

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



MAIDEN VOYAGE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **MAIDEN VOYAGE**

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The Akira-class USS Nightfall is scheduled to be deployed to the Romulan neutral zone, expected to stop the Romulan Star Empire's civil war from spilling over into Federation territory. But the detection of an unexpected signal from Cardassian space forces the ship to be diverted to investigate. The situation becomes even more unusual when a fleet of Romulan starships arrives at the same location...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
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Stardate 64002.6, Ten years after the end of the Dominion War and five months after the destruction of Romulus. The Beta Antares shipyards...

"Doctor King I presume. Or do you prefer Commander King?"

Doctor Henry King looked up from the PADD to see a command division officer with captain's insignia standing over him and he smiled as he stood up.

"Ah Captain Edwards. I wasn't expecting to meet you here." He said, getting to his feet and shaking the newcomer's hand, "And either commander or doctor is fine. Henry even to you captain, though some people have called me 'King Henry' or just 'The King'. So why are you here?"

"I was simply intending to transport up there but apparently the system isn't on line at the moment. So the travel pod was the only other option."

It was then that King noticed the package Edwards was holding, wrapped in plain paper there was no indication of what it contained and the doctor frowned.

"Haven't your belongings been transferred to the ship already?" he asked.

"What? Oh this." Edwards replied, looking down at the package, "No this is something the post master asked me to take with me. Whatever it is, it's destined for a Lieutenant Hamilton. Our helmsman I believe."

"So you don't know what's in it then?"

"No. But it rattles." Edwards said, shaking the package. Then he added, "Shall we?" and he indicated the travel pod docked to the adjacent hatchway. Inside a pilot already waited and as soon as the two officers stepped inside the hatch slid shut behind them.

"Ready sirs?" the pilot asked, not even turning around.

"Whenever you are ensign." Edwards replied and there was a hum as the travel pod's thrusters powered up.

A minor shudder was all that signalled the travel pod's departure from the main orbiting structure of the Beta Antares shipyards, the star field outside the viewport not changing.

The pilot brought the pod around and it was then that Edwards and King got their first look at their destination. In space ahead of them hung a massive latticework structure, more than five kilometres in length. But it was not the structure itself that was important; it was what was inside it. Eighteen Akira-class starships in various stages of construction, from bare structural skeletons to three that appeared complete.

The travel pod headed towards the closest of these.

"Would you like me to take us straight in captain?" the pilot asked.

"Actually I'd like a good look at my new command." Edwards answered, "In your own time of course ensign."

The pilot smiled and adjusted the travel pod's heading again. The tiny craft entered the latticework of the construction dock to the stern of the heavy cruiser, passing close to the aft weapons pod. The torpedo launchers it carried thankfully sealed. The pilot then angled the travel pod downwards, flying it between the warp nacelles that hung down below the ship and as he did so Edwards pointed to the side of the pod, along the length of the Akira-class ship outside between the twin secondary hulls that extended out from the oval main hull.

"The hangar." He said, indicating the open doors to the massive hangar decks Akiras carried, "They're one of the largest open spaces aboard any starship."

As King looked for himself he saw movement within the hangar and caught sight of some of the craft docked there. Most had the typical wedge shape of shuttles or the more streamlined appearance of the Peregrine-class fighters this vessel also carried, but amongst them he also thought he caught a glimpse of something bigger. Something not in Starfleet colours.

The travel pod continued on its downward trajectory and passed under the warp nacelle before turning upwards again as the pilot flew along the length of the ship.

"Look there." Edwards said as the front of the nearest secondary hull came into view and King spotted that a hollow cylinder was protruding from the hull at this point, pointing directly ahead of the ship.

"Another torpedo tube?" he asked, "Isn't fifteen enough?" and Edwards grinned.

"It's not a torpedo tube doctor." He said, "It's a mass driver. A linear accelerator that runs almost the entire length of the ship. There's one in each secondary hull. Starfleet hopes they'll be effective against the Borg if they return. It's a bit difficult to adapt to a lump of duranium smashing right through your ship."

"Seems to me that they could make a mess of a surface target as well." King commented.

"They can." Edwards told him, "That's one of the things that makes these ships so controversial in Starfleet."

As the travel pod continued to circle the Akira-class vessel outside the markings on its main hull finally came into view.

NX-82008
USS NIGHTFALL

"My new command." Edwards said to himself softly, "At last I'm back where I want to be."
"Docking in thirty seconds captain." The pilot announced as the travel pod crossed the main hull, approaching the other secondary hull. With the pod's docking port to the rear the pilot brought it to a halt and then reversed it, a brief 'clunk' signifying that the docking was complete.
"Let's go see your new ship then shall we?" King asked as he and Edward turned around to face the hatch. Then it slid open and the two officers found themselves face to face with a Borg drone.

Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr sat down and exhaled heavily, tilting her head back in the chair. From the side of her head she plucked a compact earpiece that mounted a narrow forward protruding arm, which in turn had held a tiny transparent display screen in front of her eye. Then she sighed and leant forwards as she started to pull off her boots.

"Tough day mom?" her teenage daughter Nikki asked, looking up from the stack of PADDs on the table that held her schoolwork.

"You wouldn't believe it." Carr replied, "The *Nightfall's* supposed to launch this afternoon and half the secondary systems aren't one hundred percent yet. One of the outside engineers decided to have another go at making the lidar turrets function as an anti-torpedo system and blew out half the control links to that and the transporters. Now both systems are off line. Thank God we've got warp drive."

"So what's he like?" Nikki asked.

"Who?" Carr asked.

"The new captain. It's fourteen hundred. Isn't he here yet? Do you think this ship will end up like all the others he-"

"Oh no!" Carr exclaimed, "I forgot." And she leapt out of the chair and rushed towards the door, carrying her boots with her. As the door to their quarters slid shut after her mother departed Nikki shook her head and sighed before getting back to her studies.

"Good afternoon captain." The Borg said.

"Lieutenant Maximilian isn't it?" Edwards asked as he stepped out of the travel pod.

"Yes sir. I will be your chief engineer. Most of the crew refer to me as Max." And then the Borg stepped to one side to allow Edwards and King to exit the travel pod.

"Incredible." King said as he stepped from the pod, looking the Borg up and down, "I knew that one of the renegade Borg faction under – under – What was his name?"

"Hugh." Max replied.

"Yes of course." King said, "Hugh. I knew that you were here but I had no idea that you'd retained all your implants."

"I find them useful." Max said, "They enable me to interface directly with the *Nightfall's* systems and also the nanite hive that exists on board. Which reminds me. Captain this is for you." And he held out an earpiece with a mounted display, "This is personalised to you. It connects wirelessly to your combadge and allows you to access the ship's systems in a similar manner to my implants. Additionally it can detect the vibrations in your skull caused by speech and convert that data to an audio signal via your combadge. Even a whisper can be detected and transmitted cleanly no matter how much background noise is around you."

Edwards took the device and slipped it over his ear. It activated automatically and it appeared to him that text had appeared floating in mid air before him.

INITIALISING. PLEASE WAIT.

"How long will this take to get set up?" he asked but then the message vanished, "Oh wait, I think it's done."

"I would expect so sir." Max said.

"So do I get one of those doohickeys?" King asked, "I will be the second highest ranking officer aboard after all."

"They are just for the command crew at present doctor." Max explained and King smiled.

"Then I'll be awaiting mine then lieutenant. I'm sure the captain will point out to you that I am qualified to command this ship."

"My apologies commander." Max replied, "Few medical officers are and I-"

"That's quite alright Max." Edwards said, "Now I'd like to see some more of my ship if you don't mind."

"Of course sir." Max said, "Please do come with me."

"Guard to order!" a voice shouted from down the corridor and the troops lining it snapped to attention, holding their rifles across their chests. These were not Starfleet personnel. The troops lined up along one wall were all human and wore the uniforms of Earth's Military Assault Command Operations while opposite them were an equal number of Andorian Imperial Guard. On their right sleeves, each wore an embroidered patch that showed an image of an Akira-class starship, the name *USS Nightfall* and the phrase 'Never forget what you already know' around the edge. The soldiers' officers stood at the far end of this honour guard, also both stood at attention.

"Good afternoon gentlemen." Edwards said as he walked up to them, "I take it you two are the commanders of my ground forces?"

"Yes captain." The human replied formally, "Captain Gary Heart, MACO."

"Captain Shry. Imperial Guard." The Andorian added and Edwards smiled.

"At ease gentlemen." He said and as the two men relaxed he added, "So tell me about those rifles. They don't look like phasers to me." And he looked back down the corridor at the weapons held by the troops.

"They aren't sir." Heart answered, "Six millimetre selective fire automatic rifles. We've a choice of duranium tipped armour piercing or impact fragmentation rounds for use on softer targets."

"Another anti-Borg weapon?" King asked.

"Yes sir." Heart said.

"Just make sure your men know not to fire the armour piercing ones near the hull." Edwards said, "Depressurisation's a killer."

"That was thought of captain." Shry said, "The rifles can mount a phaser emitter beneath them. Equivalent to one of your type two phasers. The men can use those if it becomes necessary to use them against a tough target aboard the ship."

"Well let's just hope it never comes to that." Edwards said and he looked around, "Now where's my first officer. Shouldn't she be here?" Nobody replied, "Well let's see how this works then." Edwards said and he looked up slightly as many people habitually did when addressing a starship's computer, "Where is Lieutenant Commander Carr?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr is in turbolift four." The computer voice replied and Edwards turned his head to the doorway just beside him, labelled 'TURBOLIFT 4'. Just at that moment the doors slid apart to reveal Carr hopping up and down as she struggled to put her boot back on in a hurry. Realising that the door was open she tried to turn and in doing so overbalanced and fell forwards. Right into Captain Edwards. Both Carr and Edwards let out brief cries of alarm as they fell and the other officers looked on in horror as the pair landed in a heap on the deck.

"Oh no, no, no!" Carr exclaimed as she picked herself up, "I killed the captain."

"I'm not dead yet." Edwards said, "But a hand up would be appreciated."

"Oh of course." Carr said as she offered her hand to him, "I'm so sorry. I got delayed."

"That's quite alright lieutenant commander." Edwards said, "Now we haven't been introduced yet. I'm Captain David Edwards and this is Commander Henry King."

"A full commander? I hadn't realised-" Carr began.

"That I outrank you?" King interrupted, "Don't worry lieutenant commander. I know my place." Then as he noticed the patch on Carr's right sleeve he glanced back at the military honour guard and added, "I see you've got one of those patches as well."

"What? Oh this." Carr replied, holding her sleeve where the patch was attached, "Oh yes. When the troops got theirs the Starfleet personnel decided they liked the look of them. I know it's not exactly regulation but-

"That's quite alright." Edwards interrupted, "In fact I wouldn't mind one myself." And then he paused before adding, "Well now that we've got the introductions over with, I'd like to see the bridge lieutenant commander."

"Of course sir." She replied and she looked at King, "Are you coming as well?"

"Oh no. I want to see what sort of medical facilities the designers have decided to inflict on me."

"The best I hope. I'm one of the designers after all." Carr replied.

Carr and Edwards then stepped into the turbolift and the doors slid shut. Shry turned to Heart.

"So which one of them do you think will try to kill the other one first?" he said.

The turbolift door slid open again to reveal the bridge of the *USS Nightfall*, which at that time was a hive of activity and Edwards noticed that several of those present wore headsets like the one Max had issued to him.

"Captain on the bridge!" Carr called out and the crew stopped their own chatter and all looked around as the two senior officers stepped out of the turbolift.

Edwards looked down at the label on the package he held.

"Is there a Lieutenant Bradley Hamilton here?" he asked.

"That would be me sir." A man in a command division uniform said, raising his hand, "I'm chief."

"Chief helmsman. Yes I know. Here. This is for you." And Edwards held out the package.

"It arrived at last!" Hamilton said excitedly as he snatched the package and tore off the wrapping to reveal a box covered in images of what looked like a Federation starship.

"That is not a class of vessel I am familiar with." The female Vulcan science officer standing behind him said.

"It'll be another of his science fiction things T'Lan." Carr told her and then she looked at Edwards, "The lieutenant's something of a sci-fi fan sir." She explained.

"Its kind of why I joined Starfleet." Hamilton said, "Thanks for bringing this sir. I've been waiting two months for it to get here from earth."

"Happy to help." Edwards replied, "Now who else do we have here?"

"Well Lieutenant T'Lan is your science officer." Carr said, pointing to the Vulcan who simply nodded slightly without her expression changing at all, "And Lieutenant Commander Charlotte Grey is ops chief."

"Pleased to meet you captain." Grey said from her seat at ops.

"Then at tactical we have Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole who is also your chief of security and second officer. The MACOs and Imperial Guard generally come through him if they need anything."

Like T'Lan, Cole opted for a simple nod though he also had a hint of a smile on his face. Carr then turned to a dark skinned man close by Cole.

"And finally the man standing behind Cole in the command division uniform isn't part of the *Nightfall*'s regular crew. He's Snowman."

"Snowman?" Edwards asked.

"My call sign." The man said, "I command your attached fighter squadron. The name's Lieutenant Commander William White. But most people just go with Snowman."

"Very well." Edwards said, "Hopefully I'll get the chance to speak to you all individually soon but for now we better get the important things out of the way." And he looked at Carr, "Commander?"

"Of course sir." She replied and she looked upwards, "Computer this is Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr. Transfer all command codes to Captain David Edwards."

"Confirmed." The computer replied, "Command transferred to Captain David Edwards as of stardate six four zero zero two point seven."

"Good." Edwards said and he made his way to the chair in the centre of the bridge, "Then this is mine I think." And he sat down. At which point he noticed that the chair was equipped with a safety harness and looking around the bridge he saw that this was true of every station. It seemed that no one worked standing up on this bridge.

"Just in case." Carr said as she took the seat beside him, "A lot of bridge crews have reported being dissatisfied by delays in inertial dampening systems. These at least keep you in your chair while the ship is pitching and rolling."

"Will it do that a lot?" Edwards asked.

"It will with him flying." Cole commented, looking at Hamilton.

"Very funny." Hamilton replied as he took his seat. Unlike the other duty stations that had only the standard Starfleet touch panel interfaces the helm also possessed small joysticks on the arms of the chair that after Hamilton strapped himself in he took hold of. Then he inserted his feet into a set of pedals on the deck between him and his more standard console, "Helm ready captain." He announced.

"Very good." Edwards said, "Now ladies and gentlemen Starfleet is deploying this vessel to patrol the Romulan neutral zone. Our assignment will be to do our best to stop the civil war in what's left of the Romulan Empire spilling over into our space. Less officially Starfleet will also be assessing whether or not to continue with the development of this particular variant of the Akira-class, so there's a lot riding on our shoulders." Then he looked specifically at Grey, "Lieutenant commander, contact dockyard control and get us clearance to leave."

"Yes captain." She replied, taking her seat, "Dock control this is *Nightfall*, requesting permission to depart."

"*Nightfall* this is dock control. Permission granted."

Edwards activated the intercom set into his chair.

"Engineering this is the bridge. We are about to depart spacedock. Are engines on line?"

"Affirmative captain." Max replied, "Impulse and warp drives are at one hundred percent."

"That's good to hear." Edwards said and after shutting of the intercom he turned to Hamilton, "You may proceed from spacedock lieutenant." He said.

"Thrusters or impulse power captain?"

"Helmsman's choice lieutenant." Edwards replied with a smile and as Hamilton smiled as well the other bridge officers began to fasten their safety harnesses.

"If it's alright with you captain, I'm going to go and find something to hold onto." White said.

"As you wish Snowman." Edwards said and the fighter pilot turned to leave. However before he could make it to the turbolift door Hamilton pushed forwards on both joysticks and the ship lurched as it dropped away from the shipyard. White staggered, bracing himself against the wall while Edwards gripped the arms of his chair tightly and as the view on the main display that dominated the forward wall of the bridge showed that the Nightfall was now turning sharply, a manoeuvre that Edwards could feel, he also began to fasten his harness.

"Warned you." Cole said.

"Course locked in for the neutral zone captain." Grey said.

"Very good." Edwards said, tugging at his harness to make sure it was secure, "Warp eight. Engage."

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Captain Edwards was alone in his quarters when the door chimed.

"Come." He called out and the door slid open to allow Carr to enter the room, "Ah, lieutenant commander. We're not there already are we?"

"No captain. Still a while to go yet."

"Then to what do I owe this visit?"

"Well thought I'd bring you an update on the ship's status and also apologise. I think we got off on the wrong foot."

Edwards grinned.

"You mean the foot you were balancing on before you tumbled into me?"

"Exactly." Carr replied with a nervous grin.

"Think nothing more of it." Edwards said and he opened up an access panel located beside his replicator.

"Is there something wrong with your replicator? I could have Max—"

"No nothing's wrong with it." Edwards said and he held up an isolinear chip, "I was just adding this." And Carr frowned.

"What is it?"

"At my last posting there was a science officer who was a genius for creating menus that Starfleet standard replicators could reproduce but that still tasted real. He said you just needed to know how various compounds acted when replicated and program the data into the replicator as a single object rather than let it assemble the meal by combining the replicator patterns of the different ingredients and blending them. Anyway I made sure to get a copy of his entire database."

"And that works? Carr asked, watching Edwards replace the panel and activate the machine.

"Oh yes." Edwards said and then he paused briefly, "Have you eaten yet?"

"No captain."

"Then won't you join me? We can go over that status report while we eat."

"I won't be bothering you?"

"Of course not. There is just one thing though."

"What's that captain."

"Call me David."

Carr smiled.

"Only if you call me Grace."

"Certainly Grace. Take a seat." And then he turned to the replicator, "Programmed banquet number four. Two persons." He said clearly and a tray of food materialised in the replicator. Edwards carried this to the table and set it down.

"It doesn't look like enough." Carr said.

"This is just the first tray. There'll be two more yet." Edwards replied, "We better make some more room." And the pair began to slide the various PADDs and forms away from the area of the table they needed for eating.

"May I ask a personal question?" Carr asked as Edwards returned to the replicator for the second tray.

"Go on."

"Is it true every starship you've served on was destroyed?" she asked.

