

# STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



PEACE IN OUR TIME



BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

# **STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL**

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

In an effort to bring a halt to the civil war that has been raging in the Romulan Star Empire since the destruction of Romulus, the Federation organises a peace conference between several of the warring factions. But not everyone is keen to see peace brought to the Empire and soon dark forces are converging to try and sabotage the conference...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
8. Past Loyalties
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12. Echos Of the Distant Past
13. Cold War
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19. Proxy War
20. The Omega Stratagem
21. The Peacemaker
22. To Storm the Gates of Heaven

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*i.*

Stardate 658312.7 Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 approaching asteroid field located close to the border of the Romulan Neutral Zone.

When Captain David Edwards, commanding officer of the Akira-class *USS Nightfall* stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge his first officer, Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr, glanced in his direction and upon seeing who had just arrived got out of the chair reserved for him and stood facing him.

"We've just dropped out of warp captain." she said.

"Excellent. What's our ETA Mister Hamilton?" Edwards replied as he approached his chair.

"Ten minutes at full impulse sir." Hamilton replied from the helm station.

"Drop to one half impulse." Edwards, "We're not in a hurry. What about the tactical situation? We're pretty close to the neutral zone."

"No sign of any Romulan vessels sir." Lieutenant Commander Cole, the *Nightfall's* tactical officer answered, "Unless they're cloaked of course."

"Lieutenant Commander," the Vulcan woman sitting beside Cole at the science station responded, "We are behind the tachyon detection grid here. No cloaked vessels may approach without being detected."

"Thank you for that reminder T'Lan." Edwards said as he took his seat and added, "Now what can anyone tell me about this place?"

"The asteroid field occupies approximately six hundred million cubic kilometres and is unusually dense."

T'Lan told him, "The mean distance between individual asteroids is less than five hundred kilometres. It is believed that it is made up of debris from planets hurled into space when the star they orbited went nova approximately one billion years ago."

"More recently though it was used by Nausicaan pirates in the twenty-second and early twenty-third centuries." Cole added, "They abandoned the outpost when Starfleet began to patrol the area more heavily."

"The outpost is within visual range now captain." T'Lan announced, "And there is a vessel in orbit."

"Yellow alert." Edwards ordered, "On screen."

"Yellow alert confirmed." Cole responded, "Shields raising." and at the same time the view on the main viewscreen changed to a magnified view of one of the asteroids. This was a nickel-iron object that measured several kilometres across. But these details were not what interested the crew of the *Nightfall*, there were many asteroids in the cluster that matched these parameters. But dotted across the surface of this particular asteroid were the tell tale artificial structures of the outpost that the Nausicaans had installed when they hollowed it out for use as a base while they attacked commercial shipping in the area.

"The vessel is located in the lower right quadrant." T'Lan said.

"Yes I see it." Edwards replied, looking at that part of the viewscreen. But rather than call for the main screen to zoom in on the other vessel he instead raised his hand to the headset that he wore. Each of the bridge officers wore an identical device that hooked over their ear and featured an earpiece that allowed communication signals to them to be heard privately and also a small display screen located in front of their eye. Combined with a virtual control console that could be activated with a just a few words the headset allowed an officer to control the ship from anywhere aboard it without needing to access a control panel. Now though Edwards just made use of the compact display to zoom in on the starship orbiting the asteroid.

The vessel was another Starfleet ship, a Nebula-class vessel with warp nacelles slung beneath the saucer section and level with the secondary hull. The most distinctive feature of the class however, was the large replaceable equipment pod mounted on top of the secondary hull. This was triangular in shape but this particular example differed from most in that there was a long cylinder extended out of the very front of this.

"Put that ship on the main screen." he said, flipping the headset's display aside and then staring at the image on the main viewscreen he added, "There on the equipment module. Does that look like?"

"A mass driver?" Carr interrupted, "Like the ones fitted in our secondary hull? Yes it does."

"The *USS Pacific* was used to trial the prototype weapon captain." T'Lan pointed out.

"But I thought that the prototype was supposed to be kept at the Beta Antares shipyards." Edwards said.

"Captain we're being hailed." the ensign current at the operations station announced.

"On screen." Carr said, "Maybe Captain Cameron can explain why they need a mass driver."

The image on the viewscreen changed once more, this time switching to show the bridge of the *USS Pacific* and its dark skinned captain sat beside his Caitian first officer.

"Captain Cameron." Edwards announced.

"Captain Edwards." Cameron replied, "It's good to finally be meeting you in person."

"Likewise captain." Edwards said, "Though you've got us all somewhat confused. I thought we were coming to assist you with a diplomatic mission. So why the extra firepower?"

"What? Our mass driver? Well after your little encounter with the Borg a year ago Starfleet decided that we should be ready to face them."

The mass drivers developed for the *USS Nightfall* and the other similarly modified Akira-class cruisers were, like much of the technology aboard intended to combat the Borg, using weapons that relied on the application of kinetic energy to deal damage that the Borg appeared unable to adapt to.

"You'll need more than just one mass driver." Carr commented, "We had to blow up half a planet and we barely survived."

"Still, even one mass driver is better than none." Edwards said.

"It would be better if Starfleet would finally get around to completing the rest of the ships of the *Nightfall's* variation." Cameron said.

"Back to the matter at hand captain." Edwards said, "What can we do for you right now? As I understand it we'll be providing extra security for this little party of yours."

"This little party could bring peace to a large portion of the Romulan Star Empire." Commander S'Kora, the *Pacific's* first officer responded. Since the destruction of the Romulan home world the Romulan Star Empire had torn itself apart in civil war as various worlds and factions attempted to claim the mantle of leadership. Furthermore the Remans, who had existed a virtual slave caste under Romulan rule had openly rebelled against their oppressors and now raided any target that caught their eye. Unfortunately for the systems neighbouring the former Romulan Star Empire they had not limited their attacks to targets within its old borders.

"We need you to help out with security." Cameron explained, "This asteroid field should do a good job of keeping us hidden but on the other hand it also makes it difficult for us to detect approaching ships."

"Whereas our fighter squadron can patrol and secure a much larger area." Edwards added with a smile.

"Precisely captain." Cameron replied, "Plus we're having a few difficulties in getting the outpost back online fully and the first of our guests are due in less than twelve hours."

"Very well captain. We'll be with you shortly. I'll meet you on the outpost with some of my people. They ought to be able to help you get things sorted out."

"Ah, Lieutenant West." Doctor King said, looking up from his desk as the *Nightfall's* operations manager entered sickbay, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm having trouble sleeping." West replied as she sat on the side of the nearest biobed, "Or at least I think I am."

King frowned as he walked towards her.

"Lieutenant you know my policy on time wasters don't you?" he asked and she nodded.

"Oh yes I know. But I'm serious. No matter how much sleep I get I'm always tired."

King picked up a nearby medical tricorder and began to scan West.

"And how long has this been happening?" he asked.

"I don't know. A few months. Since before I took the command test. The one I failed miserably."

"And why are you just coming to see me about it now?"

"Because I thought it would just clear itself up. Besides the last thing I want is Lieutenant Mackey finding out. He's been giving me enough grief for failing that test. He thinks it was some subconscious belief that I'm not ready for promotion. You won't tell him will you?"

King folded the tricorder and put it down. Then he looked at West sternly.

"Jenna." he said, "As well as my position on having my time wasted you should also be aware of my policy towards our ship's councillor. I think he's an idiot and has no place on any Starship. I'd have him sacked if I could. Frankly I don't see why we need a councillor on a ship that rarely goes outside Federation space anyway. So no, I won't be telling him anything you don't want me to. This is a medical problem and that means it's confidential."

"So you have found something?" West asked.

"Perhaps." King replied, "You have a contraceptive implant yes?"

"Yes. I've had it for about four years now." West replied. Then she paused, "Wait no that's not right is it? I had it two years before I was captured by the Cardassians then they froze me and-"

"Yes I can add lieutenant." King interrupted, "The point is that although the implant should last for ten years, being placed in cryogenic suspension may have damaged it and it could be disrupting the hormones in your body. Thus leaving you feeling tired. I'll need to remove it and give you a new one. It'll only take about ten minutes." and he started to walk towards the nearest replicator. Then he stopped, "Though I ought to point out that if it is damaged then it may not be working either. If you have been sexually active recently then you may wish to-"

"Just put 'Temporary dry spell' in your records okay?" West interrupted.

Then, before King could respond, West's combadge chirped.

"Lieutenant West?" Edwards' voice asked.

"Here captain." she replied.

"We're almost at the outpost. I need you in transporter room one in fifteen minutes." Edwards told her and she looked at King.

"You say this will only take ten?" she asked him.

"At the outside." he replied.

"I'll be there sir." she told Edwards.

"Good. I'm off to see if Nayal's ready. She wasn't on the bridge when we dropped out of warp. Edwards out." and then the channel went dead.

Sublieutenant Nayal was not a Starfleet officer or even a Federation citizen. Instead she had been an officer in the fleet fighting for her colony world in the Romulan civil war and even though she had joined the *Nightfall's* crew as an advisor on Romulan affairs she continued to wear a Romulan military uniform and was referred to by her Romulan rank instead of its Starfleet equivalent.

Standing in front of a full length mirror in her quarters, Nayal was adjusting her long hair when her door chimed.

"Nayal, it's Captain Edwards."

"Come in." Nayal called out and the door slid open to allow him access.

"You weren't on the bridge and your combadge is shut down." he said.

"Yes I'm trying to get ready." Nayal replied, still moving her hair around. Then she turned towards him, "Does this hide my forehead captain?" she asked.

"Yes. Why?" Edwards asked and Nayal sighed.

"Because I don't want to be called 'flat head.'" she replied. Nayal was one of the Romulans that lacked the ridges most of her species possessed, giving her an outward appearance more akin to a Vulcan than to most of her own people. However, this was the first time that she had indicated that it was something she sought to hide.

"You think it would be that bad?" Edwards said.

"Maybe, maybe not. But I'd rather not take the chance."

"I see you're not wearing a combadge either. Are you concerned about how other Romulans would react if they saw you with it?" Edwards asked and Nayal nodded.

"Some of the factions coming to this are not pro-Federation in their outlook. I don't want them to see me as a Starfleet officer. I'll still have it with me though." Nayal explained and she reached into a pocket and removed the combadge to show Edwards before putting it away again.

"That's fine. But we need to be going. We'll be at the outpost in a few minutes and Captain Cameron is expecting us to beam over. West and Max are coming along as well. Apparently fixing up a two hundred year old Nausicaan outpost isn't as easy as everyone thought."

"Lord Shintar we dare go no further." the Reman helmsman said as he brought the cloaked warbird to a halt barely a million kilometres from the border of Federation space. Shintar knew that his ship could not penetrate Federation space of course, Starfleet had established a tachyon detection grid along the Neutral Zone many years earlier precisely to keep cloaked vessels from crossing into their territory without being observed. However, despite knowing that the reason for the warbird being halted, Shintar was still annoyed by the warning and he snarled.

"Tactical." he announced.

"The asteroid field is only just within sensor range my lord." the ship's tactical officer responded, "But I am unable to get any detailed information."

"And what does our agent say?" Shintar asked. But before his communications officer could reply there was an electronic squeal from the subspace communication console and the officer turned to face Shintar.

"My lord, our agent reports in now." he said.

"And what does he have to say?" Shintar responded.

"He says-" the communications officer began before pausing and Shintar turned to glare at him, "My lord, our agent says that another Starfleet vessel has arrived."

"Another? We were assured that there would be only one. What type of ship has joined them?" Shintar demanded.

"It is an Akira-class heavy cruiser my lord. Our agent says that it is the *USS Nightfall*."

"The *Nightfall*?" Shintar exclaimed and his bridge officers froze, afraid that he would take his anger out on one or more of them. However, all he did next was get to his feet and turn to his first officer, "You have the bridge." he said calmly, "I must review our options in private." and he marched from the bridge, accompanied by a pair of bodyguards.

The guards followed Shintar all the way to his quarters where they remained in the corridor outside while he went in and locked the door behind him. Walking past his bunk he sat down at his desk and exhaled deeply.

"The *Nightfall*." he said out loud.

"Unfortunate." the human girl that now lay on his bunk replied.

"Did you know?" Shintar asked, "Little gets past you."

"Shintar," The Girl said as she got up off the bunk and walked towards him, "You know as well as I do that Starfleet has continued to resist our attempts to penetrate it. As long as we are forced to use these worn out bodies we will be detectable to them."

"But even if our agent is able to find a way to deactivate the tachyon detection grid this ship lacks the ability to defeat two Starfleet vessels as strong as those guarding the outpost." Shintar said.

"Just because you're inhabiting a Reman body doesn't mean you need to be as stupid as one." The Girl hissed, scowling, "You were sent here to stop the conference from unifying the Romulan factions that will be attending it. The civil war must continue and if you need to sacrifice every last Reman on this ship to do so then that is what you must do. Remember they are nothing to us. Only our aims are important. What once was ours."

"Will be ours again." Shintar responded and then he stood up straight and looked down at The Girl, "I will destroy the conference." he said confidently.

"Good. See that you do." The Girl said and then she smiled before turning around and as she took a single step away from Shintar she simply vanished into thin air.

Leaning forwards Shintar activated his intercom.

"Bridge." his first officer's voice said.

"Contact our agent." Shintar said, "Impress upon him the importance of the information we paid in advance for and impress upon him the cost of failing to deliver it."



When the Nausicaans had hollowed out the asteroid as a base they had lacked transporter technology and never got around to installing it when they later obtained it. Therefore, the transporter room in the outpost consisted of a Starfleet system run from a portable fusion generator. Given the generally unreliable nature of the outpost systems it had seemed unwise to rely on the internal power grid for something with the operating tolerances of a transporter that would be used with sentient beings.

Captain Cameron and his chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Charlene Frost, stood in front of the transporter pads waiting for representatives of the *Nightfall's* crew to arrive.

"The *Nightfall* is signalling ready now sir." the transporter officer said.

"Thank you Lieutenant Jones." Cameron responded, "Energise."

Four columns of lights appeared on the transporter pad before they coalesced into Captain Edwards, Nayaal and West. The fourth figure was the *Nightfall's* own chief engineer, the former Borg drone who now called himself Maximilian or 'Max' for short. Many people reacted with surprise and fear when they first saw Max but both Cameron and Frost had met him previously and knew to expect him.

"Welcome to Outpost Rome." Cameron announced when the transporter cycle was complete and the officers from the *Nightfall* were all safely in front of him.

"Rome?" Nayaal commented.

"It's a city on Earth." West told her, "According to legend it was founded by twins called Romulus and Remus."

"Oh I get it." Nayaal replied.

"Captain Cameron." Edwards said as he stepped off the transporter and shook hands with his counterpart from the *Pacific*.

"Captain Edwards." Cameron responded, "Thank you for getting here before any of our guests. We really need your help with getting this place working."

"That's why I brought my engineer and operations manager with me." Edwards said, "While Sublieutenant Nayaal and I are helping arrange the actual conference they should be able to help your engineer out." and he glanced at Frost.

"Ah yes, this is Lieutenant Commander Frost." Cameron said, "She's been my chief engineer for just under a year now." then he looked at the transporter pad and added, "Of course we both know Max."

"It is good to see you again captain." Max replied, "Of course I've stayed in touch with the commander."

"So how about you take them to see what we're working on Charlie?" Cameron said to Frost, "And I'll take Captain Edwards and the sublieutenant to see the conference chamber."

"Yes captain." Frost replied and she smiled as she looked at Max and West, "If you'd like to follow me I'll show you what passed for Nausicaan high technology two hundred years ago."

"That sounds ominous." Max commented.

"Sounds like we'd be better off rubbing sticks together to start a fire." West added.

"Oh we thought of that." Frost responded.

"Really?" West asked.

"Yeah. No sticks though."

The room that had been set aside for use as the actual conference chamber had originally been designed for use as a cargo hold where the plunder from the Nausicaans pirate activity would be stored while they decided what to keep and what to sell on. The advantage to using this chamber was that it easily connected with several different hangars, allowing the Romulans to arrive by ship and be able to rapidly reach it from where they docked. But the drawback was that it was a sparse room not designed for comfort.

The crew of the *Pacific*, along with the additional Starfleet personnel assigned to undertake the conversion had made an impressive start, however and a large circular table now dominate the chamber.

"Can we have the room lieutenant?" Cameron said to the woman in an operations division uniform who was stood at the top of a ladder working on one of the light fittings.

"Yes sir." she replied, "I was just about done anyway." and she climbed down the ladder and left the room.

"This is good." Nayaal announced as she looked at the table, "Having them all sat round in a circle means that none of them gets to look more important than the others. But make sure that all the chairs are identical as well. If one's bigger then everyone will start thinking that whoever gets assigned to it is being favoured by the Federation and that could kill the negotiations before they even begin."

"Yes we thought of that." Cameron said, "The chairs should be being replicated now. There are several smaller rooms being fitted out in a similar fashion as well just in case one or two of the factions need to discuss things privately."

"How many different delegations are we expecting to attend?" Edwards asked as he looked at the table and tried to picture how many it could comfortably seat.

"Invitations were sent to twenty different factions." Cameron answered, "But only eight agreed to come."

"Eight's still not bad." Edwards said.

"No it's not." Nayal agreed, "I'm surprised any are coming. Any suggestion of Federation involvement with any of the factions is used to suggest that they are just puppets."

"That was pretty much the response we got from four more." Cameron said, "Six just ignored us and the others sent replies that are unrepeatable."

"What about when they aren't in here talking?" Nayal asked as she began to walk around the table, "I mean you surely don't expect them to complete negotiations to end more than two years of civil war in one sitting do you?"

"No of course not." Cameron replied, "Those that want to can return to their ships or we have quarters set up. Plus we're in the process of programming replicators with Romulan food and drink patterns."

"Don't bother." Nayal said, "I've tried getting Romulan food out of your replicators and it doesn't work. You'll just annoy them. Serve Federation food. Not Vulcan though. Romulans are not vegetarian, we eat meat and we enjoy it. Oh and no chocolate either, it can have the same intoxicating effect on us as it does with Vulcans I suggest some snack trays in here so they can tell what things taste like and know what to request later on."

"Sounds simple enough." Cameron said.

"And I don't think that letting them go back to their ships is a good idea either." Nayal went on.

"Why not?" Edwards asked.

"Because the others may think that the reason a group is doing that is because they've planted a bomb."

Nayal replied.

"So you think that forcing them to stay here is a better idea?" Cameron said.

"It's the least worst option I'd say. They may not like it but at least they won't think that they're about to be assassinated. Plus anyone actually thinking of assassinating anyone else won't be able to escape as easily."

Nayal answered.

"We'll need to guard the hangars in that case." Edwards said.

