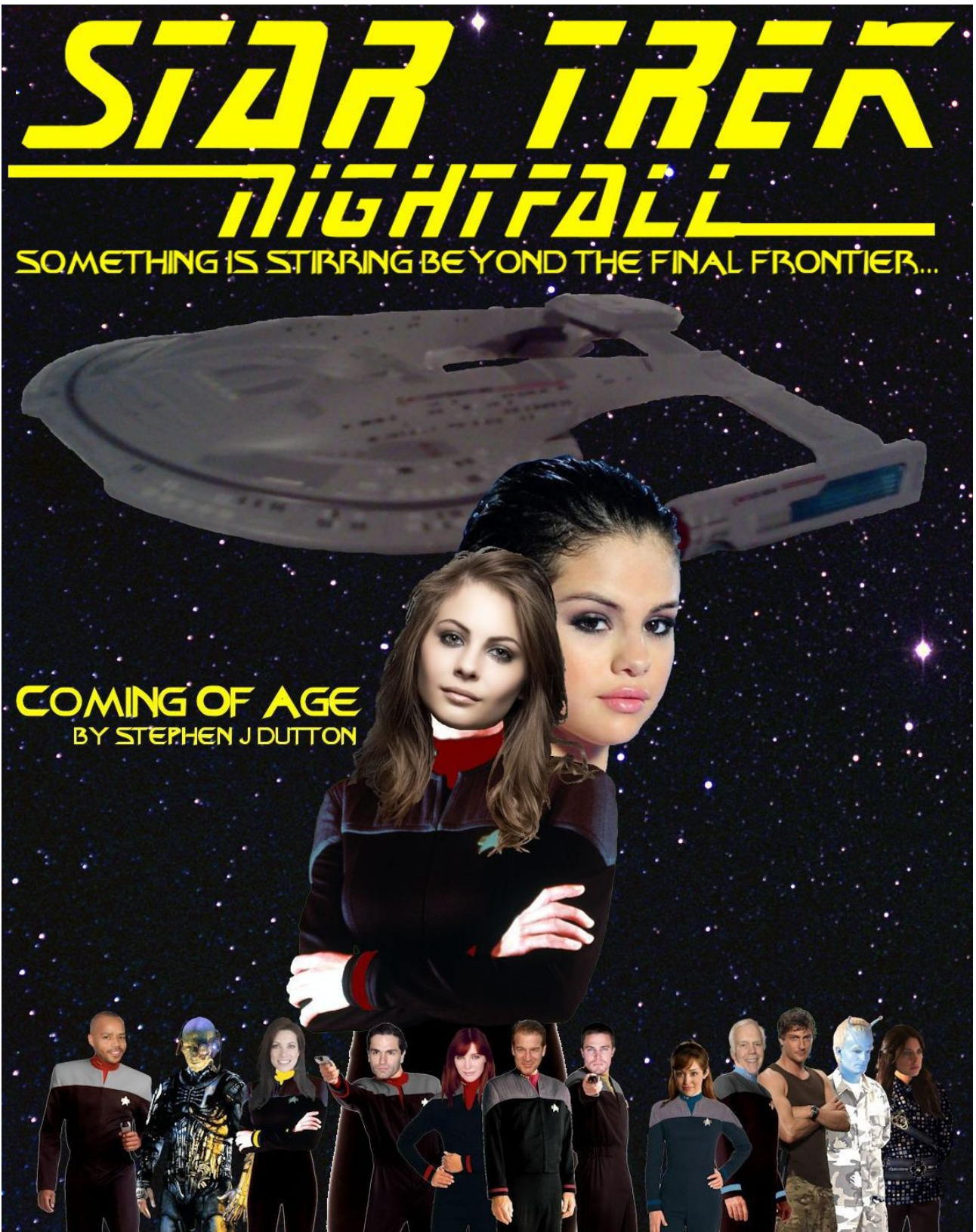


STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

COMING OF AGE
BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **COMING OF AGE**

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

When Nikki turns eighteen she not only receives life changing news about her education and place on the *USS Nightfall*, but also discovers that her father has chosen not spend her birthday with her as he had promised. Looking for a distraction from this, she inadvertently puts the entire ship in danger..

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

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

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i.

Stardate unknown. Location unknown.

The young human girl closed her eyes and concentrated. Opening them again she saw not the sterile room she had been in before but instead a world filled with apparently random lights flashing in the distance.

"What do you have to report?" a voice called out and The Girl smiled.

"One of us has penetrated Starfleet." she replied to The First.

"No such mission was authorised." another voice stated.

"I know." The Girl said, agreeing with The Second, "None of the agents we have sent to the Alpha Quadrant were instructed to infiltrate Starfleet and none of them are unaccounted for."

"Starfleet is too organised." The First said, "The limitations of our reanimation techniques do not allow us to penetrate their security."

"And our efforts to improve on those techniques were foiled by Starfleet itself." The Second added.

"And it is aboard the very vessel that foiled those experiments that I believe we will find our agent." The Girl said.

"Explain." The First replied.

"I think perhaps I should let someone who was present explain." The Girl said and she looked around just as an adult Reman appeared in the virtual world, "This is Shintar." she said, "Our leading agent within Romulan space. Shintar would you please explain what happened?"

"I was ordered to sabotage the conference being organised by Starfleet to try and establish peace between several of the factions in the Romulan civil war." Shintar announced.

"We know what your orders were." The First said, "We approved them."

"Carry on." The Girl told Shintar, "Tell them how you were able to succeed."

"The tachyon detection grid protecting the Federation border was disabled in the sector closest to the conference site." Shintar said, "I had attempted to bribe a Ferengi merchant to sabotage it but he was unsuccessful."

"If your Ferengi agent failed to deactivate the tachyon detection grid then how did you achieve it?" The First asked.

"It was someone aboard the Starfleet vessel." Shintar replied, "They deactivated the grid and signalled us that the way was open."

"The vessel in question is the *USS Nightfall*." The Girl added.

"Perhaps the Ferengi just paid off one of the crew." The Second suggested.

"No." The Girl replied, "The communication sent by whoever deactivated the tachyon detection grid clearly identified the sender as one of us but failed to indicate who they were masquerading as aboard the ship or who they actually were. I can provide you with a copy of the transmission if you require."

"I take it that there has been no further word from this mysterious individual?" The Second asked.

"None." The Girl answered, "It has been several months and whoever it was has yet to make contact again."

"Perhaps because their actions during the peace conference led to their discovery." The First suggested.

"That is a possibility." The Girl agreed, "But I would like to believe that it is because whoever it is, they are unable to find a way of contacting us without arousing suspicion."

"So what is it that you want us to do?" The First asked.

"I want you to authorise me to infiltrate the *USS Nightfall* and not only uncover the identity of our agent aboard but also how they were able to accomplish this."

"What you ask carries risks with it." The First said.

"Great risk. For yourself and for us." The Second agreed.

"I have been aboard the ship before, as have others of our kind." The Girl pointed out.

"But only for short periods." The First replied.

"And for most it did not work out very well." The Second agreed, "Whether flesh host or flesh form, it has been a death sentence for them."

"It is a risk I am willing to take." The Girl said.

"Send another." The First told her.

"There is no other I would trust for this." The Girl said, "Besides, from what we know of the ship I believe that there is a weakness in its security that I will be better able to exploit than any other."

There was no reply immediately but The Girl could sense that this was because the others were discussing her proposal amongst themselves.

"We have reached a decision." The First announced, "You will infiltrate the *USS Nightfall* and discover which of us is already there and how they were able to achieve this without being discovered."

Stardate 66015.9. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol near Romulan Neutral Zone. Two Days out from Draken IV.

As the chief operations officer aboard the *USS Nightfall*, Lieutenant Jenna West spent most of her on duty hours on the bridge at the operations position and it was while she was carrying out her mid-morning shift that she saw a communications packet arrive.

"Mail call." she announced and the other officers present looked in her direction, even Lieutenant Hamilton the chief helmsman was able to turn towards her while still being able to concentrate on flying the ship thanks to the heads up display mounted in the headset bridge officers wore to assist them in controlling the ship.

"Anything for me?" he asked.

"Doesn't look like it." West replied. Then she looked towards the tactical station, "Something for you though Commander Cole." she told the lieutenant commander on duty there, "Oh and something for T'Lan." and she glanced across at the ship's Vulcan science officer. Then her eyes widened slightly and she just added, "Oh." "Is there a problem lieutenant?" Captain David Edwards, the *Nightfall's* commanding officer asked from the centre of the bridge.

"There could be sir. Though I'm not sure I ought to-" West began.

"Come on, spit it out." Edwards told her.

"Well there are several messages for Nikki sir." West told him. Nikki Carr was the daughter of Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr, the *Nightfall's* first officer who at that moment was not present on the bridge, "They're from universities."

All around the bridge the other officers, with the exception of T'Lan winced.

"I do not understand." she said.

"Nikki's university applications have just got a response." Cole replied.

"Is that not good news lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked, "Though I admit the responses have arrived somewhat earlier than expected."

"That's the point T'Lan. It means that either Nikki's application was so good that they aren't waiting for final results before offering a place or they considered it so bad that they aren't even considering it." Cole explained.

"And would you have just rolled out the red carpet for her if you were a university admissions officer?" Hamilton added.

"So you believe this means that her applications have been rejected then?" T'Lan asked and Cole nodded.

"How many messages are there from universities for Nikki in that packet lieutenant?" Edwards asked and West counted them.

"Seven sir." she replied and Edwards and Cole both looked in T'Lan's direction.

"That would indicate that every university that she applied to has rejected her." T'Lan said, "This is not logical. Her projected academic results are adequate for entry into further education and I provided her with a reference myself."

"You didn't use the word 'adequate' in it a lot did you?" Hamilton asked.

"I did not." T'Lan replied.

"Well that rules that out then." Hamilton said.

"Lieutenant West I want you to delay distributing the contents of that mail packet for a while." Edwards said.

"Yes captain. Would you like me to contact the universities?" she responded.

"No." Edwards said, "I'm not going to interfere in their selection process. But I do want you to tell Lieutenant Commander Carr that I want to see her in my ready room as soon as possible." then he stood up and began to walk towards his ready room, "Cole, the bridge is yours." he added as he went.

Lieutenant Commander Carr was at that moment in her bedroom in the quarters she shared with her daughter. Sat on the edge of her bed she tapped her fingers impatiently on the table beside it as she waited for the communication link to Draken IV to be established.

"Come on Stuart, pick up." she said to herself as she glanced towards the closed door again, concerned that Nikki would overhear. Then the display on the bedside communication unit suddenly activated and the face of her former husband appeared.

"Hello?" he said, then he frowned, "Oh. Grace. It's you."

"Yes it's me." Carr replied, "Look Stuart we arrive in two days, right in time for Nikki's eighteenth so I'd like to make sure that-"

"Oh yeah. Look, about that." Stuart Carr said, scratching his head, "I'm not so sure I'll be able to make it. I've got a lot on right now."

"You've had three months notice Stuart. Plus you're your own boss, you get to set your own vacation days."

"That's not the issue Grace. It's just that Liz and I-"

"Liz?" Grace interrupted, "You're ditching your own daughter on her birthday to go off with Liz? What happened to all that stuff about her wanting to be a part of Nikki's life as well when you married her? Because so far I've seen no evidence of that. You didn't even call last year. Now are you going to be there in two days or not?"

Stuart scowled.

"Don't lecture me Grace." he said, "I'll see what I can do." and then the display went black as suddenly as it had activated as Stuart Carr terminated the call from his end.

"Oh well done Stuart." Carr muttered, "Jerk." Then the communicator sounded and Carr quickly activated it, expecting it to be her former husband calling back to apologise, "Stuart you've-" she began.

"Sorry commander, it's me." West said before Carr could finish.

"Oh, right. Sorry." Carr replied, "What can I do for you lieutenant?"

"The captain wants to see you in his ready room as soon as possible." West told her.

"Did he say what for?" Carr asked.

"Err, I think you're better speaking directly to him. West out." West said and then she shut off the channel and Carr frowned.

"Second time in two minutes." she said to herself, "Does no-one want to talk to me today?"

Then she got up and left her bedroom, walking into the main living area where she found her daughter sat on a sofa looking at a PADD.

"Mom, where are you going?" Nikki asked, looking up as Carr picked up her combadge from the desk she used for most of her work.

"The captain wants to see me." Carr replied and Nikki smiled.

"Making big plans for when we get to Draken?" she said.

"Cut that out." Carr said, "You know there's nothing between me and the captain." then she approached Nikki to look at the PADD, "So what are you studying?" she asked.

"Fashion." Nikki answered, turning the PADD around to reveal a page from a clothing data catalogue, "I need to look my best when dad meets us."

"Sure, it's not like you've got closest full of clothes already." Carr said as she headed for the exit from their quarters, not wanting to bring up the possibility that Nikki's father would not be meeting them when they reached Draken IV.

Leaving her quarters Carr headed straight for the nearest turbolift to take her directly to the bridge.

"The captain's waiting in there for you." Cole said to her as she stepped out of the turbolift.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm heading for a firing squad?" Carr responded as she walked towards the door to the captain's ready room.

"The Federation does not practice capital punishment in peacetime lieutenant commander." T'Lan said from her station, "Therefore your concern is unfounded."

"It's just an expression T'Lan." Carr replied before pressing the intercom beside the door to the captain's ready room. Unexpectedly the door slid open immediately without Edwards asking who was there, "You asked to see me captain." Carr said as she stepped through the doorway and the door slid shut behind her.

"Yes, Grace. Please sit down." Edwards said.

"Sure. Wait. Grace?" Carr commented, noticing the use of her first name, "What's wrong? I know no-one's dead because I just spoke to my ex and Nikki's in our quarters."

"Just sit down Grace." Edwards told her.

"Sure David." she replied and as she sat opposite Edwards she added, "So what's going on?"

"We received the personal communications packet a few minutes ago." Edwards replied, "And there are messages for Nikki. Eight of them, all from universities."

"Oh God no." Carr said, raising a hand to her forehead, "If they've come back that fast then she's been rejected by them all hasn't she?"

"That's what we're assuming." Edwards said.

"We?" Carr asked and she looked back towards the door behind her, "Everyone knows don't they?"

"Only those who were on the bridge when the packet arrived." Edwards said, "I asked West to hold off delivering the packet until I had a chance to warn you about what it might contain. I know it's not much but-"

"Thanks." Carr interrupted, "Any warning is better than none."

"Look Grace, if it as bad as we think then I'm sure that we can figure something out." Edwards said.

"We?" Carr replied.

"Would you rather I stayed out of this?" Edwards asked in return.

"No." Carr said, smiling, "I'd appreciate the help. Did you have to do the same for any of your children?"

"No. Mine all managed to get accepted by at least one university. Even if my daughter Rebecca did end up studying art despite my advice that she study chemistry or something else actually useful."

"Well if you get West to send the communications packet out I'll get back to my quarters and see how Nikki takes it." Carr said, getting to her feet. Then she paused and frowned.

"Something wrong?" Edwards said.

“No, just wondering whether I'd be better stopping off at the MACO's quartermaster and seeing if they've got a set of body armour in my size.” Carr replied, sighing. Then she headed back out of Edwards' ready room, passing back through the bridge on her way to the turbolift, “Wish me luck.” she said just before entering the turbolift.



The PADD Nikki was looking at chimed as the messages for her from the communication packet were downloaded to it automatically when West released them onto the ship's network and Nikki smiled. Switching from the catalogue she was browsing to the messaging system she saw that each of the newly arrived messages was from one of the university's she had applied to.

"Wow, they answered quickly." she said to herself and she opened the first, "Dear Miss Carr," she said, reading the message out loud, "Thank you for your recent application to our institution. Unfortunately-" and she frowned. Then she moved on to the next message, "Dear Nikki, I write to inform you that having reviewed your application for undergraduate study we will not be able to-" and she started reading the third of the messages, once again getting just a few words in before confirming that it was another rejection. This was repeated with each of the eight messages in turn.

It was just as Nikki was reading the last of the messages that the door slid open and Carr returned.

"Nikki-" she began when she saw her daughter reading the messages on the PADD.

"Mom they turned me down just like that. All of them." Nikki exclaimed.

"I'm sorry Nikki." Carr replied, sitting down beside her daughter, "But look, maybe your grades weren't good enough-

"I don't even have final grades yet though, do I?" Nikki pointed out, "Only projected ones and those are supposed to be good enough for these universities."

"But if not your projected grades then why did they turn you down?" Carr asked and Nikki looked at the message she currently had open, reading beyond the first few sentences.

"Poor reference?" she said, "But that can't be." and she quickly went back to the previous messages, searching through each one for the specified reason for her rejection, "Your reference suggests you would not be suited to study with us. The requested background reference indicated that our curriculum would not suit an individual such as yourself." Then she jumped up to her feet and rushed towards the door.

"Wait Nikki." Carr said.

"Just leave me alone mom." Nikki responded just before the door closed behind her.

Carr got up to follow Nikki, but by the time she reached the door and stepped out into the corridor she was out of sight and Carr sighed before tapping her combadge.

"Captain, are you free to talk?" she asked, "Privately?"

"Yes, I'm still in my ready room." Edwards answered.

"Nikki just ran off. I don't suppose you could get Cole to track her on the quiet could you?"