"Ah. So you've heard about that then." Edwards replied.

"Word gets around. Someone at the shipyard told us."

"Us?" Edward commented, placing the new tray beside the previous one, "So all the crew know do they?"

"Pretty much."

"Well yes it is true sadly." Edwards said, heading to the replicator for a third time, "The first ship I served on out of the Academy was a Nebula-class explorer. But after a mission where we sat in orbit around a planet and watched six hundred million people die of a plague we could have saved them from because the Prime Directive forbade us from interfering I decided that exploration wasn't for me and got a transfer to a patrol ship instead. That Nebula-class ship was the *USS Jetstream*."

"The *Jetstream*? Wasn't that—"

"One of the ships lost at Wolf Three Five Nine? Yes. Only six of her crew escaped. So anyway I was now serving on an Excelsior-class cruiser and I'd made my way up to first officer when the Dominion War began. That ship was the *Starlost*. She was destroyed in the push to retake *Deep Space Nine* and the captain never made it off. So Starfleet bumped me up to captain and gave me an Excelsior-class ship all of my own. The

USS Rampage. Then she was lost in the final push against Cardassia Prime. After that Starfleet gave me command of various desks for ten years. None of which were destroyed as far as I know. For the past two I've been running around after admirals who are trying to decide whether or not to cancel this program."

"Are they going to cancel it?" Carr asked as Edwards returned with the final tray, "I've put almost ten years into this ship."

"Its controversial Grace. The outer worlds of the Federation have been complaining about the focus of resources on the core systems and now here we are carrying over two hundred soldiers from Earth and Andor. There are some who say it's a power grab – That the core worlds are seeking to take over Starfleet." "But those troops are only aboard until Starfleet can train up its own forces, something better than what we had in the war."

"Yes but they aren't going to invest in those forces until the concept of well equipped rapid reaction ground forces is proven. Something that could take years." Then he looked down at the food laid out between them in various small bowls, "Anyway enough business for now. Dig in." and he pushed one of the trays towards her. Neither of them noticed that in doing so he nudged a nearby PADD against the touch screen of the tabletop terminal and a small message appeared at the bottom that simply read 'PUBLIC ADDRESS ACTIVATED.'

"I've never seen anything like this." Carr commented, "Where do I start?"

On the bridge Hamilton and Grey glanced at one another as they heard this, then they turned to look at Cole who was sat in the command position and finally to T'Lan.

"Don't look at me." Cole said.

"It's all good." Edwards said to Carr, both still oblivious to the fact that their every word was being broadcast around the ship, "Just use your hands if you want."

On the hangar deck White flinched as one of the engineering crew toppled off the top of a fighter upon hearing this.

"Ooh that's good." Carr said as she swallowed the first item of food she had chosen.

"Some people find it a bit hot." Edwards said.

"Not too hot for me." Carr replied, "Can I have some more?"

In her quarters, sat attempting to complete a school assignment, Nikki looked upwards and winced.

"Oh mom." She said.

"Try one of these for size." Edwards said, holding out a plate containing lumps of replicated meat and vegetables impaled on metal rods.

"I've never seen them this long before." Carr said as she picked up one of the kebabs.

Hamilton could not suppress his smile any longer.

"Someone really ought to be recording this." He said.

"Way ahead of you." Grey replied.

"So how is it so far?" Edwards asked as Carr chewed and she tried to swallow before replying, "That's okay time your time." He said, "I can see you've got your mouth full." And in the room being used by the ground forces to exercise Shry lost his grip on the bar supporting him and dropped to the deck with a 'Thud' while the troops around him just stared upwards.

"This is amazing." Carr said as she finally swallowed her food.

"You've got a little something there." Edwards told her, pointing to his lip and passing her a cloth.

"That's okay I can get it with my tongue." She replied.

Nikki got up and stormed into her room, throwing herself onto her bed and pulling a pillow over her head.

"Ready for something a little different?" Edwards asked.

"Something spicy?" Carr responded.

"Of course." Edwards told her, "You seem to like that."

Sat at his desk in the sick bay Doctor King just sighed and shook his head.

"Its always the quiet ones." He muttered to himself and he continued with his work.

There was a clang as a tool fell from a high walkway in engineering and Max looked up to see a pair of engineers laughing.

"Bridge this is engineering." He said, activating his communications, "There seems to be a malfunction in the comm. system."

"Yes, we're getting that as well." T'Lan replied.

"Then shall I-" Max began.

"Leave it Max." Cole interrupted. Then there was a bleeping from Grey's operations panel.

"Signal coming in from Starfleet." She said, "Its marked for command eyes."

"Oh not now." Hamilton exclaimed.

"Sorry mister. But duty calls." Cole said and he activated the intercom, "Captain I'm sorry to disturb you." He said, his connection shutting off the public address system and provoking groans throughout the ship.

"Yes what is it?" Edwards asked.

"Signal for you from Starfleet sir. I don't suppose you know where Lieutenant Commander Carr is do you?"

"Ah yes, Grace – I mean the commander is here with me now. We'll be up there in a couple of minutes." And the channel went dead.

"Ooh its Grace now is it?" Grey commented.

Cole got out of the command chair as Carr and Edwards emerged from the turbolift and returned to his own station.

"Put them through lieutenant." Edwards said as he sat down and on the main display an image appeared of a blue skinned Bolian in an admiral's uniform.

"Ah Captain Edwards." The Bolian admiral said, "Settling in to your new command okay?"

"Perfectly sir. The crew have been very welcoming." Edwards replied and there was brief laugh from somewhere on the bridge that he could not identify the source of.

"Well I'm calling to divert you." The admiral went on, "We may have a problem in Cardassian space."

"Cardassian space?" Edwards asked, "What is it?"

"Its where the Cardassians live." Hamilton muttered from his station, just loud enough for the other bridge crew to hear him, "But that's not important right now." Carr and Cole both glared at him, but from her position at ops Grey smirked. Captain Edwards was able to avoid displaying any reaction however and it seemed that the admiral had not noticed.

"Yes. Teiran, a system along their border with the Romulan Empire. The third planet had a military post built on it until the Romulans hit it during one of their initial strikes. We assumed they destroyed it entirely."

"Obviously you no longer think that was the case." Edwards said.

"No. Four hours ago the *USS Elector* picked up a signal from the planet. One they identified as Dominion in origin. The *Elector* isn't suited to a mission like this so we're sending you in."

"The war's been over for a decade." Carr commented, "What would Dominion forces still be doing in the Alpha Quadrant?"

"We're not sure." The admiral said, "We can't even prove that the people sending the signal are Dominion. They could be scavengers or even some force that got stuck there and has only just regained the capability to try and find out what's happened to the quadrant while they've been stranded. Either way I want you to take the *Nightfall* and check it out. Secure that facility captain."

"What about the Cardassians?" Edwards asked.

"They've nothing in the area. They've pretty much ignored that entire sector since the war while they rebuild their homeworld. But if the military do happen to send a ship out there then you are ordered to prevent whatever is down there from falling into their hands. Cardassia's a big source of black market tech right now and there's no telling whose hands it could end up in."

"Acknowledged admiral." Edwards said, "*Nightfall* out." And as the display returned to a view of space in front of the vessel he looked at Grey and Hamilton, "Lay in a new course and take us up to warp nine point four." Then while the two officers carried out his instructions Edwards looked at Grace, "With me commander, we never did get chance to finish your status report."

As the turbolift doors slid shut both of them swore they heard more laughter on the bridge.

Approaching the system from above the orbital plane of its planet's the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp within visual range of Teiran Three. From a distance it appeared to be a barren world, with no surface bodies of water and large clouds of dust being blown about by powerful winds.

"Looks like the Romulans really did a number on this place." Cole said as he studied the tactical feed.

"What about the outpost?" Edwards asked.

"There's a beacon transmitted from near the equator sir." Grey replied.

"I'm reading massive static discharges and a fluctuating magnetic field captain." T'Lan added.

"So we finally get transporter capability back and we still can't beam down there." Carr said in frustration.

"Then this looks like an ideal opportunity to give our ground forces a trial run." Edwards said and he activated the intercom, "Captain Heart, Captain Shry. What is your status?"

"Ready to drop captain." Heart's voice replied.

"Infantry and armour available." Shry added and Edwards smiled.

"Just infantry for now gentlemen. We're here to investigate the outpost, not demolish it." He said, "Prepare two of your assault shuttles with a platoon in each. Lieutenant Commander Carr and her away team will join them on the hangar."

Smiling, Carr got to her feet.

"Cole, Grey, T'Lan, with me. Cole have two more security officers join us." She said and the named officers followed her from the bridge.

The assault shuttles were similar in size to the two runabouts that the nightfall carried, but unlike the small Starfleet vessels they carried prominent armaments and their colour scheme was undeniably military in nature. As Carr's away team approached the nearest of these they saw MACOs boarding one while Captain Shry waved them towards him from the hatchway of closest. There was a roaring as the vessels' engines started. Shry helped each of the Starfleet personnel aboard the shuttle and sealed the hatch behind them. "Take a seat." He said, "Anywhere you like."

Looking around Carr saw that the interior of the shuttle was lined with seats, most of which were filled with Imperial Guard soldiers, all wearing prominent armoured vests and helmets. There was not a block of six empty seats available so the away team had to split up to sit down. As Cole fastened his safety harness Shry sat opposite him.

"Do you know what we're doing here?" Cole asked and the Andorian officer grinned.

"Do you?" he replied and there was a shudder as the shuttle began to move, "Don't worry lieutenant commander, " he added, looking at Carr instead, "my men and the MACOs are all professionals. Just keep behind us and you'll be just fine."

The shuttle shuddered again as it entered the atmosphere.

"It appears we have encountered one of the storms." T'Lan said.

"You think?" Cole replied.

"Pilot says four minutes to target." Shry announced, "Get ready men."

The Andorians immediately plucked their rifles from the clamps set beside their seats and inserted magazines of projectile ammunition. Most of the rifles had the phaser emitters Shry had told Edwards about clamped beneath their barrels, but a certain number replaced this with a short tubular weapon and Carr saw Andorians loading what seemed to be massively oversized bullets into them.

"Grenade launchers? Really?" she asked Shry.

"Only low yield for now." He replied and then there was a klaxon, "Sixty seconds!" he yelled and the Andorians got to their feet, steadying themselves on the handrails above their heads. There was a 'Clunk' that echoed around the interior of the shuttle and the heavy ramp at the rear of the craft dropped open. Immediately there was a howling of wind and the Andorians reached down the scarves around their necks, pulling them up to the protective goggles they wore and in two rows they charged out of the shuttle.

"Goggles and scarves over there!" Shry yelled at the Starfleet officers as he followed his men out into the storm.

Protected against the fly dust the Starfleet officer followed the Andorians, T'Lan held up her tricorder, hoping to be able to take some close range scans of the outpost that loomed ahead of them like a shadow in the storm. Meanwhile the others held phasers at the ready.

"This way I think." Cole said, his headset picking up his words over the noise of the storm and he went after the Andorian troops, still just about visible.

"What have we got captain?" Carr asked Shry as she ran up to him.

"Looks like there are at least two entrances." He replied, "The MACOs have found one on the far side and it looks like there's one right in front of us."

"Can your men get it open?" she then asked.

The entrance came into view, a single heavily armoured door blocking their way.

"Too tough for phasers to burn through any time soon." One of the Andorians reported.

"Think you can trip the lock?" Carr asked T'Lan.

"I will try commander." The Vulcan replied and she darted towards the control panel beside the door, her tricorder in her hand. By holding the device right next to the lock she was able to scan the mechanism despite the storm still raging around them, "Most of the security systems are inoperative." She said, "I believe that it should be possible to use my tricorder to fool the lock into thinking I have presented a valid key."

"Don't just say it Vulcan. Do it!" Shry snapped and moments later the door rumbled open. Beyond the door lay a passageway lit by lighting panels set along the tops of the walls. A number of these were burnt out or smashed, but enough remained active to provide enough light to see by.

"Advance by pairs." Shry ordered.

The Andorians rushed inside in two columns, one along each wall of the passageway that now lay in front of them. As T'Lan entered between these columns of troops she studied her tricorder again.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr I have a life reading." She called out, "It appears human."

"Could it be one of the MACOs?" Carr replied.

"Negative commander. They have yet to gain entry to the facility." T'Lan answered, "There is definitely someone alive in here. Possibly more than one, my ability to scan this installation is limited owing to the density of the structure."

"Juts point the way Vulcan." Shry said and T'Lan extended an arm to point.

The Imperial Guardsmen broke into small groups to advance. Each group moving as far as the next junction or corner before halting and covering the advance of the next. All the while T'Lan stayed beside the stationary covering group to point the way, the other Starfleet personnel and Shry with her.

In the distance there was a dull 'crump' and the Andorians halted suddenly.

"Captain Shry this is Sergeant Vale." A human voice broadcast over the communications net, "We're in. Looks like a loading bay full of boxes."

"Excellent." Shry replied, "Hold position. We have a human contact and I don't want your men getting mixed up with it."

"Copy that captain. Holding position."

"So now where?" Shry asked T'Lan.

"It's right up ahead." She replied softly, "Ten metres or so." And she folded her tricorder away and instead drew her phaser.

"Stay back." Shry said and he beckoned a group of his men to accompany him the last short distance to the large doorway located where T'Lan had indicated their target could be found. Cole looked at his security guards and nodded before they too ran after the Andorian troops, halting just behind them and aiming their phasers at the door.

"Stand back pink skin." Shry said, "Those fancy uniforms won't stop a shot as well as our armour will." And then he slammed his hand down on the door control.

The door slid open and the Andorians charged through, each one facing a slightly different direction to cover the entirety of the room on the other side. The chamber was massive, and had multiple levels. Right now the Andorians were on the middle one, a wide platform that overlooked a large area filled with brass coloured spheres all connected by pipes and cables. The platform itself was covered in what looked like medical examination tables and in the centre was a row of four three metre tall glass cylinders that each held a murky looking fluid, preventing anyone from seeing through them. Finally a walkway led around the entire chamber above the level of both the platform and the area below. The Imperial Guard split up to cover all of these. Shry remained on the platform with his command unit while others either headed up to the walkway; spreading out to search the rooms dotted around it or went down and began sweeping the lower area.

"Clear!" and Andorian voice called out as the search of the upper level was completed and then shortly after there was another shout of, "Clear!" from below.

Shry looked around at the Starfleet personnel still in the corridor outside and smiled.

"It's okay." He said, "We've made sure it's safe." Then he frowned and after taking a quick glance around the platform added, "Though there's no sign of the human."

As T'Lan entered she switched back to her tricorder and began to scan for lifeforms.

"It's definitely here." She said and she pivoted and she halted facing the four fluid filled tubes and she halted, staring at the closest, "It's inside here." she said.

"Inside?" Carr asked, rushing to her side and T'Lan held out the tricorder for her to see.

"Commander." Grey called out, "Be careful. This equipment isn't Cardassian."

"It's not?" Carr asked, looking back towards her.

"It's Dominion." Grey said.

"Oh that's just great." Cole commented and then he looked at the tube, "So how do we open this thing?"

"My men can handle that." Shry said and he grinned as he lifted his rifle and took aim.

"No!" Carr yelled, "Stand down captain. We don't know what state whoever is inside is in."

"Or what that gunk inside there is." Cole added.

"So what do we do?" Shry asked, "Wait and see if they come out by themselves?"

"No." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*. We have a medical emergency."

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"Human?" Captain Edwards commented, frowning as he listened to the report from the surface."

"That's right captain." Carr replied, "We don't now who they are or why they're here. But the fact is that they are."

"Very well commander." Edwards said, "I'll send Doctor King down to join you as soon as possible." And then the channel went dead. Edwards reached for the intercom and was about to activate it when he paused and looked at Hamilton, "Lieutenant take the conn." He said, "I'll be heading down to the surface with the doctor."

Hamilton looked around, puzzled.

"But sir, regulations—"

"The area is secure." Edwards interrupted, "I want to take a look at what we've come out here for before it all gets taken apart or scrapped."

As Edwards and King stepped onto the hangar deck they found Captain Heart waiting.

"I've got a heavy lifter and an IFV ready for you." He said.

"I doubt that will be necessary captain." Edwards replied.

"I disagree sir." Heart said, "You're going down there to evacuate a casualty correct?"

"That's right." King answered.

"So how were you going to bring them back here? Without transporter capability you'd have to carry them through the storm. This way you can just drive them back to the shuttle without exposing them."

Edwards and King looked at one another and smiled.

"That's actually a very good idea." King said.

"It is." Edwards added, "Very well captain. We'll use your plan."

"I'm right with you." Heart said.

"No." Edwards responded, "I want you to remain here just in case. Captain Shry and Lieutenant Commander Cole are already on the surface. If there is an emergency here that requires a security response you're the best one to do it."

"Very well sir." Heart replied, disappointed at being left behind, but nodding anyway.

The heavy lift shuttle was somewhat larger than the assault shuttles that had taken the first group down, giving it an internal storage space towards the front that was large enough for an armoured infantry fighting vehicle that ran on eight wheels and mounted a projectile launcher and a coaxial phaser array in a turret.

King recognised this as what he had seen from outside the ship during their initial flyby prior to coming aboard. The two Starfleet officers found that they had to sit inside the IFV itself rather than having seats in the shuttle itself. A squad of MACOs awaited them.

"Where's Captain Heart?" one asked.

"I've asked him to remain behind and keep an eye on things here." Edwards said as he sat down and the MACO activated his communicator.

"We're set." He said simply and there was the sound of the shuttle's engines powering up.

The moment the heavy lift shuttle touched down the forward ramp dropped and the IFV roared into life - racing out of the cargo hold and towards the outpost and kicking up a cloud of particles from the ground that was barely visible in the storm.

"Problem doctor?" Edwards asked as he saw the look on King's face.

"Between the shuttle ride down here and now this." He replied as the IFV lurched again, "I just hope our casualty is in good enough shape to tolerate all these sudden movements."

Edwards smiled.

"I'm sure that under your care they'll do just fine. Besides, hopefully we won't in such a hurry on the way back."

