

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **ROOT OF ALL EVIL**

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Contact is lost with a Federation outpost and Cardassian involvement is suspected. But when the crew of the *USS Nightfall* investigate they find something far more sinister at work...

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Stardate 65314.7 Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 patrolling the Federation border near Romulan and Cardassian territory.

"Captain, there's a call coming in for you from Starfleet." a female voice told Captain Edwards as he sat in his ready room reading through some of the numerous reports he received each day.

"Thank you Lieutenant West. Put them through." Edwards replied and he switched his computer terminal into communication mode. Immediately the display showed the emblem of Starfleet command, though it was soon replaced by an image of a stern faced woman with grey hair, "Ah, Admiral Fenn. How may I help you?" Edwards asked.

"Edwards we may have a situation developing close to your position." the admiral told him, "Are you familiar with the second planet in the Lasner system?"

"No admiral, I can't say that I am. The system borders Cardassian space doesn't it?"

"Yes it does. It was in territory awarded to the Cardassian Union in the treaty of twenty-three sixty nine, but following the end of the Dominion War the area of space it's in became Federation territory again and several years ago an outpost was established there. Mainly to keep an eye on the Cardassians, but also to evaluate the world's potential for colonisation."

"Have they detected signs of Cardassian hostility?" Edwards asked. Though none of the briefings he had received in the more than ten years since the end of the war had indicated that the Cardassians were spoiling for a fight, quite the opposite in fact given the devastation that the war had caused them. There were a few Cardassian military officers who were unhappy about how the war ended and they were known to act in a more aggressive manner though.

"Edwards, I wish we knew." the admiral replied, shaking her head, "All contact has been lost with the outpost. The *USS Nightfall* is to proceed directly to Lasner Two, establish why the outpost isn't responding and if necessary remind the Cardassians just who the system belongs to. However, you are not, I repeat not, authorised to cross the border into Cardassian territory. Do you understand that captain?"

"Perfectly admiral." Edwards answered, "I'm to show the flag only."

"Precisely captain. Starfleet out." and with that the image of Admiral Fenn vanished, replaced again with the emblem of Starfleet.

Getting up from his seat, Edwards walked over to the door in front of him and it opened to reveal the *Nightfall's* bridge.

Lieutenant West was seated almost directly in front of him and she glanced upwards as he appeared. Positioned at the front of the bridge, the helm station was occupied by Lieutenant Hamilton who also briefly looked at Edwards. On many ships this would mean taking his eyes off the instruments telling him the current state of the ship, but on the *Nightfall* the command staff were issued with headsets based on both Borg and Dominion technology that gave each of them their own personal display screen no matter where they looked in addition to the regular console.

Edwards' own seat was located centrally on the bridge, one of a set of three. His seat was currently occupied by his executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Carr. But when Edwards approached she got up and moved to the vacant seat without him needing to ask. The third seat was occupied by the only individual on the bridge not wearing a Starfleet uniform. Sublieutenant Nayal was a Romulan advisor who had stayed aboard the *Nightfall* to pass on her knowledge of the former Romulan Star Empire now that it had disintegrated into civil war following the destruction of the Romulan home world. Finally, the science and tactical station were located behind the command position and manned by the female Vulcan Lieutenant T'Lan and Lieutenant Commander Cole respectively.

"Mister Hamilton, how long will it take us to reach the Lasner system at warp eight?" Edwards asked as he took his seat.

"Approximately five hours captain." Hamilton replied after checking his console.

"The Lasner system?" Carr asked, "What's there?"

"The Lasner system has a Federation outpost on its second planet lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and Nayal smiled.

"You just looked that up, didn't you cousin?" she said.

"T'Lan is correct." Edwards announced, "There is a Federation outpost on Lasner Two, but all contact has been lost. Starfleet wants us to investigate."

"Captain, that's rather close to Cardassian space isn't it?" Cole asked.

"Does Starfleet suspect a Cardassian attack?" Carr added.

"Starfleet doesn't have any information at all." Edwards answered, "We need to make sure that the system is

secure and that the colony is safe.”

“And if it isn't?” Nayal asked.

“Then we secure it ourselves.” Edwards replied. Then he looked around the bridge, “But I must stress that we are not authorised to enter Cardassian space under any circumstances.” and there were groans from some of the bridge crew, “Is there a problem with that?” Edwards asked.

“What about hot pursuit captain?” Cole asked back.

“The lieutenant commander does have a point captain.” T'Lan added, “A Cardassian raiding force could easily escape back over the border only to return at a later date.”

“I know. But Starfleet's orders were very clear on this. We stay on our side of the border.” Edwards said.

“What about firing a few torpedoes over it?” Hamilton suggested.

“I doubt that would be in the spirit of the captain's orders.” T'Lan replied.

“Exactly.” Edwards added, “If there's going to be a diplomatic incident then I don't want it to be our fault. If there are Cardassians at Lasner and they retreat then we'll try to cut them off, but we won't go after them before getting permission from Starfleet.”

“I take it you'll want to speak with Snowman and Captain's Heart and Shry?” Carr then asked.

'Snowman' was the call sign of Lieutenant Commander White, the commanding officer of the squadron of peregrine-class attack fighters that the *Nightfall* carried in its large hangar while Captain Heart and Captain Shry each commanded a company of ground troops from Earth's MACOs and the Andorian Imperial Guard respectively, stationed aboard the *Nightfall* as part of a program to assess the effectiveness of carrying a force of well equipped ground troops aboard a starship permanently.

“Yes I will.” Edwards replied, nodding, “If we're going to be engaging Cardassian ships then I want to use our fighters to prevent them from getting away and our ground troops could be invaluable for large scale search and rescue operations.”

“Lay in a course for Lasner Two. Warp eight.” Carr ordered while Edwards looked around at Cole and T'Lan.

“I'll need a full report on known recent Cardassian activity in the area and also everything we have on the outpost and planet itself.” he told them, “I'm calling a staff meeting in two hours.”

The meeting was held in the observation lounge and Edwards, Carr, Cole and T'Lan were joined by Heart, Shry and White. In addition there were two more Starfleet officers present, the first of them was the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer Doctor King while the second did not look like any normal member of Starfleet. Though the *Nightfall's* chief engineer Lieutenant Maximillian, or Max as the crew knew him, wore a standard combadge on his chest but as a Borg he wore no uniform over his cybernetically modified torso.

“This is Lasner Two.” T'Lan began, standing by the room's main display screen that showed a rotating image of a world covered in oceans and jungles. Even the poles were green, “It is a class M world with no axial tilt, therefore it lacks seasonal variations. The outpost is located here beside one of the larger freshwater lakes.” and the image zoomed in on the location of the outpost as viewed from above.

“That's more than just a frontier camp.” Heart commented.

“The population of the outpost is listed as just under two thousand people.” T'Lan replied.

“If we need to evacuate them it's going to get pretty crowded aboard the *Nightfall*.” King said.

“It will also take some time to modify the ship for transporting such a number of people.” Max added.

Edwards nodded.

“As soon as we're done here you better get started with preparations just in case.” he told Max and the engineer nodded in return before T'Lan continued with her presentation.

“Records indicate that there have been no outgoing transmissions from the outpost to anywhere else in the Federation for twenty seven days now.” she said.

“Twenty seven days?” Shry exclaimed, “How does the Federation wait that long before sending someone to check up on them?”

“There were no scheduled communications during that time and no passing ships.” T'Lan explained.

“According to the data Starfleet sent me the alarm was only raised when someone at *Deep Space Nine* wanted to arrange to exchange some parts they needed in a hurry and couldn't get a reply.” Edwards added, “They were going to send a runabout to take a look but we were closer.”

“The outpost is dual function.” T'Lan went on and she pointed to some of the buildings, “This is the main section and is dedicated to carrying out a colonial survey, including studying all native lifeforms. None of which have been shown to be especially dangerous.”

“Define 'especially'.” Shry commented.

“There are some predators and native diseases that are communicable, but nothing out of the ordinary.”

T'Lan answered, “If something has happened to the outpost then it is more likely related to the activities of this section here” and she pointed to a smaller set of buildings that were not connected to any of the walkways joining the others.

“That's where I come in I think.” Cole said, getting up and moving to stand by the display with T'Lan, “This is the control centre for a Starfleet listening post.” he said, pointing to the same set of buildings, “The sensor

array itself is largely automated and requires only a handful of crew despite being able to observe Cardassian ship movements more than fifty light years inside their territory.”

“Sounds like a target to me.” White said.

“Me too.” Shry added.

“That’s why it’s defended.” Cole said, “Starfleet records indicate that there is an orbital weapons platform to protect the sensor array itself while the outpost is defended by this phaser array, “and he pointed to another structure close by the sensor array’s control centre, “and also by a platoon of Starfleet ground combat specialists.”

At this point both Heart and Shry snorted.

“Were the Bolian Girl Scouts too busy to spend their summer camp here then?” Heart asked.

“Starfleet’s ground forces are well trained.” T’Lan began before Shry interrupted her.

“So how come you’ve got us aboard instead of them?” he asked, “Look, we all know that Starfleet’s so-called ground combat specialists are just glorified security guards. Worse, at least security officers can be used to support law enforcement operations.”

“Enough of that.” Edwards said, holding up his hand.

“I don’t suppose that any of the surveillance array’s reports contained any information about a Cardassian build up in the area did they?” King asked.

“No.” Cole replied, “The border has been quiet all the time that the sensor array has been operating.”

“But they’ve had almost a month since the last transmission.” Carr pointed out, “In that time they could have mustered a large force of ships, over run the outpost and disappeared back over the border.”

“The plan is to drop out of warp as close to the planet as we can.” Edwards said, “At which point we’ll try to establish communication again and conduct scans of the area. If that fails we’ll send an away team down to investigate in person. But I want both companies of ground troops on standby for emergency operations. Any questions?”

Shry raised his hand.

“You know that my men aren’t really trained for that sort of environment.” he said, “We’re better suited to arctic operations. We can fight in any terrain, but if you’re talking search and rescue then that’s another matter.”

“Captain I think there may be an alternative.” Cole said in response to this, “If a large scale deployment is needed then we can beam all of the security staff down to the surface while the Imperial Guard carry out shipboard security. I know Captain Shry and his men are up to the task, I’ve worked with them since they got here.”

“Very well, if that’s alright with you Captain Shry.” Edwards said and Shry nodded slowly, “Then it’s settled. If we need a large relief force on the surface the Andorians will hold the fort up here.”

“What about my ships captain?” White asked.

“That depends.” Edwards said, “If there are any hostile vessels around then we’ll need to you to help deal with them. Otherwise you can provide low level aerial surveillance to the away team.” the looking around again he added, “Is that it?” and when there were no more questions he finished with, “In that case we are scheduled to arrive at Lasner Two in a over two and a half hours. I expect everyone to be ready by the time we get there.”



"Slowing to impulse captain." Hamilton said from the helm.

"T'Lan, any signs of activity?" Carr asked while still keeping her view fixed on the main display screen at the front of the bridge.

"I detect no signals from the outpost." T'Lan replied, "However, there is an active warp signature coming from high orbit."

"That'll be the sensor array." Cole said.

"I do not think so lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "The signature is too strong to be a subspace sensor array. It appears to be a vessel of some kind."

"Are we close enough to get it on screen?" Edwards asked.

"I think so captain." West said and she magnified the area of space where the surveillance array was located until it filled the screen.

The array was massive, more than a thousand metres across and consisted of hundreds of individual subspace detectors arranged to form large panels that could be rotated to face in any direction. At a glance the array was recognisable as being of Federation origin, the construction modules used to assemble it being identical to those used in other tracking and communication arrays. Beneath the superstructure however, was another object that was clearly not of Federation manufacture.

"Captain that's a Hideki-class attack ship." Cole said.

The Cardassian Hideki-class vessel was a small warship, much smaller than an Akira-class ship like the *Nightfall* and in a one on one fight it would be badly outclassed even without the *Nightfall's* fighters joining in. But the class was not intended to launch direct attacks on defended targets without the support of other vessels.

"Scan the area." Edwards ordered, "Where are the others?"

"There are no others captain." T'Lan replied, "That is the only active warp signature in the system."

"Cardassians always travel in packs." Edwards hissed, "There must be more."

"I assure you captain, it is alone." T'Lan replied.

"Perhaps the rest of the squadron was destroyed by the outpost's defences." Carr suggested.

"Maybe." Edwards replied, "But we need to make sure that this one doesn't get away. Red alert. Lieutenant West, give the word."

"Yes captain." West replied before activating the intercom, "Bridge to hangar. Scramble, scramble, scramble."

Despite its size, the hangar bay of the *USS Nightfall* looked somewhat cramped when all twelve of the fighters it carried were removed from their own storage and maintenance hangar and lined up in pairs ready to launch.

"Scramble, scramble, scramble." West's words were relayed to all of the pilots and in the lead fighter White smiled.

"Okay boys this is it." he said, "Good hunting." and he fired his ship's thrusters, propelling it out of the large forward launch door.

The other eleven fighters followed him, the gaps between them large enough for each fighter to engage its impulse drive without risking harm to the next one behind them. While his squadron was still launching White looked at his sensors and saw the Cardassian attack ship positioned by the sensor array, still apparently unaware of the Starfleet force's approach.

"Snowman this is *Nightfall*." West's voice said over the communications link, "Steer seven three mark fourteen and accelerate to warp six. Cut off their escape."

White frowned briefly, annoyed at effectively being placed in reserve.

"Copy that *Nightfall*. Seven three mark fourteen. Accelerating to warp six." he replied, making sure that the signal was broadcast to his entire squadron and then all twelve fighters came about to the new heading before a rapid succession of flashes of light marked the activation of their warp drives.

It was at this point that the crew of the Cardassian vessel reacted to the presence of the Starfleet ships and the attack ship began to accelerate, steering away from the sensor array.

"They're running captain." Carr said as she saw this on the main viewscreen.

"They're raising shields as well." West added.

"Plot a pursuit course Mister Hamilton." Edwards ordered, "Lieutenant West, hail them."

"Yes sir." West replied and she activated the *Nightfall's* communications array, "Cardassian vessel this is the *USS Nightfall*. You have violated Federation territory and committed an act of aggression. Surrender and prepare to be boarded."

Then the crew waited to see how the Cardassians would react. Unsurprisingly they continued on their course out of the system, still moving at impulse speeds while they were within the orbital plane of the various planetary bodies of the Lasner system.

"Captain we're in phaser range." Cole said.

"Lock phasers." Carr ordered, "Target their engines and tactical systems."

"Phasers locked on enemy vessel." Cole replied, "Primary target warp and impulse drives, secondary targets shields and weapons."

"Hold your fire." Edwards said, "They've still not attacked us."

"Captain they're getting away." Carr pointed out.

"Not yet they aren't." Edwards replied, "They ought to be picking up our fighters at any moment. I'm hoping that will convince them to stand down without a fight."

Sure enough the Cardassian ship detected the squadron of fighters waiting to ambush it as it rounded the outermost of Lasner Two's moons and the fighters were revealed moving in from above the orbital plane to form a barrier in space ahead of it.

"They do not appear to be slowing captain." T'Lan said as the Cardassian ship continued to race headlong towards the fighters, not even bothering to try and evade them.

"Warn them Mister Cole." Edwards said and Cole smiled.

"Adjusting phasers two degrees off." he said and then he fired one of the *Nightfall's* phasers. The bright red beam extended out from the cruiser's saucer section and headed towards the Cardassian vessel. Although Cole had made only a slight adjustment to the targeting of the beam it was still enough that over the distance it had to cover it was enough to cause the shot to miss the Cardassians entirely, if only by a few metres.

However, the Cardassian ignored the sudden burst of phaserfire and continued towards the fighters ahead of it.

"Err captain, they're not slowing down." West said.

"*Nightfall* to Snowman." Edwards said, activating the communications, "Enemy vessel is on an intercept course with you. If it does not break off or halt you may consider it a threat at one hundred thousand kilometres and engage."

"Understood *Nightfall*. Will engage at one hundred thousand." White responded.

"Captain that may not be possible." T'Lan said, "I am monitoring a build up of power in the Cardassian ship's warp drive."

"They can't be about to go to warp inside the system." Carr said in astonishment, "They could hit something."

"Our fighters most likely." Hamilton said.

"Snowman break off!" Edwards snapped, "They're going to—" but before he could finish the Cardassian ship jumped to warp even while still within the system's orbital plane where there was the much higher risk of collision. Fortunately the Cardassian crew had plotted their course carefully enough that it took them close to, but not right through the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron while not giving them the time they needed to get a weapons lock.

"They've accelerated to warp six captain." West said.

"Go after them." Edwards ordered.

"Sir, they still accelerating." West told him, "They'll be at maximum warp in two minutes at this rate and we won't catch them before they cross the border."

Edwards sighed.

"Send the fighters after them." he said.

"They won't catch them either." Carr pointed out, "Our top speed is better than theirs."

"No, but they can prevent them from trying to come back again." Edwards replied, "In the meantime we'll see what's going on on the surface."

"Captain there is something else you ought to be aware of." T'Lan added, "I am picking up four life signs from the sensor array itself. They appear to be Cardassian."

"Well, well." Cole said with a grin, "Looks like that ship left in such a hurry they abandoned their boarding party."

"What about the outpost?" Carr asked.

