thought the regular deflector and shield array weren't enough to protect us from impacts while mining in denser asteroid fields. That's where the better yields tend to be."

"Logical." T'Lan replied, "Though a Federation deflector would be easier to maintain than this one that is clearly of Klingon manufacture."

"I wouldn't know about that." the crewman said, unaware that T'Lan was widening the parameters of her scan to include other nearby sections of the ship and she instantly began to pick up the strong power sources that Doctor King's initial scan had also detected. However, her tricorder was properly configured for searching for such energy sources and she was also able to detect the presence of materials used only in starship weapons from the way the energy was contained within them. It was clear to T'Lan that just like the power distribution systems and deflector shields the weapons were not of Federation manufacture. As far as T'Lan could tell these were also of Romulan manufacture and consisted of a pair of powerful disruptor banks. Even with the upgrades made to the Latinum Heart's power distribution system and with the local power cells to provide a dedicated reserve of power for these weapons T'Lan doubted that they could be fired more than a handful of times before they would have to be taken off line and given time to recharge, making them useless in a prolonged fight against a ship like the *Nightfall*. On the other hand against commercial shipping they would be devastating, easily disabling a freighter's limited shields with just one or two shots. Turning towards the doorway T'Lan continued to watch her tricorder's display as she walked towards the corridor.

"What are you doing?" the crewman asked, "You were only supposed to scan in here."

"I have detected anomalous readings from further astern." T'Lan told him, "I must track them down before I can certify that this vessel can safely travel at warp and she reached out to open the door when the crewman did not. However, as the door opened T'Lan found herself confronted by O'Neil and two other miners, all of them carrying phasers of various designs.

"Going somewhere lieutenant commander?" O'Neill asked.

"My scans have detected anomalies that I must-" T'Lan began before O'Neill snatched the tricorder away from her and looked at the display, instantly seeing that she had detected the modified deflector shields as well as the two added disruptor banks in place of the refineries. T'Lan reached for her combadge but before she could activate it O'Neill dropped the tricorder and punched her in the face. The blow was strong enough that T'Lan fell backwards with blood coming from her nose and she collapsed at the feet of the crewman who had escorted her here. Before she could recover, O'Neill reached down and snatched away both her combadge and the phaser holstered at her waist. Keeping the phaser in his hand he then dropped the combadge beside the tricorder before stamping on them and smashing them one after another.

"Tape her up. Hands and face." he told his men and then he turned around and strode away, heading to the nearest intercom panel so that he could contact the bridge, "Captain Tall, it's O'Neill."

"Go ahead O'Neill." Tall's voice responded, "Is that pointed eared bitch giving you any trouble?"

"She found the weapons captain. Don't worry though, she won't be telling anyone else about them."

"You didn't kill her did you?" Tall asked and O'Neill looked at where one of his men was in the process of wrapping T'Lan's hands in tape and binding them behind her back while the other had stuffed a rag in her mouth and was now sealing it shut.

"No, she's alive." O'Neill told him.

"Good. A Vulcan female will fetch a good price right now." Tall said, "Our subspace comms are back on so I'll send word ahead that we're bringing her in. In the meantime get a team together and deal with the rest of the Starfleet team. I want full control of my ship back."

"What about the repairs captain?" O'Neill asked.

"Starfleet's already brought all the parts we need aboard. All we need to do is fit them."

"Very good sir. I'll get the team together." O'Neill said and after shutting down the intercom he walked back to where his men had just dragged the now bound and gagged T'Lan back to her feet. Smiling, he stroked the side of her face, "Don't worry Vulcan. As long as you behave you won't be harmed. From what I hear, our customers want you with all your parts intact."

"Captain we may have a problem here." West announced and Edwards looked towards her.

"What's wrong lieutenant?" he asked.

"I just lost T'Lan's combadge signal." West told him as she attempted to reacquire the basic signal that T'Lan's combadge should have been sending continuously to mark her position and upon hearing this Cole also looked at her, concerned for the safety of his wife, "She was registering as being somewhere in the forward section of the ship but then it just suddenly vanished.

"*Nightfall* to T'Lan." Edwards said, activating the communication system built into the arm of his chair but there was no response, "*Nightfall* to Carr. Are you there commander?"

"Right here captain. Go ahead." Carr replied.

"Commander we can't contact T'Lan. When did you last see her?"

"About twenty minutes ago. She went to investigate some strange readings Doctor King picked up at the front of the ship. She was going to use checking out the deflector array as an excuse to poke around." Carr answered.

"She went alone?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain, we thought that would attract less attention." Carr answered.

"Well find her commander. I'll have reinforcements standing by to beam over if you need them. In the mean time make sure that ship goes nowhere. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said and then he shut off the channel.

"I'll organise a security team immediately captain." Cole said, getting up out of his chair.

"No." Edwards told him.

"Captain T'Lan is-" Cole began.

"I know she's your wife Robert, but that could affect your decision making if we have to launch a rescue mission. Tell Captains Heart and Shry to put together a hostage rescue team." Edwards said. Then he looked at West, "How many people are aboard that ship lieutenant?" he asked her.

"Our scans suggest sixty five crew captain." she replied.

"Pass that information to Heart and Shry. They'll probably want to send a pair of platoons." Edwards said and Cole hesitated.

"Yes captain." he said eventually.

"A Vulcan?" the Reman pictured on the bridge's main viewscreen said to Tall.

"That's right. I'm sending you an image now." Tall replied and he attached an image of T'Lan as she sat in the corner of an empty room bound and gagged with tape and the Reman smiled.

"Very good captain. I'll gladly pay for this Vulcan. Three bars of gold pressed latinum."

"I want twice that." Tall said, "She a Starfleet officer. That means she's in prime physical shape."

"I offer you five bars." the Reman replied and Tall smiled back at him.

"We have a deal Lord Shintar." he said.

"Come to check up on me?" Shintar asked when he sensed a presence in the room behind him immediately after shutting off the subspace communications link to the *Latinum Heart* and he spun his chair around to face the young human female who had managed to appear in his quarters without using the door.

"Another toy Shintar?" The Girl said, "How many is that in your harem now? You're letting your body distract you."

"Perhaps you should take advantage of all the extra free time you have now that the council has instructed me to guide our operations. Haven't you experimented with the ways in which these stolen bodies feel physical pleasure?" Shintar said and The Girl snorted.

"I don't have free time Shintar. The council may be trusting you to formulate your own operational plans but I'm still in charge our mission here. What I'm trying to say is that I'm watching everything you do Shintar. Besides which my body is too young, not fully matured by the standards of human society. Those who would be interested in coupling with it are considered defective by the Federation and locked away."

"An weak excuse for a weak body." Shintar replied, "In any case I'm not interested in the pleasure I might get from raping that Vulcan. Not yet anyway. Don't you recognise her?"

The Girl then looked at the image still shown on Shintar's computer terminal and her eyes widened slightly.

"Lieutenant Commander T'Lan. Chief science officer of the *USS Nightfall*." she said, "If our agent is correct then she is at the forefront of Starfleet's operations against us."

"Yes she is. So what do you think the council will say if bring her to them?"

"I think they'll be more impressed with that than this little gun running operation you've got going here Shintar. You aren't even trying to hide who and what you are. What happens when Starfleet tracks one of those pirate ships back here?"

"Unlikely. Even if they do manage to destroy this base we can always set up another elsewhere." Shintar said, "Your problem is that you were too timid. Always you had to make your opponents helpless before striking. I don't care about how many pirate ships are destroyed or how many of their crews are arrested or

killed. All I care about is the chaos it will cause.”

“Be careful with that attitude Shintar.” The Girl said, “Chaos has a habit of expanding and sucking in everything around it. It would be a shame if you got pulled down along with your new pirate friends.” and at that point The Girl took a step forwards and then just vanished into thin air.

“How much longer do you think you can delay the repairs?” Carr asked Carstairs and he paused to think. “About another half an hour at most.” he replied, “Commander, we've already provided the crew with all the materials they need to do the work themselves. With the warp core online all they need to do is swap out the damaged parts and put in the new ones. Then that would just leave the hole in the hull to be patched and that's less than an hour's work welding. They already have the spare panels themselves.”

Carr sighed.

“This would be a whole lot easier if we could just seize control of the ship outright but the captain would never go for that until we've got proof of what's going on here.” she said.

“What about the tricorder scans?” Carstairs asked.

“Power cells aren't illegal lieutenant. The crew can fill their entire ship with them if they want to.” Carr pointed out, “Now you do whatever it takes to prevent those repairs from being completed and I'm going to go and see what's happened to T'Lan.” then she looked at the two security guards standing close by, “You,” she said to one of them, “with me.”

Without bothering to ask permission, Carr then strode towards the exit from engineering. However, before she could reach the doors they slid open of their own accord to reveal O'Neill and five other members of the *Latinum Heart's* crew. All of them carried phasers and Carr instantly recognised the one carried by O'Neill himself as the current Starfleet issued hand phaser. Seeing the weapons being pointed towards the Starfleet team members present, the security guard accompanying Carr reached for his own weapon but one of the supposed miners fired before he could draw the weapon and the security was killed as a phaser beam burned right through him.

Carr dived aside as another beam of energy missed her only narrowly and he rolled across the floor.

Meanwhile the second security guard was able to draw his phaser and fire it, shooting the man who had just killed his comrade but he too was then killed as O'Neill shot him. Close to the warp core Carstairs had just drawn his own phaser and taken aim towards O'Neill when all of a sudden chief engineer Chase struck him from behind with a large wrench, avoiding the risk of any firing an energy weapon towards the warp core and Carstairs fell dead instantly.

Getting back to her knees, Carr had begun to reach for her phaser when she saw that she was now alone and instead she raised her hands over her head in surrender.

“Put her with the Vulcan.” O'Neill ordered, “I'm going to go and deal with the doctor.”

“The Starfleet team in engineering has been dealt with captain.” one of the bridge officers told Tall,

“Commander Carr has been captured and is being secured as we speak. The others are dead and O'Neill is on his way to sickbay to deal with the doctor.”

“What is chief engineer Chase's report on our status?” Tall asked.

“Full mains power restored captain. He estimates restoration of impulse power in an hour and full warp capability in two.”

“Then we just need to prevent the Nightfall from shooting us down before then.” Tall said, “Operations, engage the cloaking device.”

"Captain we just lost signals from everyone except Doctor King." West announced suddenly.

"What the hell is going on over there?" Edwards responded.

"Captain! Look!" Hamilton exclaimed as the image of the *Latinum Heart* on the bridge's main view screen suddenly blurred and then disappeared completely.

"Where the hell did they get a cloaking device?" Cole said, as startled as everyone else to see the mining ship vanish right in front of them.

"Lieutenant West, do we still have any sensor readings on that ship?" Edwards said and West hurriedly checked her console.

"Negative captain." she said, "Wherever they got that cloaking device from, they got a good one."

"If cloaking devices are being smuggled across the border then we're in deep trouble." Cole said as Edwards tapped his combadge.

"Sub-lieutenant Nayal we need you on the bridge immediately." he said.

"On my way captain." the voice of the Romulan advisor stationed aboard the *Nightfall* replied.

King heard the doors to the *Latinum Heart's* sickbay open behind him and glanced at the display of the PADD he was holding. He had secretly reconfigured a medical probe intended to be placed inside a patient to take video of their innards to act as a surveillance camera and had left it pointing towards the door. Now he saw O'Neill speaking quietly with the *Latinum Heart's* own medical officer before he began to make his way towards King, raising a Starfleet issue phaser as he came closer.

Before O'Neil could fire the phaser King spun around and lunged towards him, pressing the hypospray he had prepared against O'Neill's neck. The hypospray was loaded with a strong muscle relaxant and instantly O'Neill was rendered unable to keep his grip on the phaser or stand and he collapsed in a heap on the spot. King quickly dropped the hypospray and scooped up the dropped phaser, firing towards the doorway just as the *Latinum Heart's* medical officer as she fled from the room and the beam struck the door frame just behind her.

After her combadge was taken from her and destroyed Carr's arms were pulled behind her back and secured with plastic ties meant for binding bundles of cables and when their narrow width made them dig into her flesh she winced. O'Neill's men then dragged Carr through the corridors of the mining ship until they reached the same storage room when T'Lan had been left bound and gagged and the Vulcan looked up when the door opened.

"T'Lan." Carr said, "At least you're still alive."

"Tie her over there." one of the men holding Carr said to the other and they pulled her towards the wall where a missing panel exposed several pipes running along behind it. Pulling Carr's arms up sharply behind her, another cable tie was then used to bind her wrists to one of the pipes before two more bound her ankles together. One of the men looked across the room at T'Lan and then back at Carr, leaning in so close that Carr winced at the smell of his breath.

"Don't worry commander." he said, "I doubt the captain will be selling you on like he will that Vulcan. I expect he'll keep you here with us instead."

Carr just scowled, unable to move without risking collapsing on the spot and injuring her shoulders owing to the way in which she was bound. On the other hand the crewman grinned at her before both of the men left Carr balanced precariously with her arms tied uncomfortably behind her and exited the room, shutting off the lights in the storeroom before closing the door behind them and plunging their captives into complete darkness.

