

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



ECHOS OF THE DISTANT PAST

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **ECHOS OF THE DISTANT PAST**

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Knowing that the mysterious aliens disrupting the Alpha and Beta Quadrants are using Iconian technology results in the *USS Nightfall* being ordered into the Neutral Zone to investigate Iconia itself...

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2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
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Stardate 66428.6. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol near Romulan Neutral Zone.

Captain David Edwards, commanding officer of the Akira-class *USS Nightfall* had gathered his senior staff together for a status meeting. To his immediate left sat his first officer Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr while opposite her was his second in command who doubled as both tactical officer and chief of security, Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole. Also sat to Edwards' left were his helm and operations officers, Lieutenants Bradley Hamilton and Jenna West while to the right were his chief medical officer Commander Henry King, the former Borg drone who served as chief engineer Lieutenant Maximillian, more commonly known as 'Max' to the crew and the Vulcan science officer T'Lan. The only senior Starfleet officer not present was Lieutenant Commander William 'Snowman' White who commanded the squadron of fighters deployed aboard the *Nightfall*. He was currently on leave and not expected to return for several days yet. There were however, three non-Starfleet personnel present. MACO Captain Gary Heart and Andorian Imperial Guard Captain Shry commanded the two companies of ground troops that the *Nightfall* carried while Sub-lieutenant Nayal was a Romulan who was present aboard the ship to advise on issues relating to the ongoing civil war in the Romulan Star Empire that had been triggered by the destruction of Romulus as different factions struggled for supremacy.

So far the meeting had focused on issues currently affecting the *Nightfall* as it patrolled the border of the Federation and the Neutral Zone that separated it from what remained of the Romulan Empire but Captain Edwards had also been asked to raise another issue with his senior officers.

"The next item on the agenda has been set by Starfleet." he said, "The *Nightfall* has been operating for almost two and half years now and Starfleet command is finally willing to proceed with the next two ships of the program we're a part of." The program Edwards was referring to was one where the basic Akira-class design was modified to include technology that was primarily geared towards defeating the Borg by including a pair of mass accelerators in the secondary hulls, a hive of nanites that could prevent the ship from being assimilated and also the carrying of a large force of professional ground troops equipped with projectile as well as phaser weapons. The program had been controversial from the outset however, with many of the outer worlds of the Federation suspicious at what they saw as the increasing dominance of the core member worlds such as Andoria and Earth as well as the capability that the mass accelerators gave the ship to bombard planets with devastating effects. This controversy had for a long time delayed the program and meant that out of the eighteen vessels that work had been begun on, only the *Nightfall* itself had been launched.

"It's about time too." Commander King commented, "I was starting to think that Starfleet Command was going to scrap it. Us as well."

"Well fortunately our support is still strong where it counts." Edwards replied, "But one thing that still concerns Starfleet command is how well a Starfleet crew can work with purely military personnel." and he looked towards the two military officers at the far end of the table before he continued, "Starfleet still hasn't put together a program for training our own ground combat specialists to use the new equipment or vehicles. So the new ships will also need to use troops from member worlds. I believe that the next ship to be launched will be using an all Vulcan crew and two companies of troops from the V'Shar so I don't see there being much of an issue with them working together but the third ship is likely to have a mix of personnel like we have. So any information would be welcome."

"Well I've not had any problems." Cole said.

"A few differences of opinion on strategy perhaps." Shry added, remembering some sometimes heated discussions about what was and was not acceptable aboard a Starfleet vessel.

"I get fewer time wasters in sickbay from the infantry than I do from Starfleet personnel." King said.

"Sometimes I find it nice to have someone to talk to who isn't Starfleet." West commented next, "You know, just a different point of view."

"So no-one has any issues that need addressing?" Edwards asked, "Good. Then I can tell Starfleet."

"Captain I have some comments to make that may be of interest to Starfleet." T'Lan interrupted and there were groans from some of the others.

"Let her speak." Cole said.

"Yes, go ahead T'Lan." Carr added and T'Lan picked up the PADD she had been keeping on the table in front of her during the course of the meeting.

"Since coming aboard I have been logging all incidents where the actions of the attached ground troops have affected me personally." she explained, "They are as follows. Stealing my undergarments and printing the design of a Federation flag on them before displaying them publicly from a pole on Federation Day."

Shry frowned.

"No patriotic pride lieutenant?" he said.

"Number two." T'Lan continued, ignoring the comment, "Producing noises intended to mimic the effects of flatulence every time I mention 'gaseous anomalies'." and at this point there was a crude yet quiet sound that imitated someone passing gas.

"Yes I think-" Carr began before a second similar sound was heard, "Perhaps we should-" and then there was a third.

"Bradley you better have made that sound with your mouth." West said and beside her Hamilton smiled.

"I thought it was you." he replied.

"If we could let T'Lan continue." Cole said and he looked back towards the Vulcan woman, "Go on." he told her.

"Number three." she said, "Naming a dog after me on the grounds that it 'had pointy ears and was a bitch.'"