"We've arrived!" the driver suddenly called out and the IFV came to a sudden halt before the rear hatch dropped open.

Outside more MACOs waited, the IFV having been driven right into the outpost.

"Captain Edwards." The waiting platoon commander said.

"Lieutenant." Edwards replied, "Report."

"Actually I think you should see what we've got here." The MACO answered and he waved at a nearby stack of cargo containers.

"You opened them?" Edwards asked.

"Yes sir. Wanted to be certain we weren't all standing next to something volatile."

"And are we?" King asked as he disembarked from the IFV.

"No sir." The MACO lieutenant replied and then he looked at one of his men, "Baker! Give us one of those." And the other MACO tossed him a foil package from an open crate beside him, "There are thousands of these." He explained, tearing the package open to reveal an assortment of ration bars in different flavours, "These aren't Cardassian sir. They're Federation."

Edwards frowned as he took one of the bars and examined it closer.

"Captured during the war maybe?" King suggested.

"The date of manufacture is only three years ago." Edwards said, reading the information off the side of the bar's wrapping.

"A lot are like that." The MACO said, "Some are older, but some are definitely post war. Plus there are packs made by Cardassians, Ferengi and Romulans. Plus other survival gear. Blankets, heaters and the like."

"So someone was planning to bring a large number of people here." Edwards said.

"For the time being there's just one that I'm interested in." King said, "Which way is my patient lieutenant?"

"Follow me." The MACO replied and he led them both through the outpost until they reached the chamber where Carr and the other Starfleet officers waited, along with Shry's Imperial Guard.

"Captain? What are you doing here?" Carr asked.

"I wanted to get a look at this stuff for myself." He replied.

"But the ship—"

Carr began.

"I left Hamilton in charge." Edwards said and Cole and Grey looked at one another nervously, "What?" the captain added.

"You left a man who sees himself as an admiral in waiting in charge of the ship I spent a decade putting together." Carr said.

"All he's got to do is sit in orbit and wait." Edwards replied, "Besides, Max, Snowman and Captain Heart are up there as well. The ship will be just fine. You'll see."

A bleeping from the operations station attracted Hamilton's attention.

"Report ensign." He said, smiling as he gave his first order while in command of a real starship.

"Sensors are picking up a disturbance on the outer edge of the system sir. Looks like a warp signature." Hamilton frowned.

"Why didn't we pick it up earlier?" he asked.

"The signature is distorted, muffled almost."

Hamilton turned to the science station where a junior grade lieutenant was filling in for T'Lan.

"Sir I think the warp signatures could be Romulan." The science officer said, "The distortion is because they are running cloaked."

"But I didn't think our sensors were good enough to pick up a cloaked warbird." Hamilton replied.

"Not a modern one, no sir. But this appears to be an older model."

"Orders?" the ensign at operations asked and Hamilton paused for thought.

"Yellow alert! Shields up! Hamilton snapped and he reached for the intercom, "Hangar deck launch the alert fighters, the rest of the squadron is to follow as soon as possible. Scramble, scramble, scramble!"

"Only need to say it once." White said as he pulled on his flight suit and he looked around at the other pilots struggling into their own suits as fast as they could manage, "Come on people this one's for real!" he yelled. Rushing out into the hangar the pilots found the fighter ground crews already disconnecting the umbilical power and life support lines from their ships and by the time the pilots were sitting inside the cockpits they were ready for launch.

"Slammer, with me. Everyone else line up by numbers and wait for the word from flight control." White instructed as he moved his fighter forwards across the deck.

"Flight leader you are cleared for launch." The voice of the *Nightfall's* hangar controller stated and with his hand already resting on the thrusters controls, White accelerated through the massive forward launch doorway with his wingman beside him. With just a brief interval between each pair of fighters all twelve of the squadron were soon in space and heading away from the *Nightfall*. Far out ahead of White and his wingman were the two alert fighters with the remaining ten forming an arrowhead formation with the lieutenant commander at the front.

"Okay people we're clear of the bay." White broadcast to the squadron, "Now we've got the co-ordinates so let's get moving. Warp four on my mark. Shields up and weapons powered. Three. Two. One. Mark."

And with that the twelve tiny Peregrine-class ships accelerated away, heading for the outer edge of the system.

"Romulans?" Edwards exclaimed as Hamilton reported in and he looked worriedly at Carr.

"What would Romulans be doing here?" Grey asked.

"Maybe they detected the same signals Starfleet did." Carr replied.

"Yes and perhaps one of the factions in their civil war thinks that this place would make a nice base of operations."

"Could explain the modern rations." Shry commented and then to Edwards he added, "Do you want a shuttle to take you back up to the ship?"

"No." Edwards replied, shaking his head, "Let the fighters find out what's going on first. We'll finish up here and I'll go back up with the doctor." Then he turned to where King was studying the fluid-filled cylinder, his tricorder in his hand, "Any news doctor?"

"There's definitely a human being in there." He replied, "I'm monitoring an elevated heart rate and blood pressure. So since they clearly can't be exercising enough to cause this I'm guessing that they're under considerable stress. Most likely because of the manner of their confinement."

"You mean they're awake?" Cole asked and King nodded.

"I believe so. But there's a way to test it." He said and he suddenly slammed a fist against the cylinder, producing a dull 'thump'.

"What does that-" Carr began, but before she could finish there was a second 'thump' from inside the tube as something briefly slammed against the interior.

"Okay let's get them out of there." King said, folding his tricorder away and he stepped away from the cylinder.

"I have found no obvious openings doctor." T'Lan commented.

"I know." King replied and he looked at Shry, "Captain, those rifles will fire limited bursts right?"

"Yes doctor. Three round bursts as well as fully automatic."

"Good. Then I need three bursts fired simultaneously. One to strike here, another here and the third one here." King said and he pointed to the cylinder at the very top, the bottom and about half way up, "Just make sure they strike at an angle, I don't want the bullets hitting whoever's in there. Can your men manage that captain Shry?"

The Andorian smiled at Carr as if to remind her that the doctor had just ordered him to do exactly what he had wanted to do himself earlier and lifted his rifle.

"Easy." He said, "You just stand back." And he beckoned a pair of his men over to him.

As the Starfleet personnel stood clear of the cylinder the trio of Imperial Guardsmen brought their rifles to their shoulders and took aim.

"Cover your ears." Cole suggested, placing his hands over his ears and opening his mouth slightly. The other Starfleet officers were just copying him when the Andorians fired and there was a sudden short lived roar of three projectile rifles firing in unison. All three bursts struck the cylinder exactly where King had wanted; punching straight through without penetrating deep enough that the mysterious occupant was struck. However, the shock of the multiple impacts succeeded in shattering the transparent shell of the cylinder and fragments showered down on the floor all around it and released the fluid that also came down with a splash. As this liquid spread out the three Andorians just stood still and allowed it to flow around them.

The figure inside the cylinder was now revealed as a human woman clad in a skin-tight suit. A mask strapped in place covered her nose and mouth and a thick tube ran from this up to the top of the cylinder's housing. In addition more tubes led from between her legs while bundles of wires connected to points all along her arms and legs. Now that the fluid was no longer present to support her weight the woman dropped and the various tubes and wires pulled tight to keep her hanging in midair, a muffled screaming coming from under her mask as she thrashed about.

"Quick! Cut her down!" King yelled and he darted forwards, wrapping his arms around her waist to lift her up and take the pressure off the tubes and wires supporting her. Behind him Cole ran forwards to help him.

Shry and his men slung their rifles and instead drew knives, running forwards to cut through the tangle of tubes and wires, slicing through them as quickly as they could.

"Hold her still." King said as the woman continued to struggle, "And lay her down."

Carefully the woman was laid down on the fluid soaked floor and King undid the mask from around her face. At first it still did not come loose as he tried to pull it upwards over her face, but when he instead pulled it straight away from her mouth it moved, dragging the tube that extended down her throat with it.

"Don't try and speak." King said as the woman's screams were no longer muffled, "Stay still and be quiet. I'm going to give you a shot." And then he looked around to where his medical kit lay, "Could you pass me that?" he asked and Edwards handed him the case.

"What the hell is this doctor?" he asked, pointing at what was left of the cylinder.

"Some sort of life support container I think." King said, removing a hypospray from his medical kit and pressing to the woman's neck. There was a hiss as he activated it and then her eyes closed and she lay still, "Just a sedative." King said, "I want to get her back to the *Nightfall's* medical facilities as quickly as I can."

"We'll need to know why she was in that thing doctor." Cole said.

"And who put her there." Carr added, "They may still be around."

"Maybe they're on their way here right now." Grey added and as the others looked at her she added, "Well it could have been the Romulans couldn't it?"

"Snowman this is Charger." The pilot of one of the two advance fighters signalled, "Are you reading what I am? Looks like a second emission trail."

"Copy that Charger." White responded, "Looks like drive plasma to me. I think we're dealing with two Romulan ships. One using an older cloak and the other damaged. Someone in their civil war must be running out of ships." Then he adjusted his transmitter to signal the *Nightfall*, "*Nightfall* this is Snowman. We have a second contact."

"We're reading that too Snowman." Hamilton's voice replied, "Are you being scanned?"

"Probably. Even using passive sensors they should have seen us the moment we jumped to warp. They're doing warp one point six so we're going to swing around and drop in behind them before we match velocity."

"Copy that Snowman. Say the word and we can be there in two minutes. *Nightfall* out."



“Sublieutenant Noyal report.” The Romulan commander said as he entered the bridge of the Valdore-class warbird and took his seat. Like all of the Romulans on the bridge the commander bore the ink of someone in mourning around the edge of his face. Indeed there was probably not a single Romulan alive who did not bear such markings right now.

“There is a Federation starship orbiting the third planet commander.” Noyal replied, looking up from her control panel, “Plus a squadron of fighters heading towards us.”

The commander looked at the tactical display.

“They’re not on an intercept course.” He said.

“No sir.” Noyal replied, “But they were.”

“Then they’re about to swing around behind us to intercept.” The commander said, “They must have detected our approach.”

“That is likely commander. Our reactors are badly damaged and engineering is unable to control our emissions. On the other hand the *Kreator*—“ but before Noyal could finish the tactical display showed the Federation fighters suddenly swinging around towards them and the communications officer interrupted.

“Commander! The Federation ships are hailing us.” And he set the communications system to play White’s transmission to the entire bridge.

“Romulan vessels you are approaching a Federation starship. You are instructed to drop to impulse, decloak and identify yourself.”

As his officers all looked to him the commander thought for a moment.

“Do it.” He ordered, “Signal the others. All ships decloak.”

The fighter squadron had chosen its course to take them on a close flyby of the Romulan vessels. Close enough to be able to make an attack run if necessary, but not so close as to risk a collision.

Or so the fighter pilots thought.

The first ship to drop its cloak was a Valdore-class vessel. Modern, sleek and deadly, this ship showed signs of battle damage around its engineering section. After this came an ancient D-7 class ship traded from the Klingons during the brief Klingon/Romulan alliance of the twenty-third century. But the Romulans had more ships than just the two the Federation fighters had detected and a motley collection of transports, scouts and light warships began to appear as if from nowhere right in front of them.

“Break!” White yelled as the space ahead suddenly became a maze of Romulan starships and he banked sharply, narrowly avoiding a transport ship.

“There’s dozens of them!” one of the other pilots exclaimed as she wove her way between a dense cluster of Romulan vessels.

“Just weave.” White replied, broadcasting to the entire squadron. Then he signalled the *Nightfall* again,

“*Nightfall* do you read me? We have thirty plus Romulan ships! Requesting backup.”

Still sat in the captain’s chair Lieutenant Hamilton frowned.

“Time to change the bulb.” He muttered and then in a louder voice he ordered, “Red alert!”

“Federation ships we mean no harm.” A voice bearing the typical stern tones of a Romulan stated, the message broadcast over standard hailing frequencies to everyone within range, “This is the warbird *Tamol*. We are escorting a refugee convoy. Do not fire. I repeat do not fire.”

Hamilton looked at the science station.

“Err.” The officer said, looking at the console in front of him. Then he looked up and replied, “I’m detecting a lot of people aboard those ships sir. More than they’re designed to carry. About twice as many.”

“What about weapons?”

“I’m not sure. If they have any they’re not armed and their shields are still down.”

Hamilton activated the communications system.

“Lieutenant Commander White, would you kindly escort the Romulans into orbit?” he transmitted and then addressing the bridge crew he added, “Stand down from red alert.”

“Put the old bulb back in again?” one replied.

“Initially I’d say that the tubes were to provide nourishment and air as well as to carry away waste.” King said to Edwards while MACOs lifted the unconscious woman onto the stretcher.

“What about the wires?” Carr asked.

"Probably muscle stimulation." King replied, "Whoever stuck this woman in that tank wanted to keep her physically healthy."

"How long was she in there?" Edwards asked.

"For now your guess is as good as mine." King replied, "Hopefully she'll be able to answer that."

"That's not the only thing I want to know." Cole said.

"Me too." Edwards added and he turned to Carr, "I'm heading back up to the ship with the doctor and his patient. I want to be there when those Romulan ships make orbit. Stay here and check out the rest of the facility. I want to know what this place is for."

"I may already be able to answer that captain." T'Lan announced, "The equipment on the lower level of this room is used by the Dominion for the production of Jem'Hadar."

"And you're only just telling us this Vulcan?" Shry asked.

"It didn't seem to be important," T'Lan replied, "and nobody asked until now."

"So we could be up to our necks in purpose bred killers at any time then?" Shry said.

"Come now captain." Edwards said, "There's no proof that there are any Jem'Hadar still hiding out here." then, turning to T'Lan he asked, "Is there?"

"No captain." She answered, "Though given the interference the structure is causing to tricorder readings I—" Edwards held up his hand.

"That's good enough for me. Now the doctor and I are leaving and since Lieutenant T'Lan has already determined what the purpose of this installation is I suggest that you concentrate your efforts on finding out who reactivated it Commander Carr."

"Yes sir." Carr replied, "We'll get right on it."

"Status lieutenant." Edwards said as he stepped out of the turbolift.

"There are thirty four Romulan ships in the convoy." Hamilton replied as he vacated the captain's chair for Edwards, "Mainly transports, but there are several warbirds as well."

"And they're all equipped with cloaking devices?" Edwards asked.

"Yes sir. That's why we didn't detect them until they entered the system. It seems that most of the ships are either obsolete or damaged. The convoy commander said that they were refugees from their civil war."

Edwards frowned.

"Why the hell would they come here?" he said.

"He didn't say." Hamilton answered.

"Never mind Mister Hamilton. I'm sure that he'll tell me himself when he gets here. When will that be exactly?"

"A little under five hours sir. Their slowest ships have got only limited warp capability. Lieutenant Commander White's squadron is escorting them in."

"Good. Do we have transporter capability yet?"

"Yes sir. Lieutenant Maximillian has assured me that the system is operational. Though he does not recommend attempting to beam anything between here and the surface."

"That's okay I'm not planning on doing that. Inform me as soon as the Romulans get within transporter range. I want to speak with the Romulan commander in person."

"So she was just floating in a tank of gunk?" Heart asked as he watched two of his men lift the unconscious woman from the stretcher and place her on a medical diagnostic bed.

"Yes she was." King replied, "Now what are you doing in here captain?"

"I wanted to make sure you were safe. We don't know who she is or how she got here. So before your high and mighty Starfleet principles get you stabbed in the neck I thought I'd drop by to keep an eye on her."

King looked up from his patient.

"Really? You think I need protecting from her?"

"It's a possibility." Heart said.

"Well then have your men form up in a firing line then because I removed all of the implanted tubes and wires on the shuttle so all that's left is to wake her up." And he slid a stimulant cylinder into his hypospray. The moment King pressed the hypospray to the woman's neck and activated it her eyes snapped open and she screamed, lashing out wildly and knocking the hypospray from King's grasp.

"Well don't just stand there! Help me hold her." King snapped and Heart leapt forwards. Between them the two men took hold of the struggling woman and held her down, "It's all right. You're safe now." King said,

"You're aboard a starship."

Gasping for the breath the woman finally stopped struggling and went quiet.

"Good. Now are you going to be still now?" King asked and she nodded. King looked up at Heart and he too nodded before the two men released their grip. Instantly the woman reached out and grabbed hold of a laser scalpel from a nearby tray and rolling off the bed she backed up against the wall.

"Stay away from me!" she yelled as the two MACOs who had carried her to the sickbay unslung their rifles and Captain Heart drew his sidearm.

"Calm down!" King snapped, "Nobody's going to harm you. This is a Starfleet vessel."

"You think I'm stupid?" the woman asked, "I know Starfleet uniforms and those guys with the guns aren't wearing them. And those sure as hell aren't phasers they're holding."

King smiled.

"No, you're right. Captain Heart and his men are MACOs. This ship is the *USS Nightfall* and it's been assigned a contingent of ground troops from Earth and Andor as an experiment to try and rectify Starfleet's failings during the war."

"War? What war?" the woman asked and Heart and King looked at one another.

"Just how long was she in that tank?" Heart said.

King looked at the woman.

"What was the last stardate you remember?"

"Five zero eight three one." She replied.

"Ah." King said, "Well it's now six four zero zero four. I'm afraid you've been asleep for some time. Now how about you give me that scalpel and we'll figure out what's been done to you."

The woman trembled at the news she had lost more than a decade and as the laser scalpel dropped from her grip she slumped back and slid down the wall.

Watching the Romulan convoy arrive in orbit around Teiran Three Captain Edwards could not help but be amazed at the variety of ships present. Once only military ships would have carried cloaking devices, but since the onset of the civil war as rival colonies fought to establish dominance in the wake of the destruction of the Romulus system itself such things had become more widespread. Nevertheless Edwards was still well aware that the total firepower available to the Romulans surpassed what he had available to him aboard the *Nightfall*, even with its upgrades.

"Captain the Romulan commander is hailing us." The ensign at ops said.

"On screen." Edwards ordered and the image changed from one of the Romulan convoy to the bridge of their flagship, the Valdore-class vessel. The first thing that Edwards noticed was the extent of the damage. The lighting was operating at a reduced level and about half the monitors and instrument panels visible were smashed.

