

STAR TREK

NIGHTFALL

THE SLOVER CRISIS

SOMETHINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



A DOOR ONCE OPENED

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL ***THE SLAVER CRISIS***

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

A transit hub built by the ancient Slaver Empire offers the promise of access to an entire galaxy of their former colonies along with the artefacts still there. However, the crew of the *USS Nightfall* are not the first to have discovered the transit network and when they begin their exploration they only draw attention to their presence.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 69530.7 *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A in the Meltara Sector.

"I'll raise another ten." Sally Hamill, chief medical officer of the *USS Nightfall* said and she slid another chip towards the pile in the centre of the table.

There were four women sat around the table and despite none of them being in uniform all four were senior officers of the Akira-class heavy cruiser. Opposite Hamill sat Leyla Sodyne, the ship's Betazoid science officer. While many people avoided gambling with Betazoids owing to their well known ability to read minds there was no such issue with Sodyne, she was one of the few members of her species for who the ability failed to develop and she was no more able to sense her opponents' hands than any of the others. On the other sides of the table sat T'Lan, the ship's Vulcan first officer and Nayal its Romulan chief of operations. Of the four Hamill was clearly doing the best, with a stockpile of chips significantly larger than Nayal, the owner of the next largest stockpile.

"The good doctor seems confident in her hand." Nayal commented. Then after a moment's pause she added, "Or her ability to bluff."

"I wonder if the captain would still describe her as 'sweet' if he knew how well she could lie?" Sodyne said and both she and Nayal smiled.

"Well T'Lan? You know your husband the best, would he be shocked at our doctor's deviousness?" Nayal said.

"Devious?" Hamill said, "I'm not devious."

"I understand that bluffing at poker is considered part of the game. Robert would not be offended to know that Doctor Hamill participated." T'Lan added.

"Then the doctor's virtuous reputation is secure. I'll see your ten though." Nayal said and she too flicked a chip towards the centre of the pile.

"I'm in too." Sodyne added and she dropped one of her chips into the pile, "Plus another ten." she added as a second chip was placed on the stack.

"Well cousin? Your turn." Nayal said, looking at T'Lan and then taking a sip from her drink.

"As I keep pointing out we are not related." T'Lan said before adding some of her own handful of chips to the pot.

"Anyone would think you weren't enjoying this T'Lan." Nayal said, "Would you be happier if the game involved a tight leather dress?"

Hearing this both Sodyne and Hamill looked at T'Lan. Then they turned to Nayal.

"What do you mean by that?" Sodyne asked.

"Our beloved first officer spent some time as a member of a fantasy roleplaying group aboard the original *Nightfall* that Bradley ran. He designed and replicated figures to look like the player's characters and had them all dress up like them as well. While T'Lan was a member she was an elf mage whose clothing allowance didn't extend very far down her thighs." Nayal explained and she smiled.

"My participation was only temporary." T'Lan said.

"Just long enough for her to grab the captain's eye. I took over for her." Nayal said.

"And you got the short dress?" Sodyne asked.

"No I asked Bradley for something long and clinging." Nayal said.

"I recall that Lieutenant Commander Hamilton created a number of figures based on your likeness, not all of which were clothed in that fashion. Or at all." T'Lan said.

"Those weren't for the game though." Nayal said and then she smiled and added, "We had our own special game for those."

"I'm not sure I want to know." Hamill commented.

"Your bet doctor." Nayal told her and she looked at her hand before sliding more chips across the table.

"I bet fifty." she said.

"Fifty?" Sodyne exclaimed, "I'm starting to think that you just got me involved in this so you could take all my money."

"What money?" Hamill said, "We don't use money."

"I suspect that Doctor Hamill is bluffing and that my hand is the strongest." T'Lan said, "Unfortunately I lack the chips to remain in this hand. I must fold."

"Maybe we can come to another arrangement then." Nayal said, "Something more interesting?"

"Oh no." Sodyne said, "When I was learning this game at the Academy whenever anyone said let's make this interesting they were expecting me to start taking off my clothes. I'll tell you what I told them, if you want to see a naked Betazoid then get invited to a wedding on Betazed because my clothes are staying on."

"Don't worry Leyla." Nayal said, "I've got something far better in mind."
"I don't like the sound of this." Hamill said nervously.
"I think you will when I explain." Nayal said.
"Then perhaps you should explain rather continuing to delay." T'Lan suggested.
"If you insist cousin." Nayal replied and before T'Lan could protest about her use of the word 'cousin' she added, "Robert."
"The captain?" Hamill responded, frowning.
"Do you know any other Roberts that T'Lan is married to?" Nayal said.
"Do I understand that you are suggesting I offer a sexual encounter with my husband as a stake?" T'Lan asked.
"T'Lan's about as likely to do that as Sally is to wager her violin." Sodyne commented but Nayal ignored her.
"I'm proposing exactly that." Nayal said, "One bet, winner takes all. A night with Captain Cole. Something I'm sure everyone here would enjoy."
"What makes you think that exactly Nayal?" Sodyne said.
"Perhaps because I've seen you kiss him." Nayal replied, "Plus he once called Sally possibly the sweetest and most innocent person you could hope to meet. In my case with him married to T'Lan I know that he'll have the stamina to satisfy me. Not many humans do, fortunately for me Bradley was one of them but with him gone my choices are limited. The captain's obvious good looks are a bonus too."
"Good looks?" Sodyne said.
"You'd don't think he's good looking? Hands up everyone around this table that has seen the captain naked." Nayal said and she raised her hand. Sodyne then sighed before she raised her hand as well.
"It was hardly by choice for either of us." she said.
"T'Lan obviously you have since the pair of you are married and have a child. So get your hand up." Nayal said.
"If I must." T'Lan said as she raised her hand.
"That just leaves you doctor. You must have seen everyone aboard naked at least once." Nayal said.
"Only in a professional capacity." Hamill protested before she also raised her hand.
"So everyone knows how good he looks." Nayal said as the women all lowered their hands, "So how about it? Winner takes all, we just put our cards down and the one with the best hand gets the entire pot plus T'Lan's bonus. Then those of us with chips left can carry on. Is everyone in?"
"You know just for a laugh I'm going to say yes. I may as well thank him for saving my life from those religious fanatics who wanted to turn me into a domestic slave." Sodyne said.
"So that's two in. What about you doctor?" Nayal asked, "Don't you find the captain appealing?"
Rather than respond though, Hamill looked nervously at T'Lan.
"Oh okay." she then exclaimed, "The captain is strong and brave and charming and he helped me when I really needed it. I'm in."
"There you go T'Lan, so what do you say?" Nayal said, looking at the Vulcan, "Are you as confident in your hand as you say?"
"I am. However, there is no logic in the suggestion you have made." T'Lan said.
"So you're not that confident after all. I thought Vulcans didn't lie." Nayal said.
"We do not." T'Lan replied.
"Except when it's logical." Sodyne commented.
"Of course." T'Lan said.
"So what's the problem cousin? Make the bet and prove me wrong." Nayal said.
"Very well I shall demonstrate that my deduction concerning the strength of my hand is correct." T'Lan replied.
"Okay so on the count of three we all place our cards on the table." Nayal said.
"I don't know. Maybe this isn't such a good idea after all." Hamill said.
"Too late to back out now doctor." Nayal said and then she began to count, "One. Two. Three!"
All four women immediately placed their cards face up on the table so their values were visible and Nayal smiled.
"Well isn't that interesting?" she said. However, before anyone else could speak T'Lan's combadge activated.
"Commander T'Lan this is Lieutenant Commander Ghroc," the voice of the Nightfall's Bolian second officer said and T'Lan tapped her combadge.
"T'Lan here lieutenant commander, go ahead." she said.
"Sorry to interrupt you commander but we've just received a signal from Professor Denning, he says his team have found something but they need us to investigate it." Ghroc explained.
"Did he expand on that lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.
"Sorry no. He just said something had been found and we should go and meet him. The captain has ordered us to proceed at warp six and he wants all senior staff to gather in the briefing room. He's discussing the matter with the professor now." Ghroc answered.

"Very well lieutenant commander. We are on our way. T'Lan out." T'Lan responded before she tapped her combadge to deactivate it, "I believe our game is done." she added, looking around the table.
"Hey but what about-" Nayal began, pointing to the pile of chips in the centre of the table.
"Our game is over. You cannot change the result now lieutenant." T'Lan told her.

Lieutenant Commander Davis, the *Nightfall's* chief engineer was the last of the senior officers to arrive in the briefing room and Cole looked up at him as he entered.

"Sorry for the delay captain, there was a slight issue in engineering." Davis said.

"Better late than exploding." Martin, the tactical officer commented.

"You mean better he's late than we're all permanently late?" Nayal added and Martin smiled.

"That's the idea." he said.

"If we can begin?" Cole said and the other officers all looked at him, "Good. Now Professor Denning says that his latest investigation has uncovered something interesting on a planet in a system he calls Toros." he started to explain.

"A stasis box?" Sodyne asked eagerly but Cole shook his head.

"No, his team haven't found any new Slaver technology." he replied. The Slavers were an ancient and long extinct species that had built an empire a billion years earlier. Now though much of what was left of them were ruins. However, a number of artefacts from their period had also managed to survive, some of them intact. The majority of those that were found intact were discovered inside the incredibly advanced and highly prized stasis boxes that were occasionally discovered. The stasis technology of these boxes appeared to be perfect and even living beings could be found inside them, preserved alive and without having aged even a day after a billion years, "What they have found are fragmentary records that all point towards a single location."

"Another site on the planet?" Sodyne said.

"Somewhere in space." Cole told her,.

"Then the professor requires us to correctly determine what is at this location?" T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Exactly. The sensors aboard Foster's transport ship haven't picked up anything but if we're talking about a physical object then its orbit could be imperfect. No-one in the professor's team is qualified to make the necessary calculations to determine what effects the system's gravity would have so they need us. The professor has sent us the location data he recovered as well as their scans of the system. I want a basic calculation done by the time we reach Toros when we'll run some scans of our own. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I want you to make the calculations. We may be dealing with a space station of some kind in which case we'll need a boarding party. Commander T'Lan will lead that team but I want Martin and Davis to be ready to provide personnel from their departments."

"Captain do you think it's another shipyard?" Davis asked, remembering the rare instance of an intact Slaver orbital facility that had been lost when the system it was located in was destroyed by a supernova, itself triggered by another surviving example of Slaver technology.

"Who knows?" Cole replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

"And what about the chances of those Ferengi turning up again?" Martin added. Professor Denning's research team had originally contracted with a Ferengi vessel to keep them supplied but the Ferengi crew had seen a better opportunity for profit by stealing the artefacts that the team had discovered.

"If we detect the Ferengi then we'll give them one chance to surrender. If they refuse we'll use whatever force is necessary to prevent them from escaping." Cole said.

"You know they won't surrender. We should just open fire as soon as we see them. One quantum torpedo should be enough to deal with that transport of theirs." Nayal said.

"Nevertheless we will give them a warning lieutenant. Starfleet doesn't look kindly on commanding officers who shoot first and ask questions later." Cole said. Then he looked at T'Lan and added, "Perhaps you should cover that in your training for the bridge officer commander's test T'Lan."

"I shall make a point of it captain." she replied.

"Very good. If there are no other questions then I think we can finish this meeting now." Cole said.



When it came to studying anything to do with the ancient Slavers, Sodyne preferred to carry out the study in the privacy of one of the *Nightfall*'s science labs. As well as the usual scientific instruments carried aboard a starship this room also contained an example of a Slaver stasis box. This particular example was large enough to contain a humanoid lying down in it and although it was empty it was kept closed and active. This was done to exploit a peculiarity of stasis box technology that was the only reliable method of locating them from a distance. If multiple stasis boxes were brought within a light year of one another then they would all emit a pale green glow. When Cole entered the laboratory though the box appeared inert, indicating that there were no other such devices within a light year.

"You asked to see me lieutenant commander?" Cole asked Sodyne while she sat at a computer terminal sipping from a mug.

"Yes captain, something about these numbers that the professor gave us just doesn't add up." she replied.

"Oh really? What would that be?" Cole said, walking over to the console Sodyne was sat at and then sitting down on another nearby chair.

"Well anything orbiting a star should have two different properties, a distance equation and an orbital velocity and as far as I can tell the data supplied by the professor has neither." Sodyne said and Cole frowned.

Having risen through the ranks of the services branch before being promoted to command the *Nightfall* his training in piloting and navigating a starship may not have been as extensive as that of the dedicated command division but he was still familiar with the basics of orbital motion.

"How can that be? What did Professor Denning send?" he said.

"He sent us a distance and a bearing. As if he was describing how to reach a location on a planet from another in the most direct path." Sodyne told him.

"So you think we should be searching the planet the professor's team is on?" Cole said.

"No captain, definitely not. At least not unless the professor has got the distance massive wrong. I mean out by a factor of hundreds of millions. You see I think the numbers we've been sent just refer to a fix point on the outskirts of the Toros system. Of course for an object to remain at a fixed point like that it would need a propulsion system to stop it from slowly being drawn closer to the star or any planetary bodies by their gravity and over a billion years or so it's unlikely that any such propulsion system would still have enough fuel to remain in place. It would have fallen into the star or crashed into something else on its way there." Sodyne explained.

"I see. Do the numbers make sense for an exact position though?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied, "Using the direction of a fixed point, the galactic core for example, we have a reference for the bearing and then the distance puts whatever is being described as at a point that would be between the average orbits of Neptune and Uranus if it was in Earth's system." she said.

"And you've been up all night thinking about this?" Cole said and Sodyne looked at the time.

"Captain I'm sorry. I just lost track of time." she said when she saw that it was just after three in the morning, "I've been running on coffee."

"Then I think that this can wait until you've had some proper sleep. Are you going to come along or do I need to order you into bed?" Cole said and Sodyne suddenly spluttered as she tried to take another sip of her drink, "Sorry, perhaps I should have phrased that better." Cole added and Sodyne nodded.

"You think?" she said.

"I'm serious about getting some rest though. I don't want you falling asleep at your post and I'm sure that Doctor Hamill would agree that sleep is better than coffee." Cole said.

"Yes captain. I'll put the rest of this back in the replicator in my quarters." Sodyne replied.

The Toros system had little to make it stand out from any other system. The most significant feature, one that would normally be the main focus for a Starfleet vessel upon its arrival was the second planet of the system that was class-M. Even though there was no native sentient population the ecosystem would still warrant a detailed investigation. However, when the *Nightfall* arrived in the system and dropped out of warp it remained on its outer edge.

"I'm not picking up the professor's transport captain. No debris either though so I don't think it's been destroyed." Nayal said.

"Logic suggests that the professor would have his ship on the surface of the second planet." T'Lan added and Cole nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne commence wide area scans of the system centred around the location given by the professor. Lieutenant Nayal try hailing the professor. We'll see if he's found anything else since his previous communication." Cole ordered.

Both officers immediately began to follow Cole's orders and moments later Nayal looked up from her console.

"Captain I've established contact but it's with Miss Hewitt, not the professor." she said.

Erica Hewitt was a grad student serving as an assistant to Professor Denning and was a senior member of his team.

"Put her through lieutenant." Cole said and when Nayal nodded to indicate that she had patched him into the channel he added, "Hello Miss Hewitt, this is Captain Cole."

"Good morning captain." Hewitt responded and Cole instinctively glanced at the time displayed on the compact console built into his chair. This showed that the time aboard the *Nightfall* was mid afternoon so it seemed likely that Professor Denning's team were working on local planetary time instead of the standardised time typically used aboard Federation starships.

"Hello captain. Welcome to Toros." she responded.

"Thank you. Is the professor available?" Cole asked.

"I'm sorry, no. He's out at the secondary site with Trellan. Doctor Terry is dealing with a medical issue and Jack Foster is off hunting." Hewitt said. This list accounted for all of Professor Denning's senior staff, Trellan his Romulan assistant, Terry the team's medical officer and Foster the owner of the transport vessel that Professor Denning's research team used to travel the Meltara Sector.

"Hunting?" Cole commented.

"What is your medical issue Miss Hewitt? Do you require assistance from us?" T'Lan added.

"No, a couple of our people were attacked by some local lifeform that's all. The bites were impregnated with some kind of venom. Doctor Terry says she can treat it but a sample of the pure poison would help. That's why Foster and a couple of the other students have taken our phasers and gone out try and find the creatures." Hewitt explained.

"Very well, but remind Doctor Terry that we're out here if she needs us. I can have Doctor Hamill and a full medical team with you in under an hour." Cole said.

"A platoon of ground troops could help with keeping any nasty lifeforms at bay as well." Martin added. Ships of the *Nightfall* program included a number of features that were not standard for Starfleet vessels, one of which was the inclusion of two full companies of ground troops. The original *Nightfall* had used a company of Earth MACOs and one of Andorian Imperial Guard, however neither of those worlds had been willing to provide more troops for the newer vessel and instead the ground troops were Starfleet's own ground combat specialists. These lacked many of the skills of the standing armies of Federation member worlds but it was the intention of the *Nightfall* program to bring them up to the same quality.

"I don't think we need an army. Or any medical help right now but I will pass on your message captain." Hewitt said.

"And what about the information you discovered about something in the outer system? The reason the professor summoned us here. Have you found anything to add to this?" Cole asked.

"No captain. We have just what the professor has already told you. The location has been found in multiple sources though. Three before the professor contacted you and one more since." Hewitt answered, "Why, is there a problem with the information?"

"Let's just say that my science officer found an irregularity. We'll let you know what we find. *Nightfall* out." Cole said before he closed the channel, "Does anyone have anything?" he added.

"Nothing showing up on sensors captain." Nayal replied.

"Agreed captain." Martin added, "There are no other vessels out there and no-one is scanning us."

"It appears that the professor's information was incorrect." T'Lan commented.

"Maybe you were right Sodyne. An artificial object that ran out of fuel would have fallen into the sun a long time ago." Cole said but when Sodyne did not respond he turned to look at her, "Leyla?" he said and she suddenly looked at him.

"Yes captain?" she said.

"I was saying that it looks like you were right. Whatever was here when the Slavers controlled this system isn't here now." Cole said.

"Maybe not captain. It could just be something that we can't see." Sodyne replied.

"Something cloaked?" Ghroc said.

"A lidar sweep will only work if there's internal noise but I can organise our fighters into an improvised tachyon detection grid." Martin suggested.

"I don't think that a tachyon detection grid will find anything either. I don't think that whatever it is that's out here is in our universe at all." Sodyne said.