"Sure, I'll get right on it Grace." Edwards told her.

In his ready room Edwards got up and headed for the door and just as he was stepping out onto the bridge the door to one of the turbolifts also slid open and Nikki emerged, storming onto the bridge as well.

"Ah Nikki." Edwards said, "You really shouldn't be here you know. The bridge is for-

"This won't take long." she interrupted as she strode towards the science station and slammed the PADD she still carried down on T'Lan's console, "Happy?" she snapped, "See what you've done? Every one of the university's I applied to turned me down because of you."

"Nikki, I do not understand what-" T'Lan began before Nikki cut her off.

"And I don't care. After all the help I gave you in getting together with Robert you stab me in the back like this."

"Nikki!" Cole snapped, getting to his feet.

"She told them I wasn't suitable for university." Nikki shouted back at him.

"Perhaps we should get someone up here to take Miss Carr back to her quarters." Edwards said, looking at Cole.

"Right on it captain." he replied as Edwards walked over to Nikki and took hold of her.

"Now look here young lady, this is a starship and that means every one of my officers deserves your respect. I don't care what's happened, you don't come storming into a restricted area and start hurling accusations." he said sternly.

"Well look at what she did." Nikki replied, taking hold of the PADD again and pushing it towards Edwards, "I'd have been better off asking Max for a reference. Even a letter from a Borg couldn't have made them hate me more than she's done."

The turbolift opened again and this time an Andorian stepped from it. He did not wear a Starfleet uniform however, instead he wore the uniform of a captain in the Imperial Guard.

"Ah Captain Shry." Edwards said, "Sorry to have you brought here but could you please escort Miss Carr back to her quarters and make sure she stays there?"

"Of course captain." Shry replied. Then he looked at Nikki, "Are you going to come along?" he asked. "Sure." Nikki replied, "I don't want to be anywhere near here anymore." and she glared at T'Lan, "In fact I never want to see or speak to her again." and then when Edwards let go of her she stormed back towards the turbolift, pushing past Shry to get inside. "Really?" Edwards said, looking at Cole when the turbolift door closed again, "You brought the commander of one of our ground combat companies up here rather than a couple of security guards?" "I didn't think having a pair of armed guards removing Nikki from the bridge would do any good." Cole replied. "Probably not." Edwards agreed. Then he looked at T'Lan, "What about you?" he asked, "Are you okay?" "I am unharmed captain." T'Lan replied, "Just somewhat confused about what has transpired." "Aren't we all?" Hamilton commented from his station.

The door to Carr's quarters opened to reveal both Nikki and Shry.

"Nikki, I don't care how upset you are," Carr began when she saw her daughter, "you can't just go-" "Do you really think I care what anyone on this ship thinks? As far as I'm concerned I'm done with this place. I'll go and live with dad when we get to Draken." Nikki snapped back at her mother as she hurried to her own room and closed the door behind her. "I'm sorry about this captain." Carr said to Shry. "That's alright commander." he replied, "Maybe talking things over with her father will help." "Ah." Carr said, "That could be a problem." "Don't tell me he's standing her up again." Shry said and Carr nodded slowly. "Looks that way. Second year running." she said, "I guess that's more bad news I need to break to her."

"Well it looks like I trusted the right person to get this job done." The Girl said just after she appeared out of nowhere, stepping into existence on a raised walkway behind a Bolian male who had a medical regeneration sleeve around his left forearm.

"Organisation always was my strong point." he replied, looking up from his PADD to the decorations being put up in the large room below them, "Mind you, parties aren't normally my thing. Especially ones for juveniles."

"You think organising a party for these people is bad?" The Girl asked, "Try being one."

"No thanks." the Bolian said, "Mind you I wouldn't have minded a body in better physical condition than this one." and he raised his injured arm.

"That was deliberate." The Girl replied, "We couldn't cover up the accident that killed your host so we had to make it look like he was injured in it. Just not so badly that he couldn't organise all of this." and she pointed to the process of decoration.

"Yes, fortunately Ralon Larr had quite the reputation for putting together the best entertainment on a whim while he was alive." the Bolian said, "Being him actually has the potential to be rather fun."

"Just remember why you're here Ralon." The Girl said, "What about the attendees?" and Ralon smiled.

"News of this event has spread quickly across the planet and also to several Starfleet vessels in the sector. I've received requests for more than a thousand tickets already. Who knows, we may even turn a profit on this little operation." the he produced a slip of silver coloured plastic, on the back of which was an embossed Starfleet emblem, "And here's yours by the way." he added, "On the house of course."

"Of course." The Girl replied, snatching the ticket from him, "Now what about our primary target? If she doesn't attend then all of this is for nothing."

"The *Nightfall* should get the message today. If your information about her is good then we ought to get a response soon. Certainly in time for tomorrow night."

"Good." The Girl said, "Then I'll allow you to get things finished here." and she turned around and began to walk away. Moments before she vanished Ralon looked around and called out to her.

"Don't forget your costume." he said, "Nobody gets in without one and that includes you." but The Girl did not respond before she vanished as suddenly as she had appeared and Ralon turned his attention back to his workers, "You there!" he called out to one, "In what dimension does that look right going there? I want it over the bar."

When Carr returned to her quarters at the end of her duty shift she found a pair of Earth MACOs standing guard outside, there to ensure that Nikki did not try to leave again before the *Nightfall* reached Draken IV and both soldiers snapped to attention as Carr approached.

"Did she give you any trouble?" she asked.

"No ma'am." one of the MACOs replied, "We've not heard a sound from her."

"I hope that's good." Carr said, "Well you can stand down now."

"Yes commander." the MACO said before both men turned and strode off down the corridor leaving Carr to enter alone.

Stepping inside her quarters she saw that they were as neat and tidy as they had been when she left hours earlier for her shift.

"Nikki I'm back." she called out, "Have you eaten?" and when no reply came she went to the door of her daughter's room and tried to open it, only to find it locked, "Computer, command override. Authorisation Carr, Lieutenant Commander. Alpha zero two."

"Override accepted." the voice of the *Nightfall's* computer responded and the door slid open.

"Nikki you need to eat something." Carr said as she walked towards the bed Nikki lay on, her eyes red from crying.

"Just leave me alone." Nikki said, "First T'Lan and now dad. Tomorrow is my eighteenth birthday and so far everyone seems to be going out of their way to ruin it."

"Well maybe this will help make it better." Carr said, holding out a PADD.

"What's that?" Nikki asked as she took the PADD.

"Just a bulletin that arrived about half an hour ago. Jenna was going to send straight to you but I wasn't sure you'd have your PADD turned on."

"I've not." Nikki replied and then she frowned, "What's a Starfleet party?"

"Apparently it's where the children of Starfleet officers can get together for the evening. Providing they wear a Starfleet uniform that is."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Only if you're claiming to be a Starfleet officer in public. But at a private party it's called fancy dress." Carr answered, "Now we get into orbit a couple of hours before this starts. Max is taking the transporters off line to do some work on them but that's plenty of time for you to take a shuttle down to the surface and go."

"I'll give it a miss." Nikki said, handing the PADD back to her mother.

"There'll be drink." Carr said.

"Drink?" Nikki repeated.

"Well synthehol. It's a private party and each ticket holder is entitled to four drinks." Carr replied, "Come on Nikki, you can use that copy of my uniform you replicated when you were actually trying to pass yourself off as an officer to get real beer."

"You mean that time you and the captain sneaked off to get married?" Nikki replied, finally smiling and Carr frowned.

"Oh shut up." she said as she got up, "Now come get something to eat." then after taking one step towards the door she looked around and added, "Oh and Doctor King wants to see you before you go down to the surface."

"The King? What does he want?" Nikki asked.

"'Doctor' King to you. Or 'Commander' King." Carr said, "And he didn't say."

3.

"Are you still obsessing over that T'Lan?" Cole asked, walking up behind the Vulcan as she sat on the couch in his quarters. Then as he sat down she held up a hand with the index and middle finger extend towards him.

"I fail to understand why my reference was seen as negative." she replied, still staring at the PADD she held while Cole placed his own index and middle fingers against hers, stroking them.

"Look T'Lan," he said, "what's done is done. I've read what you wrote myself and frankly I thought it made Nikki out to be far more responsible than she actually is. It never mentioned her storming onto the bridge and yelling at someone who tried to help her for example."

"Indeed. But there must be something I missed." T'Lan said before they were interrupted by the door to Cole's quarters chiming.

"Open." Cole said and the door slid apart to reveal a Romulan woman, who thanks to the lack of ridges on her forehead could easily pass as a Vulcan if she so chose, standing in the corridor with her arms behind her.

"Sorry didn't mean to barge in and interrupt the passion cousin." she said as she entered the room and saw Cole and T'Lan with their fingers touching in the Vulcan style of expressing affection.

"You're not interrupting Nayal." Cole replied, "So what brings you here?"

"I just wanted to make sure we're still on for visiting the ruins on Draken IV." Nayal answered, "It'll be interesting to see some of the route my ancestors took when they fled the boredom of Vulcan."

"Yes we'll be heading down there as soon as we can after we get into orbit." Cole told her.

"Will Lieutenant Hamilton be joining us sublieutenant?" T'Lan asked.

"No he won't." Nayal answered, "Because that would be like two couples doing something together and Bradley and I are not a couple."

"Yes we know, you're just friends who happen to sleep together whenever you want." Cole replied.

"Exactly." Nayal answered, "Plus Jenna's asked him to help her study for the bridge command exam."

"Jenna actually asked him?" Cole said, "Wow, she must be desperate after that failure." then he tried to peer around Nayal's back at what she was obviously hiding there, "So what's behind your back Nayal?" he asked and the Romulan woman smiled as she produced a hat with a wide floppy brim.

"I got this to keep the sun off me." she said as she put it on her head, "So cousin, how do I look?"

T'Lan paused.

"Perhaps Lieutenant Commander Cole is better able to offer an opinion." T'Lan replied and Nayal looked at Cole and smiled.

"Like a berk." Cole said, grinning back at her.

Commander Henry King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer, also known as 'King Henry' or 'The King' on occasion was just completing the requisition for new medical supplies to be loaded onto the ship at Draken IV when he noticed someone entering the sickbay.

"Just one moment." he called out, "Take a seat and hold a tricorder to your chest and I'll be there in a minute."

"You asked to see me." Nikki said, ignoring his instructions and King looked up from his computer, momentarily confused by the fact that Nikki was wearing an exact replica of a Starfleet uniform as worn by a member of the *Nightfall's* crew, right down to the MACO inspired patch on the sleeve.

"Are you trying to get arrested for impersonating an officer?" he asked.

"I'm off to a party. It's fancy dress." Nikki replied as she sat down opposite King, "Mom said you wanted to see me first though."

"I do." King replied, "I asked you to come and see me a few months ago remember?"

"Yeah, about my university application."

"But you decided not to bother." King said.

"What difference would it have made? T'Lan made sure none of them gave me a second look." Nikki replied.

"Ah yes, your little outburst on the bridge."

"You heard about that?" Nikki said, "I'm not sorry and I'm not saying it."

"Well you ought to young lady. Firstly because from what I hear it's a surprise that I didn't literally hear it from in here and secondly because you're blaming the wrong person." King replied

"What? T'Lan wrote my reference."

"Yes she did. A very fine one most likely. Vulcans don't lie but they have a way of turning the truth into whatever they need it to be. All very logically of course." King replied, "But when your application reached the Federation University Admissions Service they contacted the ship for more information. They wanted to

make sure that the reference was genuine.”

“Why didn't I hear about this?” Nikki asked.

“Because it's supposed to just be a formality. Now I see every official message that gets sent to or from anyone in my department and so when the admissions service sent a request to that idiot Lieutenant Mackey I saw both the request and his response. I sat on the response for as long as I could but eventually it had to be sent.”

“The councillor?” Nikki said, “But I haven't spoken to him in years.”

“Exactly.” King replied, “Like every sane person on this ship you keep as far from that fool as you can. But he just sent out a copy of his last assessment of you from when you were fourteen rather than contacting you for an interview so he could compile a fresh one. Given how much longer you've been aboard than I have I'd have thought you'd know even better than me how self important that worthless little man is, desperate to prove he has a use aboard a ship that rarely goes beyond Federation borders other than using up oxygen and an office. Now had you come to me when I asked originally you could have lodged a complaint and I could have stepped in. But you didn't so the report had to go and that was what the universities saw. The admission service probably thought that you made up the one from T'Lan.”

“Oh no.” Nikki said, leaning forwards and placing her face in her hands.

“Oh no indeed.” King said, “I think you may just owe our science officer an apology.” and Nikki sighed.

“I suppose so.” she said, “But what about Lieutenant Mackey? Can't we do anything about what he did?”

“Beyond it going in his personnel record that he submitted a report almost four years old? Nothing I'm afraid. Now go enjoy your party. Oh and happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” Nikki replied, getting back to her feet, “I suppose I better think of how I can make things up with T'Lan as well.”

“Yes I think you should.” King responded before turning back to his requisition forms.

In common with other akira-class cruisers the hangar of the *USS Nightfall* was the largest internal space aboard. But even given the size of it, the hangar still seemed crowded when Nikki entered it but a lot of this had to do with the side nearest to her having been taken up by what looked like most of the MACO and Imperial Guard companies that the *Nightfall* carried as part of a pilot program to evaluate the effectiveness of trained ground troops aboard a Starfleet vessel.

“Snowman.” Nikki said, walking over to a dark skinned Starfleet officer who was standing beneath the wing of one of the squadron Peregrine-class fighters that the *Nightfall* carried, watching the ground troops, “What's going on?”

'Snowman' was the officer's call sign. His real name was William White and he commanded the fighter squadron.

“Ordering me to tell you commander?” White asked in return, looking at the rank pins on Nikki's collar. The three gold pins marked her out as a full commander, outranking Lieutenant Commander White.

“Oh this?” Nikki said, pointing to the rank pins and she smiled, “I just wanted to outrank mom.”

“And almost everyone else aboard.” White commented, “Now as for our ground combat contingent I have no idea what they're up to on my hangar deck but I'm certain I won't like it. All I can tell you is that they've unpacked and assembled fifteen portable latrine units and connected them all to a single waste storage container and now they appeared to be unpacking a large amount of ration packs known for being hot and spicy.”

“So it's a bet of some kind then?” Nikki said, “It has to be.”

“Possibly. I just hope they remember that the house takes a cut on all gambling.” White said.

“Does that include a percentage of what's in that container?” Nikki asked and White paused and frowned.

“I don't think so.” he replied. Then he looked across the hangar in the other direction and noticed a runabout being moved into launch position, “Looks like your ride is ready.” he said and then when he saw a group of crew members that included Cole, Nayal and T'Lan all dressed in civilian clothing heading for it he added, “Though you may want to wait for the next one.”

“Why?” Nikki responded, looking around and when she saw the group she added, “Oh.”

“You're not going to start yelling at her again are you?” White asked, “Because if you are-”

“No. Don't worry.” Nikki interrupted, “In fact this could be good. I need to tell her I'm sorry. It was Mackey that got me rejected. Thanks Snowman.” and she began to walk across the hangar.

“Nikki.” White called out after her.

“What?” she asked, looking back at him.

“Enjoy yourself commander.” he said, snapping to attention and saluting. Then as Nikki continued on her way he headed for the ground troops who were at that moment sharing out a carton of ration bars, walking specifically up to Captain Shry and his MACO counterpart Captain Gary Heart, “Okay what are you lot up to?” he asked.

“It's all here.” Heart replied, handing him a PADD and White looked at it carefully for a few moments.

“I want in.” he said and as he returned the PADD to Heart he was handed a ration bar.

Meanwhile on the far side of the hangar Cole had his hand on T'Lan's shoulder when he saw Nikki coming towards them.

"Let me handle this." he said, positioning himself between T'Lan and the approaching Nikki.

"Why not let them sort it out between themselves?" Nayal asked, lifting the brim of her hat so she could see properly, "Maybe a good fight will make T'Lan actually express some feeling." but Cole ignored her.

"Nikki-" Cole began, holding up his hand as she drew closer.

"I've come to apologise." Nikki said and Cole frowned, "To both of you. I shouldn't have done what I did and I know now that it wasn't T'Lan that caused my applications to be rejected."

"You hear that cousin?" Nayal said, "You're off the hook for your hate mail."

"Then who was responsible?" T'Lan asked.

"Mackey." Nikki replied, "That's why Doctor King wanted to see me a few months back. He'd seen the letter the councillor had written and was trying to do something about it."

"Let me guess." Cole said, "After I told you, you didn't bother going. Right?"

"Right." Nikki said, sighing, "I just thought that he wanted to discuss my options but I'd already sent off the forms so I didn't bother." So Mackey got to send a report that was four years old and made it look like I faked T'Lan's letter. So I'm sorry."

"Perhaps now you will understand the benefits of approaching problems logically." T'Lan said, "Rather than with an impulsive emotional outburst."

"What is that it?" Nayal asked, "She just gets to say she's sorry and you're fine with that cousin?"

"Why would I not be?" T'Lan responded, "It is much less troubling than your continued use of the word 'cousin' to refer to me even though we are not related."

"Don't think you're fully off the hook with me though." Cole added, looking at Nikki, "Now get on the runabout, I've got ruins to look at."