"Jolan tru captain." The Romulan commander said, making use of the traditional Romulan greeting, "My name is Commander Kelak."

"Greetings commander." Edwards replied.

"Captain I know what you're wondering." Kelak said, "Why are we here? And quite frankly I'm wondering the same thing about you. This is not Federation territory."

"Or Romulan." Edwards said, "Yet here we both are. So how about you beam over to my ship and we can discuss why neither of us should be here?"

Kelak smiled.

"Of course captain. I would be honoured to accept your invitation."

Aboard the *Tamol* Kelak looked at Nayal as soon as the transmission from the *Nightfall* was ended.

"Sublieutenant you will accompany me." He announced.

"Of course commander." She replied.

"But leave that behind." Kelak added, pointing to the disruptor pistol holstered at her waist and then he drew his own sidearm and handed it to the closest officer.

"But commander, what if-" Nayal began.

"If what sublieutenant? Do you really believe that the Starfleet captain wishes us harm? Despite appearances our ships are no match for a fully functional Starfleet heavy cruiser and its attached fighter squadron. No. We will go aboard unarmed. There's been more than enough killing on this trip."

Instinctively Nayal's hand moved towards her empty holster the moment she became aware of her surroundings in the *Nightfall's* transporter room and she saw the two security guards standing beside Captain Edwards with their hands resting on the phasers they carried in holsters.

"I see you do not entirely trust us captain." Kelak said, stepping from the transporter pad and then he held out the bottle of blue liquid he held, "For you." He said, "The finest vintage of kali-fal my planet produced. A token of my good will."

"Thank you commander." Edwards replied and he took the bottle. All the while an old saying ran through his mind.

Beware of Romulans bearing gifts.

"This is my navigator." Kelak said, indicating Naya, "Sublieutenant Naya. She is currently filling in for many of my first officers duties as well."

"You've lost your first officer?" Edwards asked.

"No. But I have lost my chief engineer and my first officer was the most logical choice to take over from him in engineering. As good an officer as the subcommander is he can't be in two places at once."

"Of course not." Edwards said and he held up the bottle, "Now if you'd like to accompany me to my ready room I'm sure I have some glasses there. If not I'll replicate some."

"Certainly. But I have a favour to ask of you first." Kelak said.

"Go on." Edwards replied.

"Most of the ships I escorted here are in need of repair and our fabrication systems can produce parts at a limited rate. If you were willing I'd like to-

"Ask us to replicate some for you?" Edwards interrupted with a grin, "Of course. My chief engineer should be able to assist you. He just needs to know what you need."

Kelak looked at Naya.

"You know what is required." He said, "Go tell Captain Edwards' engineer." And Edwards looked towards one of his guards.

"Escort her to engineering." He said and the guard nodded.

"This way miss." he said, directing Naya towards the door.

As she left with the guard Edwards turned back to the Romulan commander.

"Now let's go see if I've any glasses shall we?" he said.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr I think you should see this." T'Lan called out from one of the doorways located on the upper walkway.

"What is it T'Lan?" Carr asked as she climbed up onto the walkway.

"This room contains cryogenic equipment." The Vulcan science officer replied and as Carr came closer she stepped through the doorway.

"Cryogenics?" Carr asked as she reached the doorway herself and she looked inside. There she saw a row of cryogenic storage capsules, each one designed to contain a single humanoid. All but one was still sealed, the armoured casing offering no indication whether or not they were occupied, "Any way to tell if anyone's inside these things?" she asked.

"Perhaps." T'Lan answered, holding her tricorder close to the nearest of the sealed capsules, "I may be able to access the capsules' internal monitoring systems using my tricorder." Then she began to move along the row, holding the scanning device close to each capsule in turn, "All contain organic mass lieutenant commander, but it would appear that in each case the occupant is dead."

"Dead? How?"

"Hypothermia I suspect. Though Doctor King would have to confirm that diagnosis. Without external power from the base the capsules were forced to rely on their emergency storage cells. All of these are now drained. When the power failed the internal temperature would have started to climb, bringing the occupants out of cryogenic suspension but still leaving them exposed to extreme cold."

"So they froze to death because it got too warm?" Carr said.

"Exactly. Though even if they had have survived the thawing process I doubt they would have lived much longer."

"Really? Why not?"

"The capsules are armoured lieutenant commander. With no way to break out the occupants would have suffocated in hours."

"So what about this one here?" Carr asked, pointing to the only open capsule.

"The back up cells apparently lasted long enough for external power to be restored." T'Lan replied, "It's occupant was removed before failure."

Carr pointed back out of the door.

"You think it was the woman floating in the cylinder out there?" she asked.

"It seems logical lieutenant commander."

"Then how long has she been here?"

"I estimate that the capsules were all activated just before the Dominion War began."

"Then she's been held prisoner for twelve years." Carr replied.

T'Lan folded her tricorder and put it away.

"Lieutenant commander, if I am to determine why this facility was reactivated it would be helpful to know exactly when this occurred. For that I will require access to the main power generator."

"Okay. I'll see to it." Carr said and she returned to the walkway outside, leaning on the handrail as she looked down.

"Lieutenant Grey!" she called out, "I need you to go and find the main power generators. Let me know as soon as you find them."

"Hobbs go with her." Cole ordered one of the Starfleet security guards, "Just in case."

5.

Nayal froze when she saw Max.

"I get that a lot." He said, "Now I believe you have a list of parts you require." He then added, holding out his hand.

"What? Oh yes this." Nayal replied and she passed him the PADD she had brought with her. Then a thought struck her, "How did you know?" she asked.

"This vessel has nanites swarming throughout its systems." Max replied, "They told me."

Nayal looked up.

"Nanites. Right," she said then she looked back at Max, "You're really a Borg?" she asked him.

"I was. Though I have not been a part of the collective for many years now."

"But why keep all that technology in your body?"

"Why not? It helps me do my job."

"But wouldn't you rather look like a normal – a normal – what species are you anyway?"

Max looked up from the PADD.

"I do not know." He answered, "The collective designated me as Species Six Four Three Nine. That is all I know." Then he looked up, "These specifications appear sufficient for us to replicate the parts from. Though I will need the captain's authorisation."

Edwards gasped as he took a sip of the Romulan ale.

"Smooth." He croaked, "Very smooth."

Kelak smiled and downed his in one.

"My world was famous in the Empire for it's kali-fal captain," He said, "and it was exported in great quantities. To support this we built up a significant shipyard capability in orbit that became strategically important during the war with the Dominion and the production of kali-fal took a back seat to supporting warships. For a short time we even had several Starfleet vessels docked there. We had hoped that after the war when our kali-fal exports began once again became our primary industry we would be able to open up new markets in the Federation, but both our governments soon returned to their own ways and the embargo returned. Then came the destruction of Romulus and the Empire was plunged into civil war and our shipyards became a target. Too important to allow a rival to control, but too remote to be worth diverting a force to seize. Instead we suffered hundreds of small raids, with many different factions trying to simply destroy the shipyards. Our planetary government reached out to the Federation for help, but your people do not intervene in what you call 'internal conflicts' even when there is a long-term advantage in supporting one side or another."

"Tell me about it." Edwards muttered, remembering the reason for his transferring away from Starfleet's exploration division.

"Then just over two weeks ago a force of Remans came into our sector and began striking at the planet itself. Those things are monsters captain and without the Empire to keep them in check they are running amok. They ignored the shipyards, instead bombarding our cities and withdrawing before our ships could respond. Tens of thousands died and it was decided that since with our limited resources we could not protect our world we should leave and try and find sanctuary in the Federation as so many others of our species have done."

Edwards frowned.

"You're a bit off course then aren't you?" he asked.

"The Remans were unwilling to simply let us go captain." Kelak replied, "We started out with over two hundred ships. Those that made it here are merely the ones that survived. More than half, those without cloaking devices, were destroyed on the second day of our voyage here. Many of the others suffered system failures. We took aboard as many as we could, but it was not possible to save everyone. Each time we stopped to transfer survivors the Remans returned. Our leader Admiral Tolot died with his ship, ramming one of the Reman warbirds to buy time for the rest of us to escape. Then one of our people mentioned this place. An abandoned outpost that our fleet had attacked during the war. It was closer than Federation territory and offered a place to rest so we came here in the hope of finding safety."

"What about the Remans?" Edwards asked and Kelak sighed.

"Their attacks stopped when we changed course." He said, "So long as we stayed on this heading that is. Two ships decided to try and make a break for Federation territory, but the Remans found them and destroyed both. Another six thousand died that day."

"You know commander," Edwards said, leaning across his desk towards the Romulan officer, "it sounds to me like those Remans were driving you here."

Aboard the Reman warbird the vessel's commanding officer scowled and his fingers reached for the necklace he wore, a crude set of severed Romulan ears threaded on a length of cord. All around him the stations were manned by more Remans, pale hairless creatures that resembled blood sucking predators from old Earth horror films. The commander had seen images from some of these and found the comparison amusing.

"A Federation heavy cruiser?" he asked.

"Yes Lord Shintar." His subordinate replied, bowing his head before his superior, "Akira-class. A squadron of attack fighters launched from the ship intercepted our prey at the outer edge of the system and escorted them as far as the third planet."

"They are no match for us Lord Shintar." A second Reman added, "We have four D'deridex-class warbirds. If we strike now we can—"

"We do nothing until I command it!" Shintar yelled and he leant back in his chair, "Signal him." he said, "Tell him I need to talk with him. And remember your place."

"Yes my lord." The second Reman said and he turned to the communications system. Almost immediately the main display changed to show a humanoid face. But this was not another Reman, though it possessed similarly pale skin its had long ridged ears set into the sides of its head running up from the base of the jaw until disappearing into the thick black hair it had.

"What is it Shintar?" the Vorta asked.

"Why is there a Federation ship present Vayon? This was not part of the plan."

"I'm aware of that Shintar. They have people on the surface as well."

"What about the Romulans? Have they landed?"

"No. They're sat in orbit while the Federation helps fix their ships." Vayon replied, "But don't worry. I'm about to give them something else to worry about." And then the channel went dead.

"Ah captain, I was just preparing our replicators to produce—" Max began as Edwards entered engineering accompanied by Commander Kelak. Edwards held up his hand.

"That needs to take a back seat for now lieutenant." He said, "We have bigger problems to deal with."

"What's happened?" Noyal asked, looking at her superior.

"The captain believes that the Remans may have been trying to drive us here." Kelak replied, "Something to do with the outpost on the surface."

"But how would they know we knew about it?" she then asked.

"I don't know." Kelak admitted, "But I've sent word back to our ships that the individual who told us about this place is to be found and brought before me. Perhaps he knows more than he's been letting on."

"Surely you don't think he's working with the Remans." Noyal said.

"Not knowingly. But it is possible he is in the pay of another of our enemies sublieutenant. It is an unfortunate fact that we have many of them."

"What do you require of me captain?" Max asked, looking at Edwards.

"We need a way of detecting cloaked ships." Edwards answered, "There's a force of D'deridex-class warbirds out there and I don't want them suddenly popping up and blasting us before we can react."

"The standard method for detecting cloaked vessels is by means of a tachyon detection grid." Max said.

"That's what I thought." Edwards said and he looked at Kelak, "I've got this ship and two runabouts. It'll mean installing emitters on your ships as well." He told the Romulan.

"But a tachyon detection grid will only detect vessels passing between our ships captain." Kelak replied, "What if the Remans instead decloak beyond our perimeter and attack the ships on the outer edge of our fleet? They won't pass through the net and we'll loose more ships."

"I suggest outfitting our stock of probes with tachyon emitters as well." Max said, "These can be placed beyond the perimeter of the volume of space our ships occupy to form an outer perimeter that the Remans will be unable to cross. On the other hand should they attempt to attack the probes then they will expose themselves to our fire."

"Having our fighters patrol the perimeter should help." Edwards added and then he looked directly at Max, "Figure out what we need to implement this and get it together."

"Sublieutenant I will be returning to the *Tamol*. You are to remain here and liase with the Starfleet crew. Inform me as soon as there are any developments."

"Good. Well now that's sorted I'm going to check in with my away team." Edwards said, "Hopefully things are going better for them down there than they are up here."

Grey held up her tricorder while Hobbs held his phaser at the ready.
"Think we're going to run into trouble down here crewman?" she asked.
"Just a precaution ma'am." Hobbs answered her.
"Well just don't go shooting anything important in the rector room. Come on, its right up here I think. I can detect higher levels of ambient thermal energy."
Grey led the way to a sealed doorway labelled in Cardassian script.
"I don't suppose you can read that can you?" she asked the guard and he shook his head.
"Sorry no."
"Well let's just hope it says 'Reactor room,'" Grey said and she reached for the control beside the door.
"Wait. Let me go first." Hobbs said, "Its my job to protect you after all."
"Oh very well." Grey said, stepping back and Hobbs activate the door control.
The door slid open immediately to reveal what was indeed the reactor room, the large fusion plant clearly visible in the centre of the room.
"Coast looks clear." Hobbs said as he stepped inside and looked around.
"I told you so." Grey replied and she was just about to follow him into the room when she paused, "That's odd." She said, staring at her tricorder, "I'm picking up-" and as she turned around a tall alien with a face covered in grey scales and a tube carrying a white fluid from a dispenser on his chest into his neck appeared out of thin air.
Grey gasped, dropping her tricorder and reaching instead for her phaser. But before she could even lay a hand on her weapon the Jem'Hadar fired, the blast of energy from his rifle catching her square in the chest. Even as Grey was still falling Hobbs leant around the door and fired his phaser, the bright red beam slicing through the Jem'Hadar soldier's throat. But as he died three more of the aliens appeared and opened fire, forcing Hobs to duck back into the reactor room.
"Mayday! Mayday!" he yelled, slapping his hand on his combadge, "I'm under fire from at least three Jem'Hadar in the reactor room. Lieutenant Grey is dead."
Back in the chamber where the other Starfleet officers waited with Captain Shry and his Imperial Guard platoon Carr and Cole looked at one another in shock at the news of Grey's death.
"We need to move." Cole said, drawing his phaser.
"First squad with me!" Shry yelled, briefly checking his rifle.
Carr also drew her phaser and she tapped her combadge.
"*Nightfall* we're under fire from Dominion forces. We have one down in the reactor room. We're heading there now."
With the Imperial Guardsmen leading the way the group ran towards the reactor room. As they drew closer the sound of Jem'Hadar rifle blasts alternating with the distinctive familiar sound of a Starfleet phaser being fired confirmed to them that they were on the right path.
"Scanners." Shry snapped and he reached up to his helmet and slid down an eyepiece that covered his left eye while leaving the right one available for aiming his rifle. The other Andorians did likewise, the eyepieces allowing them to see beyond the visible spectrum.
"Contact!" the lead Andorian snapped as a humanoid shape appeared for a brief moment in the view from his eyepiece before it disappeared again. As the Starfleet officers looked they saw nothing and the corridor was filled with phaser beams as the Andorians opened fire and swept it for the still shrouded Jem'Hadar they knew was down there somewhere. The alien soldier appeared suddenly as despite its camouflage one of the lethal beams struck it.
"Hobbs we're closing on your position from behind the Jem'Hadar." Cole signalled, "Watch your fire."
As the first Andorian reached the corridor leading to the reactor room he leant around the corner and emptied his magazine down it.
"I count seven." He said, "All in cover from this angle. Looks like the Starfleet guy is pinned down."
The phaser fire had alerted the Jem'Hadar to the presence of more enemies behind them and a volley of blasts came flying from the corridor to strike the wall opposite.
"Can your man seal that door?" Shry asked Cole.
"I'll ask." Cole replied and he tapped his combadge, "Hobbs can you get that door shut?"
"Sure. But why-"
"Never mind. Just do it." Cole ordered and Shry looked at the two soldiers whose rifles carried grenade launchers mounted beneath them.
"Fire in the hole." He said.

There was a hiss as the door to the reactor room slid shut and a 'Clang' as it finally closed. As soon as they heard this the two Andorians held their rifles around the corner and without bothering to aim they both fired their photon grenades towards the Jem'Hadar.

The two explosions occurred in rapid succession and the sound of Jem'Hadar weapons ceased suddenly. "Move!" Shry yelled and leading the way personally, he and his men charged around the corner. The confines of the outpost corridor had kept the grenades' energy blasts concentrated and there was little left of the Jem'Hadar but charred corpses lying where they had fallen. One of the Imperial Guard bent down to pick up a weapon and inspected it briefly, hoping to have obtained a souvenir. But after confirming that the weapon was as inoperative as its late owner he just grunted and tossed it aside. Meanwhile Shry ran up to the closed reactor room door and banged on it with his fist.

"Crewman Hobbs!" he shouted, "Open the door!"

Carr and Cole reached the doorway just as it slid open and found Hobbs standing inside, his phaser still in his hand.

"I said I ought to go first." He said, "Then the Jem'Hadar attacked us from behind and he looked down to where he had dragged Lieutenant Grey's body.

Cole knelt down beside it, briefly examining the scorch mark on her tunic.

"Probably killed instantly." He said and looking up he added, "We should get the body back up the *Nightfall*."

Carr nodded and was about to activate her combadge when it was instead activated by an incoming transmission.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr this is Lieutenant T'Lan."

"Go ahead T'Lan." Carr replied.

"I have been studying the Jem'Hadar birthing equipment and it seems to have been used within the last two weeks."

"Yes. We've encountered them. But Captain Shry's troops have dealt with them all."

"That seems unlikely in such a short space of time lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and Carr frowned.

"Why? How many do you think there should?" she asked.

"If my calculations are correct then there are between two and three hundred Jem'Hadar active on this planet."

"None of which seem to know the war is over." Cole commented, having been listening in on the conversation.

Carr looked at Shry.

"Captain what are our chances against that many Jem'Hadar?" she asked.

"Not too bad." The Andorian replied, "Jem'Hadar are terror troops commander. They've got more support weapons than Starfleet ground troops, but we've still got the edge. Problem is their numbers. I'm pretty sure we'd win out in a straight firefight but we'd take heavy casualties along the way. If you want us to fight them it may be a good idea to get some more men down here."

Carr sighed and tapped her combadge.