"So that's why gravity from the star and the local system is irrelevant." Cole said, "Okay lieutenant commander, what do you suggest?"

"We need to use our sensors to probe subspace. I think there could be something there." Sodyne said.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, objects within subspace are not immune to the effects of gravity." T'Lan pointed out.

"Maybe commander but the effects of gravity from our universe would be massively reduced and an object placed there would require less power to maintain its position." Sodyne pointed out, "Plus when it ran out and the object began to drift the rate would be much, much smaller."

"Your argument is logical lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and she turned to Cole and added, "I agree that we should adjust our sensors to focus into subspace."

"T'Lan aren't there an infinite number of subspace realms?" Cole said.

"Correct. However, logic would suggest that an object placed within subspace would not be placed in a deeper realm. The power requirements for accessing it would be prohibitive." T'Lan explained.

"Okay so how long will it take to make the modifications to our sensors?" Cole asked.

"They'll have to be tied into the warp drive. We need to project and focus the energy directly into subspace rather than just allowing it to skip through." Sodyne said and Cole nodded.

"Okay Sodyne get down to engineering and work with Lieutenant Commander Davis. Let us know when you're ready to run the scan." he said and Sodyne smiled.

"Thank you captain. I'll get right on it." she said and she got up and dashed to the turbolift.

"So what are your orders while we wait captain?" Ghroc asked.

"Hold position and keep running regular scans. Who knows, there may be a less exotic explanation than a mysterious object hidden in subspace." Cole answered.

"And what if Professor Denning calls and asks for an update captain?" Noyal added.

"Then put him through, I don't see any point in lying to him." Cole told her.

"You want to do what with the warp drive?" Davis said when Sodyne gave him a brief outline of her idea.

"Use it to run an active scan into subspace. The warp drive is the only source of power strong enough for us to break the subspace barrier for us to project the energy through." she replied.

"Doable. In fact with four warp cores to use I can probably dedicate one to you entirely." Davis said, "Will that be enough power for you?"

"I hope so. T'Lan was right when she said that the power requirements of sending something too deep into subspace would be prohibitive." Sodyne said.

"Okay let's see." Davis said as he leant over the main console in engineering, "If I give you warp core number one then we should be able to branch it off into the lateral sensor array."

"How will you regulate the energy flow?" Sodyne asked.

"No need." Davis answered, "I'll turn the fine control over to the nanite hive. They should be quite capable of controlling the flow of energy into the sensors. We'll just rig an overflow system that will dump any surplus into our deflector shields. I assume that our shields coming up won't interfere with your scans?"

"I don't think so. Mind you I'm not even certain what it is that I'm looking for." Sodyne said.

"You're looking for? I thought we were all looking for something." Davis commented.

"I meant 'we'." she said.

"Just as long as you remember that when whatever we discover wins a prize from the science council. I want to be up there on that stage pretending to be grateful to all the little people who made it possible rather than just being one of the little people you don't get time to mention in your acceptance speech Leyla." Davis said.

"Don't worry Ashley, I'll make sure you get your share of the prize." Sodyne responded.

"Good. Now we've got that settled let's get started with the modifications." Davis said and he turned to look towards the *Nightfall's* array of four warp cores where several engineers were monitoring them, "Okay alpha team!" he called out, "I want core number one disconnecting from the drive. The output will be diverted exclusively to the lateral sensor array and control of it transferred to the science station. You've got one hour so get moving."

"Thank you." Sodyne said to him when he turned back towards her.

"Any time." he replied, "Now if you don't mind I have a few billion nanites that need talking to. Sometimes those little buggers can be too bright for their own good and I need to make sure they understand what we want correctly."

"Thank you again. I'll be on the bridge when everything is done." Sodyne said before she turned to leave.

3.

Leaving the bridge under T'Lan's command, Cole had entered his ready room to go through the multitude of background tasks that were a key part of a captain's role in commanding a starship but he looked up from the computer console when he heard the intercom sound from his door.

"Captain it's Lieutenant Commander Martin. May I speak with you?" Martin's voice said.

"Of course commander. Come in." Cole responded and the door slid open to allow Martin to enter, "Please take a seat." Cole added.

"Thank you captain." Martin said before he sat opposite Cole.

"Now what can I do for you commander?" Cole asked.

"Captain we've encountered concealed Slaver weapon systems that were just dormant instead of destroyed before and it hasn't gone well." Martin said.

"No." Cole agreed, "An entire star system consumed by a supernova and the *Nightfall* itself almost destroyed."

"Captain what if whatever the Slavers hid in subspace is another weapon system?" Martin said, "Our scans could wake it up."

"Are you suggesting we don't run the scans?" Cole said but Martin shook his head.

"No captain, Starfleet exists to make discoveries like this and if we're going to avoid doing anything just because it carries some risk then we may as well pack up and go home. I just want to discuss the precautions we should take." he said.

"I understand. I was the tactical officer on the previous *Nightfall* after all." Cole said and he leant back in his chair, "I see no problem in bringing the ship to yellow alert when we are ready to run Lieutenant Commander Sodyne's scans of subspace. We can deploy our fighters and raise our shields before the scans start. If they do trigger an attack then at least we won't be a sitting target. Would you agree?"

"Yes captain. We don't know how long it would take for a hostile craft to exit subspace but from what we've seen of Slaver firepower our shields should take at least a hit or two and enable us to respond." Martin said.

"In that case co-ordinate with Lieutenant Nayal to get our pilots ready. Davis' people are well on the way to having the modifications to our sensors done and you know how impatient Leyla Sodyne can be when it comes to anything to do with the Slavers." Cole told him and he smiled.

"Yes captain. That young lady sure is eager to learn all she can. A little too eager sometimes if you ask me." he said.

"Well hopefully these precautions will turn out to be unnecessary but I agree that we can't overlook the risk. Is there anything else you need to discuss?" Cole said.

"No captain. With your permission I'd like to go and make the preparations." Martin responded and Cole nodded.

"Yes, carry on lieutenant commander." he said.

"Davis to Sodyne." Davis said after tapping his combadge.

"Yes commander?" Sodyne responded.

"Are you at your station?" Davis asked.

"I am."

"Good. Can you tell me if an option for 'sensor warp interface' has appeared on your console interface?"

Davis asked and Sodyne checked her console for any new icons. Sure enough at the bottom of the screen a small panel had appeared that was labelled exactly as Davis had described.

"Yes, I see it." she replied.

"Good. If you open that it will bring up the command interface for the modifications to the sensors." Davis told her.

Sodyne promptly pressed the panel and watched as it expanded into a window that offered her the option of channelling power directly from one of the *Nightfall's* warp cores to its lateral sensor arrays.

"Confirmed, I have the interface." she said.

"Good, you're ready to go Sodyne. Davis out." Davis said before he closed the channel.

"Commander." Sodyne then said to T'Lan while she sat in the captain's chair.

"Yes Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" T'Lan asked in reply.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis and his people have completed the modifications needed to run the scans of subspace. May I proceed?" Sodyne said.

"Not yet lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied and she tapped her own combadge, "T'Lan to Captain Cole, Lieutenant Commander Sodyne reports that she is ready to commence the scans of subspace." she said.

"Okay T'Lan I'm on my way. Take us to yellow alert and launch fighters. Cole out." Cole responded.

"Lieutenant Nayal order the launch bay to deploy our fighters. Lieutenant Commander Martin bring us to yellow alert. Raise our shields as soon as our fighters are clear of the ship." she said and an alarm sounded as the *Nightfall's* alert status was raised.

Cole appeared from his ready room a few moments later and T'Lan stood up to allow him to take his seat. "Status?" he asked as he sat down, putting on the control headset that bridge officers wore.

"Half our fighters are already out captain. They're forming up behind us for cover." Nayal announced.

"Deflector shields are energised captain." Martin added, "I can raise them once all our fighters are out."

"Very good." Cole said, "Helm stand by for evasive action if we do wake anything up. Our weapons aren't powered so hopefully we won't look like too much of a threat."

"Aye captain. Impulse engines standing by." Ghroc said.

"All fighters now deployed." Nayal added when her console showed that the last of the *Nightfall's* twelve strong squadron of Peregrine-class attack fighters had left the hangar.

"Raising shields." Martin said when he heard this.

"All systems and stations reporting yellow alert captain." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Very well Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, you may commence your scan." he said.

"Aye captain, scans commencing now." Sodyne said as she engaged the warp power to the *Nightfall's* sensors. Then once her console confirmed that this extra power was available she started her scan, "Active scan commencing." Sodyne's initial sensor sweep was set to search only just beyond most peripheral layer of subspace that was used for faster than light communications and sensors and although the scan took more than a minute it revealed nothing unusual, "Initial scan complete captain, no results. Increasing penetration depth."

Increasing the power to the sensors increased their ability to penetrate further into subspace, pushing deeper than the surface layers and getting further away from the commonly used peripheral layer. This time the scan ran for only a few seconds before Sodyne's console alerted her to an irregularity.

"Captain I have something." she said.

"Please be more specific lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Can you describe what you have detected in detail?"

"It looks like there's a section of subspace that has been distorted somehow." Sodyne said, "Energy is flowing in a distinct pattern within it."

"Are there black holes in subspace?" Ghroc asked.

"The idea of gravitational singularities within subspace has been postulated but no research has ever proven their existence." T'Lan answered before Sodyne could.

"Thank you commander." Sodyne commented. Then she looked at Cole and added, "Captain the pattern of the flow is more linear and bidirectional. It doesn't look like everything is being sucked towards a single point somewhere."

"Like waves on a beach moving in and out rather than a whirlpool?" Nayal suggested and Sodyne nodded.

"That seems like a good analogy, although the waves would be confined to a narrow channel while the rest of the coast was more random."

"Like a roadway?" Cole said.

"I suppose you could call it that, yes captain." Sodyne said and then she smiled, "It's a transwarp conduit." she added excitedly, "We know the Slavers had technology far in advance of our own so it makes perfect sense that they could have developed transwarp drive. The location we were given must be the exact point of the aperture into real space. That's why it was able to remain in the exact same spot even after a billion years, gravity can't pull it towards the centre of the system because it's being cancelled out by the force of gravity on apertures in other systems."

"How many are we talking about? I mean if there's a subspace conduit there then where does it lead to?" Martin asked.

"It could lead anywhere. Possibly just to a single location but it could be just one access point to a network that spreads across our entire galaxy." T'Lan said and Sodyne smiled.

"We may not know where it leads to but I can tell you exact what it leads to." she said.

"I'm not following you commander." Cole replied.

"It leads to more systems that were settled by the Slavers. Systems that could be far beyond Federation territory and totally undisturbed since the Slaver Empire collapsed." Sodyne explained, "Captain we should take the *Nightfall* into-"

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I'm not about to take this ship into a transwarp conduit on the basis of a single sensor scan." Cole interrupted.

"But captain-" Sodyne began.

"Lieutenant commander, the captain has made his position clear and the decision is perfectly logical. There are too many unknown factors to make risking the *Nightfall* and the lives of all of its crew by entering a transwarp conduit blindly." T'Lan said.

“Naya I’m going to need to speak to Professor Denning. Maybe his team will have found something on the surface of the second planet that might give us some hint about where this transwarp conduit leads.”



“Professor!” Hewitt yelled as she ran towards the complex pattern of shallow holes that Professor Denning was overseeing the digging of along with Trellan and the two men turned towards her.

“This can’t be good.” Trellan said, “Do you think Doctor Terry has failed to find an antidote in time?”

“I hope that’s not it Trellan.” Denning replied and he waved to Hewitt as she continued to run towards them, “Hey careful. If you trip out here Trellan and I would have to carry you back to base camp.” he added when she ground to a halt and breathed deeply as she tried to get her breath back.

“It’s the *Nightfall* professor.” she gasped.

“Oh great. What have they destroyed now?” Trellan commented.

“Come on now, they’ve done their best and its not their fault we’ve lost some sites.” Denning told him.

“No but if we don’t get some results soon your Federation Science Council won’t care about that and well lose their support. Then that would be the end of our expedition wouldn’t it professor?” Trellan pointed out.

“Erica what did the crew of the *Nightfall* have to say?” Denning asked.

“They contacted us earlier when they arrived at the position in space that you gave to them. They said that there was something wrong with the information.” Hewitt said.

“There was nothing wrong with that data. I checked it myself.” Trellan said, looking at Denning.

“Don’t worry, I trust you.” Denning replied before he looked at Hewitt and added, “Go on.”

“Well they just made contact again. Nayal told me that they ran some sort of scan of subspace and that has revealed the existence of a transwarp conduit starting from the location we gave them.” Hewitt said.

“You’re serious, that’s what they said? A transwarp conduit?” Trellan replied and Hewitt nodded,

“That’s exactly what they said. Professor, Captain Cole wants to be able to speak to you.” she told him.

“Okay. Trellan can you keep an eye on things here?” Denning asked Trellan.

“Of course professor.” he responded.

“Okay Erica, let’s go.” Denning added and he and Hewitt began to hurry back towards their camp.

The research team’s base camp consisted of several modular structures that had been set up beside the transport ship that had brought them here. Denning and Hewitt entered the largest of these and found Jack Foster, the owner of the transport ship along with two other members of the research team. All three of them had significant amounts of mud on their clothing and carried phasers. The weapons were all of Federation manufacture but models with limited power output rather than the weapons issued to Starfleet and Federation member planetary militaries.

“Hey professor, we got the critter. We just dropped it off with Doctor Terry.” Foster said with a smile.

“Great.” Denning replied as he rushed past.

“Erica what’s going on?” Foster added as she followed Denning into the building.

“The *Nightfall*’s found a transwarp conduit in the system. They want to speak to the professor about it.” she told him and his eyes widened. Although he was not a scientist as the owner of a starship he understood the importance of transwarp travel.

“Hey hold on I want to hear this as well.” he said and he rushed after the two researchers as they made their way to the communications suite.

The communications suite was a small windowless room that had a simple terminal set up on a desk to one side and a large display mounted on the wall behind it. Denning rushed right up to the terminal and sat down in front of it, activating the device.

“This is Professor Denning calling the *USS Nightfall*, do you read me?” he said.

“This is the *USS Nightfall*, reading you loud and clear professor.” Nayal’s voice responded, “Captain Cole has asked me to put you through to him. Stand by.”

“Professor Denning.” Cole’s voice added a few moments later, “Thank you for getting in touch.”

“I heard that you’ve made a significant discovery captain.” Denning said.

“A transwarp conduit..” Foster added from behind him.

“That’s correct. We ran a scan of subspace and located the distortion leading right up to the position you supplied. We’re continuing to study it but so far we’ve limited ourselves to remote scans rather than a physical study without any details about where it leads to.” Cole told him.

“Let me guess, you’re wondering whether my team has found anything that could tell you that.” Denning said.

“That’s right professor.” Cole said, “I’d also like you here in person to take part in the study.”

“Well I’m afraid that we haven’t found anything that would tell you where the conduit leads to captain and I’m not sure what I could offer in the study of one.” Denning responded.

“Perhaps not professor, but sooner or later I’m going to have to send a probe into that conduit and I may need you to interpret whatever we find on the other end of it.” Cole said.

“You know I wouldn’t mind taking a look at that conduit myself.” Foster commented.

"No. No-one else here can fly your ship." Denning reminded him, "If we need to evacuate then you're needed here to get everyone to safety."

"Oh really? So how do you intend to get to the *Nightfall*?" Foster asked and he folded his arms and smiled, convinced that he had come up with a reason why he had to travel to the *Nightfall* as well.

"I'll send a runabout to pick you up professor." Cole said and Foster's face fell. However, he smiled again when Cole added, "It's pilot can remain behind to fill in for Mister Foster while he's here as well. Can you handle a Starfleet runabout Mister Foster?"

"Hell yes I can fly one of those things." Foster replied.

"Then as long as Professor Denning doesn't object I see no reason not to be able to get your assessment of conditions inside the transwarp conduit regarding travel through it." Cole said.

"Thank you captain. If it's alright I'd like to bring Erica along with me. Trellan can run things here in our absence." Denning said.

"Of course professor. I'll have quarters prepared for you both. The runabout should be with you in about half an hour. *Nightfall* out." Cole responded before the channel was shut off.

"Erica you'd better go and get your things together." Denning told Hewitt, "You too Jack."

"Half an hour is all the time I need to shower and change. See you then professor." Foster replied and then he turned and dashed out of the communications room.

When the door to Sodyne's laboratory opened Davis stepped inside with an excited expression on his face. Sodyne was not alone on this occasion, T'Lan was also in the laboratory with her and both women were studying a large wall mounted display screen.

"Is that it?" Davis asked.

"If you mean is this a scan of the transwarp conduit then yes Lieutenant Commander Davis, this is it." T'Lan replied.

"An honest to God transwarp conduit. Right at our fingertips." Davis said, staring at the display as well.

"I couldn't have found it without your help." Sodyne added.

"Oh this makes it all worthwhile." Davis said, pointing to the display, "So what do we know so far?"

"Only that the conduit terminates at the exact point given to us by Professor Denning." T'Lan replied.

"Our scans haven't shown up any of the interspatial manifolds used to support the only other conduits that Starfleet has been able to study so far." Sodyne added.

"Well those were Borg conduits and from what I remember examination was only possible while ships were engaged with Borg ships. Not much point in hanging around long enough to make a detailed study if it means you end up assimilated." Davis said.

"All our information suggests that the Slaver Empire pre-dates the Borg Collective by a considerable margin. Perhaps they either didn't need interspatial manifolds at all or the distance between them can be much greater and the nearest one is out of range of our sensors." Sodyne suggested.

"A logical conclusion." T'Lan said before she continued with her explanation of what had already been discovered about the Slaver transwarp conduit, "Unfortunately the conduit itself is not straight and although the termination point here in the Toros system is static the conduit appears to flex, presumably as a result of gravitational forces acting on it."

"We're only talking a couple of metres in comparison to an overall diameter of more than five thousand but it's enough that we can't extrapolate an end point based on the vector of the conduit at this end." Sodyne said.

"And you need me to help get inside and traverse it safely, right?" Davis said.

"That is correct." T'Lan answered, "Lieutenant Nayal is still running sensor scans from the bridge and feeding the data to us here but the captain knows that eventually it will be necessary to carry out a physical study from inside the conduit. What is required is a probe that can be programmed to enter the conduit, navigate to another termination point before safely exiting. Then once it has determined its location it can re-enter the conduit and follow its path back to us here." T'Lan told him.