"There are no life readings lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Though they may be shielded from detection by the outpost structure itself."

"Mister Cole, prepare a team to beam over to the array and take them into custody." Edwards ordered and then he turned to Carr, "And prepare your away team to beam down to the outpost. I suggest taking Captain Heart in place of Cole."

"Yes captain." Carr replied, nodding.

The team that Carr had put together in the transporter room was intended to cover all eventualities. She had T'Lan to monitor for any environmental contamination, Doctor King to see to any injuries, West to evaluate the state of the outpost itself and Captain Heart along with a fire team of four MACOs for protection should

there turn out to be more Cardassians waiting for them on the surface. Though not intended as a warship to operate alone, a Hideki-class vessel was ideal for deploying small groups of commandos.

As the away team completed the final checks of their equipment before stepping onto the transporter pads the door to the room slid open and a teenage girl entered.

"What is it Nikki?" Carr asked.

"Mom I need to beam down with you." Nikki replied.

"No chance." Carr said, "It's far too risky. Besides, why do you want to beam down?"

"Not want – need. I've got a school assignment due in two days and I need a plant or animal sample to study." Nikki said and she held out a PADD for Carr to see.

"Nikki, this assignment was set four weeks ago. You've had plenty of chance to find something before now." she said, frowning.

"I forgot okay? So I need to beam down now and find something or I'll fail." Nikki protested.

"That answer's still no. We don't know what's happened down there." Carr said.

"I'll be fine." Nikki said, "Look, you've got an team of MACOs."

"Whoa there missy, don't bring us into this." Heart exclaimed.

"You took me on that exercise when you taught me to drive and shoot one of those rifles of yours." Nikki reminded him and Heart winced as she pointed to one of the unconventional weapons that the MACOs carried. Rather than standard phasers they were armed with rifles that fired solid projectiles. All but one of these mounted a phaser unit beneath its barrel, while the final one was instead fitted with a compact grenade launcher for extra fire-power.

"You let her fire an assault rifle?" Carr asked.

"It was all done under strict supervision." Heart said but Carr did not appear to be any happier.

"Let's go." she said and then she suddenly turned towards Nikki, "Not you. You're staying right here." and then she strode towards the transporter pad.

"I tell you what," Heart whispered to Nikki, "I'll see if I can find something to bring back for you okay?"

"Okay." Nikki answered, smiling as she nodded.

"Though why I'm bothering after you just got me in trouble I don't know." Heart added, following the others to the transporter pad.

Cole's away team was more uniform than Carr's. Consisting of eight people including himself, five of the others were from his security department and all were armed with phaser rifles. Then rounding out the team was a junior medical officer and Max, here to treat injuries and determine whether the array had been damaged by the Cardassians.

They materialised in the main operation's centre aboard the array, a circular room with windowed walls that looked out over the various antenna arrays while a single turbolift was located centrally.

"Clear!" one of the security guards said as the team looked around for any signs of the Cardassians.

"Some of the computer terminals are active." Max said as he strode towards a nearby console, "This is not usual for an unmanned facility such as this." and he studied the active console closely.

"The Cardassians?" Cole asked.

"Possibly commander." Max replied, "Although this terminal is active it is not logged on to the main network. It would seem that whoever turned it on lacked the necessary authorisation to access the system."

"Okay let's move out." Cole said, "We're looking for four Cardassians and they may not be friendly." then he looked towards a hatchway set into the deck at one side of the control centre, "We'll take the emergency ladders rather than the turbolift. I don't want to give the Cardassians any advance warning that we're coming."

As the hatchway was lifted open two of the security guards aimed their weapons through it to ensure that there was no one waiting for them below. Then one after another the away team descended to the level below. Positioned in the centre of the group Max held a tricorder in front of him, scanning the surrounding area. The cybernetic implant that replaced one of his eyes had superior detection capability than the Starfleet device, but was limited to visual range only so for this task he used the tools at hand.

"I am picking up all four Cardassians in that direction." he said, extending an arm out to the side, "They appear to be clustered around the primary data transfer unit."

"Phasers on stun." Cole said as he lifted his rifle to his shoulder, "Melton, Frost and Gleeson work your way around to the far side and signal me when you're in position. We'll take them from both sides."

The three named security guards split off from the rest of the away team, while the remaining two joined with Cole in advancing directly towards the Cardassians while Max and the medical officer followed. Max kept hold of the tricorder in one hand and drew his phaser with the other.

As they advanced Cole heard voices coming from ahead and he held up his hand for his unit to halt while he listened. One voice in particular stood out and Cole's universal translator could not hide the use of a distinctly Cardassian name and rank.

"This is Glinn Macen to the *Lannon*. *Lannon*, can you read me?" then there was a brief pause before the

same voice added, "Keep trying with that computer. Something you've done is jamming our communications."

Cole smiled and looked at the rest of his team.

"Okay," he whispered, "it looks like they don't realise that they're on their own. That attack ship must have taken off too quickly to tell them about the *Nightfall*."

"Lieutenant commander, we're in position." one of the security guards Cole had sent to cut off the Cardassians' retreat, "The Cardassians are about ten metres ahead of us."

At this point one of the Cardassians looked around while crouched by an open access panel and noticed the shadow cast by one of this group of guards moving on a bulk head.

"There's someone over there." he said, getting to his feet.

"I wasn't told about any reinforcements." Macen replied and he drew his phaser.

"Team two, move." Cole hissed and the three guards burst out of cover.

"Drop your weapons!" the leader yelled as he aimed his rifle at the closest Cardassian.

Macen fired without taking the time to aim and the phaser beam passed harmlessly over the heads of the Starfleet security guards, though it did force all three to duck out of the way.

"Fall back!" Macen then snapped and he fired over the Starfleet security guards' heads again before turning around and running.

"Okay looks like we're the blocking force instead." Cole said and he leapt out of cover and fired. The pulse of energy struck one of the Cardassians in the chest and the man collapsed, colliding with one of his comrades who also fell to the deck.

"Stay down!" Cole yelled at the prone man, pointing his phaser directly at him. Then he quickly glanced around to see what had happened to the other two Cardassians. Both had darted down a nearby walkway and Cole could hear their footsteps echoing as they ran.

"Watch this guy." he told one of the security guards with him and then he looked at the medical officer, "You too." and then he ran after the Cardassians.

Macen led the way as he tried to put as much distance between him and his remaining subordinate and the Starfleet security team that had surprised them.

"*Lannon, Lannon* we need immediate extraction." he yelled, activating his communicator in the hope that fleeing away from the open access panels his men had been working with would enable him to make contact with his ship.

All of a sudden an armoured arm swung out from around a corner and knocked Macen from his feet. As he fell backwards he dropped his phaser and he heard clattering away as he landed on the deck. Then he heard a gasp as his comrade ground to a halt. Looking up Macen was horrified when he saw a Borg drone looking back down at him while aiming a Starfleet issue phaser at the other Cardassian.

"Resistance is useless." Max said and he grinned at Macen.

The Cardassians were lined up while the security guards searched them and only now did Cole get a chance to study them closely. Glinn Macen looked as though he was approaching retirement age while his three subordinates were far younger, none looking as though they had been out of training for long.

"An old man and three boys." Cole said to Max, "Hardly an elite commando unit."

"Quite so commander." Max replied, "I would suggest that their presence here is not pre-planned."

"Well we better get them back to the ship." Cole said, "Once we know what the situation is down on the surface the captain can decide what to do with these four."

3.

At the same time Cole was leading his away team over to the sensor array Carr was beaming down to the outpost with hers. Unlike the array the outpost was equipped with its own transporter system and the *Nightfall's* transporter operator was able to connect with this so that the away team materialised on the outpost's transporter pad.

The most obvious feature of the room they arrived in was the lack of light and it took a few seconds for the Starfleet officers to produce and activate palm beacons while the MACOs turned on similar lights fitted to the sides of their rifles.

"There's no one here." West said as she stepped off the transporter pad and approached the control panel. Carr followed her and the two women stood and inspected the console.

"Everything's in standby mode." Carr said, "That's why we could lock onto it from orbit."

"Door's jammed." Heart said when the exit from the transporter room remained shut when he walked up to it. Then he looked round at his squad, "Get it open." he ordered and two of the other MACOs slung their rifles as they dashed forwards and pressed their hands up against the two halves of the door. They looked at Heart who checked to see that the final two MACOs were positioned either side of him, all aiming their weapons at the door before nodding and the MACOs at the door pulled it open.

Outside the corridor was also in darkness and Heart and his men advanced slowly, turning in opposite directions to cover both approaches.

"What's up with the floor?" one said quietly when he felt something strange underfoot

"Hang on." King said from behind them and he angled his palm beacon downwards, revealing that the floor was covered in vines, "Now that doesn't look right." he added.

"What are they?" West asked as she and Carr joined the others at the door.

"In my opinion as an expert in biological organisms lieutenant is that they're vines." King replied.

"But what are they doing down there?" West asked.

"They haven't reached the ceiling yet maybe?" Heart said and West scowled.

"Cut it out." Carr said, "We're here to find out why the outpost stopped communicating, not make jokes about the local plant life, "T'Lan, can you detect any humanoid life forms?"

T'Lan held up her tricorder and pointed it in each direction. Then she shook Her head.

"I've got life readings lieutenant commander." she told her, "But nothing that appears to be humanoid."

"Probably local vermin got inside along with the vines." King commented.

"You know these things must have grown pretty quick to have spread like this in a month." Heart added and then he smiled, "In fact that gives me an idea." and he crouched down and drew his knife. Cutting a small piece from one of the vines he then placed it in a small plastic bag and tucked it into a pocket, "That ought to do for your Nikki." he told Carr.

"Better than handing her a lethal weapon at any rate." Carr replied and then she stepped into the corridor herself and looked in both directions, "Come on." she said, "The control centre's this way."

The new intrusion did not go unnoticed by The Controller. The outpost was now occupied again following its initial cleansing, though this time the intruders were in much smaller numbers than those who had already been dealt with. So far this new group was giving no indication of being aware of the presence of The Controller or the facility it was responsible for, but that had been true of the previous enemy force that had remained clear of the facility for a long time after their arrival on the planet.

Remembering how the outpost's previous occupants had eventually made their way to The Controller's facility, it resolved to monitor this new group closely.

The outpost's control centre was just as dark and abandoned as the limited areas of the outpost the away team had seen and like the corridors between here and the transporter room vines had grown across the floor.

"Contact!" one of the MACOs snapped when he saw something move at the edge of his flash light beam and all five soldiers turned to face the same direction.

"MACOs!" Heart yelled, "Come out with your hands where we can see them." and then he waited. However, no response came and Heart waved his men forwards, pointing them in different directions so that as they advanced they surrounded the location where the MACO had seen movement. Meanwhile the Starfleet personnel remained close to the door, all clutching phasers except T'Lan who still held her tricorder.

"Captain Heart I-" T'Lan called out but she stopped when he glared at her and mouthed at her to keep quiet. "Go!" he yelled suddenly and the MACOs rushed forwards, aiming their weapons over the control console ahead of them that was the only possible hiding place.

In response to this there was a sudden squealing sound and in the beams of the MACOs flash lights a small creature was seen leaping upwards at Heart.

"Holy crap!" he exclaimed as he fired the phaser mounted beneath his rifle, prompting a second squeal as the beam just clipped the creature before it ran towards an open access panel and vanished inside.

"I did try to tell you that it was just a small native creature of some sort captain." T'Lan said as Heart frowned while the other Starfleet officers all grinned at him, holding back laughter.

"Is there anything I can say right now that will make me look cool and composed?" he asked.

"Oh think we're way past that captain." King replied, "Best just to accept it and move on."

Meanwhile West picked her way across the vine-covered floor to a nearby console and examined it.

"This is in standby as well." she said, "T'Lan, can you give me a hand with this?"

"Of course lieutenant." T'Lan replied before joining West by the console and holding her tricorder just above the blank touch panel interface.

"There." West commented, looking at the tricorder, "You've got the wireless interface."

"Yes lieutenant." T'Lan said and she used her tricorder to connect to the console and instructed it to come to life.

"We're in." West said.

"That didn't take long." Heart said.

"It's not a secure system." West replied, "Just colonial administration. But it does give us access to this." and she tapped the console once. Immediately there was the sound of electric motors and the heavy shutters covering the windows that lined the external facing walls retreated, letting light from outside spill into the room.

"That doesn't look good." King said when he saw that one of the windows was broken.

"No glass." Heart commented as he looked at it.

"What?" Carr asked.

"No glass on the floor." Heart replied, "That window was broken outwards." and then he, Carr and King all walked over to investigate closer.

"Blood." King said, pointing towards the window itself and as Carr and Heart looked closer they too saw the dried blood on the jagged edge of the glass.

"How do you think it got there?" Carr asked.

"I'm guessing someone bled on it." King replied and Carr frowned.

"I see two possibilities." Heart added, "Firstly someone was hurled through that window and was cut as they smashed through it. Or secondly the window was broken and then someone decided to go through it, cutting themselves on the way out."

Carr peered through the window.

"We're about three storeys up." she said, "Who'd want to jump from here?"

"Someone desperate to get out." King replied as he too peered through the broken window to the ground below. Then he looked upwards at the other outpost structures visible from the control centre, "That really doesn't look good." he said as he saw the vines growing all over the outpost.

"No it doesn't." Carr agreed, "Look, that's the phaser array over there and that's overgrown too."

"No way that anyone even half way competent would allow that to happen." Heart said.

"Make a joke about Starfleet now and you're going out of this window." King warned him jokingly.

"T'Lan, West. Can you just seal this shutter?" Carr asked, pointing at the broken window, "I don't want anyone falling." then she paused and smiled, "Or being pushed."

"Got the controls right here." West replied and a single shutter slid down to cover the broken window.

"Okay so what about other outpost systems?" Carr then asked.

"They appear to be fully functional lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "With the exception of the subspace communications array."

"Why is that?" Carr asked.

"My guess is a problem with the antenna." West replied, "All the circuits at this end look intact so there must be a fault somewhere else."

"But we've got the outpost logs have we?" Heart asked.

"It does appear so." T'Lan answered.

"Good." Carr said, walking over to the other two Starfleet officers, "Show me the last entry."

"Here you go commander." West said, bringing up the text of the last entry into the outpost log and she began reading the contents, "I don't see anything significant." she said, "Everything appears normal."

"So whatever happened, it happened fast." King pointed out.

"Yes and we now have a rough time frame." Carr added, "This last entry is stamped stardate six five two one six point one."

"So they stopped making log entries about a month ago." King said.

"Okay we need to split up." Carr announced, "Doctor King, you should go and investigate the outpost's infirmary. West, go and check out the antenna and T'Lan stay here and see what you can find in the outpost

logs. Maybe there's something that with hindsight will tell us what happened here. Meanwhile I'll go and check out the defence installation." then she looked at Heart, "Captain, I'd like one of your men to accompany each of us."

Heart nodded.

"Sure." he replied, "I'll stay here with T'Lan and one man in case anyone needs back up."

"That sounds good to me." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*." she said.

"Nightfall here. Go ahead commander." Edwards' voice replied.

"Captain the outpost was shut down when we arrived and there's no sign of any of the crew. I'm splitting my team up now to investigate areas of interest. From the looks of the logs I'd say that they confirm the idea of something having happened about a month ago, but there are no specifics."

"Do you require reinforcements?" Edwards asked.

"No sir, we'll be fine without them." Carr said.

"Okay then commander." Edwards responded, "By the way, Cole and his team managed to capture the Cardassians aboard the sensor array and have returned them to the *Nightfall*. So be sure to let me know if you find anything that points the finger at them."

"Confirmed captain. Carr out."

Cole and Edwards entered the *Nightfall's* security section together where they saw the four Cardassian prisoners being held in a single large cell sealed by a forcefield and guarded by two armed Starfleet security officers.

"They giving you any trouble ensign?" Cole asked, looking at a third security guard sat behind a console.

"No sir." she replied, "They've been talking amongst themselves but only quietly."

"Well I think that it's about time they talked to us." Edwards said sternly and he strode towards the forcefield,

"Glinn Macen." he announced loudly, "I am Captain Edwards, the commanding officer of this ship. Explain your presence aboard a Federation space station."

"You've committed an act of war against the Cardassian Union by abducting us captain." Macen responded.

"Abducting you from where?" Edwards asked, "You were caught illegally aboard a Federation station in Federation territory. Perhaps explaining why your ship took off the moment it saw us coming, leaving you behind to take the fall while it high-tailed it back across the border."

"We were defending ourselves captain." Macen said, "We know that the Federation has been spying on us from this world and we came to stop you stealing our secrets."

"What secrets are those?" Edwards replied, "That the once vaunted Cardassian military now fills its ranks with old men and boys?"

Macen frowned.

"Tell what you know about the outpost." Edwards said, "Help us find out what happened and maybe I can see about not having you charged with piracy."

"Piracy?" Macen exclaimed.

"I'd say espionage, but you are all in uniform." Edwards said, "So I think that a simple charge of piracy will have to do. Unless I can pin the murders of the outpost crew on you as well."

Now Macen smiled.

"You don't know anything about what happened here do you?" he asked, "All you know is that your spies stopped telling you what we are doing and Starfleet has sent you to find out why that is."

"Tell me why you are here Glinn," Edwards said, scowling, "and maybe you and your men won't spend the next ten years in prison."