The turbolift doors slid open and Nayal walked onto the *Nightfall's* bridge, taking a seat beside Edwards.

"Nayal we've got a cloaked ship out there." he told her and she frowned.

"Romulan?" she asked.

"No, it's a mining vessel that has obviously been modified. We had an away team aboard but we've lost contact with them." Edwards told her.

"The cloak is good though." Cole added, "It probably is of Romulan origin."

"But the tachyon detection grid on the border ought to stop any smuggling ships bringing them across the Neutral Zone." Nayal said.

"We've seen the grid be shut off before now." Hamilton commented, "Remember the peace conference." Just across from Hamilton, West looked up. Acting under the influence of The Controller she had been the one to shut down a section of the detection grid to permit a Reman controlled warbird across the border.

"Then I'm sorry captain but I don't think I can offer you any help." Nayal said, "If the crew of that ship know how to operate their cloaking device properly their ship will be totally invisible. Perhaps you could rig up a tachyon detection grid using the *Nightfall's* fighters and probes. You've done that before."

"We don't know how long it will take the mining ship's crew to fix their engines." Edwards told her, "By the time we can make the modifications to our ships—"

"Modifications that the miners may notice." Cole commented.

"—the miners may have repaired their engines and left." Edwards continued, "We already know that they have thrusters so it's unlikely that they're in the same place they were before they cloaked."

"Captain given the I recommend using the lidar system." West said. In addition to the usual arrays of subspace sensors, the *Nightfall* was fitted with a pair of laser emitting turrets above and below the main saucer section of the cruiser's hull that were used to detect objects from their reflections. Against a cloaked ship the pulses of laser energy were just as useless as standard sensors, however it was also possible for the lidar turrets to be reconfigured to emit constant beams instead of discrete pulses. Projected against a solid object such as a ship's hull these could act as a form of direction microphone, picking up sounds even through the vacuum of space as vibrations in the hull caused tiny distortions in the beam and not even a cloaked ship could prevent itself from being detected if a beam crossed its hull. The drawback was that a cloaked vessel had to be very close to the *Nightfall*, less than one light second to get effective real time information and the beams also had to be projected directly at the cloaked vessel to begin with.

"Do it." Edwards said, nodding and West immediately activated the lidar turrets.

As soon as these extended from their mounting they began to emit continuous beams of laser energy. West rotated the turrets slowly, watching for any variation in the beam feedback that could not be accounted for by the *Nightfall's* own motion. The bridge crew waited silently as West continued her scan until all of a sudden she looked up from her console with a smile on her face.

"Got them." she said, "Four hundred kilometres from their previous position and moving at sixty kilometres per minute. They must have fired their thrusters just after they cloaked and coasted since then."

"They can't raise shields while cloaked. Can we beam across?" Edwards asked but West shook her head.

"I can tell you where they are captain, but I can't tell you how their ship is orientated. Anyone who beams over would be doing so randomly and could end up embedded in a bulkhead."

"We need a fixed point inside the ship to deploy our strike teams." Cole added.

"A low level phaser strike could disable their cloaking device captain." Nayal pointed out but Edwards shook his head.

"No." he said, "Even if we don't end up injuring our own people we'd tip our hand to these supposed miners that we know where their ship is."

"Then somebody find me something aboard that ship that we can lock onto." Edwards said.

Peering out into the corridor, King confirmed that there were no other members of the *Latinum Heart's* crew that were about to storm the vessel's sick bay before retreating back inside and closing the door. Then he tapped his combadge.

"King to *Nightfall*." he transmitted.

"Captain! Doctor King is transmitting from the mining ship." West exclaimed.

"Doctor, it's good to hear your voice." Edwards said in response to King's signal, "Can you tell us what's happening over there?"

"Some thug just tried to kill me. That's what just happened." King replied, "Don't worry, I've dealt with him but someone else is bound to try something similar soon. Have any of the others reported in? I didn't want to contact them just in case they weren't in a position to speak freely."

"Doctor you're the only member of the away team we still have contact with." Edwards said, "Look doctor, the *Latinum Heart* has cloaked."

"Cloaked? Where did they get a cloaking device from?" King responded in surprise.

"We don't know. But we need a fixed point of reference to beam over a boarding party." Edwards said.

"A well armed one I hope." King commented.

"We have MACOs and Imperial Guard on standby." Edwards told him, "We need a clear area about five metres across and data on orientation."

"I understand captain." King said, looking around for a clear area. However, there did not appear to be anywhere in sickbay that met the criteria given to him and so he headed for the exit, "I'll have to leave sickbay to find one. Stand by." he added.

Opening the door to the corridor outside, King pointed his phaser in each direction before making his way towards the rear of the ship, guessing that he would be better able to access the mineral storage pods this way. Hearing voices ahead of him, King pressed himself up against a wall behind a large protruding strut that ran from the floor all the way up to the ceiling. Peering around this he saw a pair of the ship's crew walk around a corner, both of them carrying weapons. Unwilling to give them the chance to fire first, King immediately took aim and fired his phaser twice in rapid succession. Both shots were on target and the two

men fell before they even had the opportunity to react. King then paused, just in case the two crewmen he had just shot were just the lead element of a larger party. However, when no further crewmen appeared King carried on his way.

He found the entrance to a storage pod a short distance ahead and he ducked inside before closing the door behind him. Looking around the interior of the pod King saw that it was not being used to store refined minerals. Instead it held cargo containers, all of which bore standard Federation shipping labels and on closer inspection King saw that these indicated that the containers ought to have been aboard several different vessels being transported to different planets.

Regardless of this obvious evidence of piracy, the storage pod had a large open area around the door and King moved to the centre of this before coming to a halt and tapping his combadge.

"King to *Nightfall*, I'm standing dead centre of an open area at least ten metres in diameter. Is this good enough?" he signalled.

"Perfect doctor." West responded, "Stay still and standby."

Moments later King heard the characteristic sound of a transporter and the air all around him was filled with light as a force of armoured Andorians materialised.

"Move!" Captain Shry ordered and the densely packed soldiers moved away from King, clearing the area they had just beamed into completely at which point Shry signalled the *Nightfall*, "Clear. Send in the MACOs." and another group of troops from the *Nightfall* was beamed aboard the mining ship, this time MACOs led by Captain Heart.

"Doctor are you okay?" Heart asked, having materialised just beside Doctor King and King nodded.

"Fine." he replied.

"Then I suggest you return to the *Nightfall*. We'll handle everything here." Heart said and King nodded again as he tapped his combadge.

"King to *Nightfall*. One to beam up." he said and moments later he vanished in a glowing pattern of lights, at which point Heart and Shry looked at one another.

"Ready?" Heart asked.

"You take the bridge. We'll take engineering." Shry responded.

Emerging from the storage pod the soldiers spilt into two groups, with the MACOs heading towards the front of the mining ship and the Imperial Guard to the rear. Rather than being armed with conventional phaser weaponry, the troops carried by the *USS Nightfall* were armed with projectile firing assault rifles that had more compact phaser units mounted beneath their primary barrels. When deployed on a planetary surface the MACOs and Imperial Guardsmen would typically use duranium tipped armour piercing ammunition, however where accidental hull breaches were a concern they instead used frangible ammunition that fragmented on impact. This was of minimal use against targets protected by any sort of armour, but the crew of the *Latinum Heart* were not expected to have any such protection. Intended to be used primarily against Borg drones whose shields could not protect against physical attack, these firearms still suffered from the drawbacks that had resulted in their being rendered largely obsolete by the introduction of directed energy weapons. Primarily this was the limited amount of ammunition they could carry before being required to reload but another was the noise that they made and when the first of the *Latinum Heart's* crewmen was seen by Captain Heart's MACOs there was no further hiding their presence as the roar of assault rifle fire echoed down the ship's corridors. Both groups of troops picked up their pace now that their presence had been revealed and the rate of fire increased as they fired on any armed crew members they came across without issuing any warnings.



"What the hell is that?" Captain Tall said, frowning when he heard the distant sound of gunfire. Projectile weapons were so uncommon few people could even identify the sound of it when they heard it but this did not mean that they would ignore it, "Try and-"

"Captain!" one of the bridge officers suddenly interrupted, "We have reports of intruders."

"How is that possible? Check the status of the cloak." Tall ordered.

"The cloak is functioning perfectly captain. But there are confirmed reports of intruders armed with projectile weaponry moving towards engineering and us." the crewman said before frowning, "Sir the intruders aren't Starfleet."

"Then who are they?" Tall demanded.

"It looks like we're being attacked by Earth MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard."

"They can only have come from the *Nightfall*. It must have been that doctor. He got a signal out and they beamed them over." Tall said and then he reached out to a nearby console to activate the shipwide intercom, "All hands, all hands. We are being boarded by Starfleet troops. Grab whatever weapons you can and show them that this is our ship, not theirs."

Before Tall could even take his hand off the console there was an explosion from the direction of the door as the MACO assault team blasted through it to force their way inside. The explosion was followed the sound of projectile fire as the MACOs came through the breach in the door shooting, picking off the members of the bridge crew that they deemed to be dangerous. Tall recoiled at the unfamiliar sound of the MACOs' assault rifles being fired close up in such an enclosed space, clamping his hands over his ears and ducking for cover behind a console. All of a sudden he became aware that there was someone standing over him and he looked up to see Captain Heart aiming his rifle down at him and smiling.

"Now captain," Heart said, "about whose ship this is."

Although firing directed energy weapons in close proximity to an active warp core risked causing catastrophic damage to it the Imperial Guard troops under Captain Shry's command has no such worries about using their assault rifles loaded with frangible ammunition around one and this gave them a decisive advantage as they came storming into the *Latinum Heart's* engineering section. The Andorians concentrated their initial fire on the engineers between them and the warp core, these being the crewmen able to use any energy weapons they had without fear of triggering a core breach.

Beyond the core an engineer who had a disruptor holstered on his belt drew the weapon anyway and was in the act of swinging it towards the attacking force of Andorians when all of a sudden Chase knocked the weapon from his hand and sent it sliding across the deck.

"No you idiot!" the chief engineer yelled, "Do you want to kill us all?"

The Andorians were spreading out after their initial entry, positioning themselves so that they were able to cover all areas of the large compartment.

"Surrender!" Shry yelled over the bursts of projectile fire, "Resistance is futile."

Shry then saw one of the mining ship's engineers leap from a walkway, landing on top of an Andorian and attempting to wrestle his rifle away from him. Fortunately the tough body armour and helmets the Imperial Guard wore protected the soldier and he was able to keep a tight grip on his weapon. His assailant was too close for the Andorian to fire his weapon in self defence but while they wrestled a second Andorian leapt forwards to defend his comrade and used the butt of his own rifle as a club, striking the engineer at the base of his skull to incapacitate him. Another engineer that had been rushing to try and help steal the Andorian's rifle was promptly hit by rapid burst of fire from an Imperial Guardsman and fell dead several metres short but the rest of the engineering staff were not done yet. Picking up whatever solid objects came to hand, the engineers threw some of these towards the advancing Andorian troops but the rigid armour plates that protected their torsos and heads meant that at most all the thrown objects would achieve was to inflict a minor injury to an arm. At the same time some engineering picked up larger objects that were suitable for using as improvised clubs even though these remained useless while the Andorians remained beyond arms' reach. On the other hand the Andorians continued to push forwards, firing at any target that appeared aggressive. One or two engineers raised their hands in surrender as the Imperial Guard troops came close and they were forced to the floor, their hands secured behind their backs with thick plastic handcuff ties. "Fall back!" Chase yelled as the leading Andorian troops drew level with the warp core and the surviving engineers turned to flee, heading for whatever hatchways they thought they could get to ahead of the Andorians. However, with the warp core now behind them the Imperial Guard troops were free to make use of the phaser units mounted beneath their rifle barrels and, with their weapons set to project wide angle stun blasts they opened fire, catching multiple crewmen with each blast.

Chief engineer Chase himself ran to a ladder that led up to a jefferies tube that he knew that would take him almost the full length of the ship but just as he was climbing through the entrance to the tube Shry charged up to the ladder as well and reached out to grab Chase by his ankle, pulling him back down with such force that the Latinum Heart's chief engineer fell from the ladder and landed at the feet of Shry.

"Rethinking that surrender yet?" Shry asked as he pointed his rifle downwards and Chase slowly lifted his hand over his head.

"That was definitely gunfire." Carr said when she heard another rattling sound in the distance. Having worked on the *Nightfall* project for many years even before the modified Akira-class cruiser was launched she had become familiar with the weapons that the ground troops assigned to the vessel were armed with. Gagged and still in pitch darkness, T'Lan could neither speak nor nod in agreement so she remained silent and motionless and more gunfire could be heard somewhere beyond the door. When the firing died down Carr waited to see if it would start up again. With no way of measuring time she had no way of knowing how long she waited exactly but when she heard no further firing she took a deep breath before shouting out, "In here!" she yelled, "Help! Help!"