"Hmm. That could be tricky." Davis replied as he considered this.

"What's the problem?" Sodyne asked.

"Well even the most advanced probes carried by starships are pretty basic in engineering terms. We tell them where to go and what to do but each one has only so many functions that they can carry out. Now sending one into the transwarp conduit and letting it find a route through is straight forwards enough assuming that these scans are right and conditions inside appear the same as those in the conduits that other ships have encountered and getting a position from a stellar fix is easy. The issues that I see are opening the aperture from inside the conduit to get out and then reopening it to get back in. Since we can scan inside the conduit for at least a short distance we should be able to detect the probe at this end and open the aperture for it and obviously we can open it when the probe is launched but that still leaves two operations that none of our probes are configured for." Davis said.

"What do you need to open the aperture?" Sodyne asked.

"A series of coded tachyon pulses if this aperture opens in the same manner as others discovered. Of course those were Borg conduits, not Slaver." Davis said.

"Logic suggests that we should conduct tests in opening the conduit before we send a probe inside. That will determine whether a probe can be adapted to do the same." T'Lan said.

"To be honest I think that it would be better to use a shuttle or runabout. I'm pretty sure that they'd have the power needed to generate the tachyon pulse through their navigational deflectors. We're looking at more power than a phaser emitter can manage." Davis said.

"That is unacceptable lieutenant commander. The captain has been quite clear that lives are not to be put at risk until unmanned investigation has been taken as far as possible." T'Lan said.

"And what if unmanned investigation isn't possible at all?" Sodyne asked, "Commander T'Lan I'm willing to take that risk."

"I do not doubt that you are Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. However, the captain is not." T'Lan told her and then she noticed a smile appear on Davis' face, "You have something to add Lieutenant Commander Davis?" she said.

"You know we don't have to limit ourselves to just one probe." he said, "We could program one up as a navigator to find a path through the conduit and then determine its location at the other end and then have more set up purely to open the apertures. If we find we need more power than a single probe can provide then we just add more probes and program them to operate in unison."

"Our very own little machine collective." Sodyne commented.

"I'd suggest using some of our nanite hive for a control system since they're used to working as a group but I don't think that they'd survive inside the conduit with just a probe casing to protect them. The radiation levels are just too high, they'd be rendered inert in under a minute." Davis said.

"Then you will have to create the best imitation of their ability to co-operate as you can Lieutenant Commander Davis. How long do you estimate it will take to complete the work?" T'Lan said.

"Oh not long. It's a simple networking task to get the probes to work together. We'll set the navigator probe as the master and all the others will be slaved to it." Davis said, "I can start work on that immediately, I'll just leave the number of slave units as an unknown until we've had the chance to determine the exact power requirements."

"Very good lieutenant commander. Please proceed." T'Lan told him.

5.

The Starfleet lieutenant who piloted the runabout to the planet's surface wore the red of the command division and as soon as he landed Foster showed her to the flight deck of his transport.

"So you can handle this?" he asked the lieutenant.

"It all looks pretty straight forwards, yes." the woman said, nodding her head.

"Okay just remember that this isn't one of your cruisers. Don't try to take her up to full power from a cold start." Foster said.

"Yes, I remember. No more than quarter impulse until I'm out of the atmosphere and don't accelerate past warp three until the warp field has the chance to stabilise itself." she replied and Foster smiled.

"Okay it sounds like you've got it. Now I'm off to check out that runabout of yours." he said before he rushed out of the room.

Moving as quickly as he could Foster disembarked from his transport ship and then ran the short distance to where the lieutenant had landed the runabout *Seine*. Since it was intended for the compact craft to return to the *Nightfall* with Foster and his two passengers the lieutenant who had flown it from the Starfleet vessel had left its systems active and its engines running. This meant that when Foster embarked, finding Professor Denning and Hewitt sat in the rear cockpit seats, it was ready to launch.

"Okay everything looks set." he said as he sat down and placed his hands on the controls, "Hold on."

Foster fired the runabout's thrusters and the craft rose up off the ground into the air. Then once he was satisfied that he had gained enough altitude he switched to the runabout's impulse drive and accelerated upwards.

"Whoa!" Hewitt exclaimed, "Are you trying to blow us up?"

"Don't worry." Foster replied, "This isn't a fifty thousand tonne transport. Starfleet runabouts are racers compared to my ship. Now I'm going to get us out of the orbital plane at full impulse and then it's just a quick hop at warp five to the outer system where we can rendezvous with the *Nightfall*."

Rather than plot a course directly to the *Nightfall*, Foster flew the *Seine* away from the plane in which the Toros System's planets orbited. This took the runabout into a region of space that was relatively free of other objects and gave Foster the opportunity to engage its warp drive, taking it to the outer system where the *Nightfall* waited close to the location of the transwarp aperture. Despite the massive distance this entire process took only a few minutes and the runabout's occupants soon found themselves looking at the waiting heavy cruiser.

"Weird." Foster commented.

"What is?" Hewitt asked and he glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Part of me was expecting to see something out here but it just looks like empty space." he replied.

"You mean like a wormhole?" Denning suggested and Foster nodded.

"That sort of thing, yes. I suppose that must prove how impressive a transwarp conduit is, it doesn't even need to be big and flash." he said.

"Seine this is *Nightfall*, do you read me?" Nayal's voice said suddenly over the communication system.

"Yes *Nightfall*, this is the *Seine*. Go ahead." Foster responded.

"Seine you are clear to land. Approach aft launch bay doors. *Nightfall* out." Nayal told him.

The launch bay of an Akira-class cruiser was the largest internal space aboard them, stretching the full length of the saucer section. This enabled it to have a pair of smaller doors at the rear as well as the main space door to the front and by designating the forward door for take off and the aft doors for landings it meant that launches and recoveries could be handled simultaneously with minimal risk. Foster manoeuvred the *Seine* between the *Nightfall*'s two secondary hulls that extended out from the rear of the saucer section and here he saw the two aft doorways. One of these was closed but the other stood open, highlighted by the pale blue glow from the forcefield generator that kept the atmosphere inside the launch bay. This was not strong enough to resist the pressure of the runabout as it passed through but it snapped shut instantly once the craft was inside so that none of the atmosphere was lost to space.

Once inside the launch bay a member of the ground crew signalled to Foster for him to set down on a part of the deck that was marked with a number '4'. Foster had been aboard the *Nightfall* before, although this was the first time he had carried out such a landing and he knew that this was an elevator that led down to one of the storage and maintenance hangars.

"Okay setting us down." he said as he used the runabout's thrusters to manoeuvre it into position above the elevator before gently lowering to the deck where there was a 'clump' as it landed, "That's it folks. We're there." he announced as he shut down the engines and opened a hatch.

As the trio exited the runabout they saw Martin approaching them and Denning waved.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin." he called out.

"Professor Denning." Martin replied, "Miss Hewitt. Mister Foster." he added, greeting each of them in turn, "First carrier landing Mister Foster?" he then commented, smiling at Foster.

"I knew it. He's dented something." Hewitt commented.

"No chance. It may be bigger than a shuttle but I landed plenty of them aboard cargo ships and space stations before I got my own ship." Foster protested.

"That explains it then. It was pretty good." Martin replied.

"Only pretty good?" Foster asked.

"You perhaps came in a little fast." Martin told him.

"That was a habit I got into running cargo shuttles. The faster you were into a launch bay the faster your shuttle was turned around for another run." Foster said and Martin gave a slight nod.

"Well as I say, it was pretty good." he said before he turned towards Denning and added, "Now professor if you'd all like to come with me I'll show you to the captain. He and Commander T'Lan are waiting in his ready room."

"What about our things?" Hewitt asked, looking back towards the *Seine*.

"You've all been assigned quarters for your stay. Your belongings will be taken straight there." Martin answered as he turned towards the nearest exit from the launch bay.

Martin took Denning, Hewitt and Foster to the nearest turbolift and from there through the bridge to the door to Cole's ready room. As they walked across the bridge Foster noticed that many of the displays showed some aspect of the scans that were still being carried out on the transwarp aperture and the conduit that lay beyond it.

"Come in." Cole's voice said as soon as Martin pressed the intercom and the door to the ready room promptly slid open. Inside the ready room Cole was sat behind his desk while Tan sat in front of it and three additional chairs had been placed for Denning and his team members, "Please take a seat." Cole told them.

"So have you figured out how to get into the conduit yet captain?" Foster asked as he sat down and before Denning could speak.

"We have not attempted to open it as of yet Mister Foster." T'Lan told him, "However, Lieutenant Commander Davis is confident that it can be opened with a suitable tachyon pulse."

"I take it you have a plan for exploring the conduit captain." Denning said, looking at Cole.

"Yes we do." Cole replied and he passed a PADD across his desk to Denning. As he took the device both Hewitt and Foster leant in to look at the display. This showed a number of probes arranged with one above the others, "Davis is preparing a networking system for a number of probes. One will be configured to navigate through the conduit and determine where it leads to while the others will simply be to open and close the apertures."

"Ingenious." Denning said.

"Probes? When do you send a ship in there?" Foster asked and Cole smiled.

"You sound like my science officer." he replied.

"She's eager to try going inside?" Denning commented.

"That would be an understatement." Cole said.

"She volunteered to take a shuttle into the conduit without any prior exploration by our probes. I of course rejected that as violating the captain's order to limit the risk to personnel." T'Lan added.

"I've been over our data again and I've not found anything that gives even a hint about where the conduit might go." Hewitt said.

"Until now we didn't even know that the Slavers had transwarp drive at all." Denning added.

"It is not a surprise professor. The Slavers were an incredibly advanced species technically and the alleged size of their empire would require a means of rapid transportation." T'Lan said.

"What do you know about the conditions inside the conduit?" Foster asked.

"So far our sensor readings match those taken by other Starfleet vessels during their encounters with such conduits. The only difference we have observed between this conduit and those used by the Borg is the lack of interspatial manifolds to support them within subspace." T'Lan said.

"There's a significant level of radioactivity of course but it doesn't look to be dangerous." Cole added.

"If it heads back to Federation space then it could cut weeks off our travel time there and back." Foster commented.

"You seem more excited about this than I am Jack." Denning commented.

"What can I say professor? Normally my job is just to sit and wait for you to finish digging your holes. This time there's something that I can actually get involved in." Foster said.

Just then Cole's combadge activated.

"Sodyne to Captain Cole." Sodyne's voice said and Cole tapped his badge.

"Cole here commander. Go ahead." he replied.

"Captain we've completed our scans and we're ready to try opening the aperture." Sodyne told him.

"Very well. I'd like Lieutenant Commander Davis come to the bridge and join us. We'll carry out and monitor the test from there." Cole said before he tapped his combadge again, "I think we should take this to the

bridge." he then told the others in the ready room with him and all of them got to their feet to return to the bridge.

"The main deflector is configured to emit a tachyon pulse captain." Sodyne said when she saw him leaving his ready room. Rather than taking their seats Cole and T'Lan remained standing in the centre of the bridge along with Professor Denning, Hewitt and Foster.

"What will your starting point be lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.

"I've accessed the Starfleet records of the Galaxy-class *USS Enterprise*'s encounter with a Borg vessel that made use of a series of transwarp conduits. They duplicated the pulses emitted by the Borg vessel to open the aperture."

"Do you think the same pulses will open this aperture? It's not Borg." Hewitt pointed out.

"Even if it doesn't we should get some reaction and then we can fine tune the signal to get an exact match." Sodyne answered.

"Logical deduction." T'Lan added just as one of the bridge turbolifts opened to reveal Lieutenant Commander Davis.

"Ah commander, you're here. Excellent, now we can begin." Cole said.

"One moment captain." Davis responded as he walked over to a console positioned along the back wall of the bridge. This was usually used to remotely monitor engineering functions and Davis input his identity to alter the layout and information presented to be the same as his master console in engineering, "All set captain." he added.

"Very good. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne please commence the tachyon pulses." Cole ordered and Sodyne smiled.

"It will be my pleasure captain. Commencing tachyon pulse emission now." she said as her finger moved to trigger the *Nightfall*'s deflector dish.

"Deflector now emitting at sixty percent power captain." Davis said from the engineering console.

"No sign of the aperture opening." Foster commented.

"Lieutenant Nayal what do your scans show?" T'Lan asked.

"About a quarter of the energy is being absorbed into the conduit commander." Nayal told her.

"Try adjusting the frequency of the pulses up by five percent." Davis suggested and Sodyne nodded.

"Increasing pulse frequency." she said.

"Deflector power output steady. There was a slight increase for a moment but it's settled down." Davis said

"Most likely overshoot from the frequency adjustment." T'Lan said.

"Any effect Nayal?" Cole asked.

"I'd say so." Denning said and he pointed to the main viewscreen where a small point of blue light had just appeared.

"Almost all the energy is being absorbed now captain." Nayal added.

"Sodyne keep increasing the pulse frequency. Slowly though, we don't want to overdo it." Cole said, waving his hand in an upwards motion as he spoke.

Carefully, Sodyne increased the frequency of the pulse while keeping the duty cycle the same with equal on time to off time so that the power output remained the same once the emissions had settled into their new frequency. This continued for just over a minute before all of a sudden the point of blue light expanded to almost fill the viewscreen, now appearing as a shifting pattern of light similar to the patterns in the surface of a pool of water.

"That's it! Captain we've done it!" Sodyne said excitedly.

"Captain our navigational system has a lock. It says there is definitely some sort of passageway on the other side of that thing." Ghroc said from the helm station as the heads up display he wore showed him the transwarp conduit on the other side of the now open aperture as it was a tunnel of some kind.

"Captain the aperture is five thousand, one hundred and thirty-five metres across." Nayal added.

"Easy enough to get a starship into there then." Martin commented.

"Not just yet though." Cole replied, "Sodyne what can you tell me about the interior?"

With the aperture open the full range of the *Nightfall*'s sensors could be deployed to gather data and Sodyne began checking each one in turn.

"Gravity is unstable captain. Varying from zero to point zero-one-six gees. The vector is also variable and appears related to the curvature of the conduit." she said.

"Makes sense. The gravity will be pulling the conduit." Cole commented.

"It means that any probe or vessel that enters will have to remain under power to avoid hitting the side of the conduit." T'Lan added.

"What happens if you do hit it?" Foster asked.

"The conduit walls are basically a forcefield. It will be like hitting one of them." Davis said.

"And if you penetrate the forcefield?" Hewitt asked.

"Logically you would collapse the conduit and be exposed directly to subspace." T'Lan told her.

"So basically we put that on the list of things not to do." Nayal commented.

"Quite. Continue your analysis please Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." Cole said.

"I'm picking up significant levels of radioactivity captain, though it's well within the limits of what our shuttles can withstand." she said.

"What about modulated signals?" Denning said suddenly.

"You think someone will be trying to contact us professor?" Cole said.

"I was wondering whether the Slavers may have left a navigation beacon of some sort behind as well." Denning told him.

"That is an interesting suggestion." T'Lan said.

"Our communication system isn't registering anything that looks like a modulated signal." Nayal said.

"I agree captain." Sodyne added, "Everything I'm seeing here just looks like noise."

"So much for that theory then." Denning added.

"Captain holding that aperture open is continuing to use power." Davis pointed out from the rear of the bridge and Cole nodded.

"Very good Commander Davis. Sodyne shut off the tachyon pulses and let's see what happens." he said.

"Aye captain. Shutting off the beam now." Sodyne said as she turned off the constant stream of tachyon pulses being emitted by the *Nightfall's* main deflector dish. As soon as the repeating pattern of pulses from the *Nightfall* ceased the aperture appeared to collapse in on itself until it vanished entirely, leaving no visible trace that it had ever existed.

"Analysis?" Cole said.

"The aperture has closed captain." Sodyne replied, "All sensor readings now match those we were getting before we commenced emitting the tachyon pulses."

"And the conduit itself?" T'Lan asked.

"Our subspace scan indicates that it has returned to its previous state as well captain." Sodyne answered.

"Then the conduit's traversable. We can open and close it without damaging it." Cole said and he turned towards Davis, "Mister Davis do you have enough information to complete the probe network?"

"I think so captain. Although data from inside the conduit would help to be certain." Davis answered.

"Sodyne prepare a class one probe. Program it to enter the conduit after we open it again and then hold position. After we close the aperture we'll wait five minutes before opening it again and recovering the probe." Cole said. Then he looked back at Davis and added, "Will that be enough?"

"It should be captain, yes." he responded.

"Probe is configured captain." Sodyne then announced.

"Launcher is loaded and ready." Martin added and Cole nodded.

"Sodyne open the aperture please." he said and Sodyne activated the tachyon pulse emission from the deflector dish again. This time the pulses opened the aperture straight away and once again the massive blue distortion appeared in front of the *Nightfall*, "Launch probe Mister Martin." Cole added.

"Probe away." Martin said as he launched the specially programmed probe from one of the *Nightfall's* forward torpedo launchers.

The probe steered directly towards the centre of the aperture before passing right through and entering the conduit.

"Probe has successfully entered the conduit captain, taking up position ten thousand metres in." Sodyne said.

"Is the telemetry clear?" T'Lan said.

"Perfectly commander." Nayal responded.

"Sodyne you may close the aperture." Cole said and she terminated the tachyon pulses, closing the transwarp aperture once more.

"Probe telemetry lost captain." Nayal said when the aperture had disappeared again.

"I've got the probe on our subspace scan captain." Sodyne added, "It's holding position as programmed."

"If a probe can survive then a starship definitely can." Foster commented.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis, based on the readings taken so far how many probes will be required for your network?" T'Lan said.

"Judging from these power readings we'll need eight class eight probes to open an aperture." Davis told her, "As long as we can open the aperture at this end ourselves that means we'll need a total of seventeen. That doesn't allow for any losses of course."

"We're only carrying twenty class eight probes captain." Martin pointed out.

"Which we may as well use up. We can always replicate more." Cole replied, "Mister Davis please prepare all our class eight probes for use in your network. We'll deploy them as soon as they're ready."

"How long will that take?" Denning asked.

"The networking program is almost entirely done. It just needs the numbers I left as undefined enumerations filling in. The only big task that still needs to be carried out is to set eighteen of them up to emit the necessary tachyon pulses. The other two will be configured as master control units. Overall I'd say that we'll be ready to go in about three to four hours." Davis told him.