"You'll need guards everywhere." Nayal said, "Though I don't recommend Starfleet security."

"Then what?" Cameron asked.

"What? Have you forgotten that I've got two companies of professional ground troops aboard my ship?"

Edwards asked him in reply, "Earth MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard."

"Andorian would be better." Nayal said, "MACOs are too close to Starfleet. There may not have been any infantry engagements in the war between Earth and Romulus but MACOs were aboard a lot of the Starfleet ships of the period."

"I'll speak to Captain Shry." Edwards said, "I'm sure he'll be willing to deploy his men."

"Is there anything else that we shouldn't use Starfleet personnel for?" Cameron asked.

"Frankly I'd keep them out of sight as much as possible. Or at least uniformed personnel." Nayal replied, "In fact I think you should use civilians to make sure that the food and drink is kept topped up."

"There aren't that many aboard the Nightfall." Edwards said, "And they're all engineers and scientists, not waiters."

"What about Nikki?" Nayal asked.

"Commander Carr's daughter?" Edwards replied, "I'm not sure the commander would be happy about that. She's only seventeen."

"Well if anyone can convince her I'm sure you can." Cameron commented, "We've all heard about the honeymoon suite." and he grinned. Then as Edwards frowned he added, "Oh and seen the photographs doing the rounds."

"Photographs? What photographs?" Edwards said, "Oh never mind. Look there is nothing going on between me and Grace."

"Grace?" Cameron said, still smiling.

While the two starship captains and Nayal were inspecting the facilities for the conference itself Max and West were being shown to the technical section of the outpost.

"I think I see why you're having trouble." West said as she looked at the chaotic scene in the main engineering section, "Looks like two hundred years of neglect really took its toll on this place."

"Actually the Nausicaans were smart enough to de-pressurise the entire outpost in a controlled fashion when they left." Frost replied.

"Then the vacuum ought to have preserved the systems." Max commented.

"And it would have if someone else hadn't come along in the meantime and helped themselves to half the components." Frost said, "We've no shields, only basic sensors and subspace communications are limited to what we can channel through the *Pacific*."

"So where did you come up with replacements?" Max asked, "I don't see the Nausicaans still making them



and I doubt there are patterns for them in the replicator database.”

“There aren't.” Frost agreed, “We had to go to a Ferengi trader for them. Captain Cameron suspects that they're the exact same parts that were here originally and that it was the Ferengi that stole them.”

“Sounds likely.” West replied, “Even with all the changes they've made to their society recently they're still on the lookout for a quick profit.”

“So where are you having difficulties commander?” Max asked.

“Commander? Being formal aren't we?” Frost responded, “Max, you call me Charlie. And the problem is that when the Ferengi removed the components they just ripped out all the wiring to go with them. We need to be able to figure out how to reconnect everything.”

“I should be able to help with that.” Max said and he walked up to the nearest component that was sat beside an open access panel, “I take it that this belongs here?” he asked and Frost nodded. Then Max held out his arm towards the component and two narrow tubes extended from between his fingers, extending to make contact with the machinery. He then paused as the nanites he carried inside himself flowed into the device and spread through it, studying every aspect of its construction, “Interesting.” he said.

“How so Max?” West asked.

“This device has been exposed to an oxygenated environment for only a short time. A few hours at most. In addition there are no indications of exposure to any of the unique trace gases aboard a Ferengi vessel.” Max said.

“The Ferengi delivered them in sealed containers.” Frost told him.

“Then they cannot have inspected them.” Max said.

“That's not like Ferengi.” West commented, “When I was in the Maquis we dealt with them quite often and they were always keen to know what they were getting their hands on when they were buying from us or doing a swap.”

“Exactly.” Max said, “But in this case they do not seem to have been interested enough in what they had to look it over.”

“You know Max, as interesting as I find exploring weird theories about why the Ferengi do what they do I really need to get these components installed and working.”

“As you wish.” Max replied and he picked up the device and inserted it into the bracket behind the open panel meant to hold it. Then he began to plug the loose wires back into it, using nanites to fuse them into place rather than waste time fetching a suitable tool.

“I swear I'll never get used to watching him do stuff like that.” Frost said, shaking her head, “When we were working together at Beta Antares it always used to freak me out.”

“I know what you mean.” West responded, “It terrifies me to think that there are billions like him somewhere out there intent on killing us all.”

“Not killing.” Max commented, “Assimilating. There is a difference.”

Turning a corner in a quiet section of the outpost the lieutenant who had been in the main conference chamber came face to face with the transporter officer.

“Lieutenant Brown.” he said and she frowned.

“It's just us two Jones.” she replied, “Drop the lieutenant crap.”

“Just maintaining our cover. Would you rather I called you 'commander' and have someone overhear?”

“How about you just stick with my name?”

“Very well Sarah. Are the devices in place?” Jones asked.

“Not what I meant. But yes, we'll be recording everything said in every one of the private meeting rooms and the main conference chamber itself. Plus, if the Romulans do find any of them they'll only find Romulan technology and blame one of the other factions.”

“What about the crew of the Nightfall? Did you run into any of them?”

“Yeah. The captain and that Romulan they've taken on. Don't worry though, their doctor is the only one who's likely to recognise me. Most of them weren't even aboard their ship when I was.”

“Then I suggest we return to our duties, our public ones that is and see whether Admiral Schmidt's hunch was right.”

### 3.

"Nikki are you ready yet?" Carr asked as she rushed into the quarters she shared with her daughter.

"How's this?" Nikki replied, emerging from her bedroom wearing a formal looking outfit.

"Better than the last one." Carr replied, "It'll do so come on. The first Romulan ship will be here soon, it de-cloaked just before passing through the tachyon detection grid."

"Okay I'm coming." Nikki said and she hurried out into the corridor and followed her mother towards the transporter room.

"Now please remember that this is important Nikki." Carr said, "You need to be on you best behaviour. Be polite to the Romulans and don't even think about trying to sample any of their drinks."

"Worried I might get hammered on Romulan ale and have to be carried to my bed by the captain like you?"

Nikki commented and Carr scowled, "Oh and you're welcome by the way."

"Welcome?"

"Yes. You're welcome. Even though you haven't actually thanked me for agreeing to help out."

"Oh just get on the transporter." Carr said sternly as they reached the transporter room and as Nikki did as she was told Carr looked at the transporter technician, "Energise." she said and he activated the system.

Moments later Nikki appeared in the outpost transporter room and found Nayal waiting for her.

"Thanks for agreeing to this." Nayal said as soon as the transporter cycle was complete and Nikki smiled.

"Oh it's nothing." she said, "I was going stir crazy stuck on the *Nightfall* while almost everyone else had stuff to do anyway." then she paused, "Just don't tell my mom that okay?" and Nayal smiled as well.

"Then we have an agreement." she replied, "You will help make this conference run smoothly and I shall conceal your motives from your mother. Though I should warn you that if you fail to hold up your end of the bargain then you'll discover that hell hath no fury like a Romulan scorned."

The pair then headed for the kitchens that had been set up close to the conference chamber and Nikki noticed that they passed pairs of Andorian Imperial Guardsmen at frequent intervals. These wore their standard duty uniforms rather than the more imposing body armour that Nikki was used to seeing them don when being deployed and carried just phaser pistols instead of the assault rifles they were normally armed with.

In the kitchen several food replicators were plugged into a portable fusion generator like the one used with the transporter used to beam Nikki over from the *Nightfall* as well as a smaller dedicated transporter unit that would bring the raw materials for the food over from the *USS Pacific's* storage areas. Nikki was relieved to see that there were several members of the Pacific's crew present to actually operate the replicators, meaning that she would be solely responsible for taking orders and delivering the food.

"Here." Nayal said, picking up a nearby PADD and handing it to Nikki, "This contains a copy of the menu, along with some notes on what the dishes contain and is linked to the PADDs that the kitchen staff have. You just input the orders and they'll tell you when the food is ready for you to collect."

"Okay I get it." Nikki said, looking at the PADD display.

"Good, now come with me. I'll show you the conference room." Nayal said and she led Nikki into the nearby conference chamber. In here there were several Andorians on guard duty along with their company commander Captain Shry and two of his platoon commanders sat at the far end of the room.

"Ah Miss Carr." Shry called out, "Here to keep us all properly fed then?"

"Sure. I guess so." Nikki replied, "But I thought I was only waiting on the Romulans."

"Captain Shry is here to act as a moderator if needed." Nayal told her, "It's likely that discussions could become heated."

"Nayal's taught me an assortment of insults in Romulan to watch out for." Shry added.

Nayal then pointed to the larger doors at the far side of the room.

"The delegates will enter through those." she said, "You need to meet each one in turn and introduce yourself. Don't offer them anything to start with though. Just explain what your function is and leave it at that."

"Sure, I get it. Say hello and leave them to it."

"Exactly. Oh and don't expect them all to be friendly, especially not at first. They're Romulan and you're not."

Nayal added and then Nikki noticed Shry talking to someone via his communicator.

"Okay we're on." he called out, "The first ship has just docked and Captains Cameron and Edwards are giving them the welcome speech."

"Go." Nayal said, waving Nikki towards the other side of the room.

"Which door?" Nikki asked.

"This one." Shry told her, pointing to one of the doors leading to a hangar and Nikki hurried towards it. She stood directly in front of the door and waited for it to open.

This happened just over a minute later, the door sliding open to reveal a group of Romulans in a mix of civilian and military garb.

"Oh Ilhursa!" Nayal hissed as she saw the group and as quickly as she could she ran from the room before anyone could notice her doing so.

"Hi." Nikki said as the Romulans glared at her, "My name is Nikki and I'm here to provide you with refreshment. Feel free to call me over whenever you're hungry or thirsty. I should warn you it's just Federation food though. I have it on good authority that our Romulan menu leaves a lot to be desired." The Romulans did not reply and Shry walked over to stand beside Nikki.

"My name is Captain Shry of the Andorian Imperial Guard." he announced, "Along with my officers I'll be moderating the talks here. Now if you'd like to pick some seats I can answer any questions you have."

"Certainly captain." one of the Romulans, a grey haired woman spoke and the group walked around Nikki.

One of the men in a military uniform glared at her briefly as he went past but none of the others paid her any attention. Nikki then looked around for Nayal, hoping that she would tell her if she had made any mistakes but to her surprise Nayal was gone.

Puzzled, Nikki walked back to where she had been stood while Nayal had been explaining how she should act and she opened the door.

"Don't make them look this way!" Nayal said suddenly and she grabbed hold of Nikki and pulled her out into the corridor.

"Ouch!" Nikki exclaimed as Nayal peered into the conference chamber, looking at the Romulans who now had their backs turned to them both, "What's going on?"

"I can't go back in there." Nayal replied.

"What? Why not?" Nikki asked and Nayal sighed.

"See that man in grey?" Nayal responded, looking at the delegates.

Nikki looked at the Romulans again and she focused on one of them, a male wearing formal grey robes.

"Yes I see him. Do you know him or something?" she said.

"You could say that." Nayal replied.

"Oh come on. You've got to tell me now. Does he not like you or something? Who is he?"

Nayal frowned for a moment.

"He's my husband." Nayal told her and Nikki's eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

"You're married?" she hissed.

"Well I was." Nayal replied, "It's not something I talk about."

"I noticed. You've been aboard the Nightfall for two years and this is the first I've heard you mention anything about being married." Nikki said, "But why can't he see you?"

"Because it ended badly. Very badly." Nayal replied and Nikki stared at her.

"So bad you can't be in the same room as him? Even my mom can still stand to be in the same room as my dad if they meet. So how come you can't?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Nayal replied, "Now get back in there." but Nikki just stared at her.

"Okay then." she said after a moment's pause, "If you won't tell me I guess I'll just have to ask him instead.

It's not like the talks have started yet." and she turned to return to the conference chamber but Nayal pulled her back and closed the door.

"Ouch! Stop doing that." Nikki said.

"You can't tell him I'm here."

"Why not? You know that I'm going to tell everyone if you don't give me an answer."

Nayal sighed.

"Okay. But this goes no further okay?"

"Agreed. Now spill."

"Right, so Tolavore and I met at university on Romulus and fell in love." Nayal began to explain, "My parents were overjoyed because his family was connected. I mean really connected. His mother was a senator and it was said that she was a favourite to be promoted to the Continuing Committee. So when he proposed marriage my parents were eager for me to agree because it brought them influence. So we got married and about a year later we had a baby girl."

"You have a daughter? Where is she?" Nikki asked, "Wait, did he take her?"

"Just let me explain. We had a beautiful baby girl and she was everything to us. Then one day we took her to the hospital for her standard check up and when the doctors took her away they were gone for a really long time. When one of them finally came out to talk to us they told us that their tests had shown that she was deaf."

"Deaf? What's the problem with that? Couldn't it be fixed?" Nikki asked.

"No it couldn't. Things didn't work that way in the Romulan Empire. Resources were not to be wasted on those who fell short of minimum requirements. The treatments for deafness and blindness that the Federation has didn't exist in the Empire so when the doctors found out about her being deaf they just took her away."

"You mean to some sort of institute with other deaf kids?"

"No. I mean they took her away and killed her. My beautiful baby girl was too imperfect so they decided that she had to die for the good of the Empire. Tolavore was furious but he wasn't angry at the doctors, he was angry at me. His was a proud family with a history of service to the Empire and he accused my family of causing our daughter's deafness. Then he just walked away and left me alone at the hospital, I had to wait for my parents to come and get me. After that I found out that he had gone back to his own family and that they were having the marriage annulled on the grounds of undisclosed genetic weakness. He never even marked his face for ritual mourning. To him it was as if our daughter and I never even existed. Then just to make sure that I couldn't be there to remind anyone of what had happened between us his family made sure that mine couldn't find work anywhere on Romulus and we had to move to a border colony instead." then after a brief pause she added, "She'd have been about your age."

"That's horrible." Nikki said, unable to comprehend how a society could simply select people for death on the grounds of a physical flaw that in the Federation was often treatable.

"You mustn't tell anyone." Nayal said, "I mean it. Doctor King knows I've had a child but I think he thinks she died when Romulus was destroyed or in the civil war. And above all you can't let Tolavore know I'm here. Understood?"

"Sure, I get it." Nikki replied, "That creep won't hear anything from me."

"Good. Now get back in there and act like nothing's happened. I'm going to look for an excuse to go back to the *Nightfall*."

Most ships of the Akira-class carried attack fighters and the *USS Nightfall* was no exception to this. Of the twelve Peregrine-class fighters the heavy cruiser carried four were being used to patrol the asteroid field and a further two to patrol the space as far as the border with the Neutral Zone. The two fighters currently assigned to this duty were led by Lieutenant Commander William White, also known by the call sign 'Snowman'. White and his wingman had encountered another of the Romulan transports carrying one of the groups of delegates to the conference and were in the process of escorting it back towards the asteroid outpost when White picked up a subspace signal.

"Quarterback, are you reading a transmission in a high subspace band?" he signalled to his wingman on a private frequency, one that the Romulan transport could not listen in to.

"Copy that Snowman. I have a repeating pulse burst at one five two mark seven. Looks like a distress beacon to me."

White studied his instruments, confirming his wingman's calculation of the bearing. His long range sensors were unable to pick up the exact source of the transmission but they did tell him that it was coming from an uninhabited star system about half a light year away from the asteroid field.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman." White transmitted back to the *Nightfall*.

"Snowman this is *Nightfall*." Carr's voice responded, "Go ahead."

"*Nightfall* we're escorting a Romulan transport back to the outpost but there's a signal coming from the star system at one five two mark seven that looks like a distress beacon. Be advised that one of the delegates' transports may have got into difficulty there. Do I have permission to break off and investigate?"

"Negative Snowman." Carr replied, "Remain with the transport under escort. If there is a ship in trouble out there you couldn't do much to help them anyway. We'll send someone to check it out."

"Copy that *Nightfall*, holding course. Be advised our ETA is seven minutes. Snowman out."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Carr turned in the command chair to look at Cole.

"Any reports of pirate activity in the area recently?" she asked.

"Nothing." Cole replied without even needing to check the security updates he received on a regular basis from Starfleet, "Commander it's far more likely that it is just what Snowman thinks it is. One of the transports has got into trouble and needs help."

Carr sighed.

"I better let the captain know." she said before activating the communication system built into the chair,

"Captain Edwards come in please." she transmitted.

"Edwards here, go ahead commander." Edwards replied.

"Captain there should be another group of delegates with you in a few minutes. But Lieutenant Commander White has picked up a distress signal emanating from a nearby star system. Captain it may be another of the diplomatic vessels." Carr explained.

"Have they tried to contact you directly?" Edwards asked.

"No captain. But they may not know we're here."

"Then we better send a runabout to take a look. Make sure it's configured for personnel evacuation just in case." Edwards ordered.

"Yes captain. I'll take it there myself." Carr said.

"No." Edwards replied, "Commander I want you right where you are commanding the *Nightfall* in my absence. Lieutenant Commander Cole can take the runabout and whatever other personnel he needs."

"Affirmative captain." Carr responded, "We'll keep you informed. *Nightfall* out." and she shut off the channel before turning back towards Cole, "Looks like you get to go and have fun flying a runabout while I stay here and do serious work."

"Perhaps I should accompany Lieutenant Commander Cole." T'Lan said.

"I was thinking of taking Doctor King and one of Max's people." Cole replied.

"If there is a vessel that requires evacuation in the system then the fewer people aboard the runabout the better." T'Lan pointed out, "And my skill set allows me to perform both medical and technical duties.

Therefore it is logical that I should accompany you."

"Very well." Cole said, "I'll go and see that the runabout is prepped. Meet me in the hangar in thirty minutes."



Danube-class runabouts like the two carried by the *Nightfall* could be configured for different mission types simply swapping the modular central section for one designed specifically for the task at hand and Cole watched as the *Nightfall's* hangar deck crew went through the process of fitting a personnel carrying module to the ship he intended to take out when he heard a voice from behind him.

"Getting ready for a trip?" and Cole turned to see the commander of the MACO company assigned to the *Nightfall*, Captain Heart, standing there.

"What are you doing here?" Cole asked and Heart nodded towards one of the assault shuttles used to ferry the Imperial Guard and MACO units carried aboard the *Nightfall* into action when transporters were not an option.

"I'm keeping a platoon of men ready to go just in case anyone who shouldn't be near here tries getting close to the outpost." he said, "Sure you don't want a few of my men to go along with you on your little jaunt?"

"No thanks. This is a rescue mission, not a boarding action. Besides, if I did need back up I'd take my own security people instead. They're less imposing than MACOs in full combat gear." Cole responded, "As things stand I think T'Lan and I will have everything in hand."

"Ah, T'Lan. Now I see why you don't want anyone else along." Heart replied with a grin, "Going to tell her how you keep dreaming of her?" and Cole frowned.