The door suddenly slid open again and light from the corridor flooded into the storage room. Tilting her head, Carr looked towards the door to see Captain Tall standing there and her eyes widened as she feared that in shouting for help she done nothing but attract the ire of her captors. However, Tall then looked over his shoulder as Heart and a team of MACOs followed him through the doorway.

"See, I told you they hadn't been harmed." he said.

"Carstairs is dead." Carr responded as Heart headed towards her, drawing his combat knife from his belt, "So are both the security guards Cole assigned to us. I don't know about Doctor King."

"King Henry is just fine." Heart replied, using one of the doctor's nicknames based on his first name of Henry and then he cut through the plastic ties binding Carr's wrists, "In fact without him contacting the *Nightfall* we wouldn't have been able to get the precise co-ordinates we needed to get through the cloak."

"Cloak? You mean this ship has a cloaking device?" Carr said in surprise, rubbing her wrists while Heart crouched down to cut through the cable ties around her ankles.

"A good one. We located the ship with lidar but couldn't get any interior information while the cloak was working until the doctor's signal gave us something to lock onto." Heart explained before he walked over to where T'Lan lay patiently waiting to be untied and he smiled as he crouched down in front of her to rip the tape from her mouth, "Are you okay commander?" he asked and T'Lan nodded before Heart then completed the removal of her gag by pulling the rag from her mouth.

"I am uninjured." she said, "However, I cannot free myself."

"That much is obvious." Heart said as he used his knife again to separate T'Lan wrists and ankles. T'Lan's hands remained wrapped in tape but Heart helped the Vulcan to her feet before he began to unwrap them.

Captain Edwards was waiting in the *Nightfall's* transporter room when Carr and T'Lan were beamed back to the Starfleet heavy cruiser.

"Grace." he said, "I'm glad to see you safe."

"Thanks to Captain Heart and Captain Shry, yes." she replied, glancing at the Shry who had also beamed back with some of the crew of the mining ship who had been taken alive, including both Captain Tall and chief engineer Chase, while Heart remained aboard their vessel.

"Nayal's taking a look at that cloaking device now." Shry said as security officers stepped forwards to take charge of the prisoners and escort them to the brig, "With any luck that will help narrow down where it came from even if we can't get any of the prisoners to talk."

Edwards nodded.

"Very good captain." he said before he looked at Carr and T'Lan, "What about you two? How are you feeling?"

"I am unharmed captain." T'Lan replied first, "Our captors indicated that they intended to sell me. Combined with their access to a cloaking device, logic suggests that this indicates they have Reman contacts."

"What about you Commander Carr?" Edwards asked, looking at his first officer as she began to rub her shoulders.

"I'm still not sure if my arms have gone back into place yet captain." she said, "I'm sure we could come up with a far more comfortable way of tying me up." then her eyes widened as she realised that she had just suggested she wanted to be tied up by Edwards, "I didn't mean-" she hastily added.

"Don't worry commander, I'm sure everyone here knows exactly what you meant." Shry interrupted, grinning, "Right T'Lan?" he added.

"The meaning of the words was clear." T'Lan responded.

"Well I want the pair of you to report to sickbay immediately." Edwards said, "Doctor King and Emma will check you out. I'll speak to you both later about what happened aboard the mining ship."

Cole had no need to look at the PADD he was holding, he knew exactly what the information displayed on it was but he wanted the effect of there being too much to remember as he recited the list of charges to Captain Tall while the man was sat in an interrogation room.

“Operating a starship without valid licence or safety certification. Possession of a cloaking device. Possession of unregistered weapons. Possession of unlawful weapons. Theft. Assault. Resisting arrest. Kidnapping. Unlawful imprisonment. Piracy. Attempted murder. Murder. Oh yes and my favourite, treason. Your crew fired on Federation troops Captain Tall.” Cole said and he tossed the PADD down onto the table in front of Tall, “Do you know what the penalty for all that is?”

“Life.” Tall replied.

“Death actually.” Cole said.

“The Federation doesn't have the death penalty in peacetime and the war ended more than a decade ago.”

Tall pointed out and he grinned.

“Perhaps so. On the other hand both the Klingons and the Cardassians do have the death penalty for these crimes and if the labelling on those cargo canisters in your hold is anything to go by then you've violated both of their territories to commit your crimes. Now I'm guessing that you didn't apply for entry visas to either species' territory so I suppose we can add illegal entry to the charges they'll be wanting to extradite you for.”

Cole said and Tall's face fell, “So what's it to be captain? Will you co-operate and spend the rest of your life confined to a Federation prison colony or shall I have our operations chief contact the Klingons. I'm sure that Captain Edwards will be only too happy to hold an extradition hearing as soon as they can send a warship to collect you. Then they can either stand you in front of a firing squad or just toss you out of the air lock the moment we beam you over to their vessel.”

“You can't do that.” Tall said, “You can only extradite me to the Klingons if I'm not likely to be executed.”

Cole shrugged.

“Then you'll just spend the rest of your miserable life on Rura Penthe. I suggest you pack a warm jacket. It's pretty cold there this time of year. Every time of year actually. Of course the Klingons could just lie and execute you anyway. I'm sure that you'll violate some rule that will enable whoever is in command of their ship to mete out summary punishment. I tell you what though, I'll see if I can get the Federation ambassador to the Klingon Empire to lodge a formal protest at the same time as your remains are being repatriated.” he said, sitting down opposite Tall, “Now how about you tell me where you got all those upgrades for your ship?” Tall snorted.

“So what if you hand me over to the Klingons? If I tell you anything then I'm just as dead. Probably by worse means than a bat'leth to the back as well.” he replied.

“We can protect you against reprisals.” Cole told him but Tall shook his head.

“Not from them you can't. They ruled most of this galaxy and they're going to take it back.” he said and Cole frowned.

“These people supplying you with weapons, they wouldn't happen to be able to pop in and out of thin air would they?”

“The Iconians are supplying weapons to pirates.” Cole told the senior officers of the *Nightfall* when they assembled in the briefing room.

“The Iconians?” West repeated, “Are you certain about that?” the alien intelligence that lurked within her had never shown any interest in interfering with mundane missions but whenever the Iconians were involved it would invariably attempt to undermine the *Nightfall's* actions.

“The captain of the *Latinum Heart* described seeing several of the Iconian creatures we nicknamed golems, the fleshforms as they call them. Plus he also described a human girl being seen with the individual who seems to be heading up their operation. An Iconian inhabiting the body of a Reman called Shintar.”

“That's a familiar name.” White commented.

“Quite Lieutenant Commander. It is the name-” T'Lan began.

“We all know the name T'Lan.” Edwards interrupted, “But what I don't get is what the Iconians hope to gain from arming pirates.”

“Captain Tall informed me that the Iconians don't appear to care how the weapons and defensive systems are being used.” Cole said, “Just as long as they are not used against any other ship carrying systems provided by them.”

“Are they operating out of a fixed base?” Hamilton asked and Cole nodded.

“Yes, apparently it's a planetoid that was once home to an Iconian outpost. There's no trace left of the original outpost but the Iconians have established a new one outfitted to install the systems they are offering on pirate ships and also to handle all of the stolen cargoes that are being taken back there.” he said.

“Which is where exactly?” Heart said.

“Ah, now that's the problem. Tall wouldn't answer that one. He's more afraid of Shintar than of anything I can threaten him with.” Cole said.

“Let me in there. I'll make him talk.” Shry commented.

"I won't have anyone being physically coerced into answering questions aboard my ship." Edwards said sternly.

"Of course not captain. But perhaps the reputation of my people can be of use." Shry suggested.

"Why not simply pull the location of the base from the mining ship's logs?" King asked.

"The crew of the *Latinum Heart* have been careful to cover their trail doctor." Max said, "I have examined their logs already and the computer subroutines that would record the ship's navigational data have been purged."

"In that case we'll just have to try and reconstruct their path ourselves." Edwards said and he looked towards West, "Lieutenant I want you to catalogue all of the stolen goods aboard the *Latinum Heart*."

"You want me to establish when and where each container was stolen?" West asked.

"I do." Edwards told her.

"Use Nikki if you need help." Carr added and West nodded.

"That sounds straight forwards enough." she said.

"Max while West is checking out the cargo I want you to examine the ship itself. Look for any clues that could point to it having been in a particular place at a particular time. These pirates must have been heading back to that Iconian base regularly so there must be a way of locating it from their ship." Edwards added.

"Of course captain. Though I feel I ought to point out that the nature of a cloaking device will make this harder. Low level energy will not be able to penetrate the cloak to affect the hull of the ship." the former Borg drone responded.

"Try anyway." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander Cole, I want you to keep trying with the prisoners. See if you can get any of them to talk."

"Yes captain." Cole replied.

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance captain." T'Lan said, "A mind meld would reveal-"

"You heard what I said about physical coercion." Edwards interrupted, "Using mind melds puts us on shaky ground legally. Any defence lawyer will claim you affected the prisoners' memories."

"A logical defence strategy." T'Lan replied, "However, we should consider that the benefits of preventing the Iconians from continuing their operation would outweigh obtaining prosecutions of the pirates we have arrested."

"They're murderers." Heart said, "What about the people they've already killed?"

"Acceptable losses probably." Shry commented.

"Regrettable." T'Lan responded, "But perhaps less than those that could be suffered if the Iconians are able to continue distributing illegal weaponry."

"Perhaps, but I don't want to ruin our chances of get convictions by rushing to gather evidence by inadmissible means." Edwards said, "Finally while the pirate ship and its cargo are being examined we need to check with Starfleet Command. They'll have full records of reported pirate attacks in the sector and we'll see if any of them can be tied to the *Latinum Heart*."

"I'll handle that." Carr said and Edwards nodded.

"Very good commander." he said, "Now everyone get to work. I want the *Nightfall* ready to assault the pirate base as soon as we locate it."

After the meeting broke up West returned to her quarters before heading for the transporter room to take her over to the *Latinum Heart*. She opened a drawer to reveal a PADD and a phaser. West picked up the PADD and then reached for the phaser. However, just as she was about to pick up the weapon she stopped, her hand hovering just over it.

"You know you should take it with you." the voice of The Controller said inside her head and West scowled.

"No." she replied, "I don't need it. The *Latinum Heart* is crawling with security guards and soldiers. Even if we do come under attack we'd be well protected." then West smiled, "But that's not why you want me to take the phaser, is it? You want to be able to use it on anyone who gets too close to finding out where that pirate base is, don't you?"

"Surely you can see that doing what I want is better for you in the long run. If you are no use to me then I may as well kill us both."

"Well do it then!" West shouted out loud and then there was a chime from her door alerting her to the presence of someone outside and she turned around, "Come in." she said and the door slid open to reveal Nikki.

"Are you okay?" Nikki asked as she entered West's quarters, "I thought I heard a shout."

"I'm fine. I just banged my elbow that's all." West replied and Nikki smiled at her.

"Really hurts, doesn't it? So mom says I'm to go over to the mining ship with you."

"That's right. Let's get going." West said.

"Sure. But if you're taking that phaser should I get one too?" Nikki said and West looked down to see that she was holding her phaser in her hand.

"No. I don't need this." she said, tossing it back into the drawer and pushing it closed.

The two women then exited West's quarters and made their way to the nearest transporter room where they were beamed over to the *Latinum Heart*, finding a member of the *Nightfall's* crew manning the transporter. "What's the current situation?" West asked as she and Nikki stepped down from the transporter pad. "The ship is secure. Security teams are present at key positions and Lieutenant Maximillian is in engineering examining the cloaking device." the transporter operator replied and West nodded. "Nikki and I are heading for the hold. We need to run an inventory of the cargo." she said and then she looked at Nikki, "Come on, the hold is this way." she added and the pair walked out of the transporter room. "So what's supposed to be so interesting about the cargo anyway?" Nikki asked, "Isn't dealing with stolen goods the job of the Federal Marshals?" "Captain Edwards hopes we can use the shipping documentation to plot the course that the pirates took since leaving their base." West explained. "So we'd get its location you mean?" Nikki said. "Exactly. Ah, here we are." West answered, coming to a halt at a doorway that had been left open and was being guarded by a pair of Starfleet security officers, "Nothing's been touched has it?" she asked one of them. "No lieutenant. Everything is exactly as it was after the MACOs and Imperial Guard finished shooting the place up." the guard replied and West walked through the doorway into the hold. Inside she found the same stacks of shipping containers that Doctor King had come across, and the labelling was still intact. "There are hundreds of them." Nikki said, "Where do we start?" West looked around. All of the shipping containers looked fairly mundane and there was nothing about any of them to make them stand out in a way that made West want to start with any particular one. "Having second thoughts?" the voice of The Controller said inside West's head, "Perhaps you should just send the little girl away and forget about all of this." "That one." West said, pointing to a container just inside the door. "What's so special about this one?" Nikki said, staring at the container. "Nothing." West said, shrugging, "It was just the one I was looking at when you asked."

7.