"Oh now that's not fair." Captain Heart exclaimed, "That was Lieutenant Commander Carr's idea." and Carr winced.

"If we could just move on. We can assign blame some other time." she said.

"Number four. Putting a notice on the ship's notice board that read 'For a logical and efficient time call T'Lan' and then including my communication details." T'Lan said and Edwards frowned.

"Since when do we have a notice board?" he asked.

"I've never seen one either." King added.

"Or me." West agreed.

"Really?" Carr said, looking at Edwards, "All of that and what you pick up is a notice board?"

"I've seen every part of this ship." Edwards said, "And I've never seen a notice board anywhere."

"That is most likely because it is no longer needed." Max told him, "Before the computer core was online a primitive notice board was used to distribute information."

"That's how I put together my first role playing group." Hamilton said with a smile.

"Well obviously there are one or two things that need looking at." Edwards said, "Though I don't think that Starfleet needs to be informed of them all. Now there is one last thing I'd like to mention before we adjourn. Following the evidence we've been discovering that the aliens trying to stir up trouble are making widespread use of Iconian technology I approached Starfleet Command to request that we be allowed to visit Iconia itself. I'm hoping that we may be able to uncover some more information about what they are capable of."

"You really think that there's anything left there?" King asked, "From what I heard the planet's a radioactive wasteland still."

"Maybe, but it's still the original source of the technology being used against us." Edwards responded, "The problem is that Iconia is located right in the middle of the Neutral Zone and Starfleet is still wary of violating it."

"But the Star Empire is in no position to declare war on the Federation for sending a ship into the Neutral Zone." Nayal pointed out.

"Maybe not now. But if we are ever in a position to try and negotiate peace with whatever faction comes out on top the Federation doesn't want them thinking that we won't respect our treaties. So both the rules forbidding entering the neutral zone and developing cloaking technology still stand."

"Big mistake if you ask me." Shry commented, "The Romulans violate the zone regularly with their refugee transports and I guarantee you that there are cloaked warships getting as close to the tachyon detection grid as they can just to test our defences."

"Maybe so. But Starfleet has given its orders and I have to obey them." Edwards said, "Now unless anyone else has anything they want to add we'll bring this meeting to a close."

With no other business from any of the gathered officers the meeting was ended and the officers returned to their duties. Edwards' duty shift was now over and so he headed for a turbolift where he was joined by Max and Nayal.

"Captain." Nayal said as soon as the door closed and the three of them were alone, "You know that we could get to Iconia without being noticed."

"The sublieutenant is correct captain." Max added, "I am confident that we could disable-"

"Turbolift halt." Edwards said, bringing the turbolift car to an abrupt stop. Then he looked at the two officers with him, "And how exactly would we explain to Starfleet command that we violated their orders?" he said sternly, "You heard what I said about maintaining treaties and I meant it. If the Federation isn't willing to set aside commitments it made then I sure as hell am not either. Now I don't want to hear a word from either of you about this again. Understood?"

"Fully captain." Max replied and Edwards turned to Nayal.

"Fine." she said, folding her arms, "But you know that sooner or later someone is going to have to go to Iconia and it will probably be us."

In a nondescript office building three other Starfleet officers met. None of them wore uniforms or any

indication of their rank as they gathered together in the office that had been vacant for some time thanks to someone having hacked into the building management agency's computer and convincing it that the office no longer existed.

"Admiral Schmidt." one of the two officers said as they entered the darkened office to find the man sat looking out of the window while still remaining far enough back from it to make spotting him from the outside difficult.

"Admiral." the first officer's female companion added as both of them sat down.

"I take it you've both heard?" Admiral Schmidt asked.

"What? That Starfleet command has turned down Captain Edwards' request to enter the Neutral Zone and visit Iconia?" the female officer said, "Yes, we heard about ten minutes before you summoned us to this meeting."

"I'd have thought that the abortive attacks on our starbases along the Neutral Zone would have turned a few heads." the male officer added.

"The key word there Commander Jones is 'abortive'. Thanks to the efforts of Captain Edwards and his crew those responsible for corrupting the system updates did not find the helpless targets they were expecting. Next time they may decide to concentrate their resources on one or two targets instead and from the sensor logs I've seen I doubt that our starbases could resist a squadron of their ships for long."

"So what's our section's next move admiral?" the female officer asked.

"Ah, straight to the point Commander Brown." Admiral Schmidt replied, "Captain Edwards has been told that he is not to violate the Neutral Zone, therefore we must make it possible for him to do just that."

"That would mean violating Starfleet orders." Jones said.

"Which is one reason why I will be heading to Starbase one-twenty-three as soon as we are done here. I'll meet with our contacts there and see to it that permission is granted for the *Nightfall* to enter the Neutral Zone so that Iconia can be investigated."

"The crew may become suspicious if they are ordered into the Neutral Zone so soon after being denied permission to do that." Brown pointed out.

"Which is why the order must be delivered in person by someone who appears to have the authority to do so." Admiral Schmidt replied.