West took a deep breath before pressing the intercom button beside the door to Hamilton's quarters. Though she had rarely been inside them she was well aware that the Nightfall's chief helmsman had decorated the interior of his quarters with artwork and collectables related to his keen interest in fantasy and science fiction, an interest that she did not share at all.

"Bradley it's me." she said after pressing the button and the door slid open, allowing her inside. Stepping through the doorway she took a look around, trying to remember what Hamilton had said about certain pieces but drawing a blank.

"Take a seat." Hamilton said as he carried an empty tray back to the replicator to recycle it, "And let's get started."

"Sure." West replied and she sat at the nearby desk and put her PADD down on it, "I brought my study notes with me." she added.

"Oh, right." Hamilton said, walking over and sitting down beside her. Picking up the PADD he began to scroll through the notes she had made. This consisted mainly of references to Starfleet regulations.

"So?" West asked and Hamilton shrugged.

"All this is valid I suppose." he said.

"But?"

"But if all you had to do to be a command officer was quote regulations then a computer could captain a starship." Hamilton said, "You need to be able think like a captain, have the nerves of steel of a great leader."

"A great leader huh?" West replied, looking around at the objects decorating Hamilton's quarters again, "Oh boy."

Nikki was used to seeing large numbers of people in Starfleet uniform gathered together but they had invariably been older than the crowd in the club where the party was being held. Looking around she could see more young people than she could count, all of them wearing replicas of Starfleet uniforms. Most of these could be recognised as fake even from a distance, with civilian clothing of roughly the right pattern having been recoloured and adjusted. One or two of the older girls also wore versions of the now out of date optional 'skant' dress that had been modified to make them as short as possible. Meanwhile the live band playing on the stage wore obvious reproductions of the uniforms worn in the mid twenty-third century when each vessel had its own emblem rather than there being just one for all assignments. However, there were a handful of other party goers that like Nikki looked to have simply acquired genuine uniforms in their size. Nikki then glanced down at the ticket she held.

"Four drink limit huh?" she said to herself, "Well time to go get number one I think." and she headed towards the bar, unaware that in a darkened part of the walkways running back and forth above the main room two figures were watching her.

"There she is." The Girl said, smiling, "Congratulations Ralon, you've played your part admirably."

"It was nothing really." the Bolian appearing man replied, "But now that we have her here what do you want to do with her? Bringing fleshforms here to abduct her will attract attention."

"Of course it will." The Girl said, "But abducting her is not a part of my plan. I want her to take me with her, not the other way around." and Ralon frowned.

"Take you where?" he asked.

"To wherever our lost comrade is hiding." The Girl answered, "Now I think it's time I went down there and made myself a new friend."

The Girl then proceeded down from the walkway, walking all the way rather than simply transporting herself from the walkway to the floor below just in case one of the many party goers observed her sudden appearance and reacted in a way that would likely tip Nikki off to what was happening. The success of Ralon's advertising turned out to be something of a double edged sword now. Though it meant that The Girl was able to conceal herself in the crowd quite easily as she watched Nikki from a distance it also made it harder for her to keep track of her target given that she was dressed in a similar manner to almost everyone else in the room. Fortunately the quality of Nikki's uniform made her easier to follow but the key feature of it was the brightly coloured patch she wore on her arm, a detail that no other uniform in the room included and it was this that The Girl used as she finally reached Nikki just as she had reached the bar to claim the first of her drinks.

"Excuse me." The Girl said to Nikki over the sound of the music, "But what's that on your arm?"

"Oh this?" Nikki responded, pointing to the patch and The Girl nodded.

"Yes, I've never seen anything like that on a Starfleet uniform before." she said.

"Hang on a moment." Nikki said as her drink was handed to her and the barman stamped her ticket to indicate that she had been served with it. Then she turned back to The Girl and stepped away from the bar, "I'm from the *Nightfall*." she said, "It's an Akira-class cruiser that's part of some study to see how well Starfleet can operate with dedicated ground combat troops aboard. We've got a company of MACOs from Earth and a company of Imperial Guard from Andoria. The patch is a MACO thing that the rest of the crew have adopted as well."

"That's so cool." The Girl said, smiling to present a friendly face, "My folks are stationed here on Draken and aside from tonight it's universally dull."

"Let me guess, services division." Nikki said, noticing the gold coloured collar and bans on The Girl's sleeves.

"Mom's an engineer, dad's in operations." The Girl lied, "I just copied one of mom's uniforms."

"Pretty much what I did. But let me tell you, dull is not how I'd describe the *Nightfall*." Nikki said.

"How about I get a drink and we find somewhere a bit quieter and you tell me all about it?" The Girl asked.

"Sure." Nikki replied and she held out her hand, "The name's Nikki by the way."

"Pleased to meet you Nikki." The Girl said as she shook Nikki's hand.



West yawned and tossed her PADD down onto the table.

"I don't get it." she said, "All this goes in but it just doesn't stick when it comes to the exam. Mackey keeps saying it's a subconscious recognition of the fact that I still haven't adjusted to being back in Starfleet."

"Sounds more like recognition of the fact that our ship's councillor has the personality of a Denebian slime devil." Bradley replied before adding, "You'll get it eventually Jenna, don't worry about it."

"Well you managed so it can't be that hard huh Bradley?" West commented and she grinned.

"Perhaps a drink to keep us both awake." Hamilton said and he got up and walked over to the replicator. As he did West leant her head back against her chair and closed her eyes, "How do you want your raktajino?" Hamilton asked. But rather than answer him West suddenly got to her feet and headed for the exit, "Hey, where are you going?" he called out to West, noticing that she had left her PADD behind.

"Better things to do Hamilton." West responded, waving as she left his quarters.

"Hamilton?" Hamilton said to himself as the door slid shut behind her, "Since when does she call me Hamilton off duty?"

Before downloading itself into the storage device embedded in West's brain following her revival from the cryogenic stasis that had cost her ten years of her life The Controller had had a full outpost and the robot army deployed to defend it at its command. Now though 'she' was limited to brief periods of activity while West was asleep as well as being able to affect West's own behaviour at certain times. These periods of activity and the influence The Controller was able to wield were becoming steadily easier and she made the most of them to expand her knowledge about the ship she now found herself aboard. Already through the use of some carefully crafted computer programs she had been able to destroy a peace conference that would have proven dangerous to the schemes of her own people had it been successful and The Controller was certain that there would be other similar opportunities to advance their cause in the future that she needed to be prepared for. That meant two things, firstly she had to learn as much about not only the starship she was aboard but also Starfleet and the Federation in general as she could and secondly she had to have ways of subverting them to her will.

Returning to West's quarters The Controller sat down at the computer terminal there and switched it on. At first it appeared perfectly normal, the screen showing a standard Starfleet menu system. But by pressing certain parts of the screen in just the right order this was replaced by streams of far more alien code and The Controller began to type, adding to this.

Soon after finding an isolated spot to talk The Girl had shown Nikki a device that she claimed to have smuggled into the party that emitted an energy beam that removed the stamps placed on their tickets to mark off the number of drinks they could obtain from the bar before being limited to soft drinks only. Of course Nikki had no way of knowing that the tickets and the stamps had been designed specifically to allow the device to function or that the supposed synthehol beverages that she was getting in fact contained a small quantity of a chemical intended to make her more susceptible to suggestion.

"A Borg cube?" The Girl asked, feigning both surprise and interest in Nikki's tales of life aboard the *Nightfall*, "You saw a genuine Borg cube up close?"

"Sure." Nikki replied, "Well as close as you can get in a runabout without getting assimilated. But I got see it blow up."

"But I thought Borg cubes were unstoppable." The Girl said and Nikki shrugged.

"Not when you blow up half a planet to stop them they're not." she said.

It was then that The Girl decided the time had come to try and advance her plan to the next stage.

"It sounds so exciting." she said, "Living here on Draken is just so boring, Even when starships arrive in orbit I never get to see them. I'd give anything to get aboard one just once."

Nikki smiled.

"Well seeing how you've been kind enough to share that wand with me the least I can do is invite you back to the *Nightfall* for a quick tour. There are some places I'm not supposed to go alone but there's still loads to see."

"That sounds great." The Girl replied, "So do we just beam up?"

"No. we can't. The transporters are off line right now. But we can sneak back on a shuttle."

"Won't the pilot notice?" The Girl asked.

"Notice what?" Nikki asked in return, "Two Starfleet officers returning from shore leave?"

Nikki and The Girl looked at the row of small transport craft on the landing field. Nikki's identity card had been enough to get the pair of them this far but to get The Girl onto the *Nightfall* itself was going to be harder. Any

of the shuttle pilots from the *Nightfall* would let Nikki aboard without question but they may well question the presence of The Girl if given the opportunity.

"Okay, there's our ride, the *USS Severn*. A runabout from the *Nightfall*. You know what to do?" Nikki asked and The Girl nodded.

"Wait for you to get aboard the runabout and then follow with this." she said and she held up an equipment case that was marked 'STARFLEET MEDICAL – URGENT' that she had picked up along the way.

"And if the pilot asks and questions?"

"It's a delivery for a Lieutenant Mackey. I don't know what's in it but he requested it be sent up immediately. But what if they ask to see inside? It's empty."

"She won't. But don't hold it as if it's empty, try and act like there's some weight in it."

"Okay, I've got it."

"Good. Now here goes." Nikki said and she calmly began to walk towards the runabout, climbing aboard.

"Back so soon?" the pilot commented as she looked around from the console she was carrying out pre flight checks on, "It's only eleven thirty."

"I used up my four drink limit by eleven." Nikki replied, "And as it happens all my stories of life with a parent in Starfleet are far more interesting than anyone else's and I've already heard them all. So when are you heading back up to the ship?"

"In about an hour and a half unless we get an urgent request to launch."

"Mind if I just take a seat then?" Nikki asked, sitting down in the co-pilot's seat.

"Go ahead it's-" the pilot began before The Girl appeared in the hatchway at the rear of the cockpit.

"*Nightfall*?" she asked.

"That's right." the pilot answered, "What have you got there?"

"Didn't ask and they didn't tell." The Girl answered, holding up the empty case, "But it's for a Lieutenant Mackey and it's urgent."

The pilot sighed.

"I'm not taking any flak for him." she said, "Come on in and take a seat. I can have you up there in ten minutes."

"Thanks." The Girl said and as she took a seat the pilot sealed the hatch and began to power up the runabout's engines.

Even running on just thrusters until the runabout reached an altitude where its impulse engine could be safely engaged the flight into orbit took only a few minutes. Watching through the forward viewports Nikki smiled as she saw the familiar shape of the *Nightfall* first from a distance and then as the pilot flew the runabout between the two secondary hull assemblies that protruded from the rear of the saucer to where the large doors used for landing auxiliary craft were located. For a moment she was about to turn around and tell The Girl that she always enjoyed watching the final approach sequence before remembering that the pair were supposed to be strangers and she did not want the pilot to get suspicious.

As the runabout penetrated the force field used to maintain the atmospheric pressure of the hangar the first thing that Nikki noticed was the large number of people gathered around the portable latrine units that the MACOs and Imperial Guard had set up. Most of them were in the uniforms of the *Nightfall*'s ground troops but Nikki spotted several Starfleet ones as well.

"That's weird." she said, "What are they doing down there?"

"Beats me." the pilot replied as she landed the runabout, "Okay everyone out." she announced, "I need to get back to the surface so I'm not stopping." then she looked at The Girl, "You know the way?" she asked.

"I can show her." Nikki said, spotting an opportunity.

"Sure." the pilot replied and her two passengers hurried off the runabout before it promptly took off again and shot out of the main launch door at the front of the hangar.

"What was that you were saying about something weird?" The Girl asked, alert for the risk that she may have been discovered already.

"Oh it's that lot." Nikki replied, "The ground troops I told you about. They've set up a bunch of portable field latrines and appear to be putting them to far more use than is normal. Look." and she pointed to where a man in a MACO uniform suddenly darted towards one of the tiny cubicles and vanished inside, "I'd go and ask what they're up to but I'm afraid I'd end up taking a swim in that storage unit."

The Girl frowned, confused by the actions of the people she was supposed to be able to blend in with.

"So where are we going first?" she asked.

"My quarters." Nikki said, "But be quiet. I don't want to risk waking mom." and The Girl smiled.

Ship time aboard the *Nightfall* matched that of the Starfleet outpost on the surface and so it was almost midnight as Nikki led The Girl through the almost deserted corridors of the ship. Only once did they hear voices from nearby and Nikki held up her hand for The Girl to stop while she took a look around the corner.

"It's okay." she said softly, "It's just a couple of the civilian engineers who have helped develop the ship. They won't notice you, just your uniform." and then the pair carried on walking, moving right past the two civilians coming the other way as far as a turbolift.

"Deck three. Section four." Nikki said and the turbolift began to move, stopping just a few seconds later and the door opened onto the corridor that led to the quarters she shared with her mother, "Okay this is it." Nikki told The Girl as they reached the door, "Like I said, keep quiet so we don't wake mom." Inside the quarters were in darkness, just as Nikki had expected and she cautiously reached out to turn on the lights.

"That's odd." she said, "Mom's not here. Look." and she pointed to her mother's bedroom doorway that was wide open and revealed the bed inside to be unoccupied.

"Is she on duty?" The Girl asked, concerned that the person she had relied on to get her this far seemed to be unaware of a great deal of information about what was happening aboard the ship.

"Maybe." Nikki answered, "Anyway, my room's this way." and she headed for her own bedroom, The Girl following her. Inside, Nikki sat on the edge of her bed and picked up the PADD from the table beside it, "Here," she said, "this has loads of pictures on it. I can tell you all about the ship with it."

"That's excellent." The Girl replied as she set the equipment case down on the bed and opened it, "I'm sure it'll come in useful." and then from inside the equipment case she produced a cube of a rubbery milky white substance that she put down on the bed.

"What's that?" Nikki asked, "I thought that case was empty."

"No, not empty." The Girl replied, "This is just something to make sure you don't cause me any trouble." and all of a sudden the cube appeared to melt into a puddle on the bedsheets and it shot across the bed towards Nikki. In reaction to seeing this Nikki leapt up, dropping the PADD. But the now fluid appearing substance leapt up through the air after her and struck her in the chest. Nikki tried desperately to pull it away from her but it flowed over her body and along her arms as she touched it. Continuing to spread, the substance pulled Nikki's arms to her sides and pinned them there before it moved further down her body and began to wrap her legs as well. Finding herself encased completely from the neck down, Nikki lost her balance and fell back onto her bed.

"What is this?" she cried out, "Get it off me."

"I don't think so." The Girl replied and at the same time a pair of muscular humanoid figures that looked as if they were sculpted out of the same material the Nikki was now wrapped in materialised as if from nowhere to stand either side of The Girl, "Watch her." she told them, "If she tries to call for help then have the flesh fill her mouth as well." and the figures just nodded silently.

Leaving the fleshforms to watch Nikki, The Girl picked up the equipment case and PADD and returned to the main room of Nikki's quarters, heading straight for the desk where a computer terminal was located. On any other starship or space station The Girl would have attempted to make a direct physical connection with the terminal, bypassing the security software using the enhancements made to her host body. But she knew that the systems aboard the *Nightfall* were constantly monitored by the hive of intelligent nanites that flowed through it and without a valid access code or enough knowledge of the system to be able to hide her activity making use of her enhancements in this way risked her being discovered before she had found what she was looking for. Instead she sat down in front of the terminal and activated it in the normal manner. Then she began to browse through the unrestricted files it contained in the hope that they would reveal some trace of one of her people that the crew of the *Nightfall* would not be aware of.

The best of the ancient ruins left behind by the migrating proto-Romulans were located far from the Starfleet outpost in a time zone where it was still daylight and Cole, Nayal and T'Lan were all making their way up to the top of hill where it was hoped that they would get a commanding view of the entire site.

"You know we could have just taken one of the organised tours." Cole said as he struggled to keep up with the Romulan and Vulcan women he was with, both from species with superior stamina to even a man such as himself in peak physical condition.

"The tour guides don't know anything about my people." Nayal replied, "Stick with me and you'll learn a lot more. Isn't that right cousin?"

"It is not," T'Lan replied, "and please cease calling me 'cousin'. The information you have provided us regarding your history so far has clearly been influenced by the official propaganda of the Romulan Empire's former government."

"What are you saying cousin?" Nayal asked, halting and placing her hands on her hips as she frowned at T'Lan.

"She's saying the tour guides know more than you do." Cole said, glad of the brief rest.

"On the contrary Robert, I have also noticed that the tour guides are lacking in depth knowledge of the diaspora that led to the settlement of Romulus and are instead focused purely on the practical implications of the artefacts here rather than their cultural significance."

"See?" Nayal added, nodding and smiling as she looked at Cole, "Diaspora." then she frowned, "Hang on, isn't that what you get with food poisoning?"

"No." Cole replied, "That's something different." then he looked around, "I tell you what," he said, breathing heavily, "I reckon we've seen everything worth seeing now so how about we head back to the ship? It may be the middle of the afternoon here but my body clock is telling me it's the middle of the night."

"Perhaps Robert is correct." T'Lan added.

"Fine." Nayal responded, "Since no one appreciates the wealth of historical information I have we'll head back. Someone call us a shuttle."