Captain Edwards was stood in his ready room looking out of the window at the *Latinum Heart* as it appeared to hover alongside the larger *USS Nightfall* when there was a chime from his door.

"Come in." he said out loud and the door slid open to permit Carr to enter, "Ah Grace." Edwards added, looking over his shoulder when the door slid shut again, "Take a seat."

"Thank you." she replied as she walked over towards the desk and sat down at the same time as Edwards sat in his chair as well.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Sore." Carr answered, "You know being tied up like I was used to used as a form of torture?"

"Are you sure you're fit for duty? I can get Lieutenant Commander Cole to fill in for you if you need more time." Edwards said but Carr shook her head.

"I won't be any more comfortable sitting around in my quarters." she said, "Besides, T'Lan's back on duty."

"T'Lan didn't almost have her arms ripped out of her sockets." Edwards pointed out.

"Well you're stuck with me." Carr replied.

"What, even if I can come up with a more comfortable way of tying you to your bed?" Edwards said and the two officers smiled at one another.

"God that was embarrassing." Carr said, "Especially considering how we've already had one security team burst in on us while handcuffed to each other naked." and the two officers smiled at one another, "Anyway captain," Carr continued, "I've been checking with Starfleet regarding recent pirate attacks in this sector and I've got multiple hits." and she handed a PADD to Edwards, wincing as she extended her arm.

Edwards frowned when he saw this.

"You are in pain aren't you?" he said.

"Some, yes. The problem is that every time I try to rub one shoulder or the other I just end up stretching the other and making it hurt instead." Carr said. Then she hesitated for a moment before adding, "David, could I ask you a favour?"

"Of course Grace. What do you want?"

"Could you rub my shoulders?"

"If you want. Stand up." Edwards said, getting to his feet and walking around his desk to stand behind Carr. He set the PADD she had given him down on the desk and they both looked down at it as Edwards began to gently rub Carr's back between her shoulders, "How's that?" he asked.

"Just a little higher." Carr replied before turning her attention to the PADD, "You can see that there have been more than a dozen reports of a pirate ship using a cloaking device in this sector during the past week alone." she said, "The pirates don't appear fussy about what sort of cargoes they target either. Anything will do."

"That suggests they've got a market for general goods." Edwards commented, "Like a base with a large population that needs supporting."

"One interesting thing is that in some cases the pirates appear to have used their cloaking device to get within transporter range of their target and then just beam the cargo from its hold to their own ship. If they're quick enough they can get the lot before the target crew even realise that they're under attack." Carr said.

"That's almost impressive." Edwards said, "If it wasn't illegal."

"Yes, it's a shame the effort some people will go to to commit crimes." Carr agreed and then she sighed,

"Captain I could let you do that all night." she added.

"Shall I come back later?" a voice said from behind them and Edwards and Carr spun around suddenly to see Emma standing in the doorway, the door to the bridge having opened without either of them realising.

"Emma!" Carr exclaimed, "How did you get in here?"

"I opened the door." Emma replied, "I'm tied into the ship's computer and have full medical access to every area on the ship. Remember?"

"Next time use the intercom and check first." Edwards said, "Now what do you want?"

"Doctor King ordered me to deliver this to you." Emma answered, holding up another PADD as she walked over to the two command officers and handed the device to the captain, "It's the medical report on the pirates that our troops captured. He says that they are all healthy enough to be questioned in accordance with Starfleet regulations but that if you do decide to let Captain Shry off his leash then could you at least let him know in time to back date the report to show whatever injuries get inflicted. I find it worrying that he is willing to do this."

"I expect the good doctor was joking." Edwards replied, "Perhaps an effort to introduce you to the concept of humour."

"Perhaps." Emma agreed, "Though I think that he would rather not be responsible for teaching me anything. In fact I think he considers me to be in his way. That report could have been sent electronically rather than in

person after all.”

“Doctor King will get used to you, don't worry.” Carr said, “Right now though all the duty schedules are based on you just being an EMH, not part of the crew. Once they've been sorted out you'll be able to handle shifts on your own like you did before he came aboard and you were the only doctor we had. Now get back to sickbay and if you have any questions about what your life is going to be like from now on just find someone and ask them.”

“Of course commander.” Emma replied before turning around and using her connection to the *Nightfall's* computer to open the door remotely again.

“And stop doing that unless it's absolutely necessary.” Edwards told her.

“Of course captain.” Emma said and then she left the ready room.

“Problem with the captain?” Hamilton asked from the helm station.

“No, though I think that he and Commander Carr were surprised when I walked in on them while she was telling him what she wanted him to do to her tonight.” Emma responded and with the exception of T'Lan, the rest stopped what they were doing and looked at her, “What's wrong?” she asked, “Did I say something I shouldn't have?”

Max did not require an environmental suit to survive in the vacuum of space and by magnetising the soles of his feet he was able to remain anchored to the hull of the *Latinum Heart* as he walked across it in search of any evidence that could point towards any specific place that the ship had spent a prolonged period of time. As he had predicted, the use of the cloaking device by the pirates had limited any forensic evidence based on natural background radiation hitting the hull but the cloak could do nothing about physical impacts, no matter how small and weak. The *Latinum Heart* possessed a navigational deflector like all starships had to have if they were to travel at warp speeds without even the smallest particle of matter in their path from tearing right through the ship from prow to stern and that would knock small objects out of the path of the ship, this would not be active while it was stationary and Max was hoping that the pirate base would be located somewhere that would deposit physical evidence to the *Latinum Heart's* hull that would not just fly straight off as the ship accelerated.

Using his Borg enhanced optics Max searched the hull as he walked across it, moving back and forth in straight lines along the entire length of the ship until he found a shallow crack in an outer hull plate and stopped to inspect it more closely. Magnifying his view as much as possible, Max saw that there were traces of a grey particulate substance that stood out against the blue of the hull and obviously was not part of the ship. Crouching down on the hull Max pointed his arm towards the crack and from this a pair of thin tubes emerged, extending towards the crack. As a drone in the Borg Collective, Max would have used these tubes to inject Borg nanoprobes into a victim to be assimilated. However, now his body contained nanites of Federation origin instead and he put them to much more benign uses. Injecting a few hundred of the nanites into the crack, Max waited as the tiny machines moved towards the particles caught in it along with them. Small enough to burrow into the particles caught in the hull, the nanites began to analyse the chemical make up of the substance, transmitting the result directly back to Max.

“Max to Lieutenant Commander T'Lan.” Max signalled, able to activate his combadge without tapping it.

“T'Lan here lieutenant. Go ahead.” T'Lan responded.

“Commander I need to speak with you.” Max said, “I have a chemical analysis that I would like you to take a look at.”

“Understood lieutenant. I will meet you in the chemistry lab in ten minutes.”

“Yes commander. Max out.” Max said and he deactivated his combadge only to activate it again immediately.

“Max to *Nightfall*. One to beam up.” he transmitted.

After materialising back aboard the *Nightfall*, Max made his way to the cruiser's chemistry laboratory. Unlike the majority of Starfleet vessels the size of the *Nightfall*, including standard Akira-class heavy cruisers, the ships of the *Nightfall* project had very limited laboratory space and most of what was available was used for research relating to the unique systems found aboard the ship itself. However, T'Lan was still a fully qualified Starfleet science officer and thus was fully capable of evaluating a chemical analysis. She arrived at the lab shortly after Max and found him waiting inside, having just completed downloading the results of the nanites' scan into the laboratory's local computer.

“Lieutenant.” T'Lan said in greeting.

“Commander.” Max responded, “The data I collected has been uploaded, it just requires your final analysis.”

“Of course.” T'Lan said as she walked over to the computer, “Though logic would indicate that you already have some suspicions about the subject of your analysis.”

“I do.” Max replied, “I believe that it is matter from an asteroid field. Ordinarily I would dismiss it as either the natural consequence of operating a mining ship or a result of pirates using an asteroid field as a hiding place from which to spring an ambush on an unsuspecting target. However, in the case of the *Latinum Heart* I would discount both of these possibilities. The former due to their not operating as a mining vessel at all and the second because their cloaking device renders the need to hide behind naturally occurring obstacles

unnecessary.”

“I concur with your assessment lieutenant.” T'Lan said as she began to study the data gathered by the nanites, “The particulate matter you have analysed is rock, however. We also know that navigation close to asteroid fields is hazardous and all vessels avoid it where possible. Therefore, the pirates must have approached an asteroid field out of necessity and logic suggests that having their base of operations within an asteroid field would be the only incentive to take such a risk.”

“That was also my conclusion commander.” Max said, “I was hoping that from the data I have collected you would be able to narrow down which asteroid field the pirate base is located in to a single system.”

“That may be possible. Your analysis does indicate the way in which the particles have been exposed to stellar radiation from their star. In this case it appears to be very strong. Unsurprising since a high level of solar radiation could help mask operations from long range scans by Starfleet patrols vessels such as ourselves. I would say that the asteroid field this sample originated from orbits an A-type main sequence star.”

“A-type stars are relatively rare.” Max commented and T'Lan nodded.

“Yes, they make up less than one percent of all stars. However, there are still six of them within this sector alone.” she said.

“Six systems is still more favourable than more than eight hundred.” Max pointed out, “We should take this to the captain. Perhaps combined with whatever information Lieutenant West is able to come up with it will be possible to identify a single system as the location of the pirate base.”

“Agreed. Though we may wish to give Captain Edwards some advance notice that we are on our way. If Emma is correct he and Commander Carr may be discussing a sexual relationship.”

“*SS T'kala*.” West read out loud from a shipping label while Nikki entered the name into a PADD that was linked via her combadge to the *Nightfall's* main computer and from there to the main Federation shipping database.

“Vulcan transport ship.” Nikki responded, “It hasn't been declared overdue yet but there hasn't been any contact with the ship for more than a week.”

“Then it's likely that it's been destroyed.” West said, “Call up the most recent check in location and tag it for investigation.” then she moved on to the next container and read out the name of the ship it appeared to have come from, “*Gul Velten*. That sounds Cardassian.”

“That's what the database says.” Nikki said, “There's a note here that the Cardassians have enquired about the freighter after it failed to return to their space.”

“Let me see what we have so far.” West said, climbing down from the stack of cargo containers and Nikki held out the PADD. West swiped her hand across the display to change from the list of vessels that the cargo inside the *Latinum Heart's* hold had come from, more than thirty different ships, to a star chart that noted the last reported position of each one and West saw that there was a definite pattern moving along the Romulan Neutral Zone. These attacks are spread out over more than fifteen light years. These pirates have been right across the sector.”

“Is there anything in the direction they came?” Nikki asked and West shook her head.

“No, it's dead space. No colonies and no outposts. The perfect place from putting a secret base you don't want anyone to just stumble across. The problem is that there are so many good places to hide a secret base that even knowing it's there isn't going to help us find it easily. I just hope Max and your mother have come up with something.”

“None of them are talking captain.” Cole told Edwards, “My men have questioned all of the prisoners but those that aren't pleading ignorance are insisting that they'd rather end up being executed by the Klingons than risk crossing the Iconians.”

“It would be interesting to know what they've done to make them so afraid.” Edwards said.

“My guess would be that they've killed enough people to convince the pirates that they're serious about maintaining security.” Cole replied.

“In that case they should have taken more precautions against the ships that get their upgrades being capture by us.” Edwards said before the intercom at his door chimed.

“Captain, it is Lieutenant Commander T'Lan. I have Lieutenant West with me.”

“Come in.” Edwards said and the door slid open to allow the two female officers to enter Edwards' ready room, “Given that both of you are here together I assume that you've been able to come up with a lead.” he added.

“Correct captain.” T'Lan said, “Thanks to a rock sample Lieutenant Maximillian located on the hull of the *Latinum Heart* he and I were able to narrow down the location of the pirate base to just six systems.” then she looked towards West and continued, “Combining that with the probable course that Lieutenant West was able to extrapolate from the details of the stolen cargoes we have identified a single system as the likely location.”

"T'Lan that's excellent." Cole said, smiling at his wife.

"Thank you." she replied.

"What's the system?" Edwards asked.

"That's the problem." West said, "It's a star called Neraten about twelve light years away."

"I'm not familiar with it." Cole said.

"It is A-type and the system features no habitable planets of any sort." T'Lan said, "The pirate base is most likely located in the system's asteroid belt which is particularly dense with a mean distance between objects of a metre or more across of less than ten thousand kilometres and a significant quantity of smaller matter such as the dust that Lieutenant Maximillian discovered on the hull of the *Latinum Heart*."

"Searching that is going to be difficult captain." West said, "We'll have to deploy a large number of probes and all our fighters to even stand a chance of finding the base before we get spotted and the pirates evacuate."

"In addition to the natural complications of searching the asteroid belt we cannot discount the possibility that the pirate base may be equipped with a cloaking device captain." T'Lan pointed out, "In which case locating it precisely may take several weeks even if it is possible at all."

Edwards smiled.

"Actually I think we can find the pirate base using just one ship without risking the pirates from cloaking it." he said and he got up out of his seat and moved to look through the window at the nearby *Latinum Heart*."

