

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



A BEACON IN
THE DARKNESS



BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL

A BEACON IN THE DARKNESS

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

A series of starships suffer unexplained engine failure, leaving them adrift. But the seemingly random failures turn out to be part of a larger pattern the crew of the *USS Nightfall* find themselves facing the very threat that their ship was intended to fight...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
8. Past Loyalties
9. Peace in Our Time
10. Coming of Age
11. Virtual Warfare
12. Echos Of the Distant Past
13. Cold War
14. Revelations
15. The day the Sky Fell
16. Dark Science
17. Ghost in the Machine
18. The Long Way Home
19. Proxy War
20. The Omega Stratagem
21. The Peacemaker
22. To Storm the Gates of Heaven

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Stardate 64472.9 USS Nightfall NX-82008 on patrol near the Romulan Neutral Zone.

Flickering flames provided illumination as the teenage thief studied the door.

"Well Nikki? What do you see?" the large ranger to her side asked as he adjusted his cloak.

"It's just a door Gary, nothing more." Nikki replied.

"Your objective lies beyond this door." The mysterious hooded figure close by stated.

"Yes I know, I tracked it here." The ranger responded. Then he turned to the nearby figure in full plate armour and added, "Perhaps Sir William the White Knight should take the lead.

"Why do you say that?" William White asked, lifting the visor of his helmet to reveal the dark skin of his face.

"Because your enchanted shield protects you against flames no matter how hot." Nikki pointed out.

"Whereas the rest of us would be incinerated if there really is a dragon guarding the treasure." Gary added.

"Okay then, I'll go first." William replied, "Now everyone get behind me and we'll have our new friend the elf mage blow open this door with her magic."

"I fail to see the logic in any of this."

Nikki Carr winced as both MACO Captain Gary Heart and Starfleet Lieutenant Commander William White groaned.

"I thought you said you explained all of this to her." Lieutenant Bradley Hamilton said from across the table, lowering his hood to look at Nikki.

"I did." Nikki replied and she turned towards the Vulcan Lieutenant T'Lan who was playing the role of the spell caster in their game, "T'Lan don't you remember what I told you?"

"Of course I do. That this was a simulation of a scenario requiring individuals of different talents to co-operate for their mutual benefit. But I still see no logic in what I am expected to do. How am I supposed to destroy a solid hardwood door?" T'Lan answered.

Lieutenant Commander White lifted the visor of his helmet again.

"Using a fireball spell." He told her.

"But I have no means of ignition." T'Lan pointed out, "Or fuel for a fire."

"That's why it's called 'magic'." Captain Heart replied.

"T'Lan, trust me. Your character is an elven sorceress. She doesn't need a match to start a fire." Nikki said.

"I see. The flames are spontaneous." T'Lan said and the other gamers all smiled.

"Precisely, now roll the damn dice." Heart said, sliding a small polyhedral die across the table towards her.

"There is one more thing I do not understand." T'Lan said and aside from Nikki the other players in the game all sighed, "Why am I dressed like this?" and she pointed to the very short and very tight dress that appeared to be made of animal hide that she wore.

"Because dressing like our characters helps us get into character." White said, still holding open the visor of his suit of reproduction plate armour.

"Yes, see?" Heart said, picking up the small painted plastic figure that represented T'Lan's character from the map on the table. Like T'Lan herself it wore a short dress and knee high boots of matching animal hide,

"That's you. That's the figure Bradley had for you to use so your costume matches it."

"Though I'd like to know why he has a figure that looks like T'Lan in a ridiculously short dress and boots."

Nikki commented.

"It's just part of a set." Hamilton replied.

"Oh you just tell the computer what you want them to look like when you replicate them." Nikki said.

"I don't see the problem myself." White commented as he and Heart both looked down at T'Lan's exposed legs.

"That's because you're a bunch of perverts." Nikki replied.

"Can we just get on with the game?" Hamilton asked.

"Yes, T'Lan roll the dice." Heart said and the Vulcan woman picked up the die from the table.

"Yellow alert! Senior officers to the bridge, all crew to action stations." A voice suddenly blared out over the ship's intercom.

"What happens now?" T'Lan asked.

"Game stops." Hamilton replied as he stood up and took off his hooded cloak to reveal his Starfleet command division uniform beneath it, "Come on T'Lan, you're our science officer so we better get going."

"But my uniform-" T'Lan responded.

"Will have to wait." White interrupted, "Just be grateful you don't need to find someone with a can opener if you're going to fly a fighter any time soon."

On bridge of the *USS Nightfall*, the ship's second officer Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole currently occupied the central captain's chair while the crew responded to his call to action. From the corner of his eye he saw the turbolift door open at about the same time he heard it and he looked around to see two women exit it. One of them was a human who wore a Starfleet uniform with the same gold collar as his own whereas the other had the distinctive pointed ears of Vulcan-like species and the only thing that prevented her from being mistaken for a Vulcan was the Romulan uniform she wore.

"Trouble from my people commander?" the Romulan asked as she sat in one of the chair beside the captain's.

"Not this time Nayal." Cole replied. Then he frowned as he noticed something amiss about the Starfleet woman who had exited the turbolift with Nayal, "Lieutenant West." He said as she took her place at the operations station, "Forget something?"

"No, I don't think so commander." She replied.

"Earrings." Cole said.

"I'm sorry?" West said.

"Earrings lieutenant." Cole repeated and he placed his hands to his earlobes.

"Oops." West said as she suddenly realised that she was still wearing a pair of large shiny earrings and she began to remove them, "Sorry commander." She added as she took them off and replaced them with a headset featuring an earpiece and compact heads up display. All of the *Nightfall's* seniors officers had such a device that allowed them to access and control systems remotely.

"Just be careful lieutenant." Cole responded, "Those aren't part of the uniform and you can guarantee that the captain will notice."

"Yes sir." West said as she slipped the earrings into a pocket.

Then the turbolift door slid open again and Hamilton and T'Lan stepped out of it, Hamilton wearing his uniform but T'Lan still in the costume she had worn for the game. Seeing this Cole just sighed and placed his head in his hands.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole I apologise for my attire." T'Lan said as she took her place at the science station behind him, "Unfortunately this is how I was dressed when you sounded yellow alert and it seemed more logical to respond to that than change first."

"Think the captain will notice?" West commented with a grin.

Captain Edwards, the *Nightfall's* commanding officer and his first officer Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr entered the turbolift together as they headed for the bridge.

"So what do you think it is this time?" Carr asked as the door slid shut, "Raiders?"

"I doubt it." Edwards replied, "Cole would have sounded a red alert for that." Then he looked upwards as he said, "Bridge." And the turbolift began to move.

"I just wish these things wouldn't happen when I'm trying to sleep." Carr said, "I'm always worried that I'll arrive on the bridge in my slippers by mistake."

"Yes," Edwards agreed just as the turbolift halted, "I was in the same position. Perhaps we should have some rule about not call alerts when we're both in bed."

"I'm sorry captain I'll try and keep that in mind next time." Cole called out as Carr and Edwards realised that the turbolift door was now open. Carr winced and shook her head slowly.

"We really need to check these doors when we speak." She whispered as she and the captain exited the turbolift and Edwards nodded.

"So what's the story commander?" Edwards asked as Cole got up to take his place at tactical and the captain and first officer headed for the two vacant seats in the centre of the bridge.

"Looks like a shipping accident sir." Cole told him, "We've picked up an automated beacon."

"The beacon identifies the ship as the science vessel *USS Ming* captain." T'Lan said as she studied the sensors readouts on her console, "Half a light year distant. I am not detecting an active warp field."

"Any idea why-" Edwards asked, looking at T'Lan and suddenly stopping mid sentence when he saw how she was dressed, "Did regulations concerning uniforms change while I was asleep lieutenant?" he asked as Carr also looked at the Vulcan and frowned.

"I apologise captain." T'Lan replied, "I-"

"Never mind that now T'Lan." Edwards interrupted, "Can you determine why the *Ming's* warp drive isn't active?"

"No captain, only that they are adrift in interstellar space and their distress beacon is running." T'Lan answered.

"Shall we hail Ming captain?" Hamilton suggested from the helm with a hint of a smile.

"Yes I think so." Edwards said and he looked at West, "Lieutenant West, hail the *Ming*." And Hamilton's smile widened.

"Hailing the *Ming* captain." West replied.

"Something amusing you Mister Hamilton?" Edwards asked as he noticed the expression on the helmsman's face.

"No sir." Hamilton answered.

"Good." Edwards said.

"I've got the captain of the *Ming* for you sir." West said.

"On screen lieutenant." Carr said and the main view screen that filled most of the bridge's front wall shifted from showing the space in front of the *Nightfall* to a darkened Starfleet-style bridge with crew moving from one station to another while their captain stared straight ahead.

"*Ming*, this is Captain Edwards of the *USS Nightfall*." Edwards said, "We detected your beacon, what's wrong over there?"

"*Nightfall*, good to hear from someone so quickly captain." The *Ming*'s captain replied, "I'm Captain Grant and I can't explain what's happened exactly but we've lost all main power and we can't get it back on line. Can you assist us?"

"We'll be there in a couple of hours captain." Edwards replied, "Will you be okay for that long?"

"Should be captain." Grant answered, "Whatever's happened doesn't appear to be spreading to any other systems. We'll be right here waiting for you."

"Understood *Ming. Nightfall* out." Edwards said and the view screen shifted back to an image of a starfield. Then Edwards turned his attention to Hamilton, "Lay in an intercept course lieutenant. Warp eight."

"Confirmed captain, steering one one two mark seventeen. Warp eight." Hamilton replied.

"And Lieutenant T'Lan?" Edwards added.

"Yes captain?" she asked in reply.

"Go and put your uniform on before we get there."

"Yes captain."

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When T'Lan reached her quarters she found Nikki Carr sat leaning against the door.

"Sent home to change?" Nikki asked as she got to her feet.

"Yes." T'Lan replied, opening the door to her quarters.

"Been there, done that." Nikki said as she followed T'Lan through the door, "I found it useful to keep spare clothes with me for when school said what I was wearing wasn't suitable."

"Nikki, I am afraid that I am unable to assist you with your schoolwork at this moment." T'Lan said as she headed for her bedroom, "But we have received a request for help from a disabled Starfleet vessel."

"Oh I'm not here about school." Nikki replied, "I came to see what you thought of the game."

"I fail to see the point." T'Lan replied.

"It's to have fun." Nikki told her, "T'Lan if you want my help in attracting a guy then you're going to have to socialise more than you do. You know, actually speak to people and make yourself seem more human?"

"But I am not human." T'Lan said, "I am a Vulcan."

"And that's the problem." Nikki said, "All people see you as is a science officer. You need them to see you as a woman."

"And dressing like this and pretending to fight non-existent creatures to gain theoretical wealth will accomplish this?" T'Lan asked.

"Maybe not. But there are other things we could try."

"Such as?" T'Lan asked as she opened her closet and removed a uniform that she set down on her bed.

"Well for starters you could wear something other than a Starfleet uniform all the time." Nikki said when she noticed that inside the closet were various patterns of Starfleet uniform.

"I have this as well." T'Lan replied, taking out a set of robes marked with Vulcan lettering but Nikki shook her head.

"No." she said, then she frowned as T'Lan opened a drawer and took out what looked like a pair of shorts and a vest top, "That's a lot of exercise gear T'Lan." Nikki said when she noticed that the drawer was filled with such clothing, "How come you need so much when you never wear it?"

"These are not for exercising in." T'Lan said, "These are my undergarments."

"Seriously?" Nikki asked as she picked up what T'Lan had just taken from the drawer and held it against herself, "Sorry T'Lan, but I could walk out of my quarters wearing nothing but these and my mom wouldn't bat an eyelid. I think we should start with changing these." Then she noticed that the costume T'Lan wore would not allow for the underwear to fit beneath it without being noticed, "For example, what are you wearing under that?"

"Nothing." T'Lan answered.

"Okay, maybe that's going too far." Nikki said, "But this is something we're going to have to work on."

The Nova-class *USS Ming* displayed few lights as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp just off its starboard side. Most significantly the vessel's warp nacelles were dark, indicating that they were completely off line. With only limited power available to them the crew of the *Ming* had shut down everything considered non-essential so as to conserve what power remained to them. This included transporters so when an away team consisting of Lieutenant Commanders Carr and Cole along with Lieutenant T'Lan and the *Nightfall's* chief engineer Lieutenant Maximillian beamed over they did so using only their own ship's transporter system. They did however materialise in the *Ming's* transporter room where Captain Grant was waiting for them. As the team from the *Nightfall* appeared on the transporter pads both Grant and the security officer beside him gasped, the guard's hand moving towards his phaser when they saw the *Nightfall's* engineer.

"It's okay." Maximillian said as the officers relaxed, "I get that a lot. Well, maybe not the phaser."

Maximillian was a former Borg drone who had regained his individuality. He had however retained his implants and thus the only indication of his new allegiance was the Starfleet combadge he wore on his chest. "Captain I'm Lieutenant Commander Carr. First officer of the *Nightfall*." Carr said as the away team stepped off the transporter pads, "This our security chief Lieutenant Commander Cole, science officer T'Lan and chief engineer Lieutenant Maximillian."

"Max for short." Maximillian added, "Now I believe that you're having trouble with your engines. Perhaps someone could show me the way?"

"Go with the lieutenant ensign." Grant told the security guard and the ensign nodded nervously.

"This way sir." He said to Max and the Borg followed him from the room.

"So what happened captain?" Carr asked as Grant began to lead the rest of the away team to the bridge.
"We don't know exactly." He answered, "We were four days out of Tersis Two when our warp drive suddenly failed and mains power went with it."
"You were able to get off a distress signal though." Cole commented.
"Actually that's something odd as well." Grant replied, "We didn't activate the beacon, it came on all by itself."
"That is not standard procedure." T'Lan commented, "Have you determined why?"
"No." Grant said, shaking his head, "But quite frankly we've been more preoccupied trying to restore power before we lose life support."
"Logical." T'Lan said.
"Not that it's done us any good." Grant said, "Nothing we try can even tell us why we don't have power. Ah, here we are." And the door to the bridge opened in front of them.

Max knew that most of the engineering staff were staring at him as he inspected the warp core but he ignored them in favour of his task. The warp core itself was still glowing a pale blue, indicating that the magnetic field that held the antimatter inside was still functioning. If that failed then the resulting uncontrolled mixing of matter and antimatter would produce an explosion powerful enough to destroy not only the *Ming*, but probably also the *Nightfall* given its current proximity to the science vessel.
"Were there any indications of a problem prior to the power failing?" Max asked.
"No, none at all." The *Ming*'s chief engineer replied, "One moment we're doing warp six and the next only the inertial dampeners are preventing us all being smeared across bulkheads."
"And what of your impulse drive?" Max asked.
"Shut down simultaneously with the warp drive. We've got thrusters only."
"How did you maintain containment?" Max asked next, looking back at the glowing warp core.
"Didn't need to." His opposite number from the *Ming* told him, "The magnetic fields around all of our antimatter remained active from auxiliary power."
"Unusual." Max said, "May I access your computer?"
"Go ahead." The other engineer said and Max stepped up to the main engineering console and extended one arm with his fist clenched. Two narrow tubes extended from his hand and connected with the console while he operated it with his other hand, "There are no components damaged," He said, "and all fuel valves have sealed to prevent leaks."
"Yeah we kind of noticed that." The *Ming*'s engineer replied, "Nothing's wrong but nothing's working either."
"The problem is a control issue. When did you last update your computer operating system?" Max asked.
"About six months ago. Why?" the *Ming*'s engineer asked in reply.
"Because the main computer is no longer communicating with any of your primary systems. The only way that is possible is if the operating system is corrupted and rejects the connection." Max explained.
"But I can see the computer core from this console." The *Ming*'s engineer protested and he called up a status report from the main computer to demonstrate this.
"Try adjusting the warp plasma flow rate." Max suggested.
"But the warp drive is off line."
"Indeed. But the computer appears unaware of this fact. So try changing the flow rate and see what happens."
The *Ming*'s engineer sighed as he tried Max's suggestion in spite of not thinking it had any merit.
"Oh." He said as he saw the readout from the main computer remain unchanged even though he had just set the plasma flow rate to a ridiculous level.
"Oh indeed." Max said and then he tapped his combadge, "Max to Carr." He said.
"Carr here, go ahead Max." Carr's voice responded.
"Commander I have isolated the problem." Max told her and then he looked at the *Ming*'s engineering staff, "I believe that it is within the capabilities of the *Ming*'s own crew to rectify it."
"Very good Max." Carr replied, "Join us in the transporter room and we'll let them get on with it."

"That didn't take long." Edwards said as Carr, Cole and T'Lan returned to the bridge of the *Nightfall*.
"No, Max figured it out as soon as he plugged himself in to the *Ming*'s systems." Carr replied.
"So how long until we can be on our way?" Edwards asked.
"Purging of the corrupted elements of the *USS Ming*'s operating system should take just under two hours captain." T'Lan answered as she took her station.
"Err captain we may want to be leaving sooner than that." West said.
"What's the problem?" Carr asked.

"Well it's just that I'm picking up another emergency beacon." West replied.

"Another one?" Edwards asked, "Its definitely not an echo of the *Ming's*?"

"No sir, this is no echo." West said, "It's a clear signal coming from about four light years away."

"The signal is not from a Starfleet vessel, but it looks to be of Federation origin." T'Lan added.

"Hail them." Edwards said, "See what their problem is."

"They aren't responding sir." West replied, "In fact I've lost their beacon as well."

"I don't like this." Carr commented.

"Neither do I." Edwards replied, "West are there any signs of other ships in the vicinity?"

"You're thinking that they're under attack?" Nayaal asked.

"They're well inside Federation territory, but a cloaked ship could have slipped across the neutral zone." Edwards replied.

"I detect no other ships near the one that was broadcasting the beacon captain." West said, "In fact I'm having trouble picking up that ship as well."

"It appears that their vessel is coated in refractive plating that is disrupting our sensors captain." T'Lan said.

"Oh this just gets better." Edwards said, "West, get me Captain Grant aboard the *Ming*." And a moment later Grant's face appeared on the main bridge view screen again.

"Yes Captain Edwards?" he asked.

"Captain Grant we've picked up another distress signal. Will you be alright if we head off to investigate it?" Edwards asked.