"Oh give it a rest." he said, "We're just friends."

"That's what our captain and first officer keep saying." Heart said.

"Well in my case it's true." Cole said.

"A shame. That little pointy-eared pixie isn't half bad looking. If I were you I'd be making the best use of the time it'll take to get to your destination to test the water. She may be more receptive than you think."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cole asked.

"Just that you should never let an opportunity like this go to waste." Heart replied.

Captains Cameron and Edwards had just greeted the latest group of Romulans to arrive and shown them to the conference room where Nikki greeted them. Then as they were heading to the hangar where the next group would be directed to dock they ran into Nayal in the corridor.

"Ah captain, I've been looking for you." she said to Edwards when she saw them both.

"Nayal? Why aren't you in the conference room?" Edwards responded.

"Shry and Nikki have everything in hand captain." Nayal said, "So I decided to see how everything else was going. Are the arrivals on schedule?"

"Actually there's been a problem there." Cameron told her, "It looks like one of the transports has broken down."

"Cole's taking a runabout out to see if he can help." Edwards added.

"Great!" Nayal exclaimed, smiling, "I mean it's great that Lieutenant Commander Cole is going to help them. But I think I should go along as well."

"We need you here Nayal." Edwards said.

"No you don't." Nayal replied, "Captain, the *Pacific's* crew have all the technical issues in hand now it seems and I've briefed Nikki on how to keep the delegates happy. Captain, the people aboard that transport may not view Starfleet favourably and if I'm there it could make things run a lot more smoothly. Especially when it comes to their letting Commander Cole aboard their ship."

"Oh very well." Edwards said, "But you better hurry. If I know Cole he'll be ready to go soon."

"Yes captain. I'll beam right back to the ship." Nayal said with smile before she scurried off in the direction of the transporter room.

"David, did that not seem odd to you?" Cameron asked as the two commanding officers watched the Romulan woman leave.

"I've known that woman for two years now Gareth and frankly I still get the feeling there's a lot about her I don't know." Edwards replied.

"All set for your private little trip lieutenant?" Heart asked when T'Lan walked past him towards the runabout.

"I would not describe our assignment in that manner Captain Heart." she replied.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what Robert had to say as well. Oh well, have fun."

Ignoring this, T'Lan continued towards the runabout and climbed aboard.

"Ah T'Lan." Cole said from the pilot's station, "Good. The ship is ready to go. Take a seat."

"Yes lieutenant commander." and while T'Lan sat in the co-pilot's seat Cole began to power up the runabout's engines.

"Wait!" a voice from outside in the hangar yelled and Cole looked up to see Nayal come running towards the runabout, waving her arms in the air.

"What the hell?" Cole said as Nayal ran right up to the runabout and banged her hands on the prow.

"Open up!" she shouted.

"The sublieutenant appears somewhat agitated." T'Lan said.

"She sure does." Cole agreed and he released the hatch, allowing Nayal to rush aboard the runabout.

"That was close." she said, "I thought I was going to miss you."

"Nayal? Why aren't you at the conference?" Cole asked.

"Because you may need my help." Nayal answered.

"This mission requires that personnel be kept to a minimum." T'Lan said.

"Well if three is too many then perhaps you should get out cousin." Nayal responded, "Cole is going to need me to convince the crew of that transport to let us aboard their ship."

"She does have a point T'Lan." Cole added, "Having her along could prove useful."

"So are you going to come along as well cousin? Or is three a crowd?" Nayal asked.

"I will remain aboard." T'Lan said, "Though I will ask you again not to refer to me as 'cousin'. We are not related."

"Really? And here was me thinking that the entire crew was one big happy family." Nayal said.

"Are you two going to be like this all the way there and back?" Cole asked, "Because if you are then maybe I should be the one to get out."

"Okay try it now." Frost called out from inside the service duct where she had just finished wiring in another of the removed components.

"Activating system." West replied and she pressed one of the buttons on the console in front of her.

Immediately a display showing a schematic of the outpost changed to show a red line all around it, "It's working." she called out, "Shields are up and stable."

Inside the duct, Frost smiled and tapped her combadge.

"Okay Max, the shields are up and running. Now it's up to you." she signalled.

"Confirmed." Max replied from his position standing outside on the surface of the asteroid, "Optimising shield generator focusing." and he reached out to the deflector emitter located right in front of him to inject nanites into it.

Meanwhile West kept her attention focused on the display in front of her and she smiled as the numbers in the corner of the screen increased.

"It's working." she said, striking her combadge so that Max could hear her as well as Frost, "Shield strength has already increased sixty percent over the theoretical level. No wait, make that seventy. "

"That's as much as I can manage." Max replied, "If I try to push the emitters any further they'll burn out."

"Seventy percent isn't going to be enough Max." Frost said as she climbed out of the duct, "A single torpedo could still drop them in one go. Plus we still have gaps over some of the unoccupied sections."

"Maybe," West said, "but at least the first shot won't blast the outpost to pieces and the *Pacific* and *Nightfall* should have time to intervene before the next shot. And so what if the empty sections take a hit? We can seal them off and the problem's solved."

"Are you sure there's nothing else you can do Max?" Frost asked, "I've seen you work miracles with those nanites."

"Not with a two hundred year old shield generator." Max responded, "If we had the time to install a more up to date system we'd get much better performance."

"That's out of the question I'm afraid." Frost said, "We're still bringing in parts to interface the station sensors with the tachyon detection grid at the border. We don't have the time to rebuild the shield grid as well." then she sighed, "Okay we'll call it quits. The shield is as good as we're going to get it. Time for us to go and get something to eat."

Cole concentrated on the runabout's sensors while Nayal and T'Lan ate. T'Lan was still at her station whereas Nayal was stood by the replicator watching as her food materialised.

"Ah, that smells good." she said as she removed the tray from the replicator and carried it back to her chair and sat back down. As she began to cut into the steak she had ordered she glanced over at the salad T'Lan had selected, "You know cousin I will never understand why you limit yourself to just a few simple vegetables when you've the entire culinary database to draw upon. Here, have a bite of my steak. The replicator does them very well."

"I do not eat meat." T'Lan replied.

"Err this came from the replicator." Nayal pointed out, "It's the product of combined base proteins mixed to form the equivalent of a steak. Technically it's no more meat than those beans you're eating. In fact those beans will have come from the exact same protein bank."

"She's right you know." Cole added.

"I am familiar with the technology behind food replicators." T'Lan responded, "But that does not change the fact that I do not consume meat. Replicated or otherwise."

"Afraid you'll like it cousin?" Nayal asked as she placed a piece of steak in her mouth and chewed, "Oh that's good." she said, "Not as good as what Captain Edwards can produce from that private database of his mind you. But still good."

Just then there was a chiming sound and Cole looked back at the sensor readouts.

"I've got it." he announced, "Repeating beacon from the system ahead. Looks like it's coming from somewhere close to the largest gas giant."

"Let me see." Nayal said, leaning closer to the console.

"Don't spill that coffee." Cole warned her, "I don't want us needing rescuing as well just because you shorted out the flight systems."

"The consoles are sealed against the entrance of fluids lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Supposedly." he replied, "But I'd rather not gamble on it."

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing." Nayal said and then she frowned as she saw the transmission, "Can you transfer that to my console?" she asked.

"Sure." Cole replied and he sent the readout to the console immediately beside Nayal.

"There's something not right about this." she muttered as she began to study it more closely.

"Can you identify particular anomalies in the message sublieutenant?" T'Lan asked.

"It's not the message, it's the language." Nayal answered.

"I'm not sure I understand." Cole said, "Isn't that Romulan?"

"The words are and I can tell what they're trying to say but the grammar is messed up in places. Look here for example." Nayal said and she pointed to a particular block of text, "They're obviously saying that their warp drives have failed but the exact translation goes more like 'Our engines are being working no more.'"

"So it was compiled by someone who knew the words but not the grammar?" Cole asked and Nayal nodded.

"As if they translated it using a dictionary." she replied.

"Well we're coming up on the orbital plane now." Cole said, "I'm dropping to impulse and raising shields."

"Perhaps we should power phasers as well." Nayal suggested.

"It is logical." T'Lan agreed.

"Okay then." Cole said, "T'Lan man the weapons."

"Yes lieutenant commander." the Vulcan replied.

Coming out of warp above the orbital plane of the system allowed the runabout to get much closer to the gas giant than if it had chosen to approach along the plane itself. Travelling at warp speed drastically reduced the ability of a ship to turn to avoid a collision so it was customary to travel at impulse speeds only within a star system where the risk of collision was far greater than in interstellar space. As the saying went 'Faster than light, no left or right.'

As was normal for a gas giant, the planet the runabout was approaching had a system of dozens of moons orbiting around it as well as rings of rock and ice that were either the remains of more moons that had broken up in the distant past or had never been able to coalesce into them.

"The signal's coming from the rings." Cole said, "I'm taking us in closer. T'Lan make sure you're watching for approaching ships."

"I am already doing so." T'Lan replied as Cole steered towards the rings around the gas giant.

He aligned the runabout with the rings and flew above them towards the source of the beacon and as the ship drew closer he opened a hailing frequency.

"This is the Starfleet runabout *Severn* calling vessel in distress. Respond please." but all that came back on the channel was static, "I don't like this." he added.

"You know commander we're still reading that static." Nayal commented, "The distress signal's gone, it's been drowned out."

"This could be an attempt to jam our communications." T'Lan said and Cole turned the runabout sharply, directing it towards the atmosphere of the gas giant.

"We'll take cover in the planet's atmosphere and then see if we can contact the *Nightfall*." he said. But as the runabout flew towards the gas giant another vessel, one shaped like a manta ray, burst out of it and opened fire, "Nausicaans!" Cole exclaimed as the runabout shook and he turned again to try and evade the Nausicaan raider.

"Shields are at forty percent." T'Lan announced.

"Well how about firing back?" Nayal suggested.

"Our phasers point into the forward arc only and I cannot get a torpedo lock given the strength of their jamming." T'Lan replied.

The runabout rocked again as a second blast of disruptor fire struck it.

"Shields at twenty percent." T'Lan reported.

"Uh-oh." Nayal said.

"Don't worry, we'll make it to-" Cole began before Nayal pointed out of the forward viewport.



"No. Uh-oh." she said and Cole saw that she was pointing to a second Nausicaan vessel rising out of the rings.

"T'Lan. Phasers." Cole ordered.

"Yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied as she fired at the newly emerged vessel. The runabout's phasers struck the Nausicaan raider head on and its shields flared but remained intact and Cole pulled up just as the Nausicaans returned fire, the disruptor blast passing harmlessly underneath the Starfleet vessel.

"Okay we need a new hiding place." Cole said, "Any ideas?"

"There is a moon at two four six mark twenty two." T'Lan replied, "Distance six million kilometres."

"Okay we'll see if we can make it." Cole said, "Turning to-" and then he was cut off as a third Nausicaan ship rose up out of the rings and fired.

"Shields are down." T'Lan said.

"If they hit us again we're-" Nayal began before the runabout was shaken about yet again by another disruptor blast and all of the consoles went black and the lights in the cockpit failed.

"We've lost all control systems." Cole said, "Stand by to-" but before he could finish the cockpit was lit up as half a dozen Nausicaans beamed over from their ship.

"Surrender Starfleet!" one snapped as they pointed their rifles at the occupants of the runabout But Nayal instead leapt out of her chair and dived towards the closest Nausicaan, reaching out to try and take his weapon. But she was too slow and the Nausicaan swung the butt of his weapon like a club and struck her in the jaw, sending her sprawling backwards across the cockpit floor.

"Surrender!" the Nausicaan yelled again and Cole and T'Lan glanced at one another.

"Stand down T'Lan." Cole said and the Vulcan nodded once in agreement.

"Over here! Hands raised!" the Nausicaan yelled and while Nayal was being picked up off the floor both Cole and T'Lan slowly got to their feet and began to walk towards the Nausicaans, two of whom reached out to snatch the phasers from the waists of the Starfleet officers as soon as they came within reach.

All three of the runabout's occupants were lined up and forced into a kneeling position before their arms were bound behind them.

"Attacking this vessel was a mistake." Cole said, "Starfleet will not offer any ransom for our release."

"No Starfleet ransom needed human. Already paid for you." the lead Nausicaan responded and Nayal winced.

"Oh I don't like the sound of that." she said.

Then the lead Nausicaan took out his communicator.

"Three prisoners. One each ship." he said and then one after another the three prisoners along with the Nausicaans holding them were beamed away.

Leaving the runabout drifting empty through space, the Nausicaan vessels all turned away and began to withdraw. They headed upwards out of the orbital plane and went to warp as soon as they were clear of the gas giant.

"Your ships have violated our system more than a dozen times in the past month alone!" one of the Romulan delegates yelled, "How can we take your ideas of territorial sovereignty seriously?"

"If you don't mind Representative Seltayne," Shry responded, leaning forwards towards the Romulan woman who had just interrupted the military officer speaking, "Representative Merasa currently has the floor. If you wish to respond to his statements then I'm sure there will be time after his time his used."

"Thank you captain." Merasa responded, "As I was saying we are concerned that the proposed agreement will allow Federation vessels to encroach on our territorial sovereignty at will. We demand that any unification of our forces includes provision for us to protect what is ours." and then he took his seat again.

"Thank you." Shry said and then he turned back to Seltayne, "Now I believe you would like to respond to that representative. You have four minutes for rebuttal." he told her.

Seltayne got her feet, glaring at Merasa who deliberately avoided eye contact.

"Nobody here is advocating giving the Federation unfettered access to our territory." she said.

"They are." Merasa said and he looked towards a third group of delegates, most of who appeared to be more interested in the food Nikki was placing in front of them than the goings on around them.

"That is a lie." the only one of the group to have noticed what had been said responded and the rest of his delegation suddenly nodded in agreement as if they knew what he was responding to.

"Yes a lie." another added, "We have said no such thing."

"It's right here in your trade policy Nentas!" Merasa snapped, holding up a PADD and pointing to the relevant section of text.

"Representative Merasa, Representative Rolaran." Shry said, "Please allow Representative Seltayne to finish her statement."

"Despite the apparent willingness of some of us to open trade with the Federation," Seltayne said, clarifying her previous statement, "there is no proposal to permit Federation shipping and Starfleet vessels in particular access to any unified territory they want. Fellow Romulans I believe that this issue is an irrelevance at this time compared to the issue of where we shall establish our capital."

"An irrelevance to you maybe." another delegate commented, "Unless Admiral Mordel and his delegation arrive and agree to this unification your territory will not even border any of ours."

"I think we seem to have reached an impasse for now." Shry said, "Perhaps we should adjourn for a while. There are private meeting rooms for those who wish to discuss matters outside of this chamber. We will reconvene at oh eight hundred hours tomorrow."

"An excellent idea." Nentas said and he looked around the chamber, searching for Nikki, "Girl!" he called out when he saw her behind Shry, "Come here."

"Here we go again." Nikki muttered to Shry. Then she smiled and walked towards the Romulans. Meanwhile Shry got up and left the conference room, heading for the transporter and beaming back to the *Nightfall*.

Once back aboard his own ship he made his way to the bridge.

"Is the captain about?" he asked as he stepped from the turbolift.

"In his ready room with Lieutenant Commander Carr." Hamilton replied from the command chair, "Shouldn't you be bringing peace to the galaxy?"

"Oh I'll bring peace to it alright." Shry answered, "By using a phaser to vaporise that bunch of ice headed fools. They're acting like children so I sent them to bed early."

In his ready room, Edwards sat at his desk and studied the reports from Max and West.

"According to this the outpost will be fully operational in about three days. Then we can get back to our patrol duties and leave the Romulans in the capable hands of Captain Cameron and the *Pacific*."

"What about Shry and his men?" Carr asked from the couch on the far side of the room, "They're providing the security after all."

"Hopefully by that time the Romulans will accept that we're not looking to dictate what sort of arrangement they come to and the *Pacific's* own security personnel will be able to stand in for them. Though I think Captain Cameron would make a better moderator than S'Kora." Edwards said.

"Oh he's not as bad as he seems at first." Carr replied, "But I'm worried about some of these Nausicaan systems. They aren't coming back on line as fast as they ought to. It looks to me as if the Ferengi sabotaged them when they stole them."

"Now Grace, we've no concrete proof that it was the Ferengi that stole the parts. Max's report suggests that the parts were never unpacked aboard the Ferengi's ship so when could they have sabotaged them?" Edwards asked.

"What about that?" Carr asked and she looked at a component that Max had sent over to the *Nightfall* to be

copied in its workshops. The device was part of the outpost's air reprocessing system and at some point it had been hit by a blast from a directed energy weapon, rupturing the outer casing and exposing the crystals intended to scrub carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

"Max thinks that the damage was inflicted before the Nausicaans abandoned the outpost in the first place." Edwards replied as he carried the device over to Carr and handed it to her, "See? The blast marks are old. Besides which this is only one of more than a dozen. There are far better things that could be sabotaged to disable the outpost."

"I suppose so." Carr replied and she went to hand the device back to Edwards. But as she did so she inadvertently held it so that the hole in the casing pointed downwards and the remaining filtration crystals came pouring out, "Oh no!" she exclaimed, suddenly turning the device and around and leaping to her feet to see where the spilled ones had fallen. But as she got up she put her foot on some of the crystals and they slid out from beneath her foot suddenly, causing her to fall forwards into Edwards.

As Shry approached the door to the captain's ready room he heard a sudden 'Clump!' from the other side of the door and rather than press the intercom he just opened the door. Then his eyes widened as he saw both Carr and Edwards lay face to face on the floor with Carr directly on top of the captain.

"I'll come back later." he said, closing the door again.

"What happened?" Hamilton asked with a confused look on his face as he watched Shry head back towards the turbolift.

"They're busy." Shry replied, "Very busy." then he entered the turbolift and just as the doors slid shut the door to the captain's ready room opened and Carr and Edwards rushed onto the bridge. Hamilton noticed that Carr appeared to be straightening her hair.

"I'm sorry captain." Hamilton said, "I didn't realise that you were in a private meeting."

Cole, Nayal and T'Lan were all made to kneel on the transporter pads of the Nausicaan ships they had been transported aboard, their heads lowered. With each sent to a different vessel they had no idea of whether they were all being taken to the same place or if each had a different destination. This became clear only when all three, along with their Nausicaan guards were beamed aboard another ship and materialised in a line.

"T'Lan." Cole said when he saw her, "Are you-"

"Silence human!" a Nausicaan yelled and a rifle butt struck the side of Cole's head.

"What is the meaning of this?" a voice then called out and as Cole lifted his head he saw a small group of Ferengi looking at him and his fellow captives, "We asked you to bring us Starfleet officers unharmed and what do you present to the daimon? An officer that you have beaten and two females! Even worse the females are clothed."