"Infiltrating aboard their own ship?" Cole commented, "Nice."

"I'm glad you like the idea commander." Edwards replied, "Because I want you to take command of the *Latinum Heart*. Select a crew drawn from our own crew or any of our ground troops and take the ship to the Neraten system. Hopefully they'll recognise your ship and permit you to approach."

"Are we to attack the base when we find it captain?" Cole asked.

"No, not immediately. I want to know as much about the facility as possible. Dock if you can and send a team aboard to assess how much resistance we can expect. We'll attack only after we're confident that we can overpower whatever defences the Iconians have in place. If necessary we'll have your team sabotage them before we arrive."

"Lieutenant, how do you fancy the idea of acting as my first officer?" Cole asked, looking at West.

"Me?" she replied, "But I'm not qualified to be a command officer."

"Yes you." Cole said, "You've acted as my temporary first officer before and I think we worked well together. Plus the *Latinum Heart* isn't a Starfleet vessel. What does it matter if you haven't passed the command test yet?"

"Okay, count me in." West said, smiling.

"I can't have you plundering my entire command staff." Edwards said to Cole.

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on it." Cole reassured him, "I'll take Shry as my tactical officer. Though you may not like who I want as my helmsman. Or helms-woman if you will."

"Rebecca." Edwards said, realising right away that his own daughter who was serving aboard the *Nightfall* as an assault shuttle pilot with the MACOs was who Cole wanted.

"Correct. She's a capable pilot by all accounts. Fortunately she got warp qualified privately before joining the MACOs since they don't operate any warp capable craft." Cole said and Edwards smiled.

"Yes she is." he said, "It's all down to someone having the foresight to suggest she take flying lessons at university in between wasting her time studying for the degree I warned her not to take. Speak to Max. See how long it will take to get the *Latinum Heart* fully operational."

"Yes captain." Cole said.

"Captain, I would suggest that Nayal accompany Lieutenant Commander Cole to the pirate base." T'Lan said, "She is experienced in operating cloaking devices after all. If his crew is detected by the pirates then it may prove useful to activate the cloak and withdraw."

"If you want her then she's your Cole." Edwards said and Cole nodded.

"I'll take her." he said, "Even if we don't get found out being able to search the asteroid belt without being detected could come in useful."



"So how does getting your first command feel?" Nayal asked when Cole and West entered the bridge of the *Latinum Heart* to find their newly appointed staff already present. None of those present wore either Starfleet or military uniforms.

"Pretty good." he replied before looking around at the haphazard state of the bridge's systems, "Mind you I think even an old Constitution or Miranda-class ship would be more prestigious than this heap of rust."

"Max did check the ship out as safe to fly." Shry commented from the tactical station.

"Yes, at low warp." West pointed out and then she looked at Rebecca, "Lieutenant Edwards, what speed do you think you can get this ship up to?"

"I'd say warp six point five. Maybe warp seven." Rebecca replied.

"Warp six point five will do. Let's not get ourselves killed before we even reach the pirate base." Cole said.

"Lay in a course one six four mark five. Warp six point five." West ordered.

"Course laid in." Rebecca replied.

"Engage." Cole ordered and Rebecca activated the *Latinum Heart's* warp drive.

"The *Latinum Heart* has successfully entered warp captain." T'Lan reported from the science station when the converted mining ship disappeared in a flash of light and Edwards nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Hamilton I want you to follow that ship the drop us out of warp point one of a light year away from the Neraten system. With any luck the pirates won't be able to detect us that far out and we'll be able to wait for Commander Cole's call before we reveal our presence to the pirates." he replied.

"Pursuit course locked in captain, engaging at warp six point five." Hamilton said and the *Nightfall* followed the *Latinum Heart* into warp.

"I thought it would be you." Shintar said as he strode into his quarters flanked by a pair of Nausicaan mercenaries and found The Girl waiting for him.

"What are they doing here?" she asked, looking at Shintar's guards and realising immediately that they were not Iconian agents but actual Nausicaans.

"There are a lot of dishonest people here." Shintar replied, "Now they can rob and kill almost anyone they want when they're away from here but I'd rather not waste my time having to worry about someone trying to put a knife in my back. Even though we both know that it wouldn't have much effect on me."

"Send them away." The Girl said, "What I have to say is not for them."

"They stay." Shintar said as he sat down, "If you're worried about them finding out who we are then don't. They already know." and The Girl frowned, "Your problem is that you have been too cautious." Shintar continued, "That is why our return to the galaxy has stalled and that is why the council opted to give me command."

"Well your recklessness has come back to bite you Shintar. Starfleet is on its way here now." The Girl said.

"You are certain about this?" Shintar asked.

"Of course I am. Some of the thugs you provided with weapons managed to get arrested and their ship has been seized. Our agent aboard the *Nightfall* was just about able to get a message out while her host slept. They're using the pirate ship they captured to infiltrate this installation."

"Which ship?" Shintar said.

"The *Latinum Heart*." The Girl told him.

"Ah, so they intend to use the cloaking device to get close do they?" Shintar said and then he got back to his feet and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" The Girl called out after him.

"To make sure that we are secure." Shintar responded, "Unlike you I have taken precautions against this sort of thing. Let yourself out."

The Girl continued to stare at the door even after it had closed behind Shintar, scowling. Then she suddenly turned around and vanished.

Rebecca brought the *Latinum Heart* back out of warp on the very edge of the Neraten system, the bright blue star clearly visible on the bridge's main viewscreen.

"Now at one half impulse captain." she announced and Cole nodded his head.

"Sublieutenant Nayal, is the cloaking device functional?" he asked.

"Fully captain." the Romulan woman replied.

"Then activate it sublieutenant." Cole said.

"Cloak activating." Nayal reported.

"Captain weapons and shields now reading as off line." Shry reported.

"That's normal." Nayal said.

"Okay we should proceed with the next stage of the plan. Lieutenant West are there any signs of the pirate base?" Cole asked, looking at the nearby console where West stood.

"None captain." she answered. Then she frowned.

"Something wrong lieutenant?" Cole said when he noticed this.

"Captain I'm picking up tachyon emissions."

"Tachyons? What's the source?"

"There appear to be several of them. I'm picking up multiple emissions from several asteroids about sixteen light minutes from here. Captain I think it's a tachyon detection grid." West said.

"Well there goes our surprise attack." Shry said.

"Captain we won't be detected by the tachyon detection grid as long as we remain outside the perimeter established by the asteroids." Nayal said, "I'd suggest keeping us at least three light minutes away."

"Lieutenant Edwards set a course for that asteroid field, one half impulse." Cole ordered, "But do as Nayal says and keep us beyond the range of the tachyon detection grid."

"Yes captain, adjusting course now." Rebecca said.

West stepped back from her console and moved to stand directly behind Cole.

"So what's your plan now?" she asked softly.

"Right now I don't actually have one." Cole admitted, "But the closer we get the more information we'll be able to gather." then he hesitated before adding, "Hopefully."

The *Nightfall's* fighters were all being moved up into the main hangar when Edwards arrived to check on the preparations to assault the pirate base. Lined up in pairs the entire squadron could be launched in under two minutes and would allow the *Nightfall* to concentrate on the base itself while its fighters provided a screen against attack by any pirate vessels in the system.

"Commander White." he called out when he saw White inspecting his own fighter.

"Yes captain?" White responded and he began to climb down from the attack craft.

"I just thought I'd come and check on progress myself." Edwards said.

"Well eleven of my ships are ready to fly." White said, "But there's a problem with Drummer's fighter. The warp core keeps going into thermal shutdown."

Edwards looked towards the rear of the hangar and there he saw a Peregrine-class fighter being dismantled by a ground crew.

"I'll speak to Max." he said, "Maybe he can spare some more engineers to give you a hand."

"That would be useful captain. Though I have to say that I'd really appreciate it if you could get Max himself to come down here. Being able to interface directly with machines tends to speed up repairs if you take my meaning." White replied and Edwards nodded in agreement. However, before he could reply his combadge activated.

"Captain." Carr's voice said.

"Go ahead commander." Edwards replied.

"Captain we've just received a transmission from Starfleet command marked for command eyes only." Carr told him.

"About the pirate base?"

"I don't think so captain. I think it's a personnel report."

"Okay, I just need to stop off in engineering and then I'll be right up. We can look at it in my ready room when I get there."

"Yes captain." Carr said and then as the channel was shut off Edwards turned back towards White.

"Looks like the result of Jenna West's command officer's test has just come in." he said.

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"Cloaking devices are temperamental things." the voice of The Controller said as West made her way back towards the bridge after a short break, "No one would know if you disabled it. In fact you'd probably be doing all of your comrades a favour by forcing Robert to withdraw."

West smiled.

"You're scared." she muttered, "Maybe scared that you'll die here or maybe scared that we're going to ruin another Iconian plan."

"It is only a matter of time before we succeed. The Federation is nothing compared to the ancient Iconian Empire. You have what? A couple of hundred systems limited to the Alpha and Beta Quadrants? We had tens of thousands of worlds across the galaxy."

"And yet it all fell apart." West commented, "Now shut up and let me get on with my work."

"They know you're coming. That's why they activated their tachyon detection grid. While you slept last night I sent a message to my superiors. Think about that Jenna. I'm getting better at influencing your actions while you're awake and I can control you entirely while you're asleep."

"Not for long." West said, "The more you think you're learning about me, the more I'm learning to keep you in your place."

It was then that West reached the door to bridge, a new one fitted by the *Nightfall's* engineers to replace the one destroyed by Captain Heart and his MACO assault team. This slid open to allow West onto the bridge where Cole was standing beside Nayal, the pair of them monitoring the *Latinum Heart's* sensors.

"Ah lieutenant," Cole said when he saw West, "you should see this."

"You've found the base?" West asked.

"Yes, unsurprisingly right in the middle of that tachyon detection grid." Nayal said.

"Like a spider sitting at the centre of a web." Cole added as West hurried over to join him.

"Are those warp signatures?" she said.

"Four of them. It looks like there are other ships docked here already." Cole said.

"Plus we've got five more on approach." Shry commented.

"I'm thinking that we should position ourselves somewhere out of sight before dropping the cloak and following them." Cole said, "I'd like to get a look at what's inside that place before calling in the *Nightfall*."

"I don't think that's a good idea captain." West said, remembering the words of The Controller.

"Why not?" Cole asked.

"I doubt that the pirates operate a tachyon detection grid all the time. They take a lot of power to operate so I think they've had advanced warning about us and activated the grid to prevent us from sneaking up on them. They probably know the identity of our ship so if we drop our cloak we'll still be in the same position as if we tried to run the grid while cloaked." West explained and then she smiled briefly, thinking about how she had just taken what The Controller had told her and turned it against the Iconians.

Cole nodded, the *Nightfall's* command staff were well aware that there was a spy aboard the cruiser passing information to the Iconians, but fortunately for West they did not suspect that she was playing host to one of their enemies.

"Then if the *Latinum Heart* isn't good enough we need to find ourselves another ship." Cole said, "Lieutenant West, I want to know exactly how many people are aboard each of those other pirate ships heading for the base."

Passive sensor scans of the pirate vessels heading towards the base in the asteroid field revealed powerful weapons aboard all of them, obviously beyond the limitations set by Federation law. Three of the five had relatively large crews, with at least twenty people aboard. On the other hand the final two were much smaller raiding vessels with correspondingly smaller crews. The vessel with the smallest crew was a Nausicaan vessel and it carried a crew of just six. However, for humans to come walking off a Nausicaan vessel would undoubtedly attract more attention than was desirable for what was supposed to be a covert operation. This left just one ship with a crew of nine, just within the limits of the *Latinum Heart's* transporter to be able to lock onto and beam them all out at once. In preparation for this Cole gathered together all of the security officers and ground troops he had brought along with him for this mission, twenty-six in total and deployed them in the transporter room. All were armed with rifles and they aimed these towards the transporter pad while the operator prepared the device for operation.

"I have a lock on them all now sir." she announced and Cole nodded.

"Energise." he said.

Nine columns of glowing light appeared on the transporter pad before the crew of the pirate vessel materialised right in front of the Federation troops. Caught completely unaware by the transporter, some of

the pirates had been sat down and they now collapsed as they materialised still in a sitting position but without a chair to support them and promptly collapsed while others staggered after being beamed away mid stride.

"Gentlemen," Cole called out just as the pirates realised that they had more than a dozen phaser and projectile rifles pointing towards them, "I take it that I have your undivided attention?"

"What the hell's going on here?" one of the pirates yelled as he picked himself up off the transporter pad, "You know the rules. No attacking ships in this system. It's safe ground."

"You'll have to forgive me." Cole replied, "Unfortunately no-one passed that bit of information along to Starfleet. By the way you may all consider yourselves under arrest."

One of the pirates foolishly reached for a disruptor he had tucked into his belt but when he pointed the weapon and pulled the trigger nothing happened, the power cell having been drained as a precaution during the transport process. In response to this attempted attack one of Cole's security staff took aim with his own weapon and there was a sudden flash of red as the beam from a phaser set to stun struck the pirate, rendering him unconscious and sending the disruptor skidding across the transporter pad.