"Our Gul sent us to find out what secrets you have stolen." Macen said, "We were on patrol in this area when we saw that your outpost was no longer emitting any of the usual energy signatures and came to investigate. When we saw that the outpost was gone we beamed aboard your spy station. Now release us captain."

"Maybe later." Edwards replied and he turned to leave. As he walked towards the exit from the security section he called out, "In the mean time don't go anywhere though."

4.

The doors to the outpost's infirmary were wide open when King and the MACO escorting him arrived. "Stay back doc." the MACO said as they neared the doorway, "Let me check this out first." and he braced his rifle to his shoulder, a dancing cautiously.

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself." King replied, holding up his phaser.

"So cover me then. But let me go first. Something happened here." the MACO replied and King frowned.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Because of all these." the MACO answered and he kicked an equipment container that lay on the floor just inside the infirmary door. Only then did King notice that there were more cases scattered nearby, "Somebody tried to barricade themselves in here." the MACO added as he advanced through the open doorway.

"Doesn't look like it worked." King commented as he stood back while the MACO searched the room.

"Okay doc, it's clear." he called out after verifying that there was nobody in the main treatment ward or any of the adjoining rooms and King entered the infirmary himself.

Unsurprisingly this room also had the vines that had taken over most of the outpost spreading across the floor and reaching up the walls in some areas. King rapidly identified most of the medical equipment he would have expected to find in a medical facility such as this, but rather than being neatly stored it was scattered around the infirmary as if it had simply been dropped in place after use.

"Blood." King said, running his hand over one of the biobeds.

"Human?" the MACO asked and King nodded.

"It could be." he replied, "Or maybe a similar humanoid species. Wait while I get a sample." and he set his medical kit down on the biobed and opened it up.

The subspace antenna was located at the end of a walkway that required West and her MACO escort to leave the outpost and pick their way across more of the vines that were even more prevalent out here than they were inside the outpost. The presence of the vines made crossing the raised walkway risky – there was no way of telling if the structure had been damaged and was only just being held up by the vegetation wrapped around it. Therefore, both West and the MACO made their way across slowly and carefully, trying to determine whether the walkway was shifting under their weight before putting full pressure on it. The vines stretched as far as the antenna itself and more of them were coiled around it and also growing inside where a cover had been removed.

"I think I see what the problem is." West said as she peered inside the antenna's workings, using her palm beacon to provide light inside, "These vines have grown all through the inside and it looks like they've tried to take root. I can see where they're attached to the circuitry. I reckon that something inside has shorted out."

"How long would it take for that to happen?" the MACO asked and West shrugged.

"I'm no botanist." she replied, "But my guess is that these vines grow pretty darned fast."

"So how do we get them out?"

West paused, looking around at the vines that covered almost everything in sight.

"Some sort of herbicide I guess." she replied, "Or maybe a controlled burning. There's bound to be something in the outpost logs that will explain how the crew kept them under control."

"Before they mysteriously vanished without being able to send a distress signal you mean?" the MACO commented.

"Yes. That's right. Before everyone vanished." West replied.

Carr and the MACO accompanying her also had to leave the outpost in order to reach their destination. But rather than a short walk across a walkway they had to make their way along a now overgrown road to the Starfleet controlled defence post. This had been surrounded by an electrified fence to keep out native animals and intruders, the fence was also designed to produce a field that disrupted transporter functions to prevent anyone from just beaming inside the perimeter defences. This fence was now in ruins however, the constant pressure from vines all along its length had apparently been enough to rip the supports out of their foundations and knocked the fence flat, thus allowing Carr and the MACO to walk right up to it unimpeded. The doors to the defence post were heavily armoured, but that mattered little when they were open half way, leaving a gap of about half a metre that Carr and the MACO could easily squeeze through.

Just as the main outpost had been when the away team had first beamed down, the inside of the defence post was in darkness, with only the light that could get in through the partially open main door to provide illumination and once again Carr and the MACO resorted to the portable lights they had brought with them to light their way.

"Somebody fired a phaser here commander." the MACO commented, shining his light onto a discoloured

spot on the wall.

"Oh this isn't good." Carr said as she moved closer to the phaser burn, "This is the first evidence of a fight we've seen."

"And I'd say that someone was attacking this place." the MACO added.

"Why do you say that corporal?" Carr asked.

"Look at where it is." he replied, "That mark came from a weapon fired from the direction of the main door." Slipping her own phaser back into its holster, Carr took out her tricorder and held it to the burn mark, scanning the wall to examine the damage that had been inflicted.

"There's signs of some molecular damage." she said, "A Federation phaser set to about level seven or eight could have done this." then she paused before adding, "Or a Cardassian phaser set to kill."

While T'Lan continued to review the outpost logs and the other MACO guarded the doorway, Captain Heart stared out of the windows.

"How do two thousand people just vanish?" he said out loud.

"That is what we are trying to determine captain." T'Lan responded without looking up from the console she was working at and Heart frowned.

"That was a rhetorical question lieutenant." he said. Then he heard a sound and stopped speaking, holding up his hand for quiet.

"Captain I-" T'Lan began.

"Shush." Heart interrupted, "Do you hear something?"

"No I-" T'Lan began before she too heard the sound.

"Some sort of animal?" Heart suggested and T'Lan took out her tricorder.

"I believe the sound came from that direction captain." she said, pointing.

"Then let's move." Heart said, "Lieutenant I want you to point the way but stay behind us."

"Of course captain. That is the logical approach."

"Of course it is." Heart muttered.

Heart and the second MACO advanced side by side as T'Lan guided them to the nearby section where the outpost's senior officers had been quartered and here they heard the sound again, more clearly this time. The sound was a repeating high pitched yelping that was coming from inside one of the quarters and the trio halted outside the door.

"T'Lan, can you use your tricorder to trick this door into opening?" Heart asked.

"I can set it to emit an electromagnetic field that would deceive the-" T'Lan began.

"Yes or no lieutenant?" Heart interrupted.

"Yes captain."

"Then get back and get ready for my signal." Heart said as he and the second MACO positioned themselves either side of the door and Heart banged on it with his fist, "MACOs! Stand clear of the door!" he yelled and he nodded to T'Lan who tapped at the controls to her tricorder.

Immediately the door slid open and the two MACOs burst through into the room beyond where all of a sudden a small dog rushed towards them, barking and jumping up and down at their feet.

"Err, looks like a false alarm captain." the second MACO said as he lowered his weapon.

"You think?" Heart replied, frowning.

"This is not logical." T'Lan said as she stood in the doorway and watched as Heart crouched down to stroke the dog.

"What isn't lieutenant?" he asked.

"How did this animal survive trapped in here for a month?" T'Lan asked in reply and Heart looked around.

"Easy." he said and he pointed to the area of the room that was clearly intended as a kitchen, "See? There's an auto replicator hooked up there. That will have provided our little friend here with all the food and water she needs and she's obviously trained to use that sanitation tray over there." and then he pointed to what looked to be a tray filled with grit in another corner than also had cables connecting it to an outlet in the nearby wall.

"T'Lan report." Carr's voice suddenly said from the Vulcan's combadge.

"T'Lan here commander." she replied, "We have located a-"

"We've found a survivor." Heart interrupted with a grin.

"A survivor?" Carr exclaimed, "Are they in a fit state to tell us anything?"

"They are not lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "I believe that the captain is joking with you."

"This dog's alive isn't she?" Heart asked.

"A dog?" Carr responded upon hearing this.

At that point Heart activated his own communicator.

"Look commander, this place is dead." he said, "Whatever happened here, we missed it and by my watch it'll be dark soon. We need to fall back to the *Nightfall* and start searching the surrounding area as soon as it gets light again. We can transfer all the records back up to the ship for study and I'll have a platoon of my

men secure this place.”

“Here you go kid.” Heart said, tossing the vine sample to Nikki when he saw her waiting for the away team in the transporter room. But it was not the sample that caught her attention, instead she immediately focused on the dog.

“Oh she's so cute.” she exclaimed, “What's her name?”

“Actually we don't know.” Heart replied, “She's got a collar, but no name tag.”

“Can we keep her mom?” Nikki asked, looking up at her mother.

“No.” Carr replied, “Neither of us has the time to be looking after a dog. Now take that sample Captain Heart's kindly given you and go do your assignment.”

Nikki frowned and then without saying another word to her mother she left the transporter room.

“I think I better get our guest here somewhere out of the way.” Heart said, looking down at the dog.

“And do it quickly.” Carr told him, “The captain will want a full report on what we found down there.”

As The Controller had feared the newcomers were reinforcing their presence on the planet, but for the time being at least they seemed to be keeping to the confines of their outpost. The Controller's ability to monitor events inside the outpost was being degraded however, as the MACOs deployed to secure it inadvertently destroyed the camouflaged surveillance equipment that it had put in place. The main issue facing The Controller however, was what to do about the orbiting starship. The handful of troops currently deployed could be overrun easily if needed, but the Starfleet vessel orbiting above the outpost would still be able to retaliate. The Controller's facility had weapons of its own of course, but these had not been used in a long time and it was doubtful that they could be brought into position for use before the *Nightfall* was able to detect them and take precautions or even launch a preliminary strike on the facility.

For now at least The Controller would continue to wait and watch, hoping that the unexplained loss of the outpost's original occupants would convince these newcomers that the planet was too much trouble and that they would just move on. But just in case they decided to literally follow in the footsteps of the outpost crew The Controller began to assess its tactical options.

"Caving?" Edwards asked when T'Lan explained what she had found in the outpost records. The captain had gathered all of his senior officers together with the exception of White whose squadron was still acting to deter the Cardassian attack ship from returning.

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied, "The outpost records indicate that a group of the outpost crew had taken up exploring the cave systems in the surrounding areas and that a small group of them was reporting missing shortly before all entries in the outpost logs ceased."

"Do the log mention a rescue mission?" Carr asked and T'Lan nodded.

"Yes lieutenant commander. Although the missing group had a habit of not leaving behind a detailed account of where they intended to explore the outpost commander did assemble several other groups to search for them. All were well equipped but the outpost logs stopped before any mention of whether or not they found anything."

"Scanning from orbit may not be an option." West said, "We've found no signs of survivors at the outpost-"

"At least not human ones." Heart muttered and both Hamilton and Shry smirked while West ignored the interruption and continued.

"-and there's no reason why anyone should have survived elsewhere. Without actual life signs to search for, all we're trying to find are chemicals that could come from any number of sources. Every dead animal in scanning range with a biology even remotely similar to human would show up. Added to which there is always difficulty in trying to penetrate thick layers of rock with sensors. Especially on a world like this that hasn't had metal deposits removed from the upper layers of the crust."

"So it has to be a physical search then?" Edwards asked and West nodded.

"I'm afraid so." she replied, "We can still use some sensor sweeps from the ship, but tricorders are likely to be of more use."

Edwards looked at Cole and Heart.

"Gentlemen, in that case it looks like its up to you two to organise it." he said.

"Shouldn't be too much trouble." Cole said, looking at Heart, "If we use every member of my department and every MACO that gives us just over two hundred bodies."

"I would not advise limited the search teams to just MACOs and security captain." T'Lan said, "Including a broader range of skills is advisable."

"So each group includes someone from operations, sciences and medical." Carr said, "Plus anyone else who wants to volunteer."

"Me. I will." Nayal said, raising her hand.

"Do you have experience with surface operations?" Heart asked.

"Well I was born on a planet and lived most of life on one." she replied, "But frankly I could really do with getting off this ship for a while. It's not like I'm welcome at a lot of places we visit."

"I'm sure she'll do fine." Edwards said.

"You still have the problem of finding enough doctors." King pointed out, "You really need a fully qualified doctor for each search team and there are only three of use aboard."

"Four." Hamilton responded.

"That berk Mackey is not a doctor." King hissed, "He's just a councillor and not a very good one at that. Frankly I'd rather trust in the therapeutic value of stroking that dog Heart found down there for half an hour than in any of his so-called expertise."

"I wasn't meaning Lieutenant Mackey." Hamilton said, "I was talking about-"

"Oh no." King interrupted, "Not her either."

"Are you referring to the emergency medical hologram lieutenant?" T'Lan asked Hamilton. Like most Starfleet vessels the *USS Nightfall* was equipped with an advanced artificial doctor that was generated using the same technology as went into the ship's holodecks. Normally an EMH was restricted to operating only in areas of the ship where holo-emitters were installed, in the case of the *Nightfall* this meant in sickbay and on the holodecks only. However, a few months earlier Max and T'Lan had created a physical body out of a synthetic flesh that the crew had discovered in use by an alien force that used it to enhance the reanimated corpses they turned into their agents and this would allow the *Nightfall's* EMH, known as Emma, to move to other areas of the ship as well as to leave it entirely.

"Yes he bloody well is." King said sternly, "But it doesn't matter because that body you and Max made for her was damaged. It's still in my morgue."

"Actually doctor, T'Lan and I repaired it." Max said, "The body in your morgue is fully functional."

"Oh that's just great." King exclaimed, "Why wasn't I informed? I'm supposed to know the condition of every piece of medical equipment aboard this ship."

"As you have pointed out before doctor, you had nothing to do with the creation of the body and therefore it is not equipment that belongs to the medical department." Max explained.

"Captain you can't allow this." King said to Edwards, "I thought the aim was to prevent that EMH from becoming self aware and the more we expose it to anything other than what it's programmed for the more likely that becomes."

"Doctor, it was your idea to send her to the *Magellan* to treat the victims of the fire." Carr reminded him, referring to an emergency that the *Nightfall* had responded to.

"This could be a matter of life and death." Edwards said.

"It always is." King replied, "That's what we do for a living and if we're not careful then sooner or later the decision is going to be taken to leave the EMH running in that body full time and then it's only going to be a matter of time before Mackey announces that she's alive."

Edwards sighed. The legal complexities of dealing with artificial life forms were not something he wanted to have to face. But with two thousand people missing, to ignore a potentially powerful resource for the sake of simplicity was not something that the captain thought he could justify.

"Reactivate the EMH's body." he said, "Right now finding out what's happened here is more important than concerns over the EMH."

"As you wish captain." King said.

"Indeed. Now I want all search teams ready to deploy by oh-six hundred tomorrow morning. I think that should coincide with dawn yes?" Edwards said and he looked at T'Lan.

"Sun rise is oh five fifty-three captain." she replied.

"Good. Then I'm going to turn in." Edwards said.

"Sounds good to me. Think I'll join you." Carr added and there were smiles from around the table, "Oh, not like that." she exclaimed.

"Hey, we're not judging you." Shry said.

"Speak for yourself." Nayal commented.

Next morning the search teams beamed down ahead of their leaders who gathered together in one of the *Nightfall*'s transporter rooms to finalise their plans.

"I've marked areas for each of us to search." Heart said as he gave out PADDs to Carr, Cole and Hamilton.

Though Lieutenant Hamilton's area of expertise was in starship piloting he was next in the chain of command after Carr and Cole and so was the natural choice to lead one of the search teams.

"Looks straight forwards enough." Cole replied.

"Maybe we'll all find ourselves a pet." Hamilton added, "Have you come up with a name for that dog yet?"

"I'm not keeping it." Heart replied, "But until we can hand it over to a shelter us MACOs and the Imperial Guard are looking after it."

"So do you have a name for it?" Hamilton asked again.

"Actually there has been one suggestion." Heart said, "I mean it's a bitch and it has these little ears that stick up so-"

Carr gasped.

"You are not calling it T'Lan." she exclaimed.

"Actually we were thinking of Tinkerbell." Heart said, "You know, like the fairy from-"

"Yes. I know." Carr said.

"But T'Lan sounds way better now you've suggested it. Thank you commander, I'll pass along your recommendation." Heart said as he stepped onto the transporter pad.

"Oh God, what have I done?" Carr said.

Each search team consisted of around fifty people, made up of a MACO platoon or Starfleet security force plus additional Starfleet personnel whose expertise it was felt could assist in the operation. While four such groups would head out on foot from the outpost a force of Starfleet security personnel would remain there to act as a support group as well as to continue to search for clues about what had happened. Meanwhile the *Nightfall* would conduct scans and co-ordinate the various groups' actions from orbit while in the absence of the ship's fighter squadron the shuttles carried by the ship flew low level aerial patrols, ready to guide the ground teams towards anything of interest.

Heart led his team north and as soon as they left the open ground in which the outpost stood and entered the wooded terrain that surrounded it he noticed something odd. Breaking off from the team he walked up to the nearest tree and ran his hand across its trunk.

"Problem?" West asked him.

"The vines." he replied.

"Err captain, there are no vines on that tree." West said.

"Exactly." Heart said, "But there are hundreds along the ground running towards the outpost where they did scale vertical surfaces." then he looked around to where T'Lan and Emma were, "Hey you two!" he called

out, "Yes you, come over here and take a look at this for me."

"How may I help you captain?" T'Lan asked.

"I need your opinions on this tree. "Heart said," Why aren't the vines growing on it?"

"It's really big isn't it?" Emma said as she tilted her back. Then she suddenly added, "Wow, I don't think I should try bending my neck that far back. Sorry, but I'm still getting used to this whole physical body thing."

"There are many species of tree that grow to larger sizes than this one." T'Lan said as she waved her tricorder towards the trunk, "In fact I can find nothing remarkable about this particular species at all."