The Girl frowned, frustrated at her lack of success. Most of the *Nightfall's* computer network was restricted and all she had been able to access so far were a handful of generic information files such as a deck plans and details of emergency procedures such as what to do in the event of decompression, fire or instruction to abandon ship. Getting up she returned to Nikki's bedroom carrying her PADD. There she found Nikki lay on her bed, still wrapped tightly in the synthetic flesh cocoon and as The Girl appeared she looked up at her.

"I need your help." The Girl said, standing at the end of the bed.

"No." Nikki replied.

"Oh come now Nikki, have I harmed you? Have they?" and she looked at the pair of silent fleshforms as she walked around the bed to stand beside Nikki before looking down at her, "So long as you behave and tell me what I need to know you're perfectly safe with me I promise. Now I want you to tell me all about the people in these pictures." and The Girl held up Nikki's PADD and began to scroll from one image to another that showed Nikki with various crew members.

"No. I'm not helping you." Nikki said. Then before The Girl could reply there was the sound of the exit from the Carrs' quarters opening as someone entered. Realising that this was her mother returning Nikki took a deep breath, ready to call out and warn her. But before she could produce any sound The Girl suddenly clamped her free hand down over Nikki's mouth and held it there firmly.

In the main room outside Carr hummed as she set down a bag beside her desk and then sat on the nearby couch, removing her combadge and then starting to take off her boots. Then she noticed a light coming from the computer and she got up to investigate. It was just as she was leaning over the terminal that she heard a sound coming from in Nikki's room.

"Nikki?" she said, "Are you back?" and she began to walk over to the open bedroom door. However, before she was even half way there The Girl suddenly appeared standing in it, "Who are you?" Carr demanded, "And what are you doing in my quarters?"

"I was invited here." The Girl answered, "Isn't that right Nikki?" And at that moment the two fleshforms pulled Nikki into view, holding her up between them.

"Mom run!" Nikki yelled.

Recognising the fleshforms from previous encounters Carr turned to run towards her own bedroom, hoping to reach the phaser that she had stored there. But before she could take a single step The Girl suddenly looked at the equipment case she had left on the desk by the computer terminal and it burst open as she activated another cube of synthetic flesh. The malleable substance slid off the desk and spread out in Carr's

path before she could evade it. Then the moment she stepped into the puddle it had formed the flesh anchored her in place as it spread upwards, encasing her just as it had done with Nikki and as she lost her balance Carr fell onto the floor.

"Well isn't this nice?" The Girl said as she walked over to Carr and sat her up before beckoning for her fleshform bodyguards to bring Nikki over, sitting her down so that she and her mother were located back to back and the flesh wrapping them fused together, "Now I have two people to help me find what I want."

"I am a Starfleet officer." Carr replied sternly, "I do not co-operate with kidnappers and terrorists."

"Now that is a shame." The Girl said, "Because I think your dear Nikki would really rather you did."

"Not likely." Nikki said. But then the synthetic flesh that encased her suddenly began to spread upwards, flowing over her mouth and nose before sealing itself over her entire head.

"See?" The Girl said to Carr as Nikki tried to shake her head loose, "My guess is that you've got just a couple of minutes to change your mind before the oxygen already in her lungs runs out."

Carr could feel Nikki struggling behind her and in an instant she knew what she had to do.

"Okay I'll do whatever you ask!" she snapped, "But let her breathe."

"There, that was easy." The Girl said as the covering retreated from Nikki's head and she gasped for breath.

Then she stood in front of Carr and leant towards her, staring into her eyes, "Now tell me your access code to your ship's computer network."

"I really don't like the look of that." Cole said as he disembarked from the runabout and saw the assembled ground troops still gathered around the portable latrines, "I'm going to find out what's going on." and he marched across the hangar towards them, "Okay," he called out, "what are you lot up to?"

"Just checking out the equipment commander." Shry replied as he spooned food from a ration can into his mouth.

"That's right." Heart added, "If we need to deploy any of this equipment in an emergency then we need to know that it's all in working order."

"And you're in on this as well?" Cole asked, looking at where White sat on a crate.

"I'm just here to make sure that no harm comes to my hangar deck." White replied.

"Fine, have it your way. Now give me one of those beers." Cole said and he pointed to the cases of beer being consumed by the soldiers.

"Real or synthehol?" Heart asked.

"Real." Cole answered.

"Beer him." Heart ordered and a MACO tossed a bottle of beer at Cole who caught it. Then Heart handed him a bottle opener to remove the top and after opening the beverage Cole returned the tool and headed back towards the runabout.

"So did they tell you what they are doing?" T'Lan asked him.

"Yes but I don't believe them." Cole answered, sipping at his beer, "Mark my words, there's something going on aboard this ship."

The Girl sat at the computer terminal, looking through the ship's personnel files. It had occurred to her that perhaps the reason one of her people had been able to infiltrate the *USS Nightfall* was that they were masquerading as someone other than a Starfleet officer and so she had focused her attention on these individuals. Local defence forces had been infiltrated on numerous occasions so the ground combat troops aboard the *Nightfall* were the obvious place to start. However, the drawback to this theory was that both the MACOs and Imperial Guardsmen aboard were subjected to the same physical tests as the Starfleet crew. This meant that although the results of these were considered confidential even within Starfleet and thus held only in the ship's medical database that Carr and thus now The Girl did not have access to, it was certain that the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer would have brought any oddities in his examinations to the attention of the captain.

There was of course the issue of the former Borg drone who served as the ship's chief engineer. Despite being a Starfleet officer his physiology meant that he did not require regular medical checks. But the hive mind of the collective meant that impersonating a drone was near impossible and The Girl's people had not made any efforts to infiltrate Borg society, instead finding other ways to manipulate them into actions that would help The Girl's cause. Even a lone Borg outside the collective was not something The Girl regarded as a viable flesh host. Such an individual would draw attention even without being a spy and anonymity was key to infiltration.

The Girl was then left with the handful of advisory personnel aboard the *Nightfall*. Most of these were human engineers and scientists who would not be subject to the same standards of physical health and fitness as the crew so would not be required to submit to regular medical inspection. On the other hand their access to systems outside their speciality would be limited and accessing anything to do with Federation security would bring the risk of discovery.

On the other hand the Romulan advisor present on the *Nightfall* posed an interesting possibility. Many

Romulans had been impersonated during their civil war in order to keep it going and number of them had been lost. Conceivably one of these agents could have found their way into Federation territory. Once there they could have worked their way into the Federation's trust while still being able to avoid the extensive medical checks that would give them away. Though why they would not have reported in normally by now was a mystery.

As she continued with her search The Girl ignored her two captives as they still sat on the floor back to back, encased in the synthetic flesh The Girl had smuggled aboard and occasionally squirmed as they tried to get comfortable.

"Mom where were you when I got back?" Nikki asked suddenly.

"Nikki I really don't think that this is the time." Carr replied.

"You said you were going to be here all night but you weren't." Nikki said, "Were you with Captain Edwards?"

"What?" Carr asked.

"The captain, did you go and see him after I left?"

"As it happened I did." Carr said, "He asked me to help him review some operational files."

"Right. Operational files." Nikki said.

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

"It means I can smell your perfume mom. Oh and what sort of wine goes with paperwork? Red or white? Because I can smell that on your breath as well. How much did you drink? Or did you just bathe in it?"

"Fine, so he had a glass of wine afterwards." Carr said, "There's nothing wrong with that."

"So if we look in that bag we won't find the outfit you wore when you weren't sneaking through the corridors of the ship and worried someone might see you ducking in and out of the captain's quarters in the middle of the night then?"

"Oh don't be ridiculous Nikki." Carr said.

"Since we're both going to die why don't you just admit that you and the captain have been having an affair since he arrived?" Nikki exclaimed, but before Carr could answer The Girl turned around in her chair and glared at them.

"As much as I'd love to sit and listen to your bickering I have a job to do." she said and she thrust Nikki's PADD in their direction, "Now who is she?" she asked, pointing to an image of tall woman with long dark hair wearing a science division uniform, "She's in several images taken on different occasions but she's not recorded in your crew database."

"What, Emma?" Nikki replied

"Emma?" The Girl repeated.

"Emma is just the name that Nikki gave to the Emergency Medical Hologram. EMH. Emma. Get it?" Carr added.

"Get what?"

"It's because the name sounds similar to the letters when put together." Nikki said, "Who are you people that you can't spot that?"

"That can't be a hologram because none of the images were taken in the sickbay." The Girl said, "So who is it?"

"It is the EMH." Nikki told her, "Honest. Max and T'Lan made her a body out of that stuff you use for those golem things." and she looked up at the pair of fleshforms.

"Golems? Ah yes, after the mythical creatures built to protect your people from attack." The Girl said as she looked at the fleshforms as well, "I suppose that is one way of describing out fleshforms. Though not entirely accurate." then she turned back to her prisoners, "But you say that your crew were able to craft a body from our flesh. How?"

"Because every time we beat you we learned a little bit more about you." Carr replied sternly, despite her situation, "And eventually Max and T'Lan learned enough to recreate it for themselves."

"And Doctor King went berserk." Nikki muttered.

"But this body still exists?" The Girl asked and Nikki nodded, "Good. Then you will take me to it."

"I would, but I'm a little tied up right now." Nikki replied, scowling. Then all of a sudden the flesh encasing her retreated, splitting open to release her.

"Hey, what's going on?" Carr asked, trying to look around as The Girl dragged Nikki to her feet.

"Your daughter and I are going for a little walk lieutenant commander." The Girl replied as she picked up Carr's combadge from the desk and swapped it with the replica one stuck to her chest, "Don't worry about being left alone though. The fleshforms will make sure no harm come to you." she pulled Nikki towards the door and dragged her out into the corridor, "Okay lead the way." she ordered, "And don't forget that it takes just a thought from me to make sure that your mother dies in the most unpleasant way possible. Now move." and she shoved Nikki in the direction of the turbolift that they had used to get here from the hangar deck.

"Okay, okay. I'm moving." Nikki replied and she began to walk. Reaching the turbolift she stepped inside and for a brief moment she considered issuing the order for the doors to close before The Girl could follow her

but she hesitated, remembering The Girl's warning about the consequences for her mother who remained a prisoner and in that time The Girl was able to follow her into the turbolift.

"Well?" she said, staring at Nikki.

"Sickbay." Nikki said and the doors slid shut before the turbolift began to move, reaching the exit closest to sickbay in a matter of seconds.

As the doors slid open again The Girl stood back and let Nikki exit the turbolift first, removing the choice of enacting an emergency close of the doors by Nikki to separate them. Then once both of them were stood in the corridor outside Nikki headed for sickbay. This was only a few metres away from the turbolift, deliberately located to allow medical personnel rapid access to all parts of the ship as well as enabling sick and injured crewmen to reach sickbay quickly. However, as soon as The Girl saw the sign beside the door identifying sickbay she took hold of Nikki again.

"How many personnel will be inside at this time?" she asked.

"None." Nikki replied.

"Are you sure?" The Girl said, "Remember your mother."

"I'm sure. We have an EMH remember? The medical staff use her to cover the night shift unless there's an emergency in which case she'll let Doctor King know and he'll summon as many people as he needs to deal with it."

"Very well, carry on." The Girl said, letting go of her grip on Nikki.

Nikki calmly walked into the sickbay and as she did so the computer detected her presence and reacted by automatically turning on the lights.

"Computer activate-" she began before all of a sudden The Girl clamped a hand over her mouth.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, removing her hand.

"Well don't you want to speak to Emma?" Nikki asked.

"No. I want to see this body your friends have built for it." The Girl replied, "Now show me where it is kept."

"This way." Nikki replied, pointing towards an unmarked door.

"What else is through there?" The Girl asked.

"It's the morgue." Nikki told her, "I think it's kind of sick if you ask me. They should leave her turned on all the time if she wants but everyone's worried that she might become self aware. As if that's a bad thing. They don't even let her use the body unless there's something that needs her attention where there aren't any holomitters."

"Ah, so the body is not in constant use then?" The Girl said, smiling, "How interesting. Now let's go and see what it's doing right now shall we?"

Nikki walked over to the morgue and opened it. The room beyond was climate controlled to be several degrees cooler than the rest of sickbay to slow down the decay of bodies stored inside. There was room in the morgue for around fifty bodies to be stored in individual numbered drawers positioned around the walls and Nikki opened up one of the closest of these, one labelled 'EMMA 7'.

"There. See?" She said to The Girl as pulling open the drawer revealed the body of a tall woman in a Starfleet science division uniform that although it featured a combadge and the typical *USS Nightfall* patch had no other form of markings on it, "She's inactive. She can't hurt you."

"Wake up." The Girl said to the body, "Don't you recognise me?" but the body laid out in front of her remained motionless. Then The Girl reached out and turned the body's head slightly, examining the structure closely,

"This is not built entirely of our flesh." she said, "I sense much cruder technology at its heart."

"I don't know how it works." Nikki replied, "Just that Emma can work it by remote control if she needs to-"

"Remote control? The Girl interrupted, "So your artificial doctor does not literally inhabit this body then?"

"Like I said, I don't know exactly how it works." Nikki told her again.

"Then I need to see this 'Emma' of yours." The Girl said, "Summon her."

"Fine, but can we at least stand out there where it's warmer?" Nikki replied and The Girl gesture towards the exit from the morgue.

"After you." she said.

"Computer." Nikki said out loud as she exited the morgue before The Girl interrupted again.

"But do not attempt to use the hologram as a means to escape." she warned.

"Yeah, I get it." Nikki replied, "Computer, activate emergency medical hologram."

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." said the hologram that promptly materialised in the centre of the sickbay, facing towards the main door. Then it turned around and The Girl saw that the body she had just inspected was an exact physical duplicate of the hologram, "Ah Nikki, what's the matter?" she asked.

"There's nothing wrong with me Emma." Nikki answered.

"Then why have you activated me?" Emma asked, "You should know that Doctor King disapproves greatly of frivolous use of my system."

"I just wanted to show you to someone I met at a party." Nikki said and she looked at The Girl and Emma did likewise.

"Do you know me?" The Girl asked.

"I do not." Emma replied, "Are you familiar with another EMH Mark Seven ensign?" she added, using the single gold rank pin on The Girl's collar to determine how to address her.

"No you're the first of your kind that I have encountered." The Girl said. Then she paused, waiting to see how the EMH would react. But when she did nothing The Girl added, "What once was ours." and waited again.

"What about what was yours?" Emma asked and The Girl turned to look at Nikki again.

"This thing is not what I am looking for. Turn it off."

"Thing?" Emma said, "I'll have you know that—"

"Computer deactivate emergency medical hologram." Nikki said and Emma promptly vanished.

"How much will it remember?" The Girl asked.

"Everything." Nikki said, "It's a computer program." and The Girl smiled, "What now?" Nikki asked.

"Interesting things can be hidden inside computer programs." The Girl replied and then she looked around,

"It's stored there yes?" she asked, looking at the sickbay located just inside the entrance to sickbay and Nikki nodded. Then The Girl looked around again, "These will do nicely I think." she said, approaching the closest of the biobeds that sickbay was equipped with, "Now get on it."

"Why? What are you going to do to me?" Nikki asked, worriedly and The Girl sighed.

"All this obsession with what I'm going to do to you." she said, "You really ought to be far more concerned about what I will do to both you and your mother if you don't do exactly as you're told. Now get on the biobed."

Nervously Nikki moved towards the biobed and climbed onto it before lying down. Then The Girl touched the control panel to activate the restraint field built into it and Nikki felt the flicker of the energy field activating around her. Not as confining as an isotropic restraint used to fully immobilise a patient during surgery, the restraint field was designed to prevent a violent patient from harming medical staff during treatment and it held Nikki firmly in place.

"I think this may come in useful." The Girl said and she reached down and ripped the patch from Nikki's sleeve before pressing it to her own where the backing of the patch latched onto it.

"Hey!" Nikki exclaimed when she saw this.

"Oh quit complaining." The Girl said, "Count yourself lucky I didn't just strip you completely and take your entire uniform. Now I can't be watching you at the same time as I work." The Girl added as she walked away and began to inspect the assorted medical equipment laid out ready for use in sickbay. Finding what she needed she then returned to Nikki holding a dermal stimulator and she leant over Nikki, "And I can't have you disturbing me with your chatter either." she said before holding the dermal stimulator towards Nikki's mouth.

"Hey wait I—" Nikki began but The Girl reached down through the restraint field to close Nikki's mouth by pushing up on her jaw, holding it closed while she passed the dermal stimulator over it. Nikki let out a muffled scream as she felt the skin on her face knitting together over her mouth, "Now close your eyes." The Girl added, "Otherwise this could inflict permanent damage and Nikki clenched her eyes shut as the dermal stimulator was moved higher up her face and directed at them, "Finally some peace and quiet." The Girl said before heading towards the computer.



Lieutenant Maximillian had retained all of his Borg implants even after being separated from the collective when the drone known as Hugh had returned to their vessel and spread knowledge of individuality amongst them all. This meant that although his ability to access and manipulate technology made him an ideal engineer it also required him to regenerate, recharging his stored energy and taking in the basic chemical compounds he needed to maintain his body. To accomplish this a standard Borg alcove had been constructed in his quarters, half of which resembled the interior of a Borg vessel while the remaining half was decorated in a more typical, if somewhat spartan, Federation style with chairs laid out around a table to be used by the occasional visitors that Max received.