“Carry on commander.” Cole said, “Sodyne I want the data you’ve gathered passing on to Doctor Hamill for a full medical assessment. I want her to confirm the safety precautions that we need to take before we send a manned craft into the conduit.”



Davis' estimate of the time needed to modify the probes to be sent into the transwarp conduit was accurate and just over three hours later all of the class eight probes carried by the *Nightfall* had been prepared and loaded into two of the cruiser's torpedo launchers, ready for rapid deployment.

"Launchers indicating loaded and ready captain." Martin said.

"Very good commander." Cole responded from his chair, "Sodyne you may open the aperture in your own time."

"Yes captain. Sending tachyon pulses now." Sodyne said and for a third time she used the *Nightfall's* main deflector to emit a series of tachyon pulses at the specific frequency to trigger the opening of the transwarp aperture.

"Aperture is open." Nayal confirmed as the blue vortex appeared in space again, large enough to swallow the biggest starships ever made by the Federation.

"Launch probes." Cole ordered.

"Aye captain, launching probes now." Martin said and he activated the torpedo launchers.

One after another all twenty of the probes that had been loaded into the launchers burst out of them before organising themselves into a formation. This consisted of two rings of nine probes, all of them configured as tachyon emitters while the final pair of probes took up positions in the centres of these rings to act as the master controllers. Once these formations had been established they moved side by side towards the aperture and passed through it into the transwarp conduit on the other side. Unlike the class one probe that had come to a halt within the conduit, from the point of view of the *Nightfall's* sensors these formations of probes appeared to rapidly accelerate away and in a matter of seconds they were too far away for them to be able to continue tracking them.

"That's it captain, we've lost them." Sodyne said when the probes disappeared and Cole turned to T'Lan in the seat beside him.

"I guess now all we can do is wait." he said.

With the amount of time it would take for the probes to carry out their programmed mission unknown Cole took the opportunity to rest, returning to his quarters while T'Lan took command of the *Nightfall* in his place, her scientific curiosity and superior Vulcan stamina leading her to declare that it was logical for her to remain on the bridge. With their daughter T'Sal being cared for by Davis' wife this left Cole alone in his quarters and he replicated himself a meal before sitting down to eat. Almost as soon as he did though the intercom at the door sounded.

"Yes?" he said.

"Captain it's Doctor Hamill. I can go-" Hamill's voice responded.

"No, come in doctor." Cole interrupted and the door opened for her.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you while you're eating captain." she said when she saw the food in front of him.

"That's okay doctor. Please sit down." Cole replied.

"If you're sure captain." she said before sitting down at the far end of the table from Cole and he looked at her.

"Is something wrong doctor?" he said, "I haven't seen you this nervous since you put a gypsy curse on Ghroc." and Hamill winced.

"Please don't remind me of that captain. It's just that it feels strange to be in your quarters alone with you captain. I wouldn't want the crew to start getting the wrong idea." she replied.

"Doctor I don't think anyone is going to suggest that anything inappropriate is going on between us." Cole said, "It's not as if we're going to start broadcasting this meeting over the intercom to the entire ship so they can take everything the wrong way."

"I'm sorry I don't understand that captain." Hamill said.

"Never mind, it's probably a bad example since it turned out that the people involved in that little incident did end up in a relationship with one another. Now I take it that you're here to give me the results of your study of the transwarp conduit." Cole said and Hamill handed the PADD she had brought with her to him.

"Yes captain. Assuming that the scans Sodyne took of the interior of the conduit are representative of conditions inside it as a whole then the hull of a shuttle pod should be able to protect the occupants for about eighteen hours. After that enough radiation would have penetrated to pose a risk to the crew. On the other hand the hulls of runabouts and fighters should offer indefinite protection. Obviously the same goes for a starship. If we take the *Nightfall* into the conduit we won't even need to raise our shields to keep the crew protected. I wouldn't recommend doing an EVA though, a spacesuit won't offer more than about twenty to

thirty minutes of protection from the radiation.” she explained as Cole skimmed through her report, eating as he read.

“Very good doctor.” he said after swallowing the food in his mouth, “Depending on what the probes find on the other end of the conduit I plan to take an away team through in a runabout. I’d like you to join it.”

“You’re going captain? Shouldn’t T’Lan be leading it.” Hamill pointed out, knowing normal Starfleet practice for the role of captain and first officer when it came to leaving a starship.

In response Cole smiled at her as he answered.

“Doctor this conduit could take us to the opposite side of the galaxy in no more than an hour. Do you really expect me to pass up the opportunity to be in the first team to see what’s out there?” he said.

The probes recorded every detail of the interior of the transwarp conduit possible as they continued to follow it. Rather than a single tunnel through subspace the conduit branched off at multiple points. Davis had considered this possibility and the probes were programmed to take the straightest path possible. Even at the junctions though, there were no signs of the interspatial manifolds that had supported the transwarp network that the Borg had constructed to give them access to as much of the galaxy as possible and the probes recorded this information as well. They continued to follow their roughly straight line path until the section of the conduit they were following came to a dead end. At this point eight of the probes began to emit tachyon pulses identical in frequency to those used by the *Nightfall* to open the aperture in the Toros system. Between them the probes were just about able to match the output of the *Nightfall*'s deflector dish and the end point of the transwarp conduit suddenly opened out into another aperture leading back to normal space. Passing through this the probes arrived in another star system that possessed a mundane yellow star at its heart. The probes that had opened the aperture were now entirely drained of power and they drifted onwards while the rest all came to a halt and began to search the star field surrounding them for signs of identifiable objects.

While this sensor scan was taking place the probes also took note of the planets orbiting the star and logged their classifications for review by the crew of the *Nightfall*. In addition to the natural features of the system though the probes soon detected something else, energy emissions that were clearly artificial coming from several of the planetary bodies and more significantly a spacecraft heading directly towards them.

“Multiple objects emerging from transwarp conduit in grid two-eight-eight. Identified as Federation Starfleet class eight probes. Point of origin Alpha Quadrant. Threat level zero. Presence in this system is anomalous. Prepare to assimilate and determine reason for presence. Scout craft seven-one-six-four adjust course to intercept. Assimilate and investigate source.”

“Lieutenant Commander Sodyne your duty shift is complete. You may leave your station if you wish.” T’Lan said when she noticed the Betazoid yawn.

“I want to be here when the probes get back. You need me to open the transwarp aperture.” Sodyne replied.

“The probes may not return for some time lieutenant commander and any of your staff ought to be capable of opening the aperture.” T’Lan pointed out.

“You’re shift finished before mine commander and you haven’t handed over control to Lieutenant Mayer.”

Sodyne said and she glanced at the command division lieutenant who was supposed to be the officer of the watch but that was currently sitting at one of the bridge’s rear consoles while T’Lan remained in command.

“I am capable of going without sleep for significantly longer than you are lieutenant commander.” T’Lan said,

“However, if it will convince you to take the rest you require I will hand over the conn to Lieutenant Mayer.”

then she looked at Mayer and added, “Mister Mayer please take over for me.”

“Yes commander.” Mayer responded, getting up from the rear console position and making his way to the captain’s chair that T’Lan in turn vacated.

“Lieutenant Jackson please take over from Lieutenant Commander Sodyne.” T’Lan added to a junior science officer who was also sat at one of the rear consoles.

“Oh very well.” Sodyne said, “I just hope we don’t miss anything important.”

“Even if our probes do return while you are sleeping the data will still be available for you when you wake up.” T’Lan said as the two women were walking towards the turbolift.

“T’Lan you don’t understand.” Sodyne said, shaking her head.

Stepping into the turbolift, T’Lan was about to state her destination when all of a sudden the officer at the operations console spoke up.

“Object detected inside the transwarp conduit.” he said.

“Just one?” Sodyne asked as she stepped back out of the turbolift and T’Lan followed her.

“Yes commander, just one.” the operations officer replied.

“The other master control probe must have been lost.” Sodyne said, knowing that the tachyon emitting probes had not been expected to return.

"There's too much mass commander. Approximately two and a half million tonnes. Whatever this is, it isn't one of our probes." Mayer said as he checked the scan results and both T'Lan and Sodyne brought up a copy of the data he was looking at on their headsets.

Through the heads up display the two officers both saw the general cuboid shape of the object that was rapidly approaching the transwarp aperture from inside the conduit itself and although neither of the women had seen such a craft in person they were well aware of what it was.

"That's a Borg scout ship!" Sodyne exclaimed just as a blue light appeared in space in front of the *Nightfall* as the transwarp aperture opened once again and the Borg vessel exited the conduit into the Toros system. "Red alert." T'Lan said more calmly, "Lieutenant Mayer I will take command until the captain returns to the bridge. Tactical raise shields and arm all weapons."

T'Lan and Sodyne returned quickly to their stations, replacing the junior officers who had only just taken over from them and all around the bridge the officers present fastened their safety harnesses just as an ominous transmission was received from the newly arrived Borg vessel.

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Resistance is futile." an echoing voice stated without any hint of emotion. This was then followed by a blast of energy that impacted on the *Nightfall's* shields.

"Shields down to ninety-five percent commander." the tactical officer said.

"They're testing our defences." Sodyne said.

"Helm take evasive action. Pattern delta-four." T'Lan ordered.

"Aye commander. Evasive pattern delta-four." the helmsman responded and he pulled on the *Nightfall's* manual flight controls to turn the heavy cruiser aside before another energy blast could weaken its shields further.

As the ship was turning the bridge turbolift opened and Cole and the other senior bridge officers emerged. All of them were already wearing their headsets and as such were already aware of the basic situation.

"What can you tell me T'Lan?" Cole asked as she undid her safety harness so that she could give the captain's seat up to him.

"The Borg vessel emerged from the transwarp conduit and immediately attacked captain." T'Lan replied while the other senior officers were also taking their stations and replacing their subordinates.

"Have we suffered any damage?" Cole said.

"Negative captain." Sodyne answered.

"Shields are at Ninety-two percent. Phasers are powered and all torpedo launchers loaded." Martin added as he checked the *Nightfall's* tactical status while fastening his harness.

"Quantum torpedoes, ten round spread. Fire." Cole ordered and Martin fired a spread of ten quantum torpedoes towards the Borg vessel.

At two hundred metres along each side, the cube shaped Borg scout was less than half the length of the Akira-class *Nightfall* but overall it had greater volume and mass and Martin had configured the torpedoes to spread out to inflict damage to the widest possible area instead of concentrating it in one position. The torpedoes struck the magnetic field surrounding the Borg ship almost in unison and exploded against it. Designed to have superior shield piercing power the blasts ripped open sections of the scout ship's hull in multiple places and the vessel suddenly ceased firing its energy blasts as it instead concentrated on repairing the damage.

"Captain analysis of the Borg vessel indicates that it is limited to impulse power." Sodyne said as she studied the *Nightfall's* sensor scans of the Borg scout and saw that it lacked any indication of an active warp field. It was then that the turbolift opened again and Professor Denning entered the bridge, steadying himself on the door frame.

"Captain what's happening?" he asked.

"We're under attack by a Borg ship. If you want to stay then take a seat here and strap yourself in." Cole replied and he indicated the empty seat beside him.

"The Borg?" Denning exclaimed as he rushed to the vacant seat and sat down.

"Don't worry, it's just a scoutship. Not a full cube. We can handle it. Nayal are our fighters ready to launch?" Cole said.

"All pilots ready captain, but with our shields up-" Nayal began but Cole turned towards Ghroc.

"Mister Ghroc lay in a course at zero mark eighty-five. Ten light minutes at warp two." he ordered.

"We're withdrawing?" Denning exclaimed, "What about my people on the planet? You can't just abandon them."

"Don't worry professor we aren't leaving." Cole reassured him.

"The Borg vessel is limited to sublight speeds professor." T'Lan added, "Moving away by ten light minutes will give us the chance to lower our shields long enough to deploy our fighters without leaving ourselves vulnerable to attack."

"Course laid in captain." Ghroc said and Cole nodded.

"Engage." he said and before the Borg scoutship could finish its repairs the *Nightfall* accelerated away.

At warp two it took just one minute to get the ten light minutes away from the Borg vessel that Cole had specified, at which point the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp again.

"Captain the Borg ship has turned and is coming after us." Nayal said.

"Tactical drop shields. Nayal get our fighters out there." Cole responded.

"Lowering shields captain." Martin said and Nayal activated the intercom.

"Bridge to launch bay. Scramble. Scramble. Scramble." she said. With the *Nightfall's* shields lowered the twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters it carried were able to exit the launch bay in pairs through the large forward launch door. Once they were outside in space the pairs spilt apart, the two halves of the squadron forming up either side of the *Nightfall*, "All fighters launched and clear captain." Nayal reported when the process was completed.

"Shields up." Cole ordered, "Status of Borg vessel?"

"Range six and a half light minutes captain." Nayal told him, "Heading right for us at full impulse. Point nine-eight of light speed."

"It appears to have completed its repairs captain." Sodyne added.

"Helm hold position." Cole said and Denning frowned.

"You're just going to sit here?" he said and Cole smiled.

"Yes we are professor." he replied, "Mister Ghroc keep us lined up on that Borg vessel."

"Mass accelerators captain?" the Bolian asked and Cole nodded.

The ships of the *Nightfall* program had been designed and built specifically with combating the Borg and their technology in mind. During all confrontations with the Collective it had been observed that while they could adapt to and become nearly invulnerable to attacks by all forms of directed energy weapons and torpedoes, they remained vulnerable to purely physical impacts. To take maximum advantage of this the Akira-class cruisers had been modified to house a pair of mass accelerator cannons in their secondary hulls. These massive weapons ran for almost the entire length of the vessel and could accelerate a duranium projectile to a significant fraction of the speed of light. Against a conventionally shielded starship they were next to useless but their effectiveness against even a full sized Borg cube had already been proven. They could also be used to conduct highly effective planetary bombardments though and as such the program had been controversial from the start, with a number of Federation member worlds and even some senior Starfleet officers questioning the motivation for deploying such weapons.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin transfer control of the mass accelerators the helm. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc if the Borg vessel maintains its speed I want you to open fire at one million kilometres. Five rounds per gun." Cole told him, "Then take us to one half impulse. We'll follow that strike up with a strafing run. Nayal let our fighters know what we're planning. I want them with us as we go."

"A swarm attack captain?" Martin commented.

"Exactly." Cole replied.

"That is logical. The Borg have shown a pattern of attacking targets one at a time. I believe that we will be the focus of any return fire and our fighters will be given a relatively clear run." T'Lan added.

Ghroc set his headset to show him the range to the approaching Borg scoutship while adjusting the exact facing of the *Nightfall* so that its mass accelerators were aimed directly at it.

"Borg cube now at five million kilometres." Nayal announced as the cube drew closer. The nature of the mass accelerators meant that though they had a theoretically infinite range the further away a target was the greater the chance that it could simply move out of the path of the unguided projectiles and Ghroc continued to wait as the Borg vessel got even closer, "Four million kilometres." Nayal said before then adding, "Captain our fighters are asking you to confirm the order to hold position."

"Confirm the order lieutenant." T'Lan told her while Cole just continued to watch the approach of the Borg scoutship on the *Nightfall's* main view screen.

"Borg ship at two million kilometres. Course and speed holding." Nayal said and Ghroc flipped open the covers of the triggers for the mass accelerators' triggers that were built into his manual flight controls.

"Mass accelerators ready for firing captain." he said, still watching the range readout in his headset as it continued to countdown towards one million kilometres.

The moment that the countdown reached one million Ghroc squeezed the triggers, not waiting for a further announcement from Nayal or order from Cole and he held the triggers down long enough for his headset to show that five projectiles had just been launched in rapid succession from each of the mass accelerators. The time for these projectiles to get from the *Nightfall* to the Borg scoutship was long enough for the Borg sensors to detect them and for the hive mind driving the vessel to acknowledge that they posed a threat. However, with so much energy used to accelerate it to its current velocity it was not possible to move out of the path of the projectiles before they all struck their target.

Even against a stationary target the kinetic energy of the projectiles was enough to inflict considerable damage but with the Borg scoutship moving directly towards them at almost the speed of light the relative speed of the projectiles was magnified massively and they struck one after another with tremendous force, more than enough to smash right through the hull and carry on going through the vessel. With each layer of

material that they struck the projectiles lost more energy but this was just transferred straight into the structure of the Borg scoutship and this ripped apart everything nearby. All ten projectiles passed straight through the scoutship, leaving a trail of destruction behind them that left the vessel crippled.

"Now Mister Ghroc. One half impulse and take us right past them. Mister Martin fire at will." Cole said, looking at the heavily damaged Borg vessel on the viewscreen.

It was clear from the image alone that the scoutship was heavily damaged but Cole knew that it was only a matter of time before it was able to effect repairs and he wanted to finish it off before that could happen. Ghroc immediately accelerated the *Nightfall* up to half impulse while Martin locked the *Nightfall's* weapons onto the scoutship before unleashing a barrage of quantum torpedoes from the heavy cruiser's multiple launchers. Following Cole's orders the *Nightfall's* squadron of attack fighters kept pace with the cruiser and when the *Nightfall* fired its quantum torpedoes they rapidly released a volley of photon torpedoes from their own launchers. Each of these slammed into the already severely damaged Borg scoutship and it was rocked by multiple explosions both from the torpedoes themselves as well as secondary detonations from inside it. "Fire phasers!" Cole exclaimed as the *Nightfall* got within a quarter of a million kilometres of the Borg scoutship and Martin fired all of the *Nightfall's* phaser emitters that had a line of fire to it. This was also the point at which the *Nightfall's* attack fighter squadron broke formation and swarmed over the cube shaped craft, strafing it with their own phasers. This barrage of fire produced yet more explosions from inside the Borg vessel and sections of it tumbled away.

"Captain the Borg power core is destabilising." Sodyne said, "A breach is imminent."

"Helm full impulse, move us away from the Borg vessel." T'Lan ordered and Ghroc twisted the flight controls to turn the *Nightfall* away from the Borg scoutship, accelerating to full impulse. Seeing this the fighter squadron's pilots also broke off, each of them heading in whatever direction would get them furthest away in the fastest time possible.

It was just under a minute later that the Borg power core finally breached and a massive explosion consumed the entire vessel in a brilliant flash of light. By this time the *Nightfall* and all of its fighters were already several million kilometres away though and they were well out of the danger zone.

"The Borg ship no longer appears on our sensors captain. Destruction is total." Nayal said.

"Then it's over." Denning said, smiling.

"Maybe not professor." Cole replied and Denning frowned.