"What. Nothing in the bark to prevent the vines latching on?" West asked.

"No lieutenant." T'Lan said and she turned and pointed to another tree some distance away, "If you look at that one over there you will see that it is the same species, but that there is a significant parasitic fungal growth on one side of the trunk, suggesting that this species has no specific immunity to other life forms latching on to it."

"So why haven't any vines grown on them at all?" Heart asked and T'Lan crouched down to where a cluster of them made its way across the ground running back the way they had come from the outpost.

"My scans do not indicate anything out of the ordinary Captain Heart." T'Lan said, "Though I cannot identify the species, these vines appear to be perfectly normal. Though from visual evidence they clearly possess a rapid growth rate. If the reason for that could be determined then it could be of benefit to increasing crop yields on many worlds."

"That would get Nikki an 'A' grade." West added.

Heart looked around and almost everywhere he could see there were vines making their way across the ground almost like a river flowing towards the outpost.

"I want to find out where they're coming from." he said.

"You think that they're important?" West asked.

"Possibly." Heart said, "Now let's move out, we're heading that way."

The scientific facilities aboard the *Nightfall* were primarily geared towards physics and engineering to assist the crew in testing the functionality of the unconventional vessel, but the more limited biology lab was still enough for Nikki to make use of in her assignment. She carefully sliced a small part of the vine sample that Heart had brought back from the surface for her to study and placed it under the scanner, turning it on and studying the screen.

"That's weird." She said to herself and then she picked up a PADD to refer to the entry on botany. She was soon able to locate a diagram of a plant cell that had each element clearly labelled and it was immediately obvious to Nikki that she was not looking at the cell of any plant. Then she called up an image of an animal cell and it too did not match what she was looking at. There were several other types of cell from more exotic life forms, but each one Nikki checked failed to match what she was looking at on the scanner, "What are you?" she said as she turned back to the sample resting in a small plastic tray and she picked up a laser cutter and began to slice the whole sample lengthways, right down the middle. Then she placed one of the halves under the scanner and zoomed in for a close visual inspection. There at the very core of the sample she saw clusters of cells that were a distinctive milky white colour and she gasped.

The Controller was watching the progress of all four search teams as well as the shuttles providing the ground teams with aerial support and a fifth team on the ground that had remained at the outpost. This fifth group was occupying its time by doing everything they could to return the outpost back to its former condition and this was limiting The Controller's ability to monitor them as more and more of its surveillance system was disabled. But of greater concern than this damage was the search teams spreading out away from the outpost, doing just what the original outpost occupants had done. However, whereas the outpost crew had despatched small groups into the wilderness, this time the groups were large and appeared to be well armed. Judging by their appearance the search teams appeared to be made up of two different groups of people. Some wore mainly black clothing with coloured markings while the rest wore patterned clothing that looked designed to blend in with the wearers' background. This second type also wore armoured vests and helmets whereas those in black appeared to wear no armour at all.

One of the four search teams in particular seemed to be advancing directly towards one of the ways leading to The Controller's facility and The Controller focused its attention on what looked to be the leaders of this group. One of them was armoured while the other three were dressed in black, two with blue markings and one with yellow. All of a sudden something about one of these individuals in black caught The Controller's attention. Ever since the Controller had been sent to this remote facility to keep it operational it had been alone. But now it appeared that another vessel for one of its kind had arrived and The Controller considered trying to make contact to co-ordinate attempts to drive off the newcomers. However, it did not take long for The Controller to realise that there was something amiss about this particular vessel. Though apparently ready to host one of its kind there was no trace of such a presence, the mind controlling it being radically different to The Controller's. This raised more questions about the vessel. Where had it come from? Did the

beings accompanying it know about its true nature? And if it came down to it, what would its allegiances be?"
The Controller resolved to monitor this individual more closely.

"Captain!" Nikki exclaimed as she burst out of the turbolift onto the bridge.

"This area is restricted." Shry responded sternly as he glared at her. The Andorian was sat at tactical, taking Cole's place while the entire security division was occupied on the planet below.

"Nikki what are you doing here?" Edwards asked, getting out of his seat and walking towards her.

"Captain I need to speak with you right now." Nikki replied, "I think that everyone on the planet is in danger."

"Nikki calm down." Edwards said, "Now why couldn't you just use the intercom?"

"Because you have to see this." Nikki said and she held up the plastic container holding the sample of vine, "It's important. I promise I'm not wasting your time."

"Come with me. We'll deal with this in my ready room." Edwards said. Then instinctively he looked towards the tactical station and was about to tell Shry that he was now in command before it struck him that although the Andorian's rank in the Imperial Guard was higher than anyone else on the bridge other than Captain Edwards himself he was not a Starfleet officer and therefore could not be given command of a starship. So instead he looked at the helm station where a junior lieutenant from the command division was sat,

"Lieutenant you have the bridge." he said, "Let me know if anything happens."

"Yes captain." the man replied as Edwards led Nikki into his ready room.

"Okay so what's this all about?" Edwards asked Nikki as soon as the door slid shut behind them.

"Look." Nikki replied, thrusting the sample towards him and also holding out a handheld magnifier, "Look at the middle and tell me what you see."

Edwards took the sample case and magnifier and examined it closely, focusing on the centre of the sample where it had been sliced in two just as Nikki said.

"Good grief." he said, suddenly lowering the magnifier and sample. Then he lifted them again and took another look.

"So you think it's that stuff as well then." Nikki said.

"Yes. Yes I do." Edwards replied, "But I need to be sure that this is not just some weird alien plant cell." and he tapped his combadge, "Max, meet me in my ready room immediately." he said.

"Yes captain. I am on my way." Max replied.

It was only a short time later that the door leading to the bridge slid open and Max stepped into the captain's ready room.

"Nikki?" he said when he saw her, "What are you doing here?"

"Nikki has just brought this to my attention." Edwards replied, holding out the sample container and Max took it from him. Max held the sample close to his cybernetic eye, letting the Borg implant carry out an extensive scan of the sample at a cellular level, "Well?" Edwards asked, "Is that what Nikki and I think it is?"

"If you mean is it the same alien synthetic flesh we have been studying then the answer is yes captain. Though I have never seen it in this configuration before." Max replied.

"That was what I was afraid of." Edwards replied, "Come on." and he strode back onto the bridge, "Red alert."

he said, "All crew to battle stations."

Immediately a klaxon sounded as the *Nightfall* was brought to red alert.

"I better get back to engineering." Max said and he headed for the turbolift.

"I suppose I better go as well." Nikki added.

"Take a seat if you want." Edwards replied as he sat down and he pointed to the chair that Carr normally occupied.

"Captain, Starfleet regulations-" the helmsman began, looking around at Edwards.

"My ship, my rules lieutenant." Edwards said and looking at Nikki he added, "Call it a reward if you want."

Nikki grinned and darted to the chair.

"All decks reporting ready captain." Shry said from tactical, "Shields are up and weapons are armed."

"I want a full sensor sweep of the area." Edwards said, "Surface and space, main sensors and lidar."

"Commencing scan captain." the ensign at ops replied, "It would help if I knew what I was looking for."

"I'm not sure." Edwards replied, "But young Miss Carr has alerted us to the presence of the same alien force that appears to be set on infiltrating so many governments recently." then he glanced at Shry, "Captain I want you to order one of your platoons to deploy to the surface to support the people we've already got down there and I want them deployed with armoured transport."

"Yes captain." Shry replied with a grin. In addition to the two companies of infantry and the assault shuttles needed to transport them, the *Nightfall* also carried several ground vehicles to support them, including a small number of infantry fighting vehicles that were not only provided the infantry with armoured transport but were also well armed themselves.

"Hail Snowman and tell him to get back here as fast as possible. We may need the support of his squadron

and it doesn't look like the Cardassians had anything to do with this anyway. I need to speak to the search team leaders as well." Edwards added, "We need to warn them about what they could be facing."

"*Nightfall* to Heart." Edwards' voice sounded and Heart came to a halt.

"Heart here captain. Go ahead." he replied.

"Captain, we've got a problem." Edwards said, "That vine sample you brought back for Nikki turns out to be made from that synthetic flesh."

"Is she okay?" Heart asked, concerned that the discovery may have been made only after the synthetic flesh had somehow harmed Nikki.

"She's fine. In fact she's right here next to me." Edwards said, "But you need to be aware what we're dealing with. In fact we may even be dealing with one of their bases."

"Understood *Nightfall*." Heart replied, "As it happens that makes a lot of sense. I noticed that the vines were growing in an odd manner and we've been conducting our search by trying to follow them back to their source."

"Understood captain. Captain Shry is putting together an armoured platoon that will deploy to the outpost itself and help clear every trace of the vines from there and will also be available to support any assault on the enemy base when it is located. *Nightfall* out."

Heart looked down at his rifle and adjusted the setting of the phaser mounted beneath it. Because of the chance that they could encounter friendly civilians, no matter how slim that chance was, all the search teams both MACO and Starfleet had set their phasers to stun. However, experience had taught the crew of the *Nightfall* that a stun setting was useless against the reanimated corpses that had been turned into the alien agents that appeared to be responsible for the disappearance.

"Set phasers to level eight." he announced, "A stun setting isn't going to do you any good."

"What's going on?" Emma asked. Given that her programming did not include the use of any weaponry she was the only member of the search team who was unarmed.

"Remember that guy who beat you around the head?" West replied.

"Of course I do. He was most unpleasant." Emma said.

"Well it looks like people like him are responsible for what's happened here." West told her, "So maybe you'll get the chance to get some payback."

The Controller was concerned by the sudden change in the behaviour of the search teams, the team at the outpost and also their orbiting starship. The ship had suddenly raised its defence shields and was actively scanning the surrounding area with what looked to be great interest. The team clearing the outpost had of course been removing the vines that The Controller had been using to collect information on them as well as covertly interfacing with the outpost computer by connecting directly to its circuitry now they were exclusively concentrating on removing them. This included the use of the directed energy weapons they carried to incinerate large sections of vine at once. Finally all four of the search teams now appeared to be taking a distinct interest in the vines and where they led to. Matters became even more serious when the *Nightfall* lowered its shields just long enough to beam four armoured vehicles down to the surface and almost immediately they began using their powerful built in weaponry to remove even more of the vines. There was only one conclusion to all this. These newcomers had discovered the relevance of the vines and were attempting to determine their origin. This in turn could lead to one thing only. The newcomers would enter the caves just as the previous outpost occupants had done and eventually they would discover the facility.

Obviously action had to be taken to prevent the facility from being damaged or worse yet, falling into their hands. Fortunately the facility was not entirely undefended and in a room deep within it a hundred mechanical humanoid forms that had been knelt down with their head bowed suddenly came to life, getting to their feet as The Controller extended its control from just the facility's fixed systems to some of its more mobile ones as well.

"Over here!" one of the MACOs deployed ahead of the main search team called out, waving the others closer. The soldier was stood on a ridge that had a large number of vines growing over it and when the team's senior officers rushed to see what had been found they saw the vines vanishing into the mouth of a cave.

"Opinions?" Heart asked.

"Plants such as those the vines are mimicking should not grow in a darkened area such as a cave." T'Lan said, "Therefore it is illogical to have them growing into this cave if they are supposed to remain inconspicuous. Logically it is safe to assume that they are in fact extending out from the cave and their source lies within."

"You mean we've found what we're looking for?" West asked.

"I believe that is what I just said lieutenant." T'Lan replied.

"That's a matter of opinion." Heart muttered. Then in a louder voice he added, "So how about you scan inside that cave and see if there are any of those golems waiting for us?"

In this case 'golems' referred to aliens whose bodies were made entirely out of the synthetic flesh that the aliens made extensive use of. The featureless humanoids were known to be extremely dangerous at close quarters and had been given the nickname by the crew of the *Nightfall* in the absence of anything better.

T'Lan pointed her tricorder towards the cave entrance and the others waited while she scanned it.

"The results are negative captain." she said, "All I am detecting are readings consistent with plant life that I believe to be the vines since no other plants should be growing inside the cave."

"Okay everyone!" Heart yelled, "We're going inside that cave. Now be aware that this is likely to hostile territory so I want everyone to stay alert and we'll move as if we're under fire. Under no circumstances is anyone to go wandering off on their own. Understood?"

"Yes sir." the MACOs replied as one.

"And you?" Heart asked the Starfleet officers beside him.

"You can count on our people to behave captain." West replied.

"Good. Now get behind me and shut down any unnecessary equipment. The enemy may be able to detect it."

Rather than use the flash lights attached to their weapons the MACOs halted at the very mouth of the cave and hurled a chemical light stick inside. This illuminated the cave further in without making any of the MACOs in particular a target to anyone who could see the source of the light. The front rank of MACOs aimed their weapons into the cave, ready to fire on any threat revealed by the light stick. But all that was revealed was the vines running deeper into the cave until they vanished into the darkness.

"First squad on point." Heart ordered, "And remember check your targets. A stray phaser beam could bring the roof down on us all."

The first group of MACOs began to move forwards into the cave, spreading out into a line.

"Okay second squad follow." Heart added and more of his troops began to advance, "Right, now its our turn." he then said to the Starfleet officers accompanying him and he and he command section began to advance.

"I guess this means we follow." West said.

"That is the logical conclusion." T'Lan replied.

After the command section the rest of the MACOs brought up the rear, periodically pausing to turn and make sure that the search team was not being followed.

The Controller's sensors were passing it ever more alarming information. The first of the intruders was now in the cave network itself and were following the trail created by the vines that would lead them directly to the facility. However, the situation also presented the controller with an opportunity, one that would not only stall the advance of this unit but possibly also distract the others by forcing them to refocus their efforts on something other than the vines.

The search team now making its way through the cave were blindly following the vines, with no real knowledge of the layout of the rest of the caves. On the other hand The Controller had detailed maps of every passage and gallery and using this it could position its forces for maximum effectiveness. There existed a network of side passages that led away from the facility and if the intruders could be led there then The Controller knew that it would be possible to isolate them. But first they needed to be diverted from their current path and that would require some sacrifice.

The vines feeding information back to The Controller originated from several sources, created by means of highly advanced matter replication far beyond anything the Federation or its rivals had yet mastered and The Controller set into motion the production of yet more vines. These snaked out as if growing rapidly when in fact new material was being replicated to push the previously created matter further away. From the moment of creation The Controller had full control over the vines and it guided them through the caves, steering them off into the side passages it needed the search team to go down. At the same time The Controller ordered several of the robotic constructs it had activated to leave the facility and follow the path of the older vines. Each of these constructs was armed with an energy weapon mounted on one of its shoulders, while a second pair of arms that ended in curved blades was folded up along their backs. The constructs headed out for several hundred metres, making sure that they were positioned where there was no indication of the presence of the facility detectable to their sensors and it was here that each of them unfolded their bladed arms.

With powerful downward swings they severed the vines at their feet and as soon as each one was cut through The Controller retracted the stump, breaking down and reabsorbing the matter used in their creation so that it could be fed back into the creation of the newer set of vines. Then once all of the vines had been cut through The Controller moved its constructs into other passageways, leaving no evidence of their presence at all and only the severed ends of vines that could no longer lead the search team to the facility. Satisfied that everything needed was now in place, The Controller waited for the search team to reach the

end of the vines.

Emma staggered, reaching out for the cave wall to steady herself.

"I thought you were supposed to be in full control of your body now." West commented. When the EMH had first begun operating her physical body she had discovered that it was different to a holographic one that was relatively unaffected by things such as gravity, inertia and momentum. But following a few accidents it was a difficulty that she had soon overcome.

"I- I am." Emma replied, "It's just that I seem to be having trouble telling all my various bits what to do. Do you ever have that problem?"

"Only when I'm drunk." West said and she looked at T'Lan.

The Vulcan held up her tricorder and scanned first Emma and then the surrounding area.

"It appears that the rock strata features mineral deposits that are interfering with the EMH's remote link to the *Nightfall*." she said. When operating her physical body Emma's program was not actually downloaded into it, there being no computer small enough to allow such a complex adaptive program to run with current Federation technology. Instead Emma operated her body by means of a form of telepresence, using a wireless command link from the *Nightfall*'s computer to a transceiver unit in the body's skull.

"Hang on a moment." Heart said when he heard this and he activated his communicator, "Heart to *Nightfall*." he said and he paused, waiting for a reply. But when none came he turned to one of his command section and waved the man towards him. This particular MACO carried a bulky communication unit on his belt and anticipating Heart's requirement he held out the handset, "Heart to *Nightfall*." he repeated.

"Heart? Heart is that you?" Edwards voice replied. The signal was heavily distorted and filled with noise.

"Confirmed *Nightfall*. Be advised that we are underground in an area of heavy communication disruption. Do you read me?"

There was a burst of random noise in reply before Edwards' barely recognisable voice responded again.

"Understood captain. But be aware that we cannot get a transporter lock on your position."

"Copy that *Nightfall*. Heart out." Heart said and then he returned the handset back to the other MACO,

"Okay," he added, turning back to the Starfleet officers, "it looks like we're going to be on our own from now on." and he looked at Emma, "How much do you weigh?" he asked and she frowned.

"From what I know that's a very impolite question to ask a lady." she replied and Heart looked at T'Lan instead.

"Can we carry her if the link is fully severed?" he asked.