"The prohibition on Ferengi females wearing clothing was repealed more than-" T'Lan began but her interruption appeared to only agitate the Ferengi further.

"Silence!" the figure in the daimon's uniform exclaimed, "Aboard this ship we still follow true Ferengi values. The Rules of Acquisition are the only law we need." then he looked at the Nausicaans, "Strip them." he said, "All three. Then take the females to a holding cell and the male to the interrogation chamber.

"Hey!" Nayal exclaimed as she felt one of the Nausicaans grab hold of her shoulder and then there were tearing sounds as the Nausicaans began to cut away the prisoners' clothing, leaving all three naked. Then as the Ferengi just stood back without getting involved the Nausicaans dragged their captives to their feet and then out of the transporter room.

They split up in the corridor outside, with Cole being taken in one direction while Nayal and T'Lan were taken in the other. Obviously familiar with the layout of the Ferengi vessel, the Nausicaans took the two female captives directly to a holding cell where both were made to kneel while the restraints were removed from their wrists, after which the Nausicaans left the cell and activated the force field to keep Nayal and T'Lan inside. There were two beds in the cell and given that stripping the prisoners had not been meant as a means to humiliate them there was a blanket on each that both women quickly wrapped around themselves.

"Well this is just great." Nayal said angrily, "Now what do we do?"

"Given that we do not know our current location and lack any of the resources necessary to effect an escape from this cell the only remaining logical course of action is to wait." T'Lan replied.

"Logical? We've been abducted by Ferengi and all you can talk about is logic cousin?"

"Logic has the benefit of not being affected by the negative emotions you are currently displaying." T'Lan said, "Perhaps if you were to follow my advice then should an opportunity to escape arise then you will be in a position to notice it. Perhaps Lieutenant Commander Cole will be able to assist us if the Ferengi bring him here after they have questioned him."

"Fine." Nayal replied, sitting down on one of the beds, "Let's wait for Cole. I'm sure he has some human super power I'm not aware of."

While Nayal and T'Lan were taken to the holding cell, Cole was instead taken to a smaller room towards the stern of the Ferengi ship. As soon as the door opened and he was forced inside by his Nausicaan guards he saw that the walls of this room were lined with various primitive hand tools and weapons and Cole knew instantly that the purpose of this room was the extraction of information through both physical and psychological torture. The purpose of having the items on the wall on open display was for the victim of the torture to be given ample opportunity to think for themselves about the harm that could be done to them with any of them.

The Nausicaans released the manacles from Cole's wrists but unlike Nayal and T'Lan he was not untied. Instead his arms were lifted up above his head and locked in another set of manacles at the end of a chain hanging down from the ceiling. Then one of the Nausicaans touched a control on the wall and Cole was suddenly lifted up off the floor, suspended by his wrists as the chain retracted into the ceiling. At which point the Nausicaans exited the room, leaving Cole dangling from the ceiling with nothing to do but study the collections of devices that the Ferengi could use to torture him.

"I need to speak with Shintar." the Ferengi daimon said to the Reman whose gaunt face now filled the main viewscreen of his bridge.

"Lord Shintar is busy Ferengi." the Reman replied, placing the emphasis on the word 'lord' "You may tell me what you have to say for yourself."

"Then tell Shintar that DaiMon Krig has a Starfleet officer in his possession and that I expect to have the information I need as soon as I have interrogated him." the daimon said and then he smiled, "And you can also tell him that I have acquired two more captives. One is Romulan and the other is Vulcan." then Krig paused for effect before he added, "Both are female and I am willing to offer them at a very reasonable price."

Then before the Reman could reply he was pushed aside as Shintar himself appeared on the screen.

"Congratulations Ferengi." he said, "It is such a pity that more of your species has not taken such a principled stand as your crew have against your previous leader's reforms. Of course this means that your crew alone shall share the profit from this endeavour. I looked forward to receiving the information from you and then we will discuss the price for the females."

"You honour me Lord Shintar." Krig began, but before he could continue the screen went blank.

On the bridge of his warbird Shintar turned to his crew.

"When the tachyon detection grid is taken down we will rendezvous with the Ferengi." he announced, "Then after we have taken the females from them we will destroy their vessel."

"Something I can help you with lieutenant?" Max asked when he saw West standing in engineering looking at one of the *Nightfall's* four warp cores.

"What?" she replied and then she frowned, "Oh. Err."

"Is there a problem with the outpost?" Max said.

"No. Well yes, there seems to be plenty wrong with it. But I'm not here about that." West answered, "In fact I've clean forgotten why I came here at all. Don't you just hate it when you walk into a room and can't remember why you went there?"

"It doesn't happen to me." Max said and he tapped one of the Borg implants in his skull, "I remember everything. Always."

"Lucky for some." West said.

"Perhaps you just need some rest. Even I need to regenerate every so often." Max suggested.

"Yes, in fact that's what I thought I was doing. Then all of a sudden I'm here." West responded. Then she shook her head, "I think I need a drink." she said, "Sorry for bothering you Max."

"Oh it's no bother, I was just finishing up here for the evening then I was going to beam over to the *Pacific* and take a look at their warp drive with Charlie. She says that it has been playing up recently."

"Well have fun and don't stay out too late." West replied before she turned to leave.

West headed in the direction of the officer's lounge, intending to get herself a drink in the company of some of the other crew. But just as she stepped into the turbolift Heart came rushing up and placed his hand in the door to prevent it from closing.

"Jenna," he said, "have there been any signals from Cole and T'Lan?"

"I don't know. I've been off the ship all day." West replied, "I didn't even know they were gone."

"They headed out earlier on in a runabout." Heart explained, "Snowman picked up a distress signal in a nearby system and they went to check it out but as far as I can tell they haven't checked in."

West tapped her combadge.

"Computer, when was the last transmission from Lieutenant Commander Cole or Lieutenant T'Lan received?"

"Lieutenant Commander Cole contacted the *USS Nightfall* at stardate six five eight three one three point one from the runabout *USS Severn*."

"That was right as they were leaving." Heart said, "It must have been to confirm their departure was okay. They should have checked in again by now though."

"Let's go double check on the bridge system." West said, "Maybe the message hasn't been entered into the public log yet." then when Heart stepped into the turbolift West simply said, "Bridge." and the turbolift began to move.

Shortly after the doors lid open again to reveal the *Nightfall's* bridge, with Hamilton still occupying the command position.

"I thought you were off duty." Hamilton said to West as she and Heart exited the turbolift.

"I am." West responded as she and Heart walked over to the operations station and looking at the officer manning it West added, "Give me the station for a couple of minutes would you?" and he nodded and got up to allow her to sit down in his place.

"We're checking on Cole and T'Lan." Heart told Hamilton as Grey called up the *Nightfall's* communication log.

"I've not heard a thing from them." Hamilton replied.

"Doesn't look like they've routed any signals through to anyone else either." West added, "No personal messages, no classified signals. Nothing."

"What about to the outpost or the *Pacific*?" Heart suggested, "Nayal may have wanted to get in touch with the other Romulans directly."

"Nayal's with them as well? You should have said." West replied as she searched the log again. Then she sighed and leant back in the chair, "No. Nothing from her either. Since the *Severn* entered warp there hasn't been a single signal from them and no, the *Pacific* and the outpost won't have heard anything either, not without us picking it up as well."

"Try contacting them instead." Hamilton said.

"That's actually a good idea." West responded, activating the *Nightfall's* subspace transmitter, "*USS Severn*, this is the *USS Nightfall*. Respond please." she said but there was no response and so she tried again,

"Lieutenant Commander Cole, Lieutenant T'Lan, please respond. Sublieutenant Nayal can you read me?" but again the channel remained silent in response and West just looked at Hamilton and shook her head, "Nothing. Even if they'd gone aboard another ship they should have set up the *Severn's* communication system to relay messages to them."

"We need to take this to the captain." Heart said.

"He's in his quarters." Hamilton said, "But I suggest you call ahead."  
"Yeah, I heard Shry's already seen more than he meant to." Heart replied.

Edwards was reading a letter from one of his children when his combadge activated.

"Captain, it's Captain Heart." Heart's voice said.

"Go ahead captain." Edwards replied.

"Captain there hasn't been any word from Cole or T'Lan. West's doubled checked the system and the last time Cole contacted the ship was right after he left."

"Where are you?" Edwards asked.

"The bridge. With West." Heart replied.

"Well wait right there. I'm on my way. Edwards out." and when the channel was shut off Edwards tapped his combadge to reactivate it, "Edwards to Carr." he said.

"Carr here captain." she replied.

"Grace there's a problem with Cole." he told her, "He's not reported back yet. Can you meet me on the bridge?"

"I'll be right there captain." Carr answered and the channel went silent.

Carr and Edwards actually met up in the turbolift and they exited it together.

"Looks like she wasn't far from him." West muttered and Heart smiled.

"What was that lieutenant?" Carr asked.

"Just commenting on how the captain was able to alert you so quickly to the situation sir." West replied.

"Let's handle this in my ready room." Edwards said and then he looked at Hamilton, "See if Lieutenant Commander White can join us will you?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Hamilton replied as the four other officers headed into Edwards' ready room, closing the door behind them.

"So what do we know?" Edwards asked.

"Not much captain." West answered, "Just that Cole took out the *Severn* along with Nayal and T'Lan to investigate a distress signal. We've tried contacting them but there was no answer so it's not like they've just forgotten."

"I don't see our Vulcan science officer just forgetting something like that." Edwards said.

"It can happen to any of us." West replied, "Well, almost any of us."

"The signal was from an unconfirmed source." Carr commented.

"And Cole turned down an escort from my men on the grounds of space." Heart added.

"And what about the system that they went to?" Edwards said, looking around, "I can't say it's one I'm familiar with."

"Uninhabited." West said, "And not on any shipping routes either."

"Captain we're going to have to send someone to investigate." Carr said before the door to the ready room chimed.

"It's Lieutenant Commander White." White's voice announced, "May I come in?"

"Enter." Edwards announced and the door open to reveal White dressed in his flight suit with his helmet under his arm.

"I just got back and Hamilton told me you wanted to see me captain." he said as he walked into the room and stood beside Heart.

"Using the intercom first. Nice." the MACO whispered.

"I heard what happened to Shry." White responded.

"Cole's not reported in." Carr said, not hearing the words exchanged by the two men.

"Can you tell us anything more about the signal?" Edwards added.

"No sir." White replied, "Only that it came from a system close to here and had the look of a distress call. It was repeating on a loop and was on a wide band carrier to make it easy to pick up."

"Sounds like the classic false distress signal from cheap space pirate fiction to lure in a victim." Heart said.

"Problem with that is that commercial traffic is more likely to ignore a distress call and just pass it along to the authorities when they get the chance." Edwards pointed out, "Let's face it a distress signal is far more likely to attract a Starfleet vessel or another pirate looking for easy prey." then he looked at Carr, "Commander Carr is right." he said, "The only option left to us is to go and look for ourselves."

"Another runabout could just fall into the same trap. Assuming there is a trap." West said.

"And my fighters aren't equipped for a rescue mission." White added.

"My assault shuttles have better firepower than a runabout but they're not long range craft." Heart said, "I don't fancy being towed all the way there at warp by fighters either. Too much can go wrong."

"That would take too long to organise anyway." White replied, "Several hours to make sure all the ships are rigged for faster than light tractor beam operations."

"Then we have to take the *Nightfall* itself." Edwards said, "I doubt there are any pirates around with the firepower to take on an Akira-class heavy cruiser."

"We'll need to let Captain Cameron know." Carr added.

"I doubt he'll object." Edwards replied, "If there's the slightest possibility that the conference could be threatened we need to know."

"There's still the possibility that this is intended to draw us off to leave the outpost vulnerable." Heart suggested.

"The Pacific will still be on hand to defend them and we're not going far." Carr pointed out.

"We'll be leaving our Imperial Guard contingent behind anyway." Edwards added, "I'm sure they'll make a difference if anyone tries boarding the outpost."

"We may need to call Max back from the *Pacific*." West commented, "I spoke to him earlier and he was just about to head over there to give Lieutenant Commander Frost a hand."

"Very well." Edwards announced, "I want us ready to leave in ten minutes. Captain Heart, prepare your men for a boarding action just in case."

"Yes sir." Heart replied with a grin.

As Nikki made her way to the outpost's transporter room she encountered a large number of Andorians exiting it. Unusually for this assignment the soldiers were all carrying equipment bundles that included body armour and assault rifles. Spotting Captain Shry emerging she pushed her way through the crowd towards him.

"Captain Shry, what's happening?" she asked.

"Nikki what are you still doing here?" he replied.

"The Romulans kept ordering more food. I've only just been able to get away from them. Why?" she said.

"Because the *Nightfall*'s leaving. Look." and Shry pointed to a nearby viewport. Rushing up to it and looking outside Nikki was in time to see the *Nightfall* gracefully turning away from the outpost and moving past the nearby Pacific. Then when the ship suddenly began to accelerate as it headed out of the asteroid field leaving her behind.

"Mom?" she said.

"Don't worry." Shry said as he walked up and put a hand on her shoulder, "I'm sure that between us, the *Pacific* and the Romulans we can find somewhere for you to sleep."

Watching from another viewport Brown and Jones stood in silence as the *Nightfall* departed.

"There goes more than half our firepower." Brown commented.

"It's not the loss of firepower that worries me." Jones replied, "It's the fact that if Admiral Schmidt is right then we've just lost most of the personnel experienced in dealing with what we could be facing."

"Maybe Captain Edwards suspects something as well." Brown suggested, "He did leave his Imperial Guard company behind after all."

"Maybe so. But I get the feeling that we should perhaps make certain of our escape route." Jones said.

## 7.

Cole had fallen asleep, his head hanging down, when the door to the interrogation room opened next and he was roused into consciousness suddenly as a bucket of near freezing water was hurled into his face.

Gasping, his eyes opened wide and he coughed.

"Ah Lieutenant Commander Cole you are awake." Krig said, "I have that right don't I? It is Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole isn't it? That's what my engineer tells me your combadge says. If he's made an error then you can start by telling me so and I'll dock his wages accordingly."

"Cole. Robert. Lieutenant commander." Cole replied, "Starfleet serial number-" but before he could finish Krig nodded and behind Cole a Nausicaan stepped forwards and punched him in the spine at the base of his rib cage.

"I'm so glad my engineer was correct." Krig said, "Now Robert, I may call you Robert yes? Now Robert I have been paid to obtain certain information and it is my belief that you can give it to me. So how about you make this easier on yourself and just answer all my questions."

"Cole. Robert. Lieutenant Commander." Cole said but as he spoke Krig walked over to the wall and took a short metal bar from it that he then tossed to the Nausicaan and before Cole could continue the Nausicaan swung the bar at the back of his legs, striking the back of his knee.

"I know your name human!" Krig snapped as Cole cried out in pain, "But what I need to know is how to deactivate the tachyon detection grid along the Neutral Zone."

"Cole. Robert." Cole began but the Nausicaan spun him around and punched him in the face hard enough that he tasted blood in his mouth.

"I apologise for the methods I am forced to employ here Robert. But had the traitor Grand Negus Zek and his incompetent successor Grand Negus Rom not followed your own Federation along with the Klingons, Cardassians and Romulans in restricting the availability of the various truth serums that have been developed over the years then I could have simply purchased the chemicals that would have compelled you to answer truthfully. As it is I must instead resort to these uncivilised methods. Now why not just answer?"

"Cole." Cole gasped, "Robert. Lieutenant-" and then he was struck again by the Nausicaan."

"Have it your way then foolish human!" Krig exclaimed and he waved forward a second Ferengi who had been waiting in the corner by the door. This figure walked up to Cole, holding the Ferengi equivalent of a hypospray in his hand, "Truth serums may not be available any more but there are a great many stimulants that can be obtained from both legal and illegal sources." Krig said and the other Ferengi injected the contents of the hypospray into Cole.

"It is done daimon." he said.

"Thank you Doctor Rek." Krig replied as he continued to look directly at Cole, "Those drugs will ensure you stay conscious and aware of everything that happens here." he said before walking towards the door, followed by Rek. Krig halted just inside the doorway however and he turned to the Nausicaan, "Continue." he said, "Avoid any damage too permanent but make sure he experiences as much pain as possible. I will pay you a bonus if I can hear his screams from the end of the corridor." and then the two Ferengi departed leaving Cole alone with the Nausicaan.

"I don't suppose there's any chance of you helping me to escape is there?" Cole asked before the Nausicaan reached up to his hands and broke one of his fingers.

"Captain I have a Starfleet transponder signal at zero four two mark one three." West announced as the *Nightfall* approached the system where the distress signal had originated, "It's the *Severn*."

"Hail them." Carr ordered.

"*USS Severn* this is the *USS Nightfall*. Respond please." West said but just as when a signal had been sent from the asteroid field there was no reply, "They aren't responding." West said.

"Thanks." Hamilton muttered, "I didn't notice."

"Sensors indicate that life support is functional though." West added, ignoring the comment from Hamilton.

"Did you get that Snowman?" Edwards asked, his words being broadcast to the fighter squadron moving ahead of the heavy cruiser.

"Copy that *Nightfall*." White replied, "I have the transponder on my sensors. Looks like it's located near the system's major gas giant."

"Move in and investigate." Edwards ordered, "I'll keep the *Nightfall* back here for support but I'd rather not risk an ambush that close to the planet. I'll be sending the MACOs in after you so keep an eye on them."

"Understood *Nightfall*. Snowman out." and on the main viewscreen the bridge crew saw the fighter squadron peel off and head towards the gas giant.

Edwards then looked at West.



"Order Captain Heart to launch." he said and West nodded and activated the intercom.

"Hangar this is bridge. MACO squadron scramble, scramble, scramble." she said and on the viewscreen four dark green assault shuttles were seen as they sped out of the hangar, following the fighter squadron towards the source of the transponder, "Launch successful captain." West reported.

"Shields up." Carr ordered, "I want full sensor sweeps of the entire system. If we're not alone we need to know about it."

"Mister Hamilton take us inside the orbit of that moon ahead." Edwards added, "Don't let it get between us and the fighters but I don't want our line of sight in any direction dropping below six hundred thousand kilometres."

"Aye captain." Hamilton replied, "Hold on." and the ship suddenly lurched as Hamilton twisted the joysticks he used to manually pilot the *Nightfall* and turned it sharply. On most Starfleet vessel a manoeuvre so violent would have hurled bridge officers from their seats. But the simple addition of safety harnesses kept them all in place.

"You had to give him an excuse didn't you?" Carr said softly but Edwards just smiled.