"What do you mean captain. Look at that, there's nothing left of that ship." he said, pointing to the image of the expanding debris field on the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge.

"I mean that that was just a scoutship professor." Cole said, "It didn't even have independent warp capability. The transwarp conduit out there obviously leads deep into the Delta Quadrant and without that it would have taken tens of thousands of years for that ship to have got to us here. A ship like that wouldn't go far from a mother ship on it's own."

"Starfleet intelligence believes that scouts of this type are used in advance of larger vessels." T'Lan added, "The first example of such a craft encountered by Starfleet had been destroyed in an accident and it was soon followed by a second such scoutship."

"Which means we could still be expecting more company." Martin said.

"Contact lost with scout craft seven-one-six-four. Presence of Federation Starfleet vessel confirmed. *Sphere three-nine-eight* and *Sphere four-zero-seven* divert to grid two-eight-eight. Enter transwarp conduit and assimilate Starfleet vessel. Determine tactical capability used to destroy scout craft seven-one-six-four."

7.

"You asked to see me captain?" Davis said as he entered the *Nightfall's* briefing room where Cole sat with Martin, Sodyne, Professor Denning and Hewitt. The wall mounted displays showed maps, images and diagrams showing the research sites being studied by Professor Denning's team on Toros II.

"Ah yes lieutenant commander. Please take a seat. We were just going over Sodyne's analysis of the Borg scoutship. Basically if we'd been in a more conventional starship then we wouldn't have got off so lightly but our mass accelerators gave us the edge." Cole said.

"The Borg's lack of independent warp capability was a factor as well." Sodyne added, "We may not be so lucky next time."

"Next time? So you do think that there will be more Borg coming?" Davis asked and Cole nodded.

"Yes, I expect that they are on their way now and could arrive at any time. The transwarp conduit offers the fastest way for them to reach us so I suspect that they'll come through there. That's why we've also been going through the professor's research with him."

"Captain Cole is hoping that the Slavers had a way of shutting down the aperture." Denning said.

"If they did we haven't found it yet though." Hewitt added.

"So you want me to come up with a way to do it?" Davis said.

"No I want you to work with Lieutenant Commander Martin on preparing our defences for when the next wave of Borg arrive." Cole told him.

"We need a first line of defence to hit the Borg the moment they arrive in the system. Right when they come out of the transwarp conduit and before they get the chance to get a good look at what's in the system." Martin said.

"You mean a minefield." Davis said.

"Exactly. How long will it take to prepare enough anti-matter mines to completely block the transwarp aperture?" Cole asked.

"That depends on how dense you need the minefield to be captain." Davis replied.

"Dense enough that any Borg vessel at least the size of a sphere will be hit by at least four mines." Cole told him.

"That's about one mine every two hundred and fifty metres. Four hundred in total." Davis said as he carried out a quick mental calculation.

"Can you do it?" Cole said.

"Oh yes captain. I'm sure your history as a tactical officer makes you aware of how simple mines can be and we've got enough anti-matter fuel in our tanks for thousands of them. Are there any specific properties you want to include? The trigger mechanism for example?" Davis said.

"How about fitting thrusters to increase the number that can swarm a ship?" Martin suggested and Davis nodded.

"Doable." he said, "We can use a class one probe as a template and swap out some of the sensors for the warhead."

"How long are we talking about to produce them commander?" Cole asked.

"For replication and arming? Basic mines about four and a half hours. More advanced ones based on a probe double that. On the other hand deploying mines based on our probes will be a lot easier. Instead of having to deploy them in place either ourselves or using shuttles we'll be able to just fire them from our torpedo launchers. Of course we'll also deplete our stocks of base materials pretty badly. I'd suggest gathering more that we can use to replenish them." Davis said.

"Where are you supposed to get new material?" Denning said when he heard this.

"The Borg scoutship." Sodyne responded, "My analysis of its structure indicated it was made of a lot of useful materials."

"Examining the wreckage of a Borg ship could also reveal useful intelligence on them captain." Martin added, "Our knowledge of the current state of the collective is almost non-existent."

"Very well." Cole said, nodding, "We'll send our runabouts to survey the wreckage and gather any useful material. Lieutenant Commander Martin I want you aboard one of them to carry out an intelligence assessment of anything you find. Lieutenant Commander Davis what are we looking at for total time to produce and deploy each type of mine?"

"Probably about even. Say ten hours. We can make the more basic mines quicker but the time saving will be taken up in deployment." Davis told him.

"In that case proceed with replicating mines based on our class one probes. Start deploying them as soon as possible." Cole said.

"Yes captain. I'll get my people on it right now. Is there anything else?" Davis replied.

"No thank you lieutenant commander, you may go." Cole said and Davis turned to leave.

"I should go as well captain. We may need that intelligence assessment." Martin pointed out and Cole nodded again.

"Yes, please do commander. Let us know immediately if you find anything significant." Cole said as Martin got up to follow Davis out of the briefing room.

"So what about my people on the surface captain?" Denning asked.

"Are we going to have to abandon another system?" Hewitt added.

"I hope not." Cole answered, "I'm still hoping that the Borg may not see this system as a priority and they won't come here for several weeks but from what we know about them they will send another ship to investigate the loss of their scout. Now if it's a smaller vessel then our minefield may be enough to take them out entirely. At the very least it will slow them down while they make repairs. Just in case though I intend to defend your research site to the best of our abilities."

"You've already seen how effective the *Nightfall* can be against the Borg." Sodyne commented, looking at Denning and Hewitt.

"Quite. However, if the Borg send a cube or an equivalent vessel then we are going to be outmatched. When I was on the original *Nightfall* we did take out a cube but we had to blow up an entire continent to do it. So if that's the sort of ship they send we'll try to draw them away from the planet so you can escape. Otherwise we'll do the opposite and draw them in. That's where we'll face them." Cole explained.

"You'll let them reach the planet? I don't like the sound of that captain." Denning said.

"Don't worry professor, we'll deploy one of our infantry companies to protect you. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne can you rig a dampening field that will prevent the Borg from beaming down directly to the camp?" Cole said, looking down the table to where Sodyne sat.

"I should be able to captain. Any transport scrambler that the Borg won't be able to adapt to though will require a pretty powerful dampening effect. I'd expect other electronics to be affected as well." she replied.

"You mean like phasers? How are your troops supposed to protect us if their phasers don't work?" Hewitt said and Cole smiled.

"The *Nightfall* carries enough ballistic assault rifles to equip all our ground troops." he said, "We've tried them out against the Borg in practice and they work. Their drones can't adapt to them. When they detect the dampening field the Borg will probably beam their drones to the surface just outside its area of effect and advance on foot. They'll be easy pickings for our troops. In the meantime we'll deal with their ship in space." "Ambush captain?" Sodyne said.

"Exactly. The less chance they have to fire on us the better so we'll come over the horizon and let them have everything we've got. Hopefully that will draw them after us and cut their force on the surface off from support in space." Cole replied.

"You make this sound like it's going to be straight forwards captain." Denning commented.

"Most battle plans are straight forwards when they're being discussed professor." Cole said, "Unfortunately most of them prove to be rather more complicated when they are actually put into action."

Doctor Hamill had performed medical procedures of various sorts on many different species of alien and that included a number of post mortem examinations. Normally these were carried out to determine the cause of death but on this occasion she was looking for something quite different. The body lying on the biobed was of a Borg drone and despite it appearing to be dead the biobed's monitors were still actively searching for any life signs that would indicate that it was starting to regenerate. In addition to this there were four security guards in sickbay, all of them armed with phaser rifles set to different beam frequencies who were ready to open fire at a moment's notice. The drone had been one of the crew of the Borg scoutship and its corpse discovered floating among the debris of the vessel, having survived its destruction intact. As soon as it had been discovered by the runabouts searching the wreckage Martin had recognised the potential intelligence value of the corpse and had it beamed back aboard the *Nightfall*, sending it directly to sickbay for Hamill to study.

Accessing the drone's chest cavity had required the use of the most powerful of Hamill's medical lasers but once the outer plating had been removed she was able to probe the interior of the body just as she would for any other species.

"Where are you?" she said to herself as she searched the dead drone's chest cavity through a set of head mounted magnifiers until she saw what she was looking for, "A-ha! There you are." she said, reaching for a nearby set of pincers. Reaching in through the hole in the dead Borg's chest she carefully aligned these with the object she had been looking for before gently taking hold of it and pulling it towards her.

The object was a small electronic component about five centimetres in length and one of many foreign objects embedded in the Borg's body. As she removed the object from the body there were still several wires trailing from it and she used a surgical laser to cut through each of them in turn before dropping the object into a nearby dish.

It was then that the door to sickbay opened and T'Lan entered.

"Here for this commander?" Hamill asked, lifting up the dish and tilting it so that T'Lan could see the object inside it.

"You have found and removed the neural processor? Excellent." T'Lan replied.

"It's not my normal sort of surgery but yes, I've found it. So that can tell us what the Borg are up to?" Hamill said.

"Yes doctor. The neural processor is a drone's link to the Borg Collective. It contains a record of their orders."

T'Lan said, "Did your examination reveal anything of note?"

"Well I haven't been able to perform much of an examination. I had to wait for Martin's security team to arrive before I could go anywhere near the body to begin with and after that I was focusing on finding this little gizmo but I have made a few observations." Hamill said.

"Such as?"

"Such as before the Borg Collective did this to her she was a female of the Shivolian species. I found a brief reference to them in the Starfleet medical database from the *USS Voyager's* logs. There's very little information about them though and if this one hadn't been assimilated then I'd be wanting to send the body back to Starfleet Medical for a more extensive examination. Of course the modifications made by the Borg have changed things around in there and it's too dangerous to send a drone even if it's supposed to be dead. Anyway, she appears to have been assimilated within the last four to six months judging by the state of the tissue damage where the implants were inserted. That means that the collective is still active in the Delta Quadrant though I can't tell you anything about their overall strength." Hamill said.

T'Lan then turned towards a large stack of medical kits that were located across the room.

"You have prepared for the expected fighting I see." she said and Hamill nodded.

"Yes, emergency medical kits with a focus on treating burns, lacerations and trauma. Each one will also contain hyposprays loaded with nanites in a fluid suspension. In fact Lieutenant Campbell was in here about ten minutes ago to ask about issuing more of those to our troops." she said.

"What is your assessment of how effective injecting nanites into an individual who has been infected by Borg nanoprobe doctor? It was previously held that the number needing to be injected to provide an adequate defence against assimilation would prove toxic themselves." T'Lan asked. One of the most significant differences between ships like the *Nightfall* and other more mundane Starfleet vessels was the inclusion of a self aware nanite hive throughout its systems. In some circumstances these could provide an alternative means of controlling parts of the ship or diagnosing failures in its systems their primary purpose was defensive. The Borg were known to assimilate vessels by injecting their nanoprobe directly into them, thus depriving the occupants of any internal defences or even basic control of their ship. However, the *Nightfall's* nanite hive had been shown to be able to effectively counter this. The billions of nanites in the *Nightfall's* hive could easily overwhelm and neutralise the more limited number of nanoprobe that Borg drones were capable of carrying.

"The simulations suggest it will work providing that the nanites can be injected quickly enough, within about five minutes probably and before any Borg nanoprobe reach the victim's brain but without practical tests we can't really know." Hamill said, "Of course no-one is stupid enough to volunteer to be injected with fully active Borg nanoprobe so we won't know for certain until they get tried. Toxicity is a problem but that's why I'm recommending that they only be injected after a person has been infected and is in the process of being assimilated. By that point they'd be pretty much done for anyway. I've given instructions that two injections should be given, one to the base of the skull so the nanites can protect brain functions and the other to the point where the Borg nanoprobe were injected. The problem is that our nanites won't have anything like the advantage in numbers that they do when the hive as a whole is defending the ship. I've kept the number low to reduce the risk of poisoning by the nanites themselves. I'll make sure that every one of my medical teams will know what to do so if we do get boarded they'll be ready. This isn't exactly a treatment that is fully approved by Starfleet Medical though so I'm going to need the captain's permission to offer it to the crew."

"Thank you for your assessment doctor, I will inform the captain. He will probably wish to speak with you personally before he authorises anything though." T'Lan said and then she looked at the body of the Borg drone, "Are you finished with the corpse now?"

"Unless there's anything you want from it, yes." Hamill answered.

"In that case please prepare it for destruction. As you have already said, even a supposedly dead Borg can prove to be dangerous." T'Lan said.

B.

With Davis and most of the *Nightfall's* engineering department occupied in preparing the minefield that Cole wanted to use to block the transwarp aperture it fell to Sodyne to prepare the dampening field that would be used to defend the research site on the surface. To speed up the process she used as many off the shelf components as she could and when the design was complete she took it to the bridge where Cole was on duty.

"Captain I have the design for the transporter scrambler." she said, handing him a PADD with the schematics for the device on it.

"You've based it on a subspace transponder?" Cole said when he recognised the core of the device and Sodyne nodded.

"It's designed to put out a lot of power and can do it over a wide bandwidth. Of course I've adjusted it to operate in the electromagnetic spectrum rather than through subspace. It will prevent transporter materialisation over a radius of about a thousand metres." she said.

"What about secondary effects on other equipment?" Cole asked.

"The field has to be strong captain, anything unshielded will be effected. That includes communicators, tricorders and deflector shield generators. Mister Foster's transport is going to have to be fully locked down. If it isn't then the dampening field could affect the magnetic storage bottles of the anti-matter fuel tanks. On a related point you'd better make sure that none of our troops are carrying any photon grenades." Sodyne answered.

"It's that powerful?" Cole commented.

"It has to be captain. Like any other energy field it will lose strength the further away from the centre it gets. Unless we either litter the area with hundreds of field emitters or accept the Borg beaming in within about a hundred metres then this is the field strength we need. Phasers and other particle weapons will also be affected somewhat. They will fire but they'll be far less effective and the wasted energy will be dissipated as heat. Even Starfleet issue weapons will overheat pretty fast." Sodyne explained.

"Will it have the same effect on Borg weaponry?" Cole said.

"If they deploy tactical drones armed with their plasma weapons then yes. In fact the beam will lose coherency almost immediately, the result of which should be pretty impressive to say the least."

"Define 'impressive' Lieutenant Commander."

"Have you ever seen footage of a flamethrower captain?" Sodyne said and Cole smiled.

"I was a tactical officer Leyla. We learnt all about them at the Academy." he said, "Plus during the early years of the *Nightfall* program similar weapons were considered for adding to the armoury of our ground troops. But it turns out that fire isn't much use against drones on its own and the range of such weapons is limited. Not to mention how inadvisable it is to use one aboard a starship, especially when it's your own. A bullet to the head or chest at four hundred metres is a much safer option. One thing that is worrying me though is the effect on communication. I don't like the idea of our ground troops being cut off from us."

"I've thought of that captain and I've come up with a solution. At least a limited one, we still won't have communication with each individual trooper on the ground but we will be able to get messages to and from them." Sodyne told him.

"Okay, how?" Cole asked.

"A simple optical system captain. We set up a terminal that will pulse a bright light upwards and we can respond with our lidar emitters. Visual light is one thing that the dampening field can't absorb." Sodyne answered.

"A good job too. I'd hate to have our troops tripping over their own feet in the dark." Cole commented, "Now how long to get this built and set up?"

"Give me an hour captain. The field generator will be small enough to be transported in a shuttle so I'll fly it down to the planet while you're here laying the minefield." Sodyne replied.

"Very good. Carry on lieutenant commander." Cole said, returning the PADD to Sodyne just as the turbolift door opened and T'Lan stepped back into the bridge.

"Captain I have the report from Doctor Hamill. May I present it to you in your ready room?" she said.

"Of course T'Lan. Mister Ghroc you have the conn." Cole said and he got to his feet.

"Yes captain" Ghroc said from the helm station but he waited until one of the junior bridge officers had made their way from one of the rear consoles before getting up.

As soon as they were alone in Cole's ready room T'Lan held up the neural processor taken from the dead Borg drone in sickbay.

"The doctor was able to locate and remove this." she said.

"The neural transponder, good. Is it intact?" Cole responded.

"It appears so although I have not attempted to access it yet." T'Lan said.

"Okay so what did the doctor have to say?" Cole asked.

"She is confident that the injection to counter the assimilation process will work provided it is administered rapidly. However, given that the procedure is unapproved and may have toxic side effects she requires your permission to proceed with distribution." T'Lan answered.

"Okay I think we can trust her to have everyone's best interests at heart and not recommend something that carries a serious risk. You can tell her that she's won me over T'Lan." Cole said.

"Won you Robert?" T'Lan said.

"Over. Won me over T'Lan."

"I apologise, I misheard you."

"Misheard me? That's not like you T'Lan." Cole commented.

"I was distracted for a moment Robert. I will pass on your message to the doctor. Before I do however, there is something I would like to discuss. It is the reason I asked to speak with you privately in here instead of on the bridge." T'Lan said.

"Of course, go ahead." Cole replied.

"As well as T'Sal we have a number of other children aboard the *Nightfall* as well as some civilians. Have you given any thought to evacuating them before the Borg can arrive?" T'Lan said.

"No. I know it's dangerous fighting the Borg T'Lan but I think that they'll be safer overall if they remain aboard the *Nightfall* with us. I know we could fit them aboard our runabouts and send them back towards Federation space but if the Borg do get past us then they're bound to pick up their warp trail and there's no way that a pair of runabouts can outrun a Borg ship, let alone out fight one. Added to that they'd be vulnerable to anything else that could be lurking out there. We certainly can't afford to send a fighter escort with them, we need all of them right here to support the *Nightfall*." Cole told her.

"Of course captain. Your reasoning is logical." T'Lan said.

"Thank you T'Lan. Coming from you that is high praise indeed. Now perhaps you can tell me what's on your mind that distracted you from what I said about Doctor Hamill winning me over?" Cole said.

Trellan, Professor Denning's Romulan assistant looked up into the sky as the shuttle descended towards the research team's base camp and watched it land about fifty metres from the much larger transport ship that had brought the research team to the planet. When the ramp at the rear of the small craft opened he saw Professor Denning exit with Hewitt and then Sodyne and Foster behind them carrying an equipment canister between them.

"Professor!" he called out and he broke into a run as he rushed to greet the returning team members.

"Trellan how are things going here?" Denning asked when the Romulan halted in front of him.