"Sure. As far as my engineers can tell your engineer was right about what was wrong with our ship. We'll have warp capability in a couple of hours and we'll be on our way. You go deal with this new emergency." Edwards smiled.

"Thanks captain. *Nightfall* out." He said and as the view screen switched back to the exterior view again Edwards looked at Hamilton, "Mister Hamilton lay in a course. Warp nine point five." Then he looked over his shoulder at Cole and T'Lan, "And I want regular updates. There's something not right about this ship and I want to know what it is."

3.

The ship was a freighter of Federation construction, just as T'Lan had said and at first glance it looked no different to any other ship of its class. But even when the *Nightfall* came within visual range of the freighter it did not register clearly on the starship's sensors.

"There." West said as she noticed several antenna arrays along the hull, "I've seen those before."

"Where?" Edwards asked.

"In the maquis." West told him, "They were used to help supply ships evade pursuit."

"I wasn't aware that there were any of your maquis left." Noyal said.

"They were never exactly 'our' maquis." Edwards pointed out.

"How do they function?" Cole asked.

"They set up a low level magnetic field around the ship." West replied, "That field is then used to channel all of the ship's energy emissions in one direction. When a ship equipped with them is being pursued it directs all of its energy output behind it, right at its pursuer."

"That doesn't sound like a very good way of avoiding getting caught." Hamilton said, "Sounds like it would make them easy to follow."

"Right up until they make a sharp turn and all of a sudden the energy trail vanishes from the pursuing ship's sensors." West said, "The great thing about the modification was that the antennas could be retracted to conceal them when a ship visited a legitimate port and deployed again when they got out of sensor range."

"So we've found a smuggler then." Edwards said.

"Looks that way." Carr agreed, "That'll be why they didn't make contact. They don't want us to know they're here. They probably disabled their own beacon."

"But why send a distress signal in the first place?" Hamilton asked.

"They didn't." Cole replied, "Neither did the *Ming*."

"That is correct." T'Lan added, "Captain Grant said that their distress beacon was activated automatically."

"Which is probably what happened here as well." Cole said.

"Do they know we're here?" Edwards asked.

"Unknown captain." T'Lan told him, "I cannot determine which of their systems are active."

"Well let me know if they raise shields or power any weapons they've equipped their ship with." Edwards said.

The *Nightfall* soon reached the mysterious freighter and circled around it on impulse power.

"Unidentified freighter this is the *USS Nightfall*, what is your status?" Edwards asked, his words being broadcast over a range of frequencies but there was no response.

"T'Lan is there anyone alive over there?" Carr asked.

"Yes commander. I am detecting fourteen life signs." T'Lan answered.

"So much for that DIY stealth system." Hamilton commented.

"It doesn't work when you're this close." West replied, "Even at impulse our warp field will be disrupting the field they emit."

"Okay this has gone far enough." Edwards said and he activated the ship-to-ship communications again, "Unidentified vessel stand by to be boarded."

"There's no need for that captain." A voice suddenly replied, though there was no visual communication, "We do not require assistance."

"Firstly I think you do." Edwards told the man, "You did broadcast a call for help after all. Secondly this isn't just about helping you fix your ship. I hereby inform you that we are about to carry out a health and safety inspection."

"On what grounds?" the voice replied.

"On the grounds that your energy emissions are abnormal and I want to verify that your crew is not in danger." Edwards said, "Now prepare to be boarded." And he shut off the channel. Then he turned to Cole, "Commander I want you to take charge of this. Take T'Lan and a security detail and find out what they're hiding."

"What if they aren't hiding anything captain?" T'Lan asked.

"Then from what we already know I'd say that their ship is suffering from the same fault as the *Ming* was. Tell them how to fix it and we'll see them on their way." Edwards told her. Then he looked at Carr, "And we better have Captain's Heart and Shry get some men together just in case there's any trouble." He added.

There were three of the freighter's crew present when the away team materialised, all of who stared at the six Starfleet personnel with disdain.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Cole." Cole announced, "Which of you is in charge?"

"The captain's in charge commander." One of the men from the freighter answered, "And he doesn't have time to chat."

"That doesn't matter." Cole replied and he looked around at the rest of the away team, "Franks, O'Neill, head for the bridge and make sure that everything's in order there. Frost and Cooper do the same in engineering while T'Lan and I check out the hold."

The security guards nodded and began to walk away. But just as Cole took a step the man who had spoken to him blocked his path.

"I'll show you the way." He said and he beckoned Cole and T'Lan to follow him.

Cole kept the man in front of him as he and T'Lan headed for the hold and he paused when the door to the hold opened and the man stepped aside.

"After you." Cole said, nodding towards the doorway.

"Suspicious sort aren't you?" the man said as he went through first and then Cole and T'Lan followed him. The freighter's hold was filled with massive tanks of fluid and Cole and T'Lan found themselves on a walkway that passed above them, spanning the entire length of the hold.

"Well?" Cole asked, looking at T'Lan and she took out her tricorder and began to scan the hold.

"All of the tanks are full." She said, "But I cannot identify the chemical in question." And she began to walk further along the walkway, the crewman stepping out of her way. Cole followed T'Lan, noticing that the walkway did not look to be in very good condition with patches of corrosion all along it.

"Mind yourselves." The crewman said, "This place could do with a bit of maintenance."

Cole peered over the safety rail and below him he saw that the open topped tanks all contained a dark liquid that reflected his image back at him.

"What's in these things?" he asked.

"Fertiliser." The crewman answered, but Cole suspected he was lying.

Focusing on her tricorder T'Lan also approached the edge of the walkway and directed it towards the tank immediately below her, putting her weight on the safety rail.

"This fluid does not match any chemical with which I am familiar." She said, "I will need to see the transport safety notice for-" but before she could finish she finish the safety rail suddenly gave way and she toppled over the edge into the fluid in the tank below.

"T'Lan!" Cole yelled as she hit the surface with a 'splash' and briefly vanished from view, "T'Lan!" he called out again as he ran to where she had fallen in and lay down on the walkway, looking down into the liquid. All of a sudden T'Lan broke the surface again and gasped for breath.

"T'Lan take my hand." Cole said, reaching down towards her. Then as she grabbed hold of Cole's hand he looked towards the crewman and called out to him, "Help me get her back up." He called out, but the crewman remained where he was and Cole had to drag T'Lan back up onto the walkway where she lay coughing.

"What the hell do you think-" Cole began, turning to look at the crewman again. But as he turned he saw the man slip a knife from his sleeve and charge at him, snarling.

Cole reacted quickly; using every bit of his Starfleet unarmed combat training. First he kicked at the man's legs to knock him off his feet and as he came tumbling down towards him Cole rolled aside and delivered a blow to the man's back that knocked the wind from him. As he landed face down on the walkway, now gasping for breath as much as T'Lan was, Cole kicked the knife from his hand and drew his phaser.

"Don't move!" he snapped, aiming the weapon at the man's head. Then he glanced back towards T'Lan, "T'Lan are you okay?" he asked.

"Pow." T'Lan said, forming a fist that she extended vertically as if delivering a punch straight up into the air.

"What?" Cole asked.

"Wham. Pow." T'Lan replied, punching the air with both fists this time, "You know Robert you really are good at that." And then T'Lan first smiled and then began to laugh.

Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to *Nightfall*." He signalled, "Medical emergency, two to beam directly to sickbay."

"So what's wrong with her doctor?" Cole asked Doctor King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer. Both men were stood beside T'Lan who was sat on the edge of one of the sickbay's biobeds, her uniform now replaced by a hospital gown and robe and still smiling at Cole.

"She's been poisoned." King answered.

"I know that, but what by what?" Cole asked.

"Just hold this a moment." King said and he handed a large plastic bowl to Cole, positioning him so that it was held right in front of T'Lan. Then King pressed a hypospray against T'Lan's neck and injected the contents into her. King then stepped back as T'Lan suddenly leant forwards and vomited into the bowl, clutching the side as she continued to be ill. Cole winced and leant his head back, "The chemical is a narcotic." King explained, "One of hundreds of variations on a laboratory-manufactured drug designed to produce feeling of euphoria in human and similar species. It's banned of course; long-term use can cause severe kidney and liver damage. I guess that the amount the lieutenant here got into her system when she fell into it has caused her emotional control to break down."

T'Lan then groaned as she sat up, wiping her chin.

"I don't feel well." She said.

"Is that it?" Cole asked, looking at King.

"Oh no." King replied as he wandered away, "That shot will have taken care of everything in her stomach, but there's still the issue of what's passed into her intestines and was absorbed directly through her skin and mucus membranes. That will already be in her bloodstream and is what's causing her behaviour." Then he returned with a glass of water in one hand and two tablets in another, "Here take these." He told T'Lan but she pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head slowly. King sighed and pointed to the three gold dots on his collar, "Lieutenant these mean that I outrank you and I am ordering you to take these tablets." T'Lan shook her head again.

"So what now?" Cole asked.

"This." King replied and he set down the glass of water and reached out to pinch T'Lan's nostrils shut. The Vulcan's eyes widened as she began to run out air while King just looked at her and smiled, "I can wait longer than you lieutenant." He said and all of a sudden T'Lan gasped. Taking advantage of the opportunity King tossed the tablets into her mouth and then clamped his hand that had been holding her nose shut over her mouth instead. Then he delivered a single blow to her back to make her swallow them, "There we go. Not so bad was it?" he said as he stepped away. Then he looked at Cole, "I suggest you get her back to her quarters." He said.

"Why? Isn't she still under the influence of the drug?" Cole asked.

"Of course she is. It will take hours for all of it to get out of her bloodstream." King replied.

"Then shouldn't she be here?" Cole suggested.

"Three points lieutenant commander." King said, "Firstly I outrank you as well as her, so when I say take her out of here you do it. Secondly there is nothing more I can do to help her. Finally I've just given her a dose of an incredibly strong laxative to clear the drug from her intestines before it can be absorbed into her bloodstream so I don't want her in here when it takes effect. Now go. The King has spoken."

Cole frowned.

"Here you go then doc." He said as he passed the plastic bowl back to King, "Have a bowl of puke." And as King frowned Cole helped T'Lan off the biobed, "Come on T'Lan I'll get you back to your quarters."

Cole supported T'Lan as they left sickbay and turned towards the nearest turbolift. Then as they walked along the corridor they encountered Hamilton coming the other way.

"How is she?" he asked, looking at T'Lan who grinned back at him as she continued to lean on Cole for support.

"Wasted." Cole replied, "King Henry says it could take hours for her to get the drugs out of her system. I'm taking her back to her quarters. What are you doing down here?"

"The captain gave me a break while we're not going anywhere so I thought I'd come down and see how you two were doing. I've been there myself." Hamilton said and Cole frowned.

"When?" he asked.

"Oh not long after I graduated from the academy I was part of a first contact team and the ceremony this species we'd just met insisted that we join in included drinking a disgusting sort of tea that turned out to have serious hallucinogenic properties. I spent the night thinking I was talking to William Shatner." Hamilton explained, leaving Cole little the wiser.

"So what's going on over there on the freighter?" Cole asked.

"Oh haven't you heard? A full platoon of Imperial Guard beamed over and the crew just gave up when they found themselves facing forty armed Andorians." Hamilton replied with a smile, "Captain Shry is sorting them out now and the guy who attacked you with the knife is in the brig with a broken nose. Max is preparing us to take the ship under tow back to Tersis Two."

A broken nose? But he didn't hit the walkway that hard." Cole said.

"Walkway, Andorian boot. What's the difference?" Hamilton replied, "Anyway, I'm off to grab something to eat before I get called back to the bridge. I'll let you get T'Lan to her quarters."

"Thanks." Cole said and they began to head in opposite directions.

“Robert?” T’Lan said as they walked towards the turbolift.
“Yes lieutenant?” Cole replied.
“Who is William Shatner?”
“I’ve no idea.” Cole answered.



"So there's no permanent damage then?" Edwards asked over the intercom from the bridge.

"No captain. T'Lan should be fine in a few hours." King replied, "All I can prescribe for her is rest. But I'm afraid you'll be without your chief science officer until then."

"Don't worry about that doctor." Edwards said, "There are nine other science officers aboard, I'll get one of them to fill in until T'Lan can return to duty."

"Captain I think you'll want to see this." West suddenly called out from ops.

"What is it lieutenant?" Edwards asked.

"You're not picking up another distress signal are you?" Carr asked.

"Not quite." West said, "It looks like I'm picking up two."

"Two?" Noyal exclaimed, "What the hell is going on with starships today?"

"Are either of those ships identifying themselves lieutenant?" Edwards asked.

"Yes sir." West replied, "Both are civilian craft. There's a Federation survey ship at bearing four two mark seven at a distance of two point eight light years and a Klingon freighter at two one six mark four and four light years distance."

"Oh great. In opposite directions." Edwards said.

"That survey ship is back the way we've just come." Carr noted, "Could the *USS Ming* help them?"

"Do we know the status of the Ming?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not picking them up on sensors captain." West said, "It looks like they've repaired their damage and moved on."

"Then its up to us to help both." Edwards said.

"That survey ship will only have a small crew." Carr pointed out, "I could take Max in a runabout to help them. If we can't fix their damage we can use the runabout to evacuate them."

"And in the meantime I'll take the *Nightfall* to help the Klingons." Edwards added.

Smiling, Carr tapped her combadge.

"Max meet me in the hangar." She said, "We're going on a little trip."

"Okay T'Lan open the door." Cole said when they reached her quarters but the Vulcan stared at him and shook her head, "Come on T'Lan, we don't have time for this." He added but T'Lan just shook her head again, "Okay you asked for it." Cole said and looking upwards he spoke loudly and clearly, "Computer, security override on this door. Authorisation Cole delta four four two." And the door slid open.

"Oh that's cheating." T'Lan said, frowning as Cole carried her inside. He took her to the nearby couch and set her down before stepping back.

"Well I'd better get going. I expect the captain will want a report from me." He said but as he turned towards the door T'Lan got up and rushed around him, blocking the doorway.

"Not yet." She said, "You still owe me."

"Owe you what?" Cole asked.

"A kiss." T'Lan said, pressing her lips together and sticking them out as she shut her eyes. Cole frowned.

"What are you talking about?" he asked and T'Lan frowned, opening one eye.

"On Prestus you said you wanted to kiss me for uncovering the existence of the governor's secret bases. After that at Starbase ten you offered me a steak dinner for determining that the prisoner transfer request issued to us was a forgery. I would like the kiss first and then the dinner."

"You're a vegetarian." Cole pointed out, "You said so yourself." And T'Lan pulled a face.

"Have you ever eaten Vulcan food?" she asked.

"No I can't say that."

"Don't." T'Lan interrupted, "It's so boring. Come on Robert, I want that steak dinner and my kiss." Then she stuck out her lips again, but this time before Cole could say or do anything her eyes widened, "Bathroom!" she snapped and she pushed Cole out of the way as she rushed towards her bathroom.

"I guess those laxatives are kicking in then." Cole called out after her, "Anyway, I'll be going now so you just stay here and I'm only a call away if you need anything urgent." Then without waiting for a reply he left T'Lan's quarters.

The *USS Severn* was one of two Danube-class runabouts assigned to the *Nightfall*. Though such craft often fulfilled a similar role to shuttles they were considered small starships in their own right and were capable of operating independently of a mothership or space station. Carr piloted the *Severn* out of the *Nightfall*'s

massive hangar bay and immediately set a course for the Federation survey ship broadcasting the distress signal. When the small ship jumped to warp speed Max turned to Carr.

"At maximum warp I calculate that it will still take us more than three days to cover the distance." He said.

"Yes I'm aware of that Max." Carr replied, "That's why we're in a runabout instead of a regular shuttle. Faster and more legroom."

"And how are we supposed to pass the time while the autopilot flies us there?" Max asked.

"Perhaps we could talk." Carr said, "We used to talk all the time while we were designing the *Nightfall*, but since it's been launched we don't seem to get the chance any more." And Max smiled.

"Well I am curious to hear about your relationship with Captain Edwards." He replied.

"What?" Carr responded.

"Well I remember back at the Beta Antares shipyards when you first discovered that you would not be promoted and given command of the *Nightfall* your reaction was not favourable towards the prospect of serving under him. But now you seem to have overcome that to the point where you are publicly discussing your sleeping arrangements together." Max said.

"There is nothing going on between me and the captain." Carr protested, "What people overheard was perfectly innocent. We were both in bed – I mean in our own beds, not together and we got woken by the alarm. Woken separately. Understand?" Not together."

"Perfectly commander." Max replied, "So I take it that I should find a different subject for conversation then?"

"Yes." Carr said sternly. Then she sighed, "I should have brought a book." She muttered.

Cole had just stepped into the turbolift when he saw T'Lan approaching and he held the door open for her.

"Thank you Lieutenant Commander Cole." She said as she entered after him and then stood facing the door.

"Bridge." Cole said and he looked at T'Lan and smiled, "Feeling better lieutenant?" he asked.

"Much. Thank you." She replied, still not making eye contact.

"I'm glad to hear that." Cole said before the doors to the turbolift opened again to reveal the bridge and T'Lan quickly stepped out and headed for the science station. Cole followed her, looking at the view screen as he fitted his headset on his way to the tactical station immediately behind Captain Edwards.

Like the *USS Ming* and the smuggling vessel the Klingon freighter *Tor'Kal* was adrift when the *USS Nightfall* arrived and it showed only minimal running lights.

"The *Tor'Kal* is hailing us captain." West announced.

"On screen." Edwards said and the screen changed to show a Klingon bridge that was even more dimly lit than was typical of their ships. Central to this was a somewhat aged Klingon

"My name is Captain Edwards." Edwards announced, "We picked up your signal. Can we be of assistance?"

The Klingon looked to be glaring back at Edwards.

"Is there a problem captain – Captain?" Edwards asked.

"Kurvok." The Klingon replied, "Why is there a Romulan pahtak on your bridge captain Edwards?" and it became obvious he was in fact looking at Nayal who was sat beside Edwards in her usual seat.

"Aww, you noticed me. How nice." Nayal responded with a smile and Kurvok snarled, baring his teeth.

"Sublieutenant Nayal acts as an advisor to me Captain Kurvok." Edwards told him.