"Carr to *Nightfall*." She signalled and Captain Edwards' voice replied.

"Commander," he said, "What's going on down there? Hamilton says he got a report about Jem'Hadar."

"Grey's dead captain." Carr responded, "A small force of Dominion troops ambushed us. Captain Shry's men have dealt with them but T'Lan says there could be hundreds more still active."

"Then get back up to the ship." Edwards ordered, "Leave the Jem'Hadar to the Imperial Guard and MACOs. I'll send more down right away. But look commander, the Jem'Hadar aren't our only problem. A force of Remans may have followed the Romulan refugee convoy here. In fact it's possible that the Remans were planning to deliver the Romulans to the Dominion troops."

"But what for?" Carr asked, "Thousands of Remans died in the war."

"I don't know commander. But I'm heading down to sickbay now. Hopefully our guest there will be able to shed a little more light on what's going on. *Nightfall* out."

6.

When Captain Edwards entered the sickbay he found the woman they had rescued sitting on the edge of one of the beds with King stood beside her conducting his examination. Just behind him stood Captain Heart and a pair of MACOs.

"Ah captain." King said, "I've just about cleared Miss West here. Despite her ordeal she seems in fine physical condition."

"Good." Edwards replied and he looked at Heart, "Captain I need you to mobilise your men. The rest of Shry's as well. Leave me one platoon up here but take the rest down to the surface with your IFVs. It appears that there's a large force of Jem'Hadar down there. Try and point out to them that the war is over, but if you can't then I'm authorising you to use whatever means are necessary to secure that outpost. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Heart said, snapping to attention and with the other two MACOs following he swiftly strode out of the room, grinning. Edwards turned to look at the woman on the bed.

"So your name is West then?" he said to her and she nodded.

"That's right. Jenna West." She answered.

"Formerly Lieutenant Jenna West of Starfleet. Up until about stardate four seven nine four six anyway." King added, "When apparently she decided to desert and join the Maquis."

Edwards looked briefly at the woman and she turned away.

"So when the Cardassians joined the Dominion you got caught up in their sweep across the DMZ?" he said.

"Me and everyone in my cell." West answered. Then after a brief pause she added, "So am I under arrest now?"

Edwards and King glanced at one another and smiled.

"No." Edwards replied, "At the outbreak of war there was a general pardon issued to all members of the Maquis. That still stands today."

"So as soon as we're done here you're free to go." King added, "You can even rejoin Starfleet if you want."

"For now though I need to know what's happening here. What can you tell me?" Edwards asked.

"Not much." West replied, "The Cardassians put me in stasis and the next thing I remember was a pair of Jem'Hadar dragging me out and holding me down while a Vorta stuck tubes in me while another one watched. I think there was a Reman there as well."

Edwards sighed.

"So they are working together." He said, "Now the question is why?"

It was then that the door to the sickbay slid open and Max entered, accompanied by Nayal. West gasped as she saw the Borg.

"What's a Borg doing here?" she asked.

"I thought the same thing." Nayal replied.

"Lieutenant Maximillian is my chief engineer." Edwards said, "He helped design this ship."

"But I thought this ship was just an Akira-" West began.

"This ship is more than that." King interrupted, "Like you said yourself, how many Starfleet ships in the last hundred and fifty years have carried MACOs?"

"So how can I help you lieutenant?" Edwards asked the engineer.

"I just came to inform you that the probes have been modified to emit tachyon pulses captain." Max replied.

"And work is well underway on our ships." Nayal added.

"You can have a basic tachyon detection net in place in ten minutes." Max said, "With the full system on line within two hours according to the reports from the Romulan vessels."

"Excellent." Edwards said and he activated his combadge, "Snowman are you there?" he asked.

"Ready captain." White's voice replied.

"What's the status of your squadron?"

"I've organised a four ship rotation. We launch four and keep four on alert at any time. The final four can be refuelled and serviced while their pilots take a rest. If we rotate in four hours stints we get eight hours on and four off."

"Sounds good. Launch immediately." Edwards said and he closed the channel. Before turning back to Max,

"Get the probes launched. I don't see any reason to delay getting the grid up and running. The Romulans can join us as soon as they're ready."

"Of course captain I'll-" Max said and then he stopped suddenly and frowned.

"What's wrong?" King asked.

Max looked directly at Edwards.

"Captain we have an intruder." He said, "He appears to be Romulan."

The trio of humans all turned to look at Noyal who stared back open mouthed.

"I- I-." She stammered.

"Edwards to bridge." The captain said, activating his combadge, "Intruder alert. Get the shields up in case anyone else tries beaming aboard."

"The intruder did not beam aboard captain." Max said.

"How did they dock a shuttle without us noticing?" King asked, "Even if it was cloaked we'd-"

"Nor was there a shuttle. The intruder simply appeared on deck fifteen and was detected by the nanites."

Max interrupted, "Here, I will show you." And he led the others to the closest monitor screen and held out his arm. A pair of tiny tubes extended out from his fist and connected with the monitor controls. Instantly the screen changed to show an image of one of the *Nightfall's* corridors.

"This is as the nanites perceived it." Max said, "Watch."

The corridor was empty one moment and the next a grey-haired Romulan suddenly stepped out of thin air.

Taking a quick look around he then began to run down the corridor.

"Go back." Noyal said, "Show me his face."

The footage reversed and paused at the point just after the Romulan had appeared then the picture zoomed in until his face filled the monitor.

"Friend of yours?" Edwards asked Noyal sternly.

"No." she replied, shaking her head, "But I do know who he is. He's the one that told Commander Kelak about this planet and its outpost."

"Where's he heading?" Edwards asked Max and the Borg paused for a moment.

"I believe that he is heading towards main engineering captain." He replied.

"Right then." Edwards said with a scowl, "Max with me. You too." He added, looking at Max and Noyal. Then he turned to King, "You stay with your patient." He said and then strode out of sickbay.

Just as the captain was leaving West suddenly started to run after him.

"Hey we're supposed to stay here!" King exclaimed.

"Actually you're supposed to stick with me." West replied, "So are you coming or not?"

"One minute." King said and he dashed to his desk and pulled out a phaser before running after her.

The shuttle came to a halt with the *Nightfall* hanging in space ahead of it.

"What's happening?" Carr asked the Andorian pilot, "Why have we stopped?"

"The *Nightfall's* shields are up commander." The pilot replied, briefly glancing over her shoulder at Carr.

"Why?" Cole asked, frowning.

"I don't know." The pilot replied, "Shall I-"

"No I'll do it." Carr interrupted and she tapped her combadge, "*Nightfall*, this is Carr. What's going on over there. We'd really like to dock."

"Sorry commander." Hamilton replied from the *Nightfall*, "Captain's orders. Shields have been raised while we deal with an intruder."

"An intruder?" Cole said, "I should be there. With both Heart and Shry on the planet's surface the captain needs someone to organise the search."

"There's still a platoon of MACOs aboard the ship sir." The pilot pointed out, "Their officer should be able to perform that task."

"They better be able to." Cole said.

Nikki frowned as she read the question for the third time, moving her lips in time. The assignment was already overdue for transmission back to her teachers on Beta Antares and she still had about a third of it left to do. In frustration she dropped the PADD onto the table and reached out to the computer console.

"Computer where is Lieutenant T'Lan?" she asked.

"Lieutenant T'Lan is not aboard the *Nightfall*." The computer responded.

"What about Max?"

"There is no crew member or passenger listed as 'Max'." the computer said and Nikki sighed.

"Lieutenant Maximillian. The chief engineer with machines in his head." She said.

"Lieutenant Maximillian has just exited a turbolift on deck fifteen." The computer said.

"Great." Nikki said and scooping up the PADD again she ran from the room.

The Starfleet crewman's uniform had the gold coloured collar of services division. But after leaping out to smash the man's throat the Romulan was disappointed to discover that he had been an engineer rather than

a security guard and as such was not carrying a phaser. Nevertheless, his combadge could be of use and the Romulan removed it from the corpse, instead fixing it to his own chest. Then he dragged the dead crewman out of the corridor and concealed him in a nearby storage room. Then he continued to head towards main engineering.

He stopped at the entrance to engineering and peered inside. What he saw confused him. Rather than the single warp core he expected to see dominating the room there were instead four of them and more than a dozen Starfleet engineers monitored them. Additionally there were a handful of humans in civilian clothing in a group discussing something with a Starfleet junior lieutenant.

"You there! Halt!" a man's voice yelled and the Romulan spun around to find himself staring down the muzzle of a phaser aimed squarely at him by a security guard while another stood behind him. Quickly, faster than the guard expected the Romulan leapt forwards, taking hold of the arm holding the phaser in both hands. The Romulan applied enough force to snap the bones and the guard screamed.

The second man cursed as he brought up his phaser but the Romulan had angled the first guard's weapon so that it was aimed at the second and he pressed down on the firing button, sending a bright red beam into him and his weapon clattered to the deck. Then the Romulan turned his attention back to the first guard, elbowing him in the face with enough force to crush his nose. As he too slumped towards the deck the Romulan snatched the phaser from his grip and headed into engineering.

"Captain we have phaser fire in engineering!" Hamilton exclaimed over the intercom.

"What's the status on security and those MACOs?" Edwards asked in reply.

"It looks like we have two guards down near engineering. Six more are converging. The MACOs are on their way." Hamilton told him.

Rounding a corner Edwards saw the bodies of the two security guards on the deck and he paused just long enough to pick up the phaser lying beside one of them. Then he darted to the entrance to main engineering and peered inside where he saw more bodies, both Starfleet and civilian.

"Doctor." He said softly and he nodded towards the closest body.

King passed his phaser to Max and took out his tricorder, holding out the probe towards the body.

"He's alive." He said, "Looks like a heavy stun."

"Unsurprising captain." Max said, "Discharging a phaser set to a high level within main engineering runs the risk of causing catastrophic damage to one of the warp cores.

"So our guy doesn't want the ship blowing up with him still aboard." Edwards said, "At least that's reassuring." And then he looked down at his phaser and adjusted it to a stun setting.

Nikki paused as she entered main engineering. She was not supposed to be here unaccompanied, but she knew from experience that there would normally be someone here who would challenge her and she had intended to ask that person to get the chief engineer for her.

"Hello?" she called out, "Max? Are you here?"

When there was no reply Nikki cautiously walked further into engineering and gazed up at the four warp cores surrounding her. Tucking the PADD into her jacket she began to climb the nearest ladder to the upper level.

"Hello?" she called out again and she thought she heard the sound of someone moving beside one of the warp cores. "Hi," she said, "I was just looking for-" and then her jaw dropped as she saw the Romulan crouched by the warp core. One of his sleeves was rolled up and a bundle of optical fibre cables ran from a metal plug set into his arm and into the circuitry behind an access panel he had removed. She turned to run as the Romulan raised a phaser and that was when she saw the engineer lying on the walkway ahead of her and she screamed out loud.

The sound of heavy footfalls heralded the arrival of the MACO fire team.

"Report sergeant." Edwards ordered.

"Lieutenant Jones has gone around the far side," The MACO replied, "and your security people have the other exits covered. Don't worry, whoever's in there isn't going anywhere captain."

"I'll feel better when I've got the intruder with the phaser away from the warp cores." Edwards said. Then he added, "Remember, if a high yield particle beam hits the cores you risk destabilising the magnetic field containing the anti-matter."

The sergeant smiled.

"Good job we've got these then." He said and he tapped the barrel of his assault rifle.

"Okay, then let's-" Edwards began before he was interrupted by a sudden high-pitched scream.

"Uh-oh." Edwards said and he leant around the corner into engineering, aiming his phaser. Seeing that the coast was clear he ran forwards.

"Spread out." The MACO sergeant ordered, "Shoot anything with pointed ears."

West looked at Max and reached out for the phaser.

"Give me that." She said, taking it from him and then she too headed into engineering.

The cable had torn free of the Romulan's arm as he leapt up and grabbed hold of Nikki far faster than she would have thought possible. Now his arm was wrapped around her throat and she could not break free.

"You're not one of the crew." The Romulan hissed.

"My mom's the first officer." Nikki croaked, her captor's grip limiting her air supply.

"Really?" the Romulan replied, "Well that's interesting. Though I have no need of a hostage."

"Hold it right there!" Edwards called out from below and he pointed his phaser up at the Romulan. Then he froze as the Romulan turned to place Nikki between them.

"It looks like I was wrong little one." He hissed at her, "Now you are of use to me."

"Let her go." Edwards shouted, "You're surrounded."

"Actually I think I'll keep hold of her while there are so many weapons aimed at me captain." The Romulan replied, "I doubt you'd want to explain to your first officer why her daughter was dead." Then he adjusted his phaser and fired towards Edwards.

The captain dived for cover and the beam struck a large display screen behind him, producing a shower of sparks as it blasted the screen apart. Edwards briefly jumped up to fire over the console he was hiding behind and his shot only narrowly missed the Romulan, instead striking the warp core beside him. Set to stun, the beam produced nothing more than a brief red flare of light from the shield.

"It seems I have you at a disadvantage captain." The Romulan shouted, "I don't need to worry about damaging your precious warp cores with any stray shots." And then he fired again, this time striking the console Edwards was using as cover.

From further back West held her breath as she took aim, lining up on the Romulan where his body stuck out from behind the much smaller Nikki. She fired a short duration beam and it struck the Romulan on his shoulder. Normally such a shot would have produced enough disruption to a humanoid's nervous system that he would have been unable to maintain his grip on either his phaser or Nikki, but in this case the Romulan appeared unaffected.

"Nice try." He yelled, "But it will take more than that to stop me." And he fired a blast towards West, who rolled back out of the way.

There was a sudden burst of automatic fire from one of the MACOs aimed above the Romulan's head to try and keep him pinned down as the fire team tried to work its way closer. Seeing this the Romulan fired again and this time his shot struck one of the MACOs, sending the man sprawling sideways. Grabbing hold of him the other MACOs pulled him out of the line of fire. But while all this was happening the Romulan did not notice the second MACO fire team slowly making its way up onto the walkway from behind him.

"I'm tiring of this captain!" the Romulan yelled, "I'll not have you stand in our way of getting back what we lost. Order your soldiers to back off or I'll kill the girl." But then he heard movement form behind him and he whirled around, dragging Nikki with him. He had just enough time to see the rifle aimed towards him before there was a sharp 'Crack!' as Lieutenant Jones fired a single shot into his throat. Surprised, the Romulan dropped his phaser and let go of Nikki, staggering backwards.

"Get down!" Jones yelled at Nikki and as she screamed and curled up in a ball on the walkway the MACOs opened fire again.

The Romulan shook as round after round of impact fragmenting ammunition tore through his torso and he fell, toppling over the safety rail between the walkway and the nearby warp core.

"Target down!" Jones shouted, "All clear!" and both on the walkway and the main floor below people rushed to look down to the lower engineering level where the Romulan had fallen.

Only there was nothing there. The Romulan had vanished.

"Where the hell did he go?" Edwards demanded, looking around at the other Starfleet personnel and MACOs all around him but n-one said anything. Then he noticed the sound of sobbing.

"Nikki." He said and he rushed up the nearest ladder to the walkway above, "Doc get up here!" he snapped as he saw Nikki curled up on the walkway and he crouched down beside her, "Are you hurt?" he asked.

Nikki looked up at the captain.

"I want my mom." She said.

"Captain I think you should see this." Max called out as he knelt where the cable cluster still dangled from the exposed systems and taking hold of the loose end he lifted it up so that Edwards could see it clearly.

"What is that?" the captain asked.

"That Romulan had it stuck into his arm." Nikki said, "Right here." And she pointed to her own arm, about half way between her elbow and wrist.

"Strange." Max said, examining the end of the cable closely where there was a single sharp needle-like prong, "There is no blood on this. Though there is something else."

"Let me see." King called out as he climbed the ladder to the walkway.

"One moment doctor." Max said and he shifted his attention to the end still connected to the *Nightfall's* systems, "The other end of this cable appears to have worked its way into one of our data transmission lines." He said.

"How long to remove it?" Edwards asked.

"I cannot say how long it will take to remove this alien technology captain." Max replied, "But there is an alternative." And he reached into the exposed machinery and simply unplugged the module that the cable had worked its way into, "I will replace this." He said as he turned to face King and handed the module and its attached cable to him.

"I'll get this to sickbay." King said to Edwards, "We may not have a body to examine but there may be something left on this."

"I hope so." Edwards said, standing up straight and he looked over the walkway's safety rail and looked down at where Nayal stood on the deck below with West and a pair of MACOs clustered around her, "I don't suppose you've got an explanation for any of this do you?" he asked. Nayal just stared back at him. Edwards tapped his combadge, "Mister Hamilton," he said, "you may lower our shields. Oh and please tell Commander Kelak I'd like a word with him."

"Yes captain." Hamilton replied. Then West interrupted.

"What's back there captain?" she asked and Edwards looked at Max for an answer.

"It is a power distribution regulator." The engineer answered, "It controls the flow of power from this particular warp core to the rest of the ship."

"So if it was sabotaged then you'd lose warp power right?" West asked.

Max thought for a moment.

"Not entirely. Though it would be disrupted. Only by disabling all four regulators could warp power be completely disabled."

"So if he'd had time to get at all four cores then we'd be dead in space?" West responded, "Impulse power only?"

"Correct." Max replied.

"So why did he want to disable warp power?" West then asked and Edwards struck his combadge again.

"Hamilton! Get those shields back up! Red alert!"

7.

"I count five." Heart said as he counted the traces of movement that his helmet's scanners picked up around a small cluster of buildings on the outpost perimeter, "This storm is messing with their ability to shroud properly." And then he raised a fist before pointing towards the building, "Target at one twenty. Four hundred metres. Main gun three rounds rapid."

The turret of the armoured vehicle swung around, aligning its phaser cannon with the buildings and there were there were three rapid pulses of energy as the projectile cannon launched high yield photon grenades at the buildings.

The powerful explosives reduced the buildings to scrap in an instant and as Heart looked up and zoomed in on the burning wreckage he caught sight of several Jem'Hadar bodies amongst it.

"Thought so." He muttered and then he switched on his communicator, "Okay Shry the perimeter's secure." He transmitted to his Andorian counterpart, "Time to go in loud."