"You? You're going to the *Nightfall* yourself?" Brown asked.

"No." the admiral answered, "Though I must admit the idea of being able to investigate Iconia myself is tempting I cannot afford to be seen on the *USS Nightfall*. It raises questions that I do not want to have to answer or deal with."

"Someone there knows you." Jones said.

"Precisely. Someone I doubt I could avoid." Admiral Schmidt responded.

"Well that's me out as well then." Brown added, "Remember? You sent me there to take a look at that body. I doubt their medical officer would forget me in a hurry after he saw me in action."

"Which I suppose just leaves me." Jones said, "No-one on the *Nightfall* has seen me yet."

"You'll need data files on Iconia." Brown pointed out.

"And I'll need to start studying them. I need to be an expert by the time I get there." Jones added in agreement.

"Not necessarily." Admiral Schmidt said, "In fact I think it better that you appear to be just an ordinary Starfleet Intelligence officer bearing secret orders. Take the data we have with you to present to the crew but I think that your knowing too much would look odd. Especially in light of Starfleet's refusal to devote many resources to investigating the Iconian angle."

"You can't expect the crew of the *Nightfall* to take their ship into the Neutral Zone without someone who at least appears to have actual knowledge of the Iconian civilisation on hand to advise them." Jones said.

"I don't. But I think that we can sort something out." Admiral Schmidt replied.



Captain Edwards waited in the transporter room as the smaller starship approached the *Nightfall* to rendezvous with it. There were two passengers to be transferred across and he was eager to see one of them in particular. Beside him stood Lieutenant Commander Cole, it was usual for non-Starfleet visitors to a starship to check in personally with the chief of security and Edwards saw no reason to make an exception for the guest he was expecting.

"Sir the transport is signalling ready to begin beaming their passengers over." the transporter technician announced and then before either Edwards or Cole could say anything she added, "They will be beaming them over in pairs."

"Pairs?" Edwards asked, "How many do they have?"

"Four sir." the transporter technician replied and Edwards and Cole looked at one another.

"Well don't ask." Cole said, "I'm not expecting anyone." then Edwards looked at the technician.

"Tell the transport to energise." he said before turning towards the transporter pads at the opposite end of the room.

"Energising." the technician said and on two of the transporter pads there was the typical blue glow of a transporter in operation as two men in red collared Starfleet uniforms materialised.

"Snowman. Welcome back." Edwards said to the dark skinned man who stepped off the transporter pad with a smile on his face, "I take everything went well?"

"A girl. Four and a quarter kilos." White replied.

"Congratulations." Cole added.

"I've got plenty of pictures to bore you all with." White said, "But right now I want to go and find out how the deck crew have screwed up without me to watch their every move."

"We'll catch up later." Cole said before White left the room and Cole and Edwards turned to the other man who had just materialised on the transporter pad.

"Commander Jones." Jones said as he too stepped off the transporter pad, "Starfleet Intelligence."

Cole and Edwards exchanged glances again.

"We weren't expecting a visit from intelligence." Edwards then replied.

"Nobody expects Starfleet Intelligence captain. Surprise is our weapon." Jones said, Well, surprise and a phaser."

"Yes, I'm sure it is." Cole commented.

"Crewman." Edwards said, looking around at the transporter technician, "Commander Cole and I can handle things here. Go and see to it that Commander Jones is given quarters." then he turned back to Jones, "I'll speak to you later. But for now I need to meet the other passenger I'm expecting." he said.

"One of the civilians? Of course. I'll await your call captain, but what I have to say is urgent." Jones said, "How about we meet in an hour? You, your first officer and the tactical officer."

"Very well. One hour in my ready room." Edwards said and then the transporter technician led Jones out of the transporter room while Cole took her place behind the control console.

"Energising." Cole said and the glow of two more people beaming aboard appeared on the transporter pad.

"Becky." Edwards said to the young woman in her early twenties who had just appeared.

"Dad!" she replied, leaping off the pad and rushing to embrace him, then kissing him on the cheek, "Oh it's so good to see you again."

"Yes, I'm sorry I didn't get back for your graduation." Edwards said as she released her grip on him and looked directly at him.

"Or my birthday." she said.

"Ah, yes." Edwards responded.

"Oh don't worry. I knew you were busy and besides at least you found time to call me." the young woman said.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole." Edwards then said, looking towards Cole, "This is Rebecca, my eldest daughter. She'll be staying with us for two weeks. Becky this is Lieutenant Commander Cole, my chief of security."

"Pleased to meet you." Cole said as he stepped forwards and shook hands with Rebecca. Then he remembered the second person to have beamed over from the other ship and looked at him.

The other visitor was a male Vulcan, his almost white hair suggesting that he was of considerable age though he walked without any assistance, "I'm sorry I wasn't expecting anyone else." he said as the Vulcan stepped off the transporter pad, "I'm-

"You are Lieutenant Commander Cole, chief of security for this ship." the Vulcan said, "I heard your captain introduce you. I am Saron of Vulcan and it is my understanding that you are involved in an intimate

relationship with my daughter.”