"An advisor? Is that some fancy Starfleet term for a harlot?" Kurvok asked facetiously, but both Edwards and Nayal ignored the insult.

"Captain we picked up your distress beacon." Edwards said.

"Pah!" Kurvok snapped, "We sent no distress signal. Whoever arranged for my ship to be sabotaged also arranged to make it look as if we were calling for help."

"Well we're here now captain," Edwards said, "and yours is not the only ship that we've received a distress signal in the past couple of days. Sabotage is starting to seem very likely."

"Are you telling me that you know what is wrong with my ship captain?" Kurvok asked, "My engineers can tell me nothing."

"My chief engineer discovered a corruption in the central computer of one of the afflicted ships." Edwards explained, "We can show you how to deal with it if you'll allow us to come aboard."

The Klingon's expression lightened.

"You may come aboard captain." He said, "But leave your harlot where she is." And then he broke the link.

"Well it looks like we're invited aboard." Edwards said.

"I'll put together an away team." Cole said.

"No." Edwards replied, "I'm going myself."

"But captain-" Cole began to protest.

"No arguments commander." Edwards interrupted, "I'll take Captains Heart and Shry with me. Oh and

Lieutenant T'Lan of course. I take it that you can show the Klingons how to deal with the problem lieutenant?"

"Yes captain." T'Lan answered, "Lieutenant Maximillian explained the process to me fully."

"Good." Edwards said as he got to his feet, "Mister Cole, the bridge is yours."

As had been the case with the previous two disabled ships that the *Nightfall* had encountered the *Tor'Kal's* transporters were inoperable and the *Nightfall's* system had to be used in isolation, but still depositing the away team led by Edwards in the Klingons' transporter room where Kurvok waited for them with another of his crew.

"Good afternoon captain." Edwards said, "This is my science officer Lieutenant T'Lan and these two gentlemen are Captains Heart and Shry."

Kurvok looked at the other human and Andorian and frowned.

"What sort of ship has three captains?" he asked.

"Captain Heart is a MACO while Captain Shry is from the Andorian Imperial Guard." Edwards replied, "I am the captain of the *Nightfall*."

"MACOs and Imperial Guard aboard a Starfleet vessel?" Kurvok asked, looking at Heart and Shry.

"Its part of an experimental program to test-" Edwards began but Kurvok was not paying attention to him and the Klingon suddenly let out a laugh and rushed to the two soldiers, wrapping his arms around each in turn.

"Who would think that I would find true warriors out here?" he exclaimed, "Come with me all of you. I have blood wine in my quarters."

"Captain we really ought to see to the repairs." T'Lan said.

"Take the Vulcan woman to the engine room." Kurvok told the other Klingon, "I will be in my quarters toasting these men."

The interior of the *Tor'Kal* was cluttered and as Kurvok led the away team to his quarters they found themselves having to duck to avoid improvised repairs that hung down from the ceiling several times.

"Ah here we are." Kurvok said as he entered he quarters and he placed three cups on the table and poured blood wine into each. Then he waited as his guests each took one of the cups and raised the bottle, "To victories past and future." He said before drinking directly from the bottle, "Now tell me why Terran MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard are aboard a Federation starship. I have heard tales of the military prowess of both."

"Go ahead captain, the *Nightfall* is your ship." Shry commented, smiling at the memory of how Edwards had already tried to explain the situation to Kurvok.

"The *Nightfall* is an experimental vessel Captain Kurvok." Edwards explained, "In addition to several new systems aboard the ship we also have two companies of ground troops. If the program is successful then it will be implemented on other ships by training Starfleet ground combat specialists in their tactics."

"So the Federation finally sees the value in maintaining a strong warrior spirit." Kurvok said excitedly and he took another drink from his bottle. Then he sighed and sat down, "I regret that my ship is not as impressive as yours captain – no, captains. But unfortunately after the cruiser I commanded was lost in the war the *Tor'Kal* was my reward."

Edwards smiled, remembering how every ship he had served on prior to the *Nightfall* had been lost in battle.

"Have you ever been to Tersis Two captain?" he asked then sipped at his drink.

"Tersis Two? Yes, we refuelled there before setting course to deliver our cargo to your colony on Forhaut." Kurvok replied, "Why?"

"Because so far every disabled ship we've encountered over the last couple of days were just there."

Edwards told him and Kurvok frowned.

"So it was sabotage!" he yelled. Then he got back to his feet and carried on, "As I told you earlier, I suspected sabotage from the start but I suspected a rival house, one hoping to undermine my own. But to learn that there is a wider conspiracy? I swear to you now Captain Edwards that you may count on myself, my ship and my crew to help bring those responsible to justice."

At that point Edwards' combadge sounded and T'Lan's voice spoke.

"Captain are you there?" she asked.

"Right here lieutenant." He replied.

"I regret to inform you that I have been unable to repair the damage done to the freighter's computer. The modifications made to it have resulted in further damage. The computer core will require replacing." T'Lan explained.

"Is it something we can replicate?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain. But installation will likely take at least three days."

"Three days?" Kurvok exclaimed when he heard this, "I am already two days overdue."

"What are you shipping?" Heart asked.

"A planetary disruptor bank." Kurvok replied and the three Federation officers glanced at one another nervously. Planetary defence weapons were incredibly destructive and it was rare for them to be traded openly.

"Why are you moving ordnance like that to a Federation colony?" Shry asked.

"Oh do not worry captain, the Klingon Empire is not in the business of supplying weapons to criminals. The colonial government itself has requested it. It seems that being so close to what remains of the Romulan Empire is making your people nervous enough to want to strengthen their defences and we are only too happy to help with such an admirable goal."

"If my chief engineer was available then we could probably shave a day off that figure captain." Edwards said, "But I'm afraid he and my first officer have had to respond to another distress signal."

Heart leant closer to Edwards.

"What about taking them under tow?" he suggested quietly, concerned that the offer could offend the Klingon's sense of honour.

"It's a possibility." Edwards replied before he looked at Kurvok again, "Would you be willing to accept more help from us?" he asked, "Even without my chief engineer we can lock a tractor beam onto your vessel."

Kurvok frowned.

"Reduced to being towed into port." He said, "But what are my men supposed to do while you drag my ship along behind you, helpless?"

"You're welcome to stay aboard the *Nightfall*." Edwards said, "I'm certain we can find quarters for all your men."

"They may not welcome that captain." Kurvok replied, "I've yet to see a Federation ship that serves decent food. Your replicated gagh doesn't even move." Then he looked at Heart and Shry, "But perhaps we can at least see what your warriors are made of. I will inform my crew."

The two military officers looked at one another.

"Does this sound like it's going to hurt to you?" Shry asked and Heart smiled and nodded.

"Oh yes." He said, "It sounds like it's going to hurt a lot."

5.

Using a tractor beam to tow a ship at warp speeds required careful calculation. If the tractor beam was focused improperly then the towed vessel could be subjected to tremendous structural stress that would tear it apart or the energy of the beam could destabilise the warp field allowing both ships to travel at faster than light velocities and bring them both to a sudden halt. Even worse the towed vessel could maintain its speed for a fraction longer than the towing vessel and smash right into it, potentially destroying both.

As chief science officer aboard the *Nightfall* and in the absence of Max it therefore fell to T'Lan to make the calculations for taking the *Tor'Kal* under tow, a task she chose to carry out in her private office rather than on the bridge or in engineering. After each set of calculations she ran a computer simulation to test them and refine her numbers to obtain the optimal configuration and she was watching another simulation run when the door to her office chimed.

"Enter." She called out and the door slid open to reveal Nikki.

"I thought we were meeting up to go through my assignment." Nikki said as she entered the office.

"Unfortunately your schoolwork will have to wait." T'Lan replied, "I am trying to configure our ship's tractor beam to tow the *Tor'Kal* to Forhaut."

"Oh right." Nikki said and then after a short pause she added, "What about the other issue?"

"Other issue?" T'Lan asked.

"Yes. Finding you Mister Right. You know it might help if I knew who it was you were interested in. That way I could try and find out if he likes you as well." Nikki said.

"There is no need to continue with that." T'Lan replied.

"Why not?" Nikki asked.

"My recent behaviour following the events aboard the smuggling vessel was not dignified. I am sure that Lieutenant Commander Cole will have informed many of the crew—"

"Robert's not said anything to anyone as far as I know." Nikki interrupted, "What happened?"

"That is not important." T'Lan replied, "Suffice to say that I doubt any of the male crewmembers will consider me a worthy mate following it."

"Hey look, whatever happened wasn't your fault. No one's going to—" Nikki began before the simulation T'Lan was running ended.

"Simulation complete. Structural failure of target vessel at time index four seventeen twenty-two." The computer's voice announced.

"Regardless, I still have work to do here." T'Lan said.

"May I see?" Nikki asked, walking around T'Lan's desk to stand behind her, "It might help with my math."

"Unlikely." T'Lan said, "The calculations involved are of post graduate degree level rather than high school."

"At least we're pointing in the right direction." Nikki commented, "Does that make it easier?"

T'Lan stared at the display in front of her and she noticed that the current position and bearing of the *Nightfall* had it almost perfectly aligned towards Forhaut.

"Fascinating." She said, "The smuggling vessel and the *Tor'Kal* are almost precisely aligned with Forhaut. If we had not stopped to aide the Klingon vessel we would have travelled straight to the colony. In fact I recall the course that Lieutenant Hamilton laid in from the *USS Ming*'s location to the smuggling vessel and that was along an almost identical bearing as well."

"Hey, before she left my mom said something about the Klingon ship being in the opposite direction to the one she and Max were heading. Does that mean that it's on the same bearing as well?" Nikki asked.

"It does indeed. The four ships and the colony form a line that is too close to being straight to be likely due to random chance." T'Lan said.

"So someone made that happen deliberately?" Nikki said.

"It does appear that way."

"But why would anyone do that? What does someone gain by lining them all up like that?"

"I do not know." T'Lan said, "But I think that it is significant enough that I should inform the captain."

"Okay let's go." Nikki replied.

"You are not an officer aboard this ship Nikki. It is inappropriate for you to be involved any further." T'Lan told her.

"Hey, without me you would never have noticed it." Nikki protested.

"That is incorrect. The pattern would not have remained unnoticed forever."

"But I helped. You can't deny that."

"That is correct. Very well, you may accompany me. But you should not interrupt."

"Deal." Nikki said, "And on the way we can carry on figuring out how to get you a boyfriend."

"Am I a prisoner captain?" Noyal asked Edwards as they sat alone in his ready room, "Am I perhaps to join the crew of the smuggling vessel in your brig?"

"Of course not." Edwards replied, "What I'm saying is that the Klingons know you're aboard and Captain Kurvok's admitted that they aren't happy about it. What I'm suggesting is that you limit your movements to keep away from them."

"Which includes staying out of the crew lounge." Noyal pointed out.

"I'm sure you'll be safe enough in the lounge with other members of the crew. But areas of the ship where you'd be alone may be somewhat riskier. I'm just trying to avoid trouble before it starts."

"Captain Edwards, although my enlistment in my world's military was not under the best of circumstances my training was quite adequate to allow me to defend myself. Particularly if you issue me with a phaser—"

"No. No phasers." Edwards said sternly, "You vaporising Klingons is not going to improve things."

"It will improve the smell." Noyal replied and Edwards frowned.

"Do I look like I'm laughing?" he asked.

"What about my quarters captain? Despite that Klingon captain's insinuation about my role on this ship I sleep alone."

Before Edwards could reply there was a chime from the door leading to the bridge.

"Come." He called out and when the door opened Nikki and T'Lan entered and Noyal smiled.

"Ah cousin, you're just in time." She said, "I need to stay with you while the Klingons are aboard. That's alright with you isn't it?"

"Still not laughing Noyal." Edwards said and then he looked at Nikki and T'Lan, "And I'm afraid I don't have time for your schoolwork Nikki." He said.

"This is not about Nikki's schoolwork captain." T'Lan replied, "Miss Carr has noticed a pattern to the disabled starships that had previously eluded us."

"Really? What is it?" Edwards asked.

"They all form a line." Nikki blurted out before T'Lan could speak.

"That is correct captain." T'Lan added, "The positions of all four disabled vessels form a line. When extended this line heads towards Forhaut."

"Isn't that where the Klingons were headed?" Noyal asked, "Where we'll be taking them and their broken down ship?"

"Yes." Edwards replied and he taped his combadge, "Bridge this is the captain. Have we monitored any unusual activity in the Forhaut system?" he asked.

"No sir. There's very little activity and no abnormal energy emissions on long range sensors." West's voice replied.

"Importing Klingon heavy weapons could be deemed unusual activity." Noyal pointed out.

"Although that is technically correct logic suggests that the *Tor'Kal's* cargo is unrelated to current events."

T'Lan said, "Otherwise the ship would not have been sabotaged before it reached the system."

"Hang on a minute." Edwards said, "The sabotage is affecting more than just the power of the affected vessels. It's automatically triggering the ship's distress beacons."

"That is correct captain." T'Lan agreed, "Both Captain Grant of the *Ming* and Kurvok indicated that they did not initiate their distress beacons while the smuggling crew acted to disable theirs, indicating that they did not intend to call for help either."

"So that means that somebody wanted them all to be calling for help." Edwards said.

"Broadcasting their position." Noyal pointed out.

"Could it be pirates?" Nikki said, "I heard they target disabled ships."

"Not when there's a ship like the *Nightfall* in the area." Edwards replied, "A Starfleet heavy cruiser and its fighter squadron tend to cause outlaws to keep a low profile."

"Plus not many pirates are willing to take on any Klingon vessels." Noyal added. Then she turned to Edwards and added, "Except maybe Remans if there are enough of them."

"Maybe so, but using the beacons to draw in pirates doesn't explain why the ships were so precisely positioned when they suffered system failure." He replied.

"Captain there is one other point that we have not yet considered." T'Lan said.

"What's that lieutenant?" Edwards asked.

"A line has two ends captain." T'Lan replied.

"You mean that we don't know what's at the other end?" Edwards said.

"Precisely captain."

"There's the survey ship." Noyal pointed out.

"Where mom went?" Nikki asked, "Is she going to be okay?"

"There are too many unknowns to provide-" T'Lan began but Edwards interrupted her.

"I'm sure she'll be fine. She's got Max with her as well after all." He said. Then he leant back in his chair, "Hopefully Lieutenant Commander Carr and Max will be able to provide us with more information when they get to that survey ship."

Max was studying the *Severn's* control console when Carr returned to the runabout's cockpit.

"Anything to report?" she asked.

"No commander, just making sure that our prolonged running of the warp drive at full power isn't causing them any damage to the nacelles." He replied.

"Yeah, it would be kind of embarrassing to end up as yet another disabled ship waiting for rescue." Carr said as she sat down beside Max and looked at her own console. Then she frowned, "Max have you taken the subspace antenna off line?" she asked.

"No commander, communications are on line."

"So what's happened to the beacon from the survey ship? I can't find it any more."

"It is conceivable that the ship was able to repair the damage on its own."

"And they didn't let us know?" Carr replied, "The *Nightfall* called ahead to let them know that we were on our way. The very least they ought to have done is tell us that they didn't need our help any more." Then a thought occurred to her, "Max, this ship's been out of action longer than any of the others. Could its systems have failed entirely?"

"You suspect that it no longer has the capability to send subspace signals?" he asked.

"I hope that's all it is." Carr replied, "If they've lost auxiliary power as well then they could be in danger of losing life support."

"There is also the possibility that the crew of the survey vessel have deliberately disabled their beacon." Max pointed out.

"You mean like the smuggling ship?" Carr asked, "Scan to see if they're trying to avoid detection."

"Lieutenant commander, there is an active warp field ahead of us. It appears to be at the last known location of the survey vessel." Max said, looking at the sensors and Carr frowned briefly.

"Maybe they have fixed their power system after all." She commented.

"I don't think so." Max said, "The scale of the warp field is much larger than a vessel the size of the survey ship."

"Perhaps someone else stopped by to help." Carr said, turning her attention to the sensors as well, "Hang on, that doesn't look like a Federation warp signature. Is that a Romulan ship?"

"It is not one that I am familiar with commander." Max said, "In fact it looks like-" then he suddenly stopped speaking and took hold of the flight controls, "Reversing course, maximum warp." He said as the runabout lurched from the sudden manoeuvre and Carr grabbed hold of the arms of her seat to steady herself.

"We need seatbelts on these things." She muttered. Then she looked at Max, "What's going on Max?" she asked him, "What is that ship?"

"A Borg cube." Max replied.



"Vessel detected. Federation Starfleet Danube-class runabout moving away on bearing zero zero four mark two. Prepare to assimilate."

"Can we outrun them?" Carr asked.

"Unlikely commander." Max replied, "Our maximum velocity is warp five. On the other hand without making use of their transwarp drive the Borg are capable of travelling at more than warp nine."

"Well our communications are down." Carr said, "I'd say that the Borg are jamming them."

"That is probable." Max said.

"So what do you suggest if we can't outrun them?" Carr asked.

"There is a star system point four light years ahead of us. If we can make it there before they catch us then perhaps we will be able to evade them long enough to get out of the range of their communication jamming." Max told her.

"So we hide?"

"Exactly. We cannot run and we cannot fight. Hiding is the only option left to us." Max said. Then he flinched and raised one hand to his forehead.

"Max what's wrong?" Carr asked.

"The Borg." He told her, "I can hear them. They're here." And the *Severn* shook violently.

"That was an energy dampener. Shields down to twenty percent." Carr exclaimed, "I'm rotating the frequency. That may limit the drain." And then the runabout was hit again, "Shields are down!" Carr snapped.

"They have us in a tractor beam commander." Max responded.

"Do we have thruster control?" Carr asked.

"Yes. But limited."

"Turn us around. Our only hope now is to try and disable that tractor beam." Carr said as Max rotated the *Severn* within the confines of the Borg tractor beam.

Although she had seen numerous simulations and recordings of Borg vessels during her years in Starfleet, this was the first occasion on which she had been confronted by one for real and she gasped as she saw the immense vessel now in front of the *Severn*. As Max had said the vessel was a gigantic cube that lacked any obvious warp nacelles or any other identifiable features. From a point high up on the cube's front face a pale green tractor beam extended down to latch onto the runabout and it was to here that Carr aimed the *Severn's* phasers. The brilliant red beam struck the cube close to the emission point and there was an explosion from the cube's surface. However, the tractor beam remained active and there was another burst of energy from elsewhere on the cube as the Borg fired their energy dampening weapon again and despite being held in the tractor beam the *Severn* shuddered again and the lights in the cockpit flickered.