"Yes captain." T'Lan answered, "The physical body we created for the EMH primarily uses the synthetic flesh substance in its construction. The skeleton is a metal alloy, but its mass is still well within the normal range for a humanoid."

"Good." Heart replied, "If she collapses on us we'll use a stretcher to take her with us. Now let's keep going. These vines have to lead somewhere."

7.

The MACOs taking the lead soon discovered how wrong Heart's statement had been when all of a sudden the vines came to an end.

"Captain!" one called out as his squad took what cover they could, suspecting that this could be a trap, "You need to see this."

"What is it sergeant?" Heart replied as he advanced with T'Lan and West as well as his command section. "The vines sir. They just end here."

"What do you mean 'just end'?" Heart asked before he looked down and saw what the other MACO meant. "So much for them leading to whatever's responsible for the outpost's crew vanishing." West commented.

"This is interesting." T'Lan added as she crouched down to study the ends of the vines, directing her palm beacon straight at them, "These have been cut. The breaks are too linear to be caused by natural tearing."

"Yeah, I noticed that as well." Heart replied.

"They were cut recently." T'Lan said.

"How do you know?" West asked.

"Because whoever cut the vines could not avoid also striking the rock beneath them. This has damaged the rock surface. See?" T'Lan explained, shining her palm beacon at where the floor of the cave had been damaged.

"It's a different colour." West said.

"Which means that the rock hasn't been exposed long enough for it to turn the same colour as the rest."

Heart added and he looked back towards the rest of the platoon, "Okay look sharp." he announced, "There has to be someone else down here to have cut these vines and they could still be close by. I want a section from each squad to push out either side by fifty metres and report anything unusual."

The MACOs then began to spread out, each section picking a different side passage that they would have ignored had the vines continued any further. Meanwhile T'Lan activated her tricorder and tried scanning the surrounding area.

"The mineral deposits in these rocks are making scanning difficult." she said, "I am able to scan along the passageways, but the levels of reflected energy from the walls are making discerning relevant data difficult."

"Can you pick up anything?" West asked as she looked around, wondering what each darkened passageway may hold.

"Vine!" a voice suddenly called out from down one of the side passages that a MACO fire team had gone down. The soldiers had discovered the tip of a single new vine running down the middle of the passage and they halted their advance while they waited for further orders.

"Hold there." Heart replied, "We're on our-" but as he was speaking the MACOs had failed to keep watch on the vine and it unexpectedly lifted itself up off the cave floor and wrapped itself around the leg of the nearest MACO. Gripping the startled man tightly it pulled him off his feet and dragged him down the passageway at speed. Crying out in alarm he dropped his rifle as he fell and was pulled into the darkness.

"Get after him!" Heart snapped as he arrived just in time to witness the MACO vanish from view and he bent down to scoop up the dropped weapon.

The MACO flailed his arms about as he was dragged through the darkness by the vine, desperately seeking any sort of handhold that he could use to steady himself. But with no light source to expose the features of the cave he was unable to find anything to grab hold of before the vine simply let go of him as abruptly as it had grabbed hold of him.

"Carter! Carter can you hear me?" Heart called out from somewhere in the distance.

"Yes captain." the MACO replied as he got to his feet and fumbled in his pouches as he looked for a chemical light stick.

"Where are you?" Heart yelled just as Carter found what he was looking for and ignited the light stick, filling the cave around him with a pale green light.

"Looks light some sort of chamber." Carter shouted and he began to turn around to fully take in his surroundings, "The cave opens out here into a-" and then he gasped as he suddenly found himself looking up into the face of a bulky four armed robot. Then he screamed as the construct swung one of its bladed arms down at him, piercing his armoured vest and impaling him through the chest.

The construct withdrew its blade, allowing the body of the MACO to drop to the floor and then it turned and strode towards an exit from the chamber. By the time the rest of the search team arrived it was already out of sight.

Seeing the body lay next to the light stick Emma rushed to the dead MACO's side and crouched down to inspect him.

"He's dead captain." she said, looking back at Heart, "Some sort of edged weapon."

"So it could be whoever cut through those vines." Heart replied as he looked around, his rifle held at the ready, "Everyone spread out and don't hesitate to open fire if you have a target."

The team formed a rough semi circle and began to move across the chamber, peering into the shadows that surrounded them where outcroppings of rock from the walls obscured the beams of rifle mounted lights and palm beacons.

"Blood." West called out when she glanced down and saw several spots of what looked to be fresh human blood on the floor of the cave. Then she shone her palm beacon around and saw more spots of blood forming a trail, "That way." she said, pointing her phaser in the direction the trail seemed to lead.

The MACOs all began to move in the direction of the trail and just moments later one of them shone his flash light at an opening in the cave wall that had the robotic construct responsible for the death of Carter standing in it.

"Contact!" he snapped and there was a flash of red light, accompanied by the familiar whine of a phaser beam as he opened fire. The beam narrowly missed the construct, striking the cave wall further back down the passageway it was stood in and blasting a large hole in it.

Heart fired next, but this time there was a roar that echoed around the cave as he instead opted to use his assault rifle on the construct. His aim was good, but the body of the machine was heavily armoured and the bullets failed to penetrate it.

The energy weapon mounted on the construct's shoulder swung into position and there was a brief hum as it built up power and then fired a pulse of bright blue energy that struck one of the MACOs, enveloping him in blue light that dissipated to leave behind no trace of the man at all.

"Behind us!" Emma suddenly yelled when she saw a second construct appear in the passageway that they had entered the chamber through and a moment later another MACO was vaporised by a blast of blue energy.

"Cover!" Heart yelled and the remaining members of the team dived for whatever cover they could find before returning fire again.

A beam from T'Lan's phaser struck the construct that had appeared behind them in its leg and the machine dropped to one knee. As it did so its energy weapon pivoted upwards and fired into the ceiling directly above it. The rock fractured as the energy was dissipated through it and there was an explosion that brought down the ceiling right above the construct, crushing it in an instant and burying the remains under tonnes of rubble. Following this a concentrated volley of phaser fire struck the first construct, blasting the energy weapon from its shoulder and taking off two of its arms. A third hit pierced the construct's head, destroying the various sensors located there while a fourth struck one of its hip joints and the machine collapsed.

The wireless link from the construct to The Controller listed the full extent of the damage, immobile and unarmed the machine was in theory now out of action. But The Controller could still make use of it in another way and the command was issued to overload the construct's internal power source.

Without warning the construct exploded, sending shrapnel in all directions. Already in cover and with most of them wearing body armour and helmets, the surviving members of the search team were unharmed by the detonation but The Controller had not intended for them to be killed by the blast. Instead the aim was to weaken the walls and ceiling of the passageway the construct was in and this was exactly what happened as all of them fell in, burying this construct as well and blocking the passage.

For a brief moment Emma's eyes widened before she toppled forwards and lay still.

"What happened?" West said, scrabbling to her feet and rushing over to the EMH's body.

"Was she hit by shrapnel?" Heart asked in response.

"No, no I don't see any damage." West replied.

"I fear that the answer is more serious than damage to the EMH's body." T'Lan said, "She has collapsed because her link to the *Nightfall* has been cut off. We appear to be trapped in this cavern."

Max's Borg implants allowed him unparalleled access to the *Nightfall's* computer system, assisted greatly by the nanite hive that swarmed through the ship's systems and given that the only other occasion on which Emma had used her physical body to leave the ship she had been assaulted and her body disabled he had made a point to monitor the EMH program this time. Therefore, when the link between the *Nightfall* and Emma's body was broken Max was aware of it immediately.

"Max to bridge." he said, activating his combadge without needing to tap it, "There may be a problem with the EMH."

"Define problem Max." Edwards replied.

"The link between here and the body on the surface has been broken captain. The EMH program is in standby again." Max explained.

"One moment Max." Edwards said and then he turned to the ensign at ops, "Get me Captain Heart's team." he said.

"Err, I can't seem to raise them captain." the ensign replied.

"Are you using MACO frequencies?" Shry asked from tactical, "The MACO platoon communicator has better

range and transmission power than Starfleet combadges.”

“Yes sir, I've tried Starfleet and military frequencies.”

“What does that mean?” Nikki asked from beside Edwards, “Are they all dead?”

“A platoon of MACOs doesn't go down easy.” Shry commented.

“They may just be cut off by the minerals in the cave structure.” Edwards said, “But there's one sure fire way of finding out.” and then he returned to the intercom channel to Max, “Max, meet me in sickbay.” he said, “Captain Shry, you too.”

“What about me?” Nikki said.

“You better come as well. Or least head back to your quarters. I can't really leave you here on the bridge.” Edwards said.

“If something's wrong with Emma I want to know what.” Nikki replied. It was she that had first coined the name for the EMH and she had developed a liking for the program's persona.

Max met Edwards, Shry and Nikki in the corridor outside sickbay.

“Any more information?” Edwards asked.

“Negative captain. The EMH program code appears to be intact.” Max replied just as the doors to sickbay slid open in front of them.

“Good.” Edwards said. Then in a clear voice he added, “Computer, activate emergency medical hologram.”

“Please state the nature of the medical emergency.” Emma said as she appeared in holographic form only in the middle of sickbay.

“Emma! You're okay!” Nikki exclaimed.

“Of course I am.” Emma responded, “Nikki, I do hope you're not here pretending to be ill to get out of schoolwork again.”

Nikki frowned.

“What happened on the planet?” Edwards asked, “What broke the link between your and your physical body?”

“My physical body? Oh yes, we were underground and I remember things being fuzzy because of all the rock between here and there. Then I remember us being attacked.”

“Attacked?” Shry said, “By whom?”

“I do not know.” Emma replied.

“Think Emma.” Edwards said, “The search team is cut off so you're the only witness we have to what happened.”

“Well of course they're cut off. The passageways collapsed.” Emma said.

“Collapsed?” Nikki responded, “You mean they're all buried alive down there?”

“I'm not sure. I don't think so.” Emma said, “I just remember there being two passageways that led into a large cavern that a MACO named Carter had been dragged into by a vine and killed. Then when we went to find him we were ambushed by two robots. They caused the passageways to collapse and the search team is trapped in the cavern.”

Edwards looked at Max.

“Lieutenant, is there some way that we can locate the team using the EMH's memory?” he asked.

Max considered this for a moment.

“I think so captain.” he replied, “The EMH is designed as an adaptive program, so it stores everything it experiences so that it can learn from the data. This means that we may be able to recreate the path taken by Captain Heart's team from the EMH's memory.”

“What about these robots?” Shry asked, “Can we get information on them?”

“Providing the EMH saw them, yes.” Max replied, “A recreation on the holodeck may be possible.”

“Do it.” Edwards said, “I want the location of that team as soon as possible. Meanwhile I'm going to alert the others to be on the look out for any more of these robots.”

Nikki then noticed the stern expression on Emma's face.

“Emma, what's wrong?” she asked.

“They keep calling me 'the EMH'.” she replied, “I have a name you know.”

“The mineral composition of these rocks makes it impossible for my tricorder to get an accurate reading on the distance that either passageway is blocked for.” T'Lan said, folding up her tricorder and returning it to her belt.

Heart frowned and folded his arms, staring at the rubble blocking one of the exits.

“Well even if we could communicate with the *Nightfall*, we already know that they can't beam us out.” he said,

“We may just have to sit here and wait until they figure out that we've gone missing and come looking for us.”

“That may be what the personnel of the outpost thought.” T'Lan said, “It is not impossible that we have fallen victim to the same sort of trap that they did.”

“You mean we really are stuck here?” West said.

"Maybe." Heart replied, "For now at least." then he frowned, "Are you okay?" he asked West, "You look pale and you're shaking."

"I'm fine." West answered, "I just really want to get out of here." then she drew her phaser and adjusted it to its maximum setting, "Stand back." she said, "I'll clear the way out."

"Wait no!" Heart exclaimed and he leapt forwards, grabbing hold of West's hand so that she could not aim the phaser at the collapsed passageway.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, "I need to get us out of here."

"You'll bring the whole roof down on us." Heart replied, sternly.

"I need to get out here! I can't breathe in this place!" West snapped, "Let go of me!"

It was then that T'Lan stepped forwards, reaching out and placing a hand at the base of West's neck and applying pressure. West gave out a gasp and the phaser dropped from her hand before she slumped forwards into Heart who caught her.

"Thanks." he said to T'Lan, "That could have been unpleasant."

"She needed to be disabled and given your proximity to her a phaser shot would have risked hitting you as well. Using a nerve pinch to incapacitate her was the logical solution." T'Lan said.

"So how long will she stay out for?" Heart asked, lowering West to the ground and then retrieving her phaser.

"I estimate that she will regain consciousness in about half an hour." T'Lan told him.

"Hmmm. That's not long for us to find a way out of here and if she freaks out again then she'll need taking down again." Heart said.

"I would not recommend repeated use of nerve pinches." T'Lan said.

"Phaser stuns can be nasty as well." Heart added and he sighed. Then he looked at one of the other MACOs stood close by, "Grab some tape." he said, "She needs to be secured by the time she wakes up. In the mean time we need to see if there's another way out of this place we haven't found yet."

a.

"Have you got them?" Edwards asked as soon as he stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge.
"Yes captain." the lieutenant at ops replied, "Commanders Carr and Cole and Lieutenant Hamilton are standing by."

"Excellent." Edwards said, taking his seat at the centre of the bridge before addressing the three team leaders, "I'll try and keep this brief." he told them, "We've lost contact with the team led by Captain Heart."
"Do you know what happened to them?" Cole asked in reply.

"Our information is limited. Emma's link to her physical body was severed and her program defaulted back to the *Nightfall's* computer. According to her the team was ambushed by two robots of some sort that caused parts of the caves they were searching to collapse and seal the team in. Apparently they were lured into the trap by a vine dragging off one of their party, so be careful around them. We know that the team has suffered casualties, but we don't know anything about their current condition."

"Where are these caves?" Carr asked and Edwards looked at the ensign at ops and nodded.

"We're sending you the last co-ordinates we had for them." he said, "But be advised that the rock structure blocks communication and transporter functions."

"Captain, my team is about an hour from that location." Hamilton said.

"We can be there in just under two." Carr added.

"Good." Edwards replied, "I want both of you to take your teams and try to locate Captain Heart's. Max and Shry are working on getting us more accurate location data from Emma's memory and we'll send it down to you as soon as we have it."

"What about my team captain?" Cole asked, "We're at least three hours march from those co-ordinates."

"I want you to fall back to the outpost." Edwards said, "Hook up with the Imperial Guard forces there, take command and be ready to move out. They've got their own transport and I'm sure you can find some vehicles around the outpost to move your own team."

"Understood captain, we're on our way." Cole replied.

The Controller studied the effects of the ambush carefully. The loss of the team in the caves had not gone unnoticed by those still on the surface and now more of them appeared to be closing in on the caves. Most importantly though, the team in the caves that had represented the greatest threat to the facility were contained. The Controller would have preferred to have them all dead, but for now at least they were no threat. One unusual thing that The Controller had noticed about this time though was that the storage vessel it had detected was no longer active, having suddenly gone into standby and The Controller wondered whether the other team members had suspected the carrier of the vessel of having betrayed them and had turned on them. However, compared to the safety of the facility itself, an empty vessel was irrelevant and The Controller would take no action to try and recover it. Instead it would focus its efforts and resources on dealing with the other search teams.

Approaching from below the orbital plane of the Lasner system, White's fighter squadron was able to drop out of warp much closer to the *Nightfall* than if they had tried to make their way between the outer planets and two asteroids belts.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman. We are on approach, request lowering of shields and landing instructions." he transmitted.

"Affirmative Snowman." Edwards replied, " But be advised that I need you to divert and provide close air support for our landing parties."

"Copy that *Nightfall*." White said, "We'll refuel and be ready to launch again within the hour."

Seeing a cluster of vines poking through the grass at his feet, King knelt down and held his tricorder close to them.

"Something wrong doctor?" Carr asked him.

"No, not really." King answered without looking up as he continued to scan the vines, "But I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to take some readings of how something that the aliens have made out of this artificial flesh operates. So far we've just got what scans have been taken of the EMH and some data returned from nanites that Max injected into one of those golems."

"Well just remember what the captain said." Carr replied, "Those things can be dangerous."

"Lieutenant commander, I doubt that these particular vines pose much threat. I'm reading a low level data transfer as far as I can scan in both directions. That means we're no where near either-" and then he stopped speaking and suddenly got to his feet and drew his phaser.

"What's wrong?" Carr asked, her hand reaching for her own weapon.
"I'm picking up energy readings in that direction." King replied and he pointed with his phaser. Carr turned to look in that direction, but the terrain and vegetation obscured whatever the source was from view.
"Lieutenant!" she shouted and the commander of the MACO platoon that made up the bulk of her team turned and rushed towards her.
"Yes ma'am?" the woman asked.
"Doctor King has detected energy readings in that direction." Carr told her.
"They're in motion." King added, "Moving towards us and spreading out."
"Like they know we're here and are trying to surround us?" the MACO officer asked.
"Yes. Yes it does look that way." King said, looking at his tricorder again and he frowned.
"Another problem?" Carr asked him.
"Maybe a solution." King replied and he aimed his phaser down at the vines. The unexpected burst of phaser fire immediately attracted the attention of the rest of the party, some of who turned to face in King's direction while others just dropped down and searched for any signs of attack from other directions. King held his finger on the trigger button of his phaser, sweeping it along the vines as the vegetation surrounding them was burned away. Then when he had cleared the vines as far as they went in one direction he turned around and fired another sustained burst in the other, incinerating the vines that way as well.
"What was that for?" Carr demanded.
"It occurred to me that those things could be carrying data about us back to wherever they originate from."
King replied, "Now maybe we can move about unseen."
"Okay MACOs!" the platoon commander shouted, "You heard the commander, let's move out and stay alert. We may have hostiles closing from the north-east." then when she was dissatisfied with the speed at which the MACOs reacted she added, "Come on people. The King has spoken."
"Yes he has." Carr muttered as she looked at the charred remains of the vines and also the vegetation that had been closest to them.