"Copy that." Shry replied, "We're going in loud."

Inside the outpost's main structure breaching charges blasted open sealed doors that led to the sublevels in unison and as soon as the blasts had subsided Imperial Guardsmen and MACOs hurled grenades through the ruined doorways into the passageways beyond. After each grenade detonation the soldiers rushed into the breaches, firing their phasers in suppressive patterns before hurling more grenades to clear the way for the next stage of their advance.

The aim of this was simple. By laying down as much firepower and making as much noise as possible from multiple directions at once they were aiming to confuse the Jem'Hadar and their Vorta leaders. Single sentries would be overwhelmed by the weight of fire brought to bear on them while the defenders would not know exactly where the main thrust of the assault was coming from.

However, this method of attack also alerted the Jem'Hadar to the attack immediately and they began fighting back in increasing numbers.

"Remember to keep an eye out for the Vorta." Shry broadcast as he rolled out of the way of a polaron blast, "If we can take them alive maybe we can get these Jem'Hadar to stand down."

"Take the helm Mister Hamilton." Edwards said as he rushed from the turbolift onto the bridge accompanied by both Nayal and West.

"I've got Commander Kelak waiting for you." Hamilton said as he vacated the captain's chair.

"Good put him on."

Kelak appeared on the main screen.

"Captain? What's happening?" the Romulan asked.

"One of your people just tried to sabotage my ship Kelak." Edwards replied.

"But that's impossible." Kelak replied.

"No commander, its true." Nayal said, "I saw him with my own eyes. It was the man who told us about this place."

Kelak scowled.

"Where is this traitor now?" he demanded.

"Ah." Edwards said, "He's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone?"

"Vanished into thin air apparently." Edwards said.

"But how could he beam away with-" Kelak began.

"He didn't use a transporter commander." Nayal said.

It was then that the turbolift door slid open again and Carr, Cole and T'Lan exited it, all heading directly to their stations.

"Thanks for dropping the shields long enough for us to dock." Carr said as she took her seat, "Now what's going on?"

"I think we're about to be attacked." Edwards said.

"Attacked?" Kelak exclaimed.

Shintar tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair, leaning forwards.

"Well?" he asked, glaring at his operations officer.

"There is no word from your agent my lord." The other Reman replied.

Shintar let out a low, extended growl.

"Then he has failed." He said abruptly and he leant back in his chair, "Signal the other ships. It is time to attack. Destroy the warships, leave the transports and their passengers to our Jem'Hadar partners."
"What of the Starfleet vessels Lord Shintar?" the tactical officer asked.
"Destroy them all."

"The failure of warp power would have severely compromised our systems commander." Edwards told Kelak, "But if we discovered the sabotage after it was completed it wouldn't have taken us long to fix it. So the attack must have been planned for sometime soon. Kelak you need to—" and then a bleeping sound interrupted him.
"Captain," T'Lan said, "there is a disturbance in the tachyon net."

The four cloaked warbirds approached the cluster of starships orbiting Teiran Three. They flew in a flat diamond formation, with Shintar's vessel at the rear of this. Running cloaked the ships could use only limited passive sensors to avoid giving away their position through the energy emissions of active subspace scanners. Thus it was only at the last moment that they detected the shell of probes surrounding their targets.

"Starfleet is hunting us with sensor probes." Shintar said, snarling, "As if such devices could—" "Lord Shintar, I am detecting unusual emissions from those sensor probes." The operations manager said, interrupting Shintar, "They appear to be directed towards the other probes and starships." Shintar's jaw dropped as he saw on the tactical display that the first of his ships was about to pass between two of the probes.
"Break off!" he yelled, leaping out of his chair, "They've got a tachyon detection grid in place!"

"Copy that *Nightfall*." White said, "Heading in now." And leading his flight of four fighters he steered towards the disturbance shown on his sensor readout.

"Target identified Snowman." One of the other pilots broadcast, "D'deridex-class warbird."
"Roger that Sledgehammer." White responded, "Follow me in. Weapons hot."

Briefly accelerating to warp the four Peregrine-class fighters dropped back to impulse speed just over a hundred kilometres from the banking warbird that was still trailing the tachyons that had coated it. White's tactical systems began bleeping immediately, the gaps between bleeps becoming ever smaller until they merged into one continuous tone.

"I've got lock!" he broadcast, "Torpedo away!" and his ship shuddered slightly as the photon torpedo was propelled forwards.

Aboard the leading warbird alarms sounded across the bridge as White's fighter banked away, leaving the torpedo heading directly towards them.

"Drop the cloak!" the captain yelled, panic in his voice, "Get our shields up. Get them up now!"
"Too late!" another Reman exclaimed just as the photon torpedo slammed into their ship.

The powerful weapon ripped through the upper hull surface of the unshielded warbird and the energy released illuminated the entire vessel in spite of its cloaking device. Behind White's fighter the other three ships of his flight flew straight at the warbird, passing through the space between the upper and lower wing assemblies and firing their phasers into the already damaged ship. Crippled, the vessel began to list as a damaged thruster assembly began firing continuously.

Another warning sounded in White's cockpit as the space in front of his fighter twisted and another pair of warbirds materialised from behind their cloaking devices.

"We've got two more of them." He signalled, "*Nightfall* some help would be appreciated."

"We'll be right there Snowman." Captain Edwards' voice replied.

"Glad to hear it." White replied as he turned his fighter rapidly to avoid a sudden burst of disruptor fire from the nearest warbird.

"Mister Hamilton take us to warp." Edwards ordered, "And I want quantum torpedoes loaded and ready to fire."

"Yes captain." Cole replied from the tactical station.

"Stand by for warp." Hamilton said and a moment later there was a lurch as the *Nightfall* accelerated.

Just a few brief seconds at warp was enough to close the gap between the *Nightfall* and the trio of attacking Reman vessels and there was a second lurch as Hamilton dropped the ship back to sublight speed with the warbirds right in front of it.

"Torpedoes locked on the nearest warbird captain." Cole announced.

"Open fire." Edwards replied.

A flurry of pulsing white globes shot from the *Nightfall's* forwards launchers, pounding the closest Reman ship. The massive vessel's shields absorbed the first few impacts, but the tremendous number of torpedoes that an Akira-class ship like the *Nightfall* could fire meant that they could not hold for long.

Fire erupted from along the length of the warbird as the remaining torpedoes penetrated its shields and detonated and there was a brilliant flash as one of its warp nacelles exploded, spreading glowing debris behind it. But as this ship tried to limp away the second warbird swung around to face the *Nightfall*.

"Incoming plasma torpedoes." T'Lan announced calmly.

"Phasers." Carr ordered, "Intercept them."

"Too late for a lock." Cole replied.

"Brace for impact." Edwards said and then the ship shook violently.

The safety harnesses worn by the bridge crew did their jobs, holding the wearers in their seats. But the ensign at ops had neglected to fasten his, unused to the presence of such a basic device aboard a Starfleet vessel and he was hurled from his seat, his head banging against his console and knocking him unconscious.

"Get somebody on ops!" Edwards called out and instinctively West let go of the console she had been hanging onto and rushed forwards, jumping into the empty seat while another crewman picked up the injured ensign. Quickly she looked over the console, recognising the familiar Starfleet instrumentation.

"Shields holding." She called out, "No damage to ship's systems."

There was another shudder as the Reman ship fired again, but this was not as strong as the first.

"Reman warbird is directly astern captain." T'Lan said.

"Aft torpedoes." Edwards responded.

"Firing." Cole replied.

"No damage to Reman ship captain." West then said as she studied the effectiveness of the strike.

"Where's Commander White's group?" Edwards asked.

"Still engaging the first warbird captain." T'Lan informed him, "Shall I recall them?"

"No." Edwards answered. Then he looked at Carr, "Can we get the rest of our fighters out there?" he asked her.

"Not with our shields up." She replied.

"We need a distraction." Cole said and at that moment the *Tamol* dropped out of warp and flew straight towards the warbird behind the *Nightfall*, firing.

Surprised by the sudden appearance of the Romulan cruiser the larger broke off from pursuing the *Nightfall* and instead turned to face the newcomer, leaving the *Nightfall* itself unmolested for a time.

"Drop forward shields." Edwards ordered, "And get those fighters out there."

Normally a battle between D'deridex-class and Valdore-class warbirds would be a fairly even match. The more modern Valdore-class ships possessed greater firepower, but the older D'deridex-class ships were much bigger and more resilient. But the *Tamol* had already been damaged by Reman hit and fade strikes and so she found herself outmatched as the two ships flew headlong towards one another.

"We've lost main power commander!" one of Kelak's crew warned him.

"What about auxiliary centurion?" Kelak replied.

"Engineering reports imminent failure."

Kelak scowled.

"All crew to escape pods stand by to—"

"Incoming torpedo! Impact in ten seconds!" another officer called out and Kelak braced himself for the inevitable impact.

But the impact never came as a Starfleet phaser beam shot down the torpedo and the *Nightfall* swooped in between the two warbirds, strafing the larger D'deridex-class with more phaser fire as it passed.

"My thanks Captain Edwards." Kelak transmitted.

"Just returning the favour Kelak." Edwards responded, "Now get out of here. We can handle this." And Kelak watched as a group of Federation attack fighters began to swarm around the ship that less than a minute earlier had seemed about to destroy his ship.

"Helm bring us around." Kelak ordered, "Best speed back to—" but before he could finish the order another alarm sounded to indicate a cloaked vessel passing through the tachyon detection grid. Heading for the *Tamol*, Shintar's warbird decloaked and began firing.

"Where the hell did he come from?" Carr exclaimed as she watched the Reman flagship pound the *Tamol* with disruptor fire and blast one of its long curved wings right off, sending it spinning away in flames.

"Captain you have to help them." Nayal pleaded as she watched the *Tamol* burn.

"I'm still picking up life readings from aboard the Romulan vessel captain." T'Lan added.

"Helm new heading. One four zero mark thirty. Tactical fire phasers and torpedoes as the target presents itself."

"Yes captain. Locking weapons on Reman warbird." Cole announced as Hamilton steered the ship around to its new heading, one that took it between the two warbirds to again act as a shield to the Romulan ship.

"Starfleet vessel closing Lord Shintar." The Reman at ops announced.

"What about our other ships?" Shintar enquired.

"Crippled my lord. But two are still able to fire."

"Not good enough." Shintar said, "Bring us around and withdraw. Destroy the other warbirds as we pass them."

"Destroy them my lord? But there are thousands of—"

In one swift movement Shintar drew his disruptor pistol and fired at the disobedient Reman. The shot struck him the chest and spread out, disintegrating him completely as the rest of the bridge crew looked on.

"Those ships must not fall into Federation hands." Shintar announced, "Now carry out my orders." And he slid his disruptor back into its holster.

"They're running." Hamilton said with a grin as the Reman warbird turned away from the *Nightfall* and increased speed.

"Captain the Reman weapons are still powered." T'Lan warned.

"Then stay on them." Edwards said, "Mister Cole fire at will."

"Captain the Remans are firing." West called out.

"Brace for impact." Carr responded.

"Not at us." West added, "At their other warbirds."

Sure enough a stream of plasma torpedoes followed by a burst of disruptor bolts streaked towards the closest of the other Reman warbirds, the one surrounded by the second wave of fighters launched from the *Nightfall*.

"Tell the fighters to get clear!" Edwards snapped, "Get clear before—" but it was too late and as the volley of fire slammed into the already severely damaged ship it was consumed in one massive explosion. Around it two of the tiny Peregrine-class fighters were consumed by the blast while the shields of the others were battered and they tumbled away.

Shintar's vessel adjusted its course slightly, taking it on a path that passed by both of the other damaged warbirds and it fired again. Each time the warbirds were struck by multiple torpedo and disruptor shots and they exploded, taking their entire crews with them. Forewarned by the destruction of the first warbird however, White's flight had already withdrawn to a safe distance. This created a clear path that Shintar's ship flew through until it was beyond the line of probes that marked the outer edge of the tachyon detection grid and as soon as it was clear the ship shimmered and was gone.

8.

Nikki sat on the edge of a bed and watched as King hurriedly put medical supplies into a case. Then the door hissed open and Carr entered the sickbay.

"Mom!" Nikki called out, rushing to embrace her.

"Nikki, are you okay?" Carr replied, hugging her daughter.

"She's fine." King announced without looking up, "Just taking up valuable space I may need for real patients."

Carr frowned at the doctor's dismissive attitude. Then she released her grip on Nikki and spoke.

"Are you ready yet doctor?" she asked.

"Just about." King replied, "Though I hope you realise that I've not much experience treating Romulans. Vulcans yes, Romulans no."

"Aren't they the same?" Nikki asked.

"Not quite honey." Carr replied.

"But generally what kills one kills the other." King added as he strode towards the door with the case slung over his shoulder and as he passed he looked at Nikki, "You, go." He said and then he walked out of the door.

Smoke filled the compartment where the away team materialised aboard the *Tamol*. It was clear that the environmental systems had been damaged and the air was no longer being recycled. Immediately King reached for his tricorder while Carr, Cole and the two security that had accompanied just looked around at the devastation. Though they carried phasers none drew them just yet. This was not a boarding action, it was a rescue mission.

"Which way is the bridge?" Carr asked, looking round at Nayal, the final member of the away team.

"This way." Nayal replied, picking her way through the wreckage.

Along the way King paused briefly repeatedly to check for life signs from any of the Romulan bodies they encountered, but without exception there were none. The hatchway to the bridge was partially open, but the gap was too narrow for any of the away team to squeeze their way through. Nayal struck the control, hoping to get the door fully open, but only a sharp chime was produced as the mechanism failed to function.

"Help me with this." She said to Cole and when he stepped forwards they both place their hands in the narrow gap and each took hold of one of the doors. Then, looking at Carr Nayal added, "Lieutenant Commander Carr, if you wouldn't mind would you please activate that control when I say so?"

"Of course." Carr replied, moving to stand by the door control.

"Ready?" Nayal asked Cole.

"Ready." He answered.

"Okay now." Nayal said and simultaneously Carr activated the control again and both Cole and Nayal pulled at the doors. The chime repeated, but this time there was also a grinding sound as the doors were pulled on. Then, all of a sudden the blockage in the mechanism was overcome and the doors hissed open. King rushed through the gap.

"I've got life signs." He exclaimed, rushing to the centre of the bridge where Commander Kelak lay slumped in his chair.

"Commander!" Nayal called out as she rushed to his side.

"Nayal." Kelak said and then he coughed, green blood running down his chin.

"Don't try and speak." King said as he pulled out a hypospray and pressed it to the commander's neck.

"Nayal take this." Kelak said, ignoring the doctor's advice and from his pocket he slid a tiny metallic rod,

"Hold number two. Give it to their captain. A parting gift."

"No commander. Hold on." Nayal said but then Kelak's grip on the rod slackened and he let out a sudden gasp before he lay still. King looked up at Carr and shook his head.

"I'm sorry." Carr said as she crouched down beside Nayal, "He's dead."

Vayon looked at the row of Jem'Hadar in front of him. Each of them was the first of their unit, the best troops he had at his disposal and the Vorta believed that he could count on their unswerving loyalty.

"The enemy is pushing deeper." One of the Jem'Hadar announced.

"Then you should be stopping them First Moratashan." Vayon hissed back at him, "These are just Federation troops after all."

"But they do not match what you have told us about them." Another of the Jem'Hadar replied, "They move fast and are well armed."

"Plus they have armoured vehicles and air support." A third of them said.

"And you are the pinnacle of the Founders' development of the perfect soldiers." Vayon said, "So tell me what I am supposed to tell them about why you are unable to defeat a numerically inferior enemy."

The Jem'Hadar looked back at him without speaking.

"Get out." Vayon said, snarling, "Remind your men of their duty."

Moratashan bowed his head.

"Victory is life." He said and then the other Jem'Hadar copied him.

"Victory is life." They announced and then they turned and marched out of the room.

Alone now Vayon turned his attention to a monitor screen mounted on the wall behind and using a handheld remote he began to flick through feeds from an assortment of concealed cameras. Many returned nothing, the explosives that the attacking Federation troops were using liberally had destroyed many, but there were still enough remaining for Vayon to be able to gain some idea of their movements and it made for depressing viewing. Just as the Jem'Hadar unit commanders had told him the human and Andorian troops were pressing their assault and clearly these were not the same mediocre troops that the Federation had fielded during the war. They wore effective body armour and carried weapons that were far more effective than the standard Starfleet ones. Against this the Jem'Hadar had only their basic polaron rifles and pistols, more effective weapons having been unavailable to Vayon.

Adjusting the monitor Vayon then turned his attention to the situation in space and he found this no more encouraging.

Three Reman warbirds were nothing but wreckage and although the Romulan flagship seemed to be in a condition little better the Starfleet heavy cruiser seemed undamaged. However, there was no sign at all of Shintar's flagship or any wreckage so it seemed reasonable that the D'deridex-class warbird was cloaked somewhere. Vayon activated his long-range communications.

"Shintar." he sent, "Report your status." And the image on the monitor was replaced by one of the bridge of Shintar's vessel, the Reman warlord sat in his command chair and fiddling with his gruesome trophy necklace.

"My vessel is fully functional." Shintar replied, "We are cloaked."

"What happened?" Vayon asked.

"The Romulans and their Federation allies set up a tachyon detection grid. My ships were detected the moment they penetrated it." Shintar told him.

"Well the Jem'Hadar are being slaughtered down here. I don't know who the soldiers that Federation ship offloaded are, but they're not standard Starfleet troops. I need your help."

"My people are working on a way to disable the grid." Shintar replied, "As soon as I can penetrate it I'll take out that Federation ship and the handful of obsolete warbirds the Romulans still have and send you reinforcements."

In the distance Vayon heard a dull 'thump' as a photon grenade went off.

"Hurry." He said.

The sounds of phaser fire, punctuated by blasts from photon grenades came from ahead as Heart made his way into the underground levels of the outpost.

"Shry!" he yelled when he spotted his Andorian counterpart in front of him, "What's our status?"