Max himself stood motionless inside his alcove, his arm connected to the charging socket and his remaining eye closed. But even in this state he was receiving continuous updates from the millions of nanites that swarmed throughout the *USS Nightfall*, monitoring the status of almost every system and carrying out limited repairs from within them. Thus, when he was informed that someone was attempting to manipulate the sickbay computer that stored the ship's EMH Max's eye suddenly opened and he disengaged from his alcove. Walking over to the Borg style data terminal mounted on the wall close by and it activated automatically in response to his presence.

The terminal confirmed that the computer in sickbay was being accessed by someone. Normally this level of intrusion would have gone unnoticed, but given the concerns that had been raised regarding the potential for the EMH to become self aware following Max and T'Lan's decision to construct her a physical body that allowed her to explore beyond sickbay Max had decided to maintain a closer watch on the computer that held all of her data. Now the nanites residing in this computer were monitoring the intrusion. From the information they were sending to Max it appeared that whoever was responsible for this was operating from a remote terminal, one that had been plugged into the main computer network somewhere aboard the *Nightfall* rather than by using the touch panel interface of the computer itself but there was no trace of where this outside signal was coming from.

"Max to Doctor King." he said, tapping his combadge. But there was no reply, "Doctor King I must speak with you." he added.

"Max do you know what time it is?" King's voice finally responded.

"I do doctor. I am connected to the ship's main timekeeping system. It is currently-"

"It's the middle of the night. Now what do you want?"

"Somebody appears to attempting to access the emergency medical hologram's main program."

"What?" King exclaimed.

"Someone is using a remote terminal to try and break into the core memory of the EMH." Max said, "Though the nanites have alerted me to the intrusion they have so far been unable to locate the source of the intrusion."

"Seal sickbay and inform security." King ordered, "We can at least make it so no one can go in there and start hacking in manually. I'll meet you in engineering to figure this out."

"Understood doctor. The entrance to sickbay is now sealed and I am on my way to engineering." Max replied.

Sat on the floor of sickbay, a narrow cable led from where The Girl had rolled up her sleeve and inserted it into her arm to an opening in the sickbay computer's casing. Using this The Girl was able to tap directly into the computer without needing the authorisation code to activate the built in touch panel interface or making use of the *Nightfall's* network. All of a sudden she heard a sound from the doorway beside her and turning towards it she saw that the small display beside the door showed the word 'SEALED'.

"Well it looks like someone aboard this ship has started to take note of my handiwork." The Girl announced as she got up from where she was sat, detaching the cable from both her arm and the computer before rolling down her sleeve and tucking the cable inside her uniform. Then she walked over to the biobed where Nikki still lay helpless and leant over her, "I'd take you with me." she said, "But that wouldn't be very easy." and then she looked up towards the ceiling and added, "Computer, deactivate lights." and the sickbay was plunged into darkness, broken only by the tiny amount of light given off by the various instruments including the controls on the biobed Nikki lay on. Then The Girl turned around and stepped away, vanishing into thin air and leaving Nikki alone. Unable to see it took a few moments for Nikki to realise that she could not hear The Girl anymore and that she had been left by herself and wriggling within the confines of the restraint field she tried in vain to cry out for help.

Reappearing back in Carr's quarters The Girl addressed the two fleshforms she had left there to watch over Carr.

"The EMH was a dead end." she said, "We need to look elsewhere. But the crew have become alerted to our presence. They may not know how many of us there are or exactly where we are but they'll be looking."

"Where's Nikki?" Carr asked, "I co-operated so you wouldn't hurt her. If you've-

"So you're wondering what I did with your precious offspring are you?" The Girl asked, interrupting, "Well you just go on wondering because I've too much to do to bother with you any more." then she turned around and walked out of Carr's quarters again.

In the corridor outside The Girl headed for the nearest computer access panel and activated it, unconcerned about this action being monitored,

"Computer. You will tell me where I can find the quarters belonging to the Romulan known as Sublieutenant Nayal." she said.

"Sublieutenant Nayal's quarters are located on deck six, section four." the computer replied and The Girl turned off the panel and walked away, heading for the turbolift "Deck six, section four." she told it.

"So what's the status of my EMH?" King asked as he walked into engineering. Between the four warp cores that provided the *Nightfall* with the vast majority of its power was a control console at which Max was studying the feed from the nanite hive.

"Functional and secure doctor." the Borg replied, standing up straight, "Whatever sabotage was planned the perpetrator was unable to complete it."

"So they've stopped?" King said.

"Indeed." Max told him, "The attempt to breach the sickbay computer ceased almost immediately I issued the instruction to physically seal it off."

"The sickbay computer is tied into the door controls." King pointed out, "So that an emergency seal can be automatically put in place to enforce a quarantine if dangerous or unknown pathogens are detected. Could whoever was trying to hack the EMH have been using the doors as a way in and been cut off when you enacted the seal?"

"That is what I am currently checking doctor." Max answered, "However, while the door controls are not part of the monitored data flow aboard the ship and so could conceivably be used to attempt an unauthorised access covertly, this particular attempt did not cease until shortly after the doors were sealed. If engaging the seal had cut off their access then the cessation should have been simultaneous with it."

"Okay, so they're using something else." King said, "But what gets them into my sickbay without being monitored?"

"I suggest we bring in additional personnel." Max said, "Since this is both a technological and security issue I recommend we inform Lieutenant Commander Cole and Lieutenant T'Lan."

"We better tell Captain Edwards as well. It's his ship someone's messing with." King added.

"Indeed." Max replied and he tapped his combadge, "Lieutenant T'Lan come in please."

"Yes Lieutenant Maximillian?" T'Lan replied almost immediately.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you if you were sleeping lieutenant." Max said and then before he could continue Cole's voice was heard.

"We weren't sleeping but yes you are disturbing us. This had better be good."

"Someone is trying to hack into the ship's EMH." Max said, "Could both of you join myself and Doctor King in engineering?"

Cole groaned.

"We're on our way." he said and then there was a 'Thump!' as T'Lan's combadge was struck with significant force to turn it off.

"Robert didn't sound too happy." King commented, "And I can't say I blame him."

"Perhaps I should let you contact the captain." Max suggested.

"What? In case he's currently in the middle of another of his secret rendezvous with Lieutenant Commander Carr?" King asked with a smile and then he tapped his combadge, "Doctor King to Captain Edwards." he said, "Captain Edwards, respond." and then there was a pause.

"Yes doctor?" Edwards asked in response.

"Captain we have a security issue with the EMH. Could you join us in engineering please?" King said.

"The EMH? That body Max and T'Lan made hasn't started up by itself has it?" Edwards asked.

"No captain. It's more troubling than that. I really think you should come down here and see."

"Oh very well. I'll be there in five minutes." Edwards replied.

7.

Edwards arrived shortly after Cole and T'Lan.

"So what's going on then?" he asked, leaning on the edge of the console.

"Someone has tried to hack the EMH." King replied.

"But why?" Edwards said.

"That remains to be seen captain. Max told him, "But they were using a remote terminal that somehow was able to make a connection without the nanites being aware of it and the attempt ceased when sickbay was physically sealed."

"Alternate data paths?" Edwards asked.

"They've been through them." Cole said, "Nothing that could both escape detection and remain in place for the duration of the attack."

"There is one possibility that appears to have been overlooked." T'Lan said.

"No. We've missed nothing." King said, shaking his head.

"The attack could have come from within sickbay itself." T'Lan said and Edwards frowned.

"But it was a remote attack." he said, "Max said so."

"Only the terminal was remote." T'Lan pointed out, "It is possible that the individual concerned patched into the computer using a portable device such as tricorder or PADD thus bypassing our network security."

"So when Max sealed the doors he sealed them inside sickbay." Cole said.

"And they'll still be there." Edwards said and he dashed across the room to a nearby arms locker, pressing his hand against the security panel beside it to release the seal. Taking a phaser from the locker he hooked it to his belt before removing another and tossing it to Cole who did likewise, "Let's go." he ordered, "Commander, have a team meet us there."

"Cole to security." Cole said, tapping his combadge as he and the others began to follow Edwards, "I need a security team to meet me at sickbay. Do not attempt to enter before I get there."

When the group reached the entrance to sickbay they found a pair of security guards already waiting outside for them, their phasers drawn.

"The door is secure sir." one of them told Cole.

"Good." he replied and he looked at Max, "All yours." he added.

T'Lan opened up her tricorder and pointed it towards the door.

"I am picking up a single humanoid life form." she said, "There is also a significant energy reading."

"Get ready. Phasers on stun." Edwards ordered and he and the security officers, including Cole, positioned themselves directly in front of the door to sickbay while Max stood the side and King and T'Lan waited further back.

"Stand by." Max said, reaching out and extending a pair of small tube from between his knuckles. These connected with the controls beside the door and injected a stream of nanites from within his body into it,

"Opening in three. Two. One." and then the door hissed open.

"Go!" Edwards yelled and he, Cole and the two guards rushed into the darkened sickbay and looked around, hunting for any signs of the intruder. However, there was no sign of movement and the only sound was a muffled whimpering.

"Computer, activate lights." King said as he stepped through the doorway as well and when the lights came on they all saw the source of the sound, "Good God! Nikki!" King exclaimed, rushing to the biobed. As soon as he deactivated the restraint field that had been immobilising her Nikki reached up to her face and was about to start clawing at her eyes and mouth when King grabbed hold of her wrists, "Nikki don't." he told her. "What the hell did this?" Edwards demanded as King struggled to keep hold of Nikki.

"Give me a hand here." King said and Cole and Edwards stepped forward to help him as Nikki continued to struggle and scream, "Looks like scar tissue generated using a dermal stimulator." he explained and he looked around, "T'Lan I need a dermal regenerator to clean this mess up."

"Will there be permanent damage?" Cole asked.

"No, I hope not." King said, "But it depends on what sort of butcher did this."

"Here you are doctor." T'Lan said as she passed him a dermal regenerator.

Holding the device over Nikki's eyes King moved it back and forth, the energy beam breaking down the scar tissue that had been created by The Girl and as soon as it was gone Nikki's eyes opened wide and she stared at King in fear.

"You're alright now Nikki." he reassured her, "I'll be done in just a moment, Now hold still." and he moved the dermal regenerator down to clear the scar tissue from her mouth, allowing Nikki to let out a sudden scream that made not only King but also Cole and Edwards flinch and step back. No longer held in place by either the restraint field or the officers around her Nikki rolled off the biobed and was prevented from hitting the floor

only by T'Lan leaping forwards to catch her as she burst into tears.

"Search everywhere." Cole ordered the two guards, "Make sure there's no-one hiding here that avoided the scan."

The two guards dashed off and began searching every potential hiding place in sickbay while everyone else remained gathered around the biobed.

"Get her back up." King said and Max and T'Lan lifted Nikki back up onto the biobed while he fetched a tricorder, "Good." he said, moving the tricorder probe over Nikki's face, "All of the affected tissue has been removed. There shouldn't be any lasting effects."

"Nikki can you tell us what happened?" Edwards asked, leaning on the biobed.

"I didn't mean for it to happen." Nikki replied and Cole and Edwards exchanged concerned glances.

"Mean for what to happen Nikki?" Edwards said.

"For one of those zombie things to get aboard. She looked like just some other girl at the party and she asked to see the ship. So I helped her sneak aboard. But right after we got to my quarters she attacked me." Nikki explained.

"Zombie?" King commented and Nikki nodded.

"She's one of them." she said, "She had some of that white stuff they use to make body parts from. The same stuff Max and T'Lan made Emma's body out of. That's why she made me bring her here, she wanted to take a look at Emma. Plus she brought two of those things you've been calling golems aboard. She called them fleshforms."

"So as well as this girl who looks human, there are two of these 'fleshforms' running around my ship?"

Edwards said and Nikki nodded again. Then her eyes widened.

"Wait no." she exclaimed, "The fleshform things are in my quarters. They've got my mom."

"What?" Edwards snapped.

"Mom came back and discovered them. They made her-" Nikki began but Edwards was not paying attention any more.

"You two!" he shouted to the security guards still searching sickbay, "With me. Everyone else get a search going for this mystery girl." and then followed by the security guards he ran from sickbay.

"Perhaps a description of this girl would help." Max said, looking at Cole.

"Definitely." Cole replied, "T'Lan, can you get this down?" he added and T'Lan nodded, taking out her tricorder again and activating the record function.

"Go ahead." she said.

"Well she's about my height." Nikki began, "But with darker hair. Oh and she's wearing a services division uniform. It's a good copy, like mine and she took my *Nightfall* patch as well."

"So she's masquerading as one of the crew." Cole said, "Well I'll put a stop to that." and he tapped his combadge, "Cole to security, intruder alert. I want the entire ship locked down, limit all non-essential personnel to their quarters and secure all vital areas. Tell security teams to set phasers on kill on my authority, the target will not be affected by a stun setting. A description will follow. Alert all command staff and ground force commanders. Tell them I'll brief them in ten minutes in the conference room."

Nayal awoke to the sound of someone at the door to her quarters and she looked at the clock beside her bed. Seeing that it was the early hours of the morning she groaned, closed her eyes again and rolled over, trying to get back to sleep. But the intercom buzzed again without anyone announcing themselves.

"Oh this better be good." Nayal said to herself as she climbed out of bed and walked over to the door, yawning. Then when she opened the door she found herself looking at someone she did not recognise as The Girl smiled at her.

"I'm sorry to bother you sublieutenant." The Girl said.

"Who are you?" Nayal replied. Then she looked closer at The Girl's collar and saw the single gold rank pin she had there, "Ensign?"

"Yes sublieutenant. I'm new. Ensign-"

"Wait, I don't care. Just tell me why you're waking me up in the middle of the night." Nayal interrupted and she yawned again.

"What once was ours." The Girl said and Nayal frowned.

"What's that supposed to mean? Has T'Lan developed a bad sense of humour and sent you here to play a prank on me?"

The Girl ignored her and turned to leave.

"Ensign!" Nayal snapped, "Where are you going?" and she reached out and put a hand on The Girl's shoulder, "Now you've woken me up you can at least-" but before she could finish The Girl grabbed her by the wrist and twisted her arm around, using it to push her face up against the door frame. Then before Nayal could react The Girl pulled her away from the door frame again and hurled her across her quarters. Nayal landed on her bed, rolled off the far side and crashed into the cabinets on the far side.

The Girl then advanced into Nayal's quarters while Nayal pulled herself up using the cabinets for support and

opened the drawer closest to her bed. Inside was a Starfleet issue phaser and reaching into the drawer Naya! snatched this up and pointed it at The Girl. The beam from the phaser struck her cleanly in the chest, but The Girl simply looked down at the beam and then back at Naya! when she ceased fire. Then as Naya! fumbled with the settings of the weapon The Girl lunged at the Romulan, knocking it from her grasp. Both then scrambled towards where the dropped weapon had come to a halt and reached out for it. They grabbed hold of its grip simultaneously and began to wrestle for control of it. Under normal circumstances Naya! would have had no difficulty in overpowering a human that was not quite as large as her but the modifications carried out to The Girl's body gave her a deceptive amount of strength and Naya! found the phaser being slowly turned back towards her.

Naya! rolled over, flipping The Girl over her so that she ended up flat on her back with Naya! on top of her and Naya! tried using her elbow to slam the back of The Girl's head against the floor. But aside from producing a sudden 'Crack!' this did nothing to weaken her or even slow her down.

"Who the hell are you?" Naya! exclaimed but The Girl just smiled at her before bringing a knee up into Naya!'s stomach that knocked the breath from her. This gave The Girl the opportunity to push Naya! away, claiming control of the phaser. But Naya! remained alert enough to be able to lash out with her foot when she landed against the bed and as The Girl took aim the phaser was kicked from her hand and both women dived for it again.

This time The Girl was much closer and she was able to pick up the phaser and aim it at Naya! before she could lay a hand on it. She was in time to grab The Girl's wrists and attempt to push the phaser aside but The Girl reacted quickly enough to fire the weapon, the beam striking Naya! in the chest at point blank range and she slumped forwards, landing face down on top of The Girl. The Girl then simply rolled Naya! aside and without bothering to check on her condition she got up and dashed out of Naya!'s quarters, leaving the door wide open and taking the phaser with her.

West suddenly sat up straight as the intercom on the door to her quarters chirped and for a moment she wondered where she was before realising that she was back in her quarters and looking her computer screen. A screen that for a moment as she awoke had appeared to be covered in strange alien symbols but that now had just the standard Starfleet menu screen displayed.

"West." she said, activating the intercom from her computer

"Jenna, we have an intruder." Hamilton's voice told her, "Security's been trying to raise you."

"An intruder? What is it?" West replied as she opened her desk drawer and took out her phaser, checking the charger before fixing the holster to her belt.

"It's someone that's not supposed to be aboard. But that's not important right now." Hamilton replied.

"Dear God Bradley, I have a phaser." West said.

"Just get out here. Cole's going to brief us."

"Cole? But what about the captain and Commander Carr?"

"Don't know." Hamilton replied and West rushed to the door and opened it to find him waiting outside, also armed with his issued phaser.

"Okay Bradley, let's go." she said.

"Well at least you're back to calling me that." Hamilton said and West frowned.

"What?" she asked.

"When you stormed out of my quarters you called me Hamilton, as if we were on duty." he told her.