“You're T'Lan's father?” Cole asked, startled.

“That is the logical meaning of my statement lieutenant commander. Now perhaps you can tell me where I might find my daughter.” Saron replied.

“I'll show Rebecca to her quarters.” Edwards said, “I'll leave you to escort Saron to T'Lan's and find somewhere for him to stay while he's with us.”

“Of course captain.” Cole said and he looked at Saron, “If you'd like to come this way, I'll show you to T'Lan's quarters.”

Cole could tell that Saron watched him intently as he showed the Vulcan the way to T'Lan's quarters, but as was typical with Vulcans he could not tell whether this was purely because he was watching to see which way the Starfleet officer was going or if he was glaring at Cole out of anger. Despite his relationship with T'Lan he knew too little about Vulcan attitudes to know whether Saron would consider him a suitable mate for his daughter or not.

“Ah here we are.” Cole said, pointing towards the door to T'Lan's quarters and he entered the access code into the keypad beside the door.

“My daughter has provided you with unlimited access to her quarters I see.” Saron commented and Cole winced as he realised that he had perhaps given away more than he ought to.

“Err, yes.” he replied and then he stepped through the open doorway and looked around, “T'Lan?” he called out when he did not see her in the lounge.

“I'm in here Robert.” T'Lan's voice called out in response from inside the bedroom, “If you want to join me I have plenty of time before I am scheduled to be on duty.”

“Ah, I'm not sure that's entirely appropriate right now T'Lan.” Cole said nervously, glancing at Saron who had followed him into T'Lan's quarters.

“Surely it is logical for us to take advantage of the time available to us.” T'Lan replied.

“Your logic is sound daughter.” Saron said, “Though perhaps the Lieutenant Commander would rather not indulge in sexual intercourse with you while I am present.”

“Father?” T'Lan exclaimed, her voice showing more emotion than Cole was used to and moments later she appeared in the doorway to her bedroom tying a robe around her, “It is agreeable to see you.” she added.

“Agreeable perhaps. Though I find it likely that you would rather I had not arrived at precisely this moment.” Saron said and he looked at Cole.

“Perhaps I ought to be going.” Cole said, “I'll leave you two to catch up while I go and arrange for quarters for your father.”

“Your suggestion is logical.” Saron said.

“Yes it is.” T'Lan added and Cole smiled nervously before hurrying out of her quarters. Then when the door slid shut behind him T'Lan turned to her father, “I was not expecting you.” she said.

“Obviously.” Saron replied before both he and T'Lan sat down.

“Why are you here father?” T'Lan asked.

“You invited me to visit you. It was logical that I respond. I had thought that the details of my arrival were clear enough. Obviously I was mistaken though, perhaps you are distracted by other matters.”

“There must be some mistake.” T'Lan said, “I issued no invitation and received no details of your planned visit.”

“The invitation was included in your last regular letter and my response was sent shortly after.” Saron explained and T'Lan paused to consider this.

“The communications relay station between here and Vulcan was sabotaged.” she said, “This caused a significant back log even when the replacement array was in place. Perhaps my letter was corrupted and yours lost.”

“Perhaps.” Saron said, “So am I to take it that my visit is inconvenient?”

“No, of course not father. The *Nightfall* conducts border patrols that keep us within Federation territory almost always. Now if you will give me the time to put on a uniform I shall show you the areas of the ship accessible to civilians and introduce you to my shipmates.”

“I hope these are to your liking.” Edwards said as he showed Rebecca the quarters he had arranged for her, “We have got larger rooms but we're supposed to keep them available for-”

“It's fine dad.” Rebecca interrupted as she tossed her bag onto the nearby bed, “Compared to the place I've been sleeping recently this room is positively spacious. Besides I came to visit you and I'm sure your quarters are much larger.”

Edwards frowned.

“You and your mother never said anything about you not having much living space.” he said.

“Oh it was just how things worked out. It wasn't a problem. Now when do I get one of your fancy meals? It's been more than two years since you replicated something for me.” Rebecca replied.

"Tonight." Edwards replied, "You can chose whatever you want."
"And will Grace be joining us?" Rebecca asked, smiling as she looked directly at her father.
"That's Lieutenant Commander Carr to you Becky." Edwards replied.
"Really? Because given how close she came to being my new stepmother-"
"Whoa!" Edwards exclaimed, "What do you mean?"
"Oh I heard all about how you two sneaked away to a honeymoon suite." Rebecca answered.
"Who from?" Edwards said, "No wait, Snowman. Look there was a good explanation for that."
"Sure dad. Whatever you say." Rebecca said.
Well I'll leave you to get settled in. I have to go and meet another visitor. Then I have a fighter pilot to take revenge on."