"How are things going? There are soldiers digging everywhere. Who knows what they could be destroying. I tried to stop them but they said they needed to prepare defensive positions. This is just like when the Tal'Shiar decided digs back home presented a security risk." Trellan replied and he waved to where a unit of Starfleet ground combat specialists in body armour and helmets were digging a trench.

"Hey!" Sodyne called out when she saw this and the soldiers turned towards her, "Make sure to check with the research team when you dig. We're trying to protect this place, not destroy it."

"Thank you commander." Denning said.

"Okay so where do we get this set up?" Foster added and he leant on the canister that contained the dampening field generator.

"What is it? What does it do?" Trellan said.

"It's a dampening field generator." Sodyne told him, "It should stop the Borg from beaming right among us. Unfortunately it will also shut down communications, sensors and phasers. We can set it up right here."

"Do you need me for that?" Foster said but Sodyne shook her head as she knelt down and opened the canister.

"No, you go and make sure your ship's warp core is properly locked down, I can handle things here." she said.

"Professor are we really expecting the Borg to land here?" Trellan said while Sodyne was removing the dampening field generator from its canister.

"It gets better than that. Captain Cole wants to draw them here deliberately." Hewitt told him before Denning could reply.

"And you agreed to this?" Trellan said to Denning.

"Don't worry Trellan, the captain's plan is sound." the professor said.

"Professor when you told that to the captain he told you that plans fall apart easily." Hewitt reminded him.

"Hopefully he was joking." Denning replied.

As soon as the doors to sickbay opened Cole heard the sound of violin music coming from Doctor Hamill's office and he smiled. Hamill was well known for her music among the crew and most enjoyed her performances. She practised often and this included during breaks in her duty shifts such as now. "Doctor Hamill." he called out as he walked towards the office, preferring not to take her by surprise by suddenly appearing in the room behind her. The music immediately stopped and Hamill leant through the doorway and smiled.

"Captain, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"I've just spoken with T'Lan, now I'm all yours so where would you like me?" Cole said and Hamill's eyes widened as she stared at him, "To tell me about this nanite treatment doctor. Where is best to do that?" Cole added and Hamill exhaled.

"Oh of course. I thought – well never mind." Hamill said, "Perhaps you should come into my office."

"Of course, this is probably better done in private." Cole replied and he walked into the office where he sat down in front of Hamill's desk.

Hamill had been using her computer terminal to display the music she had been playing so she had to set her violin down and adjust the display to bring up the simulation of the nanite injections as she also sat down.

"We know that Borg nanoprobe can be disabled by our nanites." she began as the simulation showed Borg nanoprobe being confronted by Federation nanites. Individually the nanoprobe appeared just as capable as the nanites and when they fought one another one-on-one either was capable of defeating the other. Where the Federation nanites were superior though was in their ability to co-operate, "You can see here the way in which they act to isolate individual or small groups of nanoprobe, for example by using themselves a bait while a larger group moves in to overwhelm them."

"Yes doctor, I know this. Remember that I've been part of the *Nightfall* program since before the prototype ship was launched. I had the benefit of working with an actual Borg, or at least a former Borg." Cole said.

"Of course captain, I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure nothing was missed." Hamill said.

"That's okay doctor but please move on. We have no idea how long we have before more Borg arrive." Cole pointed out.

"Yes captain. The question has always been how to achieve this for individuals who have been attacked without poisoning the subject. Normally when we use nanites to treat a patient we use only a few hundred, a thousand at most to avoid triggering a reaction from their immune system. Since our white blood cells can't destroy the nanites the body would go into overdrive and just keep on producing them with all the complications that leads to. This means that we can't flood someone's body with nanites to destroy any Borg nanoprobe as soon as they are injected. What Starfleet Medical has instead been looking at is using them as a treatment instead of a vaccine." Hamill explained.

"Just as they were always intended to be before they became self aware." Cole commented.

"Exactly captain. The current thinking is to use a two stage process. The first is an injection at the same location where the Borg nanoprobe entered the body so the nanites can immediately begin to attack them."

"And the second?" Cole asked.

"The second is an injection to the base of the skull about here captain." Hamill said and she pointed a finger to the back of her skull where it met the top of her spine, "This will act a means to prevent any Borg nanoprobe spreading to the subject's brain and affecting its function. If it's successful then the process should be complete within about twenty minutes, at which point the nanites will shut down. Once they're inactive the body's immune system will be able to destroy and dispose of what's left."

"And if the assimilation process goes on for longer than that?" Cole said.

"Captain eye witnesses to Borg attacks have confirmed that victims become Borg within about five minutes of being infected. If the process isn't blocked within twenty then they'll be too far gone and getting them back will be next to impossible. It's only happened on a handful of occasions where Borg drones can be entirely cut off from the collective. Most cases of this have involved individuals but there have been cases of small groups or the crews of damaged ships being separated." Hamill said.

"Like what happened to Max and his ship. The Collective terminated its connection to his ship when it was infected by the virus designed to reawaken the crew's individuality."

"Max, Lieutenant Maximillian right? The Borg you worked with on the previous *Nightfall*?" Hamill said

"That's right. He was our chief engineer." Cole replied.

"Do you mind me asking what he was like captain? I've never met a Borg drone or even a former drone. There aren't that many of them around."

Cole considered this for a moment, trying to think of the best way to describe the man he had known for a number of years before he sacrificed himself.

"He kept to himself a lot. It's not that he was unfriendly but he still had all of his implants so his physical needs were a lot different to anyone else in the crew. We never did find out what species he came from originally or how he came to be assimilated by the Borg Collective and I think that weighed heavily on him. So much that it could explain why he opted to keep his implants." he said and Hamill frowned.

"Why?" she said.

"Well even if he had them all removed he'd still be one of a kind and I think in the end he was lonely. Not that he ever said that to anyone but that's still the feeling I got. Nayal was there when he died and his last words were a request that if we ever did find out who his people were we should tell them what happened to him and how he died." Cole said.

"How did he die?" Hamill asked and Cole smiled at her,

"Saving the Federation." he said before he started to get back to his feet, "Well doctor if you are happy that this treatment can help protect our people against being assimilated by the Borg then I am happy to allow it to be issued and administered to the crew. If the Borg behave as they have on previous occasions then assuming we can drive their attack back the Collective will wait while it reconsiders the resources needed to crack a hard target."

"I hope so captain." Hamill agreed and she got back to her feet, setting her computer terminal to show the music she had been playing again and then picking up her violin to return to her practice. Just as she began to draw the bow across the strings of her violin again though Cole suddenly leant his head back through the doorway of her office.

"Perhaps this will all be done in time for you to have another game of cards doctor. T'Lan tells me you did very well last time." he said and Hamill's hand slipped, producing a screeching sound as she dragged the bow over the violin strings instead of the notes she intended to play. She quickly turned around to face the doorway but by that time Cole was already walking towards the exit from sickbay.

3.

Cole was on his way back to the turbolift when his combadge activated.

"Davis to Captain Cole." Davis' voice said and Cole tapped his combadge to speak while continuing to walk along the corridor.

"Go ahead commander." he said.

"Captain I thought you'd like to know that the last mine has just been completed and is on its way to the forward torpedo bay for arming and deployment. The minefield will be complete in under ten minutes." Davis told him.

"That's excellent news. Do you know if Lieutenant Commander Martin is back onboard yet?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. I spoke to him a few minutes ago. His salvage operation has partially replenished the materials we needed to construct the mines but not entirely. We're down to about sixty percent. Once this is all over I'd like to find a nice deserted asteroid belt somewhere that we can use to fill up the rest. Unless we're heading back to Federation space for a resupply." Davis answered.

"Sorry commander but we aren't due to head back home for another two months yet. I'll see what I can do about the asteroids though." Cole said as he reached the turbolift and stepped inside. "Bridge." he said and the turbolift car began to move, whereupon he returned to his conversation with Davis, "Commander after you've confirmed that the minefield has been activated I want you to make sure that all our systems are ready for battle. Also check the warp drive. If the Borg send a cube then we'll have no choice but to withdraw, we can't face a ship like that on our own."

"Understood captain, I'll get right on it. Davis out." Davis said and the channel went dead just as the turbolift doors slid open and Cole stepped out onto the bridge.

"T'Lan have you forgotten that you've been promoted?" he said, smiling when he saw T'Lan sat at the science station usually occupied by Sodyne instead of in the captain's chair while he was off the bridge.

"It was logical to make use of this console while I was accessing the Borg neural processor." she replied as Cole walked over to her and looked at the console himself.

"Is that where the scoutship came from?" he asked. Part of the console showed a star map of a region of space Cole was not familiar with and marked on this there was a line that represented the transwarp conduit.

"It is." T'Lan answered, "The neural processor confirms that the system our probes arrived in is located within the Delta Quadrant, deep within Borg space. It is the one shown at the centre of this map. As soon as our probes exited the transwarp conduit they were detected, intercepted and assimilated by the scoutship. It then entered the conduit to investigate the source of the probes."

"No chance that this is just a very unfortunate coincidence then?" Cole commented.

"No captain. From what I can tell the Borg are aware of the transwarp aperture in their system they do not make great use of it." T'Lan replied.

"Why not?" Cole said.

"I cannot tell from the data I have studied so far. Perhaps it does not connect to anywhere they consider worth going. They have their own transwarp drive and conduits for long distance travel after all." T'Lan suggested.

"I suppose so. What else can you tell me?" Cole said.

"Because of the system's location there are few vessels in the area. Most of the ships appear to be deployed to frontier sectors instead." T'Lan said and Ghroc smiled at them from the helm station.

"All the easier to assimilate their neighbours." he commented.

"That is likely." T'Lan said, "The closest vessel at the time the scoutship entered the transwarp conduit was here." she continued and she pointed to the shown map on the science console, "It is a sphere and given what we know about their speed capability it would already have been here if it had been immediately diverted to investigate the loss of their scoutship."

"The Collective must have decided that a single sphere wasn't enough." Cole said, "That means that either they are sending a bigger ship or more than one. What other ships were in the area of this system T'Lan?"

"The nearest cube was located here." T'Lan said as she pointed to a position close to the very edge of the map, "However, there is a second sphere located significantly closer. If it also diverted to the transwarp aperture then at maximum speed it would be arriving in the system in around ten minutes."

"And how long after that to reach us here?" Cole said, bracing himself for the news that a pair of Borg ships would come through the transwarp aperture within the hour.

"Based on the flight time of the scoutship it would take fourteen minutes for the spheres to reach us." she said.

"Then we don't even have half an hour before we're up to our necks in Borg." Noyal said from the operations console.

"At least now we have an idea of what we could be up against." Cole said, "Lieutenant Noyal I want you to set up a transporter program that will allow us to beam all of our people up from the surface as fast as possible. Use every transporter available, including the ones in cargo holds and our shuttles."
"The dampening field on the surface will prevent evacuation by transporter." T'Lan pointed out, "We will need to shut down the field generator and wait for it to disperse before we can beam our troops up."
"Not just our troops. I want the entire research team beaming up as well. It's going to be difficult enough for us to evade a pair of Borg spheres, Foster's transport doesn't have a chance. If there are two spheres coming then we can't even try to lure them both away. One is bound to follow the other ship." Cole said.
"I'll get started on it now captain. It shouldn't take more than about ten minutes." Noyal responded.
"Good because we may now have less than half an hour before the Borg turn up. Helm get into orbit around the second planet and position us so that we're behind the horizon to any ship that comes through the transwarp aperture. We'll drop a probe as a sensor relay. T'Lan will Professor Denning's campsite be detectable from the aperture?" Cole said.
"Yes captain. It will be located on the planet facing the aperture for the next sixteen hours." T'Lan told him.
"Good. Then that will give the Borg something to come towards us for. Then once they're in position we'll spring our trap. In the meantime sound red alert. I want everyone ready for a fight by the time we enter orbit." Cole ordered.

Most of the emergency medical kits and stocks of nanite filled hyposprays had been distributed when Martin entered sickbay.

"Jack, here for some hyposprays?" Hamill asked when she saw him and then she noticed that the rifle he had slung over his shoulder was not an ordinary Starfleet-issue phaser rifle, instead it was one of the assault rifles that were typically reserved for the *Nightfall's* ground combat specialists and even they usually used phasers owing to their greater familiarity with the weapons. Against the Borg though the assault rifles offered a much better level of protection, "Are you joining our ground troops?" she added.

"No but since Captain Cole and I both know how to use these things he decided that we should carry them as well. If the Borg send any drones to the bridge we'll make them fight to take it. Of course having a counter agent for being assimilated will help as well." he answered.

"Of course, I've got a carton over here." Hamill said and she walked over to the remaining stock of hyposprays and picked up one of the remaining cartons. As she did Martin approached her and he placed a hand phaser on the counter beside her.

"The captain also told me to make sure that you got this." he said, "I checked my security console and it told me that your issued phaser is still in your quarters."

"I'm a doctor, not a soldier." Hamill said.

"Trust me doc, the Borg won't care about that blue uniform of yours. Besides I've seen you carry a phaser before." Martin said.

"I can't stun a Borg drone though, can I? I have to kill them."

"Doctor neither the captain or I have a problem with you just running and hiding but if you're cornered by the Borg then you have a choice, them or you and what they'll do to you is far worse than just killing you." Martin said.

"Okay you can tell the captain that I have the phaser." Hamill said and she attached the holster to her uniform.

"Very good doctor." Martin said, smiling as he picked up the hyposprays, "I'm sure the captain will be relieved to hear it."

Flying a shuttle through the dampening field would have been dangerous so the generator was still inactive when Sodyne took off in the shuttle. She had left the commanding officer of the company of ground combat specialists on the surface with instructions on how to turn it on after giving her the opportunity to get out of the area of effect. Looking at her sensors she smiled when it suddenly showed an energy field activating behind her that obscured detailed scans of the surface.

"Try beaming through that." she said to herself before she checked her sensors to get a fix on the *Nightfall* and the first thing she saw was that the heavy cruiser's shields were raised, "Sodyne to *Nightfall*." she signalled, "I'm on approach now, can you lower your shields so I can land?"

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne this is the *Nightfall*." Noyal's voice responded, "Our shields will be lowered when you are in landing position. Hold at one thousand metres."

"Copy that *Nightfall*. Closing to one thousand metres. Sodyne out." Sodyne said before she shut off the shuttle's communication system.

As she piloted the shuttle out of the planet's atmosphere she set a course that would take her behind the *Nightfall*, arcing around until she could see the rear of the starship ahead of her. Slowing down she brought the shuttle to a halt when she was a kilometre away and activated the communication systems again.

"*Nightfall* this is Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. I'm in position. Can you lower your shields now?" she said.

"Affirmative lieutenant commander. You are cleared to dock. Be advised our fighters are in launch position, proceed with caution." Nayal told her.

"Understood *Nightfall*. Sodyne out." Sodyne said as she double checked her sensors to confirm that the *Nightfall's* shields were dropping before she approached any closer and risked colliding with the invisible energy barrier.

One of the aft launch bay doors began to open and Sodyne used the shuttle's thrusters to guide the craft through it. Inside the launch bay the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron was laid out ready to launch through the forward launch door. The only thing that appeared to be preventing the fighters from launching was the lack of crew, the cockpit canopies of the twelve craft were all open and Sodyne could see that there was no-one inside any of them. The arrangement of the fighters in the launch bay left little room for her to land but fortunately one of the elevators leading down to the storage and maintenance hangar on the levels below had been deliberately kept clear and Sodyne manoeuvred her shuttle towards this before gently setting it down and shutting off its engines.

"What's going on? Are the Borg already here?" she asked the ground crew technician standing close by when she exited the shuttle and noticed a fire team of armoured ground combat specialists armed with their assault rifles. She also saw that the technician was armed with a phaser on his belt, something that was definitely out of the ordinary.

"Not yet commander but Captain Cole expects them soon. He's already brought us to red alert and ordered that everyone is armed. You may want to keep that with you." the technician told her and he pointed to the phaser Sodyne had armed herself with before going to the planet's surface.

"Thanks, I will." she replied before she headed for the turbolift, walking past the ground troops as she did and looking again at their weapons.

When she reached the bridge Sodyne found that apart from the science station that was manned by one of her subordinates all of the other main stations were manned by department heads. As the technician in the hangar had warned her all of the bridge crew were wearing phasers on their hips. In addition to this she saw that both Cole and Martin had ballistic assault rifles clamped to their seats.

"Is everything ready on the surface then commander?" Cole asked when he saw her and she nodded.

"Yes captain. The dampening field generator has been deployed and our troops are dug in down there. I'd rather they were more careful about where they were digging though." Sodyne answered before she sat down and fastened her safety harness.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne please concentrate your scans on the subspace aperture and conduit. The minefield has been deployed but we need the maximum notice possible of approaching Borg vessels. You will need to interface with the probe placed as a relay." T'Lan told her.

"Yes, I see it." Sodyne replied as she checked her console and saw that a class three probe had been deployed so that it could monitor the transwarp aperture and minefield while keeping the *Nightfall* hidden from anyone who came out of it. The downside to this was that it limited the *Nightfall's* own ability to monitor the aperture to the scanning capability of the probe itself. The deep subspace scan was still functional though and the planet would not block that, meaning that it was still possible to monitor the interior of the transwarp conduit.

The first Borg sphere to arrive in the area known to the Borg Collective as grid two-eight-eight had taken up a position almost a million kilometres from the transwarp aperture and waited for the arrival of the second vessel. Although both vessels were same size they presented several differences in their surface contours as a result of adaptations made and damage regenerated since their construction. The different experiences during their service had also resulted in their crew complements varying by several hundred. Despite these differences though the two vessels were still considered to be of the same class and suitable for the same mission profiles as one another by the Collective which was why they had been paired together for this assignment.

"*Sphere three-nine-eight* and *Sphere four-zero-seven* now in grid two-eight-eight. Entering transwarp conduit." the element of the Collective that controlled the two spheres fed back to the main hive mind for transmission to the unicomplex at the heart of Borg space and the two spheres moved in unison towards the aperture. One of the six hundred metre diameter vessels projected a stream of tachyon pulses towards the location of the aperture to open it and then allowed the other vessel to enter the transwarp conduit before it too entered and the aperture closed behind them. Like the scoutship that had entered the conduit earlier the two spheres knew the route through the various turnings and junctions and they both followed this, heading towards the Alpha Quadrant and covering the equivalent of thousands of light years every minute.