"I did? Wait. I stormed out?" West said and then she shook her head, "I'm working too hard." she said,

"Please don't tell Mackey."

Then before Hamilton could reply his combadge activated.

"Hamilton it's Cole." Cole's voice said, "We've got phaser fire in Naya!'s quarters. You're closest, can you-"

"We're on our way." Hamilton replied without waiting for Cole to finish and he broke into a run, heading for the turbolift.

"Bradley wait for me!" West called out after him.

B.

Edwards and the two security guards took positions outside Carr's quarters, their phasers drawn and set to lethal levels.

"Check your targets." Edwards warned the security guards, "Remember this is a hostage situation and there is a friendly target in there." then he tapped his combadge, "Computer. I need an emergency door release for Lieutenant Commander Carr's quarters on my mark. Authorisation Edwards, alpha one." then he paused and braced himself, "Mark!"

The door opened with a sudden hiss and Edwards dove through ahead of the security guards, landing on the far side of the desk from Carr and the fleshforms. Inside the room Carr gasped and the two fleshforms both turned towards the door just as the first of the security guards was entering the room. Picking up the chair from the nearby desk, one of the fleshforms hurled it across the room and it struck the security guard and knocked him backwards. Meanwhile the second guard side-stepped the attack and darted around his fallen comrade as well as the thrown chair. But while he was evading the chair the second fleshform was charging towards the doorway and it slammed into him with its full weight, grabbing hold of the hand in which he held his phaser and squeezing it tightly. The guard screamed as the bones in his hand were broken. Then there was the sound of a phaser being fired as Edwards leant over the desk and opened fire. The beam struck the fleshform attacking the guard at the base of its neck and the energy of the beam melted a large hole that spread upwards to consume most of the back of the figure's head as well as a large part of its shoulders. The figure collapsed, but it pulled the security guard down with it and as he fell the man struck his head on the floor and lay still.

"David look out!" Carr yelled as she saw the other fleshform turn towards the captain.

The fleshform lashed out, ripping up the computer terminal and sending it flying across the desk but Edwards ducked and the smashed terminal flew into the wall beside the doorway where it struck the control panel and caused the door to slide shut once more. The fleshform then reached down to grab hold of the edge of the desk with both hands and lifted it up off the floor, at which point Edwards fired his phaser again. This time he fired it just above the floor so that the beam sliced through the fleshform's ankle and with its foot blown off the fleshform suddenly dropped to its knees. As it did so the desk came crashing back down and smashed apart as it hit the floor. With no time to try and get clear Edwards just concentrated on firing again and the next shot from his phaser burned a large hole through its chest. The damage inflicted by this convinced the fleshform that it was no longer a viable option to remain aboard the *Nightfall* and as it fell backwards it suddenly vanished into thin air before hitting the floor. At about the same time part of the fragments of the destroyed desk were starting to hit the floor and one landed beside Edwards before falling towards him and striking him across the temple.

"David!" Carr exclaimed as she saw the phaser fall from his hand as he collapsed in a heap. Still encased from the neck down in the alien synthetic flesh all she could do was wriggle forwards off the couch she was sat on and drop to the floor before wriggling across it on her stomach towards him, "David I'm coming, hang on. Please be okay, please be okay."

The presence of the debris from the desk made moving across the floor more difficult for Carr but she was soon able to get close enough to lie beside him and she placed her face close enough to his that she was able to feel his breathing.

"Oh thank God. You're alive." she said, "But out cold." Then she lifted her head and looked around before wriggling to test the strength of her bonds now that both of the fleshforms were out of action, "And I'm still stuck in this." she added. Looking towards the door she called out, "Hello? Is anyone out there? Hello? Help."

"Nayal's door's open." Hamilton said as he and West rounded a corner in the corridor outside and they both drew their phasers. As they pressed themselves up against the wall beside the open doorway they could see that the inside of Nayal's quarters were dark and silent.

"Is she in there?" West asked.

"Nayal?" Hamilton called out, "Are you okay?" and he peered around the door. Seeing nothing in the darkened room he crept through the door and reached out for the light switch. As soon as the lights came on he saw Nayal lay sprawled out on the floor, "Nayal!" he exclaimed, rushing to her side.

"Is she alive?" West asked.

"Yes. I think she's been shot." Hamilton replied and he tapped his combadge, "Hamilton to sickbay, medical emergency. I'm bringing in Nayal with what looks like a phaser stun injury." then he holstered his phaser and picked up Nayal, cradling her in his arms, "Let's go." he told West.

"Bradley what happened to Nayal?" Nikki said when she saw him carrying the Romulan into sickbay.

"She's been shot." Hamilton replied, carrying her to the nearest biobed and setting her down.
"We found her like this." West added as King pulled a cart of medical instruments towards the biobed and began to examine Naya.
"I don't like the look of this." King said and Hamilton stepped back and held his hands up to his head.
"You've got to help her doc." he said.
"Is the injury that bad?" West asked.
"Injury?" King replied, "She's been hit with a single stun blast from close range. She'll sleep it off by herself in about an hour or so."
"So what don't you like the look of?" Nikki asked.
"What she's wearing." King replied, "What sort of adult wears a onesie covered in cartoon ducks to bed? I recommend its amputation and a transfusion of good sense."

"I'll keep this quick." Cole said to the officers gathered in the *Nightfall's* conference room. With the exception of Doctor King, all of the department heads were present as well as Captains Heart and Shry and Lieutenant Commander White, "An agent of the alien power we've been encountering regularly over the last couple of years is loose aboard this ship and is disguised as a member of the crew. I've had my men secure all vital areas of the ship and ordered non-essential personnel to remain in their quarters to cut down on the risk of friendly fire. That means I want the MACO and Imperial Guard contingents to conduct a full section by section search. Hamilton and West will liaise with them. Commander White, I know you're not a formal part of the *Nightfall's* chain of command but I'd like you on the bridge with myself and T'Lan to help co-ordinate things."

"Consider it done." White replied, "Not much use for a fighter pilot in a room to room search anyway."

"What about Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr?" Heart asked, "Where are they?"

"Lieutenant Commander Carr has been taken hostage by the enemy and Captain Edwards is working to effect her release." Cole replied.

"Perhaps I should send a section to back them up." Shry suggested and Cole nodded.

"Do it." he said, "The quicker we can get Captain Edwards back on the bridge the better."

The ground forces stationed aboard the *USS Nightfall* were still preparing when Heart and Shry led Hamilton and West into their armoury. Here each of the more than two hundred soldiers, both human and Andorian, were being issued with protective body armour and helmets as well as rifles. However, unlike the phaser rifles normally issued not only to Starfleet ground combat specialists but also to purely military organisations such as Earth's MACOs or Andoria's Imperial Guard these troops were being issued with assault rifles that fired solid projectiles. The reasoning behind the issuing of these weapons was drawn from the hope that ships like the *Nightfall* would be able to defeat attacks by the Borg. In repeated encounters with the Borg they had shown themselves unable to adapt to physical impacts even when the Federation's most advanced energy weapons and torpedoes had become useless. Therefore the *Nightfall* itself mounted a pair of mass accelerators in its secondary hulls for launching massive duranium projectiles at Borg starships while its ground forces were equipped with weaponry to fight against armies of Borg drones. The normal six millimetre armour-piercing bullets intended to be used against Borg drones could not be used aboard the *Nightfall* however, the hardened tips of the projectiles could easily penetrate bulkheads and damage critical systems. Worse yet if fired close to the outer hull they could even cause an explosive decompression. Therefore, the ammunition being issued to the MACOs and Imperial Guardsmen was instead designed to break up on impact Useless against an armoured target but considered quite capable of dealing with one of the mysterious aliens' reanimated human host bodies. Should greater firepower be needed however, then each of the soldiers carried a secondary weapon mounted beneath the barrel of their rifle. For most this was a weapon equivalent to a Federation phaser pistol, while a smaller number carried grenade launchers capable of firing a variety of explosive rounds instead.

"Listen up!" Heart yelled as he entered the armoury, "We have an armed hostile aboard who is impersonating a member of the crew. Our mission is to search this ship deck by deck, checking every corridor, compartment, duct and storage locker. Security have stationed men at each key location and non-essential personnel have been confined to quarters so if you see anyone moving around you may assume that they are hostile until proven otherwise. Lieutenants Hamilton and West will be assisting us and Captain Shry has unit assignments." then he looked at Shry.

"Imperial Guard company command section." Shry called out, "Report to Lieutenant Commander Carr's quarters on the double. Captain Edwards is there-" and at that point there were cheers and whistles from the troops, "Quiet!" Shry yelled, "This is a military operation, not voyeurs anonymous. Lieutenant Commander Carr has been taken hostage and the captain has gone to try and effect her release. You'll back him up, now go." and at that moment one a group of Andorians picked up their equipment and rushed from the room.

Then Shry held up a PADD, "Each platoon commander has been issued with a list of between two and four decks to search, depending on their size. In the meantime Captain Heart and I will keep the MACO

command section in reserve along with our Starfleet advisers ready to respond to any sightings of the enemy. Your target is described as appearing human, female and of average height. She was last seen wearing a services division uniform and armed with a phaser stolen from Sublieutenant Nayal. Remember that a phaser stun won't affect a zombie so if you're in any doubt hit her with a stun blast and if that doesn't work empty your magazine."

"Does everyone know what they're doing?" Heart asked.

"Yes sir!" came the reply, shouted by numerous voices at once.

"Then move out. We have a job to do and there's no telling how much damage this zombie could be causing."

When the Andorian command squad arrived outside Carr's quarters the first thing they saw was the body of a security guard on the floor, his phaser lay beside him while a smashed chair was located against the far wall. From the blood on the guard's forehead and on parts of the chair it was easy to see what had happened to him.

"Sergeant Torlen to bridge," the squad's leader said, activating his communicator, "I have a man down outside Lieutenant Commander Carr's quarters."

"Is it the captain?" Cole responded from the bridge, concerned.

"No sir. Looks like a security guard," the sergeant answered, "The door to Lieutenant Commander Carr's quarters are sealed. Can you release them for us?"

"Stand by sergeant," Cole replied.

On the bridge Cole looked at T'Lan.

"Accessing the door control system now lieutenant commander," she said.

"You know if there's one man down-" White commented and Cole nodded in return.

"There could be more," he said and he tapped his combadge, "Bridge to sickbay. The Imperial Guard are preparing to storm Commander Carr's quarters. Stand by to receive casualties."

"Casualties?" the reply was not Doctor King's voice as Cole had expected but Nikki's and he winced.

"Damn, I forgot she was still there," he said softly to White as he stared back at Cole, "It's just a precaution Nikki," Cole added.

"Well as a precaution I'm bringing the EMH on line," King responded, "Unless you can give me a reason not to. I'm all on my own down here with two patients already and all of my staff are confined to their quarters."

"Go ahead doctor. Cole out," Cole said and then he looked at T'Lan again, "Well?" he asked.

"I can release the door on your command," she replied.

"Then give Sergeant Torlen a ten second countdown," Cole ordered.

"Yes sir," T'Lan said, "Sergeant Torlen, standby for emergency door release in ten seconds," and at this point the Andorians positioned themselves to storm Carr's quarters the moment that the door opened while T'Lan continued her countdown, "Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Now."

The door slid open right on queue and the Andorians charged forwards.

"Imperial Guard!" Torlen yelled, "Nobody move!"

Looking around the room the Andorians saw no-one standing. The first person they saw was the second security guard lay just inside the door with the remains of one of the fleshforms beside him. But turning around they saw Carr and Edwards lay side-by-side amongst the wreckage of the desk with their faces still close together.

"This isn't what it looks like," Carr said as she looked up at the Andorian squad.

"Captain Edwards," Torlen said, ignoring Carr's comment and he rushed to check on the captain.

"He's alive," Carr said, "But some of the desk hit him on the head."

"Medic," Torlen called out and one of his men slung his rifle over his shoulder and rushed forwards, taking out the Andorian equivalent to a Starfleet medical tricorder.

"Looks like a clean blow to the skull," the medic announced as she scanned Edwards' head, "No signs of fractures or internal bleeding or swelling but we need to get him to sickbay," and she turned around and waved two more of the squad forwards. As these two advanced they unfolded and assembled a stretcher and placed it on the floor beside the unconscious Edwards. Carefully they lifted him onto the stretcher, strapped him down and then picked him.

"Okay let's move," Torlen said, "Four on the stretcher, everyone else providing cover," and with four Andorians carrying Edwards the squad hurried back out of Carr's quarters.

"Hey!" Carr called out after them, squirming, "You can't leave me like this."

Torlen's face appeared back around the door frame and looked down at her.

"Just kidding," he said and he pulled out his knife and crouched down beside her.

"Be careful with that thing," she said, "I like having all my fingers."

"Trust me. I know what I'm doing," Torlen replied and he gently sliced the synthetic flesh covering Carr, starting at her neck and moving straight down. But as soon as the blade had passed the flesh simply resealed itself, "What is this stuff?"

"Whatever they use to make their bodies from," Carr replied.

“In that case maybe I should let the doc take a look at it.” Torlen said as he put his knife away. Then he picked Carr up and held her over his shoulder before heading out of her quarters.

3.

Ordinarily The Girl could have just used her transportation system to move to any other part of the *Nightfall* that she was sufficiently familiar with to avoid materialising in the middle of a wall or piece of furniture. But her examination of the ship's systems indicated that the nanites flowing through it were quite capable of detecting such abnormal activity in public areas. She could hear the sounds of soldiers moving through the corridors of the ship both behind her and to each side, obviously searching in a pattern designed to prevent her from being able to slip around them.

Then a thought occurred to her. For reasons of crew privacy the nanites did not monitor their quarters and this applied to cabins whether they were occupied or not. The Girl quickly located a computer access panel and activated it.

"Computer direct me to the nearest vacant crew quarters." she said.

"Cabin six five four is vacant." the computer replied, "Turn right and proceed sixteen metres."

Quickly, The Girl turned off the computer panel and hurried down the corridor until she reached the vacant cabin and, hearing the sound of soldiers closing in on her position she tried the door. Given that it was vacant, the cabin was not sealed and the door slid open as soon as she pressed the control panel, allowing her to slip inside and close the door behind her just moments before the first of the nearby MACO squad came around the corner, rushing up to the closest cabin door and banging fist on it.

"MACOs! Open up in there!" he yelled.

Meanwhile The Girl took a brief look around the vacant cabin she was now hiding inside. It was obvious that as soon as the MACO search team reached it they would discover her and one way or another her mission aboard the *USS Nightfall* would come to an end. Either she would suffer critical injury or, knowing where she was would allow the crew to bring down an overwhelming force on her. However, now that she as in an area guaranteed not to be monitored by nanites she could safely move to any other unmonitored area she knew of. The problem was that she knew of very few of these, only the quarters occupied by Carr and Nayal and sickbay and none of these seemed like a favourable spot to try reappearing. Her communication with the fleshforms she had left in Carr's quarters had been cut off, suggesting that they had had been attacked and if that was the case then there was no guarantee that the quarters would not now be guarded. Likewise both sickbay and Nayal's quarters could now be filled with armed Starfleet officers. However, there was another solution even if it was somewhat risky. Rushing to the computer terminal that was one of the few furnishings present in the otherwise empty room she activated it.

"Computer, show me a schematic of this ship." she said. The image that appeared was a basic deck layout that, given the unsecured nature of the terminal, omitted some details in areas to do with the *Nightfall's* tactical and command and control systems. However, there was enough information presented for The Girl's purposes. Setting the phaser down beside the computer she took out the cable she had used to connect with the sickbay computer and plugged herself into the terminal, downloading the schematic into her own memory system in moments. Then she unplugged herself again, turned off the computer, put away the cable and picked up her phaser again.

Finally, taking a single step forwards she vanished.

When The Girl reappeared, having used the information in the schematic to calculate the relative position of another nearby cabin she was just inside the door of the quarters of a crew member who had not long before been woken up by the MACOs demanding to search them.

The man clad in his pyjamas gasped when The Girl appeared and he turned towards the combadge that lay on the other side of the room from him. Realising that he was about to raise the alarm, The Girl charged towards him. She could not use the phaser without triggering the *Nightfall's* internal sensors but she did not need the weapon to kill a man. Lashing out with her fist, she struck at the man's throat. The blow landed with enough force that as well as knocking him over it crushed his windpipe, cutting off the supply of air to his lungs. But even as he lay dying the man tried to drag himself across the floor towards his combadge, hoping that just activating it would be enough to attract help. As he crawled towards the combadge The Girl simply strode along with him and reached down to wrap her arms around his neck. Lifting him up towards her she then gave his head a sudden twist and there was a 'Snap!' as his neck broke and The Girl just dropped him to the floor.

Heading for the door out of the dead man's quarters The Girl opened it and peered out into the corridor outside. Seeing that the MACOs were continuing down the corridor away from her she smiled and darted out of the cabin and headed away from them.

"Two patients for you doctor." Sergeant Torlen announced as he and his squad brought Carr and Edwards

into sickbay.

"Mom!" Nikki exclaimed and she jumped from the biobed she was still sat on and rushed towards her mother as she was set down on another.

"I'm fine honey." Carr told her daughter. Then she looked at King, "See to the captain first."

"I was going to." King replied.