"Are you feeling alright Robert?" Carr asked when the door to Captain Edwards' ready room slid open and the *Nightfall's* security chef entered the room looking distracted.
"I wasn't the only one to be visited by a relative." Edwards responded from behind his desk as Cole took a seat beside Carr, "T'Lan's father is here."
"Really? She never said anything to me about him visiting." Carr said.
"Me either." Cole told her, "In fact T'Lan seemed pretty surprised about his being here as well."
"You think he's here to put an end to your relationship with her?" Carr asked.
"I don't know. She hasn't said anything about him to me before." Cole replied, "As far as I knew-" and then he was interrupted by a chiming sound from the door.
"Come in." Edwards called out and the door opened again to reveal Commander Jones, "Ah commander," Edwards added as the intelligence officer entered to room,"do take a seat."
"Yes," Carr added, "we're interested to know what brings someone from Starfleet Intelligence all the way out here to the border."
"A major threat to the Federation I'm afraid." Jones replied as he sat down and Cole snorted.
"You don't think that the Romulans can threaten us right now do you?" he asked.
"No, not the Romulans or the Remans either." Jones replied and he looked at Edwards, "Captain you recently requested permission to take the *USS Nightfall* into the Neutral Zone."
"Yes and it was denied." Edwards replied.
"Officially yes." Jones said, "But I'm here to instruct you to do just that. The threat that the aliens you've been encountering pose to our security is possibly the greatest single threat that the Federation has ever faced. Even the Dominion and the Borg had to fight their way through our defences but if what you've found out so far is even half right then these aliens could materialise an army at Starfleet Headquarters itself and there's not a thing we can do about it."
"Does intelligence have any idea who they are?" Carr asked.
"None." Jones said, "We've been collating confirmed and possible sightings of their agents and even some of those larger humanoids I believe you nicknamed golems."
"One of their agents referred to them as 'fleshforms'." Carr commented.
"Fleshforms then. But so far your ship has had the most contact with them and we've got little else to go on. Starfleet Command wants you to investigate Iconia itself. Even if there aren't any clues there as to who is behind these incidents then maybe we can recover some Iconian technology of our own that we can use against them." Jones continued.
"What about our treaty with the Romulans?" Edwards asked.
"The Romulan faction that controls the systems closest to Iconia has refused all attempts at maintaining contact with the Federation." Jones answered, "As far as we're concerned they are already hostile towards us and one ship entering the Neutral Zone isn't going to make things worse."
"Unless they send a ship of their own to intercept us." Cole pointed out.
"Yes, what will our rules of engagement be?" Edwards asked.
"No-one will be watching you too closely on this captain. If you feel that the *Nightfall* is threatened you'll have free reign to defend it and your crew."
"Sounds a little extreme." Carr said.
"Yes it does." Edwards agreed, "Not that I'm complaining about having Starfleet's backing if I feel it necessary to fire on a Romulan vessel, but I was expecting to be ordered to withdraw if we face Romulan opposition." Jones smiled.
"Not this time captain. My superiors are quite serious about this mission." he said.
"What about the two passengers we took aboard?" Cole asked, "They're both civilians."
"They'll have to come along for the ride. They'll have agreed that their visits were subject to the needs of the service anyway." Jones told him.
"I'm not happy about that." Edwards responded, thinking about the implications of the *Nightfall* coming under attack while his daughter was aboard, "We can't risk word getting out about your mission before we get to Iconia captain."

"You're not the only one with family aboard." Carr commented, reminding Edwards that her daughter Nikki was also aboard the *Nightfall*, serving as an intern in engineering.

"No, I suppose now I get to find out how you feel." he replied. Then he looked at Jones, "I take it that you have more than just some verbal orders from Starfleet?"

"I do. I've brought along everything we have from encounters other than yours with these aliens and also everything that we have on Iconian technology."

"Which can't be that much." Cole said.

"It isn't." Jones agreed as he produced an isolinear chip and handed it to Edwards, "There are logs from the *USS Enterprise*, the previous one, from when it and the *Yamato* visited Iconia. That resulted in the loss of the *Yamato* by the way and also some information gathered from a mission into the Gamma Quadrant where some renegade Jem'Hadar had seized control of a gateway. I'll give you the files and I suggest you distribute them to your officers."

"And what will your role be in all this commander?" Cole asked.

"Strictly an observer. Despite my higher rank the chain of command will remain as it is and you and Lieutenant Commander Carr will take over should anything happen to Captain Edwards." Jones replied.

"Well it's nice to know that plans have been made for my early demise." Edwards commented. Then he added, "So I take it that we're to come up with a plan for getting us down to the surface of Iconia ourselves then?"

"Correct captain. I'm aware that your ship carries two companies of ground troops and I'm not familiar with their methods of operation like you are." Jones told him, "This is your show. I'm just here to take whatever you find back to Starfleet when you're done."

"In that case I'd like to be able to examine this data you've given me Commander Jones." Edwards said, holding up the isolinear chip he had just been given, "Then I'll see that my senior officers get it and I'll let you know what we come up with." then he looked at Carr, "Lieutenant Commander, could you have helm lay in a course for Iconia?"

"Yes captain." she replied, getting to her feet.

"And if you don't mind there's something I'd like to deal with as well captain." Cole added as he too stood up.