"Somebody pick him up." Cole said, "Then get all of them secured."

With the MACOs and Imperial Guard covering them, the security guards moved forwards to take the pirates into custody.

"I want a lawyer!" one of the pirates shouted as he was being dragged from the room.

"And you'll get one as soon as you are handed over to the Federal Marshals." Cole told him. Then he reached out to the transporter console to activate the intercom built into it, "West." he said.

"Here captain." West responded from the bridge.

"I'm taking a team over to the other ship to double check that it's secure." Cole told her, "When it is I want you to leave a skeleton crew here under Captain Shry and we'll head for the base."

"Yes captain. I'll wait to hear from you."

"Captain I have Lieutenant Commander Cole for you." Nikki said, looking up from the ops console where she was filling in for West. Then she frowned.

"Is there a problem?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not sure captain." Nikki said.

"Let me see." Carr said and she got up and walked over to see what her daughter was looking at.

"Look at this." Nikki said, pointing, "The transmission isn't coming from the *Latinum Heart*. The identification tag claims to be a ship called the *Grand Experience*."

"She's right captain." Carr added, looking at Edwards.

"Put him through." Edwards said, "Maybe he can sort this mystery out for us."

"Yes captain." Nikki said and moments later the main bridge viewscreen switched to show Cole standing in the bridge of a ship that was obviously not the *Latinum Heart*.

"Correct me if I'm wrong Lieutenant Commander but that doesn't look like the ship you left here with." Edwards said.

"Ah. No captain. We've located the pirate base but it seems that they were tipped off about our arrival. They've got a tachyon detection grid in place so we couldn't approach with the *Latinum Heart*. Instead we've seized another ship and I'm going to take a small team aboard the base to try and assess its defences. I'm letting you know this just in case anything happens to us."

"Very well commander. The *Nightfall* and its fighters can be with you in a matter of minutes if we're needed."

"Thank you sir. I've attached the base's location to this message along with all the data we've gathered so far. Hopefully you'll be able to use that help plan your assault."

"Thank you commander. We'll take a look at it now. *Nightfall* out." Edwards replied and then the view screen went back to a view of the star visible outside the ship.

"We've got the data files captain." Carr said and Edwards nodded.

"Transfer them to my ready room. I'll take a look at them there. In the mean time bring the ship to yellow alert just in case Commander Cole signals for help. If not I'll call a briefing when I've been through the data."

The pirate base was built into an asteroid that was just over ten thousand metres across. Being this size it was far too small to maintain an atmosphere of its own or have a significant gravitational pull. Instead the base was fully sealed and scans indicated that it was maintaining an artificial gravity field. The structure of the base consisted of several squat structures up to five hundred metre across at the base with sides that sloped inwards before reaching horizontal roofs that featured landing pads and communication antennas. Short enclosed passageways connected these structures together while a single tall spire rose up from the centre of the complex and some of the pirate ships docked at the base were connected to this. The tower and some of the larger structures also included obvious hangars and several smaller vessels could be seen inside these, increasing the number of pirate vessels in the system even further.

"I'm picking up some weapon arrays." Nayal commented, "Looks like several pulse cannons."

"That's nothing compared to the weapons we found aboard the *Latinum Heart* or this ship." West commented and Cole nodded in agreement.

"Maybe the Iconians don't expect this place to be attacked." he said.

"Or maybe they don't care." Rebecca suggested.

The *Grand Experience* was contacted by the pirate base as soon as it reached the outer edge of the asteroid field where the base was located. However, there was no formal challenge or request for identity. Instead it was just a simple order.

"*Grand Experience*, follow beacon seven for docking." the controller announced before the channel became silent once more.

"Any ideas sublieutenant?" West asked, looking at Nayal who in turn studied the sensor readouts on the console she and Rebecca were both sat at.

"We're picking up several repeating beacons." the Romulan woman replied, "Each one seems to be coming from a docking port or hangar and sending out a simple numerical identification."

"So where's number seven?" Cole asked.

"Dead ahead." Nayal said, "The docking port set into the main tower about half way up."

"Then take us in." Cole said and Rebecca nodded.

"Moving in. Switching to thrusters only." she said, slowing the ship down so that it could safely navigate the asteroid field to the docking port. The docking port itself consisted of a large magnetic grapple that was shaped to fit around a standard air lock and as Rebecca guided the *Grand Experience* up to the port the grapple suddenly activated, latching onto the hull of the ship with a loud 'thud' that echoed through the ship.

"We've got a positive seal." Nayal announced and Cole nodded.

"Excellent. In that case Nayal, West, I want you two with me. We'll take a couple of troops along with us for back up and take a look around."

"What about me?" Rebecca asked.

"Stay here and keep the ship ticking over. I'll leave a security team at the air lock to make sure no-one comes aboard but if they fail or if you hear that anything has happened to us then I want you to get out of here. The *Latinum Heart* is still cloaked so just make for the *Nightfall* and get your father to bring the ship in."

"Why don't men ever ask for directions?" West said as the team from the *Nightfall* made its way down the tower and began to explore the rest of the complex. The level of the tower where the *Grand Experience* was docked was largely deserted and Cole had had his team of infiltrators make their way to a nearby turbolift before descending to the more crowded lower levels and it was clear that the base housed far more than just the crews of the pirate vessels docked here. If anything it was a fully functioning community. The population of this community came from many different species, some of them Federation members while others were independent. Now Cole was simply following the general flow of the crowd as he led his team through the complex.

"If we start asking questions we could give ourselves away." Cole replied, "Now how about you run a discrete tricorder scan and see if you can find out where this place's weapons and shields are being controlled from?" West took a quick look around to make sure that no-one was paying close attention to her before she slid her tricorder from beneath her jacket. Fortunately the pirate base was not the sort of place where people took too much interest in what strangers were doing and West was able to start her scan without being noticed, keeping the tricorder hidden from view with her arm.

Very quickly the scan picked up several strong power sources and also the concentrations of minerals that were often used in the manufacture of weapons. However, none of these were what attracted West's attention. The scan also picked up a shadowy area that was obviously on a level just beneath the surface of the asteroid. This defied being scanned but there was obviously a strong power source located right by it. West could not recall having ever encountered anything resembling this before and yet it also felt familiar to her.

"We need to go down." she said "About two levels and then head back in the direction of the tower."

"No." the voice of The Controller said, "Stay away from there." and West smiled.

"We definitely need to go down." she said again.

"Okay, no need to keep saying it." Nayal commented.

"Lead the way." Cole told her and West began to walk back the way they had come. Along the way she noticed a ramp leading downwards that the team had walked right past on their way from the tower. Now West led them down this ramp to a sub level where the crowds were much thinner.

"This way." West said as she continued to walk.

"Notice how a lot of people down here are carrying weapons?" Nayal commented and Cole nodded.

"At least we blend in with that." he commented, referring to the phasers that his team carried. Given that all of the team's weapons were the latest designs for Starfleet, MACOs and the Imperial Guard they were all holstered in such a way that they could not be clearly seen, such weapons were not common in the hands of criminals. The bulges in their clothing that the holsters created were obvious, however and an expert eye

would immediately see that they were armed.

"It's right ahead." West said as she glanced at her tricorder again.

"What is?" Nayal asked, "You still haven't told us what we're looking for."

All of a sudden Cole came to a halt where the passageway ended at a walkway that overlooked a large chamber that was filled with components for starship mounted weapons and deflector shield generators, but it was not these armaments that had drawn West to this location. Instead it was the active Iconian gateway at the far end of the chamber.

"I don't believe it." Cole said, his eyes widening as he stared at the portal that was guarded by a pair of heavily armed Iconian robots while several of the milky white muscular humanoids known as fleshforms carried more weapon components out of the portal.

"How did you know this was here?" Nayal asked, looking at West.

"It was just a hunch." West replied but it suddenly dawned on her what the truth was. The Controller had known what the tricorder readings represented and somehow West had been able to pick up on that. Rather than The Controller using her, she had been able to use The Controller.

"This explains how they're getting Romulan technology over the border past the tachyon detection grid." Cole said, "They could be getting that stuff from anywhere in the Romulan Star Empire."

"Or even further away." West pointed out, "They could have bases like this all across the galaxy."

"Stand aside for Lord Shintar!" a voice cried out from behind the team and they turned to see Shintar being escorted down the same ramp they had just come down. He was easily identifiable by being the only Reman in the group while several Nausicaans acted as guards and an assortment of other hangers on swarmed around him. In return Shintar looked towards the team from the *Nightfall* and the alterations made to his physiology by Iconian technology enabled him to pick out Cole and Nayal. Despite having never met either of them in person before he had seen images of them, supplied to him by a Ferengi who had captured the pair of them as well as T'Lan and he recognised them instantly.

"Them!" he yelled pointing towards the group, "Seize them!"

"We've been made!" Cole snapped as he took his phaser from beneath his jacket and fired it at a nearby man who had just drawn a weapon of his own and he screamed as he fell from the walkway. The other members of the team also drew their weapons as a large space opened up around them as people hurried to get out of the line of fire.

There was a pulse of green light as a disruptor was fired from nearby and it struck a MACO just as he was firing at another armed man. The MACO gasped momentarily as the light spread to envelope his entire body and when it faded there was nothing left of him.

"No!" Shintar cried out, "I want them alive!"

"Just surrender." The Controller told West, "I'll get you back to the *Nightfall* easily."

"Run!" West shouted as she fired her phaser at one of the Nausicaans protecting Shintar and she attempted to dive out of the way of the beam, however it was too slow and came crashing down to the floor with a large hole burned in its side.

"This way." Cole said when he spotted an open hatchway a short distance along the walkway and the team ran towards it, firing their phasers towards anyone who appeared to be getting ready to stop them. Cole was first through the hatchway and then he counted the others off as they followed him up until the final team member, an Andorian soldier was just about to come through when he was shot in the back and he fell forwards. Cole dragged the Andorian's body the rest of the way through the hatchway before closing it. Then he used his phaser to shoot the control mechanism before anyone could open it from the other side,

"Hopefully that will hold them long enough for us to put some distance between us and them." he said and at the same time he reached into his jacket for the combadge he had hidden in a pocket and activated it,

"Lieutenant Edwards do you read me?"

"Yes, but only just. There's some sort of interference." Rebecca responded from the *Grand Experience*.

"That's not important right now. We've been discovered, I need you to launch the ship and get out of here as fast as you can. Make contact with the *Nightfall* and tell your father that the Iconians have an active gateway set up here. We're going to try and locate the shield generators so he can beam us out, but that gateway has to be destroyed. Cole out." and before Rebecca could respond he put the combadge away again.

“Okay we're out of here.” Rebecca said to the Andorian now sat beside her, “Disengaging clamps.” however, when Rebecca attempted to separate the ship from the docking port nothing happened.

“The station is on lock down.” the Andorian beside her said, “Clamps won't disengage.”

“Damn.” Rebecca said, “None of the weapons on this ship will adjust to fire at them either. Oh well, I suppose that just leaves one option. Powering up impulse drive.”

“How do you know that the docking port will give way before our hull does?” the Andorian asked.

“I don't.” Rebecca replied, “I'm hoping that the base crew won't either and that as soon as I fire up the impulse engines they'll release the lock down to let us get away rather than risking losing half their tower.”

Rebecca then brought the raider's impulse drive on line and the entire ship began to shake as even at a minimal setting it strained to escape from the docking port. The severity of the shaking began to increase as Rebecca increased the output of the impulse drive but there were no immediate signs of the base crew releasing them.

“Lord Shintar, there is a vessel attempting to escape from the tower.” one of the base control staff told Shintar via his communicator.

“Which vessel?” Shintar asked.

“The *Grand Experience*. It docked less than three hour ago.”

“That must be the ship the Starfleet team used to get here. Release it.” Shintar said.

“Release it?”

“Yes, I said release it. Then shoot it down as it flees.”

“Yes Lord Shintar. It shall be done.”

The *Grand Experience* lurched forwards suddenly as the docking clamps were released and there was nothing to hold the ship back.

“Whoa!” Rebecca exclaimed as she was forced to act quickly and shut off the impulse engine before the ship was sent hurtling into another nearby asteroid in the field. At the same time the Andorian beside her raised the ship's shields just in time as one of the pulse cannons that protected the base opened fire.

“You know I really think they don't like us.” Rebecca said, “Let's get out of here.” and she fired the ship's thrusters, steering around the asteroid directly ahead of them as the pulse cannon continued to fire.

Fortunately the *Grand Experience's* shields had been substantially upgraded and the outdated weapon was unable to inflict any damage before Rebecca steered the ship behind the asteroid, using it to block the base's line of sight.

Continuing under thruster power only, she piloted the ship all the way out of the asteroid field by the shortest route possible and as soon as it was clear she activated the main subspace antenna.

“*USS Nightfall*, do you read me?” she transmitted.

“Rebecca.” Nikki's voice responded.