"We've lost phasers." Carr said. Then the runabout began to move and there was more light from the cube as an opening appeared directly in front of them.

"They are taking us in." Max said, "They mean to assimilate this vessel."

"Well there's no way that they're assimilating me without a fight." Carr responded and she leapt from her chair and rushed to the back of the cockpit where several hand phasers were stored and she grabbed hold of one. The runabout shuddered again as it came to a halt, docked inside the Borg cube and there was the sound of something being attached to the outside of its hatch.

"Here, take this." Carr said, tossing the phaser to Max and then removing another from the storage rack.

Aware that stun settings had no effect on Borg drones, Carr adjusted the phaser to a lethal level. All of a sudden the runabout's hatch opened and Carr spun around and fired, the phaser blast taking the first drone to step through hatch off its feet. Then she took aim at the next drone and prepared to fire again. As she did this she noticed Max moving to stand beside her, but rather than aiming his own phaser at the Borg coming through the hatchway he extended a fist towards Carr's throat and a pair of tiny tubes emerged and the tips forced their way into her flesh. Carr gasped and her eyes widened. At the same time she dropped her phaser and clamped her hand over the wound just as Max withdrew the tubes. Staggering back away from Max, Carr felt metal bursting out from under her skin around her left eye before she collapsed. Just before she lost consciousness she heard Max's calm voice.

"Resistance is futile."

Edwards sat in his chair and looked at West.

"Any word from Carr and Max yet?" he asked.

"No captain." She answered, "I've tried signalling but they aren't answering us."

"Well tell them that we're about to set off for Forhaut." Edwards said. Then he looked around towards T'Lan at the science station, "We are about to get going aren't we?" he asked her.

"Yes captain. My calculations are complete. We can take the *Tor'Kal* under tow whenever you give the order. Though I do not recommend accelerating directly to a high warp speed." T'Lan replied.

"Hear that Mister Hamilton?" Edwards said, "You'll have to take it nice and slow."

"Understood captain." Hamilton replied.

"Very good. Take us to warp one and have Lieutenant T'Lan advise you before accelerating further. Engage."

Carr's eyes opened suddenly. She found herself standing up in a passageway that was lined with stationary Borg drones, each one plugged into an alcove. She gasped and tried to step away from the alcove she had been placed in, but when she tried to move she felt the jolt of a force field and realised that she was confined.

Turning her head as much as the force field would allow Carr caught sight of herself reflected in a polished metal panel between two of the alcoves opposite her. Here she saw that the Borg had removed her uniform and replaced it with a rubbery garment that covered her torso but left her limbs exposed. Limbs that thankfully were still her own rather than some artificial construct grafted into her flesh. Another thing she was relieved to see was that her skin had not taken on the whitened tones typical of Borg drones. But on the other hand her left eye was now surrounded by a Borg implant that was obviously only the first of many still to come.

"Oh no, not like this." She said to herself and she flexed her limbs again to test the force field. Once more the field shocked her when she touched it. Then her thoughts turned to her daughter and she considered the likelihood that she would never see her again. Or worse still that they would meet again after Carr's assimilation had been completed only for her to make Nikki a part of the collective as well, "Nikki I'm so sorry." She said, feeling tears welling up in her still human eyes. Carr then wondered how long the *Nightfall* would be able to hold out against the Borg cube when it was inevitably caught. The Borg would undoubtedly assimilate the *USS Severn* and from the runabout's databanks they would discover the existence of the Akira-class vessel nearby and move to assimilate it as well. The *Nightfall* had been designed specifically to be able to fight the Borg by exploiting observed weaknesses in their ability to adapt to the weapons deployed against them. But it had been intended to be deployed as part of a squadron of such vessels rather than face a Borg cube with nothing but its own fighter squadron for support.

The *USS Nightfall* would be destroyed. The luckier members of the crew would die with the ship, while those less fortunate would soon be occupying alcoves of their own aboard the cube. Carr's thoughts turned to her friends amongst the crew. Some like Captain Edwards she had known only for the handful of months since the *Nightfall* had been launched whereas others she had known for years while she worked on the design and construction of the ship. Others like Maximillian.

"Max what the hell have you done to me?" she muttered.

"I am sorry lieutenant commander, but it was all I could think of to save you."

Carr looked around again, but there was no sign of Max and it took a few seconds for her to realise that the voice had come to her from inside her head.

"Max?" she whispered.

"Yes commander."

"What's going on? What have you done?" Carr asked, this time directing the question at Max rather than it being a rhetorical to herself.

"I injected you with some of my nanoprobes."

"That's obvious. But why?"

"Because if I had not then the Borg from this cube would have done so and you would have been assimilated." Max answered.

"Would have been? Max, I'm trapped in an alcove surrounded by drones and it seems that you're plugged into my head." Carr hissed.

"The nanoprobes I injected into you were specifically configured to fool the Borg into believing that you were undergoing assimilation. In truth they have merely carried out some minor cosmetic alteration and established a neural link that allows us to keep in contact and from the point of view of the collective mimics your mind being added to it." Max explained to her, "Fortunately I have been able to masquerade as a drone from this ship by partitioning off a part of my neural implants and having these simulate the data feed between a drone and the ship."

"And aside from doing an all too convincing impersonation of a drone, what exactly have you been doing while I've been trapped here?" Carr asked.

"Attempting to sabotage the cube commander. I had hoped that I would be able to replicate the effects of the drone Hugh who's return to individuality spread throughout the crew of my vessel and freed us. But unfortunately I was unsuccessful. It would seem that the collective has adapted to avoid such a repetition. Therefore I have instead turned my attention to our escape."

"Escape? How?"

"The runabout of course. It is the only vessel available to us." Max replied.

"And unless I'm wrong the Borg are planning on assimilating it along with me."

"Correct commander. But as I was able to do with you, I have been able to delay the assimilation of the *USS Severn*. It is still intact and waiting for us in the docking bay. However, before we can make good our escape we need to ensure that the cube will not simply catch us again."

Carr sighed.

"The runabout only does warp five Max. You said yourself that this ship can easily outrun us. How do-" she said, stopping speaking when she saw a pair of drones marching down the passageway towards her. The drones stopped right in front of her alcove and one of them walked up to the control interface between it and the neighbouring one. All of a sudden there was a pulse of green light as the force field was deactivated and the drones took hold of Carr's arms, "Max!" she hissed, "There are-"

"I know." Max interrupted, "I can sense your distress."

"What are they doing?" Carr asked as she was pulled from the alcove and along the passageway."

"They are taking you to an assimilation chamber." Max said, "It appears that the collective has decided to accelerate your assimilation into it."

"Max help me." Carr pleaded, trying to pull away from the drones but their greater strength got the better of her.

"Do not struggle commander. They may suspect that assimilation of any sort has not yet taken place." Max warned her, "You must behave in a passive manner to maintain the deception."

"But what are they going to do to me Max?"

"Never mind commander. Remain calm and do not fight back. Resistance right now really is useless. I know where they are taking you and I will be there soon. I promise."

The two drones took Carr to a room that was filled with human sized platforms, each one fitted with what were obviously restraints to hold a victim immobile while they were assimilated into the collective. They lay Carr down on one of these platforms and positioned her limbs so that the restraints could snap shut around her wrists and ankles. Then with Carr immobilised the two drones turned around and left her there, alone and helpless.

Afraid and with her head the only part of her body she was able to move, Carr looked around. Most of the walls in this room were lined with various types of prosthetic limbs as well as numerous other implants whose function Carr could not even guess at and it dawned on her that the reason the garment she wore did not cover her limbs was because the Borg planned to remove them all and replace them with some of these bulky cybernetics.

At the far end of this place of surgical horror was a Borg alcove that contained another drone and from the looks of the assorted blades built into its arms she guessed that this was the surgeon. To confirm her fears the drone awoke and stepped out of its alcove before it advanced on her.

Panicking and despite Max's warning about remaining inconspicuous Carr began to try and break free of her restraints. The few accounts of assimilation available all agreed on one thing, it was a terrifying and agonising ordeal that involved both physical and mental torture.

"No! Leave me alone!" Carr cried out, but the Borg surgeon ignored her and instead went over to a rack of implants and removed one before carrying it over to the platform to which Carr was strapped. Then as the drone reached out with one hand towards her face a drill extended from its arm and whirred into life.

Carr screamed and closed her eyes as she expected the drill to gouge out one of her eyes at any moment. But the expected agony did not come. Instead just as the Borg was about to plunge the drill into her left eye Max entered the assimilation chamber and charged towards it. Reaching out he grabbed hold of one of the armoured data cables that ran from the back of the Borg's skull and down into its spine and ripped it free.

There was a brief shower of sparks as exposed wires of differing electrical potentials fell free and came into contact while the Borg surgeon shuddered and then collapsed, landing on the floor with a 'crash!'

Carr opened her eyes and looked at where the Borg surgeon had been standing moments earlier. But now she saw only Max, looking back down at her and clutching the cable torn out of the surgeon in his hand as he smiled at her.

"We need to get going." He said, "It will not take long for the collective to realise what I have done and react."
Carr tugged at her restraints.

"Kind of tied up here." She replied.

"I can remedy that." Max said and he approached a nearby control interface that he began to access. The sound that had heralded the sealing of Carr's restraints was repeated as they sprang open and Carr swiftly pulled her limbs away from them and sat up.

"Thanks. Now where's my uniform?" she asked.

"Destroyed I'm afraid." Max told her, "Though given the ambient temperature of Borg vessels I doubt you will require anything more than what you already have."
Carr frowned.

"I'd just feel better fully dressed that's all." She said and Max smiled.

"You are at least wearing more than when you and Captain Edwards-"

"Not funny." Carr interrupted, "Now how about you get us both out of here?"

"Of course commander. If you'd like to follow me."

"Sure. You're the one that knows where the runabout is." Carr said as she climbed off the platform and headed towards Max.

"Actually we aren't going directly to the runabout commander." Max said, walking to the doorway and checking for any signs of Borg activity in the passageway outside, "There's something we need to collect first."

7.

Avoiding the areas of the cube that held large concentrations of drones, Max guided Carr through its passageways until they reached an area filled with machinery that hummed and was covered in glowing green lights.

"Wait here." Max said softly when he noticed a small cluster of Borg drones in alcoves on a ledge overlooking the machinery that interested Max, "And let me know if they move." He added, looking up at the stationary drones. Then he advanced on the machinery.

"So what is this place?" Carr asked as she watched the drones above her.

"An engineering node." Max replied and he reached out to a column that came up to his waist and opened the cover, "And this is a transwarp coil."

"A transwarp coil?" Carr repeated, her eyes widening as she looked away from the drones and at the thick disc that Max removed from inside the column, "Is that compatible with the *Severn's* warp drive?"

"It will function for a time commander. Though I doubt that there will be anything left over for Starfleet to examine afterwards." Max replied.

"I don't suppose that there's time to grab another of those is there?" Carr asked.

Max delayed answering while he reached into the empty transwarp coil mounting with his free hand and Carr looked up again, just in time to see one of the Borg drones look down at Max.

"Max!" she called out, "Hurry!"

"Almost finished commander." He replied and he swiftly withdrew his arm and ran towards Carr before there was an explosion and a jet of fire erupted from the empty transwarp coil mount. Then the nearby drones all stepped from their alcoves, "Time to leave."

"Max, what did you just do?" Carr asked as she followed him back down the passageway, looking nervously over her shoulder for signs of Borg pursuit.

"When a Borg vessel is critically damaged its vital technologies self destruct to prevent their capture." Max explained, "Though the Borg are happy to assimilate the technology of others they do not wish to see the reverse happen. After removing the transwarp coil from its mount I injected nanoprobes to manually trigger the destruct command. This vessel no longer has transwarp capability."

"How long will it take for them to fix it?"

"Several days. The destruction of the coils and core will be complete. Though the cube retains conventional warp capability. Now we must hurry."

Max continued at a brisk pace through the cube, this time leading Carr to the docking bay where the *USS Severn* was still located. The docking bay was large enough to hold the *Nightfall* itself and the runabout that was the only vessel that it held at that time looked tiny in comparison with the amount of room available. Max's claim to have stopped the Borg from dismantling the vessel to assimilate it had been correct and it appeared intact.

"I will need you to monitor the warp drive from the cockpit while I interface this with it." Max said, holding up the transwarp coil and Carr nodded.

Checking one last time for any sign of active drones Carr and Max sprinted across the open space between themselves and the runabout.

"Max! Trouble." Carr snapped when she saw a group of drones step from alcoves in the docking bay wall. Fortunately Borg drones were not known for their speed and rather than run across the docking bay towards the two Starfleet officers they instead lumbered towards them at a walking pace.

"We will reach the *Severn* ahead of them commander." Max responded.

"I glad you know how to run Max." Carr replied as she glanced at the advancing Borg again and saw that she and Max were pulling further ahead of their pursuers.

The *Severn's* hatch was open when Carr and Max reached it and they dashed aboard. As soon as they were through the hatch Max sealed it behind them.

"Commander you must bring the ship's systems on line. I suggest you focus on engines, shields and weapons. We will require them to escape." He said.

"Got it." Carr responded, dashing to one of the piloting stations and activating the console.

The damage inflicted by the Borg's energy draining weapon had thankfully been only temporary, the power having drained from the shields and weapons but the ability to generate that power remaining intact and during the time Carr had been held aboard the cube both the phaser banks and the deflector shields had recharged almost completely. Initially the runabout's engines appeared to be fully functional as well, but then the warp drive status monitor suddenly reported the system off line.

"Max we just lost the warp drive." She called out.

"Unavoidable commander. I need to take it off line while I interface the transwarp coil. We will not need it anyway."

"You better know what you're talking about." Carr said and then she saw that everything needed for the runabout to lift off was now on line and operating as normal, "Hang on, we're taking off." She called out as she fired the *Severn's* thrusters and the runabout rose up off the deck. Then Carr rotated the ship, looking for an obvious avenue of escape. But the docking bay doors remained sealed and she had no means of opening them using the runabout's console as she could with the *Nightfall's* hangar doors when needed, "Err Max, there's no where to go." She said.

"Do we have shields commander?" Max asked from the runabout's midsection where he was still working.

"Yes." Carr answered.

"Then raise them." Max told her, "Now what about torpedoes?"

"Fully loaded. Wait, torpedoes?"

"Yes. Commander we cannot open the docking bay doors so you need to launch a spread of photon torpedoes to create an opening."

"Are you insane? Do you know what the detonation of torpedoes will do to us?" Carr yelled.

"Given the yield of the micro torpedoes that this vessel is equipped and the strength of our shields, very little. Though I recommend transferring impulse power directly to the structural integrity fields until after the detonation." Max said and Carr sighed.

"Well it beats assimilation." She muttered and she turned the *Severn* so that it faced the outer door of the cube's docking bay and armed its torpedoes. Immediately an alarm sounded as the runabout's targeting system detected that the vessel was confined within the Borg cube, but Carr ignored this as she locked the system onto the massive outer door, "You better be right about this Max." she said softly before she fired a salvo of micro torpedoes.

The torpedoes appeared to Carr brilliant white pulses of light that shot out of the runabout's nose and towards the door, spreading apart to inflict damage over the widest possible area. Then came the first detonation and even though the *Severn's* viewports automatically reacted to prevent the light from blinding her, Carr still flinched. The shockwave of the blast reached the runabout soon enough after the light that Carr could not tell the difference as it was shaken about. Below the runabout the Borg drones that had come after Carr and Max had no protection against the blast. Even their built in personal shield generators were unable to protect them against such a powerful release of energy and they were vaporised in a moment. But that was not all to rock the ship. Now open to space and before the Borg could erect a force field to contain it, the atmosphere in the docking bay was blown out into space and the hovering *USS Severn* was hurled along with it.

"Okay we're out." Carr exclaimed as she once again saw stars outside the ship, "Now what?"

"Take evasive action quickly. The Borg will attempt to recapture us." Max responded and Carr accelerated, transferring the power from the impulse drive away from the structural integrity field and back to propulsion just in time to prevent the Borg tractor beam from locking onto them.

"Ha! Missed." She said with a smile as she continued to pilot the runabout on a random course. Then the ship lurched again and Carr recognised the impact of a pulse from the Borg's energy draining weapon, "Max!" she called out.

"All done." Max replied as he hurried back into the cockpit and sat down beside her.

"Okay, so now what?" Carr asked.

"Now I divert every bit of spare power from the engines into the transwarp coil and use the deflector array to open a transwarp aperture." Max replied and as he worked the lights in the cockpit grew dim.

Carr stared out through the viewport in front of her and watched in amazement as there was a bright flash of pale blue light that expanded to form a swirling vortex right in the *Severn's* path. Then the runabout lurched again, only this time from extreme acceleration as it jumped to transwarp speed moments before another blast from the Borg cube passed through the space where it had just been.

"Enemy vessel fleeing towards grid seven six four along marked path. Transwarp drive inoperable. Pursue at warp nine point nine."

"So we've lost them then? Carr asked, looking at Max.

"Yes commander. The cube cannot follow us at transwarp and cannot catch us at conventional warp speed before we rendezvous with the *Nightfall*."

"How far away is the *Nightfall*?"

"There is a message in our communication buffer informing us that the ship is proceeding to the Forhaut system with the Klingon vessel under tow." Max said and he frowned.

"What's wrong Max?" Carr asked when she saw this.

"The message also indicates that all of the disabled vessels have been arranged in a line that extends directly towards Forhaut."

"But why?" Carr responded.

"I can think of only one explanation commander." Max answered, "But I doubt that you will like it."

"Try me." Carr told him.

"Whoever is responsible for disabling the ships is trying to lure the Borg to Forhaut." He replied.

"But there's a Federation colony there. One that can't possibly hold out against a Borg cube. They'll be assimilated." Carr said.

"Precisely commander. Also as you have already realised the *USS Nightfall* is also unlikely to defeat it alone." Max said.

"How did you know that? I didn't tell you that." Carr pointed out.

"No, but the neural transceiver I established in your head allowed me to hear your thoughts."