"That's fine." Edwards replied, nodding, "I'll call everyone to the briefing room when I'm ready."

3.

When Cole entered the officers' lounge located at the very front of the *Nightfall's* primary hull he saw Doctor King, Hamilton, West, Shry and Nayal along with Carr's daughter Nikki gathered around a table located by some of the viewports through which it was possible to see that the ship had entered warp and he headed over to join them.

"You looked stressed lieutenant commander." King said, "Please remember I'm not a counsellor."

"Yes but our ship's counsellor is incompetent." West said, "I should know."

"He's still insisting you keep seeing him?" Nayal asked.

"Every week." West replied, "Failing the bridge command test didn't help at all."

"Well now I have to deal with the disapproval of a Vulcan father." Cole replied.

"Oh God, here we go." King muttered, "I'll be back in a moment." and he left the table.

"You mean T'Lan's father?" Nikki asked, leaning forwards, "What has he said?"

"He said very little. He just stared at me." Cole answered.

"He's here?" Nikki exclaimed, "Why didn't T'Lan warn you?"

"I don't think she knew he was coming." Cole said before all of a sudden King put a bottle and a glass down on the table in front of him.

"Get some of that down you." he said.

"Is this synthehol or real?" Cole asked as he poured himself a drink.

"Does it matter?" King asked in reply.

"There's a mission briefing soon." Cole said.

"In that case don't worry it's synthehol." King replied and Cole threw back a drink before gasping.

"Wow that's strong." he said.

"Uh-oh." Hamilton said suddenly as he looked towards one of the large sets of doors to the officers' lounge, "I think T'Lan's giving her father the tour."

"Oh no." Cole said as he looked round to see both T'Lan and her father approaching them, "This can't be good."

"Father," T'Lan said when they reached the table, "you know Lieutenant Commander Cole of course. But these are some more of my fellow officers."

"Pleased to meet you." Nayal said, standing up and reaching out her hand in greeting as she had seen humans do but Saron just looked at her.

"From your uniform and your demeanour I take it that you are Sub-Lieutenant Nayal." he said, "The Romulan who consistently addresses my daughter as 'cousin' despite being asked not to. I am correct in saying that you are attempting to elicit an emotional reaction to this?"

"What's wrong with that?" Nayal asked, "It's just a joke between friends uncle."

Noticing how Nayal had just referred to him, Saron responded with another question.

"Have you considered that the emotion you may provoke would be anger and that you may not like my daughter or myself when angry?"

"Watch this." Hamilton said to Cole softly, "He's going to turn bright green and rip his shirt."

"And you must be Lieutenant Bradley Hamilton." Saron said, turning towards Hamilton.

"So T'Lan told you about me then?" Hamilton replied.

"With great accuracy it would seem." Saron said.

"Father may I also introduce Commander King our chief medical officer, operations chief Lieutenant West, Captain Shry of the Andorian Imperial Guard and Nikki Carr." T'Lan said, pointing out each of the other crew members in turn, "This is Saron, my father."

"Did T'Lan warn you that there was a company of Imperial Guard aboard?" Shry asked.

"She informed me of your presence yes." Saron replied, "Fortunately my own father worked alongside some of the Imperial Guard in the years leading up to the founding of the Federation and the experiences he shared with me have meant that I do not share the suspicion of your people that some of mine still hold."

"Well that's nice to know." Shry replied.

"What is it that you do Saron?" King asked, "Are you a scientist like T'Lan?"

"No. I am a lecturer on the study of ancient civilisations." Saron replied, "My daughter gave up teaching to follow her current path."

"I never knew you were a teacher." Nikki said, looking at T'Lan. Then she turned towards Saron, "So have you seen much of the ship?"

"I believe that this section concludes the tour of unrestricted areas." Saron replied.

"It does." T'Lan added.

"What about the restricted sections?" Shry asked and he looked at Cole, "I'm sure that Lieutenant

Commander Cole would be willing to clear you.”

“And escort you as well.” Nayal added, “After all if he and T'Lan are to continue with their relationship then you'll be seeing a lot more of each other and it's logical for you to get to know one another.”

“Despite your comment seeming to have been made in jest it is indeed logical.” Saron said.

“It would be my pleasure.” Cole said as he got to his feet, glaring at Nayal.

“Then we can continue my father's tour together.” T'Lan said and she took his hand in hers. Then as they walked away in the company of Saron, Cole glanced back at Nayal again and scowled at her.

“Sub-lieutenant,” Shry said, “you may want to consider bunking with Hamilton for a while until Cole can calm down.”

“Agreed.” King added, “As well as protecting you from the wrath of Cole while you sleep it means you're less likely to wear that ridiculous duck covered onesie you sleep in.”

After reviewing the information that Jones had provided him with, Edwards decided that he would apologise to Rebecca before calling the briefing. The deployment of the *Nightfall* into the Neutral Zone inevitably meant that he would be needed on the bridge more than he had expected and would therefore, be unable to spend as much time with her as he had hoped. However, when he arrived at her quarters he found them empty.