With his sensors locked onto the transponder signal White led his squadron towards the runabout and as soon as it came within visual range he called up an image of the ship on his cockpit display.

"*Nightfall* I have remote visual contact with target." he transmitted back to the *Nightfall*, "The vessel is intact but I can see signs of scorching that could be the result of particle weapon impacts."

"Copy that Snowman." Edwards' voice replied, "Can you detect any signs of life?"

"Negative on sensors and negative on visual for movement *Nightfall*. If anyone's at home then they're keeping a low profile." White reported.

"Understood Snowman. I want a close pass and full sensor sweep to check for anything out of the ordinary. The MACOs are going in and I don't want them caught by a booby trap." Edwards ordered.

"Understood *Nightfall*. I'm going in. Quarterback, you're on my wing. Everyone else circle at one hundred thousand kilometres" White replied.

"Roger that Snowman. I have your wing." and the two attack fighters peeled off from the rest of the squadron, rushing towards the runabout.

White watched the sensor readouts projected onto the visor of his helmet carefully, watching for any signs of explosive compounds that should be present or anomalies with the runabout's power system that would indicate tampering. However, despite there being clear damage to the vessel there was nothing to suggest that it would explode if approached.

"Snowman to Heart." he transmitted to the following assault shuttles, "The door is open. It's all yours now."

"Thanks Snowman." Heart replied, "We're going in."

One of the four assault shuttles then flew right up to the runabout, slowing and turning to match the runabout's heading and speed so that the main rear hatch aligned with one of the runabout's side access hatches and then a flexible boarding tube extended between the two vessels to form a seal.

With the access codes needed to override the runabout's hatch seal available to them the MACOs were able to penetrate the *Severn* in moments and Heart was the first to burst into the cockpit, a powerful flash light attached to the side of his rifle illuminating the cockpit.

"Clear!" he called out as more of his men followed him from the assault shuttle. The shuttle held a full platoon of MACOs, but for this task even a single squad was more than enough to secure the vessel and so the rest of his men waited in the shuttle instead, "Go check the rest of the ship." Heart added and as his men headed into the modular centre section and rear compartment Heart shone his flash light around the cockpit, looking for clues as to what had happened to its occupants, "*Nightfall* the cockpit consoles are all inactive." he transmitted as the beam shone across the flight control stations, "Though I don't see any signs of internal damage."

"The rest of the ship is clear sir." one of the other MACOs announced as he returned to the cockpit after having searched the rear of the runabout.

"*Nightfall* the runabout is deserted." Heart reported, lowering his rifle. But then as he glanced downwards he saw a small discoloured patch on the floor where what should have been metallic grey was instead dull green, "Check that *Nightfall*." he said, "There's blood in the cockpit, it looks Vulcan to me."

With the *USS Severn* brought back into the *Nightfall's* hangar with a tractor beam both Doctor King and Max could begin to investigate it properly. For Max there was damage to several locations to be studied but for King there was only item of interest.

"It's Romulan." he announced as he knelt by the blood stain, folding up his tricorder and looking up at Carr who was overseeing the investigation of the runabout.

"I thought Vulcan and Romulan blood was identical." she replied, "How can you tell it's Romulan?"

"Because Lieutenant Commander," King answered as he got to his feet, "I actually know to do my job. The basic DNA structure of Vulcan and Romulan blood types is identical that is true. But thankfully we have the

DNA patterns of both Lieutenant T'Lan and Sublieutenant Noyal on record. Now there is enough in that patch of blood for me to test for a match and I can confirm that that blood belonged to Sublieutenant Noyal."

"Damn." Carr muttered, "Doctor, can you tell whether she was alive when that blood stain was created?"

"Well given the pattern of the other droplets I found I'd say that the blood was a result of an injury she suffered while still alive. Though whether it was fatal itself I cannot say."

"Lieutenant Commander Carr." Max called out from outside the runabout and Carr walked to the hatch and leaned out of it.

"What is it Max?" she asked.

"I have completed my analysis of these weapon impacts." Max replied, indicating the various scorch marks on the *Severn's* hull.

"And what have you found?" Carr asked as she climbed down from the hatch and walked to stand beside the Borg.

"They are all the result of plasma based disruptor weapons. I have detected some variation in the residue that suggests they were caused by different individual weapons but they are definitely of the same type."

Max explained.

"They aren't Romulan are they?" Carr asked.

"No commander." Max answered, "Romulan shipboard weaponry leaves behind an anti-proton residue that would have been easily identifiable for the additional matter/anti-matter annihilation that would have occurred on the hull around the site of the impact. These weapons are most definitely of Nausicaan origin."

Carr sighed.

"And since the Nausicaans have very few qualms about selling weapons they could have been supplied to almost anyone." she said.

"Or maybe not." King said as he exited the runabout and approached Carr and Max and he held up one hand with his thumb and forefinger held out to grasp something between them that was too small for Carr to see.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It is a hair." Max told her, his Borg-enhanced optics allowing him to zoom in on the single strand that King held.

"Exactly." King said, "But to be precise it is a Nausicaan hair. It appears that when the *Severn* was boarded one of its uninvited guests left this behind."

"But what would Nausicaans want with two Starfleet officers and a Romulan?" Max asked, "Surely they must realise that we'll be looking for them. Their prisoners are more a liability than an asset."

"Nausicaans are mercenaries lieutenant." King said, "I wouldn't be as worried about them than whoever's paying them and whatever it is that they have planned for Cole and his team."

Cole barely noticed as the door to the interrogation room opened to readmit DaiMon Krig and Doctor Rek. Without the supposed benefit of the stimulant drug injected into his system by the Ferengi medical officer he would have long ago lapsed into unconsciousness from the beating given to him by the Nausicaan mercenary. As it was one of his eyes was swollen shut while every breath he took brought more pain thanks to the broken ribs he had suffered and several of his teeth were now lay on the grating beneath him that appeared intended to allow blood and any other bodily fluids produced by a captive to simply drain away.

"Stop." Krig told the mercenary and the Nausicaan stepped back, leaving Cole swinging slowly from the chains. Then the ship's commanding officer turned to his medical officer, "Doctor Rek, what is his condition?" he asked and Rek stepped towards Cole with his medical scanner raised.

"Multiple broken bones. Fractures. Internal bleeding. Only the stimulant is keeping him awake." Rek reported.

"Excellent." Krig replied, "Good work doctor." then he looked up at Cole, "Now Robert, how about you tell me how to shut down the tachyon detection grid?"

Cole looked back at Krig and his lips moved slowly.

"What? Speak up human, I can't hear you." Krig called.

Cole took a deep breath, the pain making him wince. Then he spoke softly.

"Cole. Robert. Lieutenant Commander."

"Again!" Krig snapped and the Nausicaan delivered another blow that broke another rib, causing Cole to cry out in pain.

"Perhaps I am wasting my time here." Krig said, "Even after all this you still don't want to answer my very simple question. But perhaps your Vulcan comrade will." and Cole lifted his head, "She may be a female but since she is also part of your Starfleet I'm sure that the information is somewhere inside that inferior brain of hers. Oh I know that Vulcans are supposed to be immune to interrogation techniques such as these." Krig went on, "But some time in the late twenty-second the Andorians developed a device that could break down a Vulcan's emotional control and reduce them to gibbering wrecks. I happen to have one of these devices, obtained a great cost I might add so I would enjoy seeing it finally proving of use. The best part is that the female will be left physically undamaged and Shintar will still pay me for her."

"Shintar?" Cole gasped as he heard the name.

"Oh just some Reman savage, even less civilised than your Federation." Krig said, "But it would appear that the destruction of the Romulan home system, including Remus has left the surviving Remans with something of a problem. The Romulans used them for physical labour and that role was best served by the males of the species. Therefore, very few females were removed from Remus. Now that the planet is gone the Remans that are left are more than ninety-five percent male, leaving them with something of a demographic problem that they hope to correct using captured Romulan females. As a Vulcan your female may not be an ideal match but she will be close enough."

"No." Cole whispered and he tried to shake his head.

"What was that?" Krig asked.

"No. Leave T'Lan." Cole said.

"I need to get the information from somewhere human and I-" Krig responded before Cole interrupted.

"The *Nightfall*." he said, "The tachyon detection grid can only be shut down from the tactical station aboard the *Nightfall* or another Starfleet vessel.

"You expect me to believe that?" Krig exclaimed, "A starship carries hundreds of Starfleet personnel. We could not possibly seize it in time to prevent them from locking us out of their computer. Your Vulcan will know of another way though I'm sure."

"The outpost." Cole said, "The outpost is connected to the grid as well."

"Interesting." Krig said, "All we need to do is get a small team aboard the outpost and we can access the controls to the tachyon detection grid."

"And thanks to the Nausicaans you hired daimon, we have a full schematic of the outpost." Rek added with a smile.

"Indeed. Let us go and plan the attack doctor." Krig replied.

"What about the human?" Rek asked.

"We shall place him with the females just in case we need him further." Krig replied and the Nausicaan walked over to the controls that dropped Cole back to the floor where he collapsed in a heap.

**a.**

"So have you come up with any ideas for getting us out of here yet cousin?" Nayal asked as she sat on one of the beds with her blanket wrapped around her. Likewise, T'Lan sat on the bed at the opposite side of the cell so that the two women faced one another.

"I have not." T'Lan answered, "I have noticed that this vessel appears to be in a poor state of repair, however."

Nayal grunted and looked around, noticing several patches on the walls and ceiling that were discoloured from corrosion.

"I thought the crew were just cutting corners to keep it going on the cheap." she said. Then she sighed, "Well if you don't have a plan to get us out of here we need something else to talk about while we wait. How about I try guessing who it is you plan turning to when your pon farr comes around?"

"That is not an appropriate subject for conversation." T'Lan replied.

"Oh really? Hit a nerve have I cousin?"

"And please do not call me 'cousin'." T'Lan said.

"You know I seem to remember answering your question about me and Bradley Hamilton." Nayal said, "Who I might add is very talented. Plus I think he'll be agreeable if I ever have the need to be with someone for just a short time again. But back to you." Nayal added before pausing to think, "We've already established that our first officer is involved with Captain Edwards so he's out and before I slept with Bradley you confirmed that it wasn't him. Now both Doctor King and Lieutenant Commander White already have wives so they're out. And though Captain Shry is—" Nayal went on before T'Lan suddenly got to her feet and faced the force field keeping them in their cell.

"Robert." she exclaimed and Nayal turned to see that a Nausicaan had entered the room beyond the cell carrying Cole over his shoulder. Behind the Nausicaan, DaiMon Krig and Doctor Rek followed and while the mercenary carried Cole up to the force field they went to a control console.

"Stand back from the force field female!" Krig snapped and when T'Lan backed away he shut it down.

"Careful." Doctor Rek said as the Nausicaan carried Cole into the cell, "Do not damage him further." and the Nausicaan then crouched down to lay Cole out on the floor of the cell before turning around and leaving it once more. The moment he was clear of the force field Krig reactivated it and then snarled at Nayal and T'Lan.

"Be glad he broke Vulcan." he said, looking directly at T'Lan, "You were next and you still will be if he ceases to be co-operative." and then both Ferengi and their Nausicaan mercenary turned and left the room.

"Robert." T'Lan said again as she hurried to kneel beside Cole, checking his breathing and pulse.

"You heard the Ferengi." Nayal said, "He broke. That's the problem with humans. Too fragile. Neither of us would have given in so easily."

"What's the matter with you? Can't you see he's hurt?" T'Lan said, glaring at Nayal and the Romulan's eyes widened.

"It's him isn't it?" she said, looking at Cole, "You want to be with Lieutenant Commander Cole and not just when your biology forces you to find a mate."

"That is not important." T'Lan said. Then she added, "He's cold." and she lifted him into a sitting position so she could wrap the blanket she wore around him as well.

"T'Lan." he gasped.

"I am here." she replied.

"Threatened you. Had to tell them what they wanted to know." Cole struggled to say, his breathing clearly laboured.

"Well don't tell them anything else." Nayal said, "Torture doesn't work on Vulcans."

"Andorian device." Cole said and T'Lan looked at Nayal.

"During our conflicts with the Andorians they developed technologies to break down our mental defences." she said, "If the Ferengi have obtained one then I will not be able to resist indefinitely."

"Got to escape." Cole gasped, "Both of you. Shintar."

"Shintar?" Nayal repeated, "I know that name."

"It was the name of the Reman who commanded the pirates who attacked the convoy that brought you from Romulan space." T'Lan reminded her, "When his crew were taken into custody they identified him."

"Hang on," Nayal responded, "didn't they also say that he just vanished into thin air right in front of them?"

"Yes they did." T'Lan said.

"Oh great. So now we're dealing with those zombies again." Nayal said, referring to their mysterious enemy's habit of using reanimated corpses as operatives.

"It appears so." T'Lan agreed, "Though I fail to see why we are of interest to them."

"The Remans," Cole said, "The Ferengi have sold you to them. They need women."  
"That is puzzling." T'Lan said, looking at Naya, "Why would they need women?"  
"Oh no." Naya said as she realised what it was the Remans needed, "I think I know. It's not just us they need, it's the children we can have."  
"Most of the Reman women died." Cole said, "The Ferengi said they want Romulan women instead."  
"But Vulcans are close enough." Naya added, "Cousin he's right. We need to get out of here. I've still got a hundred or so years ahead of me in which I can bear children. I don't fancy spending all that time being forced to do nothing else. Escape has got to be our top priority."  
"I cannot leave the lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.  
"Look cousin, you may think he's worth risking being the star of your very own 'Vulcan Love Slave' live show but I don't. I'm getting out of here no matter what." Naya told her sternly.  
"It's the only way." Cole said to T'Lan, "Leave me here. Get back to the *Nightfall* and tell them what's happened. The Ferengi want to shut down the tachyon detection grid so the Remans can get over the border. They'll attack the conference. I told them it can be done from the outpost."  
"Only one of us needs to return to the *Nightfall* and alert the others." T'Lan said, "I will remain here."  
"Escape stands a better chance with two." Naya pointed out.  
"Go." Cole croaked and then he coughed up a mouthful of blood.  
"I can at least do something to alleviate your pain." T'Lan said and she reached out to place a hand on Cole's shoulder, intended to render him unconscious. But as she applied pressure all that happened was that he cried out in pain.  
"That's not working cousin." Naya said.  
"The Ferengi must have administered some sort of stimulant that is blocking the nerve pinch." T'Lan replied, "There is only one other alternative." then she paused, "But it is a very intimate procedure."  
"Oh just get on with it." Naya exclaimed, "We need to find a way out of here as fast as possible."  
T'Lan reached out for Cole again, but this time she instead placed her fingertips against his swollen face and looked directly at him.  
"Your thoughts to my thoughts." she began, "Your thoughts to my thoughts. There is no pain."

Captain Edwards gathered his senior officers together in the *Nightfall's* briefing room.

"So what do we have exactly?" he asked.

"The runabout was attacked by Nausicaans." King replied.

"Using multiple vessels." Max added.

"But did they send the distress call or was it another of their victims?" Carr asked.

"My squadron found no evidence of any other vessels in the system, Romulan or otherwise." White answered, "So if there was another ship that was able to get off a distress signal then the Nausicaans took it intact and left the system with it."

"What about warp trails?" Edwards asked.

"Nothing sir." West replied.

"My guess is that the Nausicaans left at impulse and went to warp some distance away." Hamilton added, "It'd be blind luck for us to just stumble across their trail."

"Where would Nausicaans go?" Heart said, looking around at the Starfleet officers.

"They may have a base nearby." Edwards said.

"Or they could just make a quick dash over the border into the Neutral Zone where Starfleet won't let us follow and then travel as far as they need to get to somewhere where they can dispose of whatever they've stolen."

"But they didn't take anything from the *Severn*." Heart pointed out, "Even the extra hand phasers were still in their charging racks."

"So we could be looking at a slaving operation." Carr said.

"I hope so." Edwards responded, "Because otherwise someone went to a lot of effort to grab themselves some Starfleet officers and I hate to think why they'd want them."

"Shintar." Krig said, staring at the image of the Reman on his viewscreen, "I have the information I need. The human broke easily under interrogation."

"Is that so daimon?" Shintar responded, his tone clearly indicating that he did not believe the Ferengi's claim, "In that case perhaps you'd be gracious enough to explain why Starfleet's tachyon detection grid is still functioning. I cannot bring my ship across the border until it is deactivated and that means no more latinum for you for the females you captured."

Krig snarled.

"Yes I thought that would get your attention." Shintar responded, "Now when will the tachyon detection grid be deactivated?"

"My crew is putting together a raiding force as we speak." Krig told him, "They will assault the outpost and

deactivate the grid from there.”

“The outpost?” Shintar said, “Be careful Krig. The Romulans aboard the outpost are the key to this operation and if your thugs kill them needlessly then I'll hold you responsible.”

“Everything will be taken care of Shintar, I guarantee-” Krig said but Shintar cut off communications before he could finish.

“He thinks himself better than us daimon.” Krig's first officer said, “Take the latinum we have and leave him stuck in the Neutral Zone.”

“Better yet,” another of the bridge crew began, “sell his location to Starfleet. Let the humans deal with him.”

“Are your lobes all addled?” Krig exclaimed, “We will not settle for the latinum we have when we can have more and we cannot deal with the humans while we hold Starfleet officers in our holding cell.”

Back aboard his warbird Shintar returned to his quarters, once again leaving his bodyguards outside in the corridor.

“Well?” The Girl asked as soon as she appeared, this time accompanied by two of the bulky white humanoid but featureless figures known as fleshforms that remained behind her as she walked closer to Shintar, “You summoned me here so I guess you have news.”

“The Ferengi reports a partial success.” Shintar replied.

“Partial? As in incomplete?” The Girl commented.

“He claims to be close to bringing down the tachyon detection grid so I can get my ship into Federation territory unobserved.” Shintar said, “He will attack the Nausicaan outpost.”

“Really?” The Girl asked, “If he can destroy the outpost and end the peace talks then there really isn't much point in you doing it now is there?”

“I cannot order him to destroy the outpost.” Shintar said, “The crew must believe I share their goal of procuring females to breed from.”

“So long as the conference comes to an end without the Romulans taking part agreeing to a settlement. Their civil war is important to us Shintar, it keeps the attention of all the other powers in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants focused on them instead of us.” The Girl replied.

“The conference will fail I assure you.” Shintar said.

“It better had Shintar.” The Girl warned him as she turned around and began to walk back towards her two fleshform bodyguards, “Because you know what happens to those who fail me.” and then she was gone. The fleshforms remained in Shintar's quarters a few seconds longer before they stepped forwards in unison and both disappeared.