"My thoughts? What, all of them?"

"Yes commander."

"So you heard-"

"I heard your fears for your daughter and your feelings towards the rest of the crew. Particularly for-"

"Quit it Max." Carr interrupted, "I want that transceiver out of my head and you are never to mention what you heard to anyone, ever. Understood? That's an order."

"Understood commander." Max replied, "I shall deactivate the device immediately. It will break down and be purged from your system naturally."

"Good. Now I'm going to go and replicate a new uniform before we get back to the *Nightfall*." Carr said, getting up out of her seat.

"I am afraid that won't be possible commander." Max said.

"Why not?"

"The replicators require a large amount of power and right now that power is needed to keep us travelling at transwarp speed. If we drop out of it then the coil will fuse and we will be unable to return to it, slowing us down enough for the Borg to catch up with us."

"Oh great." Carr said, sitting back down, "Last time I had to go back in just a hotel robe and now it's a Borg swimsuit. I'm never going to live this down."

The *Nightfall* had built up its speed slowly and then decelerated again just as slowly so that it entered the Forhaut system at sub light speed, as was normal when entering any star system. On the *Nightfall's* bridge T'Lan calculated the best course for the Forhaut colony itself based on the current positions of all the planetary bodies in the system and relayed them to Hamilton. But as he carefully steered the ship along the course that offered the minimum amount of risk West noticed an unusual energy spike on the sensors.

"Captain I'm monitoring a build up of neutrinos ahead of us." She said.

"Neutrinos? What is it?" Edwards asked.

"It's a sort of subatomic particle. But that's not important right now." Hamilton muttered. Edwards frowned briefly, but chose not to make an issue of it. Instead the captain looked towards T'Lan.

"Lieutenant? Can you identify the cause before Mister Hamilton makes any more potentially career ending jokes?"

"Scanning captain." T'Lan replied. Then after a moment's delay while she studied the sensor readouts she looked up, "Captain a transwarp aperture is forming six hundred thousand kilometres ahead of us."

"Borg." Cole exclaimed.

"Red alert!" Edwards snapped, "Shields up, arm all weapons. Lieutenant West cut the *Tor'Kal* free and alert the hangar to prepare to scramble all fighters."

The sudden change to red alert triggered a rapid response throughout the ship. On the lower decks where the companies of MACOs and Imperial Guard were quartered, all of them donned armour and reported to their armouries to be issued weapons while in the *Nightfall's* hangar bays the technical crews disconnected power and data tethers from the two launch ready fighters at the same time as Lieutenant Commander White and the rest of his pilots rushed to get into their own ships.

On the other hand the Klingon crew from the *Tor'Kal* were left with nowhere to go and no idea of what was happening. Frustrated with this, Captain Kurvok instead headed for the bridge.

"Captain Edwards!" he snapped out as he stepped from the turbolift, "Why is your ship preparing for battle?"

"We've got a transwarp aperture forming close by." Edwards replied, "Feel free to take a seat if you want, just don't touch anything." And he indicated the empty seat where Carr typically sat. Kurvok strode to the chair and sat down.

"A wise move captain." He said, "To have a true warrior to advise you rather than just that cowardly Romulan witch." And from the seat on the other side of Edwards Nayal smiled at the Klingon.

"Captain the transwarp aperture is opening." T'Lan announced.

"On screen. Let's see what we're dealing with here." Edwards responded and the view screen changed to show the energy vortex of the aperture as it expanded, "Ready phasers." He added but then rather than the Borg vessel that the *Nightfall's* crew expected to see emerging from the aperture, the *USS Severn* shot out of it before the vortex collapsed behind it.

"That's our runabout." Edwards exclaimed.

"They're hailing us captain. Audio only." West said.

"Put them on." Edwards told her.

"*Nightfall* this is the *Severn*." Max's voice said.

"Go ahead *Severn*." Edwards replied, "Start by explaining how come you seem to have acquired Borg propulsion technology."

"Captain there's a Borg cube heading this way." Max said, "Lieutenant Commander Carr and I were able to escape it. But we were unable to destroy it."

"Are you both okay?" Edwards asked.

"I am unharmed captain. Though the commander has had something of a shock."

"Grace?" Edwards said.

"I'm still here." Carr responded, "Just about. But you better let Doctor King know that I'll need him."

"Captain, are we clear to dock?" Max then asked and Edwards looked at West who nodded in return.

"The doors are open lieutenant. Bring her in and I'll meet you in the hangar."

B.

Edwards and King ran from the turbolift and into the hangar just as the *Severn* was coming to a halt, guided by one of the deck marshals. Then Edwards spotted Nikki running into the hangar as well.

"Nikki!" he called out as he and the doctor rushed towards her, "You shouldn't be here."

"But mom's aboard that runabout. I heard she was hurt." Nikki protested.

"I'm sure she'll be just fine." Edwards said, "I spoke to her myself."

"But I was told she asked for a doctor." Nikki replied.

"We don't know why yet." King pointed out. Then he noticed that the *Severn's* hatch was opening, "But we're about to find out." He said and then the three of them headed for the runabout just as Max stepped out of it.

"Captain." He called out, "We need to prepare for the arrival of the Borg cube."

"Yes, I'm aware of that." Edwards replied just before Carr followed Max from the runabout.

"Mom! What happened to you?" Nikki exclaimed and she ran forwards to embrace her mother.

"Hey I'm fine." Carr replied. Then she glared at Max, "I just got a nasty shock that's all."

"How far did the assimilation process go?" King asked rushing forwards to examine the implant around her eye.

"It was never started." Max replied.

"Yeah, this is his doing." Carr added, pointing to the implant, "Though I'd still like you to remove it doctor."

"There is no need for Doctor King's services." Max said and he reached out towards Carr's face, "It is purely cosmetic." And then he took hold of the implant and there was a tearing sound as he pulled it from her skin.

"Ow!" Carr cried out, clamping both hands over her eye, "Max warn me when you're going to do stuff like that." Then she looked at Edwards, "Captain, Max is right. We need to get ready for that cube. Starfleet has to know about it."

Edwards nodded.

"Okay I'll inform Starfleet that we've an inbound cube and then call all the senior officers together to plan our response. Be in the briefing room in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes? But captain we really shouldn't waste any time." Carr said.

"I know. But I just thought you might like to change first." Edwards replied and Carr remembered what she was wearing.

"Oh yeah. Thank you captain." She said and then as she and Nikki walked away Edwards noticed King staring at Carr.

"She does wear that well though." King whispered to Edwards, "I see what you see in her."

Edwards frowned.

"Oh don't you start as well." He replied.

The heads of all six of the *Nightfall's* primary departments were gathered together along with Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander White when Carr entered the briefing room. In addition to the Starfleet personnel both Captains Heart and Shry had been included as well as Noyal and on this occasion Captain Kurvok as well.

"Ah commander. You're just in time." Edwards said as she sat down beside him, "Now perhaps you and Max can tell the rest of us exactly what we're dealing with."

"A Borg cube." Hamilton muttered.

"Mister Hamilton is correct." Max said, "Captain, we are dealing with a standard Borg cube. The data that I was able to access indicates that it is carrying ninety-eight thousand five hundred and seventy-six drones. That assumes that all of the drones Lieutenant Commander Carr and I encountered were engaged so the exact figure may be slightly higher."

"What about its weapons?" Cole asked.

"The standard load out." Max answered, "I was unsuccessful at disabling any of them."

"And how soon will it get here?" White asked, "I notice that it didn't come flying out of the same transwarp conduit you came through."

"Max was able to take out the cube's transwarp drive captain." Carr said.

"I estimate that we have four days before the cube reaches this system captain." Max added and Edwards frowned.

"That's still not long." he said, "I doubt that we can get any reinforcements from Starfleet by then."

"I thought your ship had been designed to fight the Borg captain." Kurvok said, "Are you telling me that you can't?"

"It was designed to be part of a fleet that could exploit known weaknesses in the Borg." Edwards explained, "One on one we're still outgunned against a cube."

"Then this system is going to be assimilated." Nayal said, "Perhaps we should consider a withdrawal."

"No. There's a Federation colony here and I'm not abandoning it." Edwards said.

"Actually I was thinking that maybe we could evacuate the colony as well." Nayal replied.

"And what of the other worlds in the cube's path?" T'Lan asked, "If the Borg continue on their current path they will reach the Dinasia and Iccobar systems within a few days and from there can press on into several other Federation systems."

"Okay we need to know exactly where we stand." Edwards said and he looked at T'Lan and West, "I want you two to liaise with Starfleet. Find out exactly what we've got nearby and how soon it can get here. In addition I want you to launch a series of class nine probes towards the Borg cube. I want to know exactly where it is at all times. Cole, Hamilton, White, I need you to get the *Nightfall* ready for battle. Run whatever drills you need to in order to make sure that our people know what they're doing." Then he looked at Heart and Shry, "The same goes for you two. We'll probably need to deploy both your companies en masse. Make sure your men know what they're doing."

"You won't find us lacking captain." Shry replied, "We've been training for this for several years."

"Thank you." Edwards said and then he looked at Kurvok, "Captain can I count on you and your crew?" and the Klingon snarled.

"Klingons do not run at the first sign of battle captain." He said, looking at Nayal as he spoke, "You have me and my men. Use us wisely."

"Good." Edwards replied, "Because I'd like your men to join with our ground troops in preparing to fight the Borg face to face. I expect that they'll try to board this ship and I want every available body that can wield a weapon on hand to deal with them."

"What threat will Borg drones present to the ship if they get aboard?" Nayal asked, "Do you have a plan to stop them disabling us from within?"

"They can't do that." Carr told her, "Right Max?"

"Correct commander." Max answered, "The nanite hive that runs throughout the ship will prevent the Borg from assimilating it. Quite simply there are far more nanites protecting our systems than a force of Borg will be able to inject."

"Can we do something similar to protect ourselves?" King asked.

"Unfortunately not commander." Max said, "The amount of nanites that would have to be injected into someone to guarantee that any nanoprobe that a Borg drone injected were neutralised before assimilation could take place would likely prove toxic to the subject."

"Doctor you need to prepare sickbay for the wounded and don't forget that you could be a target for the Borg as well." Edwards said.

"I notice that you haven't assigned me a task yet captain." Max commented, "Do you want me to make sure that engineering is ready?"

"No." Edwards replied, "Max I want you, Lieutenant Commander Carr and Captain Kurvok to beam down to Forhaut with me to meet with the planetary government. If they didn't notice the transwarp aperture you came through then they'll sure as hell notice when the Borg start sending drones down to assimilate the colony. I'm hoping that the disruptor Kurvok was delivering to them isn't the only thing that they've added to their defences. They may have something we can make use of."

"Captain is that wise?" Max asked, "I have noticed that my appearance can be unsettling to those not used to it."

"I'm positively counting on it." Edwards told him, "If the planetary governor is unsettled by you then the prospect of almost a hundred thousand Borg turning up should terrify him enough to listen to us and give us whatever we want."

When the Starfleet officers and Kurvok were shown into the planetary governor's office she was not alone.

"I hope you don't mind." She said as she shook hands with Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr, "But when your ship informed me of the general point of this meeting I felt there were others who ought to be involved as well."

"Of course not Governor Thompson." Edwards answered.

Then the governor paused and stared wide eyed at Max as he entered the office behind his superiors.

"I get that a lot." He said, smiling and he held out his hand in greeting. Nervously the governor accepted it. Behind Max, Kurvok entered and just grinned before the governor headed to her desk to introduce the other she had invited to the meeting.

"This is Colonel Vresk." She began, indicating a Tellerite in an obviously military uniform, "The chief of the

colonial defence force. Then there is Howard Cooper my director of transport and Jack Marcus my policing minister." The governor went on, pointing at the other two men one after another before she sat down, "Now perhaps if you'd like to sit down you could explain to us just how much trouble we're in."

Carr, Edwards and Kurvok sat down and were promptly offered drinks by the governor's aides. Both Starfleet officers accepted while Kurvok just waved them away. When it came to Max however, the former Borg drone preferred to remain standing and the governor's aides appeared concerned about approaching him.

"I have no need of refreshment." He said, sensing their discomfort.

"Governor, there's a Borg cube approaching this system." Edwards said, "Someone appears to have lured it this way."

"When will Starfleet's relief force arrive?" Vresk asked and Carr and Edwards glanced at one another briefly.

"Ah, we don't have that information just yet colonel." Carr said, "For now it looks as if—"

"For now the *USS Nightfall* will protect Forhaut." Edwards interrupted, "Along with your own forces of course."

"Captain," Vresk said, "we have very few forces with which to defend ourselves. Despite its proximity to the Romulan Neutral Zone Starfleet declare this a 'safe' sector and gave us only two orbital weapons platforms for protection."

"Yes but you have been adding to that haven't you?" Edwards replied and then he looked at Governor Thompson, "Governor, I need a full inventory of what you have to fight the Borg with."

"Colonel?" the governor said, turning her attention to the Tellerite.

"In addition to the defence platforms Starfleet provided we have eight sentry pods and we are in the process of acquiring a surface based disruptor system from the Klingons. They seem more interested in helping us defend ourselves than the Federation has been." Vresk said and Kurvok smiled.

"Your disruptor is aboard my ship." he said, "My men can show you how to assemble it."

"What about ground forces?" Carr asked, "The Borg will beam down large numbers of drones to secure people and technology for assimilation."

"I have just under a thousand men equipped to Starfleet standard." Vresk answered, "Plus I can call upon another five thousand reservists that we were able to arm with phasers obtained from the Bajorans."

"So six thousand with small arms only then?" Edwards asked.

"Correct." Vresk replied, "We have a limited number of hoppers for transport."

"Captain that will be next to useless against a Borg assault." Max said, "The drones will adapt to phaser fire relatively quickly and without support from armour or the air the troops will be forced to fight hand to hand."

"My men can help with that captain." Kurvok said, "We will show them how to fight with blade and fist."

"Against odds of approximately fifteen to one?" Max asked.

"We will die with honour." Kurvok replied, "It will be glorious."

"It will be pointless." Jack Marcus said, "Governor we need reinforcements from Starfleet."

"It's Starfleet that abandoned us out here." Howard Cooper commented.

"Gentlemen please." The governor said, holding up a hand for quiet, "This gets us nowhere." And she looked at Edwards, "Captain what do you recommend?" she asked.

"For now I don't have an exact plan governor." Edwards replied, "But I would just like to confirm a few things. Firstly I understand that all but a handful of your people live here in this city?"

"That's correct captain. About half a million people in the city and fewer than twenty thousand spread out over the rest of the continent." Governor Thompson answered.

"And the planet's secondary continent is entirely uninhabited?" Edwards asked next.

"There's nothing there we need or can export." Cooper said.

"Plus it's largely volcanic." Vresk added, "Not much of a holiday spot."

Then Edwards looked at Kurvok.

"How long will it take to set up that disruptor?" he asked the Klingon captain.

"A day." Kurvok replied, "It was designed for rapid deployment in newly captured territory."

"That's good." Edwards said and he turned back to Thompson, "Governor, I intend to try and defeat the Borg in space. Before they can even land a single drone on your planet. But just in case they get past us I would try to try and lure them away from the city. I need you to organise an evacuation. Get your citizens out into the countryside and spread them out. Don't give the Borg a target."

"You think that will slow them down enough for more Starfleet ships to arrive?" Vresk asked, sounding uncertain.

"It's a possibility." Edwards replied, "But in the mean time I'm going to need control of your defence platforms and sentry pods."

"But that—" Vresk began before Thompson interrupted him.

"You shall have them captain." She said, "And my people will make the preparations for the evacuation."

"You are telling them to run." Kurvok said when they returned to the *Nightfall*.

"Yes I am." Edwards replied as he stepped off the transporter pad, "They can't fight the Borg so I'm trying to save as many as I can."

"Captain Edwards' strategy is sound." Max added, "The collective will view hunting down small groups or individuals as a waste of effort when there are more tempting targets elsewhere."

"Just what will this more tempting target be?" Carr asked, "Is it anything to do with what you were asking about the secondary continent?"

"Yes it does." Edwards replied, "Though I may be asking a lot of you Captain Kurvok." He added, looking at the Klingon, "In the mean time I want to find out what the others have for us."

3.

"We're as ready as we'll ever be captain." Cole said to Edwards when the ship's senior officers were once again gathered together in the briefing room, "All systems are on line and ready to go."

"I've got four fighters on alert instead of the usual two." White added. The fighter pilot had abandoned the Starfleet duty uniform he normally wore to briefings for his flight suit so that he could be ready for launch as quickly as possible, "And the other fighters are fully prepped. The rest of us can be out in about five minutes."

"And our men are fully armed and ready to go as well." Heart added, glancing at Shry as he gave the status for the Andorian as well.

"You really think that the primitive weapons your warriors carry will be effective against the Borg?" Kurvok asked when he heard this. The MACO and Imperial Guard companies aboard the *USS Nightfall* did not carry the phaser rifles that were typical of their organisations. Instead their primary weapon was an old fashion assault rifle firing physical projectiles, though most also mounted a phaser weapon clamped beneath the barrel.

"Not as primitive as your bat'leths." Nayal commented and Kurvok snarled at her.

"Be careful Romulan." He said, "Or Starfleet protection or not, you may just end up with a bat'leth through your throat."

"The point is that the Borg don't adapt to physical impacts like they do to energy blasts." Shry said, "Those primitive assault rifles should give us the edge over their drones."

"The same goes for the *Nightfall* itself." Cole added, "I'm sure you noticed the mass accelerators built into our secondary hull arms. We'll be using them against the cube."

"If you have a weapon that can be used against the Borg then why are we sat here waiting instead of out there hunting them?" Kurvok demanded.

"Because we can't use them at warp." Hamilton explained, "The magnetic field around the projectiles disrupts the warp field and collapses it."

"Unfortunately we have to wait for the Borg to come to us." Edwards added, "Though fortunately the Borg have to drop to impulse in order to assimilate a world."

"What about Starfleet?" Carr asked, looking at where T'Lan and West sat together.

"Ah." West replied, "I'm afraid that it's almost as bad as we thought. There are a few ships in the area, but none of them are packing the sort of firepower we need."