“Becky?” he called out when the door opened, wondering where she could be. Then he noticed two enlisted crew members repairing a faulty lighting panel further along the corridor and he approached them, “Have either of you seen the young woman who was staying in those quarters?” he asked.

“Yes captain.” one of the enlisted men responded, “She asked us the way to the main hangar about ten minutes ago.”

“The hangar? But that's a restricted area.” Edwards pointed out.

“Yes sir. We told her that but she claimed to have clearance. Since the hangar's fully manned anyway we told her and she headed off in that direction.”

“Oh she did did she? Well I'll soon see about that.” Edwards said and he turned around and headed off in the direction of the hangar.

The *Nightfall's* hangar was the largest internal space aboard the vessel, stretching the full length of the primary hull. At the front of the saucer section there was the massive launch door while at the rear were two smaller doors through which approaching shuttles and fighters could land without risking a collision with another craft being launched at the same time. When Edwards entered the hangar there were numerous small craft scattered about being worked on by ground crew. These included both Peregrine-class fighters and also the heavily armed assault shuttles used by the Imperial Guard and MACO companies. Based on the design of the Starfleet aero shuttle, these assault shuttles replaced the wing mounted warp drives with additional weapons intended to be used to provide fire support for the infantry platoon they could carry. It was in one of the two assault shuttles currently on the hangar deck that Edwards caught sight of Rebecca sat in the cockpit beside a MACO pilot and Edwards marched towards the shuttle.

Along the way he passed by Captain Heart who was in the hangar to supervise the work being carried out to the two assault shuttles.

“Something wrong captain?” he asked when he spotted Edwards.

“Not for long.” Edwards replied without stopping and Heart looked at the two Starfleet engineers who he had been speaking to.

“I'll be right back. Just carry on with what you were doing.” he told them before following after Edwards.

Captain Edwards walked up to the front of the assault shuttle without his daughter or the pilot noticing him, instead both of them appeared focused on the control console and Edwards knocked on the forward viewport.

“Dad?” Rebecca said, looking up in surprise.

“I need a word.” he said sternly, “Both of you.” and then he walked round to the hatch at the rear of the cockpit, reaching it just as Rebecca and the MACO pilot disembarked, “What's going on here sergeant?” he asked the pilot.

“Nothing sir.” the pilot replied.

“The hangar is a restricted area.” Edwards pointed out.

“Yes sir.” the pilot said, “But the lieutenant-” and he glanced at Rebecca before Edwards interrupted him.

“Lieutenant?” he said and he stared at Rebecca who winced, “Okay young lady, hand it over.”

“Hand what over?” Rebecca asked.

“The fake ID you're using to pass yourself off as a Starfleet officer.” Edwards said.

“I'm sorry sir, but isn't she a MACO?” the pilot said and Edwards frowned.

“I was going to tell you dad.” Rebecca said as she produced an identity card from inside her pocket and passed it to Edwards. Looking at it he saw that it was a standard MACO ID card that identified her as holding the rank of lieutenant.

“May I?” Heart said from beside Edwards and he took the ID card and looked at it closely, “This is real.” he said, “She's a lieutenant.”

"You joined the MACOs?" Edwards said to Rebecca.

"If you remember you said I should study chemistry and I took art instead. Well when it turns out you were right. There aren't that many jobs around for artists, but plenty for chemists. But the MACOs accept any degree so I joined up. I'd taken your advice about learning to fly a shuttle while at university so I qualified as a pilot straight away. I've done my basic officer's training so officially I'm a lieutenant and when I get back to earth I start advanced flight training. I just came down here to get a look at one of the shuttles I'll be learning to fly. Please don't be angry."

Edwards stared at Rebecca for a few moments.

"Go back a bit." he said, "Say it again."

"What? That I'm really a lieutenant?"

"No. Further back."

"There aren't many jobs around for artists."

"Bit further." Edwards said and Rebecca sighed.

"You were right." she said and Edwards grinned.

"Hold that thought." he said and then he tapped his combadge, "Computer begin recording." he said and he pointed at Rebecca.

"You were right dad." she said again and Edwards tapped his combadge at which point the recording was replayed.

"You were right dad." Rebecca's voice said from the combadge.

"Yes I was." Edwards said, still smiling. Then he looked at the pilot, "Carry on sergeant." he said before remembering why he had been looking for Rebecca in the first place, "Oh by the way, the ship has been called into action so I may not be able to spend as much time with you as I'd hoped."

"If the lieutenant is bored I'm sure I can find something to keep her occupied." Heart commented.

"That's true." Edwards replied, "Oh, and there's a staff meeting Captain Heart. I'll probably need your input so be ready."

"Yes sir." Heart said. Then he looked at the pilot, "Carry on sergeant." he added.

4.

Once again Edwards gathered his senior staff together in the briefing room. This time however, they were also joined by Lieutenant Commander White.