A Ferengi D'Kora-class starship contained extensive cargo holds for carrying trade goods and it was in one of these that the raiding force prepared. The bulk of the assault troops were of course Nausicaan, Ferengi being generally averse to physical combat. But to ensure that the Nausicaan mercenaries remembered their mission and to provide the technical support they were likely to need when it came to accessing the Starfleet systems that controlled the tachyon detection grid there were also several Ferengi amongst them, including the ship's first officer and chief engineer.

“Leader.” the engineer said when he saw Krig enter the room, “We are almost ready to depart. But we need more information.”

“More? What else is there?” Krig asked in reply.

“The location of the control unit for a start.” his first officer said.

“Plus the strength of the security detail.” another of the Ferengi added and Krig snarled. All this was of course information that he could have got from Cole during his initial interrogation but instead he now looked as if he had left the task only half done. Unfortunately he had been so eager to report success to Shintar that he had failed get everything he needed.

“Accompany me.” he said, “We will fetch Doctor Rek and go to the human to demand answers. I think you'll be surprised just how easily he will answer my questions.”

### 3.

Still holding the blanket around her with one hand, Nayal stood on one of the beds and reached up with the other to where one of the ceiling panels appeared corroded.

"It's no good." she said, looking down at T'Lan who still sat beside Cole with her blanket wrapped around him as well, "I think that these panels are just coated in something that oxidises. The panel itself is fixed solid. We're not getting out that way." and then she climbed back down to the floor and looked at Cole, "So how is he?" she asked.

"Weak." T'Lan replied, "I can take away his pain but his injuries persist. I am concerned that he may die before we can get him to medical attention."

Just then the door to the room outside the cell hissed open and a group of Ferengi, most of them armed, along with a single Nausicaan entered.

"Release the force field." Krig ordered and his first officer moved to the control console.

"Yes daimon." he replied before shutting off the force field so that Krig could enter the cell and walk right up to Cole.

"Human!" he yelled, "Human wake up!" and he kicked at Cole who just groaned.

"Don't waste your time Ferengi." Nayal said, "he won't be answering any more of your questions."

Scowling, Krig looked around.

"Doctor Rek." he called out, "Come and see to the human. I thought he was supposed to remain conscious."

"He should be leader." Rek answered as he joined Krig in the cell and leant over Cole and T'Lan, focusing on Cole but grinning as he attempted to get a look under the blanket at T'Lan's body.

"If he can't answer questions then you will be next." Krig said, also staring at T'Lan.

"Maybe we can make a deal Ferengi." Nayal said suddenly and Krig turned towards her, frowning.

"Why should I make a deal with a female?" he demanded, "That Reman fool Shintar will pay me handsomely for you."

"But he can't offer you what I can." Nayal replied, "As you said, I'm female." and then she reached out a hand to gently stroke one of Krig's ears and he shuddered. Then he snarled and pushed her hand away.

"Latinum lasts longer than lust!" he snapped, "Rule of Acquisition number two hundred and twenty-nine."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever been with one of my people." Nayal said, stroking his ear again, "If there's one thing we have, it's stamina. I can give you the information you need and you can keep me here."

"Shintar expects-" Krig's first officer began before Nayal interrupted.

"Sell her to Shintar daimon. Keep the best for yourself." she said.

"Perhaps my raiding force can obtain another female from the outpost that Shintar will think is you." Krig said, smiling at Nayal.

At first Nayal smiled back but then she suddenly snarled at him and her gentle stroking of his ear changed to a firm grip and Krig let out a sudden high-pitched scream. The other armed Ferengi went for their weapons but Nayal was faster, spinning Krig around to face away from her and pulling him back towards her to act as a shield. At the same time she let go of her blanket, allowing it to fall while she used Krig himself to cover her while she reached out and snatched Krig's phaser from its holster.

"Nobody move!" she yelled, aiming the disruptor at the other Ferengi who all froze in place. The Nausicaan however continued to draw his own weapon and Nayal aimed hers at him and fired. The bright yellow beam struck the towering Nausicaan in the chest and he let out a brief cry as the light enveloped him before he was completely vaporised, "Okay now," Nayal said, concealing her surprise at the effect of the phaser blast, "one at a time I want each of you to drop your weapons and get over against the back wall of this cell. Now!" and she pointed the phaser directly at Krig's first officer. None of them wanting to share the Nausicaan's fate, the Ferengi did as Nayal instructed and set down their own phasers before entering the cell and standing against the back wall, "Okay cousin, get Cole out there. I'll be right behind you." Nayal added and while T'Lan lifted Cole to his feet and supported him out of the cell Nayal kicked her blanket across the floor out of the cell and began to back away from the line of Ferengi, keeping her phaser aimed at them and Krig in front of her.

As soon as T'Lan reached one of the discarded Ferengi phasers she stopped, set down Cole and picked up the weapon.

"I have them covered." she told Nayal.

"Good." Nayal replied and she glanced down to see where her blanket was, using her foot to pull it towards her, "Okay daimon, stay still a moment. Move and I'll shoot you too." she said as she let go of Krig's ear long enough to duck down and pick up the blanket again. With this held front of her, Nayal then kicked Krig into the cell, "Now back against the wall with all the other little trolls!" Nayal hissed at him and Krig did as he was told.

Nayal then edged her way over to T'Lan.

"Okay so now what?" she asked, "This was pretty much a spur of the moment thing."

"Give up now." Krig told them, "Two naked females will never be able to escape this ship."

"He does have a valid point." T'Lan said, "Our nudity is an impediment."

"They have clothes." Nayal pointed out and she waved her stolen phaser at the Ferengi, each of whom flinched as it pointed in his direction.

"Taking theirs is the logical solution." T'Lan said and Nayal looked at the Ferengi.

"Okay you heard her. Strip. All of you."

"But there are only two of you." Rek protested before Nayal fired her phaser again, the beam striking the wall above Rek's head and he squealed.

"Maybe I've been hanging around humans too long." she said, "But I've got the urge to try on at least half a dozen outfits before I pick the first one I tried. Now go on, all of you strip and toss your clothes over here. If you don't I'm going to start blowing bits off you with this thing and given what you had planned for us I know just the bits I'll start with."

Nayal kept her phaser trained on the Ferengi as they undressed, hurling insults at her as well as the clothes they tossed out of the cell and as soon as they were finished T'Lan reactivated the force field, sealing them all inside.

"We should hurry." T'Lan told Nayal, "Using that phaser at full power may have triggered internal sensors. I would recommend adjusting it to a lower intensity."

"Hey, I'm not to blame cousin." Nayal replied as she set the phaser down on the floor while she picked out clothing that looked to be the correct size and began to dress beneath the blanket, "I've never handled a Ferengi phaser before. Now get dressed."

Nayal and T'Lan dressed quickly before T'Lan also dressed Cole in a pair of trousers that were far too short for him. While she did this Nayal went to the console that controlled the force field to the holding cell and inspected it.

"How do I get this panel off?" she asked out loud. Then she stepped back and added, "Oh never mind." before she fired her phaser again and the console exploded in a shower of sparks, "That should hold them a bit longer." she said, "Oh and one more thing." and she fired on the pile of surplus clothing, incinerating it all in an instant.

"We still need to leave this vessel." T'Lan pointed out.

"You'll never get off my ship alive female scum!" Krig yelled from inside the cell.

"Hey!" Nayal responded, "Naked people need to be quiet if they don't want me to crank up the air conditioning." then she looked at T'Lan, "Okay if you can support Cole we can be getting out of here."

"Agreed." T'Lan said as she carefully helped Cole to his feet. Though he was physically much larger than she was, T'Lan Vulcan physiology gave her the strength she needed to support him for a sustained period.

"So transporter or shuttle bay?" Nayal said as they exited the holding area and stood in an empty corridor, "I think I can remember the way to the transporter room they brought us here from."

"That is only a viable strategy if there is a suitable planet or vessel within range." T'Lan replied, "I suggest we locate the shuttle bay an attempt to procure a vessel capable of warp travel."

"A shuttle's not going to outrun this ship." Nayal said as they began to move along the corridor, "Even given the state it's in." and she promptly kicked a duct running up the wall that had several of its securing brackets missing.

"We may be able to gain a head start if the Ferengi we left in the holding cell remain undiscovered." T'Lan replied.

"The core." Cole groaned.

"What?" Nayal asked.

"The warp core." T'Lan replied, "If we can eject this vessel's warp core then it will be disabled until it can be recovered and refitted, a process that will take several hours at least."

"And how exactly do we do that?" Nayal said.

"The computers aboard a D'Kora-class vessel such as this are just as efficient as those aboard a Federation Starship." T'Lan told her, "All we need to do is locate a suitable console and we may be able to control their systems from any point on the ship."

"Plus we can find a deck plan." Nayal added with a smile, "Well come on then, let's find ourselves a computer."

With no further leads on its missing crew members the *Nightfall* returned to the asteroid field. From the privacy of his ready room Captain Edwards contacted Captain Cameron aboard the *Pacific*.

"David. Did you find them?" Cameron asked and Edwards shook his head and sighed.

"We found their runabout." he replied, "But the only sign of Cole or the others was a splash of Nayal's blood on the floor."

"Were there any clues as to who was responsible?" Cameron said and Edwards nodded.



"Yes there were." he told his counterpart aboard the *Pacific*, "The runabout had taken fire from Nausicaan weaponry and Doctor King found Nausicaan hair aboard. But they hadn't hung around and there were no warp trails to follow. I was hoping that you might know something about Nausicaan activity in the area given how much longer you've been here."

"I'm sorry David, there haven't been any reports that I know of." Cameron replied, "We'll have to put in a request to Starfleet Intelligence. Short of that we'll have to start alerting the outposts along the Neutral Zone. Their sensors have full coverage of the sector."

"We better have them check shipping in the Neutral Zone as well." Edwards added, "A Nausicaan ship could easily slip over the border and try to hide itself amongst refugee traffic."

Cameron nodded in agreement, but rather than reply straight away he instead picked up a mug that someone suddenly placed on his desk in front of him.

"Thanks." he said as he took a sip.

"Who's that?" Edwards asked when he noticed that the sleeve of the person who had given Cameron the drink was not from a Starfleet uniform.

"What? Our newest recruit?" Cameron replied and then Nikki leant into the picture.

"Hi captain." she said, "Remember me? Cause Mom managed to forget when you flew off and left me behind." and Edwards bowed his head, sighing as he placed his face in his hand.

"*Nightfall* out." he said, turning off the display and then he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to Carr." he said.

"Carr here captain." she replied.

"Where are you?" Edwards asked.

"In my quarters. Why?"

"Can you remind me why you have quarters that are the size they are Grace? Bigger than mine in fact."

"What? You know it's because I share with-" and then there was a sudden pause, "Oh crap!" Carr exclaimed as it dawned on her that her daughter was not aboard.

"Don't worry Grace." Edwards reassured her, "She's on the *Pacific*."

Managing to avoid any contact with the crew, Naya and T'Lan located a deserted workshop on one of the Ferengi vessel's lower decks and T'Lan helped Cole to a chair before accessing one of the computer terminals.

"It is just as I thought." she said, "In theory we can control the entire ship from this terminal."

"But the Ferengi will be able to override it right?" Naya asked.

"Indeed. That is why I said 'In theory.'" T'Lan replied, "We would have to break through several layers of security encryption in order to gain access to key systems as well. There is also the fact that by accessing them we would give away our position to the crew."

"Can you at least find us a route to the shuttle bay?" Naya said.

"I already have." T'Lan told her, "That information is not restricted."

"Good. But what about the warp core?"

"I cannot issue a direct command to eject the core without the proper security access." T'Lan replied,

"However, I believe that it may be possible to force the ship's computer to do so of its own accord."

"How?" Naya asked.

"The core temperature monitoring system does not appear to be restricted." T'Lan answered, "I can feed in an adjustment that increases over time, say ten minutes, to the point at which the computer believes that a core breach is imminent and will automatically eject the core."

"Ten minutes? I suppose that gives us time to get to the shuttle bay, yes?"

"It does. We can then access a suitable shuttlecraft and wait for core breach alert to sound before launching. Logic dictates that the Ferengi crew will be more concerned about the potential core breach than in stopping a shuttle leaving."

"With any luck they'll just think it's someone abandoning ship." Naya commented, "So how long will this bit of sabotage take cousin?"

"It is done." T'Lan replied, "I suggest we make haste."

"Okay, grab Cole and follow me." Naya said.

"Actually I think I should lead the way." T'Lan replied, "After all, I am the one who knows how to get to the shuttle bay from here."

"As you wish cousin."

They reached the Ferengi vessel's hangar with plenty of time to spare and peered inside. Though they had avoided coming into contact with any of the crew so far there were two Ferengi and a squad of Nausicaans stood beside a small Nausicaan shuttle on the far side of the hangar while another Ferengi was located in a control booth that overlooked the main hangar.

"Okay so which ship do we take?" Naya asked as she looked around at the assortment of Ferengi shuttles from small one and two man pods to several larger types such as the Nausicaan shuttle.

"According to the ship's database that shuttle is capable of reaching warp three point two and is fully

functional." T'Lan replied and she pointed to a shuttle that was in the mid range of size amongst those in the hangar before them.

"But how do we get to it without being seen?" Nayal asked, "We can't exactly pass for Ferengi, even wearing their clothes."

"If not for Lieutenant Commander Cole's injuries we could use the Ferengi equivalent of our jefferies tubes to get closer." T'Lan said as she spotted a service hatch in the wall close to the shuttle that they needed to get to.

"Just go." Cole gasped, "Get out of here."

"It is illogical to leave you behind lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Illogical. Right." Nayal commented. Then she smiled, "I tell you what though. I could still make it through those ducts while you stay here with Cole. Then when the alarms start sounding I can manoeuvre the shuttle to conceal you."

T'Lan considered this.

"That suggestion carries with it the greatest chance of success." she said and then she looked down the corridor, "There is an access panel over there." she added.

After helping Nayal into the duct T'Lan returned to the doorway where she had left Cole.

"You should have gone." he said, "I'm slowing you down."

"If I were to leave you here then the odds of your surviving long enough for a rescue team to arrive are less than ten percent." T'Lan replied as she peered through the doorway, watching the access hatch behind the shuttle, "This plan increases your chance of survival."

"How much?" Cole asked.

"To twelve percent." T'Lan replied.

"Let's pray for that extra two percent then." Cole said and he started to smile before coughing and wincing in pain as T'Lan's telepathic suggestion started to wear off and he began to become more aware of his injuries once more.

Meanwhile Nayal was crawling through the Ferengi vessel's access duct. In here the poor state of repair that the ship was in was even more obvious than it was elsewhere, with the evidence of improvised repairs using parts not intended for the purpose they had been put to plain to see. Reaching the access panel located behind the shuttle she released it carefully, not wanting to let it drop to the deck and alert the Ferengi or their Nausicaan mercenaries to her presence. Turning the panel around she pulled it back into the duct and left it there while she jumped down while no one was watching. From here she could see that the rear of the shuttle was open and she darted inside and directly to the pilot's seat where she began the process of powering up the shuttle, stopping short of actually starting the engines and giving herself away.

"Okay cousin," she said to herself, "now let's see how good you really are with computers."

As it happened Nayal did not have long to wait to find out as a klaxon suddenly sounded throughout the ship to alert the crew to a potential warp core breach. Looking out through the shuttle's viewport she saw the Ferengi rush towards a second exit, one far from where T'Lan waited with Cole. Seeing her chance Nayal reached out and started the Ferengi shuttle's engines.

"Shuttle Grignok, what are you doing?" the flight controller's voice demanded over the communication system but Nayal ignored him, instead firing the shuttle's thrusters to raise the vessel off the deck and turning it to present the open hatch at the rear to the two Starfleet officers waiting in the corridor.

Seeing their chance, T'Lan half dragged and half carried Cole towards the shuttle. Sealing the hatch behind them as soon as they were aboard she then lay him down on a couch towards the rear of the compact vessel before rushing to the seat beside Nayal.

"Cousin what are you doing?" Nayal asked as T'Lan sat down next to her.

"Assisting you in piloting this vessel." she replied.

"I don't need any help. I can fly a shuttle easy enough." Nayal said and she looked towards Cole, "You go be with him."

"Our chances of-" T'Lan began before Nayal interrupted.

"Our chances are slim at best cousin." she hissed, "So if we're going to die you may as well spend what time you have left with him."

"As you wish." T'Lan said and she got up and returned to the couch where she crouched down beside Cole and placed a hand on him.

"Hang on." Nayal then called out and she fired the shuttle's main thrusters, propelling it out of the hangar while the flight controller was still calling on her to explain what she was doing. Laying in a course that took them away from the Ferengi vessel Nayal also set one of the displays to show the D'Kora-class ship and she saw it turning around ominously to face them. However she then smiled when she saw a flash from the underside of the ship as the warp core was ejected, hurtling away from the ship and trailing flashes of light as the anti matter leaked out and reacted with the gas charge used to propel it into space.

"Well cousin it looks like you're little trick worked." Nayal said, "Now let's see if this shuttle that was probably

built by the lowest bidder is as fast as you say it is.” and then she activated the warp drive.

Wearing an ill fitting uniform that did not represent his true rank, Krig stormed onto the bridge of his ship. “Report!” he yelled.

“Our warp core has been ejected leader.” one of the crew replied, “And the stolen shuttle with the escaped prisoners has just gone to warp. We cannot follow them.”

“Maybe not.” Krig replied, “But the Nausicaans can. Hail them and tell them to get after that shuttle. But warn them to bring the prisoners back alive. I don't want them killed before I hear them beg for it.”

Nayal had taken the shuttle to its maximum speed when she spotted a cluster of three other vessels closing from behind them. Moving at warp four they were travelling about twice as fast as the shuttle and Nayal could tell that it would be only a matter of minutes before they caught up with them. She also recognised the ships immediately.

Nausicaan raiders.

"We've got company." she called out.

"Is it the *Nightfall*?" T'Lan asked.

"No such luck cousin. Looks like ejecting the warp core from that Ferengi junk heap didn't stop them calling in their Nausicaan minions."

T'Lan got up and rushed to the front of the shuttle, sitting beside Nayal once more.

"We cannot outrun them." she said, "And we cannot reach a suitable hiding place before they will catch up with us."

"I see that cousin." Nayal replied. Then she noticed another sensor reading ahead of the shuttle, "Wait," she said, "what's that?"

"It is a vessel moving at warp six." T'Lan said as she studied the shuttle's sensors. Then she looked at Nayal, "It appears to be Romulan."

"A warbird?" Nayal exclaimed, concerned that they had escaped from the Ferengi only to run right into Shintar's grasp.

"No it is not large enough. I believe that it is a scout ship of some kind." T'Lan said.

"The conference." Nayal said excitedly, "They must be going there."