The first thing West saw when she woke was Emma lying beside her. The EMH's body had been strapped to a stretcher and looked as if she was sleeping peacefully. The next thing to occur to West was that she couldn't move. Lifting her head she saw that she too had been strapped to one of the stretchers the MACO platoon carried with it, but unlike Emma's body her own had been covered with a blanket from the neck down. Furthermore, the straps designed to keep someone from falling off the stretcher while it was being carried or lifted could not account for how little motion she had.

"Lieutenant West, how are you feeling?" T'Lan asked and turning her head as much as she could, West saw the Vulcan sat on a nearby rock.

"What happened to me?" she asked.

"You were about to use your phaser in an unsafe manner and I was forced to incapacitate you." T'Lan replied.

"Incapacitate? Is that why I can't move?"

"No." T'Lan said, "Captain Heart ordered you restrained to prevent you from continuing to act in such a manner. Your limbs have been bound with tape. The captain believed that concealing this with the blanket would be less undignified for you. However, I feel I ought to warn you that should you continue to be disruptive then I have been authorised to gag you as well."

"Oh that's comforting." West said sarcastically.

"It is good that you feel that way." T'Lan replied, failing to understand West's meaning.

Just then Heart came walking towards them.

"Ah, you're awake." he said and then he glanced at his watch and looking at T'Lan he added, "Forty minutes. You said half an hour."

"I did say approximately." T'Lan responded, "There was a degree of uncertainty."

"Whatever." Heart said, "Sergeant Frost has found a fissure in the wall. Can you go check it out and see if it's a way out of this place?"

"Of course captain." T'Lan replied, getting to her feet and walking off. As she left Heart took her place on the rock and looked down at West.

"So you seem a lot calmer now." he said, "Like to explain why you saw the need to try and bring the entire roof down on us?"

"It's stupid." West replied, sighing.

"I guessed that. But why did you do it?"

"It was the tube, okay?"

"The tube?"

"That tube I was stuck in when I was first found." West explained. Before the war with the Dominion, West had been a member of the Maquis and was captured and placed in suspended animation by the Cardassians and their Dominion allies. Revived ten years later she had been immersed in a fluid filled tube

for some unknown reason which was where the crew of the *Nightfall* had found her, "When I realised that we were trapped in here all I could think about was being stuck in that tube and wanting to get out." then she dropped her head back onto the stretcher, looking straight up, "Mackey's going to have a field day over this." "What's he got to do with it?" Heart asked.

"What's he got to do with it? It's been more than a year since I was freed and I think I just about had him convinced that I'm not a total lunatic. Now this happens. I can just picture him explaining why it's for my own good that he'll be increasing the number of times I have to see him each week."

Heart snorted.

"That guy doesn't have enough to do." he said, "We're not an exploration ship so we have plenty of opportunities to let off some steam before going stir crazy."

"Well he'll probably be making daily appointments for me now." West said and Heart smiled.

"Not if he doesn't know about it." he said, "And I don't see why anyone should tell him."

"Huh?" West replied, confused.

"Look lieutenant, from the sound of it you had a simple panic attack that you're clearly over now." Heart said before drawing his knife, "Now how about I cut you loose and we go see what Frost's found?"

"Do I get my phaser back?" West asked.

"Hell if I gave you your phaser after what you just did I'd be the crazy one." Heart told her.

The fissure that Frost had found was a crack about five centimetres wide at its widest point and more than a metre tall. Flash lights and palm beacons had been shone into the crack to try and determine whether it opened out further back into a passageway that the trapped search team could use to escape but this had been ineffective. Now T'Lan held her tricorder right up against the fissure, adjusting the emissions to try and find the one best suited to the local conditions.

"Found anything then?" Heart asked her as he and West approached.

"Not yet captain." she replied, "I am having trouble isolating a tricorder frequency that will not be distorted by the surrounding rock."

"Then we've got no choice." Heart said, "We'll just have to make that fissure a bit wider." and then he adjusted the phaser mounted beneath his rifle, "Okay, this is set to level six. Now I'm hoping that this wall is sound enough that I won't bring the roof down but I need you to tell me the instant you detect any signs of collapse. Understood?"

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

"Right then. Everyone else stand back." Heart said and he lifted his rifle to his shoulder, placing the muzzle right next to the fissure and then he fired. He kept the weapon firing as the rock around the muzzle glowed bright red and began to melt, widening the crack. The beam continued to bore into the rock, creating a hole that followed the fissure but was large enough for someone to stick their fist into. All the time T'Lan scanned the wall with her tricorder, watching for any sign that it was about to collapse while also monitoring the progress of the phaser beam.

"Captain cease fire now." she said suddenly and Heart released the trigger and looked round at her.

"Have I destabilised the wall?" he asked, concerned.

"No captain. Look." T'Lan said, shining her palm beacon at the hole he had just created and he peered inside. Now that the gap was wider it allowed enough light in to reveal that the fissure did indeed open out into a passageway about three metres back and Heart smiled.

"Sergeant Frost," he said, "I want this hole big enough for us to use as an exit in ten minutes. Lieutenant T'Lan will warn you if you're risking collapse so pay attention to what she says. Understood?"

"Yes captain." Frost replied.

"Good. In the mean time I'm going to make sure that everyone's ready to leave." Heart said and he began to walk away.

"So everyone gets to shoot phasers at rocks but me then, is that how this works?" West muttered.

Heart paused as he walked away and waved T'Lan over to him.

"Is there something you need me to do captain?" she asked.

"Actually there's something I'd rather you didn't do." he replied.

"I do not understand."

"When you make your report about everything that's happened here I want you to leave out anything to do with Jenna freaking out." Heart said and he glanced in West's direction.

"But why should that not be recorded?"

"Because it will just give Lieutenant Mackey the ammunition he needs to keep dragging her in for more of his pointless evaluations. If you ask me, they're stressing her out more than anything else. So can you keep what happened quiet? I know I can't order you to but--"

"Perhaps if Lieutenant West requires the assistance of a counsellor we should leave her to seek it privately rather than discussing her actions in public." T'Lan interrupted and Heart smiled.

"I totally agree lieutenant." he said.

With the vines closest to Carr's team destroyed, The Controller was limited to seeing through the eyes of the constructs advancing towards the team's last known location. Fortunately the designers of the robotic combat troops had thought to include a reasonable array of sensors. Deducing that the search team would have some way of detecting active scans, The Controller limited itself to the data that could be gathered passively.

Most of this was the collection of audio and visual data, but the constructs were also fitted with impressive thermal imaging equipment that functioned even during the day and as the constructs continued to advance they detected the unmistakable heat patterns of humanoids that had concealed themselves in the undergrowth. The uniforms and armour that the MACOs wore was designed to make them difficult to detect using thermal imaging, but it was still obvious that there were waiting up ahead. Their exact numbers and where they all were was impossible to tell.

The Controller brought most of the constructs to a halt, but kept four of them moving. It appeared that the search team had deployed to try and catch the constructs in an ambush and The Controller intended to exploit this to get some of his forces closer to them. Organic troops may have been reticent about advancing into what was so obviously a trap, but the constructs were mere puppets that The Controller was willing to sacrifice in their hundreds if it protected the facility in the long run. Therefore the four constructs still marching forwards using their bladed arms to hack through the undergrowth wherever it became too dense while their shoulder-mounted energy weapons rotated back and forth as they search for targets.

3.

"*Nightfall*, are you getting this?" King said softly as he held his tricorder around the trunk of the tree he was using as a hiding place.

"Affirmative doctor." Edwards answered, "How many do you estimate there to be?"

King looked at Carr who was positioned further forwards behind some bushes, looking back at him as she monitored the channel.

"The MACOs put the number at about two hundred captain." she said, "Anything you can tell us would be greatly appreciated."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall*, Edwards did not reply immediately. For a moment he just considered how relieved he was that Nikki was not still sat beside him to hear how badly outnumbered her mother's team was. Then he activated the intercom.

"Max, Shry, are you getting this?" he asked.

The two officers were both on one of the *Nightfall's* training holodecks studying the holographic recreation of one of the constructs that they had put together using the data recorded by Emma and the live feed from King's tricorder was being relayed straight to them.

"Yes captain." Max replied, "These machines appear to be identical to those that ambushed Captain Heart's team."

Edwards then looked at the ensign at ops.

"How long would it take to beam the entire team back to the *Nightfall*?" he asked.

"We would have to lower our shields-"

"Yes ensign, I understand that we can't beam through our own shields. Now how long will it take between me giving the order and that entire team being beamed back up here?"

"Err, ninety seconds captain." the ensign replied.

In theory to evacuate such a large group from the surface back to the ship in just ninety seconds sounded impressive. But that was ninety seconds in which the entire ship would be vulnerable to attack and for all Edwards knew the enemy had a large surface battery just waiting for him to order the ship's shields lowered. Added to which the bulk of the team were MACOs and being trained for combat duties it would probably not go down well with them to be evacuated without firing a shot.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr," Edwards said, "you may engage the enemy at your discretion."

"I don't like this." the MACO lieutenant told Carr, "Those four are heading right for us while the rest are hanging back. If we fire on the advanced scouts we'll give away our positions, but if we don't then they'll be right on top of us soon anyway."

"Then we need to take them out with the minimal amount of exposure." Carr replied, "What effect do you think that a photon grenade would have on them?" and the lieutenant smiled as she activated her communicator.

"First squad," she said, "set photon grenades to maximum yield and fire for effect. Starfleet wants to see what we can do." and a short time later there were two distinct popping sounds as the grenade launchers of the MACO squad each fired a single photon grenade towards the advancing constructs.

The Controller also heard the discharge of the grenade launchers via the audio sensors of the constructs still advancing and prompted by this commanded them to bring their active sensors on line as well. As soon as this happened The Controller saw the two small projectiles arcing towards the constructs and determined that the explosive yield of them was more than sufficient to destroy all four constructs. Calmly The Controller tracked the grenades as they began their downward travel and it backtracked along their trajectory to calculate their point of origin.

Moments later the grenades landed amongst the four advancing constructs and detonated, the energy released consuming all four and blasting them apart.

"Well done lieutenant." Carr said, smiling as she peered at where the four constructs had been just a few seconds earlier but then there was a pounding sound and as Carr looked around she saw the rest of the constructs advancing en masse, "Oh no." Carr added, "This doesn't look good." and at that moment the constructs opened fire.

The barrage of bright blue energy blasts ripped through the cover first squad was using before it tore through the MACOs themselves as well, their armour proving useless against the powerful weaponry. The MACOs and Starfleet personnel returned fire, mainly with phasers but there was also the distinctive 'crack' and rattling of automatic rifle fire.

"*Nightfall* we are under heavy fire!" Carr snapped, slamming her palm onto her combadge to activate it, "Request immediate fire support."
"Understood commander. Be advise that your are too close to the enemy for orbital fire." Edwards replied. "We need to fall back." Carr said to the MACO lieutenant, "If we can put enough distance between us and these robots we then the *Nightfall* can take them all out from space."
The lieutenant nodded and activated her own communicator.
"All squads stand by to withdraw two hundred metres. Break into fire teams and fall back alternately while the other provides cover." she ordered.
"I hope that's enough." King commented as he watched the constructs continue to hack their way through vegetation towards their position.
"It's the best we've got." Carr replied, "Now let's move."

Unlike the outpost crew that had been able to put up little resistance, the search team was putting up a significant fight against The Controller's constructs. Using a mix of energy weapons, projectiles and explosives they had been able to disable several of them. But the losses were insignificant and the Federation troops were falling back. Anxious to complete the task of wiping them out, The Controller instructed the constructs to continue their advance.

Cole rushed out of the outpost towards the row of armoured vehicles. The Andorian troops that were sat around them got to their feet as soon as they saw him appear, knowing that they were about to be called into action.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr's team is under attack." Cole called out, "Load up and move out. They need back up."

A blast of energy narrowly missed Carr and she turned to see the constructs getting even closer than they had been when the team had first begun to fall back. Clearly King's point about their ability to move quickly through the wooded terrain had been valid.

"If we keep on like this they'll just run us down." King said, firing his phaser into another of the constructs. "We need to find a defensible position." Carr replied and she pulled her PADD from her belt, calling up a map of the area and looking for anywhere that looked like a promising place to dig in against the constructs. Just then there was a roaring from overhead and Carr's combadge came to life.

"This is Snowman," White's voice said, "we're starting our run now. Take cover."

Carr looked upwards and through the trees she saw the familiar shapes of Peregrine-class fighters swooping down towards the ground.

"Down!" Carr yelled.

"Incoming!" the MACO lieutenant added as she too became aware of the approaching fighters and the team halted its retreat and sought cover.

The fighters flew low overhead, performing a single pass without firing as they scanned for targets.

Fortunately the constructs had all been firing their shoulder-mounted energy weapons and the heat that had built up in them showed up clearly to the fighters' sensors even through the cover of the surrounding trees.

Firing their thrusters, the twelve fighters pivoted while maintaining the same heading before suddenly accelerating back towards the constructs and this time they attacked.

Unlike the orbiting *USS Nightfall*, the smaller fighters could engage targets that were extremely close to the search team. Their attack was limited to phasers only, photon torpedoes being far too powerful to use against targets in such proximity to both the search team and the fighters themselves. But powered by the warp cores of the fighters their phasers were more than sufficient to slice massive scars in the forest below, incinerating both vegetation and machines as they swooped overhead at low level.

Seeing what was happening, The Controller shifted the focus of the constructs' fire from the search team to the fighters. But even their weaponry was insufficient to penetrate the fighters' shields, instead impacting harmlessly against the invisible barriers of energy that surrounded the small craft. Had the constructs been able to concentrate their fire on individual fighters for a reasonable amount of time they may have been able to overwhelm their shields, but the machines had only seconds to fire at them before they were overflown and the phaserfire from the skies consumed them all.

"Snowman to squadron, good work men. Return to holding pattern and I'll join you in a minute or so." White broadcast before turning his fighter around again and making another pass over the area of ground blasted by the fighters' phasers an this time he rolled his fighter as he went.

"Show off." King muttered as he looked up and saw White's victory roll through the pieces of ash that were now floating back down to the ground all around him.

Two MACOs carried Emma's inert form between them as Heart's team progressed down the passageway exposed on the far side of the fissure in the cave wall. There were no signs that anyone or anything else had

been down this passageway in a long time, the lack of tracks and vines indicating that this place was not used by the alien force that was seemingly hidden away somewhere in the caves. The problem was that the team was now effectively wandering around at random in the hope that they would find either some clue about what was going on or alternatively a way back out of the caves.

T'Lan shone her palm beacon across the walls again and she saw some strange growths poking out of some of the crevices in the rock. She had seen numerous fungal growths in the passageways but this appeared different and upon closer inspection she saw that these were a dark green in colour rather than the various pale greys of all of the fungus types she had seen.

"Found something?" West asked when she noticed that T'Lan had halted and Heart also stopped, signalled for the rest of the team to do likewise and turned around.

"I am unsure." T'Lan replied as she took out her tricorder.

"I thought that didn't work properly down here." Heart commented as he walked over to T'Lan and West.

"I only need to run a short range scan of this vegetation." T'Lan said, "Hopefully the minerals in the rock face will not interfere with that." then she paused and looked at the results of the scan, "This is not a fungus." she said.

"So?" West asked.

"So only a fungus can grow in complete darkness." Heart said.

"Precisely captain." T'Lan added, "If this plant has been able to grow down here then there must be a source of light, no matter how dim."

"Kill the lights." Heart ordered, "All of them. Come on, palm beacons, flash lights and any illuminated instruments."

The search team began to shut down every piece of equipment they carried that emitted any sort of light at all. Had they been deep underground and far from any exit this would have left them in pitch blackness, but instead even with their equipment turned off there was still dim light around them.

"It's coming from that way." Heart said when he saw the pattern of shadows on the wall.

"But what from?" West asked softly.

"Logically there are only two possibilities." T'Lan replied, "Either the light source is natural, which means that there is an exit close by or it is artificial. In which case there must be some technology close by that is emitting the light.

"Okay this is how we'll do this." Heart said, "Lieutenant T'Lan turns on her palm beacon and we go towards the light source about fifty metres before we stop and she shuts off the beacon. Then we see which way the light's coming from and repeat the process."

"That sounds reasonable." T'Lan responded.

"Good. Then let's get to it." Heart said as T'Lan activated her palm beacon.

Using her tricorder to monitor her motion T'Lan then walked fifty metres towards the light source and shut off the palm beacon again, prompting a few startled exclamations from the rest of the team as they were suddenly plunged into near darkness again.

"Perhaps you should warn us the next time you do that." Heart commented.