The *Nightfall's* crew waited anxiously for the arrival of the Borg. Ever since their first invasion of the Federation at the very end of 2366 and start of 2367 the Borg had been considered one of the greatest threats to its existence. Even the slightest indication of a Borg presence anywhere close to Federation space would draw a massive response with dozens of starships being assembled into task forces and planetary defence systems coming to full readiness. Since the disaster at Wolf 359 where thirty-nine starships and more than eleven thousand lives had been lost Starfleet had tried desperately to come up with weapons and tactics that would allow them to effectively combat the Borg and their vessels and ships like the *Nightfall* were the culmination of this process. However, even with their specialised weaponry and defences against the nanoprobes used for assimilating vessels a single ship of the *Nightfall* program was not expected to be able to stand up to a Borg sphere or cube alone in a direct fight.

"Maybe we should get our fighters out there." Nayal suggested but Cole shook his head.

"No, I don't want to tire the pilots out before the Borg even turn up." he said, "Assuming they do come through the aperture then we'll have plenty of time to drop our shields, deploy the squadron and get our shields back up before they get to us."

"Captain I have two contacts inside the conduit." Sodyne suddenly announced when the subspace scan detected the approach of the Borg spheres and moments later the probe left to monitor the aperture scanned it opening.

One of the two spheres was still slightly ahead of the other and as soon as it emerged through the aperture the minefield detected it. Even if the minefield had been made up entirely of 'dumb' mines that required a target to come within their blast radius before detonating the leading sphere would have still struck six of them and with the addition of thrusters to enable more of the weapons to swarm it a further eight slammed into the vessel in rapid succession before exploding. Given the limited amount of time and resources that Davis had had to create the minefield he had been forced to give the mines conventional photon warheads instead of the more hard hitting quantum warheads used by the *Nightfall's* torpedoes and even though it was unprotected by its shields as it emerged from the transwarp conduit the sphere was not destroyed. The multiple explosions were enough to inflict serious damage though and after passing through the minefield it began to slow down, focusing all its energy on regenerating the damage.

Behind this first sphere the second was forewarned about the minefield and it raised its shields as it came through the transwarp aperture. By following the exact same route through the minefield as the first sphere the second was able to pass through the gap that had been created when the first sphere struck the mines ahead of and close by it. The sphere did not escape entirely unmolested however, as more mines that had begun to approach the first sphere instead moved into range of the second. As well as its shields, the second sphere had also powered its weapons before coming through the transwarp aperture and it was able to fire at some of the mines as they approached it, picking off two of them before they came close enough for their proximity fuses to be triggered. Much of the energy of the explosions was absorbed by the sphere's shields but some still penetrated to strike the vessel beneath and one of the mines did not detonate until it had already passed through the shield and its full force was directed into the sphere.

"Report. How effective were the mines?" Cole asked when he saw the repeated flashes of anti-matter detonations on the bridge's main viewscreen.

"Twenty-two detonations confirmed captain." Nayal replied, "Fourteen hits to the first sphere and up to eight on the second."

"Up to?" Ghroc commented.

"Some of the mines may have detonated short of the target. I picked up weapons fire from the sphere as well. I think it was defensive fire to try and shoot down the mines before they hit."

"Analysis of damage inflicted?" T'Lan added and she glanced towards Sodyne.

"Difficult to determine commander." the Betazoid science officer, "We're relying entirely on the probe's sensors after all. I can tell you that both spheres are still intact but the first appears to have been severely damaged. I'm still picking up strong power readings but little activity. I think it's gone into a regeneration mode."

"And the other sphere?" Cole said.

"Coming this way captain." Nayal told him.

"It's course takes it directly towards Professor Denning's base camp." Sodyne said, "I'm guessing that they've detected the dampening field and it's attracted their attention."

"Then the professor and our people on the surface have company coming. Okay we know where the Borg are now so let's get ready to attack. Nayal get our pilots to their fighters. Martin drop our shields when they're ready to launch and then get them back up again once they have. We'll stay behind the horizon until the

sphere heading our way enters orbit. Then the *Nightfall* will engage that while our fighters go to warp and engage the other one at extreme range. They don't need to destroy it, just keep it burning energy fighting them that it can't use to regenerate the damage it's suffered. We've split them up now let's see if we can pick them off one at a time." Cole ordered.

"Energy field detected on second planet. *Sphere four-zero-seven* hold position and regenerate. *Sphere three-nine-eight* move to position above centre of field. Stand by to assimilate source. Starfleet vessel not detected. *Sphere three-nine-eight* and *Sphere four-zero-seven* to maintain alert status. Likelihood of Starfleet vessel still being in system high. Assimilate once detected."

Despite the damage suffered by the second sphere, the one designated *Sphere three-nine-eight* turned towards the source of the energy field on the system's second planet and accelerated towards it. Despite being within the boundary of a solar system where there could be a significant number of objects in its path the sphere went to low warp, cutting its journey time from several hours to just a few minutes. Dropping back out of warp, the sphere entered orbit directly above the research team's campsite and conducted another scan.

"Energy field disrupting transporter functions for radius of nine hundred and ninety-eight metres. Drones to beam beyond perimeter and advance on foot."

Simultaneously almost a thousand Borg drones from the sphere's complement were beamed directly from their alcoves aboard the vessel to the surface of the planet below. These materialised in a circular formation just beyond the range of the dampening field's ability to block transporter functions. From this distance the drones could see the research team's camp and their transport ship. The dampening field also limited the drones' ability to carry out a scan of the area but on the basis of this visual information alone they all stepped forwards into the area covered by the field.

For a moment the drones came to a sudden halt as the dampening field disrupted their link to the Collective. However, the close proximity of the drones to one another enabled them to connect to each other instead, forming a localised equivalent to the greater Collective before they continued their advance.

Concealed inside a well constructed and camouflaged hide Lieutenant Campbell, the commanding officer of the company deployed to protect the campsite watched the advancing Borg drones through a pair of binoculars. Although most of the electronic device's features were entirely internal to it and thus unaffected by the dampening field the option to wirelessly relay images from it to another device was blocked so he had no way of sharing what he saw with his men.

"They're coming." he said to another nearby soldier, "Spread the word, fire at will."

The other soldier turned on the spot and ran from the observation post. Outside he moved as quickly as he could to one entrenched and camouflaged firing position after another, doing his best to keep low so that the approaching Borg drones would not be able to plot their positions just by tracking his movement.

"Lieutenant's orders, fire at will." he said to each fire team he came across and the soldiers readied their rifles.

In centuries gone by the armies of Federation member worlds would have had access to projectile weapons capable of hitting targets well beyond the kilometre radius of the transporter scrambler's dampening field but such weapons were beyond the scope of the *Nightfall* program and the maximum effective range of the Starfleet troops' rifles was less than half that so for the time being they held their fire, watching and waiting as the Borg continued to advance at a slow walking pace towards them.

The uneven nature of the ground around the campsite meant that the Borg did not advance at the same rate on all sides. However, the hidden Starfleet ground combat specialists did not have to wait for all of the drones to get within range before opening fire and the moment the first drone got close enough a shot rang out from a rifle. Although the soldiers had trained with their ballistic rifles, including some live fire exercises this was still their first live use of them and this first shot missed its intended target. Instead it struck the ground close by the drone it had been aimed at and produced a small plume of dirt. However, this was quickly followed up by more shots and several of them struck the Borg drones.

Even though the shielding of Borg drones and vessels was incapable of stopping a physical impact or projectile the bodies of Borg were still armoured as a result of their implants and the bullets fired by the Starfleet troopers' were not guaranteed to penetrate this. Their integral armour could not protect them forever though and several of the Borg fell to the ground. Unlike an ordinary army where the other soldiers would have sought cover and returned fire the Borg simply ignored their fallen comrades and continued to advance towards the campsite. Few of the drones were equipped with ranged weapons and those that were held their fire, their implants telling them that these would be ineffective within the dampening field.

While the company of ground combat specialists deployed to the surface were engaging the Borg drones Cole ordered the *Nightfall* and the cruiser's squadron of attack fighters into action against the spheres. "Helm, take us to half impulse. Fire mass accelerators as soon as you have a shot. Nayal pass the word to our fighters. Good hunting." he said.

Acting on this order the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron turned away from the planet below and accelerated to full impulse until they were far enough away to safely go to warp, at which point they turned towards the badly damaged and regenerating sphere and jumped to faster than light speed. Meanwhile Ghroc flew the *Nightfall* around the planet towards the sphere that was orbiting over the horizon.

"Contact in five seconds captain." he said moments before the Borg sphere came into view. Much larger than the scoutship that the *Nightfall* had already faced, the sphere dwarfed the *Nightfall* in size but this did not dissuade Ghroc from continuing towards it and the moment his headset indicated that he had a clear shot he squeezed the triggers for the cruiser's twin mass accelerator cannons, firing brief bursts from them both at the same time. Some of the solid duranium projectiles clipped the edges of the sphere and smashed all the way through but those that hit closer to the centre only made it part way through before being brought to a halt by the structure of the vessel.

"I've got a lock." Martin announced.

"Fire all weapons." T'Lan told him and Martin immediately opened fire with the *Nightfall's* torpedoes and phasers.

Unlike the projectiles from the mass accelerator cannons the Borg shields were able to absorb a significant amount of the energy from these weapons though and the sphere was able to project a tractor beam at the *Nightfall*, bringing it to a sudden halt and holding it firmly so that the starship's mass accelerator cannons were pointing away from it. This caused the *Nightfall* to lurch violently and the bridge officers felt themselves being pressed against their safety harnesses. Martin was still able to fire another of phaser blasts and quantum torpedoes but even though the range was shorter than for the first the Borg shields absorbed a greater amount of the energy.

"Borg shields are adapting captain." Sodyne said.

"The tractor beam is draining our shields captain." Martin said when his console alerted him to the loss of shield strength.

"They've got us stuck fast captain. If I try forcing us out we'll blow up before we break free." Ghroc added.

"I'm open to suggestions Sodyne." Cole said.

"I recommend adjusting phaser frequencies by fifteen percent captain. Then an increase of three percent after each shot." Sodyne responded.

"Mister Martin do it. I want that tractor beam taken out." Cole said.

"Yes captain." Martin replied as he adjusted the *Nightfall's* phasers. However, as he did so Nayal looked up from her console.

"Captain we've got breeches in our shields." she said and almost immediately there was a green glow to the side of the bridge that heralded the arrival by transporter of a group of four Borg drones.

Ghroc was the first to react from the helm station, aiming his phaser towards the intruders and firing a blast that struck one directly in her chest. This produced a flash and shower of sparks before the drone fell forwards and collapsed dead on the floor.

Nayal was the next to fire, releasing her harness and rolling sideways to fire around her console. Her phaser blast caught a second drone in his shoulder and he staggered backwards before being hit once more as Sodyne fired from her station while taking cover behind her chair. However, by this point the Borg had been able to analyse the bridge crew's phaser settings and the beam was blocked by the Borg drone's shield.

"They've already adapted, switch to secondary frequencies." T'Lan called out.

While she and the other bridge officers armed only with phasers were adjusting their weapons both Cole and Martin were releasing their assault rifles from the clamps that held them in place. It then took just a second for them to chamber rounds and bring the weapons to their shoulders before firing. Each of them fired a single shot at the Borg drone that had already been hit in the shoulder and from such close range the armour built into the Borg's body offered no protection. Both bullets penetrated the drone's body and it too collapsed in a lifeless heap.

From the moment they had materialised the Borg had been spreading out and one of the remaining pair had got close enough to swing his arm at Ghroc while the Bolian was still readjusting his phaser. Fortunately he was able to reach up with both hands and after dropping his phaser he grabbed the arm being swung towards him. As he grabbed the arm Ghroc saw the nanoprobe injection tubes extend to try and infect him but they just flailed about unable to reach him while he held the arm away from him.

More gunshots then echoed around the bridge as Cole fired several shots in rapid succession at the drone attacking Ghroc. Most struck the drone cleanly and he jerked under the impacts. However, one of the bullets only clipped the drone and ricocheted off before hitting the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge. The technology of the screen prevented the entire display from shutting down but in addition to the elements destroyed as the bullet punched through them the force of the impact also destroyed a small area around the point of impact. The gunfire was enough to partially disable the drone through and it dropped to its knees while still attempting to get its injector tubes close enough to inject nanoprobes into Ghroc. In dropping to his knees though the drone became a more difficult target and Cole ceased fire for fear of hitting Ghroc. Instead T'Lan rushed towards the helm station, returning her phaser to her holster as she moved. Then as soon as she came within arm's reach of the drone she reached out and grabbed hold of two of the prominent cables connecting different parts of his body and then pulled on them as hard as she could. Her Vulcan strength was enough to enable her to rip these free and this damage was enough to finish off the drone. When it suddenly went limp Ghroc pushed it away from him as T'Lan stepped back out of the way and it crashed to the floor at their feet.

The final drone had headed towards the rear of the bridge, taking it towards the science station and Sodyne hurriedly adjusted her phaser to a new frequency. She completed this just in time to be able to aim her weapon up at the drone while it loomed over her and fired from point blank range. The adjustment made to her phaser was enough to enable it to penetrate the Borg's shield and its chest exploded in a shower of sparks that made Sodyne flinch as it fell.

"From behind Sodyne one of the bridge's junior officers rushed forwards from his station at a rear console, pointing his phaser at the drone that was still twitching in a random fashion.

"Commander are you-" he began before Sodyne called out a warning.

"No stay back Farrell, it isn't dead yet!" she yelled as the officer stood over the drone but she was too late and the crippled Borg was able to reach out and inject nanoprobes into the man's leg. Farrell let out a scream as the swarm of microscopic machines were injected into his flesh and he dropped his phaser and fell. Seeing what had happened Martin moved closer before putting two bullets in the Borg's head to finish it off, "Farrell's down!" Sodyne exclaimed as she crawled closer to him.

"Do you have a nanite hypospray lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked as she hurried to see what Farrell's condition was.

"Yes, right here." Sodyne replied as she grabbed the hypospray she had under her console and double checked that it was ready for use. Farrell had begun to convulse as the Borg nanoprobes worked to turn him into a drone and Sodyne could not get to the wound on his leg to deliver the injection, "Hold him down." she said and Martin quickly knelt down beside Farrell to hold him still.

"Do it." he told her and she quickly pressed the hypospray against the spot on Farrell's leg where she had seen him injected by the Borg before triggering the device.

"Do not forget the second injection." T'Lan reminded her.

"I know." she said before she looked at Martin and added, "Roll him over."

Martin nodded before rolling Farrell over to lie face down and this allowed Sodyne to inject Farrell with a second dose of nanites at the base of his skull. As soon as this was done Farrell lay still and Martin was able to relax his grip on the man.

"Get him to sickbay but make sure he stays under guard." Cole ordered and two other junior bridge officers moved to pick him up before carrying him between them towards the turbolift, "Nayal get me an update on what's happening aboard my ship. Martin I want a tactical report as well. We need to break free of this tractor beam if we're going to have any chance of destroying that sphere."

"Intruders reported in main engineering captain." Nayal said.

"Are they contained?" Cole asked and Nayal nodded.

"It looks like it captain." she said, "A fire team of our ground troops and two security teams have them pinned down. They tried to start assimilating the ship but the nanite hive destroyed the nanoprobes that were injected."

"They struck at our most critical locations. A logical move." T'Lan commented.

"Yes but at least we can protect ourselves." Cole replied.

"The tractor beam is still locked on us and draining our shields captain. Strength is down to forty percent."

Martin added as he returned to the tactical station, "We're getting more random breaches that the Borg could beam through.

"What about system damage?" T'Lan said.

"There's a bullet hole in our main viewscreen." Nayal responded.

"Better than our chief helmsman being assimilated." Cole said and then he looked at Martin, "Can you get a phaser lock on the source of that tractor beam?"

"Yes captain. We're too close for torpedoes but I think I can get a shot with our ventral phasers." Martin told him.

"Then do it. Rotate phaser frequencies until you find something that will get us loose." Cole ordered before

turning towards the front of the bridge again, "Mister Ghroc as soon as we're free of the tractor beam take us to full impulse and get us out of orbit. I want that sphere to follow us."

"Yes captain." Ghroc said and he strapped himself back into the helm station.

"Phasers locked captain. Firing now." Martin announced before he fired one of the *Nightfall's* ventrally mounted phasers, aiming it directly at where the tractor beam was being emitted from the Borg sphere. The first blast was slightly off target and instead of disabling the tractor beam it burned a shallow hole in the hull of the sphere before Martin cut the beam and tried again. This time his shot was on target but the Borg shields had adapted to absorb phaser fire of that frequency and Martin immediately adjusted it, increasing the frequency while narrowing the bandwidth before firing a third shot. The new frequency was enough to bypass the Borg shielding and there was a small explosion from the sphere as the tractor beam emitter was hit, terminating the beam.

"Now Mister Ghroc, full impulse." Cole exclaimed and Ghroc smiled.

"Yes captain, full impulse." the Bolian replied as he pulled on the flight controls.

The *Nightfall* immediately began to move away from the planet, leaving orbiting and heading into interplanetary space.

"The Borg aren't following captain." Nayal reported when the *Nightfall's* sensors showed that the sphere was still in orbit above the research team's campsite on the planet below.

"I'm picking up disruption to their power grid. We may have hit them harder than we thought." Sodyne added before the sphere suddenly started to move, heading towards the apparently fleeing *Nightfall*.

"Here they come. Borg sphere closing." Nayal said and Cole nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin lock aft torpedoes and fire a full spread." he said.

"Aye captain." Martin replied. He had already anticipated being called upon to fire on the Borg sphere so he had maintained a lock on the vessel and all he had to do was launch a spread of torpedoes from the aft launchers mounted in the weapons pod to the rear of the *Nightfall*. Each of the launchers was loaded with several torpedoes so a small cloud of the weapons burst from them in rapid succession and sped towards the pursuing sphere.

The Borg shields were partially effective in absorbing the torpedo attack but not fully and there were more explosions from the sphere as some of the quantum torpedoes penetrated its defences and exploded against the hull.

"Captain the Borg ship is slowing down." Nayal said.

"I'm registering significant power levels from inside. It looks like the Borg are shifting to a regenerating mode." Sodyne added.

"This time we really have hit them hard. Time to finish them off." Cole said.

"We must angle our attack carefully. Any overshoot could endanger our people on the planet." T'Lan pointed out.

"Agreed." Cole responded, "Helm circle around and line us up from the side. Fire mass accelerators as soon as you have a clear and safe shot."

"How many rounds captain?" Ghroc asked.