"For now Starfleet is building up a fleet of ships in the Dinasia system," T'Lan added and she got out of her seat and walked to a wall mounted view screen to display a map of the local region of space where she pointed to the Dinasia system, "but they will not be able to challenge the Borg cube for at least two weeks."

"Will Starfleet be issuing trans-phasic torpedoes?" Hamilton asked, referring to a weapon system brought back in time from almost thirty years in the future. Trans-phasic torpedoes were capable of confusing Borg defences and penetrating their vessels before detonating. So far there was no indication that the Borg were close to adapting to these weapons but it was acknowledged that the more they were used the more rapidly the Borg would learn to defeat them. Therefore they were only issued to starships on a limited basis. Given that the *USS Nightfall*'s other systems were intended to exploit the known weaknesses of the Borg it had been decided that the ship would instead be armed with more conventional quantum torpedoes.

"No." West replied, "Starfleet operations does not believe that the tactical situation warrants it."

"Of course not." Heart said, "Earth, Andor, Vulcan or Tellar. Pick any one of them and they've got more people on them than every Federation world in this sector combined. Starfleet's run the numbers and decided to keep its fancy new torpedoes for when the Borg are punching through the Mars Defence Perimeter for a third time."

"Better not let the locals think that." Edwards said, "There are enough outer colonies complaining that the Federation isn't looking after their interests."

"However, I do have one piece of good news to report." T'Lan said.

"Just one?" Edwards responded.

"Unfortunately, yes captain." T'Lan replied, "And it's short term usefulness is questionable."

"Go on." Carr said, "Tell us."

"Yes commander." T'Lan said and she tapped the screen where it showed the icon of a Starfleet starship. Instantly the display changed to show an image of a Nebula-class vessel, easily identifiable by its low mounted warp nacelles and large modular equipment pod above its hull, "The *USS Pacific* is just two days

from the Beta Antares shipyards." She said.

"What's so special about the *Pacific*?" King asked.

"That's the ship we tested some of the *Nightfall*'s systems aboard before we went over to a specifically built ship." Carr told him.

"Indeed." T'Lan went on, "The interchangeable equipment pods made the Nebula-class the most logical type of vessel to use for this project and several of the pods used for development are still stored at the Beta Antares shipyards."

"Including the accelerator?" Carr asked.

"Yes commander. The pod mounting a single mass accelerator is still present and intact. I estimate that it could be installed in sixteen hours." T'Lan replied.

"So it will take the best part of three days for them to get to the shipyard and swap out their equipment pod for the one we need?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

"And by my reckoning another two or three days for them to reach us here." Edwards added.

"Yes captain." T'Lan repeated and Edwards looked at Max.

"Well?" he asked.

"It may be long enough." Max responded, "But I wouldn't like to base any defence around the assumption that we'll have the *Pacific* to back us up."

"We'll get in touch with the *Pacific* anyway." Edwards said, "But my plan doesn't rely on them alone." And then he got up and approached the view screen T'Lan was stood beside, "You may sit down lieutenant." He told her and then he adjusted the view screen to show everyone what he had planned, "Forhaut has two moons." He began, "So we'll use these as cover while the Borg approach. The *Nightfall* will lead the attack of course, but we'll be making use of our fighters, the Forhaut sentry pods and our assault shuttles as well. When the *Nightfall* engages the Borg they will undoubtedly try to lock a tractor beam onto us." Edwards continued and the view screen showed a diagram of the *Nightfall* positioned in front of the Borg cube with one of Forhaut's moons behind it, "That's when the rest of our ships will emerge and engage the Borg."

"A wave attack tactic?" Cole asked, "Wasn't that what Admiral Hanson tried at Wolf Three Five Nine?"

"And got himself and eleven thousand others either killed or assimilated." Hamilton added, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Yes, but the fleet at Wolf Three Five Nine was charging across open space, two ships at a time." Edwards replied, "I plan for just three waves, one of which will be entirely expendable."

"The sentry pods?" Carr said.

"Correct." Edwards answered with a grin, "They're nothing but unmanned flying bombs. They'll be the second wave, launched as soon as the *Nightfall* is caught. The Borg will have two choices, either engage them or ignore them. If they engage them, then we'll hopefully be able to break free while their attention is elsewhere. On the other hand if they ignore the sentry pods then they'll smash right into the cube with enough power to reduce it to scrap.

"Now following the sentry pods will come the rest of our ships, the fighters and assault shuttles. If we've been unable to free ourselves then I want Lieutenant Commander White's ship to concentrate on trying to disable the Borg tractor beam. On the other hand if we are already free then we'll provide covering fire while the fighter squadron makes a strafing run across the cube. All of this will be designed to distract the Borg from the assault shuttles."

"Here it comes." Shry said softly, looking at Heart, "The bit where we get shot at."

"All of the shuttles are to make hard contact with the cube, use breaching charges to penetrate the hull and deploy their troops. Max, I need you to provide Captain Heart and Captain Shry with details of what they can expect to find inside that cube and where it is most vulnerable."

"Of course captain." Max replied, "Though given the disparity in numbers I doubt that they will be able to inflict critical damage."

"I just need them to stir things up a bit and keep the Borg distracted while we engage them." Edwards said.

"So you'll still be shooting at the cube while we're aboard it?" Heart asked.

"Yes I'm afraid so." Edwards answered, "But we'll try to avoid the locations where your shuttles are docked and you ought to try your best to penetrate deep into the cube where explosive decompression is less likely. We'll try to beam you out if we need to evacuate you quickly."

"A lot of 'trying' in there." Shry commented.

"Now the colonial government is evacuating their city with only a handful of seriously ill patients and medical staff remaining behind." Edwards continued, "Hopefully with the city almost entirely shut down the Borg will ignore it in favour of the target we're going to offer them." Then he looked at Kurvok, "This is where your ship comes in captain." He told the Klingon.

"My ship has only a single low energy disruptor bank." Kurvok replied, "Your runabouts carry greater firepower. Besides, my ship's engines are still off line. We cannot manoeuvre and we cannot fight."
"I realise that captain." Edwards said, "What I'd like to do it remove the *Tor'Kal's* warp core, locate it underground and use it to power the planetary disruptor that you're carrying. We'll set it up here." And Edwards pointed to where the view screen showed a map of Forhaut, in particular at the uninhabited continent. We'll also re-task both defence platforms so that they orbit above this location. I want this continent to be the Borg's most tempting target on the planet. Then when they move in close to try and assimilate it we'll have a little surprise in store for them. Max and T'Lan I want you to control these defences as well as the sentry pods from a runabout. Try to keep out of the way and retreat if the Borg come after you."

"I notice that although you are making use of my ship and my cargo you have yet to explain what role my men will play in this fight captain." Kurvok said, "Did you invite me here just so I could hear how we would be left out of it?"

"No." Edwards told him, "Captain even with the best will in the world, I fully expect the *Nightfall* to be boarded by the Borg. Now they can't assimilate the ship with just a few drones, but they can try to disable key systems just as we'll be trying to do to them. Lieutenant Commander Cole's men are well trained to defend this ship, but they carry only phasers and the Borg may adapt. I want your men to act as a reserve to defend key points and hunt down any Borg that are beamed over from the cube. Does that meet with your approval?"

Kurvok grinned.

"Captain I give you my word, this ship will not fall. My men will defend it to our last breaths." He said proudly.

"Just remind your men that we need the Borg to die before they do." Nayal commented.

"Then I think we all know what we're doing." Edwards said and he looked at West, "Lieutenant, I'll need you to get me the *Pacific*. In the mean time everyone is dismissed."

Back on the bridge of the *Nightfall* the main view screen the bridge of another Starfleet vessel, the Nebula-class *USS Pacific*. Central to the image was a bald, dark skinned human who was the vessel's captain while beside him sat a feline alien. This was the *Pacific's* Catian first officer.

"Captain Cameron." Edwards said, "I don't believe we've spoken before."

"No Captain Edwards, I don't believe we have." Cameron replied, "I just wish our first conversation was under better circumstances. This is my first officer, Commander S'Kora." And the Catian nodded, letting out what sounded like a low growl.

"I believe you already know my first officer, Lieutenant Commander Carr." Edwards said.

"Of course, we worked together for a number of years." Cameron replied, "Hello again Grace. Oh and congratulations to you both by the way, Captain and Missus Edwards. We'd have sent a gift but—"

"We aren't married." Edwards said as Carr sighed and held her head in her hands.

"Really?" Cameron replied, "Because I heard that the pair of you—"

"We didn't!" Carr snapped.

"If you say so lieutenant commander." Cameron replied, "Now what is it that you called to discuss?"

"I'd like you to take your ship to Beta Antares." Edwards said, "Then I'd like you to get hold of the prototype mass accelerator they've got there and bring it to Forhaut to back us up. Or at least pick up any survivors."

"Beta Antares is two days away Captain Edwards." S'Kora commented.

"I know." Edwards replied, "And my science officer estimates that it will take sixteen hours to carry out the work. But we really need you to be ready in case we fail here. Alternatively if the Borg are slower than we're predicting then we could use the extra firepower."

"Sixteen hours?" S'Kora said and he looked at Cameron, "Captain I'm sure I can have our crew get it done in twelve."

"You hear that Captain Edwards?" Cameron said, "We'll be early." And Edwards smiled.

"The earlier the better." He replied, "*Nightfall* out."

The *Nightfall's* massive hangar bays were a hive of activity as the ship's crew prepared to engage the Borg. All of the auxiliary craft required fuelling and arming and their flight systems testing prior to launch. In addition the main launch bay provided enough room for both companies of ground troops to gather together for their equipment to be inspected.

With the *USS Severn's* warp drive inoperable because of the modifications Max had been forced to carry out to adapt the ship to be able to use the Borg transwarp coil, Max and T'Lan were instead going over the second of the *Nightfall's* two Danube-class runabouts, the *USS Mersey*.

"Will you two be ready on schedule?" White asked as he entered the runabout with West where they found Max and T'Lan both in the cockpit reviewing its systems.

"Given our current estimate of the Borg's arrival time we will be ready." T'Lan replied.

"And you're confident that the Borg won't regard you as a priority target?" West asked, "The captain's plan kind of depends on you being around right up until the end."

"I am going over ever one of the Mersey's systems to ensure that the amount of energy emitted will be kept to a minimum." Max replied, "The Borg ought not to consider us a priority target at any stage of the battle." White looked at West.

"Whereas we'll be obvious targets." He said.

"And expendable." West added. Then she turned back to Max, "So is there anything else you can do to make this thing more stealthy?"

"They could paint it black." White suggested.

"Will that work?" West added, frowning.

"Against Borg sensor technology the effect will be minimal." T'Lan said.

"Maybe, but it'd look cooler." White commented.

"What's your plan for if everything goes wrong and the Borg start assimilating everyone?" West asked.

"I'm confident that we can make it as far as the system's gas giant while the Borg are occupied by the colony." Max replied, "That gives us fourteen moons, a ring system and a highly charged atmosphere to hide in until the *Pacific* can arrive." Then White grinned.

"So did Captain Cameron really ask if Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr got married at Starbase Ten?"

"He did." West replied, "The captain and Carr were not happy, let me tell you."

"But how did they find out?" White asked, "How many more people outside of the crew of this ship know about what happened?"

"Oops." Max commented and West and White stared at him.

"You didn't." White said.

"I may have mentioned it to Lieutenant Commander Frost." Max replied.

"Who?" West said.

"Charlie Frost." White told her, "She's the *Pacific*'s chief engineer. She and Max worked together for years before the *Nightfall* was first laid down."

"We kept in touch," Max said, "and I remember how she and Carr were friends so I thought she'd like to hear the news."

"But the captain and lieutenant commander were not really married." T'Lan said, "Why would you tell anyone otherwise?"

"Because it's hilarious." White said, "They were completely naked and handcuffed to the bed in the honeymoon suite when a full security team armed with phaser rifles burst in. Come on, even you must see the funny side of that T'Lan."

"Humour is an illogical concept." T'Lan responded.

"You're wasting your time." West said to White.

"I know. She can't even cast a fireball spell." White replied.

"Actually there are those of us who think that's a good thing." West said before holding up the large PADD she held, "Anyway I need to get this report back to the bridge. T'Lan will you be long here?"

"No. The runabout is almost ready. I should be back at my station in less than an hour." T'Lan answered.

"Good. I'll see you then," West said and then she turned to leave.

Edwards withdrew to his ready room while the crew of the *Nightfall* completed their preparations for the coming battle. He had reports from Starfleet regarding the taskforce they were assembling on the assumption that the battle here would not go the Federation's way and also updates from the surface of Forhaut about the preparations underway to move the population away from the city and spread it out. The door to the bridge chimed and he looked up.

"Come in." he called out and the door opened and Carr stepped into his office, "Ah commander, how are our preparations going?"

"We're ready captain." she replied, walking up to the desk and then sitting down. Then she paused before she continued, "David I've a favour to ask. A personal one."

Edwards leant back in his chair.

"Go on Grace." He said.

"It's about the runabout you're sending Max and T'Lan on." She said.

"You think you ought to be aboard it?" Edwards asked, "I'd have thought after the past few days you'd have had enough of them."

"No captain, I want Nikki to be aboard it." Carr replied.

"Nikki?"

"Yes. I know it's a breach of protocol, but if things go bad then the runabout is the ship most likely to escape. The Borg will be more interested in the colony and Max is quite capable of keeping out of their way until the *Pacific* gets here to pick them up."

"You're right Grace it is against regulations." Edwards said. Then he smiled, "But I think that we can overlook that for now."

"Thank you captain. This means a lot to me." Carr said.

"Is there anything else?" Edwards asked her.

"Yes, actually there is one thing I like to talk about." Carr answered, "It concerns when we-" but then the door chimed again.

"One moment Grace." Edwards said, then he looked towards the door, "Come in." and the door opened to reveal West.

"Captain, commander. The Borg have just dropped out of warp." She said.

"Sorry commander, but this will have to wait." Edwards told Carr as he got up and rushed to the door. From there he quickly made his way to his chair and as Cole vacated it he sat down.

As Carr followed Edwards and took her place next to him the bridge was fully manned and in addition Kurvok stood just behind Cole at the tactical station.

"On screen." Edwards said and he watched as an image of the Borg vessel appeared in front of him,

"Report." He added.

"The cube is moving directly towards Forhaut at impulse speed." T'Lan replied, "It will arrive in two point one hours at its current speed and its heading will bring it close to the outer moon."

"Then that's where we position ourselves." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton, thrusters only. Position us so that the outer moon is between us and the Borg vessel."

"Yes captain." Hamilton replied and he pulled on the manual control interface that his station was fitted with to manoeuvre the *Nightfall* behind the moon.

"All ships should prepare for launch." Edwards ordered, "But hold until the cube is forty minutes away. I don't want people cooped up in fighters and shuttles any longer than necessary." Then he looked at T'Lan just as she was getting up from the science station, "Oh and T'Lan."

"Yes captain?" she asked.

"I want you to stop by Lieutenant Commander Carr's quarters on your way to the hangar. Take Nikki with you in the runabout." He told her.

"But captain, regulations state that-"

"I'm aware of the regulations lieutenant." Edwards interrupted, "But the runabout has the best chance of survival if this doesn't go well."

"What about the other civilians captain?" T'Lan asked. Compared with a Galaxy or Nebula-class ship the *Nightfall* only had a handful of civilians onboard and aside from Nikki Carr they were all scientists and engineers who were part of the development program.

"They all volunteered to aboard this ship." Edwards replied, "If they want to leave then they can head down to Forhaut. But they better hurry. Now you have your orders, go."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied and she headed for the turbolift.

"Thank you captain. I owe you." Carr whispered.

"Yes you do." Edwards replied.

The Borg cube scanned Forhaut as it approached the planet.

"Total planetary population estimated at five hundred and two thousand, seven hundred and sixty-three spread over a wide area. Prepare to assimilate."

But then there was a brief flare of energy as the *Nightfall* moved out of eclipse from around Forhaut's outer moon.

"Starfleet heavy cruiser detected, Akira-class. Crew compliment five hundred. Change course to intercept. Prepare to assimilate."

"Lieutenant West, open hailing frequencies." Edwards ordered.

"Yes captain, hailing frequencies open." She replied.

"Borg vessel you are approaching a Federation world. You are ordered to withdraw or we will open—" Edwards began before he was interrupted.

"We are the Borg. Lower your shields and disarm your weapons. You will be assimilated; your biological and technological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile."

The warning sounded over the *Nightfall's* communication system and Edwards studied the faces of his crew.

"Well captain, it looks like we've got their attention." West said.

"Yes it does." Edwards replied, "Mister Cole?"

"Yes captain?" Cole asked.

"Open fire. All phasers, all torpedo tubes."

Phaser and torpedo fire erupted from the *Nightfall*, blasting at the Borg cube and its surface was dotted with explosions that were clearly visible on the bridge view screen.

"Minimal damage captain." Cole said, "Borg vessel still operating at full power."

"Adjust phaser frequencies." Edwards ordered, "Don't give them chance to react."

Then the *Nightfall* shook as a blast of energy from the Borg cube struck it, informing the crew that the Borg were returning fire.

"Shields down to eight percent." West called out, "Rotating frequencies"

"Mister Hamilton. Whenever you're ready." Carr said.

"Almost there." Hamilton replied. Rather than the main view screen he had been focused on the image projected by his headset, one that included an aiming reticule and range measurement to the cube, "Firing." He exclaimed when the reticule was on target at the centre of the cube and his fingers tightened over the triggers built into the manual flight controls.

Magnetically accelerated to an incredible velocity, the projectiles launched from the *Nightfall's* twin mass accelerators tore into the cube before it could react to move out of the way and there were more explosions.

"Borg energy grid fluctuating captain." West called out, "I think we hit something important there."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Hamilton said but then the *Nightfall* lurched as the Borg seized the ship in their tractor beam. Then before anyone could react there was a second tremor as the Borg used their energy-draining weapon again.

"Shields fluctuating captain." West said, "I'm not sure they'll hold much—" but she stopped speaking as a group of four Borg drones materialised in the centre of the bridge.

A bright red beam of light struck the chest of one before it had taken a single step as Cole shot it with his phaser and the Borg shuddered before it toppled forwards.

Leaping out of their chairs Carr and Edwards engaged a second drone with their own phasers and it too collapsed. But when Cole fired at a third drone that was advancing towards Hamilton's helm station the shot was blocked by the Borg's built in shield generator.