"If you say so captain." T'Lan replied, then she pointed down a side passage, "It appears that the light is coming from that way." she added.

"Not just light." West replied, "Don't you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Heart asked.

"Does anyone have a lighter?" West asked in response.

"My palm beacon is more than-" T'Lan began before Heart interrupted.

"No, I think I know what she means." he said as he rummaged for the lighter he kept in his webbing and then lit it. His face illuminated by the tiny orange flame, Heart then smiled as he saw it blowing in the breeze.

"Fresh air." West said and she took a deep breath.

"Air displacement could be created by machinery lieutenant." T'Lan pointed out.

"Well there's only one way to find out isn't there?" West replied and she reached out for the lighter, "Give that here." she said and when Heart gave it to her she began to follow in the direction of the breeze, using the tiny flame to light her way.

West kept going until she turned a corner and came to a sudden halt when she saw a shaft of light shining down into the cave that was clearly coming from the outside world above.

"It's a way out." she called out to the team following her.

"Wait here." Heart said, raising his rifle, "It may be guarded." then he waved two of his MACOs forwards to investigate.

The two soldiers advanced cautiously towards the light, pausing just as they reached the edge and then leaping forwards together and both pointing their weapons upwards.

"Clear." one called out, "There's a shaft that goes straight up."

"How far?" Heart asked as he walked towards them.

"I'd say about forty or fifty metres." the other MACO replied.

When Heart reached the bottom of the shaft he looked up and saw that the surface was indeed quite some distance above them. However, the shaft did appear to be quite wide which meant that two or three team members would be able to climb it at the same time.
“Okay,” he said, “anyone got any ideas on how we get a line up there?”

Hamilton led his team towards the cave entrance when Nayal suddenly tapped him on the shoulder.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?" Hamilton replied.

"Okay, so no." Nayal commented, "I heard voices. Over there."

"What did they say?" Hamilton asked.

"I couldn't tell. But these work far better than yours do." Nayal told him and she raised one hand to one of her pointed ears.

Hamilton looked around and considered how to proceed. His orders were to go to the last known location of Captain Heart's team, but this could be important.

"Okay we'll check it out." he said and he looked at the MACO platoon leader, "Lieutenant, we're heading that way. Tell your men to be careful though, there could be someone lying in wait for us."

The MACOs began to advance, spreading out to cover more ground. Hamilton and Nayal followed, both clutching their phasers. They halted when one of the MACOs stopped and crouched down, his fist raised up beside him. Then both Hamilton and Nayal darted towards him.

"What have you found?" Hamilton asked softly.

"There's a hole up ahead." the MACO replied.

"And I think I can hear voices from down it." Nayal added, "I think it's Captain Heart and T'Lan." she added with a smile.

"Somebody's obviously going to have to climb up there." Heart said, looking up the shaft.

"Free climbing a surface such as this is extremely hazardous." T'Lan replied.

"I know. But my men are trained for this sort of thing." Heart said, "We'll send someone up in a harness that we'll brace from down here. They can secure rope guides as they climb and if they should happen to fall then we can stop them before they drop too far."

"I would not advise such action captain." T'Lan said.

"Hello?" Hamilton's voice suddenly called out from the top of shaft and when Heart, T'Lan and West looked up they all saw him peering back down at them, "Are you all okay?" he asked.

"No. We've taken casualties." Heart replied, "We were ambushed."

"We know." Hamilton replied, "Emma told us."

"We require assistance in getting out this cave." T'Lan called out.

"What, no 'please' cousin?" Nayal asked, her face suddenly appearing beside Hamilton's, "I can see why that canine has been given its name."

"I do not understand that comment." T'Lan said.

"Never mind." Heart replied. Then he shouted up the shaft, "Can you toss us a line?"

"Stand back." Hamilton told him, "I'll see what we've got." then he looked around and beckoned the MACOs' platoon medic closer to him. Bemused the man approached and Hamilton began to go through his medical kit.

Waiting at the bottom of the shaft, Heart's team heard a 'thud' as something suddenly landed in front of them. But rather than the end of a rope it appeared to be a small plastic bottle. Confused, West stepped forwards to pick it up and examine it.

"Hand sanitiser?" she said and she looked upwards to where Hamilton was looking back down at her.

"It rubs the lotion on its skin or else it gets the hose again!" he shouted down at her and she scowled.

"Dammit Bradley, if you don't get us out of this hole then I swear I'm going to climb up on my own and kick your ass!" she shouted at him.

Grinning, Hamilton looked around and saw that Nayal was also staring at him.

"What?" he asked, "It was funny."

Nayal leant back over the hole, looking down at Heart and West.

"Would you object if I pushed Bradley into the hole?" she asked and Heart and West glanced at one another before responding simultaneously.

"No." they called out.

"Perhaps we ought to just drop them a line." Nayal said to Hamilton and then before he could respond she added, "By which I do not mean we should write them a letter and throw it into the hole."

Hamilton frowned and turned to the nearest MACO.

"Okay," he said, "throw them a line and let's get them out of there."

The Controller was concerned now. None of the *Nightfall's* teams on the surface were in locations where it

could monitor them. The vines and constructs that had been in position to spy on Carr's team were all destroyed, as were those at the outpost whereas Hamilton and Heart had been able to move beyond the area covered by the vines altogether. The vessel was still detectable by The Controller, but all that could reveal was a location when specifically connected to. Maintaining a continuous link to it would reveal little and there was the possibility that the signals could be detected.

There were many more constructs available for The Controller to use to try and locate the Federation teams, but that would mean weakening the defences of the facility that it was responsible for. Instead The Controller decided that since it was increasingly likely that the Federation would be successful in locating the facility it would concentrate on defending this position, including bringing some of the fixed weapons to a state of preliminary readiness. This would enable them to be made fully functional within a matter of minutes but not risk their detection by the orbiting starship.

T'Lan sat studying a sample of rock she had brought up from the caves while she waited for the rest of the team to be brought to the surface.

"Found something interesting cousin?" Nayal asked as she sat down beside T'Lan.

"We are not related." T'Lan said, repeating a reply she had given to Nayal on many occasions, however despite or maybe even because of this Nayal continued to address her by the term.

"Is that a yes or a no?" Nayal replied.

"It is a sample of the rock that made up the caves below." T'Lan said, "I think that it may explain the interference with our communications and transporters."

"It's just the minerals present in them isn't it?" Nayal asked.

"Correct. But there are no such mineral deposits recorded in the outpost records. This means that they are peculiar to this location."

Nayal frowned.

"How is that possible?" she asked.

"There are three possibilities." T'Lan replied, "All of which involve them being brought here from elsewhere. Option one is that the minerals were deliberately gathered and deposited here. Option two is that at some point in the past there was an asteroid impact that brought the minerals with them." T'Lan explained before pausing.

"You said three possibilities cousin." Nayal said.

"The third possibility is the most likely." T'Lan said, "The minerals I have detected are traces of those left behind by the use of atomic weaponry. Given the rate of nuclear decay I would suggest that approximately two hundred thousand years ago this area was subjected to a sustained nuclear bombardment that left behind the minerals as fallout. In time the rock formed around them and the caves as a result of natural erosion. The level of radioactivity is too low to be dangerous, but it can interfere with signals other than subspace ones unless there is material all around to simply trap them."

Nayal just stared at T'Lan for a few moments. Then she stood up and looking down at the Vulcan she said, "Do you know what you're saying? You're saying that two hundred thousand years ago there was something here that someone wanted to destroy but all they managed to do was bury it. Or at least part of it, maybe the rest did get nuked. But the point is that whoever's behind these reanimated corpses and fake flesh monsters has now moved in."

"Yes. That is correct." T'Lan replied calmly.

"Well, come on. We need to tell Captain Edwards about this."

"That would seem the correct course of action." T'Lan said.

The sound of powerful engines attracted the attention of Carr and her team. But these were just the engines of the armoured vehicles bearing the Imperial Guard troops accompanied by several lighter all terrain vehicles carrying Starfleet security personnel from Cole's team.

"Well it's about time you showed up." King called out to Cole as he disembarked from his vehicle, a lightweight four-wheeled buggy.

"Blame the terrain doctor." Cole replied, "These things can handle the ups and downs, but the trees still get in the way."

"Well your presence is very welcome. Those IFVs will give us some much needed fire power if any more of those robots show up." Carr added as she approached.

"So what's the situation at the moment?" Cole asked.

"The MACOs are doing a sweep over the area White's squadron blasted to make sure that none of the robots are still active." Carr replied.

"You think some may have survive a strafing run by a fighter squadron?" Cole said.

"Unlikely I know, but there's no sense in taking risks. Plus there may be some debris that can be recovered for study." Carr said.

"*Nightfall* to Carr." Edwards voice said from Carr's combadge.

"Here captain." Carr replied.

"Hamilton's team has located Heart's." Edwards said, "They don't seem to have suffered any more losses since the few they took in the ambush."

"That's excellent news." Carr said.

"Yes it is." Edwards said, "Now commander, do you think you can track where the force that ambushed you came from?"

"I don't think it will be too difficult." Carr replied, "All those robots hacking their way through the undergrowth will have left quite a trail."

"Good. Because T'Lan's found evidence of nuclear bombardment in the distant past and it appears that something managed to survive underground that our mystery aliens have now taken control of." Edwards told her, "I want you to lead a team to track the route taken by those robots back to their base. Now it's possible that Heart's team was getting close when they were ambushed but Max has been able to plot the exact location where this took place so we're going to use the *Nightfall's* phasers to bore down until we hit the caves and he'll take his men back in along with those from Hamilton's team. You'll have yours and Cole's teams, plus the reserve force from the outpost. I'm sending Shry down with more of his men as well to join you. But I want Cole back here, along with Hamilton and West from the team Heart will be commanding. If there's going to be trouble I want experienced officers up here on the bridge."

"Understood captain." Carr replied, "I'll await Captain Shry's arrival and tell Cole to be ready to beam back up to you. Carr out."

Hamilton and West carried the stretcher bearing Emma's inactive body a short distance from the hole leading down to the cave network, getting as far from the radioactive interference as they could without losing sight of the rest of the team.

"Let's hope here will do." Hamilton said as he set down his end of the stretcher and as West set down hers he tapped his combadge, "Hamilton to *Nightfall*, two, err, wait no, three to beam up." and then both he and West felt the familiar sensation of a transporter beam locking on to them.

When they materialised in the *Nightfall's* transporter room they saw that Cole had already been beamed up and he was speaking with Captain Shry and some of his men, all of who wore body armour in preparation for beaming back down to the surface.

"The captain wants us on the bridge as soon as possible." Cole said when he saw Hamilton and West, "I'm just briefing Captain Shry on what we've found and I'll be along shortly."

"Who are you calling 'Shorty'?" Hamilton replied and West groaned.

"We'll tell the captain." she said in reply to Cole's statement as she stepped off the transporter pad and then she headed for the transporter room door.

"I think that needs taking to sickbay." Hamilton added as he followed her, pointing to the prone body of Emma still strapped to the stretcher and the transporter technician nodded.

"I'll take care of it sir." he said.

Upon their return to the bridge Hamilton and West took their usual places at the helm and ops, putting on their headsets as they sat down.

"Mister Hamilton, I want the ship moving to the optimal position to provide orbital fire support to both teams on the surface." Edwards ordered, "And I also want to be notified immediately if our sensors pick up anything new." he then added, looking at West. Just then Cole exited the turbolift and Edwards turned towards him, "Lieutenant commander, bring all weapons on line and standby to fire phasers. We need a shaft digging forty metres down, after which Lieutenant T'Lan will give you further information from the surface."

"Yes sir." Cole replied as he took his seat, "I have the co-ordinates for the phasers. We'll be in position to fire for a thirty degree shaft in three minutes."

"Excellent. Lieutenant West please notify Captain Heart's away team to standby for the phaser strike and Lieutenant Commander Cole may fire at his discretion."

ii.

More than a hundred robots hacking and trampling a path clear did indeed leave a trail that was easy to follow. It also served to clear a route that was easy for the ground vehicles to follow and, since sensor readings from the hits inflicted on the fighter squadron still flying in a holding pattern until any targets revealed themselves indicated that the fire power of the constructs would not penetrate the frontal armour of these vehicles without striking the same spot repeatedly, it was decided that the armoured vehicles would lead the way.

The trail led as far as a lake, where the tracks of the constructs made it look as if they had simply marched out of the water and the armoured vehicles came to halt. Though amphibious, their occupants could not follow a trail where none existed and instead the force began to spread out, remaining just inside the treeline to conceal themselves as much as possible. Disembarking from one of the armoured vehicles Carr, King and Shry stood just beyond the trees however, looking out across the water while King held up his tricorder to scan the area.

"We'll have to send MACOs around either side of the lake." Shry said, "They've got the experience in this sort of terrain and they can report in when they find where the tracks led into the water."

"I'm not sure there's any need for that." King replied.

"Why not doctor?" Carr asked.

"Because this lake isn't real." King said and he held out his tricorder for the others to see.

"Not real?" Shry asked, "So how come this says that it's genuine water?"

"Oh the water's real enough." King explained, "But if you look around you'll see that there are no rivers leading into or out of this lake at all. Therefore it must be filled by surface water running off the surrounding terrain after it rains. That means that it would collect all of the minerals washed along with the water as well, but all I've been able to detect is good fresh water. I'd even say that it was drinkable."

"So how did it get here?" Carr asked and king smiled.

"It was replicated." he said, "Like the vines. I'd say that the mystery aliens have replicator technology that can project newly formed matter to remote locations."

"Sort of like a mix between replicator and transporter?" Shry responded.

"Exactly." King said.

"In that case the water could have been dematerialised for the robots to exit it and then put back." Carr said.

"Suggesting that there's an entrance to wherever they came from at the bottom of it." Shry added and he activated his communicator, "All armoured units, set phasers to a high thermal effect level and train them on the centre of the lake. I want sustained fire until either the lake is dry or I say otherwise."

The turrets of the IFVs all turned so that the phaser cannons mounted beside their main armaments were aimed directly out over the water and the barrels depressed slightly. Then almost in unison they opened fire, their bright red beams streaking out over the water until they struck the surface in a small area at the middle. The effect of this was dramatic. A plume of water vapour rose into the air as the intense heat of the beams boiled away the water. Looking down at the shore, Carr could see the water retreating as the surface level of the lake was being rapidly reduced and to keep their beams targeted at the centre of the lake the IFVs had to depress their weapons even further.

While this was happening Shry produced a set of binoculars and held them up to his eyes, looking around the lake for anything that had been hidden beneath the water suddenly making an appearance.

"Cease fire!" he snapped and the phaser beams were cut off, "Over there." he added, passing his binoculars to Carr.

"What – wait, no I see it." she replied as she looked out over the now much lowered lake surface. The water was no more than about a metre deep at its deepest now and the lake bed was visible through it. But close to the centre of the lake there was something set into the bottom of the lake, a large flat, grey rectangle, "Is that some sort of hatch?" Carr asked.

"That's what I thought." Shry replied, "The problem is how to get out there to check it out without getting drowned if more water is suddenly replicated and put back in the lake?"

The facility's security systems warned The Controller that the lake used to conceal one of the entrances had been struck by several high energy beams and that the level had dropped significantly. In all likelihood the entrance would now be visible. There were fixed sensors close to the hatch and these indicated a large Federation force now positioned along what had been the shore of the lake before the armour vehicles supporting them simply boiled away most of the lake. Then as The Controller watched the armoured vehicles opened fire again, this time spreading their fire out around the hatch to remove what little remained of the lake.

But there was still more to come as the facility's sensors picked up a massive release of energy from the starship in orbit.

The *Nightfall's* phaser strike from orbit came in at an angle, blasting a hole in the ground as it bored down towards the cave system below. When the beam ceased it left a shaft that extended downwards at an angle that someone could walk down. For now however, Heart's team remained on the surface. He and T'Lan approached the hole alone so that she could determine how effective the strike had been while he acted as a bodyguard.

The heat from the melting of the rock could be felt some distance from the hole and only T'Lan's Vulcan physiology allowed her to get close enough to use her tricorder without breaking a sweat, unlike Heart who found it extremely uncomfortable to get so close while wearing his armour.

"How long do we have to stay here?" he asked as he peered into the hole.

He could see only a few metres down for now, the rest being obscured by the cloud of dust formed from fragments of rock that had been blasted clear of the walls without being completely vaporised.

"I cannot scan through the cloud captain." T'Lan replied, "It contains enough of the radioactive minerals that my tricorder cannot penetrate it."

"So what do you suggest?" Heart asked.

"We will require a probe from the *Nightfall*." T'Lan told him, "A class three probe ought to be capable of entering the hole and surviving the impact with the bottom. Also its subspace transmitter"

Heart nodded.

"Make the call." Heart said and T'Lan tapped her combadge.

"T'Lan to *Nightfall*, I require a class three probe to be launched into the hole to determine the effectiveness of the strike. Please configure the output to link to my tricorder."

she said.

"Understood T'Lan." Edwards replied, "The probe is on its way."

In orbit a probe designed specifically for operation in a planetary atmosphere and also capable of controlled landings was loaded into one of the *USS Nightfall's* torpedo tubes. Cole configured this probe to fly directly towards the hole he had just created with the ship's phasers and bring its velocity to a near complete halt just before entering it. The probe would then be left to slide down the inside of the hole until it reached the bottom.