“That's Lieutenant Edwards.” Carr added.

“Sorry mom. I mean Commander Carr.”

“This is the *Nightfall*.” Captain Edwards said, “What is your situation?”

“The pirates have discovered Lieutenant Commander Cole and his team. The commander ordered me to get clear and warn you.”

“Warn us about what?” Edwards asked.

“There's an active Iconian gateway at the base. Commander Cole said it has to be destroyed. The commander and his team are going to try and disable the base's shields so you can beam them out.”

Rebecca answered and Edwards nodded.

“Very well, we're on our way.” he said, “Get out of the system and wait for us. We'll take care of the base. *Nightfall* out.”

As soon as the connection to the *Grand Experience* was broken Edwards looked towards Hamilton.

“Mister Hamilton, maximum warp if you would.” he said.

“With pleasure captain.” Hamilton replied, smiling and he pushed his hands forwards on the *Nightfall's* manual flight controls

“Red alert.” Edwards added, “All crew to battle stations.”

“The base's shields just went up.” West said as she studied her tricorder, trying to determine where the shield generators were located. After passing through the hatch the remainder of the infiltration team, Cole, West,

Nayal and a single Starfleet security guard had managed to make their way to a utility tunnel that was lined with ducts carrying data and power lines as well as piping water around the base.

"So we better hurry up and find those generators then hadn't we?" Nayal replied.

"That should be easier with the shields up." West commented, "The generators will be consuming more power."

West then suddenly turned around and faced in the opposite direction before turning again.

"Make your mind up." Nayal commented.

"The problem is the emitters." West said, "They're consuming power as well."

"Well can't we just knock out one of them and wait by the hole it puts in the shield?" Nayal said.

"Shintar and his men would know where the hole was and they'd know we were there as well." Cole pointed out, "Plus we don't exactly know which direction the *Nightfall* will approach us from. If it comes from the opposite one then there'll still be a shield between us and the ship."

"This way." West said at last, pointing in the direction they had been heading to begin with, "The main shield generator is this way. About five hundred metres ahead and two levels down."

"Report." Shintar said sternly as he walked into the base's operations centre, "Why don't I have Starfleet prisoners on their knees in front of me pleading for their lives?"

"Lord Shintar we have tracked them to a service tunnel." one of the command staff said, "With their ship gone it is obvious that they will attempt to procure another means off this asteroid. They will have to try and steal a ship. I'm sending as many guards as I can to protect the hangars while putting together another team to go into the utility tunnels after them."

Just then an alarm sounded and Shintar turned towards another of the command staff who gave a report before Shintar even needed to ask for it.

"We have an incoming vessel. Warp signature is Federation." he said.

"The *Nightfall*." Shintar hissed, "Tell every ship here to launch immediately. Warn them that if that Federation starship isn't stopped it will destroy this base and they won't have anywhere to obtain the spare parts they need to keep their new weapons operating."

"Yes Lord Shintar." the operations technician responded.

With crews scattered around the base, the launch of the pirate ships docked at the base was somewhat haphazard. Although there was an understanding that ships using the base would act in its defence if called upon to do so, no plans of action had every been designed nor had any exercises ever been carried out. The result of this was that when the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp it found itself facing a motley collection of vessels ranging from warp-capable shuttles up to modified transports around half the length of the Starfleet cruiser that did not represent the entire force of ships being prepared to protect the pirate base.

"I am picking up more ships powering up that are still docked at the base captain." T'Lan announced.

"We could do with taking some of these out before they can launch." Carr said, "It'll help to not have to fight all of them at once."

"Agreed." Edwards said, "Launch fighters and move us into attack position."

The *Nightfall's* fighter squadron was deployed in pairs, forming a line in front of the cruiser as it flew towards the waiting pirate ships. These held their position rather than moving to intercept the Starfleet force, none of the pirate crews wanting to risk being the first vessel to come into firing range of any of their attackers.

Meanwhile, as the *Nightfall* and her fighters headed for the waiting pirates T'Lan used the opportunity to conduct more detailed scans of their ships and base.

"Captain I am reading more than fifty thousand life signs in their base." she announced.

"That's more than we can safely transport." Carr pointed out and Edwards nodded.

"Commander Hamilton can we engage the asteroid that the base is built on using our mass accelerators?"

he asked. The primary difference between the ships of the *Nightfall* program and ordinary Akira-class heavy cruisers was the pair of mass accelerators mounted along the twin hulls of the ships. Running almost the full length of the vessels these could accelerate a solid duranium slug to a significant fraction of the speed of light. Like the projectile firing rifles carried by the cruisers' ground troops, the mass accelerators were designed primarily as a defence against Borg vessels. The Borg had always shown themselves to be unable to adapt to physical attacks and the *Nightfall* had been designed to exploit this flaw against their ships and the Borg drones themselves. Against other starships the mass accelerators were next to useless, most vessels could easily move out of the path of the projectiles before impact and they would also be easily deflected by modern shields. However, an obvious secondary use of the mass accelerators was for planetary bombardment. The impact of the projectiles on a planetary surface had the potential to cause severe damage with very little effort and this had made the entire project controversial as some Federation member worlds questioned why the Federation was giving itself this capability. This feeling was especially strong on the outer colonies who also saw the ground forces assigned to the ships being drawn from the core worlds of the Federation only.

"Their shields cover the entire asteroid captain." Hamilton replied as he studied the pirate base through his heads up display, "We'll have to wait until Cole can take them down."

"Do we have a fix on him?" Carr asked.

"I'm picking up four combadge signals from inside the base." Nikki said, "Lieutenant Commander Cole, Lieutenant West, Sublieutenant Nayal and Crewman Broadhurst. We can beam them out as soon as the shield drops."

"T'Lan where are the base's primary power generators located?" Edwards asked.

"They appear to be at the heart of the asteroid on which it is constructed captain." T'Lan replied.

"Excellent. In that case as soon as the base's shields drop I want our people beamed out of there. Then disable their power plants. Those structures must be air tight for this place to exist so the occupants ought to be safe enough until Starfleet can send ships to pick them up." Edwards said.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman, enemy vessels coming into range. Do we have permission to engage?" White's voice suddenly said over the communication system.

On the display built into his own headset Edwards saw a diagram showing the fighters moving ahead of the *Nightfall* now close enough to the pirate ships to be able to engage them. None of the pirates had fired on the Starfleet vessels yet but Edwards was not willing to take the chance on them getting in the first shot with a weapon capable of destroying a fighter outright and killing its pilot.

"Confirmed Snowman. Target weapons and engines where possible. Shoot to disable. Good hunting." Edwards told him.

"Understood *Nightfall*. We're going in." White replied and the fighter squadron surged ahead, breaking formation to split into pairs as they began by targeting the smaller pirate vessels. Most of these smaller ships were little more than shuttles that had been upgraded with more powerful weapons. However, despite their upgrades they were no match for the purpose designed Federation attack fighters, a fact that was not lost on their hapless pilots and seeing the Federation craft heading for them caused most of them to panic.

The majority of the shuttles arrayed around the larger pirate vessels suddenly broke from their own poorly organised formation and tried to move away from the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron, but the effect of this was to give White and his pilots exactly what they wanted – a clear shot at their engines.

"I've got a lock. Firing phasers." White announced to his pilots as he fired at a pirate shuttle. The twin phaser beams struck one of the shuttle's warp nacelles and there was a momentary flash before the nacelle went dark and the shuttle began to spin with drive plasma leaking out of the damaged engine.

"Snowman we have one on our tail." White's wing warned him and White quickly checked his sensors to see that another pirate shuttle had broken from their lines to try and get behind the two Starfleet fighters while they were occupied with White's target.

"I see them Quarterback." White responded, "On three, turn and burn. One. Two. Three!"

The pirate shuttle fired at White's wingman just as the two fighter fired their thrusters so that they spun through one hundred and eighty degrees to face behind them while still continuing in the same direction. This sharp turn spread the impact of the phaser strike over a larger area of the fighter's shields and it failed to penetrate. On the other hand when both fighters fired their phasers back at the shuttle simultaneously they were easily able to overwhelm its shields. In this case the damage inflicted by the fighters was more than the shuttle could stand and it exploded, showering the two fighters with debris as their pilots fired their impulse drives to propel themselves in the direction they were now facing.

While the pirate shuttles were engaging the Peregrine-class fighters the larger craft were turning their attention to the following *USS Nightfall*.

"Captain I am detecting multiple weapon locks." T'Lan warned.

"Okay let's not take any chances. We've know they're getting military specification weapons. Tactical, target phasers at the largest pirate vessel and open fire. Take out weapons and engines only if possible." Edwards said.

"Yes captain." the tactical officer standing in for Cole replied and moments later the *Nightfall's* phasers opened fire, sending multiple beams of bright red energy towards a slow moving freighter. The weapons that had been added to this ship had been mounted on the exterior of its cargo hold and this made them an easy target for the *Nightfall's* tactical officer who was able to target the mountings without any concern about the effect it would have on the rest of the vessel. Even where the phaser strikes burned through the freighter's hull they damaged only unoccupied sections of the ship.

"Captain I'm monitoring a build up of power in their warp drive." T'Lan said as another of the externally mounted weapons was blown away from the freighter.

"They've had enough." Carr said, "They're retreating."

"Let them go, we've got enough other targets to deal with." Edwards said, "Tactical move onto the next ship."

"Incoming." Hamilton exclaimed when he saw a flash from another of the pirate ships and a torpedo raced towards the *Nightfall*.

"Romulan plasma torpedo captain." T'Lan added as she scanned the weapon.

"Divert auxiliary power to shields." Carr ordered just before the entire ship shook under the impact of the

torpedo, "Damage report." she added.

"Err," Nikki began as she attempted to get the information from her console, "shields down to eighty-two percent but I'm not seeing any structural damage at all."

"I'm not giving them another chance." Edwards said, "Tactical, target that ship with quantum torpedoes and fire for effect. Three rounds."

The three torpedoes were fired simultaneously from three different launchers and all of them turned straight towards the pirate freighter. The pirates did their best to try and take evasive action but their vessel was made for hauling heavy loads, not out turning torpedoes. The result was that the freighter presented its flank to the three quantum torpedoes and all of them struck it at the same time. They easily penetrated the basic shielding of the freighter before their warheads exploded directly against its hull, one towards the prow, one amidships and the final one towards the stern. The effect of this was immediate and dramatic as the entire freighter broke apart under the multiple detonations.

"Your fleet appears to be having a bad day Shintar." The Girl said as she appeared in the operations centre of the pirate base behind him and both of Shintar's Nausicaan bodyguards reached for their weapons.

"Ignore her." Shintar told them, "She is irrelevant." then he looked at The Girl, "If you've come to gloat you're wasting your time. The shields surrounding this facility are too strong for that Starfleet vessel to penetrate them, they are our technology not the primitive versions that Starfleet uses and most of my fleet is still intact."

"Lord Shintar!" one of the command officers suddenly cried out, "We have reports of phaser fire near the main shield generators."

ii.

Two guards protected the base's shield generators and Cole and Broadhurst fired at the same time to take them both down before either could get off a shot. However, as soon as this was done the Starfleet team revealed its presence to the other pirates nearby.

"Quick! They're sealing the doors." West said as the large doors ahead of them that separated the underground passageway they were in from the chamber beyond began to close.

"Move!" Cole snapped and the team began to run. Another pirate appeared, this one armed with a disruptor and he fired at Broadhurst. The blast caught the security guard in his chest and he collapsed on the spot. In response to this Nayal returned fire before the pirate could either fire again or retreat out of sight. Despite firing on the move her aim was good and the pirate also fell, his disruptor sliding across the floor. Another pirate attempted to grab hold of this but a single blast from Cole's phaser made the disruptor explode before the pirate could reach it.

The three surviving team members rushed through the doorway into the shield generator room while the doors slammed shut behind them.

"You!" Cole shouted at the assembled pirates, "Up against that wall." and he pointed to a large blank wall and waved his phaser at them to emphasise his point. With their hands raised, the unarmed pirate engineers moved towards the wall and Cole looked at Nayal, "Cover them." he told her, "West and I will see about taking down this shield."

Nayal nodded but a knocking sound from the door behind them made her look around.

"Perhaps we ought to do something about that door before they find a way of overriding the lock." she suggested.

"I'll do it." West replied, "You take a look at the shields commander."

"Okay, get to it. The sooner we're out of here the better." Cole said and the group split up, Nayal moving to watch the pirates, West heading back towards the door and Cole for the shield generators that took up most of the room.

As West approached the door she adjusted her phaser to a high thermal setting, her intention being to weld the two halves of the door together. However, as she raised the weapon she was interrupted.

"Open the door." The Controller told her, "You have to. I've already told you that I can get you back to the Nightfall."

West scowled and pointed the phaser at the top of the door.

"You don't control me." she said and she fired the weapon.

"No!" The Controller exclaimed, powerless to prevent West from maintaining the phaser beam long enough to fuse the two halves of the door together, effectively sealing them shut.