"They've adapted." Carr called out.

Then just as Hamilton looked around to see the drone reaching out towards him there was a roar and Kurvok tackled the Borg, knocking it off its feet. Without making a sound the drone reached up towards Kurvok, but the Klingon warrior was ready for this and as the Borg extended its nanoprobe injectors he drew his curved mek'leth short sword and swung at the drone, first severing its outstretched arm and then on the backstroke he embedded the blade in the drone's throat and it went limp.

At the same time as Kurvok was despatching the drone, the final Borg from the group advanced on Captain Edwards and Nayal fired the phaser she had been issued at it. But just as the previous bursts of phaser fired had been, this was blocked by the Borg's internally generated shield. But the attack did divert the Borg's

attention and it swung its arm around in her direction. Dropping her phaser, Naya! reacted by grabbing hold of the drone's arm and holding it away from her as the drone attempted to inject her with nanoprobes.

"Get the shields back up!" Edwards yelled as he rushed to help Naya!.

Attempting to make use of the training in unarmed combat she had been given by her homeworld's military Naya! hooked one of her legs around one of the drone's and tried to trip it. But the Borg's mass was too great for her to get adequate leverage against and all she achieved was to keep the pair of them locked together. Then Edwards arrived to grab hold of the Borg's free arm just as it was about to try and strike Naya!. With one arm wrapped around the Borg, Edwards pressed the muzzle of his phaser directly against the back of its head and fired. Coming from inside the Borg's shield, the phaser blast punched through its skull with lethal effect.

"Thank you captain." Naya! said as they both lowered the deceased drone to the floor.

"No thank you." Edwards replied, "That thing was heading for me." Then he looked at West, "Well?" he asked.

"Shields restored captain, but only at ten percent." She replied.

"At least it'll be enough to stop them beaming any more drones over." Carr said.

"Too late I'm afraid commander." Cole said, "I've detected transporter signatures on deck eight of the primary hull and deck C of the portside secondary."

"Sound intruder alert." Edwards ordered.

Max, T'Lan and Nikki instead watched the *Nightfall* charge the Borg cube from the cockpit of the *Mersey*.

"We have to do something!" Nikki yelled when she saw the *Nightfall* suddenly caught in the tractor beam of the Borg cube that dwarfed the Starfleet vessel in comparison.

"Perhaps you would be better waiting in the rear section where you do not have to witness this." T'Lan suggested.

"No way." Nikki replied, "I can't just sit back there without knowing what's happening. Now what are we going to do?"

"Captain Edwards' orders were very specific." Max told her, "When the *Nightfall* is seized by the Borg's tractor beam we are to instruct the sentry pods to engage." And he reached forwards and pressed a single button on the console in front of him.

From the cockpit of his fighter Lieutenant Commander White could see the backs of the eight sentry pods that the colonial government had provided. Looking to either side he could see the other eleven fighters of his squadron and in the small mirrors positioned to allow him to see behind his fighter without the use of sensors he could make out some of the Imperial Guard and MACO assault shuttles. All of a sudden the sentry pods came to life and accelerated towards the horizon of the moon that the tiny ships were all concealed behind.

"Snowman to all ships." White broadcast, "Advance and engage. Weapons free." And he accelerated after the sentry pods.

Phaser rifles had been issued to the *Nightfall's* security guards and a team of four of them raised their weapons and opened fire as a group of Borg drones came lumbering down the corridor towards them. The energy pulses from the rifles rapidly cut down the first three of these but the remaining two were barely slowed as their shields adapted and absorbed the shots.

"Fall back!" the senior security officer ordered, "Sickbay is two sections behind us. We'll regroup there."

The security team ran towards sickbay but as they rounded a corner they suddenly found themselves confronted by another Borg drone that clubbed the first of them with the cumbersome implant that had replaced its original, organic arm. As the crewman fell, clutching at his cheek the others stepped in to attack the drone, using the butts of their rifles as clubs. One of the blows connected with a thick tube that emerged from near the drone's ocular implant and dislodged it, creating a shower of sparks and causing the drone to stagger about randomly until a swung phaser rifle knocked it to the floor.

"Come on we need to keep moving." The senior officer said as he helped his injured comrade back to his feet and the team kept on running.

So far the injuries brought to sickbay had been relatively minor, burns, cuts and bruises caused by the Borg's bombardment of the ship and Doctor King as startled when the door to sickbay opened suddenly and a security team burst in, one of them injured.

"What the hell is going on out there?" King demanded as he ran to examine the injured man.

"The Borg are heading this way." The leader of the security team replied.

"How many?" King asked.

"Just two that we saw." The security officer answered, "But they've adapted to our weapons already."

"Don't worry. I've got a solution." King said and he looked upwards, "Computer activate emergency medical hologram." He added.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." The hologram of a tall woman in a Starfleet uniform said as she materialised in front of King.

"Two Borg are about to come through that door." He said and the hologram frowned.

"I'm a doctor not a bouncer." She replied.

"You're a hologram." King said, "That means you do what you're told. Now take this chair and when the Borg come through the door I want you to beat them over their heads with it."

"Oh very well." The EMH said and she took hold of the chair.

"Now everyone else get away from the door and pay attention." King said, waving the security team back.

Seconds later sickbay's door opened again and the pair of Borg drones that had followed the security team there entered. Without a word the EMH swung the chair she had been given and it struck the closest drone with a loud 'Crash!' and took the drone off its feet. The second drone turned and reached towards the EMH, extending its nanoprobe injectors and attempting to inject them into her chest. The EMH gasped.

"Pervert!" she snapped and she swung the chair again, first in one direction and then back again, knocking the drone's head back and forth before it too collapsed and lay still. Then the EMH turned to look at King, "That was fun." She said, "Can I do it again?"

The Borg drone walked up to the control panel as soon as it had materialised and extended its nanoprobe injectors. As the tips of the injectors made contact with the panel the drone and thus the collective itself expected the nanoprobes to seize control of the device and from there begin to spread throughout the ship. But instead nothing happened. The injection of the nanoprobes happened just as expected but following that there was no evidence that the process of assimilation had begun. The drone attempted to inject more of the microscopic machines, this time increasing the quantity to be injected. But what happened next came as a surprise to the hive mind.

When the Borg nanoprobes entered the *Nightfall's* systems they were not alone. The ship was home to an independent hive of nanites all of its own that numbered in the billions. These formed a sentient hive mind all of their own and they reacted to the presence of the alien nanoprobes by moving to eliminate them. Then as the Borg drone attempted to inject more nanoprobes the *Nightfall's* own nanites took action, overloading an energy conduit so that electricity arced directly into the drone. The Borg shuddered as the onslaught overloaded its implants and disabled them one by one. Unable to survive with just its remaining organic body parts the drone toppled forwards, falling against the panel it had sought to assimilate and then collapsing in a lifeless heap.

"Assimilation of vessel intact impossible with current drone numbers. Proceed to shield generators and disable. Reinforcements will be deployed."

The other drones of the group that had materialised in the *Nightfall's* secondary hull then turned as a group and headed towards the nearby deflector shield generator. But as they advanced a doorway ahead of them slid open to reveal most of the crew of the *Tor'Kal*. Immediately there were bright green pulses of disruptor fire from the Klingons and the front rank of Borg collapsed. But as had happened with the Starfleet crew's phasers the Borg adapted quickly and it was not long before their shields blocked the energy blasts.

However, rather than fall back as their Federation counterparts had done Klingons instead just holstered their disruptors and drew the assortment of curved blades they carried. Then with a roar from their leader they charged the Borg drones.

ii.

The moment the first of the sentry pods emerged from behind the same moon that the *Nightfall* had used to hide itself behind the Borg cube scanned it. Then as each of the other sentry pods appeared it scanned each of these as well and rapidly identified the threat they posed.

"Federation defence vessels detected. No life signs. Presence of large-scale anti-matter warheads detected. Eliminate threat."

Keeping its grip on the *Nightfall*, the cube nevertheless turned its attention towards the unmanned bombs and opened fire. On the two occasions that the Borg had assaulted Earth, Starfleet sentry pods had proven ineffective in even slowing them down and on this occasion they fared no better. The Borg cube launched a volley of photonic missiles towards the flying bombs, allocating one missile to each sentry pod before targeting the next without waiting to see the result of the previous missile. The missiles struck the sentry pods one after another, punching through their deflector shields and triggering the warheads prematurely. But the destruction of the sentry pods had been planned for and only when the fireballs created by their explosion was the swarm of tiny craft using the sentry pods as cover revealed just as the Borg turned their attention back towards the *USS Nightfall*.

At the forefront of this swarm was the squadron of twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters led by Lieutenant Commander White. Then further behind these ships came an assortment of small transport craft, four assault shuttles similar in size to Danube-class runabouts each carried a platoon of soldiers while a pair of bulkier heavy lift shuttles intended to move armoured vehicles from an orbiting starship to the surface of a planet had also been pressed into service as troop carriers. Finally the *USS Severn*, operating on impulse power alone was being used to carry the Imperial Guard and MACO personnel that would not fit in their own shuttles.

"Drummer! Quarterback! Charger!" White snapped, "We're going for that tractor beam. Follow me in. Everyone else break and engage, get those shuttles in safely."

"Copy that Snowman, I'm on your wing." The pilot with the call sign Drummer replied and the four attack fighters peeled off from the group of small ships and accelerated towards the source of the tractor beam as rapidly as they could. As far as the Borg were concerned the Akira-class starship caught in their tractor beam still posed a greater threat than the squadron of attack fighters and shuttles so rather than firing on the smaller ships they unleashed another blast from their energy dampening weapon at the *Nightfall* instead, attempting to drain its shields enough to allow more drones to be transported aboard. The *Nightfall* itself was still firing on the Borg vessel with its phasers, but the weapons were insufficient to inflict serious damage on the cube.

On his targeting display White saw that his weapons were now locked onto the cube, specifically at the origin point of the tractor beam holding the *Nightfall*.

"Torpedo away!" he yelled as he fired a single photon torpedo as the other fighters flying in formation with him strafed the cube with fire from their phasers. The torpedo slammed into the Borg cube and exploded, causing the tractor beam to cease immediately.

Without waiting for an order Hamilton had the *Nightfall* accelerate away from the cube, letting loose another volley of projectiles from the ships mass accelerators. Meanwhile the Borg turned their attention to the fighters.

They concentrated on the eight craft escorting the shuttles towards the cube, discharging their cutting beam in an attempt to shoot one down. Detecting the Borg's attempt to lock their weapons onto his craft one of the fighter pilots rolled his ship, but the manoeuvre came a fraction of a second too late and the cutting beam blasted one of the fighter's wings off and the controlled roll became an uncontrolled tumble that lasted only until a second shot from the cutting beam destroyed the fighter.

"Mariner's down." Another of the pilots broadcast as the remaining fighters began to take evasive action. For most it was enough but one of the fighter pilots was not so fortunate and as in one last act of defiance she steered her burning fighter directly towards the cube and attempted to ram it, failing only when a photonic missile obliterated her craft before impact.

The shuttles had also veered sharply to avoid Borg weapons fire, but for now they were not considered a threat and by holding their fire they attempted to continue giving this impression. Aboard one of the assault shuttles Captains Heart and Shry studied the Borg cube that they were rapidly approaching.

"That's a big ship." Heart commented as he stared over the Andorian pilot's shoulder and out of the viewport.

“Just over three thousand metres per side.” Shry added, “So where do you reckon we should knock?” and Heart smiled.

“Up there.” He replied and he pointed to the very top of the cube, “We’ll latch our ships onto the upper hull surface and cut through. That way we don’t need to worry about the gravity field shifting when we go aboard.”

Shry nodded.

“I agree.” He said and he looked at the pilot, “Do it and signal the others to follow us in.”

As the pilot of the shuttle laid in a course for the top of the cube Heart turned to the troops crammed into the rear of the shuttle that made up the company command elements of both the Imperial Guard and MACO companies.

“Lock and load.” He ordered.

Only when the first shuttle made contact with the cube did the Borg react, diverting their weapons fire towards the shuttles. However, by this point most were too close to the cube for the Borg to get a clear line of fire and only one of the shuttles was hit. This single hit was enough to destroy the shuttle, taking with it the platoon of MACOs aboard but the rest of the shuttles were able to make it to the cube safely where they all landed on its upper hull.

Heart and Shry watched as two of their men opened a hatch in the floor of the shuttle. Beneath this was a hole that had been blasted in the cube’s hull by a shaped charge fixed to the underside of the shuttle that had detonated as soon as the two vessels came into contact. One of the soldiers plucked a photon grenade from his webbing and tossed it through the hole. The moment that it was through the other soldier closed the hatch again and waited until there was the dull ‘crump’ of the grenade’s detonation before opening it again.

“Go!” Heart yelled and the first of the soldiers jumped down into the cube below.

Heart and Shry entered the cube when their men had already formed a perimeter and as the rest of their men followed behind them they took the opportunity to study the section of the cube they found themselves in.

“Everyone check your transport inhibitors are functioning.” Heart ordered, “You don’t want the Borg beaming you into space.”

“Remember to use your phasers first.” Shry added, “They’ll have more effect on the Borg until they adapt.”

Then he looked at Heart, “So where shall we begin?” he asked.

Balancing his rifle in one hand Heart took out his PADD and quickly checked the details that Max had been able to provide after his time on the cube.

“There ought to be a shaft that way that will take us deeper into the cube. With any luck it’ll take us to something volatile that we can destroy.” He answered and he activated his communicator, “Heart to all units, spread out and do whatever damage you can. Remember that your phasers will only be effective for a few shots. Switch to your assault rifles when needed but watch your ammo usage, there are a lot of drones in here with us.”

“Try to keep our weapons fire away from the upper hull.” Edwards ordered as the *Nightfall* turned to make another pass of the Borg cube. Then he glanced at West, “Get me Commander White.” He ordered.

“Channel open captain.” West replied.

“Snowman, form your squadron up behind us.” Edwards said, “Use us for cover then try to hit any sections we’ve already damaged to capitalise on it.”

“Understood *Nightfall*. Lead the way, Snowman out.” White replied.

The ship then rocked as the Borg fired their cutting beam again. Typically the weapon would be used only after a ship’s shields had been drained and it was ripe to be dismantled and assimilated. But when vessels proved resistant to being assimilated the cutting beam would be employed to destroy them.

“Shields down to five percent.” West warned, “They can’t take another hit like that.”

“Reset frequencies.” Carr ordered, “Divert auxiliary power if you have to.”

“Return fire.” Edwards ordered next, “All weapons.”

The *Nightfall* headed straight for the Borg cube, its phasers and quantum torpedo launchers firing towards the lower half of the enormous vessel. Keeping the secondary hulls aligned with the cube Hamilton added the firepower of the mass accelerators to this, punching holes in the cube’s hull that Cole then targeted with the phasers in the hope that some critical system would have been exposed. Following this the fighters of White’s squadron attacked the damaged sections of the cube again before the Borg could repair them.

The Borg retaliated with a barrage of photonic missiles split between the *Nightfall* and its fighters. One of the missiles struck a fighter and the tiny craft was totally destroyed while a second hit the *Nightfall* itself. The missile struck the port side secondary hull arm, penetrating the cruisers already weakened shields and exploding where the warp nacelle pylon on that side joined with it.

"We're venting warp plasma!" West exclaimed when the impact and explosion rocked the ship.

"Engineering report." Carr said, activated the intercom.

"Cores two and three are fluctuating." The engineering officer standing in for Max replied, "One and four are stable for now at least."

"Take the port nacelle off line." Carr ordered, "But make sure we have warp power for the phasers."

"Yes commander." The engineer said before the channel was shut off.

The MACO squad emerged into a cavernous chamber lined with Borg alcoves.

"Over there." The sergeant said, pointing to a narrow walkway that ran from one side of the chamber to the other and the squad ran towards it. No drones blocked their path and the soldiers reached the walkway unopposed and began to cross it, "Okay here will do." The sergeant said when they were about half way across.

"What's here sergeant?" the youngest looking of the squad asked.

"Just us lad." The sergeant replied, "And them." And he pointed to the rows of drones ahead of them, "I need half of you each side of me. They'll be coming for us soon and I don't want them getting close to me."

Splitting into two groups the MACOs positioned themselves to cover both directions of approach while the sergeant aimed his rifle over the side of the walkway at one of the motionless drones in their alcoves. There was a sharp 'crack' as he fired his rifle and one of the Borg drones jerked under the impact of the bullet against its armoured torso. Then the sergeant fired a second round that found a weaker spot and the drone collapsed. The sergeant then moved on to the next drone and fired again, this time killing it on the first shot. All of a sudden the drones in the chamber came to life, stepping from their alcoves and advancing towards the walkway. The sergeant continued to fire his rifle on semi-automatic, using carefully aimed shots to pick off individual drones before they reached the walkway but there were far too many of them for him to be able to stop them all.

The MACOs fired volleys from the phasers mounted beneath their rifles, only the two armed with grenade launchers holding their fire. The phaser beams struck the advancing drones and they fell, some collapsing onto the walkway while others tumbled over the side and plummeted downwards without making any sound. But with each blast of phaser fire the Borg gained more information on the way in which the Federation weapons were adjusting their frequencies. The adjustment was carried out by means of a programmed circuit and that meant that with enough information the behaviour was predictable. It was after the fifth volley that the Borg determined the pattern to the adjustments and reconfigured their shields to match it. Then when the MACOs fired again the phaser beams were blocked by the Borgs' shields.

"Rifles!" a MACO yelled and the roar of automatic weapons fire replaced the whine of phasers.

Heart and Shry had their squads split up as they descended deeper into the cube, thinking that it would increase the chances of them finding something important that they could destroy from within and for the MACOs at least this appeared to have paid off. At the middle of the chamber ahead of his command squad Heart recognised the machinery ahead of him as a missile launcher and the feed system for bringing ammunition from a central magazine and since the launcher was being used to fire on the Starfleet vessels assaulting the cube from the outside that made it a priority target. The drawback was that the Borg seemed to have adapted to the boarding parties' phasers. On the other hand the assault rifles that the troops carried were something that the Borg could not adapt to, but it could take several rounds to bring down a single drone and the ammunition that could be carried was extremely limited when compared to a phaser's power reserves.