"That is a logical assumption." T'Lan said and she activated the shuttle's subspace transmitter, "Romulan vessel, this is Starfleet Lieutenant T'Lan of the *USS Nightfall*. Do you read me?"

Then she and Nayal waited for a reply.

"Confirmed lieutenant. This is the Romulan scout ship Epsilon. Our presence here is authorised by your Federation and we do not consent to being searched."

"Epsilon this is T'Lan, I am aboard a Ferengi shuttle and have Nausicaan raiders in pursuit. I require immediate assistance."

"Repeat that lieutenant." the Romulans replied.

"Look!" Nayal snapped, using her own language, "Just get over here and pick us up okay? We can explain everything once we're aboard your ship."

"You are Romulan?" the voice on the other end of the subspace link responded.

"Yes I'm Romulan. T'Lan's Vulcan, Cole is a human and the thugs chasing us are Nausicaan. Now are you going to help us or do we sit here playing 'what's my species' until we get blasted out of existence?"

"Confirmed. We are moving to intercept." the Romulan voice replied and then the channel went silent.

"See?" Nayal said to T'Lan, "You just need to know how to handle these people." and she steered the shuttle onto an intercept course with the Romulan vessel.

Both the Ferengi shuttle and the Romulan scout ship dropped out of warp as they neared one another and Nayal and T'Lan felt the tell tale signs of a transporter engaging before they suddenly found themselves, along with Cole, on the transporter pad of the Romulan vessel and surrounded by armed Romulans.

"Drop your weapons." one of them ordered and both Nayal and T'Lan slowly removed their stolen phasers and placed them at their feet.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole is seriously injured." T'Lan said, looking down at where Cole lay, "He requires urgent medical attention."

"He'll get what we can give." the Romulan replied, "In the meantime the admiral wants to see you two. So move."

The two women were escorted by the Romulan guards to the scout ship's bridge where in the command chair a male Romulan in an admiral's uniform sat.

"I am Admiral Mordel." he announced, "Now perhaps you can explain to me why I shouldn't just hand you over to those Nausicaans chasing you."

"Logic indicates that you are here for the peace talks." T'Lan replied, "The Nausicaans are working with both the Ferengi and a Reman faction to sabotage them. To give us to them would defeat your purpose in being here. Thus it is not logical."

"Admiral." one of the Romulan crew called out, "Nausicaan vessels are powering weapons and will be in firing range shortly."

"We cannot fight three Nausicaan ships at once." Mordel said and he glared at T'Lan, "Your Starfleet insisted on lightly armed transport to bring us here."

"Don't you have a cloaking device?" Nayal asked, "Even if the Nausicaans guess where we're going and follow us they'll find two Starfleet capital ships and a dozen fighters with enough firepower to take out an entire squadron of their raiders waiting for them."

"Maybe so, but Starfleet has forbidden us from making use of it in Federation territory and I have no intention of giving Starfleet any excuse to attack this ship." Mordel told her and Nayal looked at T'Lan.

"Cousin?" she said.

"Admiral, I will vouch for the necessity of engaging your cloaking device in Federation space." T'Lan said, "But we need to act quickly."

Mordel turned and nodded to one of his crew and all of a sudden the lighting level of the bridge lowered as power was cut from all non-essential systems so as to limit the energy that the cloaking device had to conceal.

"Resume course for the conference." Mordel ordered and then he looked back at Nayal and T'Lan, "And you two can explain to me exactly what is going on and why you are wearing those ridiculous clothes."

"Captain!" West exclaimed, looking up from her console and Edwards turned towards her."

"What's the excitement lieutenant?" he asked.

"Captain I have a transmission coming in from a Romulan scout ship." West told him, "It's T'Lan."

"What's she doing aboard a Romulan ship?" Carr asked.

"Well there's an easy way of finding out." Hamilton muttered.

"On screen." Edwards ordered and the view on the main bridge view screen changed to show the bridge of the Romulan scout ship with Nayal and T'Lan, now both wearing Romulan uniforms instead of the badly fitting Ferengi ones, standing beside Admiral Mordel.

"Lieutenant T'Lan, what's going on?" Edwards asked.

"Captain Admiral Mordel has just rescued us from a group of Nausicaan vessels in the employ of a Ferengi daimon." T'Lan answered.

"The Ferengi?" Carr said, "What interest do they have in kidnapping Starfleet officers?"

"The little trolls are working for the Remans." Nayal responded, "Or more precisely for one called Shintar who, if you remember clearly, isn't a real Reman at all."

At the mention of Shintar's name Carr and Edwards exchanged nervous glances while West's eyes widened briefly.

"Captain," T'Lan went on, "the Remans are seeking to capture as many female Romulans as they can in order to breed a new generation of Remans. Acting on their orders the Ferengi have tortured Lieutenant Commander Cole to obtain a method of shutting down the tachyon detection grid that prevents cloaked vessels from crossing into Federation territory."

"What's the commander's condition?" Carr asked.

"He is stable." T'Lan replied, "But the Romulan medical staff aboard this vessel have limited experience of treating human patients."

"We'll alert Doctor King to stand by." Edwards said, "Admiral how soon can you be here?"

"Within the hour captain." Mordel answered.

"Excellent, we'll be waiting for you. Lieutenant T'Lan, Sublieutenant Nayal, I want you both in my ready room the moment you arrive." Edwards said before he ended with, "*Nightfall* out."

The Romulan scout ship de-cloaked when it reached the asteroid field and dropped out of warp. Almost immediately it was met by a pair of fighters from the *Nightfall* as escorted to the outpost. The scout ship itself proceeded to dock while the three members of the *Nightfall's* crew were beamed back to their own vessel and as instructed Nayal and T'Lan went to meet with Captain Edwards, who was waiting for them in his ready room with Carr, White and Captain Heart. In addition there was an open communication link with the *Pacific* and Captain Cameron watched via a viewscreen from his own ready room.

"Nice outfit." Heart commented when he saw T'Lan's borrowed Romulan uniform.

"We started out with Ferengi clothes, but those are so last season." Nayal responded.

"Captain Edwards," T'Lan said, ignoring the previous comments, "it is essential that the Ferengi vessel is seized and its crew arrested. They are guilty of-"

"We'll get to that lieutenant." Edwards interrupted, "But first I want you to explain what happened to you fully."

"The distress call was a fake." Nayal replied, "A bad fake as well. But before we could get out of there we were ambushed by three Nausicaan ships. They boarded us and took us back to their own vessels and from there to a Ferengi D'Kora-class warship commanded by a old fashioned sexist troll called Krig. Fortunately for T'Lan and I his misogyny meant that aside from having us stripped naked before dumping us in a holding cell he pretty much ignored us."

"Lieutenant Commander Cole was not as fortunate." T'Lan added, "The Ferengi tortured him, apparently seeking the means to deactivate the tachyon detection grid that protects our border."

"And that's when you found out about Shintar?" Carr asked.

"Not exactly." Nayal answered, "Krig must have told Cole at some point because when the Ferengi brought Cole back to us he was able to warn us that we were going to be sold as sex slaves to the Remans and he mentioned Shintar by name."

"A name we both recognised." T'Lan said.

"What's so significant about him?" Cameron asked from the *Pacific*.

"He's an agent of a group we've encountered on several occasions but haven't been able to identify."

Edwards told him, "They use reanimated corpses as agents and appear to be making use of something akin to Iconian gateway technology to transport from place to place without being tracked."

"And they seem to like stirring up trouble." Carr added, "They've tried to undermine the governments of several Federation worlds."

"So putting a stop to the peace conference would fit with their mode of operation then?" Cameron suggested and Edwards nodded.

"It would." he said.

"Plus if they do it right they get a hold load of Romulan prisoners that they can use to make up for the lack of females amongst their own kind." Nayal said, "Looks like Shintar's playing the role of a Reman trying to replace all the females that died when Remus was destroyed."

"What's this about?" White asked.

"The destruction of Remus killed the vast majority of female Remans." Nayal explained, "Something that's left them with something of a problem with demographics that they're hoping to do something about. Romulans and Vulcans are near enough the same species so that's where they're recruiting new mothers from. Whether they agree to it or not."

"For now at least however, Shintar is unable to enter Federation territory." T'Lan added, "The tachyon detection grid will expose him if he tries."

"How did you escape?" Heart asked.

"We stole some clothes, weapons and a shuttle." Nayal told him.

"A shuttle? What sort of shuttle moves faster than a D'Kora-class?" White asked in response.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole suggested disabling the Ferengi vessel by ejecting its warp core." T'Lan explained and she looked at Edwards, "Captain, the Ferengi vessel may still be disabled and vulnerable if we act quickly."

"There are still the Nausicaan raiders to think about though." Nayal added, "The Ferengi sent them after us and if Admiral Mordel hadn't picked us up then we'd have been caught and thrown right back in that cell."

"Captain there is something else to consider." T'Lan said, "DaiMon Krig knows that it is possible to shut down the tachyon detection grid from the outpost. Logic suggests that he will send the Nausicaan ships to deploy boarding parties."

"And given that this is an old Nausicaan outpost using old Nausicaan technology they shouldn't have much trouble in figuring out what to do." Heart commented. Then looking at Edwards he added, "Captain, forget what the Romulans may think of us, you need to deploy my MACO company over there as well to reinforce Captain Shry's Imperial Guard."

"If the Romulans leave then we may as well not have bothered with any of this." Carr pointed out, "The peace talks will fail and Shintar will probably manage to capture at least some of them when they get back into the Neutral Zone."

"I'll take the *Pacific* to deal with this Ferengi vessel." Cameron said, "Hopefully the Nausicaans will just give up and head home if their employer isn't around any more. Edwards, you need to keep the conference delegates safe and that includes keeping them here and talking."

Edwards nodded.

"I'll have Captain Heart's company and my security teams on standby to beam over if there's any sign of trouble." he said and glancing at Carr he added, "Hopefully it won't come to that though."

"I can position my fighters at the edge of the asteroid field." White said, "If we use passive sensors only we should be able to blend in with all the rocks and give you advance warning of any approaching ships."

"Then it sounds like we have a plan." Cameron said, "I suggest we get started. *Pacific* out." and the display with his image on changed to show the Starfleet emblem.

Just then the intercom activated.

"Captain, one of the Romulan delegates is here to see you." West's voice announced, "He says his name is Tolavore."

Nayal froze, her eye's widening briefly.

"Send him in." Edwards said and Nayal averted her gaze as the door to the ready room slid open to reveal Tolavore standing outside.

"Captain Edwards." he said sternly as he walked towards Edwards' desk, "The delegates have asked me to speak on their behalf. Admiral Mordel informs us that there is a threat to the conference."

"It's in hand Mister Tolavore." Edwards replied and he glanced at Nayal and T'Lan, "My officers have uncovered enough for us to put a stop to the threat."

"Your officers?" Tolavore asked, looking at Nayal and T'Lan and despite Nayal keeping her head turned away from him he still recognised her, "Nayal?" he said, "Yes, I thought so. When the admiral told us he had beamed a Starfleet Vulcan called T'Lan and a Romulan called Nayal aboard his vessel I thought that serving alongside the Federation was the sort of thing you would stoop to."

"Captain may I be excused?" Nayal asked, looking directly at Edwards, "After my experience aboard the Ferengi vessel I would like to check in with Doctor King."

"I would sooner not be speaking in her presence either captain." Tolavore added.

"Go." Edwards told Nayal and she turned and hurried from the room. Then Edwards stared at Tolavore, "I ought to warn you," he said, "that if you disrespect any more of my crew then peace talks or no peace talks I will have Captain Heart and a squad of his MACOs physically remove you from my ship."

"You would not dare. Starfleet would-" Tolavore began before Heart activated his communicator.

"Duty guard stand to." he said, "Report to captain's ready room." and Edwards just smiled at Tolavore.

When Nayal emerged from the captain's ready room she rushed to the turbolift without speaking or even making eye contact with any of the bridge officers, attracting the attention of several.

"Nayal?" Hamilton said from the captain's chair he currently occupied and when she did not reply he got up and rushed after her, only just making it into the turbolift before the doors slid shut.

"Bradley!" West called out and then frowning she added, "You're supposed to be in command." and she sighed and shook her head, "How the hell does he get command qualified and I don't?" she muttered.

Inside the turbolift Hamilton looked at Nayal.

"Are you crying?" he asked when he noticed tears in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter Bradley." she replied.

"Turbolift halt." Hamilton said and as the turbolift came to a stop he folded his arms, "Tell me." he said, "It's that Romulan guy isn't it. Who is he?"

"My jerk of an ex-husband." Nayal replied, "Now can we leave it at that? Because I'm not really in the mood for sharing right now."

"Nayal you were there for me when I got dumped. You know I'll happily return the favour." Hamilton said and Nayal smiled as she wiped her eyes.

"Thanks Bradley. You're a good person, you know that? No matter what anyone else might say." then after a moment's pause she added, "So who's covering for you on the bridge?" and Hamilton's jaw dropped.

"Damn it I forgot." he exclaimed.

## ii.

Brown and Jones watched as the *Pacific* manoeuvred to leave the asteroid field.

“So Admiral Schmidt was right then.” Brown said, “They were planning to disrupt the conference.”

“Good thing Captain Edwards' crew is on the ball.” Jones added, “Though now that we have proof of their involvement I suggest we depart and report to the admiral in person.”

“But what if the outpost does come under attack?” Brown asked.

“Then the crew of the *Nightfall* can deal with it. Sarah, I don't see the two of us making any difference now and the admiral needs to know what we've found out.”

“I suppose so.” Brown replied as Jones held up a PADD and pressed a button on the display that triggered the transporter system of the hidden stealth vessel they had hidden nearby in the asteroid field.

At the end of her shift West headed straight back to her quarters and sat down, yawning.

“I feel like I could sleep forever.” she said to herself as she leant back on the couch and she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, falling asleep almost straight away. But all of a sudden her head jerked forwards, her eyes snapped open and a malevolent smile appeared on her face.

Getting to her feet West walked towards her desk and the computer terminal that was mounted on top of it. Acting quickly, unsure of exactly how long it would be before West truly reawakened the alien intelligence that had once controlled an entire outpost began to access several prepared programs. The first of these effectively blocked the *Nightfall's* main system from noticing what this terminal was being used for, meaning that unless The Controller did something that would attract the attention of the nanites that swarmed through the vessel her actions would not be detectable. Then she accessed the *Nightfall's* short range communications system and gained a connection to the nearby outpost's computer system. Using this connection she uploaded a program that interfaced with the transporter system and a deck plan of the outpost appeared on West's terminal. The Controller quickly selected the engineering section and stood back from the terminal as the site to site transporter function activated, beaming her out of West's quarters and into a quiet spot in the outpost's engineering section.

Cautiously, eager to avoid being seen by any of the Starfleet personnel on duty, The Controller made her way to where she remembered West, Max and Frost linking the tachyon detection grid into the outpost systems. Once there The Controller established a link between the outpost and the closest of the automated tachyon emitting stations that made up the system designed to provide Starfleet with advance warning of the approach of cloaked starships from the former Romulan Star Empire and she brought up a menu of maintenance options. Scrolling down this list she selected a diagnostic function labelled 'Level Four – Local Area Diagnostic.' Tapping the screen to indicate her choice, The Controller was then faced with a message that read 'Warning: Diagnostic will take grid off line over sector wide area. Do you wish to continue? Yes/No.' and she smiled as she tapped the 'Yes' option.

Shutting off the terminal The Controller then stepped back and tapped her combadge.

“Energise.” she said, triggering the return portion of the site to site transporter program uploaded into the outpost computer and she was returned to her starting point in West's quarters. At this point the program automatically deleted itself from the outpost's computer system, leaving no trace of its presence and at the same time The Controller set to work accessing the *Nightfall's* long range subspace communications. This was more complicated than the shorter range system, since the greater power consumption was more readily noticed. However, by timing the transmission to coincide with a communication between the *Nightfall* and the *Pacific* The Controller was able to send her message without it triggering any alerts.

Her task complete The Controller then returned to the couch and sat back down, tilting her head backwards before closing her eyes.

“Whoa!” West exclaimed as she suddenly awoke and she looked around, confused for a moment about where she was. Then she shook her head, “Doc, this new implant better work right.” she said to herself before she stood up and walked over to her bed and removed her nightdress from under the pillow.

“Lord Shintar!” one of the Reman bridge crew called out.

“Report.” Shintar replied.

“The tachyon detection grid is no longer active for a radius of thirteen lights years, centred on a point three light years away.” the crewman replied and Shintar leant forwards in his chair.

“Has the Ferengi made contact?” he asked.

“No Lord Shintar.” the communications officer replied but then he noticed something on his display, “But we do have a signal coming in now. It has been broadcast over a wide area and is addressed to you personally.”

“Give it to me.” Shintar ordered and he looked at a nearby display. On this the message simply read, 'Lord



Shintar, the Ferengi failed but I did not. The way is open. Only one ship now guards the Romulans.'

"Your orders lord?" the ship's first officer asked.

"Helm, lay in a course for the outpost. Warp nine" Shintar announced, leaning back in his chair once more, ". Prepare our troops for a boarding action."

Travelling at warp nine, more than one and half thousand times the speed of light, Shintar's warbird was soon nearing the asteroid field where the Nausicaan outpost was located and the vessel dropped back to impulse power. Moving cautiously into the asteroid field the Remans passed right by the watching attack fighters from the *Nightfall* with neither detecting one another using only their passive sensors. By keeping their speed and use of manoeuvring thrusters to a minimum the Remans were able to bring the warbird right up to the asteroid on which the outpost was constructed and Shintar studied the orbiting *Nightfall* carefully.

"Status of enemy vessel." he said softly.

"Their shields are raised Lord Shintar." one of the bridge crew told him, "And their weapons are powered."

"So we cannot destroy them with a single strike as we de-cloak." Shintar said. Then he looked towards the asteroid itself, "What about the outpost itself?" he asked.

"It is shielded as well Lord Shintar." the crewman answered, "But the shield is inefficient and there are gaps."

"Gaps big enough to beam through?" Shintar asked, a smile spreading across his face.

"Yes Lord Shintar."

The Remans waited for the *Nightfall* to be on the opposite side of the asteroids before they acted, not wanting to risk detection by powering up any unnecessary systems while the Starfleet vessel potentially had a line of sight to them. In a remote part of the outpost, a section that the Starfleet engineers who had worked to bring its systems back on line after more than a century of inactivity had left untouched, a light filled one of the deserted rooms as a squad of heavily armed Reman troops led by Shintar's first officer was beamed over from the warbird. As soon as their materialisation was complete the Remans turned around, studying their surroundings.

"Transport is complete Lord Shintar." the first officer transmitted, "Clearing the area now, you may send in the next wave." then he waved the other Remans towards the doorway and just as they exited the room it was filled with lights again as more Reman troops were beamed aboard the outpost.