"As many as it takes commander. As many as it takes." Cole replied and then he glanced over his shoulder and added, "Lieutenant Commander Martin maintain fire with phasers and quantum torpedoes.. I want the Borg to have to put so much energy into their shields and regeneration systems that they won't have anything left to throw at us."

"Firing captain." Martin responded as Ghroc turned the *Nightfall* around, flying the cruiser in a wide circle that looped back towards the Borg sphere. As the *Nightfall* turned Martin fired another volley of torpedoes at the sphere. These struck the sphere but the bulk of their energy was absorbed by its shield, limiting the physical damage inflicted. Then as Ghroc continued to turn the *Nightfall* and it got closer to the sphere he switched to firing the cruiser's phasers, adjusting the frequency properties of the beams between shots to try and prevent the Borg from adapting their shields to block the beams. Using this method Martin was able to blast more holes in the sphere's hull, triggering plumes of escaping atmosphere and debris but the Borg vessel remained largely intact as the *Nightfall* finally turned to face it directly.

Ghroc squeezed the triggers for the mass accelerator cannons as soon as his heads up display showed that they were properly aligned on target and he held them down for several seconds as he unleashed twin bursts of projectiles. These slammed into the already damaged Borg sphere and ripped it apart further, sending a large section flying off into free space. The sphere did attempt to return fire as the *Nightfall* sped towards it, firing a single blast from its primary beam weapon but although this hit the *Nightfall's* shields head on it failed to penetrate them before it was cut off.

"Picking up multiple energy surges from inside that thing captain." Nayal said.

"It looks like their power matrix is becoming unstable." Sodyne added.

"Helm hard about. Get us clear of the danger zone." T'Lan ordered.

"Hard about commander." Ghroc repeated as he turned the *Nightfall* away from the critically damaged Borg sphere and sped away at full impulse.

"Borg warp core breach in five seconds captain." Sodyne said.

"Are we far enough away to be safe?" Cole asked.

"I think our shields will hold but-" Sodyne began before the Borg sphere was consumed in a massive explosion. This reached as far as the *Nightfall* and showered it with fast moving debris. However, none of this was able to penetrate the starship's shields and other than a shudder the vessel was unaffected.

"Sensors confirm that the Borg sphere is destroyed captain. I'm not picking up so much as a single active drone left among the wreckage." Nayal said and Cole smiled.

"Very good lieutenant. Helm lay in a course for the second sphere, let's go and help our fighters deal with it." he said.

Although there had been some casualties in the *Nightfall's* engagement with the Borg most of these had been minor and all of sickbay was largely empty when Farrell was carried into it. With few other patients to monitor Hamill rushed to him straight away and began to scan him with her tricorder.

"Get him on a biobed quickly. Then you can get back to your stations." she told the two junior bridge officers who had taken him there and she pointed to the nearest of the biobeds. Her scans showed that although he appeared barely conscious there were considerable changes going on inside his body, with his heart rate, blood pressure and breathing all fluctuating.

The more capable sensors of the biobed confirmed Hamill's tricorder reading and sickbay's systems were also able to connect with the nanites inside Farrell's body to provide her with a better picture of what was happening. Although so far the nanites injected into the base of his skull had prevented any intrusion of Borg nanoprobe into his brain those injected into his leg had been unable to contain the nanoprobe there and now both nanoprobe and nanites had spread around much of his body.

"Doctor are you okay there?" a voice said from behind Hamill and she looked around to see a pair of security guards entering sickbay, obviously sent to protect her just in case the assimilation process inside Farrell proceeded far enough to make him dangerous to others.

"Yes I'm fine. Please let me get on with treating this man." she replied before turning back towards Farrell, at which point she sighed and added, "If only I could think of something I could do."

Farrell then began to twitch and looking at the biobed's sensor readings Hamill saw that the nanoprobe had spread as far as his spine.

"Doctor are you sure-" one of the security guards began when he saw the random movement.

"I'll be fine." Hamill replied, "Computer activate restraint field." she added and there was a brief flash as a forcefield was established over the biobed to prevent Farrell from getting up.

All of a sudden an alarm sounded and Hamill looked at the display mounted on the wall over the biobed to see that the nanites at the base of Farrell's skull had been deactivated and the Borg nanoprobe were now spreading into his brain. Looking down she saw that the colour of Farrell's skin was starting to change, apparently losing pigment as it turned a pale grey. At the same time the twitching increased and the restraint field over the biobed crackled. Suddenly Farrell thrust an arm straight up and reached through the restraint field, causing Hamill to gasp as she leapt back out of the way.

"Doctor get back!" a security guard called out and as Hamill retreated they advanced with their phaser rifles held to their shoulders.

"Computer I want an isolation field around biobed six now!" Hamill snapped and there was another flash as a larger forcefield activated to surround the area around the biobed. While this was being activated Farrell was able to sit up from the biobed and then get down to the floor.

With a staggering gait, Farrell advanced towards Hamill and the security guards but he stopped when he reached the forcefield and was unable to penetrate.

"Looks like he's contained." a security guard said.

"Yes but for how long?" the other added and they both looked at Hamill.

"I don't know what you expect me to tell you." she replied, "I'm a doctor, not a security systems specialist."

Farrell then reached for the forcefield and pressed his hand against it, causing both security guards to take aim at him. With a forcefield in the way though neither of them fired, even as part of Farrell's forehead burst open and a Borg implant appeared, expanding to cover most of his forehead at that side. Farrell then reached forwards again and placed his hand against the forcefield, causing it to crackle and shimmer around it.

"Lieutenant you should get back on the biobed." Hamill said, stepping closer and trying to present a friendly face to the man despite her fear. However, Farrell pushed his hand forwards harder and this time it push right through the forcefield, striking Hamill and hurling her backwards.

"Fire!" one of the security guards exclaimed and both of them fired their phaser rifles together.

Had Farrell not still been behind the isolation forcefield the two phaser beams would have both hit him but instead they were blocked by the forcefield, "Doctor shut down the-" the security guard began before Farrell suddenly lunged forwards and dived right through the forcefield to tackle him and send his rifle falling from his grasp.

The second security guard turned and was in the process of aiming his own rifle when Farrell lashed out and knocked it from his hand before striking the man in his face. This blow was powerful enough to knock him over and while he was incapacitated Farrell turned back to the man he had just tackled, raising a clenched fist. There was a sticky tearing sound as a pair of narrow tubes then began to emerge from between his knuckles, ready to inject nanoprobe into the security guard but before he could do this there was the sound of a phase firing and a beam hit Farrell. The security guard pushed Farrell off him and then looked around towards the source of the beam, seeing Hamill lying on the floor and pointing her phaser in his general direction.

The sound of gunfire from outside could be heard from the flight deck of Foster's transport and he and Professor Denning both sat in there looking out of the viewport. From this vantage point they could see not only the flashes of gunfire coming from the concealed firing positions of the *Nightfall's* ground combat specialists but also the ominous black figures that continued to advance towards them even as one after another fell to the fire from the supposedly antiquated assault rifles that the soldiers were armed with.

"They're getting closer professor." Foster commented, "Even with our hatches sealed I don't think that we can keep them out forever if they actually reach the ship and with that dampening field still running we can't take off."

"Look there goes another one." Denning said, almost as if he hadn't heard what Foster had said to him and he pointed to where another Borg drone had just collapsed after being shot.

"Hello professor? Did you hear what I said?" Foster asked, waving his hand in front of Denning's face.

"Yes I heard, you're worried that those soldiers out there won't be able to hold the Borg back." Denning replied. Then he added, "Grab a couple of phasers."

"Phasers? That Betazoid said that firing a phaser inside the dampening field was a bad idea. Something about overheating I seem to recall and when phasers overheat they have a nasty tendency to explode." Foster pointed out.

"Yes but they should work fine once we shut the field down." Denning said.

"Shut it down?" Foster exclaimed, "What are you talking about. That field is stopping the Borg from beaming right in here."

"If they get to us that won't matter. You and I are going to go down to the field generator and wait. If the Borg get too close then we'll shut down the field and get back in here. I'll need you to cover me once that field is down." Denning told him.

"Okay professor, but I don't like the sound of this. Going outside when there are Borg about isn't my idea of good sense." Foster replied before they both got out of their seats.

After collecting a pair of phasers from the transport's arms locker the two men made their way down to an air lock and exited the transport. Outside the sound of gunfire was much louder and Denning flinched when he first heard the sharp 'crack' of a rifle being fired from close by. With the gunfire continuing the two men rushed to where the transporter scrambler had been set up and crouched down beside it before looking around. From ground level it was much harder to determine exactly what was happening but they could hear the sounds of gunfire from all around them.

"So how do we know when to turn this thing off?" Foster asked and Denning looked around again.

"I guess as soon as we see a Borg drone appear." he replied.

With the only gunfire being that from the Starfleet ground combat specialists it was difficult for Denning and Foster to tell how close the Borg were getting. This changed though when the closest of the surviving Borg came within about fifty metres of their concealed positions. At this point the soldiers decided that it was worth setting their rifles to fire fully automatic bursts. This enabled them to spend less time aiming, instead firing rapid bursts that sent numerous projectiles along slightly different paths, thus increasing the chance that at least one of them would hit their target.

"Here they come. Get ready." Denning said and more of the Starfleet troops switched to fully automatic and the 'crack' single shots became the roar of bursts of bullets.

However, soon after this something else started to happen and the sound of gunfire began to die off.

"What's happening? What happened to all the shooting?" Foster asked.

"I think it means that the Borg are getting to Captain Cole's men. They're here." Denning said, resting his hand on the lever that would shut off the transporter scrambler and deactivate the dampening field it was generating.

"Professor look!" Foster exclaimed and he pointed to where a Borg drone had just appeared from around a large storage container.

Turning to look at the alien cyborg Denning was just about to pull the lever when he noticed something odd about the drone. He had watched the strange, stiff way they walked from the transport's flight deck but this drone took this even further, leaning over in an exaggerated manner while dragging one foot along the ground.

"Wait, it's hurt." he said before Lieutenant Campbell suddenly appeared behind the drone and fired a short burst from his rifle into it, killing it instantly.

"Professor what are you doing out here?" Campbell asked when he saw Denning and Foster crouched beside the transporter scrambler.

"Getting ready to turn this off so we can leave when the Borg get to us." Denning answered and then he looked at the dead Borg and added, "Like that one."

"Well there's nothing to worry about professor." Campbell reassured him, "This was one of the last, my men are just moping up the survivors now. We've won."

"We've won?" Denning repeated as he got to his feet and Campbell nodded.

"That's right professor. My estimate is that we were outnumbered something like eight or ten to one but when they had to march over open country while under constant fire they were easy targets." he said.

"So we've won." Foster said and then he looked skywards, "But what about up there?"

Even in its heavily damaged state the remaining Borg sphere was still more than capable of destroying the twelve tiny attack fighters sent by the *Nightfall* to engage it and so rather than attempting to destroy the large vessel the fighter pilots were instead under orders to simply harass it. By remaining at long range and making only brief attacks before suddenly manoeuvring out of the path of any return fire they were able to force the sphere to expend energy and other resources that it could have been using to regenerate from the widespread damage inflicted by the minefield.

The attacks were co-ordinated between the fighters so that the sphere was left vulnerable to them as much as possible, exploiting the Borg characteristic of concentrating its fire on one target until it was destroyed. Thus the fighters attacked in waves of at least three, moving in and firing brief blasts from their phasers while the sphere was targeting one of the other fighters. As well as their phasers the squadron was also armed with photon torpedoes but the pilots made little use of these because of the combination of the amount of time it would take to get an adequate lock and also the limited number of the weapons they carried. However, every now and again one of the fighters was able to maintain an attack run long enough to get a target lock and fire a torpedo. Although lacking the firepower of the *Nightfall's* quantum torpedoes, the photon warheads were still capable of inflicting damage and this further degraded the sphere's capabilities.

This system was not perfect though and during one run when a pilot broke away the sphere was able to switch targets more rapidly than the other pilots in the wave were expecting and when it fired at a second fighter almost immediately the beam struck the tiny craft head on and after punching through its shields destroyed the entire forward section in one go, killing the pilot outright.

For the most part though the situation was a stalemate, with the Starfleet attack fighters too manoeuvrable to be easily destroyed but also lacking the sheer numbers or individual firepower they would need to destroy the Borg sphere. This stalemate continued until the *Nightfall* arrived, moving out of the orbital plane so that its warp drive could be used to reach the battleground more rapidly without the same risk of collision.

As soon as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp it charged directly at the sphere, firing phasers and quantum torpedoes.

"Status of the Borg sphere?" Cole asked as he watched the enemy vessel take multiple hits from the *Nightfall's* weapons.

"Energy field fluctuating captain." Nayal answered.

"The damage is inconsistent with what was recorded by the probe when it came through the minefield captain." Sodyne added.

"Explain that lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"There was some fresh damage even before we fired but some of what was recorded is no longer registering on our sensors commander." Sodyne told her.

"Some of the damage from the minefield must have been regenerated while our fighters must have inflicted more." T'Lan said to Cole and he nodded.

"Just as planned." he said, "What about our fire?"

"More significant captain. I think we've damaged the main power core." Sodyne replied before the ship shuddered.

"Cutting beam captain." Martin said, "Shields holding."

"The Borg are firing photon missiles captain." Nayal announced when the *Nightfall's* sensors detected the missile launch.

"Phasers." Cole ordered and without replying Martin fired the *Nightfall's* phasers at the missiles that were closing from behind the ship.

Small and fast moving, the photon missiles made for difficult targets but Martin was still able to shoot down one out of the three before the other two slammed into the *Nightfall's* shields.

"Damage report." Cole exclaimed when the ship shook violently.

"Port side secondary hull hit captain. The hull is breached but forcefields have activated to contain atmosphere." Nayal responded.

"Captain our port side mass accelerator is offline." Ghroc added.

"What about the starboard one commander?" Cole asked.

"Still functional captain." Ghroc answered.

"Then bring us about and make the most of it. Mister Martin I want phasers and quantum torpedoes. Stand by to fire on my mark and hit this thing with everything we've got."

Ghroc spun the *Nightfall* around as it continued along its existing course before accelerating directly back towards the sphere. As he flew towards it he fired the *Nightfall's* operational mass accelerator in a sustained burst that sent more than a dozen projectiles into the sphere.

"Borg shields collapsing captain." Sodyne said when she saw the energy field around the sphere start to disappear.

"Nayal order our fighters to get clear. Mister Martin now, fire at will." Cole ordered.

Martin unleashed a volley of quantum torpedoes from the *Nightfall's* forward launchers, following this up with blasts from the cruiser's phaser emitters.

Without its shields the Borg sphere was almost defenceless against the incoming torpedoes, the best it could manage was to try shooting them down but although one of the torpedoes was hit the rest struck the sphere directly before exploding. The torpedo detonations were then followed by series of secondary blasts that became progressively larger until the entire sphere exploded from the inside.

"Target destroyed captain." Martin said with a smile on his face.

"If the Borg stick to their usual pattern of behaviour then they shouldn't give you any more trouble professor." Cole told Denning while they sat together in Cole's ready room, "They've already lost three ships in this system and they don't reinforce failure. It'll be some time before they decide to return here and I expect you'll be long gone by then."

"My estimate is that we'll be done here in about three weeks captain. Frankly there just isn't much left here. I'd still feel better if you could leave that minefield in place though." Denning said.

"I'm sorry professor but we don't know if anyone other than the Borg use that transwarp conduit. Starfleet regulations don't allow me to leave mines where they could be hit by random passing ships, especially when it could be a first contact situation. It looks bad on reports to blow up an ambassadorial vessel. We'll still be in the system for about a week though. We suffered damage in the battle and I'd like it repaired before we return to our survey work." Cole told him.

"Of course. Thank you for aiding us captain. Even just knowing that the Slavers had a network of transwarp conduits is a massive discovery and it's only because of your ship and its crew that we know that. I'd just like to add that I thought your ground troops acquitted themselves very well." Denning said.

"Thank you professor. I've already spoken with Lieutenant Campbell and Lieutenant Commander Martin about their performance and we're thinking of looking into adding more weapons to their armoury. The machine guns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries could lay down considerable firepower over a long range and just a few of those could have protected your base camp very effectively." Cole said.

"Yes it always comes down to what weapons we can build when dealing with the Borg doesn't it captain? Oh well I suppose I should just be grateful that we came out of this with so little loss of life. Now I must be getting back to my team, they need to know what's happening going forwards." Denning said and he got up to leave.

"Of course professor, it was good speaking with you." Cole replied, also standing up while Denning exited the ready room. As he was sitting down again his combadge sounded and he tapped it, "Cole." he said simply.

"Captain it's Doctor Hamill." Hamill's voice said, "I'm not disturbing you am I?"

"Of course not doctor. I have plenty of paperwork to do so I'll be here for a while yet. Now what can I do for you?" Cole replied.

"I've just finished my own paperwork captain. Including the report on the nanite hyposprays. I'm sorry they turned out to be a total failure." Hamill said.

"It's not your fault doctor. Maybe one day we'll find a method of preventing assimilation but for now all we can do is try." Cole said to reassure her.

"Thank you captain." she replied.

"You're welcome doctor. Now don't you have another card game to get to? T'Lan mentioned it to me earlier." Cole said.

"Oh yes, the card game. Captain about the-" Hamill began.

"Don't worry doctor I am familiar with Nayal's sense of humour." Cole said.

"So you won't be reporting what happened?" Hamill asked.

"Reporting? Of course not. My own wife was part of the game after all. On the other hand I have contacted a few friends on other ships to brag about the women trying to win me. Cole out." Cole said and he tapped his combadge again to turn it off.

Cole had been at his desk for several hours working through the reports he had received from every department following the battle with the Borg when the intercom at the ready room's secondary door activated. This door led to a short corridor that could be used to access the room without having to go through the bridge and was typically used by people who wanted to meet with the captain privately.

"Robert are you alone?" T'Lan's voice asked and Cole frowned.

"Yes, what's the matter T'Lan?" he responded.

"Could you let me in please. I could not go to our quarters. There is an engineering team working in the corridor outside." T'Lan said.

Confused about why T'Lan needed him to let her into his ready room Cole got to his feet and walked over to the door to open it for her. As the door slid open Cole's eyes widened when he saw T'Lan standing alone the

corridor completely naked, one arm was folded across her chest while the other reached down to cover between her legs.

"T'Lan?" he said.

"I should have listened to Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and folded." T'Lan said.