Numerous drones were closing in on Heart and his men, but short bursts of automatic weapons fire were bringing them down before they could get closer enough to try assimilating the MACOs.

Naturally enough the weapon was surrounded by numerous drone alcoves and as the MACOs approached they awoke and began to lumber towards Heart and his men. As soon as the drones began to move the MACOs took cover and opened fire but despite the torrent of gunfire the Borg kept on coming and Heart began to doubt that they would make it as far as the missile launcher's mechanism. Then as a missile rose up from the feed shaft an idea occurred to him.

"Fire in the hole!" Heart yelled as he slid the selector for his phaser to its maximum setting and took aim at the missile.

Unlike the Borg drones, the missile was unshielded and the glowing red beam struck the weapon without impediment. For about a second the casing of the missile glowed as Heart kept the beam on target until all of a sudden the missile was split open. The compact warhead functioned much like a Starfleet photon torpedo, though on a somewhat smaller scale and when the phaser hit it, it disabled its internal systems that included the magnetic containment vessel that held the tiny charge of antimatter that comprised its warhead. As Heart

had expected the blast consumed the launcher and it was only the safety systems built into the feed system that prevented the fireball created from travelling all the way back to the central magazine with potentially disastrous consequences for everyone aboard the cube, whether human, Andorian or Borg.

"Captain you are aware that we're aboard this ship as well aren't you?" one of his squad asked with a grin as the explosion subsided.

"Just checking to see if you're all paying attention." Heart replied, "Think the rest of the Borg heard that?"

"Captain, I'd say that the Borg Queen heard that one from the Delta Quadrant." Another MACO commented and he poked a finger into his ear and shook it.

Then Heart peered back into the chamber that had housed the missile launcher to confirm the damage that he had inflicted. The launcher itself was entirely gone; the explosion had not even left enough wreckage to indicate where it had been. The rest of the chamber had been wrecked as well and the corpses of Borg far enough from the centre of the explosion to avoid being totally vaporised lay around its edges. Heart smiled and reached for his communicator.

"Shry, how are you doing?" he asked as he activated it.

"We're trying to break through into an engineering node." Shry responded, "We're using grenades to clear the way but the Borg have erected shields across our path that we need to disable. What about you?"

"We've come across a weapons station. I figured we may as well try and lend a hand to Starfleet even if it is only one missile launcher." Heart replied, "Hopefully some of the other teams will have found something more effective."

Now that the Andorian and human troops were recognised as a threat the Borg followed their every move inside their vessel. Initially they had not been considered any different to any of the other species who over the centuries had attempted to board Borg vessels to either sabotage them or try to steal their technology, but when the Borg adapted to their phasers that perception changed. The invading troops had switched to projectile weapons, something very rarely used by the space faring civilisations that the Borg generally targeted and something that their drones could not adapt to. The armour grafted into Borg drones helped against the bullets, but did not make them impervious and by maintaining disciplined patterns of fire the boarding parties had managed to prevent a single drone from getting close enough to attempt to assimilate them.

Clearly a new strategy was required.

"Tactical drones respond to hostile intruders in all sections. Do not attempt assimilation. Eliminate."

As more drones disengaged from their alcoves they held out their arms to their sides where compact energy weapons emerged from storage compartments and were clamped to their wrists. Then the armed drones began to march towards the intruders.

"Shields down!" West snapped as the *Nightfall's* shields finally gave out.

"Stand by to repel boarders." Carr ordered.

"Let them come!" Kurvok yelled, steadying himself on a console as the ship shook under the impact of the Borg energy draining weapon and the lights flickered briefly.

"I'm not monitoring any transporter signatures." Cole said from the tactical station.

"The Borg are probably more interested in dealing with our boarding parties than in trying to organise their own." Edwards said and he looked at West, "Any word from them?" he asked.

"No sir. The last report was when they had breached the cube but nothing since then."

"Weapons status?" Edwards then asked.

"Phasers still functional, but we're down to our last fifty torpedoes." Cole told him.

"About four hundred rounds left for the accelerators." Hamilton added.

"That's about three minutes of continuous fire." Carr commented.

"Then keep firing." Edwards ordered, "Don't hold back but keep your targeting limited to the lower part of the cube, our own people are less likely to be down there."

The MACO squad on the walkway was the first to encounter the armed drones. At first they appeared no different to any of the others now lay dead in both directions, but as these advanced they suddenly pointed their arms towards the human soldiers and bright bursts of plasma erupted from the weapons fixed to their wrists.

"Fall back!" the sergeant yelled as two MACOs fell and he realised how exposed his men were in their current location. However, as they began to retreat they found their path blocked by another group of Borg at the far end of the walkway who also raised their arms and opened fire.

Shry spun around as he heard distant screams.

"Borg don't scream." He said and he activated his communicator, "All units sound off." He broadcast on his company's frequency.

"Armed drones heading right for us." The first Imperial Guard squad leader to check in reported.

"Same here." A second added, "Position untenable, we're falling back to-" and then there was just a burst of static.

Shry switched to the private command frequency.

"Heart you read me?"

"Right here." Heart responded.

"The Borg are shooting back." Shry said.

"Yeah, we've seen that too. I've lost a full squad already and more are taking losses. Given their numbers I think we've done all we can here."

"Agreed. We need to fall back to the shuttles. I'll call it in and get the *Nightfall* to cover us. Shry out."

"Captain, I've got Captain Shry for you." West announced and Edwards smiled.

"Put him on." He said and then he added, "Captain, what's your status?"

"Well our rifles worked well enough to keep the Borg from assimilating us." The Andorian replied, "But they've switched to just trying to wipe us out. We're starting to run low on ammo and we can't hold our existing positions, let alone advance any further."

"Then fall back and evacuate. You've done all you can." Edwards said.

"We're already doing just that. This is just to let you know that we may need some cover when we leave."

"You'll have it. We'll keep the Borg off your-" Edwards began when all of a sudden the *Nightfall* rocked heavily and only the safety harness built into their seats stopped the crew from being thrown across the bridge while Kurvok was forced to grab hold of a console to remain where he was. At the same time the bridge lights went out and the only illumination left was from the consoles that were themselves flickering.

"Captain we've lost mains and auxiliary power!" West exclaimed.

"Helm's out." Hamilton added.

"We've lost weapons as well." Cole said.

"Engineering report." Carr called out but there was no response, "Looks like comms are down as well." She added looking at Edwards.

"That it then." He said, "We're dead in space."

"What's happening? Are they okay?" Nikki asked, the fear in her voice obvious as she stared at the *Nightfall* that was now drifting towards the Borg cube.

"I'm still picking up more than four hundred life signs from aboard the *Nightfall* but they have lost both warp and impulse power." T'Lan replied and then the cube projected a tractor beam that latched onto the *USS Nightfall*.

"So are we going to help them?" Nikki asked.

"I think that it is time to execute the next stage of the captain's plan." Max said, looking at T'Lan.

"We were supposed to wait for his instruction to do so." She replied, "But since it appears that the *Nightfall's* communications are inoperable and the ship is disabled, logic suggests you are correct."

"Retasking defence platforms." Max said.

The two defence platforms fired their manoeuvring thrusters, increasing their orbital altitude so that they rose up over the planetary horizon into view of the Borg cube. For now the Borg were once again preoccupied with the *Nightfall*. They had concluded that the remaining fighters lacked the firepower to inflict serious damage, while the shuttles now detaching from the cube were retreating.

But that changed when the defence platforms opened fire.

Their powerful phaser banks struck the Borg cube's tractor beam emitter and it ceased functioning immediately.

"Federation defence structures detected. Intercept and engage."

The Borg cube turned away from the *Nightfall* and its fighters, now ignoring all of them as a new threat presented itself. The defence platforms fired again, this time unleashing a volley of photon torpedoes that struck the Borg cube without inflicting any significant damage. In reply the cube fired a cutting beam that demolished one of the platforms in an instant. The second platform fired a second blast from its phasers but once again the Borg cube remained intact and another shot from the cutting beam destroyed the final defence platform.

However, there was still one more defensive structure that had not yet come into play.

"The Borg cube is now in our field of fire." Max said, "I have a target lock."

The flash of light that erupted from the surface of Forhaut was a brilliant emerald green rather than the red of Federation phasers and the disruptor blast being powered directly from the *Tor'Kal's* buried warp core blasted a massive hole in its hull. The Borg rapidly located the source of the disruptor blast and returned fire, this time releasing a wave of four photonic missiles.

Under normal circumstances a planetary defence weapon like the disruptor bank would have been located in a heavily armoured and shielded structure. However, with no time to construct such a fortification the disruptor had instead been assembled in the open, with only the warp core being used as a power source being located below ground. Therefore it took only one missile to knock out the disruptor while the remaining three warheads demolished its structure entirely.

Scanning the surface of Forhaut for any signs of further defensive systems the Borg cube found no weapons but it did locate something else of interest. The *Tor'Kal's* warp core was still intact following the brief bombardment and it was still producing power. Thanks to the evacuation of Forhaut's only significant settlement and the damage inflicted to the *Nightfall* it was the largest source of power in the system.

"Buried matter/antimatter power source detected. Prepare to assimilate."

"The Borg cube is entering orbit above the warp core." T'Lan said.

"It is buried too deep for them to beam drones directly down to it." Max replied, "They will either beam drones to the surface to search for a way down or use their cutting beam to try and create one of their own."

"They will be directly over the warp core in ten seconds." T'Lan said.

"Can we go and help the *Nightfall* while the Borg are busy here?" Nikki asked.

"No." Max told her, "We would reveal our position and the Borg would destroy us."

"But what can we do from here?" Nikki asked.

"Carry out the captain's plan." Max answered.

"The captain's plan? But the defence platform and that planetary defence weapon were destroyed. What's left to use against the Borg now?" Nikki said, waving out of the runabout's viewport in the rough direction of the Borg cube.

"Borg vessel is in position." T'Lan said, both her and Max ignoring Nikki's question.

"Shutting it down." Max said and he reached to where his console had been set up to monitor the *Tor'Kal's* buried warp core and shut off its power.

The warp core was located in a natural cavern more than two hundred metres beneath the surface of Forhaut. Along with this was a storage module for additional antimatter with which to keep the warp core generating the energy needed to run the planetary defence disruptor and also a compact fusion generator, the sole purpose of which was to maintain the power to the magnetic fields that held the antimatter within the warp core itself and also inside the storage module. It was this fusion reactor that Max's signal sent from the *Mersey* shut down and as soon as the power stopped flowing from it both magnetic fields collapsed.

In an instant the entire contents of the warp core and the storage module was released into the cavern in one go. Reacting with everything it touched, from the cavern walls and floor to the structures of the warp core and the storage module and even the air itself the antimatter was annihilated. The annihilation of so much mass resulted in a release of energy of massive proportions, far greater than the cavern could contain and the resulting explosion shattered the structure of the rocks surrounding it.

The force of the blast was channelled in the direction that offered the easiest route of escape and given the thickness of rock around the sides of and beneath the cavern that meant straight up. Over two hundred metres of rock, weighing millions of tonnes were melted by the blast. Some of it was vaporised while the majority became molten magma that was hurled upwards at a tremendous rate directly towards the orbiting Borg cube. The cube detected this eruption but there was insufficient time for it to move out of the way of the expanding wave of molten debris. The effect of the impact was like hits from the *Nightfall's* accelerator cannons but multiplied many times over. Each piece of molten rock ripped a hole in the cube that allowed the next to tear in even deeper.

Watching from the cockpit of the *Mersey*, Nikki gasped as she saw the Borg ship was ripped apart by the crude yet devastatingly effective attack.

"What happened?" she said, unable to take her eyes away from the burning debris now starting to fall back towards Forhaut.

"The Borg cube was destroyed." T'Lan replied.

"Yes I can see that, but how?"

"I shut off the magnetic containment for all of the antimatter stored underground." Max told her, "Essentially creating a massive antimatter powered projectile cannon."

"So that was Captain Edwards' plan all along? Blow up half the planet to destroy the Borg?" Nikki exclaimed.

"Actually only a tiny fraction of the planet's surface has been completely destroyed." T'Lan pointed out.

"So why not just do that to start with?" Nikki asked.

"Because there was no way of guaranteeing where the Borg would enter orbit." Max said, "We had to lure them directly over the warp core and engaging them in space was the best way to do that. Otherwise they still would likely have started with the capital city. Now take your seat, I'm setting a course back to the *Nightfall*. It looks like I've got my work cut out for me."

Cole was in the hangar to meet the *USS Mersey* when it landed.

"Congratulations." He said, "A confirmed kill."

"Thank you commander." Max replied, "Though from the looks of things my work is only just beginning." And he looked around the hangar at the damaged fighters and shuttles as well as the damage apparent to the *Nightfall* itself.

"The captain will want an estimate of how long you expect repairs to take." Cole told the engineer.

"Of course commander. I will get it to him as soon as I can." Max said.

"And does the captain have any orders for me?" T'Lan asked.

"Not that he's asked me to give, though I'm guessing that Lieutenant Commander Carr would appreciate it if you could confirm to her that her daughter's alright."

Nikki sighed.

"Then we ought to report to her immediately." T'Lan said.

"I need to check in with Doctor King so I'll go as far as sickbay with you." Cole replied and the trio headed for the closest turbolift.

Inside the turbolift T'Lan reached out and stopped it just as it had begun moving.

"Is there a problem lieutenant?" Cole asked.

"No." T'Lan replied, "I just wanted to thank you."

"For what?"

"Nikki informed me that you had not disseminated details of my behaviour while under the influence of—"

"That's quite alright T'Lan. I didn't see the need to embarrass you in front of everybody." Cole said and he reached out to restart the turbolift.

"Nevertheless I am grateful." T'Lan said.

Moments later the turbolift stopped and the doors opened.

"Well this is my floor." Cole said stepping out. But just as the doors were about to close again he turned around and blocked them with his hand, "I would just like to say one thing though T'Lan." He said, "You have a really nice smile. It's a shame you don't do it more often." Then he turned back around and the doors closed behind him.

"Well that was-" Nikki began, glancing towards T'Lan but she stopped when she noticed the side of the Vulcan's mouth twitching as if she were trying to smile.

The lights in Edwards' ready room were still dim when Kurvok appeared in his doorway clutching two bottles of blood wine.

"I'm sorry about your ship and cargo." Edwards said as the Klingon approached and handed him a bottle.

"Sorry? Captain Edwards my ship was sacrificed to defeat the Borg. What greater honour is there? Now drink with me. To our victory." Kurvok replied, holding up the bottle he still held.

Edwards smiled.

"And to those we lost." He said as he took a drink.

"Their place in Sto'vo'kor is guaranteed captain. We won a great victory here today."

"But your ship-"

"Was just a freighter that should have been scrapped a decade ago. After today I expect to be given a real command again and I have you to thank for that."

Just then Carr knocked on the open door.

"Come in commander." Edwards said, waving her into his ready room.

"I shall leave you to run your ship captain." Kurvok said, "You may keep the blood wine." And he turned and walked out past Carr.

"Blood wine now?" Carr said when the Klingon was gone.

"Yes." Edwards replied, "Added to my stash of Romulan ale I'm getting quite a collection. Now how may I help you?"

"Max has given me the figures for repairing the ship captain." Carr said, "He estimates that we'll have full warp power back in twenty four hours. But he needs to keep impulse power restricted so that he can replicate the parts he needs."

"And what's his estimate for us to be fully operational again?" Edwards asked.

"At least four weeks." Carr replied, "Captain, we took a pounding from the Borg."

"I know, I was there." Edwards said, "The timescale will just have to do. We're not in a hurry to get anywhere after all. Now what about the governor?"

"She's screaming blue murder." Carr told him, "You rendered half her planet pretty much uninhabitable for the next thirty to fifty years or so. Apparently major changes to weather patterns are expected across the planet."

"Perhaps they'd have preferred to be assimilated?" Edwards suggested. Then he added, "Sorry, hope that didn't bring up any bad memories."

"No, no I'm fine. I never got plugged into the hive mind and I came away with all my flesh and blood parts still intact."

"Yes, I'm glad about that. I'd hate to have been responsible for sending you out to be assimilated." Edwards said and they both smiled at one another.

"Captain earlier on I never got the-" Carr began to say quietly, but she was interrupted when West appeared in the doorway behind her, "Wow, that keeps happening." Carr muttered as she looked around, "What is it lieutenant?"

"Just a report from Starfleet security." West replied, "They've looked into operations at the shipyards on Tersis Two and they haven't found any evidence that anyone was able to tamper with the ships that were disabled in the way we've described to them."

"Well that is worrying isn't it?" Edwards said to Carr, "Not only do we not know why anyone would want to lure the Borg here to Forhaut, but we can't even find out who they are."

"Hello Howard." The Girl said, smiling as she looked at the dockworker who had just returned to his locked apartment to find her waiting inside for him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not bothering to ask how she had gained entry. He already knew that she did not use doors.

"Starfleet intercepted that Borg cube." The Girl replied, "I thought you ought to know that."

"Look, I did everything I could." Howard protested as The Girl circled him, "I disabled the ships and-"

"Shush." The Girl said, "I'm not here to question your methods, I'm just here to tell you how your little scheme turned out."

Howard straightened up.

"It failed. You just said so." He said and then he noticed another figure that he had been unaware of at first. Though vaguely humanoid it towered over both him and The Girl and was lacking in features and colour. Instead it had the appearance of a three-dimensional outline that was coloured in white all over, "Is that here for me?" he asked.

"Of course not. It's just here to make sure I'm kept safe." The Girl answered, "Now where was I? Oh yes, the results of your wonderful plan."

"Starfleet destroyed the cube before it did what we needed of it." Howard said.

"Maybe, but you should see what's happened as a result." The Girl said with a smile, "All across this sector Federation worlds are demanding extra protection from Starfleet that the Federation doesn't have the resources to provide. The damage inflicted to the planet Forhaut is being blamed squarely on Starfleet and best of all the Federation actually thinks that their little colony world was our objective rather than happening to be in the way of the cube."

"So they don't now anything then?" Howard asked.

"Not a thing." The Girl replied, "Now we'd like you to remain where you are for now. Your position may come in useful later on. But right now I need to be getting back to the others. They really can't manage without me." And then she took a step forwards and vanished into thin air.