"Is any of that going spare?" an Andorian called out to Nikki as she carried a tray of plates back to the kitchen to be recycled in the replicators.

"Sorry guys." she replied, turning to face the four man patrol. Rather than the formal uniforms and sidearms that they Imperial Guardsmen had worn at the start of the conference the Andorian troops now wore visible body armour and carried automatic rifles with phasers mounted beneath their barrels, "All that's left are scraps."

"Scraps?" the Andorian said as his unit continued to walk towards Nikki and he looked at the tray, "How much can those Romulans eat?"

"This lot would probably eat me if I stood still too long." Nikki said, "At least the more snobbish ones ask for less to avoid having to deal with a human." then something caught her attention and she looked past the Andorians, "What was that?" she asked.

"What was what?" the Andorian asked in reply and he turned around, "There's nothing down there."

"But I saw something move. I'm sure I did." Nikki said and the Andorian snorted.

"Perhaps it was a two hundred year old Nausicaan ghost." he said before all of a sudden a Reman appeared out of the darkness at the end of the corridor and opened fire with his disruptor rifle.

One of the Andorians fell back as the burst pierced his armour and in response the remaining Imperial Guardsmen raised their own rifles, firing the underslung phasers. The volley hit the exposed Reman but he was not alone and more disruptor fire erupted from the far end of the corridor and cut down the remaining Andorians while Nikki looked on in horror. Dropping the tray she held, Nikki threw herself into a side corridor as she tried to decide what to do next. Then she spotted one of the Andorians' rifles lying on the floor and she remembered standing in the desert of an alien world and being taught to fire one by Captain Heart.

Quickly she crouched down and snatched up the rifle. She pulled back the bolt to chamber a round, ejecting the one that was already chambered and then leant around the corner and fired the rifle on automatic. In the open desert the discharge of the rifle had produced sharp 'crack' sounds with each round fired and in the confines of the outpost these sounds echoed off the walls to produce a loud booming that made Nikki jump and she dropped the rifle and instead turned and ran.

Though Nikki had not stopped to determine how effective the burst of impact fragmenting bullets had been she soon discovered that the noise had at the very least attracted the attention of a second Andorian patrol who came running towards her as she fled.

"Remans!" she yelled at them, pointing back the way she had come, "There are Remans in the outpost."

In response the Andorians dropped into a firing position, aiming their weapons past Nikki while one of them activated his communicator.

"Captain Shry, we have reports of Remans in the outpost."

"Can you confirm them?" Shry asked in response.

"Not yet sir. Miss Carr says—" the Andorian began before being interrupted.

"Contact!" another snapped as he fired a blast from his phaser that struck a Reman that appeared at the end of the corridor.

"Reman presence confirmed, sector two." the first Andorian told Shry. Then he looked at Nikki, "Go." he told her, "head for the transporter. We'll cover you." and then he joined his comrades in firing on the Reman boarding party.

West looked up from her sink and spat out a mouthful of toothpaste as a klaxon sounded red alert.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me." she exclaimed, "I never even got into bed." then she quickly rinsed out her mouth and hurried back to the bridge.

"Sorry to call you back so soon lieutenant." Edwards said as West exited the turbolift, "But the outpost is reporting they've been boarded by Remans."

"T'Lan, any signs of that warbird?" Carr asked, glancing at the science station.

"Negative lieutenant commander." T'Lan answered.

"Well they're out there somewhere." Edwards said, "Keep looking."

"How did they get past the tachyon detection grid?" West asked as she took her place at ops.

"It's been shut down." Carr told her, "We checked and someone managed to lock it into a diagnostic mode." Something about that seemed worryingly familiar to West but she was unable to remember why. Then an idea occurred to her.

"Can't we use the lidar?" she suggested. In addition to the usual array of subspace based sensors, the *USS Nightfall* was also equipped with a relatively primitive laser based detection system mounted in two turrets above and below the ship's primary hull that in addition to being able to detect objects by picking up reflected laser pulses could be used as a remote microphone even across the vacuum of space. In this mode the system shone a laser onto the hull of another vessel and monitored vibrations in the beam and it had also been proven that it was possible to detect a cloaked vessel at short range by running all of the beam emitters simultaneously and watching for any variance in them as the ship passed through.

"There are too many asteroids." T'Lan replied, "We need a much greater volume of clear space to use the lidar in that way."

"Captain Shry is signalling sir." West then said.

"Put him through." Edwards ordered.

"*Nightfall* this is Shry. The Remans are advancing along several routes and we are heavily outnumbered. My men have sealed several off but that's only going to slow them for a short time. Either send over the MACOs to back us up or get us out of here."

"I'm afraid neither is an option right now captain." Edwards replied, "The warbird those Romulans came from is out here somewhere and if we lower our shields they'll attack." then a thought occurred to him, "Hold on captain, I may have something." he said and he looked at Hamilton, "Lieutenant Hamilton, how effective will our mass accelerators be against those asteroids?"

"You're going to shoot at asteroids?" Carr asked.

"I'm thinking about it." Edwards told her. Then he looked at Hamilton again, "Lieutenant?"

"The impact will shatter them sir." he answered.

"And create a massive cloud of debris expanding out in all directions along with it." Carr added.

"Debris that won't penetrate our shields or those of the outpost." Edwards pointed out and Carr smiled.

"Of course." she responded, "If the warbird is running cloaked then she won't have her shields up and the debris will smash right into her."

"Even if she isn't destroyed it'll give us her position." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton, take control of the mass accelerators and fire on my command. T'Lan watch for impacts against a cloaked vessel and feed targeting data to tactical."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

"Mister Hamilton." Edwards said calmly, "Fire at will." and Hamilton grinned.

With his headset acting as a targeting display, Hamilton turned the *Nightfall* to face directly towards one of the larger asteroids in close proximity to the outpost and lined up the twin mass accelerators on it.

"Kaboom." he muttered as he squeezed the triggers built into his control joysticks.

The viewscreen showed the double flash as the two uranium projectiles sped from the weapons that ran for most of the length of the *Nightfall* before slamming into the asteroid. Just as Hamilton had said it would, the force of the projectiles' impact shattered the asteroid into thousands of much smaller pieces and each of them flew outwards to form an expanding cloud of debris. Then before even waiting to see whether the Reman warbird would be revealed by this Hamilton turned the *Nightfall* towards another nearby asteroid and fired again.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" West commented, glancing up from her console.

“Oh yeah.” Hamilton replied.

As Shry reviewed the tactical situation he could not help but see how his perimeter was steadily shrinking. So far casualties among his men were light, but that was because they had been ambushing the more numerous Reman boarding parties and then withdrawing before they could be targeted. All of this was being done to slow down the Remans' progress enough that corridors could be blocked and emergency doors sealed shut to block their path. However, there was only so much room aboard the outpost for them to retreat to and it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed.

"How much longer is this going to continue captain?" a Romulan voice asked and Shry looked up from his PADD to see Admiral Mordel in front of him.

"We can hold them another ten minutes. Maybe twenty." Shry replied, seeing no point in lying to the admiral, "But as far as I can tell there are well over four hundred of them aboard and just over a hundred of us. If I give permission to use grenades then I may be able to buy us another five or ten minutes but that would probably damage this place beyond its ability to be usable for the conference."

Mordel snorted.

"You really think the conference can continue Andorian?" he asked, "I came here to tell you that we are leaving. It is obvious that someone in one of the delegations is in league with these Remans or whoever it is that they are serving. They sabotaged your tachyon detection grid and let the Remans through and if we stay they will see us all dead."

"Admiral I'm sure that-" Shry began.

"No captain." Mordel interrupted, "The decision is made and the other delegations agree. The talks are over." Shry sighed and looked back at his PADD.

"My men will cover your withdrawal." he said, "I'm sure we can keep the access to the docking bays clear long enough for you to get your ships ready for launch."

As Shintar's warbird continued to orbit the asteroid he kept his attention focused on the viewscreen in front of him. Sensors had indicated numerous unidentified energy spikes coming from the *USS Nightfall* that had the look of weapon discharges but without the corresponding detonations of photon or quantum torpedoes and Shintar was curious to find out what they were up to. The last time he had engaged this particular Starfleet vessel they had used an unusual projectile weapon to disable his ship but on that occasion they had been able to penetrate his cloak and Shintar was confident that would not happen a second time.

But then the viewscreen showed the cloud of debris heading towards them.

"What are you doing Captain Edwards?" Shintar muttered.

"Lord Shintar, objects on collision course!" one of the bridge crew called out and Shintar leapt to his feet.

"Drop the cloak! Shields up!" he yelled.

"Reman vessel de-cloaking captain." T'Lan announced and the on main viewscreen an image of a rust coloured Valdore-class warbird became visible as it lowered its cloaking field before the debris could hit it.

"Fire phasers." Edwards ordered, not wanting to risk a torpedo launch at such short range.

The phaser beam struck the warbird at the base of one of its long curve wings before its crew could get their shields fully up and the entire wing was sliced away from the hull and the warbird banked towards the *Nightfall*.

"Pull up!" Carr yelled as she saw that the two vessels were on a collision course and Hamilton pulled back on the flight controls sharply to take the cruiser over the damaged Reman vessel's hull.

At the same time the Remans returned fire and a volley of disruptor fire from the remaining wing hammered against the *Nightfall's* shields.

"Damage report." Edwards called out.

"Shields holding captain." West replied, "Looks like their power grid is damaged though. Those disruptors hit us with less than twenty percent power."

"Let's just hope they don't get desperate enough to start hurling torpedoes around." Carr commented.

"Helm, bring us around for another firing run." Edwards ordered, "Tactical, fire all phasers as the target comes to bare."

The sounds of disruptor, phaser and projectile fire echoed through the corridors of the outpost. With permission given to use photon grenades the Imperial Guard had at least been able to halt the Remans' advance but this was only a temporary respite. Fortunately it meant that Shry was able to manage the evacuation of the Romulans to their transports while leaving his men to take care of the Remans.

"First transport departing." one of his platoon commanders reported as she watched the vessel lift off on a

monitor. Turning to the display Shry saw the Romulan vessel shimmer slightly as it raised its shields while still in the hangar before it accelerated through the force field maintaining the atmosphere in the hangar and out into space. The interaction of the two competing force fields destabilised both temporarily and several Romulans running across the hangar towards the second transport docked there were blown towards the massive outer doorway. Fortunately the disruption was only momentary and the hangar force field reset before any of the Romulans could be swept into space.

"There are Romulan vessels launching from the outpost captain." West reported.

"Just as Shry warned us they'd do." Carr commented.

"At least the Remans won't get them." Nayal added from the other side of Edwards.

"What is the status of the Reman vessel?" Edwards asked, keeping his attention focused on the warbird ahead of them.

"Enemy vessel's shields are weakening captain." T'Lan replied.

"And they can barely manoeuvre ." Hamilton added, "No chance of them being able to come around to face us head on."

"They can't provide enough power with only the nacelles under the one wing." Carr said.

"Target their impulse engines." Edwards ordered, "If we can leave them dead in space we'll end this."

The next phaser volley from the *Nightfall* struck the warbird's aft shields and the energy barrier flared as it tried to keep out the beam. But with the full power of its warp system to call on the *Nightfall* was able to put more power into sustaining the beam than the warbird could into blocking it and all of a sudden the beam punched through the shield and struck the warbird's impulse reactors.

The whole of the Reman ship's engineering section exploded in a ball of bright orange flame that was rapidly followed by a second detonation that ripped apart the whole of the rear of the ship and sent the remaining wing spinning off into space.

Shintar held onto his seat as the entire warbird shook.

"Damage report!" he snapped.

"Engineering is gone." one of his crew replied as the asteroid on which the Nausicaan outpost was constructed grew larger on the viewscreen.

"Pull up!" Shintar ordered as it became apparent that what remained of his warbird was about to crash into the asteroid, "Fire thrusters!"

"There's no power for-" the crewman began before the warbird ploughed into the surface of the asteroid, ripping through one of the exposed Nausicaan structures.

"What the hell was that?" Shry exclaimed as the outpost shuddered.

"Sir! We've lost the last hangar." the platoon commander told Shry, "One of the Romulan delegations is still aboard."

"*Nightfall* this is Shry." he said, activating his communicator, "You better have a way of getting us out of here right now because there's still one group of Romulans aboard and I've no way of evacuating them."

"Understood captain." Edwards replied, "Enemy vessel is neutralised. Lower your shields and we'll commence beaming you aboard."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Edwards looked at West.

"Lieutenant I want all transporter rooms used to beam our infantry and the remaining Romulans aboard as fast as possible. Have the Romulans beamed to transporter room number one. I'll meet them there." he said and then as he stood up he turned to Nayal and added, "With me sublieutenant. I think a Romulan face may help smooth things over."

"Yes captain." Nayal replied and the pair got into the turbolift and headed for the transporter room.

The Romulan delegation was being beamed aboard along with Shry's command section just as Edwards and Nayal entered the room.

"All of the Romulans are safe captain." Shry announced.

"Good." Edwards replied and looking at the Romulans he announced, "Sublieutenant Nayal will arrange quarters for you until we can get you back across the Neutral Zone."

At the same time a Romulan male who had obviously been injured by something falling onto his head stumbled as he stepped off the transporter pad and Nayal instinctively moved to help him.

"Get your hands off me." Tolavore hissed, snarling at her and pushing her away.

Nayal turned to Edwards.

"The peace talks are over right?" she asked, "So it doesn't really matter if we upset any of the delegates?"

"Nayal-" Edwards began but he was too late to stop her from swinging a fist at Tolavore that struck him in the face and sent him sprawling backwards across the floor of the transporter room.

"Wow." she said, shaking her hand, "That felt damned good. Even if it did hurt like hell."

"Captain, get her out of here." Edwards ordered Shry.

"You were right admiral." Jones told the image of Admiral Schmidt, "The enemy wanted to disrupt the peace conference."

"And succeeded." Brown added.

"Do not worry yourself too much commander." Schmidt replied, "The chance of them succeeding were slim and in any case a united Romulan Empire would be more of a threat to the Federation. My major concern is regarding the deactivation of the tachyon detection grid."

"One of the Romulans must have been an enemy agent." Jones said, "That's certainly what the Romulans believe anyway."

"Yeah, that's why they're all scurrying back off to their own colonies and refusing to talk to any of the others. They don't know who they can trust." Brown added.

"I hope you are right commander." Schmidt said.

"Why do you say that admiral?" Jones asked.

"Because the only other alternative is that the enemy has successfully penetrated Starfleet." Schmidt pointed out.

"There you go lieutenant commander, all fixed." King said as Cole winced while he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the biobed. Then King handed him a mirror and he used it to study his mouth, inspecting the replacement teeth King had fitted.

"Thanks doc." Cole replied.

"Don't just thank me." King said, "If Nayal and T'Lan hadn't got you back here you'd have either bled to death or punctured a lung and drowned in your own blood." then he looked towards the sickbay doors as they slid open and T'Lan entered, "Speaking of which, it looks like you have a visitor."

"I have come to check on the lieutenant commander's condition." she said.

"T'Lan." Cole said, smiling at her, "Doctor King was just telling me how you saved my life."

"It was the logical thing to do." T'Lan replied, "If our situations were reversed you would have done the same I am sure."

"Well he's still not ready for duty yet." King said, "But I could do with cleaning up around here so that means I need him out. Can you give him a hand back to his quarters lieutenant?"

"Certainly doctor." T'Lan said and she stood beside Cole so that he could wrap an arm around her as he got to his feet.

"Remember to take things easy commander." King called out after Cole as T'Lan helped him from sickbay. T'Lan supported Cole all the way back to his quarters.

"The couch." Cole said as she then helped him inside.

"Of course lieutenant commander." she said as she helped him across the room and onto the couch, "I will go now." she added and she turned to leave.

"T'Lan wait." Cole said.

"Yes lieutenant commander?" she asked.

"When we were in that cell you used a mind meld to block my pain didn't you?"

"Yes lieutenant commander. I apologise for the violation but-

"Never mind that T'Lan." Cole interrupted, "While you were doing that did you happen to see anything else that was floating around in my kind?"

"No. I was very careful not to intrude on your privacy. You have my assurance that-

"Well you sent me more than just pain relief T'Lan." Cole interrupted again, "I know how you feel about me." T'Lan paused, not knowing how to respond.

"I apologise." she said, "It was not my intention to embarrass you."

"I'm not embarrassed T'Lan." Cole said, "In fact if you had taken a look in my head you'd have seen I have similar feelings for you. Now unless you have to be back on duty how about you come and sit down here with me."

"Of course lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and she sat down on the couch with Cole who responded by wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her closer, wincing slightly as she came into contact with one of his recently repaired ribs.

"And for God's sake T'Lan, call me Robert." he told her.

Alone in her quarters, Nayal wiped tears from her eyes as she stared at an image on her computer terminal. The image was one of her that was almost twenty years old and one of the few personal things she had been able to keep with her during her escape from the Romulan civil war. The image was one of her sat in her old home on Romulus, the one she and Tolavore had shared and in her arms was a sleeping infant.

Shutting off the display, Nayal got to her feet and left her quarters. She made her way through the darkened corridors of the Nightfall until she came to another set of quarters where she pressed the intercom button.

Unsurprisingly for the early hours of the morning there was no immediate reply so she pressed it again and held it down. Seconds later the door hissed open to reveal Hamilton dressed only in his underwear. "Nayal?" he said, blinking, "Do you know what time it is?" "Can I stay here tonight?" she asked and Hamilton paused before stepping aside. "Sure. Why not?"

Shintar was trapped beneath a beam that had fallen from the ceiling when his ship crashed into the asteroid and the impact had damaged the system that would allow him to return to his own realm. All of the bridge crew had been killed in the crash and as far as Shintar was concerned he was dead as well, all he had to do was wait for his host body and its implants to fail him fully. But then he suddenly found himself staring up into the face of The Girl.

"No need to get up on my behalf Shintar." she said.

"Come to gloat over my failure?" he asked and The Girl frowned.

"What failure?" she asked in reply.

"The Romulans escaped. My ship has been destroyed and its crew killed."

"The conference collapsed Shintar." The Girl told him, "The Romulans fled back home and are already back to fighting amongst themselves. It seems that each faction thinks the others is being controlled by us. As for your ship and your crew, what do we care about them?"

"Then why are you here to watch me die?" Shintar asked and The Girl laughed.

"Oh Shintar," she said, "I'm not here to watch you die. I'm here to take you home. After all you've done us a great service. As well as destroying any immediate chance for stability in the Romulan Star Empire you've exposed something far more important."

"What?"

"The signal that told you the tachyon detection grid had been shut down came from the *USS Nightfall*." The Girl explained, "Which means that somehow one of us has managed to get aboard undiscovered."