"We're slowing down." Shry replied, "The Jem'Hadar are getting organised at last. They fall back and wait until the grenades have gone off and then they charge while we're advancing."

"Casualties?" Heart asked.

"About twenty so far."

"And the Jem'Hadar?"

"We killed more than a hundred down here. Plus that squad you killed up top." Shry said. Then he added, "What's the situation up there now?"

"I've left two squads as a rear guard." Heart said, "They've got the IFVs as support and the shuttles flying top cover. If any of those vat-grown scale heads pokes their ugly face up there they won't be keeping it much longer."

All of a sudden their communication channel came to life as an excited human voice exclaimed, "I think I've eyes on the Jem'Hadar first!"

Heart and Shry looked at one another.

"We need to move." Heart said.

The two officers hurried through the outpost's subsurface levels towards the source of the message. It came from a squad of MACOs that had taken up a position between two massive fluid pumps. Further down the cavernous chamber in which these were located was a barricade of shipping containers and spare parts that several Jem'Hadar were using as cover. Beyond that was a raised platform one which there were several more Jem'Hadar, one of which was clearly directing the actions of the others.

"Yeah, looks like a first to me." Heart said as he pulled his head back behind the pump before any of the Jem'Hadar could shoot him.

"Do you want to try?" Shry asked and Heart shook his head.

"If I wanted to be a negotiator I'd have joined Starfleet." He said.

"Looks like its time to give Andorian diplomacy a go then." Shry said and he edged to the end of the pump.

"Let me talk to your first!" he yelled out but the weapons fire from the Jem'Hadar continued.

"You forgot to say 'please'." Heart commented, grinning.

"First!" Shry yelled again, "The war ended a decade ago. Tell your men to stand down."

"Lies!" a Jem'Hadar voice called out in response, "If the war was over you would be dead."

"Hate to break this to you, but we won." Heart shouted.

"Impossible!" Moratashan replied with contempt, "The Dominion has not been defeated in its entire history."

"So how come we're here?" Shry asked loudly, "Think about it first. Have you seen any orders from Cardassia since you were hatched here? You were hatched here weren't you? You've never been off this planet."

From his position on the platform Moratashan stood and stared in the direction of the Federation troops. Nothing in the Andorian's statement could be shown to be false and the Vorta had not given him or any of the other firsts anything to back up what he had said. For the Jem'Hadar created in the Gamma Quadrant this would not have been an issue, they were bred not to question. But the so-called Alphas that were created to fight in the Alpha and Beta quadrants had been given more independence of thought.

"First Moratashan." One of his troops said, "They are hiding down there between the pumps. My unit can shroud and—"

"Enough Forth Rutel." Moratashan said, holding up his hand, "Have the men hold their position. I am going to find out the truth for myself." And he promptly turned and marched down the passageway that led back to Vayon's chambers.

Vayon was checking a polaron pistol when Moratashan entered the room.

"What is it Moratashan?" he asked without looking at the Jem'Hadar.

"I need to confirm our orders." He said and Vayon looked up from his weapon.

"Oh really? Is my relaying of the Founders' orders suddenly not enough for you?" he asked.

"It is not." Moratashan replied flatly, "Connect me with Cardassia Prime."

Vayon sighed.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible right now first." He said, "You see our communications have been cut—"

"Our communications are fine." Moratashan interrupted, "Remember the same relay that connects you to the Founders also links all the Jem'Hadar units here together. I would know if there was any interference. Now activate it."

A hint of a smile appeared on Vayon's face.

"Of course." He said, "Just give me a moment."

To do what?" Moratashan asked.

"This." Vayon replied and he shot the Jem'Hadar in the chest.

Moratashan collapsed, falling backwards from the blast.

"We are already dead." He gasped, "Victory is life." And then he was gone.

"Not today though First Moratashan." Vayon said as he walked around his desk and delivered a kick to the corpse. It was then he noticed that the Jem'Hadar's communicator had been active the entire time. What had just transpired had been overheard by every Jem'Hadar in the outpost.

Rushing to the door Vayon spotted two more Jem'Hadar in the corridor outside and fired at them. One fell, but the other spun around to return fire a stream of polaron blasts flying down the corridor. Vayon ducked back inside his chamber and slammed a hand on the door control, dropping a neutronium-reinforced door down between him and his former troops.

"Get a move on Shintar." He muttered to himself.

The sound of Jem'Hadar weapons slackened off suddenly and then halted entirely.

"Perhaps they're out of ammunition." Heart said to Shry.

"Unlikely." Shry replied, "Even if they are they've still got knives."

“Movement on the platform.” One of the other MACOs said as he peered around the end of the pump. “I am First Vo’hek.” A Jem’Hadar called out, “Tell your men throughout this complex to cease fire. I wish to negotiate a truce.”

Heart and Shry looked at one another.

“Andorian diplomacy wins the day it would seem.” Shry said and he activated his communicator, “All units hold. Do not fire unless fired upon.” And the remaining distant sounds of phaser and projectile fire died away as well, “Okay Vo’hek. Get talking.”

“The Vorta has lied to us.” Vo’hek shouted, “He does not represent the Founders.”

“Are you saying you surrender?” Heart called out.

“The Jem’Hadar do not surrender.” Vo’hek replied, “We merely want truce while we obtain new orders.”

“What do you think?” Heart asked Shry, “Trap?”

“Maybe pink skin. But maybe not.” And the Andorian leapt out from behind the pump, holding his rifle out beside him. The Jem’Hadar ahead took aim but did not fire.

“Okay Vo’hek.” Shry said as he advanced slowly, “Talk.” And from behind him the MACOs emerged led by Captain Heart and they advanced keeping their weapons trained on the Jem’Hadar position.

“The Vorta has sealed himself in with the communications relay.” Vo’hek explained, “We need that to contact the Dominion. The Vorta you may have. He is nothing to us.”

Shry smiled.

“Sounds like a deal to me.” He said, “But I need to run this by Starfleet.”

“They’ll love it.” Heart commented, “Diplomacy wins the day.”

Edwards frowned briefly as he heard Shry’s message.

“They’re offering to stand down?” he asked.

“Yes sir. A complete cease fire, though they will not give up their arms.”

Edwards looked at T’Lan.

“What do you think lieutenant?” he asked, “Can they be trusted?”

“The Jem’Hadar do have a limited code of honour captain.” She replied, “Logic suggests that they are sincere. Though how they will react when they fail to make contact with Dominion forces in the Alpha quadrant remains to be seen. Plus the Vorta is the individual most likely to be able to tell us why this place has been reactivated.”

“Okay then.” Edwards said, “We’ll take the deal. Captain Shry, bring me that Vorta.”

Shry shut off his communicator and looked up at Vo’hek.

“Okay we’ve got a deal.” He called out, “Now show us where this Vorta is hiding.”

Vo’hek led Heart, Shry and the MACO squad through the Jem’Hadar lines, the different species eying one another nervously. He took them as far as a massive heavily armoured door that had a pair of Jem’Hadar standing outside. The surface of the door showed signs that several energy blasts had been fired at it, but it remained intact.

“The Vorta cowers inside.” Vo’hek said, banging a fist against the door.

“What’s this made of?” Heart asked as he ran his hand over the surface of the door.

“It is a neutronium alloy.” Vo’hek replied, “Our weapons will not penetrate it.”

“Neither will our phasers.” Shry said, “I doubt our grenades will either.”

“Even if they did an attack like that would destroy everything behind the door.” Heart pointed out.

“That is not acceptable.” Vo’hek replied, “Find another way.”

“I’m guessing that the rest of the room is surrounded by neutronium as well.” Heart said, looking at Vo’hek.

“Yes. A reinforcing mesh embedded in the structure.” He answered.

“A mesh?” Heart asked and he smiled, “I know how we can get through. But we’ll need someone from the *Nightfall* down here. The Borg.”

3.

When Edwards entered sickbay he found the room filled to overflowing. All of King's staff as well as a pair of Romulan medics were working on the survivors that had been brought across from the *Tamol*. He even noticed the emergency medical hologram had been activated to bolster the numbers of doctors available to treat the wounded. Standing close to the door he found Carr and Nyal and he headed over to them.

"Where's Kelak?" he asked and Carr shook her head.

"He died at his post." Nyal said, "Another name for me to add." And she ran a finger down the side of her face where the names of the dead she grieved for were drawn on her skin.

"I'm sorry." Edwards replied. Then he added, "So how many did you save?"

"Thirty four." Carr told him, "But six are critical and may not make it. Captain that ship took a pounding."

"Captain Edwards there is something else." Nyal said and then she glanced at Carr, "Something I think we should discuss in private. It concerns something Commander Kelak wanted you to have. Your engineer has it."

Both Carr and Edwards looked at one another.

"Get back to the bridge." Edwards told Carr. Those Remans could come back at any time and there's still the situation planetside to be dealt with." Then he tapped his combadge, "Max are you free?" he asked.

"I am available captain." Max responded.

"Nyal tells me you have something from the *Tamol*."

"Indeed. A sealed crate. I ran a scan and detected no signs of anything dangerous. But I am uncertain as to what it-"

"We're on our way down to you now." Edwards interrupted, "Just keep everyone away from it until we get there."

"Of course captain."

Edwards and Nyal left the sickbay and headed directly to engineering. After the attempted sabotage several security guards had been stationed there by Cole to ensure that a second attempt would not be made. Two of them stood beside a door that led to one of the workshops and as Edwards and Nyal entered engineering Max emerged from it.

"Ah captain," he said, "I have moved the crate into here for privacy." And he stood aside to allow the two newcomers to pass. He followed them back into the workshop and closed the door behind him.

"Is this it then?" Edwards asked as he looked at the crate laid out on a workbench in front of him. It was a standard Romulan shipping container that was totally devoid of markings. But across the seam a high security seal had been fixed in place to prevent it from being opened.

"Yes." Nyal said, "Commander Kelak retrieved it from a high security depot on our planet captain." And she strode over to the crate and produced the rod that Kelak had given to her. Pressing this against the seal, there was a soft chime and it fell away. Then she released the crate's latches and opened it for Edwards and Max to see.

"Is that what I think it is?" Edwards asked.

"That rather depends." Max said, "What do you think it is?"

"Never mind." Edwards said and he looked at Nyal, "Kelak wanted us to have this?"

"Yes captain. He called it a parting gift." Nyal told him.

"Captain if Starfleet Command discovers that-" Max began, but Edwards interrupted him.

"I know." He said and he turned to the Borg, "Look, just stash that thing somewhere okay? Get rid of the crate and put it in one of ours. Make sure it looks like something innocent and put it somewhere only we'll know about. You are to discuss this with no one. Understood?"

"Of course captain." Max replied and then Edwards' combadge activated.

"Captain I have a message from the surface." Cole's voice said.

"Go ahead lieutenant commander." Edwards replied.

"Captain Heart reports that the Jem'Hadar have requested a truce." Cole said.

"A truce?" Edwards said in surprise.

"Yes sir. It would seem that they no longer recognise the authority of their Vorta commander and have agreed to let us have him in exchange for being allowed to contact Cardassia Prime for extraction."

Edwards glanced at both Max and Nyal.

"Fat lot of good that'll do them." He muttered.

"I know sir." Cole replied and Edwards' suddenly remembered the microphone pressed against his skull that would pick up every word he uttered, "The problem is that the Vorta has sealed himself inside a neutronium

safe room." Cole explained, "Captain Heart believes that Lieutenant Maximilian will be able to help gain access to the room."

Edwards looked at Max again and the Borg nodded once.

"Get a shuttle ready." Edwards said, "And let Captain Heart know that he's on his way."

"Yes sir." Cole said, "Oh and there's one other thing as well."

"What?" Edwards asked.

"A Romulan has beamed aboard and is insisting on speaking with you." Cole said, "He wouldn't give his name, but he said that Nayal would know him. I've had him taken to your ready room."

Edwards sighed.

"Okay, we're on our way up now." He said.

Edwards entered his ready room ahead of Nayal and found two security guards standing just inside the door while a single Romulan in military uniform sat in front of his desk. The man stood up as Edwards and Nayal came into the room and Edwards saw that his uniform bore no insignia of rank or position.

"Leave us." Edwards said to the guards and they nodded before exiting the room, "So who are you?"

Edwards asked as he walked round his desk and sat down. The Romulan man looked at Nayal.

"He's called Turren captain." She said, "He's an agent of the Tal Shiar."

Edwards paused. The Tal Shiar had been the feared secret police force of the Romulan Star Empire and nothing was known of what had happened to them since the destruction of Romulus. Many assumed that an angry population no longer afraid of reprisals had murdered Tal Shiar agents en masse. Turren's presence disproved that theory however.

"Former Tal Shiar agent captain." Turren said as he sat back down again, "Since the start of the civil war I have been acting as a security advisor to my planetary government."

"How fortunate you were able to find a place on one of the escape ships." Edwards said.

"Commander Kelak brought him along." Nayal said, frowning.

"The late commander found my skills to be useful." Turren added, smiling.

"So what can I do for you Mister Turren?" Edwards asked, "I'm pretty sure I can count on the loyalty of my crew so there's nothing to worry about there."

Turren picked up a Romulan-made PADD he had placed on Edwards' desk and switched on the display.

Edwards saw that it showed an image of the Romulan who had attempted to sabotage the *Nightfall's* warp cores and his eyes widened.

"Commander Kelak had me investigate this individual as soon as you suggested to him that our coming here was a trap of some sort." Turren said, "His name is M'Ryl. I travelled to the ship he was supposed to be on but found that he had vanished."

"Yes we know where he went." Edwards said, glancing at Nayal.

"So I heard." Turren replied, "But do you know where he came from?" and then he paused, "M'Ryl came from a town called Kellit Kar." He continued.

"Kellit Kar was destroyed by the Remans." Nayal interrupted.

"Yes it was." Turren said, "And all but six of the inhabitants were killed."

So M'Ryl was one of the six survivors?" Edwards asked, "Are any of the other five aboard your ships?"

"You misunderstand me captain." Turren replied, "M'Ryl was killed. When Commander Kelak had me evacuated I brought along copies of all my files, including the records of the massacre at Kellit Kar." And he reached out to take back his PADD, "If I may." He said and he switched the image on the screen for another of M'Ryl. This one showed him lay out on a mortuary slab, "Somehow a dead man tried to destroy your ship captain." Turren said.

The Dominion had never encountered the Borg Collective. So as Max walked through the outpost he noticed that the Jem'Hadar were staring at him as he passed, presumably considering the most effective methods of killing him should the need arise. He stopped when he encountered the two infantry commanders standing by the armoured door.

"Lieutenant," Heart said, "we can't blast through this so we need it opening. First Vo'hek here tells us that the walls have only a mesh embedded in them for reinforcement rather than a solid lining. I figure your nanoprobes could slip through this and attack the lock from inside."

Max looked at the door, his built in sensors sweeping across it and the surrounding wall.

"You are correct captain. Whoever built this used a two-millimetre mesh. More than adequate to allow nanoprobes to penetrate." And he held up his right hand in a fist then extended it out in front of him, holding it close to the wall beside the door. The two nanoprobe injectors built into his hand extended, burying

themselves in the wall until they struck the impenetrable mesh, "Prepare yourselves." He said, "The door will be opening shortly."

"Okay phasers on stun." Heart ordered, "We don't want to break anything important do we?" and he adjusted the setting of the phaser mounted under his rifle.

The assembled group of Imperial Guard, Jem'Hadar and MACOs all stood at the ready and trained their weapons on the armoured door.

Inside the armoured safe room Vayon paced up and down, awaiting word from Shintar that he was landing his forces. Then he heard a strange sound from the direction of the door, a brief high-pitched squeak. He took a step towards the door and he heard the sound again. His jaw dropped as he realised that somehow the Federation and Jem'Hadar forces lying in wait outside the safe room had found a way to get at the door's locking mechanism and that it could open at any moment.

Sure enough there was a sudden hiss and the door began to slid open. As soon as the gap was wide enough an armoured human leapt through the gap, his weapon aimed at Vayon. But the Vorta was ready and a single polaron blast sent the human sprawling backwards. A Jem'Hadar leant around the slowly opening door and fired, a low powered shot clipping Vayon's arm. However, this did not bother the Vorta at all and he fired again before ducking down behind the console in the middle of the room.

"Move!" Heart snapped as he led a mixed group of Imperial Guard and MACOs into the room, all of them keeping their rifles trained on the area around the console. There was another polaron blast from behind the console as Vayon lay on the floor and lent around it to fire. But with his field of fire from this position severely limited the shot missed the charging soldiers. Heart returned fire and he was certain that his shot struck Vayon square in the chest, but the Vorta was still able to retreat back behind the console.

Rushing forwards Heart turned and pointed his rifle down at the floor behind the console where Vayon had been hiding. Only to discover that there was no sign of the Vorta at all.

"Where did he go?" Heart said, confused.

In the *Nightfall's* briefing room Edwards looked down the table at the individuals he had assembled for this meeting. Either side of him sat Lieutenant Commander Carr and Doctor King, while further down the table were Cole, Max, T'Lan and White on one side with Heart, Shry, Nayal and Turren on the other.

"Doctor King, what do you have to tell us?" Edwards asked.

"I took a look at that device Lieutenant Commander Carr's daughter said she saw plugged into the Romulan's arm." He said, "And I found traces of Romulan tissue."

"So he was impersonating M'Ryl." Nayal said.

"I don't think so." King replied, "Not unless he was impersonating him as a corpse."

"What do you mean doctor?" T'Lan asked, tilting her head.

"The tissue traces I found were necrotic." King replied, "They were dead."

"Are you saying that a zombie tried to destroy my ship?" Edwards asked.

"Don't tell Hamilton that." Cole commented and he and White looked at one another and smiled.

"Not quite." King said, "I think that M'Ryl was more than he appeared." And he got up and walked over to the wall mounted display and activated it. The image that appeared was one of something heavily magnified, "I found this as well. Plus more samples were recovered from the wall behind where the MACOs shot him.

Thankfully their proximity to the warp core caused them to use their automatic rifles rather than their phasers or we wouldn't have had these to study."

"What is it doctor?" Carr asked, "It doesn't look like any tissue sample, I've ever seen."