"There were two security guards as well but both were beyond help." Torlen said as King and Emma both hurried to where the Andorians were now lifting Edwards from the stretcher to another biobed.

"Well at least you got Captain Edwards to me in time." King replied as he ran a probe over Edwards' skull.

"Is he badly hurt?" Carr asked.

"I wouldn't treat any head injury lightly lieutenant commander." King said, "But in this case I expect him to make a full recovery in a short time." then he looked up at Emma, "Monitor him for any abnormalities in blood pressure in his brain and administer cordafin. Start with it diluted to one part in twenty and build it up to one in two until he regains consciousness."

"Yes doctor, I know how to treat this kind of injury." Emma pointed out, "I am programmed with-"

"Are you programmed to quit wasting time and just get to work?" King asked. Then without waiting for a reply he walked over to Carr, "Now what's the matter with you?" he asked, scanning her.

"You mean aside from being stuck like this?" Carr replied, squirming for effect, "Sergeant Torlen tried cutting it with a knife but it just healed up again." she added.

"I see." King said, folding up his tricorder, "Well there's nothing I can do about this. Any instrument I use to attack the stuff that would do enough damage to stop it from growing back would do as much damage to you lieutenant commander."

"You mean she's stuck like that forever?" Nikki exclaimed.

"Of course not." King said and he tapped his combadge, "Doctor King to Max."

"Max here doctor. Go ahead."

"Max I need you in sickbay. Carr's covered in that synthetic flesh you and T'Lan have far too much experience of. I need you to come and deal with it."

"Affirmative doctor. I'm on my way. Max out."

"Commander, the sweep of the saucer section is almost complete." Shry reported to Cole who had been watching the status updates on his control headset and so was already aware of the ground troops' progress.

"Yes, thank you captain." Cole responded, "You and Captain Heart are to have your men ready to move into the secondary hulls if necessary. But only enough for the sweep. I don't want the primary hull left undefended."

"You know this would be a lot easier if we knew what she was after." White commented and he looked at T'Lan, "Lieutenant are any of our systems showing signs of interference?"

"No Lieutenant Commander." she answered, "Both Lieutenant Maximillian and I have been monitoring them and there have been no instances of attempted sabotage."

"Maybe we shouldn't be looking for sabotage yet." Cole said.

"I do not understand." T'Lan replied.

"Look, we know that whoever these aliens are they've managed to get hold of Iconian tech, including their computer programming ability. Now we know that this girl accessed the computer terminal in the XO's quarters and attempted to do the same in sickbay. Maybe she's been doing the same in other places as well but not in a manner that would raise any red flags."

"Upload a virus in pieces and then trigger them together to disable the ship?" White suggested and Cole nodded.

"T'Lan I want you to run a network use survey for the last hour. See what you can find that doesn't match our current status." Cole ordered. Then glancing at White he added, "If she wanted access to a computer she'd have to turn it on first."

"I have two terminals used to access the main network that cannot be accounted for." T'Lan announced,

"Both on deck six, section nine."

"Same deck as Nayal's quarters." White said.

"That section was searched by a MACO team." Cole said, "T'Lan can you give me a time stamp on the network access?"

"Yes lieutenant commander." she replied, sending the data to his headset in the form of a map that illustrated the public terminal accessed by The Girl in the corridor and the time at which each one was activated.

"Damn!" Cole snapped as he compared these times with the positions of the search teams and saw just how close to The Girl the MACO team had been, "They were right on top of her." then he tapped his combadge,

"Cole to Heart." he said.

"Heart here. Go ahead commander." Heart's voice replied.

"Captain your men just missed the intruder a few minutes ago." Cole told him.

"Where?" Heart asked.

"Deck six, section nine. Have them double back and repeat their sweep."

"Understood, we're on our way to back them up. Cole out."

"Grace." Edwards mumbled as he began to regain consciousness.

"No captain, it's me. Emma." the EMH replied, leaning over him while everyone else in sickbay instead turned to look at Carr.

"Just keep concentrating on getting me out of this thing would you?" she asked Max, the former Borg drone standing right in front of her as he examined the synthetic flesh.

"It does appear to be the same material that T'Lan and I studied." he said, turning towards King, "You were right to summon me."

"It can move." Nikki commented, "The stuff that was put on me tried to suffocate me at one point."

"That's why I didn't do much to try and remove it myself." King said, "I wasn't sure how it would act to defend itself."

"I do not believe that this substance has the same thinking and reasoning ability of the other forms we have seen it take." Max said, "But I do believe that it has the same vulnerabilities."

"Vulnerabilities?" Carr commented, "That's what I like to hear."

"Then hold still commander." Max said.

"I'm not exactly going anywhere Max." Carr replied and then her eyes widened as Max held up a clenched fist and two nanite injecting tubes extended from it, "Hey, wait a minute." Carr began but she was too late to stop Max from injecting a swarm of nanites from his body into the synthetic flesh.

At first when Max withdrew the tubes there appeared to have been no effect other than to create two small black dots at the point of injection. But then black lines began to spread out from these and the area between the lines began to turn grey.

"What's happening?" Nikki asked.

"The nanites are breaking down the molecular pathways that transfer information between the artificial cells."

Max said, "The flesh is dying."

"I can feel it getting looser." Carr said, flexing her arms and there was a tearing sound as the flesh down her side split.

"There we are." Max said, reaching out to take hold of the flesh and starting to peel it away from Carr,

"Doctor I suggest that this material be treated as hazardous and destroyed by means of transporter dispersion into space."

"That would be good if you had brought the transporters back on line yet lieutenant." King pointed out.

"Of course." Max replied and he looked towards the squad of Andorians that was still in sickbay, "Sergeant, if you wouldn't mind?" he said, pulling the last of the dying synthetic flesh from Carr and tossing it to the floor.

"Of course sir." Torlen replied and he raised his rifle. Then there was the flash and characteristic whine of a phaser being fired on a high setting and the energy beam vaporised the pile of synthetic flesh.

Then an alarm sounded.

"Lieutenant commander there is phaser fire in sickbay." T'Lan reported.

"Bridge to sickbay. Report." Cole said.

"King here. No need to worry lieutenant commander. That was just one of Shry's men handling a waste disposal problem for us."

"Very well doctor. But let us know in advance next time. Cole out."

Edwards groaned as he sat up.

"Was that a phaser?" he asked.

"Just disposing of some waste captain." King replied, "Now let me take a look at you." and he returned to standing beside Edwards, running a probe over his head and looking at his tricorder for the results of the scan.

"Will I live?" Edwards asked, smiling.

"Of course. Though I'd suggest taking things easy for a while." King replied, "Let Cole and our ground forces handle all this. They know what they're doing."

"I'm not sitting idly by while-" Edwards said as he swung his legs over the side of the biobed and tried to stand up. However, his legs gave out as soon as he tried to put his weight on them and he was saved from collapsing entirely only by Emma reaching forwards to catch him.

"Told you." Kind said.

"Yes. Yes you did." Edwards replied with a frown, "Now what's our status?"

"Our status is that the girl young Miss Carr helped get aboard is currently running around the ship." King said, "But with more than two hundred soldiers searching for her I doubt that will last for long."

Heart's command squad rushed down the corridor to where they had been summoned by the MACO search team.

"What have you got?" Heart asked the team's leader.

"We searched this cabin about fifteen minutes ago." the soldier replied, pointing to a cabin where the door was now open, "Its occupant was a Lieutenant Morris. An engineer."

"Was?" West commented.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Hamilton added.

"Just tell us what happened." Shry said.

"The lieutenant admitted us on our first sweep but did not respond on our second so on finding the door locked we had the bridge override the lock to allow us access. That's when we found him."

"Let's take a look." Heart said and he stepped through the doorway, followed by Hamilton, Shry and West.

On the floor of Morris' quarters Lieutenant Morris himself was obviously dead. His head lay looking sideways with his eyes wide open and in a pool of blood that had seeped out from his ears, mouth and nostrils.

"Looks like someone snapped his neck." Heart said as he crouched beside the body.

"After crushing his throat." Shry added, "Look." and he pointed to the dead man's neck where there were clear signs of it having been struck hard enough to stop him breathing.

"Someone wanted to be sure." West said, "In the Maquis we did things like that to Cardassian sentries. The first blow was to stop him calling out and the second was to kill him." then she looked up, "I'd say he was going for his combadge."

"And even activating it would have alerted us to something going on." Hamilton said.

"But why come here to kill him at all?" West asked, "What was in here that she wanted?"

"I think it was just a matter of avoiding my men." Heart replied, "The lieutenant was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

"So if she was moving around your men then we know which direction she went." Hamilton said, "After all, we know which way the MACOs were heading so she must have gone the other way."

"Which is back the way we came Bradley." West pointed out, "I didn't see anyone. Did you?"

"So she turned off before running into us." Shry said, "What's around that she'd want to get to."

"It would help if we knew what her endgame was." Heart said.

"The main computer cores." Hamilton said, "Both of them are accessible from this deck and if she's been uploading malicious code into terminals then why not just put it straight into the core now we know she's aboard and speed things up?"

"The cores are guarded by Cole's men." West replied.

"Then maybe someone should warn them before our uninvited guest gets to them and does this to someone else." Shry said, looking down at the body on the floor again.

The Girl took a quick look around the corner and at the end of the corridor she saw a pair of security guards standing guard outside the entrance to one of the *Nightfall's* two computer cores. There was no way into the core without drawing attention to herself but The Girl had come to the conclusion that discovery was inevitable now and at least being inside a computer core meant that she would not only have a defensible position but also the crew of the *Nightfall* would be limited in how they could respond for fear of damaging their own computer.

Retreating around the corner The Girl took a step that transported her from her current position to appear right behind the two guards. Both men gasped at her unexpected appearance and reached for their phasers. But before either could draw a weapon The Girl struck at both of them simultaneously. She delivered a blow to the throat of the nearest that made him spit blood as his windpipe was crushed while she fired the phaser she had stolen from Nayal's quarters at the other. The phaser was still set to stun but it was sufficient to incapacitate the guard. The Girl then reached out for the door control but it responded with only a buzzing sound when she pressed it, indicating that the door had been sealed.

"Computer." The Girl said out loud, but her voice now that of Carr, "Release access to computer core. Authorisation Carr Alpha Two."

"Confirmed." the computer's voice responded and the door slid open in front of The Girl.

"Lieutenant commander, there is phaser fire outside the starboard computer core on deck six. Both guards are down." T'Lan announced. Then she added, "The nanites report that an alien agent has just made use of their transporter technology and that Lieutenant Commander Carr has just overridden the door seal to gain entry."

"Carr did that?" Cole asked in response, "Are you sure T'Lan?"

"Yes sir." T'Lan answered, "Her voice print and combadge confirmed her identity."

"The intruder must have taken her combadge from her quarters." White said.

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

"Well at least we've got a location." Cole said and he activated the intercom, "Cole to Heart and Shry. Enemy location confirmed. Starboard computer core. Two men down on deck six."

"Got it commander." Heart replied, "We're already on our way there. I'll have all the exits reinforced and then take her down. Heart out."

"T'Lan, can you lock that core out of the rest of the network?" White asked.

"It should be possible." she replied, "Though the assistance of Lieutenant Maximillian would be of benefit."

"Good thinking." Cole said to White, "T'Lan, tell Max to get back to engineering and do whatever it takes to stop the intruder from using our own computer against us."

The *Nightfall's* two computer cores were of the standard cylindrical construction and spanned four decks of the saucer section. This meant that the main concern that The Girl had after gaining entry was to make sure that no one could follow her. With a door on each level occupied by the computer core The Girl had to disable four doors before any of them could be opened and she had to make sure that they could not easily be reopened. The first task was of course to actually disable the mechanisms that operated the doors, a task that was straight forwards enough. All The Girl had to do was open up the access panels beside each door and remove the isolar chips that held the control software and physically jamming the manual release system by removing one of the simple cogs used to convert the cranking of a release handle into lateral movement by the door. However, ensuring that the motors could not be driven directly by the nanites swarming through the system was more complicated. Fortunately in order to make sure that her activities inside the computer core were not monitored The Girl needed to deal with the nanites anyway and so after disconnecting the controls for the final door she drew her phaser again.

A high phaser setting would risk damaging the very systems she needed to help her find out who the agent aboard the *USS Nightfall* was but fortunately for her the physical structure of the nanites meant that even a low level stun setting was capable of inducing an energy pulse that was sufficient to overload their delicate circuitry while leaving the surrounding computer core undamaged. Double checking that the phaser was adjusted to a moderate stun setting, The Girl also adjusted the spread of the beam so that rather than being tightly focused the weapon produced a wide cone of energy that would envelop as much of the core at once as possible. Then she took aim at the core and fired, holding down the trigger of her phaser and sweeping the weapon back and forth and up and down to encompass the entire core. To check on her work The Girl then went to the nearest access terminal and ran a diagnostic on the core.

She smiled as she read 'NANITE LEVEL: ZERO' on the screen before putting down her phaser beside the terminal and taking out her access cable and rolling up her sleeve.

"This one's alive." Hamilton said as he checked the pulse of the stunned guard outside the core.

"This guy's dead." West responded when she checked the other guard.

"And the door's been disabled." Heart said.

"Probably had the control chips pulled from the other side." Shry added.

"Hamilton to bridge." Hamilton said, tapping his combadge, "Can someone get the nanites to rig us a way to open the door to the computer core?"

"I am sorry Lieutenant Hamilton." T'Lan answered, "Scans indicate that the core has been cleared of nanite by phaser fire."

"Oh great." Heart exclaimed when he heard this, "So we're going in blind."

"Assuming we can get through the door in the first place." Shry said, "We'll need a shaped charge to blow it."

"What about the core?" Heart pointed out, "The blast could blow a hole right through it."

"Won't matter." West said, "The ship can function perfectly well with just one core operating."

"I'd still rather avoid destroying one if we can help it." Hamilton responded.

"Well if Max could bring the transporters back on line-" Shry began.

"Max has got other things on his mind." West interrupted, "Like making sure our uninvited guest doesn't figure out a way to take control of the ship from in there."

"The shielding around the core would make transport risky anyway." Hamilton added.

"So if we can't beam in and we can't blast our way in then how do we get past this?" Heart said, slapping his hand against the door.

"We get someone to open the door." Hamilton replied.

"How?" Shry asked and Hamilton smiled.

"Wait here." he said and he rushed back down the corridor and around the corner, reappearing a few seconds later holding an isolinear chip, "Here." he said holding up the chip, "I took this from a door around the corner. I bet if we just plug this in then this door will start working."

"Maybe, but we can't get to the control system to fit it can we?" Heart replied.

"Not all of us no." Hamilton said, "But I bet someone could crawl through a jefferies tube and get into the core unnoticed. Then they could fit it."

"We'd need someone who is slim enough to move through the tubes quickly and quietly." Heart said and he looked at West.

"Someone with experience of improvising fixes thanks to having been in an underground group like the Maquis." Shry added, also turning towards West. Then Hamilton looked at her as well.

"Oh don't say a thing Bradley." she said, "Just give me the chip." and she snatched the isolinear chip from his grasp.

ii.

West crawled through the jefferies tubes that criss-crossed the *Nightfall*, keeping power and data lines out of sight yet still accessible if needed. The access points to the jefferies tubes were lightweight hatches so when West reached the hatch that led into the computer core and found it sealed like the main doors were she was instead able to use the crowbar she had brought with her to pry it open. As soon as there was a gap big enough for West to see through she peered into the computer core to make certain that she was not about to exit the jefferies tube only to emerge right in front of an alien armed with a phaser. Seeing the coast was clear she finished prying the hatch open and slid out of the jefferies tube. However, as West crept away from the hatch it suddenly sprang shut again and there was a 'Thunk!' that echoed around the room.

"Uh-oh." West muttered to herself.

Two levels below The Girl was still knelt beside an access terminal, the cable connecting her to the core as she searched through the data it held. So far she had found several examples of code that matched the profile of that used by her people, hidden away in other files where it was unlikely to be found by anyone not specifically hunting for it. However, there was no indication of who had put it there.

Then she heard the sound of a hatchway slamming shut somewhere above her and she opened her eyes and looked upwards, hoping to see the cause. But when nothing presented itself she cautiously disconnected herself from the computer and picked up her phaser again, switching it back to emit a confined beam.

West looked down the central shaft that ran for all four decks that the computer core occupied and for a moment she thought she saw movement below her. Drawing her phaser she took aim but by that time it was too late and if there had been anyone there they were gone now. Then The Girl suddenly appeared below West and fired her phaser up the shaft, missing her only narrowly. West leapt back then leant forwards again to aim her own phaser back at The Girl but once again she had disappeared from view. Knowing that just ignoring The Girl to go and insert the isolinear chip into the door control risked her being able to stage an ambush West decided that the best course of action was to instead try and deal with The Girl herself.

"West to Heart." she whispered, activating her combadge, "The enemy is aware of my presence. I'm going after her."

"What?" Heart hissed, "Lieutenant stick with the plan. You can't risk taking her on alone. That's not just some kid loose with a phaser."

"I know." West replied softly, "I'll never make it to the door anyway. Taking her down is the only chance I've got now. West out." and she shut off her combadge before the MACO could protest any further."

In the corridor outside the computer core Heart looked at Shry.

"If she's not going along with the plan then I saw go with plan B." he said and Shry nodded.