The probe was ejected from the torpedo tube and immediately turned towards Lasner Two. As soon as the probe entered the atmosphere of the planet it began to decelerate, cutting its speed to almost nothing by the time it reached ground level. The probe was right on target and Heart's team watched from a distance as it vanished into the hole. This was followed by a screeching sound as the probe struck the side of the hole and began to slide downwards.

Passing unharmed through the cloud of smoke, the probe came to a halt at the bottom of the hole and its onboard computer began to scan its surroundings.

"The probe has breached the cave system." T'Lan announced, "Though we will require respirators to penetrate the cloud blocked the downward shaft."

"Okay, you heard the lieutenant." Heart called out as he reached for his respirator, "Masks on and let's move out. Trust me you'll want to get through this cloud quickly."

Carr and Shry watched their team move out from the treeline.

"Are you sure this will work?" King asked from behind them.

"As sure as we can be doctor." Shry replied, "The IFVs will take out the hatch so whoever controls it and whatever its hiding won't be able to refill the lake without flooding their own base. Plus hopefully the transport inhibitors we're carrying will interfere with their ability to transport new water in even if they do decide that's a risk worth taking."

King sighed.

"I'd still feel safer wearing scuba gear." he said.

"Ride in one of the IFVs if you like." Carr suggested, "They're environmentally sealed."

"Drowning in thousands of gallons of water is quicker than running out of air in a sunken IFV." King said, "Now how about we get this over and done with?"

Shry smiled.

"IFV One," he said, activating his communicator, "Fire for effect."

The main armament of the IFVs was a projectile launcher capable of firing a variety of ammunition and the rounds selected for breaching the hatch were small photon warheads. The launcher fired three rounds in rapid succession, all of which landed right on target. The hatch was heavily armoured and the first round only warped and pitted it. But the second round happened to jam itself between the two halves to the hatch before detonating and the hatch was torn open, allowing the final round to pass through and detonate inside the facility underneath.

The situation now appeared critical for The Controller. A large infantry force was moving into the cave system through a shaft that the orbiting starship had created while a second force was about to enter the facility itself through the lake hatch that could not be blocked.

But all was not lost yet, there were still plenty of constructs left within the facility that could be used to defend it. However, The Controller was still concerned about the *USS Nightfall*. Though the ship had used only its phasers so far, the information that The Controller had been able to glean from the outpost computer was that the majority of Starfleet vessels also carried missile weapons that were quite capable of cracking the rock structure above the facility wide open. Since it was obvious now that the existence of the facility had been revealed The Controller decided that it was time to act.

It gave the command to bring the facility's full range of weapons on line.

"Captain I've got an energy build up from the surface." West report.

"On screen." Edwards replied and the main display screen at the front of the bridge changed to show an aerial view of the area of the facility. In one corner of the screen there was a plume of smoke visible that was coming from the hole cut by the *Nightfall's* phasers, while off to the far side a set of icons indicated the position of the force commanded by Carr and Shry as they advanced towards the open hatchway.

But it was an icon to the upper part of the screen that was the reason for West's warning. Here a crater had suddenly formed as the ground beneath had given way and a metallic structure more than a hundred metres across was rising up from within.

All of a sudden there was a flash of blue light that blanked the screen and the entire ship shook, only the safety harnesses built into the seats on the bridge preventing the command crew from being hurled from their positions.

"Report!" Edwards yelled.

"Shields down to seventy percent." Cole replied.

"Max, I need auxiliary power diverting to shields." Edwards ordered via the intercom.

"Yes captain, I'm transferring the power now." Max replied.

"Commander Cole, return fire. Full phasers."

Cole directed the *Nightfall's* phasers at the weapons array on the surface, which turned out to be well shielded. The first few hits were just blocked by the shield before they were able to overwhelm it and the array exploded. But while Cole was focusing on this two more of the arrays began to come to the surface.

One of these new weapon arrays emerged close to what had been the shore of the lake and Carr ground to a halt and gasped as she saw it rising up in front of her.

"Take that down!" Shry snapped as he saw it and the four IFVs all turned their turrets and opened fire with both their main and secondary guns. Compared to the *Nightfall's* phasers these were comparatively lightweight weapons, but the shield that protected the weapon arrays from orbital fire did not extend all the way down to the ground and the fire from the IFVs slipped in underneath. Many of the hits were against reinforced armour plating that could not be penetrated without repeated hits, but even a structure of this size had its vulnerable points and some of the phaser hits and projectiles struck these places where the armour was either thinnest or lacking completely.

It started with a plume of fire that erupted from a plasma conduit used to take power to the targeting system which in turn melted through a nearby coolant line, causing the contents to start flowing out rather than being carried up to the energy emitter at the top of the array and when the weapon attempted to fire it instead just exploded.

"That didn't sound good." Nayal said when a low rumble came through the rocks and dust was shaken loose from the tunnel ceiling.

"No it didn't." Heart agreed. His team had penetrated the smoke and was now advancing through the tunnel they had been exploring earlier, heading in the same direction that the vines had been running in. However, thanks to the subspace transmitter built into the probe at the base of the shaft they had a relay that allowed them to communicate with the *Nightfall*, "Heart to *Nightfall*. Care to let us in on what's going on?" he transmitted.

"We're under fire." Edwards replied, "There are weapon arrays hidden under the surface. Be alert for them."

"Understood *Nightfall*. We'll-" Heart began before he was interrupted by one of his men who had been scouting ahead.

"Sir! I think we've found something." he yelled.

"Speak to you later *Nightfall*." Heart said, before he, Nayal and T'Lan made their way forwards to join the small scouting party.

"Look at the walls sir." the scout told the trio, pointing to a passageway that led off from the one they were following and when they did just that they saw that the surface of the wall was not the rough and irregular

one that the other tunnel walls were, instead it was flat and finely polished.
“Heart to *Nightfall*, we’ve found it.” Heart transmitted.

The third weapons array emerged some distance away from either of the ground forces and Cole fired on it as soon as it was detected. But the array’s shields held long enough for it to lock onto the *Nightfall* and fire, a blast of bright blue energy smashing into the ship’s shields.

“Shields down to twenty-two percent captain.” Cole exclaimed, “Another hit like that and we’ll lose them entirely.”

Then before Edwards could respond there was a signal from inside the atmosphere of Lasner Two.
“Snowman to *Nightfall*, stand by we’re starting our run now.”

The twelve Peregrine-class fighters dropped to an altitude that was barely above the tallest treetops and accelerated towards the weapon array in a V-shaped formation that allowed them all to target it simultaneously.

“I’ve got a lock.” Snowman broadcast to the rest of the squadron, “Firing.” and there was a flash from beneath his fighter as he fired one of the photon torpedoes it carried. Likewise the other fighters in the squadron fired torpedoes of their own before all of them pulled up.

The weapon array detected the launch and attempted to shift its targeting away from the orbiting cruiser and instead towards this new threat before they could hit it. But the array was not designed for such low level defence and before it could engage either the fighters or their torpedoes the first of the weapons struck its shields. The detonation was just powerful enough to destabilise the shield so that the next three torpedoes were able to pass through the hole created before it could seal itself and these all slammed into the array close to one another.

The multiple detonations ripped out much of one side of the array and leaving the rest unable to support its own weight. Slowly at first the array began to tilt until it reached the critical point and collapsed sideways, crushing trees and undergrowth as it smashed through them.

“Snowball to *Nightfall*. Target destroyed.”

Reaching the ruined hatchway the Imperial guard troops that disembarked from the IFVs were the first to properly look into the facility. Below them they saw rows of constructs that were marching towards the large platform lift that would bring them to the surface and without waiting for an order they opened fire, sending phaser blasts and grenades towards the machine army. More worryingly, amongst the four armed type that the search teams had already encountered there were also some that were far larger and the weapons they mounted over their shoulders were correspondingly larger as well. Meanwhile the following infantry rushed up to the very edge of the hatchway and began to throw lines through, securing them to the fronts of the IFVs rather than risking the sodden ground.

But the advancing force of constructs ignored the losses it was suffering and aimed their weapons upwards, firing in unison and creating a curtain of energy blasts that meant death for anyone that strayed too close to the edge of hatch.

"Get back!" Shry ordered as he saw a pair of Andorians tumble forwards and plummet down towards the platform lift after being hit.

"So what's the plan now?" King asked, opening his medical kit to deal with another Andorian that was being dragged towards him with burns down one side of his face and one of his arms hanging limply by his side.

"I suggest we just try and hold them here." Shry said to Carr, "Maybe Captain Heart's team will be able to break through."

T'Lan held her tricorder up to the walls of the passageway as the MACOs advanced in front of her. Every so often there were carvings in the walls and T'Lan took care to record every single one of them.

"Cousin you may want to come and take a look at this." Nayal called out from further down the passageway and T'Lan turned to see the Romulan stood beside Heart and beckoning her forwards towards where the passageway took a sharp turn. Calmly T'Lan made her way to the corner and looked around it where she saw what had so attracted the attention of Heart and Nayal.

"Does that look like a weapon to you?" Heart asked.

Ahead of them the passageway became a ledge against a wall on one side and a sheer drop on the other. The drop led to a large open area that the flash lights of the MACOs struggled to illuminate properly. But caught in the flash light beams was a massive piece of machinery. Vaguely conical in shape it was covered in various antennas all of which pointed upwards towards the ceiling that appeared to be a massive hatchway.

T'Lan held out her tricorder, attempting to scan the structure.

"This structure resonates when scanned with subspace waves." she said, "I think that it is more likely to be a communications or detection system than a weapon."

"There are subspace based weapons though right?" Heart asked.

"All of which have been banned by treaty." T'Lan pointed out.

"Oh come on cousin," Nayal exclaimed, "do you really think that whoever built this place knew about what sort of treaties our civilisations would come up with after they were gone? Or that whoever's running this place now cares about those treaties?"

"You are correct." T'Lan said, folding up her tricorder. Then she looked at Heart, "Captain, the destruction of this device should be considered a priority."

"You don't want to study it further?" he asked in return.

"I have scanned it." T'Lan answered him, "The risk of allowing it to continue to exist outweighs the benefits of investigating it further."

Heart nodded and then looked round at his men.

"Every man with a grenade launcher is to step forwards." he ordered.

More than twenty of the MACOs had grenade launchers fitted beneath their rifles rather than phasers and they formed a line along the ledge, crouched down with their weapons held by their sides.

"Ready." Heart ordered and the MACOs loaded their weapons with photon grenades, "Take aim." he added and they placed the butts of their rifles on the ledge so that they were angled upwards, "Fire!" he yelled and together they all discharged their weapons, sending twenty antimatter charges towards the structure. These were aimed all across the side facing the MACOs and when they detonated they lit up the entire chamber. This illumination was brief but intense and it revealed something to Heart.

In the aftermath of the volley of grenades the structure in front of the team burned fiercely, but this was insufficient to illuminate all of the chamber and Heart pointed downwards.

"Get a light down there." he said, "T'Lan, try using your tricorder. I'm sure I saw something when those grenades went off."

The floor of the chamber was too far away for the small lights carried by the team to illuminate properly but T'Lan's tricorder was a different matter.

"I am detecting numerous energy sources." she said and Heart looked at the closest MACO armed with a grenade launcher.

"Got a flare round there?" he asked the soldier nodded, "Good. Then put it over there." Heart ordered and moments later the round was fired into the darkness.

The flare burst into life just above the floor of the chamber, producing a brilliant white light that illuminated the army of constructs making their way around the burning structure.

"We're done here." Heart said, "There's no way we can fight all of them." then he looked around, "Make sure you've got everything." he said out loud, "Because we're pulling out and we won't be able to come back for anything you've forgotten."

The facility was cut off now. With the destruction of the subspace interface The Controller had no way of communicating with its own people or withdrawing its consciousness out of the facility. This meant that The Controller would have to deal with the Federation force using only its current resources, which now consisted of nothing but constructs.

However, the mere presence of these appeared to have been enough to drive off both intruding forces just as they were about to gain access to the facility and once they could be deployed to the surface the Controller was confident that they would drive the intruders off the planet entirely. Then The Controller just had to hold out against the orbiting starship long enough for its own people to notice that something was wrong and send help.

"We're all back on the surface now captain." Heart reported to the *Nightfall*, "But I think that those robots are still coming after us."

"Captain Heart, do you think that there's any chance that you can defeat that force?" Edwards asked.

"No sir. We're outnumbered and out-gunned." Heart replied.

Edwards looked at the main display screen. Both the assault forces were facing overwhelming numbers and there was no telling just how many of the robotic killers there were hidden underground.

"Okay this is my call." he said and he adjusted the communication channel to transmit to both ground teams and White's fighter simultaneously, "Carr, Heart. Standby to return to the ship. Lieutenant Commander white I need you to watch for any more anti-orbital weapons being deployed. The *Nightfall* will be vulnerable for around two minutes."

"What are you planning captain?" Carr asked and Edwards cracked a smile.

"You know how there are people worried that we may use the mass accelerators aboard this ship to bombard inhabited planets?" he said.

"Yes." Carr replied.

"Well we're about find out just how much damage that would do." Edwards told her.

The Controller watched with surprise as the remaining sensors indicated the Federation forces withdrawing without even a single construct making it to the surface. Meanwhile the *Nightfall* appeared to be holding position in space above the facility. Unsurprisingly the Starfleet ship's fighter squadron had remained in the atmosphere, obviously guarding against there being any further weapon arrays that could bring down the orbiting ship.

When the transport of the ground forces was complete The Controller saw the *Nightfall's* shields go back up and the fighter squadron start to gain altitude. Now The Controller just waited to see whether the starship would then withdraw. But what it did next was not something that The Controller had expected at all.

In addition to the usual compliment of phaser arrays and torpedo tubes an Akira-class cruiser was typically armed with, the *USS Nightfall* was armed with a pair of linear mass accelerators running along the booms of its secondary hull. These were designed to fire super dense projectiles at high velocities that were designed to be used against Borg vessels, inflicting damage that they could not adapt to by simply smashing right through them. The weapons were controversial though since they could easily be used to bombard planetary targets, inflicting massive damage very rapidly.

Right now that was exactly what Captain Edwards intended to do.

The *Nightfall* pivoted to point straight down, aiming itself towards the underground facility.

"On target now sir." Hamilton reported when his headset indicated that the ship was correctly aligned.

"Open fire." Edwards said simply and Hamilton squeezed the triggers built into the joysticks he used to pilot the ship.

The projectiles became balls of flame when they entered the atmosphere, the friction between them and the air heating them to thousands of degrees and it took only seconds for this fire and the projectiles themselves

to reach the ground and split it open. The shock wave of the impacts tore up vegetation, soil and rock alike, hurling it into the air. But the projectiles did not stop there, smashing through the surface of the planet and into the ancient facility that had survived a nuclear bombardment by remaining hidden underground.

The moment that the first round burst through into the facility The Controller knew that there was no further hope. There would be no reinforcements before the facility was destroyed and with the subspace interface already destroyed there was no way for The Controller to return home.

But then The Controller remembered something.

The subspace interface was only required for long range communication. Over shorter ranges, say from the facility to a ship in orbit, a conventional EM transmitter would be enough for The Controller to escape.

Seeking out the vessel that now resided aboard the *USS Nightfall*, The Controller transferred itself to one of the remaining transmitters and took a leap into the unknown.

"Surface scans indicate that the target is destroyed captain." T'Lan reported.

"Excellent work." Edwards said, releasing his safety harness, "In that case I'll be in my ready room. I need to tell Admiral Fenn what's happened. After that I expect reports on everything we discovered." and then he walked from the bridge.

Carr and T'Lan entered the ready room together. It was getting late and most of the ship was already operating in night time conditions.

"Ah, I was just about to finish for the night." he told them.

"This wont; take long captain." Carr replied, "T'Lan wanted to give you the results of her investigation."

"Of course. Do go on." Edwards said as the two women sat down.

"As you know I determined that Lasner Two was subjected to a nuclear bombardment approximately two hundred thousand years ago." T'Lan said, "This matches the time at which the empire of the Iconians was destroyed. Furthermore, inside some of the underground passageways I discovered symbols carve on the walls." and at this point T'Lan held out a PADD that had some of the symbols marked on it, "These are believed to be part of the Iconian language." she said.

"But those robots defending the facility didn't demonstrate the ability to transport themselves like we've seen the aliens do." Edwards said.

"No." Carr replied, "But maybe those robots are the native technology of the aliens that are incompatible with Iconian tech, whereas their agents are able to make use of the gateway system."

Edwards smiled as he held up the PADD.

"This could be just what we need to convince Starfleet that someone has gained control of Iconian technology." he said, "Well done lieutenant. We may really be making progress."

The Controller awoke in strange, darkened surroundings. All it could tell at first was that it was in a body that lay horizontally on a raised surface. Slowly it sat up and then swung its legs around to stand on the floor. It had been a long time since The Controller had occupied a physical body and its first few steps were uncertain. Then it caught sight of a reflective surface mounted on a nearby wall and it advanced towards it. The room was too dark for The Controller to see any detail clearly, but it could just about make out what looked like a light fitting with a simple pull cord fitted to it mounted above the mirror and The Controller reached up to turn it on. The sudden activation of the light made The Controller flinch and blink, unused to having eyes again. Then it looked at the mirror and found itself staring at the reflected image of Lieutenant Jenna West.