"Doors sealed." she called out, holstering her phaser again and then turning to join Cole as he studied the shield generators.

"Good, give me a hand with these." Cole said, "I can't make head nor tail of this design. It's like nothing I've seen before."

"Perhaps we should get one of these guys to help." Nayal suggested, "I'm sure one of them would rather not have me shoot his arms and legs off one by one."

"I think we'll skip the random torture for today." Cole replied, "Lieutenant West see if your tricorder can provide us with nay more information."

West produced her tricorder and began to scan the shield generators that were laid out all around her.

Simply destroying them would have been easy enough by targeting any point that had a great deal of power running through it. However, most sabotage would also produce a large explosion that would kill everyone in the room as all of the energy built up inside the shield generators was released. The trick was to be able to shut them down in a controlled fashion.

It was obvious that the shield generator did not conform to any technology currently produced by the Federation, the Klingons, Romulans, Breen, Ferengi or even what remained of the Dominion in the far off Gamma Quadrant. However, West found it strangely familiar.

"This is Iconian technology." she said.

"How can you tell?" Cole asked.

West knew that she could not admit the truth to Cole, that she was now finding herself able to use the knowledge of the Iconian consciousness dwelling within her so she quickly tried to think up a reasonable explanation.

"It reminds me of what we saw on Iconia." she said, "Only this is functional."

"Well can you make it not function?" Cole said.

"Give me a moment." West replied and Cole looked at the door where a small spot was glowing brightly as

the pirates on the other side attempted to cut through it.

"I don't now how long that door's going to hold." he said, "Plus if there are Iconians about then we could be up to our neck in those golems at any moment."

"This!" West snapped and she reached out and ripped a cluster of cables free from the shield generator. At once large parts of the machinery began to go dark and silent as they lost power.

"What did you do?" Cole said in amazement and once again West found herself unsure of how to reply without revealing the existence of The Controller.

"Pulled the analogue input feed I think." she said, "Hopefully the control system thinks every bit of the shield is operating over maximum capacity and is trying to scale it back."

"Well let's find out shall we?" Cole said and he tapped his combadge.

"Captain the pirate base's shields are collapsing." T'Lan reported, "Twenty percent, fifteen percent. Ten. Five. Their shields are down."

"Well done Lieutenant Commander Cole." Edwards said.

"Captain the commander is signalling us now." Nikki said.

"Put him through." Carr told her and Nikki nodded.

"Cole to *Nightfall*. Do you read me?" Cole's voice asked.

"Yes commander we read you." Edwards replied, "The base's shields are down. Well done."

"It was all Lieutenant West's work captain. She figured out how this Iconian shield generator works." Cole said.

"Then pass on my congratulations to her." Edwards said, "Now hold on we're on our way in to pick you up."

"We'll be waiting captain. Cole out." Cole replied.

"Snowman this is the *Nightfall*." Edwards said, activating the communication system built into his chair.

"Captain, I'm reading the base shields as down." White responded.

"Confirmed commander. We're going in to pick up our people. Clear us a path." Edwards said.

"Gladly *Nightfall*. Snowman out."

Edwards then looked towards Hamilton.

"Mister Hamilton take us in." he said, "Be ready to fire the mass accelerators as soon as we have our people."

"Yes captain. Everyone hold on." Hamilton replied and he turned the *Nightfall* sharply towards the pirate base.

"Tactical transfer control of the mass accelerators to the helm and clear us a path through the enemy ships. You may use all force necessary." Edwards ordered.

"Captain," T'Lan said, "Lieutenant Commander Cole and his team are on a subsurface level. Even with a transporter lock it may prove difficult to beam them out. Perhaps I should-"

"Go." Carr interrupted, "Make sure your husband gets back here safely."

"Yes commander." T'Lan replied, releasing her safety harness and hurrying to the turbolift.

White had his fighters gather around the *Nightfall* again, positioning themselves to the rear of the cruiser so that they would not obstruct its line of fire but from where they could rapidly dart forwards to intercept any pirate vessels that looked like they were going to get past the *Nightfall's* own phasers and torpedo launchers. With his new authority to engage any pirate vessels in the path of the *Nightfall*, the tactical officer fired its weapons at any non-Starfleet vessel ahead of the cruiser and rapidly cut a heavily modified transport ship in half. This prompted many of the pirate ships to move aside and try to outflank the cruiser but each time they attempted to approach it some of the escorting fighter squadron peeled off and made a rapid strafing run across their hull.

Upon reaching the outer edge of the asteroid field Hamilton reduced the *Nightfall's* forward velocity but he did not cut from the impulse drive to thrusters. Instead he made the maximum use of his manual controls to steer the five hundred metre long starship as if it was one of the twenty-five metre fighters still trailing it, weaving around one lump of rock after another until the pirate base was finally visible clearly straight ahead of them.

"Okay that door's about to give way." Cole said, "Nayal get back over here. We need to concentrate our fire when they come through-" but before he could finish there was a loud 'clang' as a section of the door dropped out of place. Then instead of heavily armed pirates rushing through the hole a small round object was hurled into the room instead.

"Grenade!" West yelled as she saw what it was and then there was a sudden flash and a loud 'bang' that filled the entire room.

Cole collapsed, blinded by the light of the stun grenade and his ears were filled with a ringing sound as he lost all sense of what was going on around him. All of a sudden he felt a hand on his chest and heard a voice calling out his name.

"Robert. Robert can you hear me?" T'Lan asked as she knelt over him.

Cole groaned.

"T'Lan?" he said as he regained focus in his eyes and saw the face of his wife looking down at him, "Why are you aboard the pirate base?"

"I am not. I beamed you and the rest of your team back to the *Nightfall*."

Cole smiled.

"I love you." he said.

"And love you also." T'Lan replied.

"According to Bradley you're supposed to say 'I know' in response to that cousin." Nayal said as she sat up on the transporter pad.

T'Lan then tapped her combadge.

"T'Lan to bridge. The away team is safely aboard though I recommend having them admitted to sickbay immediately." she said.

"Understood T'Lan." Edwards replied, "See to it." then he looked at Hamilton and added, "You may fire at will Mister Hamilton."

Hamilton was ready for this command and he turned the *Nightfall* to face directly at the asteroid on which the pirate base was built. Then squeezed the triggers built into his flight controls and fired a rapid three round burst from each of the *Nightfall's* mass accelerators. The duranium projectiles raced towards the asteroid unguided while Hamilton turned the *Nightfall* away, plotting the shortest possible course to take the ship out of the asteroid field to where it could safely go to warp.

As each projectile slammed into the asteroid it produced a massive plume of debris from the force of the impact. The projectiles did not come to a complete stop though and as they buried themselves in the asteroid even more of it splintered behind them. This continued until the projectiles reached the subsurface levels of the pirate base where its fusion reactors were located. The duranium projectiles punched right through the armoured reactor housings, piercing the plasma filled cores inside. The extreme heat vaporised the projectiles almost immediately but by this point the damage was already done and the cores breached, spilling plasma out of the failing magnetic containment vessels and destroying the reactors entirely.

"Target destroyed captain." Nikki reported, "I mean the reactors. I'm still reading the base and most of the life forms."

"That will do Nikki." Edwards replied. Then he looked at Carr, "You have the conn." he told her, "Make sure our fighters are recovered and organise a rendezvous with our people on the pirate ships. Then get us away from here as fast as possible. Starfleet can send in a force to pick up whatever's left now."

"Where are you going captain?" Carr asked as they both got to their feet.

"To sickbay." he said, "I want to see how Cole and the others are. Plus I've got news to break."

People panicked in the darkness of the operations centre, using any handheld device that was capable of emitting light to produce some to see by.

"Well so much for your shields." The Girl said, "Somehow I doubt that the council will look favourably on your first mission as leader. It didn't end too well."

"Perhaps they will be able to see the bigger picture better than you." Shintar replied, "There are still pirate ships out there with weaponry that means Starfleet will have to expend significant resources to tracking them all down and destroying them one by one. In addition I have proven the concept of supplying arms to such groups to buy their loyalty. Something we will need when we retake our rightful place as masters of this galaxy. We can set up a dozen more bases such as this and spread chaos and disorder across the quadrant. Then while the petty empires who control what we rightfully should attempt to deal with that I will reveal the next stage of my plan to the council and in one fell swoop I shall bring this entire galaxy to its knees. What once was ours-

"Shall be ours again." The Girl said before both she and Shintar vanished.

When Edwards entered sickbay he found all three surviving members of the team Cole had taken aboard the pirate base sat on biobeds. King was examining Cole while T'Lan stood by him and Emma was stood next to West, examining her.

"Welcome back to the *Nightfall*." he said, then looking at King he added, "How are they?"

"They'll be fine." King replied, "They just got caught by the blast of a stun grenade before T'Lan here was able to beam them out."

"Couldn't you have managed that five seconds earlier cousin?" Nayal said, "It would saved us a lot of pain and discomfort."

"I executed the transporter procedure as soon as it was safe to do so." T'Lan replied, "And I would like to remind you that we are not related. The effects of the stun grenade do not give you the right to refer to me as your cousin."

"So what happens next captain?" Cole asked.

"We left a lot of disabled pirate vessels behind us." Edwards replied, "Starfleet will need to arrange for sufficient transport to evacuate all of the survivors, plus those from the pirate base itself."

"That's a lot of people." Cole commented.

"Yeah, that place was crowded." West added.

"I'm sure Starfleet will figure something out lieutenant commander." Edwards replied, looking at West and her eyes widened suddenly. Then she brushed aside the hand Emma was using to hold a medical probe in front of her face.

"Captain did you just call me lieutenant commander or I am concussed?" she asked.

"I ought to take that as an insult." Emma commented, "I would have already told you if you had a concussion."

"Congratulations." Edwards said, "You passed the test with flying colours and Starfleet has confirmed your promotion to lieutenant commander to come into effect at the start of your next shift."

West grinned.

"Well that's something else Lieutenant Mackey can't use against me any more. Hey, now I outrank him can I order him to stop making me see him twice a week?"

"Sadly no." King said, "That little twerp isn't going to give up his only real patient any time soon either, mark my words."

"I have to see him as well now." Emma commented, "Something to do with making sure I make the transition to a living person smoothly."

"Which would be far easier without Mackey butting in every week." King said.

"Agreed." West added, "Emma I think you should try asking other people about any issues you have and just smile politely when Mackey asks you lie down on his couch."

"Actually there is one thing that has been bothering me Jenna. May I call you Jenna?"

"Sure. Why not? What's the problem?"

"Oh no. Here we go again." King said, shaking his head.

"I think I should leave." Edwards said.

"I wish I could." King replied. Then as Edwards was leaving Emma spoken again.

"I was thinking about my first sexual encounter." she said and West stared at her in surprise, "I was created to be fully functional after all."

"Thanks for that by the way." King said to T'Lan.

"There is so much to consider." Emma went on, "Male or female? Should I ask them or wait to be asked? Do I need to?"

"Emma I don't think anyone can really advise you on that. I'm sure eventually you'll get close to someone and then you'll be ready." West said nervously.

"I already tried asking the person I'm closest to and they declined." Emma said and West frowned.

"Who?" she asked.

"Me." King replied, "Frankly I wish she'd just shave her head and decide she's Deltan. That way she'd have to take a vow of celibacy and we'd have one less thing to contend with."

"Well if I'm fit to leave I think I'll turn in for the night." West said, "I want to be at my best for my first shift as a lieutenant commander. Oh and Emma, I wouldn't mention sex to Lieutenant Mackey at all. Frankly it wouldn't surprise me if he'd never had any."

Returning to her quarters West prepared for bed. Standing in her bathroom she calmly brushed her teeth and when she was done she sat down the toothbrush and picked up the phaser she had placed beside the basin. Checking that this was set to maximum she pressed it against her head and stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"Well?" she said, "Aren't you going to kill me? After all I've defied you again. What's more I've figured out that

I can access your knowledge and use it against you. You don't control me, from now on I control you.”

“I wouldn't be too sure about that.” The Controller replied, West's reflection seemingly speaking the words to her, “As soon as you fall asleep I can do whatever I want.”

“Not tonight you can't.” West said and she lowered her phaser and looked at the blankets and pillow she had set up on the bathroom floor.

“Sleeping in here isn't going to help you.” The Controller said but West just smiled. Then she walked out of the bathroom and to her bed where a set of padded cuffs with locks and the keys for them lay. She put the phaser down on the bed and picked up the cuffs, locking them around her wrists before returning to the bathroom.

“Computer, seal door. Code West one.” she said out loud.

“Confirmed. Door closing, all command access functions suspended.” the computer responded and the bathroom door slid shut, sealing West inside. Then she returned to the mirror and held up her cuffed wrists.

“Good luck trying to break out.” she said, “The computer will only release that door when I need to get dressed tomorrow or if there's an emergency. Other than that we're stuck in here for the night without any computers or tools you can use to make trouble.” then she went over to her improvised bed and lay down in it, pulling a blanket over her, “Lights out.” she said and the bathroom was plunged into darkness as West's reflection glared at her angrily from the mirror.