"I agree." he replied before activating his communicator, "This is Captain Shry. We need a breaching charge at the starboard computer core access on deck six immediately."

West headed for the ladder that provided access to all four levels of the computer core, preferring it over the compact elevator due to the sound that it would make. Once at the ladder West began to climb down, moving slower than she would have liked to thanks to the need to keep hold of her phaser in one hand while holding the side of the ladder with just the other one.

Descending to the level where she had seen The Girl, West stepped off the ladder and began to creep around the edge of the shaft. Between each row of computer equipment she turned and pointed her phaser down the gap, ready to fire if The Girl presented herself but time after time she saw nothing.

"Alien girl." she said softly, "Come out, come out. Wherever you are."

Movement in the corner of her eye caught West's attention and she dived between two sets of data ports for isolinear chips that held row after row of them, the total numbering in the hundreds. This move was just in time to save her from being shot as The Girl fired her phaser again. West hurried around the rack of isolinear chips, manoeuvring into a better position to be able to return fire. But by the time she reached such a position The Girl had vanished once again.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all." West said and she hurried back towards the ladder and started to climb, making her way all the way to the top level of the computer core where she climbed off the ladder and turned in the direction of the door.

Where she promptly found herself staring down the muzzle of the phaser that The Girl was pointing at her from just a few metres away.

"Looking for me?" The Girl asked with a smile.

"Oh f-" West began before The Girl fired.

West collapsed, stunned by the phaser blast and The Girl just looked down at her in contempt before starting to walk past her to get to the ladder. But just as she was about to grab hold of the ladder The Girl felt something grab hold of her ankle and she looked down to see West looking right back up at her.

"How?" The Girl exclaimed, knowing for certain that she had hit West with the phaser shot.

"What once was ours." West announced, "Shall be ours again."

"You." The Girl said, stepping back as The Controller got to her feet, "Who are you and how did you get to be in that body?"

"I was in charge of our outpost on the planet known to the Federation as Lasner Two." The Controller replied.

"That outpost was destroyed." The Girl said.

"Yes. By the crew of this ship. They penetrated the outpost, destroyed the garrison and then bombarded it from orbit. I was unable to return home to report what had happened but I located what I thought was an unused storage vessel in a flesh host. Unfortunately for some reason it turned out to be inside a living host still in control of their body. I am able to control it whenever she sleeps and can apply some influence to her actions but my control is limited."

"Do you know how your host came to have a vessel within her?" The Girl asked.

"I have a theory." The Controller replied, "My research indicates that my host was the subject of our experiments to create hosts from living bodies rather than dead ones. Somehow she was removed from the facility at which she was being held and she joined the crew of this ship immediately after. However, a storage vessel had already been implanted within her and it was this that I detected when the outpost was attacked. Since then I've been learning as much about my host as I can. I was even able to disable the Federation's tachyon detection grid to allow a Reman ship across the border to attack a Romulan peace conference."

"Yes I know." The Girl said, smiling, "It was this action that led us to realise your presence aboard this ship. I came here specifically to find you."

"Not to sabotage the ship?" the Controller asked.

"No. Infiltrating Starfleet has been our aim for some time now but their security checks have always been too good for us to risk exposing our agents." The Girl answered, "You have achieved by chance what we have failed to do by design and given us an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. Your success with the Romulan peace conference is to be congratulated."

"Thank you." The Controller replied, "I take it that you wish me to remain aboard this ship then?"

"I do. I will tell the others what has happened and we will endeavour to avoid any harm coming to your host body. But you must realise that if you are discovered then we must take whatever action necessary to protect ourselves."

"Don't worry about that. I know enough about my host and this ship to be able to keep a low profile. The only one among the crew who could potentially discover my presence is a fool who is held in contempt even by the rest of them. He will not threaten us."

"If he does you must kill him." The Girl said and The Controller nodded.

"It shall be done." she said, "But we need a way of maintaining communication. For you or anyone else to keep coming here to meet in person is far too dangerous. There is too much risk of your arrival or departure being discovered."

"I agree." The Girl replied, "However, your host is called Lieutenant Jenna West I believe."

"She is." The Controller said, nodding.

"And as the ship's chief of operations she has unquestioned access to the communication system does she not?"

"She does."

"Then watch for a message sent to this ship openly. It will be meaningless to her and not even addressed to her but you will recognise it. The source of this message will be a mailbox that can be used as a means of contacting another of our agents who will then relay anything you have to say to us. Further messages will be sent if we have orders for you." The Girl explained.

"How will I recognise the message?" The Controller asked, "Hundreds arrive every day."

"Easy." The Girl said, "It will contain your name. Your real name."

Then The Controller looked towards the door West had been heading for.

"There are soldiers outside." she said, "They'll only wait so long before they try to get in. They may already be making plans. My host had gone against their instructions to try and deal with you herself. Not that she had any chance of succeeding, I've already stopped her from killing one of our own."

"You mustn't do that again." The Girl replied and The Controller frowned.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because if your host is about to kill one of us then that agent has already failed and not killing them could draw attention to you. Right now you are far more useful to us than any of our other agents." The Girl explained. Then she looked at the door, "Now since you were sent in here to let your friends in you had better carry out your orders."

"And what about you?" The Controller asked.

"What about me? I came here to find you and I have done just that. It is time for me to leave." The Girl replied before she turned around and took a step away from The Controller, vanishing into thin air as she did so.

The Controller then retrieved West's phaser and put it back in its holster before approaching the door. She took the isolinear chip from her pocket and crouched beside the exposed door circuitry. Fortunately The Girl had removed only the one isolinear chip that she had to in order to disable the door and so the location for the replacement to go was obvious. Then the moment that she had put the isolinear chip in place The Controller relinquished control of West's body and, still suffering from the phaser stun she collapsed to the floor.

A squad of Andorian Imperial Guard hurried towards the door, carrying a breaching charge between them. This large hollow square contained a shaped explosive charge designed to blast through an armoured wall or door just like the one blocking the way into the computer core. By directing all of the explosive force in one direction not only was the amount of explosive required reduced considerably but the assault team was able to position itself right behind the charge to take advantage of the detonation right away.

"Quick!" Shry snapped, "Get that thing in place." and he waved them towards the door.

"Wait!" Hamilton snapped and he pointed to the control panel beside the door, "The door's back online."

"West must have replaced the isolinear chip like she was supposed to." Heart said and he turned to his men, "Positions." he ordered and the MACOs deployed either side of the corridor, aiming their rifles towards the door.

"Guardsmen stand ready." Shry called out and the other Andorians set down the breaching charge and joined their MACO comrades.

"Okay lieutenant." Heart said, glancing towards Hamilton, "Do it." and Hamilton slammed his hand down on the door control.

Immediately the door slid open and the soldiers standing by charged forwards, fanning out as they rushed through the door to cover all directions.

"West." Hamilton said as he joined the soldiers in rushing into the computer core and saw her lying on the floor nearby, "She's alive." he added, "We need to get her to sickbay."

"What about the intruder?" Heart called out, "Does anyone have eyes on?" but there was no reply from any of his or Shry's men as they continued to spread out through the core in search of The Girl.

"Wait a moment." Hamilton said, "I've got an idea." and he tapped his combadge, "Computer, locate Lieutenant Commander Carr."

"Lieutenant Commander Carr is not onboard the *Nightfall*." the computer replied and Hamilton smiled at Heart.

"The intruder was using Carr's combadge." he said, "She's gone."

"Wakey wakey lieutenant." King's voice said as West opened her eyes to find herself staring up at the ceiling in sickbay.

"What happened?" she asked, sitting up and looking around to see that she was not alone. Captain Edwards, Carr, Nikki and Noyal were all sat on other biobeds while the rest of the ship's senior officers were also present.

"You put the isolinear chip into the door control system and let us into the core." Heart replied.

"But you got stunned in the process." Hamilton added, "Don't you remember?"

"I remember looking down the barrel of a phaser and then some weird dream about-

"Dreams aren't my area of expertise." King said, interrupting as he ran a probe over West's head, "However, I think it safe to say that you are no more the worse for wear than Noyal is."

"Well it was Noyal's phaser that stunned them both." Cole pointed out.

"What about that girl?" West asked as she got up off the biobed, "The one who shot me?"

"Gone." Edwards said, "Or at least as far as we can tell she is."

"And without doing much damage at all." Carr added, "Isn't that right Max?"

"Yes commander. Apart from the loss of the nanites in one of our cores and some cosmetic damage in your quarters the *Nightfall* is fully operational."

"So we're supposed to believe that this girl turned up just to break some furniture and shoot a phaser into the computer core before leaving?" White said, "Because I don't buy it."

"She was definitely looking for something aboard the ship." Carr said.

"Perhaps something the aliens think we've found when we've encountered them before." Noyal suggested.

"Or something they think that one of their earlier attempts at infiltrating the ship left behind." King added, "Maybe we haven't found what she came looking for."

"I don't think it was a thing." Nikki said suddenly and everyone looked towards her.

"Can you explain further?" T'Lan asked.

"When she was looking at my PADD she wanted to know about the people in the photos. The Crew." Nikki began, "Then when she made mom give her access to the ship's computer she used it to look at personnel files. Then when we were both in here all she was interested in was Emma."

"Then they know we've replicated their synthetic flesh." Max said.

"Yes, but that wasn't what interested her." Nikki replied, "She saw Emma's body and didn't care when she found out that it was just operated by remote control. She wanted to know about Emma's personality."

"The aliens think that there's one of their own people aboard the *Nightfall*." Edwards said, "We know that they use the bodies of dead people and control them somehow. So what if someone aboard this ship is under their control?"

"They have a spy aboard the *Nightfall*?" Carr exclaimed, "But how?"

"No chance." King said, "All of the host bodies they use are dead and if anyone aboard this ship was dead then I'd know about it."

"It would make a lot of sense though." Cole commented, "Someone had to shut down the tachyon detection grid at the peace conference. Perhaps that someone is aboard right now."

"Someone that isn't dead." King added.

"What if it isn't one of their usual host bodies?" Shry asked, "Maybe they've found themselves an old fashioned traitor."

"They did make use of a Ferengi trader as an agent." T'Lan said in agreement, "Blackmailing or bribing someone into helping them would avoid risking detection by medical means."

"Lieutenant Commander Cole." Edwards said, "I want you to draw up a plan to locate this spy and until then no-one discusses this with anyone. The last thing we need is the entire crew trying to guess who is working against us."

"I agree. It could make people nervous. Right lieutenant?" King said and he looked at West.

"What?" she responded, surprised.

"The phaser lieutenant." King said, "You won't need it in here." and West looked down to see that while she had been listening to the others talking about a spy on board the *Nightfall* she had subconsciously placed her hand on her phaser, ready to draw it.

"Oh right." she said, removing her hand from the weapon.

"That's better." King announced, "Now everyone out and I mean everyone. Only five of you have been treated by me and even all of them are just fine now. So get out of here and let me try to salvage as much of the time I ought to be asleep in as possible. Go on, everybody shoo. Shoo." and he waved his hands towards the door.

As Nikki headed back to her quarters alone she suddenly heard footsteps from behind her and looking around she saw Heart and Shry hurrying towards her.

"What do you want?" she asked them.

"You need to come with us to the hangar." Heart replied.

"What for?" Nikki responded.

"It's easier if you just come along." Shry said, "Saves us having to pick you up and carry you."

Nikki frowned.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this." she said.

"Are you coming?" Heart asked.

"Do I have a choice?" Nikki said and before either officer could reply she started to walk in the direction of the hangar.

When they got there Nikki found most of the Nightfall's contingent of ground troops and fighter pilots along with several of the hangar deck crew gathered around the portable latrines and all looking in her direction.

"Okay I give up." she said, looking around at Heart and Shry, "What's going on here?"

"Nikki Carr." Heart announced, taking hold of her arm and leading her closer to the gathered crowd, "It has come to our notice that on both your seventeenth and eighteenth birthdays there has been a distinct lack of communication from your father and that this has caused you distress."

"So in honour of your becoming an adult we have chosen to mark the occasion by offering you the opportunity to get revenge." Shry added.

"With a bunch of latrines?" Nikki asked, confused.

"To be more precise it's the storage tank that they are all connected to." White said as he stepped forwards from the crowd and held out a PADD towards her.

"What's this?" Nikki said as she took the PADD. Looking at the display all she saw was two coloured rectangles, neither of which was marked in any way.

"That young lady," Heart said, "is a PADD that has been linked to the ship's transporter system. Now back on line thanks to our chief engineer finally doing his job."

"It has also been programmed with two sets of co-ordinates." Shry said and he pointed towards the display, "Touch the upper panel and the transporter will lock onto the contents of the storage unit that these latrines have been hooked up to for the last day and a half and will transport it instantly to a particular location on the surface of Draken Four."

"Specifically the residence of one Stuart Carr." White added with a smile, "Thus giving him a taste of what he's put you through."

"Did you have to say 'taste' there Snowman?" Heart asked, "You know that makes me retch."

"And the other button?" Nikki said, looking around.

"The other button will still cause the transporters to lock onto the contents of the storage unit but will instead beam it into space and disperse the molecules." Shry told her.

"We considered adding the option of having it materialise inside Mackey's office." Heart added, "But it occurred to us that we'd get found out if we did that."

"So make your choice Nikki." White said, "Whichever one you pick the screen will wipe as soon as you press the button so unless you let us see what you do even we won't know which you picked and we can honestly say that we don't know."

Nikki smiled.

"So basically you're giving me the chance to redecorate my dad's house in various shades of sewage?" she said.

"Happy birthday." Shry replied, "Sorry it's a day late."

"In that case," Nikki began and she began to raise the PADD so that no-one else could see the screen, "I have to pick-"

"Nikki!"

"Oh no." Nikki said as she recognised her mother's voice calling out to her across the hangar and she turned to watch as Carr marched towards her as did the gathered crowd, many of whom groaned at her unexpected appearance, "Hi mom." she added.

"Nikki what are you doing here?"

"Err we had just gathered to sing her happy birthday." Heart said quickly and he turned back towards the crowd and brought up his hands as if to conduct them, "On four." he added.

"Oh don't give me that!" Carr snapped at him. Then she looked at Nikki, "But you can hand that over." she told her daughter and she held out her hand for the PADD and waited until Nikki handed it over nervously.

"Lieutenant commander, this wasn't." Heart began before Carr interrupted.

"Oh I know what this is." she said, "And it ends now." and she jabbed a finger at the PADD's touchscreen.

"Mom!" Nikki exclaimed when she saw which panel her mother had just pressed as the crowd looked on in a mix of surprise and amazement, "You just beamed-"

"I know what I just beamed and where I beamed it to." Carr said, interrupting again, "And frankly it makes a change for your father to be cleaning up after me for once." then she handed the PADD over to Heart, "Now get all this cleaned away before the authorities on Draken Four can start asking awkward questions. And as for you," she continued, turning back towards her daughter, "the captain and I need to speak to you in his ready room."

"Come in." Edwards said when Carr announced her presence outside his ready room and the door leading to the bridge slid open to reveal both her and Nikki, "Ah Nikki. Good. Both of you have a seat."

"Captain is this about what just happened on the hangar deck?" Nikki asked, "Because if it is then I-

"Nikki this is about your university application." Edwards told her, "Why? Has something just happened on the hangar deck I should know about?"

"No captain." Carr replied before Nikki could answer, "Our ground forces just wanted to help Nikki celebrate her birthday."

"Of course they did." Edwards said, a hint of a smile visible on his face. Then he turned back towards Nikki, "As I was saying, this concerns your university applications."

"You mean my failed applications." Nikki commented, "Thanks for reminding me."

"Nikki the captain is trying to help you." Carr said.

"How?" Nikki asked.

"You may not be able to go to university to continue your education." Edwards began.

"Thanks to Mackey." Nikki muttered before the captain continued.

"But there is an alternative if you remain here on the *Nightfall* with us." he said and Nikki frowned.

"You mean join Starfleet? Go to the academy instead?" she said.

"No. The academy vets applicants in the same way universities do." Carr replied, "So thanks to Lieutenant Mackey's interference you can't sign up to become an officer either."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" Nikki asked.

"Starfleet operates an intern program." Edwards told her, "You can sign up to be trained in how different departments work, then at the end of it the experience you've gained can count towards university course credits depending on what you choose to study."

"And your references would be written by the department heads you worked under. Mackey wouldn't get a look in." Carr added.

"So I'd be staying here on the *Nightfall*?" Nikki said, "But I'd be working as one of the crew only without any of the authority?"

"That's right." Edwards said, "Unless you'd rather serve your internship on another vessel. I'm sure I can-

"Oh no." Nikki said before he could finish, "If I'm going to be stuck on a starship then I at least want to be on one with people I know."

"Very good." Edwards said, smiling, "Now I'll have the application sent to you. But in the mean time your mother and I need to discuss ship's business so you are dismissed."

"Yes sir." Nikki replied before she got up and left the room.

Carr sighed.

"Something wrong Grace?" Edwards asked.

"I just hope we're doing the right thing with this." Carr answered, "Having her around still could cause problems. You know she asked me directly if you and I had been having an affair since you first took command?"

"You're kidding." Edwards said.

"At least I can deny that accusation honestly." Carr said.

"Yes. Put like that you could." Edwards agreed.