"That's because its not." King replied, "When I saw this I had Lieutenant T'Lan take a look at it as well." And he looked towards the Vulcan.

"It is life captain." She said, "But not as we know it. What I believe we are looking at is a form of synthetic stem cell cluster. These artificial cells can be programmed to mimic the function of any cell in a humanoid body. Additionally I have determined that this adaptability extends to encoding digital data into the cells."

"Are you telling us that this is some sort of living computer memory?" Turren asked.

"That is what I just said." T'Lan replied.

"But how does something like this end up inside a dead Romulan?" Carr asked.

"It could be implanted surgically or perhaps injected." T'Lan said, "It depends on how much of the substance is placed within a host body. Alternatively I see no reason why an entire body could not be constructed from this material. Of course that would require a programming method beyond our best technology to animate for any length of time."

"Is this why a phaser stun didn't even slow that Vorta down?" Heart asked.

"If it were implanted in the brain then there is a reasonable chance that it would become immune to disruption of the nervous system from a phaser blast." T'Lan answered, "But I would need a living sample to

test if you require certainty.”

“That seems to be the problem.” Cole commented, “Have we encountered anyone we think has this stuff in them that hasn’t just vanished into thin air?”

“Yes, how are they doing that?” Shry added.

“It is not conventional transporter technology. Max said, “In most cases that a subject has appeared or disappeared the conditions would have prevented a transporter operating. On the planet because of the storm activity while here on the *Nightfall* our shields were raised for the extraction. Also internal sensors detected no particle disturbance at all.”

“So if I get this right we don’t have a clue what we’re facing.” White said, looking around the table.

“That seems to be the case to me as well.” Nayal agreed.

“Is there anything we do know?” Cole asked.

“The planet is secure.” Shry said, “The Jem’Hadar seem happy to sit and wait while a ship comes to collect them.”

“Do they have adequate ketracel white to sustain them? King asked.

“We saw several large canisters.” Heart replied, “If they do run out we’ll already be long gone.”

“I’ll remember to let the pick up crew from DS nine know.” Edwards said.

“Excuse me captain,” Nayal said, “but what are your intentions towards our people?”

“The *Nightfall* will escort your convoy into Federation space.” Edwards replied, “Once there you’ll be able to request asylum.”

“With that D’deridex-class warbird still around most of our ships will never make it.” Turren commented, looking directly at Captain Edwards.

“I know. That’s why we need to come up with a way of locating her.” Edwards replied, “My plan is to destroy that ship before we head out.”

“So you’re convinced that the Remans haven’t just given up after the pasting we gave them?” White asked and Cole smiled.

“Remans are not noted for sudden changes of heart lieutenant commander.” Nayal replied.

“I doubt they’re just waiting to see what we do either.” Edwards said, “My guess is that they’ll be working on a way to disable our ships or the tachyon detection grid before they attack again.”

“They can’t sabotage the *Nightfall* captain.” Cole said, “I’ve stationed guards at all critical locations.” Then turning towards Heart and Shry he added, “Our ground forces have contributed to this as well. We’re fully covered.”

“The Romulan ships have also positioned guards.” Nayal said, “Though they have fewer troops at their disposal.”

“So our ships are pretty much secure then.” Edwards said, “That only leaves the tachyon detection grid itself for them to attack.”

Shintar approached the cluster of Reman science and engineering personnel gathered around the console at the side of the bridge.

“Well?” he asked, scowling, “Why have you not found a way to disable the Federation’s tachyon detection grid yet?”

“Lord Shintar,” one of the scientists replied, “disabling the grid is not a problem. A massive tachyon burst emitted from our deflector array will overwhelm it easily and render the Starfleet vessel blind to our approach.”

“Then do it then.” Shintar ordered.

“However my lord,” the scientist went on, “our ship would also be coated with highly charged tachyons. A low level radioactive burst, such as that produced by a torpedo detonation would illuminate us and allow them to lock their weapons onto us. We need a method of dispersing the tachyons without our on vessel being affected.”

Shintar looked around at the main tactical display and studied the symbols representing the Starfleet and Romulan vessels in space around Tieran Three. Then he found his attention drawn away from the ships to the shifting pattern of probes that formed the outer perimeter of the tachyon detection grid.

“How many probes are we carrying that are fitted with cloaking devices?” he asked.

“Nine my lord.” Another Reman told him.

“What if we use those to release the tachyons?” Shintar asked, “We will advance only when the tachyons detection grid has already been disabled.”

The other Remans looked at one another as they considered this.

"I believe it could work my lord." One of them said, "And even if it does not our ship will remain safe."

"How long will it take?" Shintar then asked.

"About three hours to adapt all the probes."

"Then get to work." Shintar said, "I want every human and Romulan in this system dead within five hours. Then we will deal with those treasonous Jem'Hadar on the surface."

Sat in his chair at the centre of his warbird's bridge Shintar took another look at the tactical display. The Federation vessel was positioned in a higher orbit than the Romulan ones, sheltering them beneath it while its remaining fighters and two runabouts formed a screen further away from the planet.

"All probes configured and ready to launch my lord." His tactical officer reported and a smile spread across Shintar's face.

"Execute launch." He said and the tactical officer turned back to his console and triggered the probe launch sequence.

Invisible even to the sensors of his own warbird, Shintar was forced to rely on the transmissions from the probes themselves to tell him their precise locations and he watched on the screen as a cluster of dots headed towards the shell of Federation probes, this cluster steadily expanding as they got further away from the warbird.

In the cockpit of his fighter White suddenly looked down as an alarm warned him of a cloaked vessel trying to break through the tachyon detection grid.

"All fighters follow me in!" he exclaimed as he steered his fighter towards the source of the signal. Then he added, "*Nightfall* we have a contact. Intercept in twenty seconds."

"Copy that Snowman." Carr's voice replied, "We'll be right behind you." And aboard the *Nightfall* she looked towards the front of the bridge where Hamilton occupied his usual spot at the helm and West was still sat at ops, "Lay in an intercept course. Full impulse" She said.

"Come to one four nine mark three six." West added and using the joysticks built into his chair Hamilton swung the *Nightfall* around.

As White's fighter closed in on the contact ahead he activated his targeting systems and began to acquire a weapons lock. Then he noticed something odd.

"Anyone else seeing this return?" he asked, "It looks too small for a warbird. It looks more like a – oh no. Break off!" and he turned his fighter sharply just before the Reman probe suddenly decloaked and emitted a massive burst of energy that propelled tachyons all around it.

"Snowman I'm reading more of them." One of the other pilots signalled and sure enough in rapid succession another eight Reman probes appeared and produced massive bursts of tachyon particles. Taken together these produced an instant tachyon field that drowned out the relatively faint beams that made up the tachyons detection grid.

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* alarms sounded.

"What's happening?" Edwards demanded.

"The tachyon detection grid has been disabled captain." T'Lan reported, "Massive tachyon bursts have blocked the signals."

"Snowman," Edwards signalled, activating the communications system built into his chair, "Photon torpedoes. Low yield, high spread. The Reman warbird should be—"

"No use captain." White interrupted, "The tachyon bursts came from cloaked probes, not the warbird itself. We're blind out here."

"Dead stop." Edwards ordered, "Don't get us too far away from the Romulans." Then returning to the ship-to-ship communications he added, "Snowman, have your squadron hold between our probes and the location where the Reman ones put out those tachyon bursts. The warbird may come that way and it may just pick up enough tachyons for you to be able to read it."

"Copy that *Nightfall*." white replied, "Holding position. Snowman out."

Shintar leant back in his chair and smiled as he saw the sudden manoeuvring by the Federation ships.

Clearly his plan had been effective. The fighter squadron had moved to intercept the probes just as he had expected and now their entire force was sat waiting for him to do whatever he had planned next. Shintar did not intend to make them wait.

"Take us in." he ordered, "One quarter impulse. Direct course, not the circular one used by the probes. I don't want us anywhere near those fighters."

"Course laid in my lord." The helmsman replied and the warbird began to accelerate.

"Isn't there anything that can be done about the interference?" Nayal asked from the chair beside Edwards' and opposite Carr.

Edwards looked at T'Lan.

"Nothing captain." She replied, "The tachyons will disperse naturally but it will take time."

"How much time?" Carr asked.

"Twenty two minutes." T'Lan replied.

"The Remans won't wait for that to happen. They'll strike while they know we're blind." Edwards said, "So we need to find an alternative way of detecting a cloaked ship until then."

"What about the lidar captain?" T'Lan suggested.

"Lidar?" Noyal commented, "A primitive system like that will never penetrate a cloak. Not even one of the obsolete types used on some of our transports."

"You've not seen our lidar." Carr replied and she looked at T'Lan.

"Instead of emitted pulses of laser energy in all directions at once we can emit a focused unidirectional beam." The Vulcan explained, "Should this beam be subjected to any form of interference then that will reflect back down to the emitter and be detectable. Even the best cloaking device will cause enough disruption for us to detect because of the vibration of its hull from internal workings."

"So then we can fire on the warbird while it's still cloaked and unshielded?" West asked, looking around from ops.

"Precisely." T'Lan answered her.

"Err, slight problem." Cole said, "We'll have a bearing but no range so we won't be able to lock a torpedo onto the Reman ship and if we transfer power to phasers they'll notice."

"So that just leaves the accelerators then." Edwards said, "Against an unshielded target."

"Which are fixed pointing forwards." Cole said, "So unless the Remans are kind enough to fly at us from that direction-

"Mister Hamilton use thrusters to rotate the ship." Edwards interrupted, "Mister Cole transfer control of the accelerator cannons to helm."

"I get it." Carr said with a grin, "It looks like we're turning on the spot to try and get the warbird in a better sensor arc when we're really lining up the accelerator cannons."

"Exactly." Edwards replied, "T'Lan please let Lieutenant Hamilton know what direction to point the ship in."

"Yes captain." T'Lan said, "No contact yet."

"Be patient." Edwards said, "They're on their way. I know they are."

"What is that Federation ship doing now?" Shintar asked as he watched the *Nightfall* slowly rotating. Then he leant forwards and added, "What is their status?"

"Their shields are raised my lord and weapons are powered. But so far there is no build up to fire."

"Of course not." Shintar said, "They won't fire blind. Take us in. Load all torpedo tubes and prepare to drop the cloak on my command."

The warbird advanced, making its way towards the *Nightfall* as the Starfleet heavy cruiser continued to slowly spin on the spot. On the bridge the crew waited silently, anxious to see whether they would detect the Reman warbird before it struck. If their opponent struck first then their only hope was that their shields would be strong enough to protect them and since the Remans would likely scan the *Nightfall* to determine where its shields were weakest this was unlikely.

"How close do they have to get?" West asked quietly, glancing at T'Lan.

"Detection is limited by the speed of light." T'Lan replied, "So realistically we are unlikely to get a positive fix at anything over a quarter of a million kilometres."

"Unless they're headed right for us." Hamilton added and he grinned at West nervously.

"Just be ready to link the location through to Lieutenant Hamilton's headset." Edwards said.

"I am ready to do just that captain." T'Lan said and then her console chirped, "Target acquired." She said, without a hint of emotion, "Bearing one seven two mark eight five. Transferring data."

"Got it!" Hamilton snapped and still using thrusters only he began to turn the *Nightfall* toward the contact.

"Lord Shintar they are turning towards us."

"They can't know we are here." Shintar replied calmly, "Stay on this heading. We will fire as soon as they present their weakest shield facing to us."

A tiny flashing arrow in his headset display told Hamilton which way he should turn the ship until the arrow became a square as the suspected Reman warbird came into his field of view.

"Got him!" he exclaimed and simultaneously he switched from thrusters to impulse power. The sudden boost in power brought the *Nightfall* around more rapidly and as the ship rotated Hamilton pulled the triggers built

into the joysticks he was using to steer the ship and held them down. There was a muffled pounding as the twin mass accelerators fired continuously and on the main tactical display a stream of glowing projectiles shot out across space. Hamilton had fired before the warbird was positioned directly ahead of the accelerators, but as the *Nightfall* continued to turn each subsequent pair of shots was fired on a slightly different trajectory.

"Incoming projectiles! Collision alert!" a Reman called out from behind Shintar and Shintar himself stared in horror at the projectiles headed towards his ship.

"Drop the cloak!" he bellowed, leaping to his feet, "Get our shields—"

"Too late!" another Reman interrupted and then the first projectiles hit the warbird.

The Reman warbird appeared from behind its cloak as soon as the first projectiles smashed through its upper wing, disrupting its camouflage as well as tearing a great hole in its hull. The next projectiles in the stream struck further along the hull, punching yet more holes in the unshielded vessel and rendering its cloak completely inoperative.

White saw this from his location and immediately activated his communications.

"Snowman to squadron. Warp one. Punch it now!" and the fighters all jumped to warp just long enough to bring them close enough to strafe the warbird.

"Mister Cole, fire all phasers." Edwards ordered, "Target engines and weapons where possible."

"Confirmed. Phasers locked." Cole replied and brilliant red energy beams erupted from the *Nightfall's* phaser arrays, slicing into the already badly damaged Reman vessel.

"Sensors indicate enemy vessel is disabled captain." T'Lan announced.

Carr reached for the intercom.

"Captain Heart, Captain Shry, report." She said.

"Shry here, we're in transporter room one. Ready to go."

"This is Heart. Same in two."

"My men are in three." Cole added from tactical.

"Hail them." Edwards said.

Almost every screen on the bridge of Shintar's ship indicated damage to one system or another and the sound of competing alarms and warnings filled the air. All of a sudden another sound joined this cacophony. It was Captain Edwards' voice.

"Reman captain your ship is disabled." He said sternly, "Surrender your vessel and prepare to be boarded. I repeat, prepare to be boarded. We are willing to take on survivors."

"Lord Shintar, what should we do?" one of the other Remans asked but Shintar just sat in his chair and scowled, "Lord Shintar. The enemy will board us. What shall we do?" the Reman repeated.

"Quite frankly I don't care." Shintar replied and the other Remans on the bridge all turned towards him, confused. As they watched their leader stood up from his chair and took a single step forwards. But before his foot could land on the deck he simply vanished.

"Does Lieutenant Hamilton always write his after action reports in this fashion?" Edwards asked, staring at the computer on his desk and across the desk from him Carr smiled.

"I can't say I've ever read any of them that he wrote before now." She said, "But his paperwork in general is — well it's unique."

"Unique is one way of putting it." Edwards said, "But what worries me more is the complete lack of answers in any of them."

"Answers to what?" Carr asked.

"About why all this happened in the first place. What was the point in reactivating an old Cardassian outpost and breeding a force of Jem'Hadar to protect it? And why drive a fleet of Romulan refugee ships there? Most importantly, who did all this?"

Then the door alarm to Edwards' ready room chimed.

"Come in." he said and as he and Carr looked around Cole entered the room.

"They're here captain." He said and he stood aside to allow West and Nayal to enter.

"I'll leave you to get on with this." Carr said, getting to her feet, "I'll go check in on Nikki."

"Of course." Edwards replied, "We can pick this up later. In fact why don't you join me for dinner? We can take a look at these reports then."

"Sure. Just let me know when." Carr replied, neither of them noticing the brief smile on Cole's face.

Cole followed Carr out of the ready room, leaving Edwards alone with West and Nayal.

"Take a seat ladies." He said and they both walked towards the desk and sat down without speaking.

"Jenna," Edwards said, "you handled yourself well at ops today. How would you like to make it a more permanent post?"

"Really?" West replied.

"Certainly. I've contacted Starfleet and they're happy to reactivate your commission at lieutenant rank. If you're interested you'll be my operations manager."

West grinned.

"Of course I'll do it captain. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Just don't let me down." And then Edwards turned to Nayal, "And as to you." He said, "This ship is being posted to the Romulan border and I think that actually having a Romulan aboard in an advisory capacity could be of benefit. Starfleet agrees with me. Are you interested?"

"Will I have to join Starfleet?" Nayal asked.

"No." Edwards replied, "In fact just the opposite. You'll still be considered a foreign citizen and you'll have no formal rank or authority aboard this ship. But you can still do some good for your people here."

Nayal paused as she considered the offer.

"Very well." She said, "I accept. Its not like I've anywhere else to go anyway."

"Then it's settled." Edwards said with a smile and he stood up and extended a hand, "Welcome to the *USS Nightfall* ladies."

Vayon looked out of the window at the city outside as Shintar suddenly appeared behind him.

"Enjoying the view?" the Reman asked.

"Of course not." Vayon replied, "The beings who engineered the Vorta gave them appalling eyesight. I'd have new eyes fitted but that could give me away."

"So you put up with being half blind instead?" Shintar asked.

"Given the alternatives yes."

"Alternatives to what?" M'Ryl asked as he stepped out of thin air and the other two looked at him and frowned, "What?" the Romulan asked.

"You incompetent fool." Shintar hissed, "All of this because you couldn't sabotage one Federation ship."

Before M'Ryl could reply the three were distracted by the sudden appearance of two more figures, both Klingons in full warrior's garb. Then more began to appear, humans, Romulans, Cardassians and other less common species as well.

"Where is she?" one of the Klingons asked, "And why did she summon us to this filthy place?"

"After being posted to Qo'nos I would have thought that this was a step up." A Vulcan commented.

"Was that a joke?" the Klingon asked.

"Vulcans don't joke." The Vulcan replied.

"Be silent all of you." A voice suddenly called out and the individuals present all looked to where a young human girl had appeared. She looked towards M'Ryl, Shintar and Vayon, "You failed." She said simply.

"I am sorry." Shintar replied, "But it wasn't my fault. Starfleet intervened. We-"

"I know what happened." The child interrupted, "The end result is still that you failed. All three of you." Then she began to look around the room, "Now can anyone tell me how much Starfleet knows?" the others present began to look at one another, but no one spoke, "So the answer's no then." She said.

"We still haven't been able to penetrate Starfleet security." A human said, "We risk exposing ourselves."

"That was what the program on Tieran Three was supposed to correct." The girl said, "Now that lies in ruins." And she paused and drew in breath, "Find a way. Starfleet is too much of a threat and it must be neutralised. What was once ours must be ours again."

And then she disappeared again.