"Iconia?" Hamilton said, "I knew we'd entered the Neutral Zone but I didn't think that we were heading there after what you said Starfleet's answer was."

"Apparently Starfleet wants this done quietly." Carr replied, "That means you're not to discuss the mission with anyone not part of the crew."

"Except for this spook that's turned up I suppose." Heart said.

"Yes, where is our guest?" King asked, looking around the table.

"Probably oozing under a door somewhere." Heart responded.

"What does that mean?" Nayal asked, confused.

"Slang for intelligence agents amongst real military personnel." Heart replied.

"Ah, now I see." Nayal said and she smiled, "It does seem to fit with how my people saw the Tal Shiar."

"I see intelligence can't give us any data on the planet that's less than twenty years old." White said as he browsed through the data on the PADD he had been given.

"After what happened the *Yamato* and *Enterprise* I don't think Starfleet was in a hurry to risk entering the Neutral Zone to visit the planet again." Edwards said.

"What about the Romulan Empire?" Cole asked, looking at Nayal.

"The Imperial government was never very keen on disclosing the results of covert activities." she replied, "If ships were sent to Iconia then they didn't find anything worth announcing to the public."

"And let's face it," King added, "they'd have announced finding an Iconian bottle opener as a great technological find." and Nayal nodded in agreement.

"There is another possible source of information available to us captain." T'Lan then announced.

"Oh really cousin?" Nayal responded, "Been studying the Iconians in your spare time then?"

"Yes I have." T'Lan said, "It was logical given the use of their technology by our opponents. Though the knowledge I have been able to gain is not as great as that possessed by my father."

"Your father?" Edwards said.

"Correct captain. He lectures on the subject of ancient civilisations and has the benefit of more than a hundred years of study into the Iconians." T'Lan replied.

"And he just so happened to come aboard unannounced when the *Nightfall* was about to be deployed to Iconia." Shry commented, "Vulcan luck?"

"Are you suggesting that my father knew we were going to be sent to Iconia in advance?" T'Lan asked.

"T'Lan you weren't expecting him." Cole pointed out.

"Correct. But according to him an invitation was included in my last communication to him. It must have been corrupted." she said.

"Or he's lying cousin." Nayal suggested.

"Vulgans do not lie." T'Lan replied.

"I think you're missing the obvious." Edwards said.

"You mean that intelligence intercepted T'Lan's communication and modified to say what they wanted?" Carr asked and Edwards nodded.

"Exactly." he said, "It seems that Commander Jones has been busy."

"And devious." Cole commented.

"Green slime indeed." Hamilton added. Then he looked to his side where West was sat looking at her PADD and he saw that she was looking at the image of Iconia itself that had been included in the data, "Something bothering you?" he asked her but she did not reply.

"Lieutenant?" Edwards said, looking at West when she remained silent.

"Jenna are you okay?" Carr asked.

"Stay away." West responded quietly.

"What was that?" Edwards asked and all of a sudden West looked up.

"What?" she said, looking around with a confused look on her face.

"You suggested that we should stay away from the planet." Max told her. Then he looked at Edwards,

"Captain, Lieutenant West is correct. We should not risk approaching Iconia with the *Nightfall* until we can guarantee that the ship will not be in danger."

"In danger from what? Ghosts?" Heart asked.

"The last vessels known to have visited Iconia triggered the launch of probes from the surface that corrupted their computer systems." Max responded, "Although I am confident that our nanite hive could protect us I cannot guarantee it."

"It says right here that the probe launcher was destroyed by the crew of the Enterprise." King said, holding out his PADD so that Max could see the relevant section of the report.

"But we have no idea what may have changed in the last twenty years doctor." Max replied, "If the aliens making use of Iconia technology got it from Iconia itself then they may have reactivated or repaired any number of defensive systems."

"What about your fighters commander?" Cole asked, looking at White who nodded in return.

"We can do a low orbital pass while the *Nightfall* waits at the edge of the system." he said, "If I can take the entire squadron then we should be able to do a basic sweep of the entire planet in one pass. Enough to pick up any energy signatures or intact structures."

"The first away team should not deploy from the *Nightfall* either captain." T'Lan added, "I recommend using a runabout."

"Putting an away team in a runabout makes them vulnerable." Heart commented.

"Oh no, I know what you're about to suggest." Shry said, wincing.

"Insertion pods." Heart said.

"I knew it." Shry responded, "I hate those things."

Insertion pods were designed to insert a single soldier into territory that could not be approached by more conventional means such as by ship or using a transporter. Looking like a slightly elongated torpedo and fired from a starship's torpedo launchers they had just enough room inside for one soldier plus his weaponry and other equipment while what remained of the internal volume was taken up by a basic propulsion and guidance system and enough life support to keep the passenger alive. The pods were designed to be as stealthy as was possible short of fitting them with an illegal cloaking device and were fully automated, after launch the soldier inside could do nothing but wait for it either land or burst open at an altitude selected for them to complete their drop via parachute.

"So we insert a platoon of ground troops to take surface scans and then what?" Cole asked, "Thirty or so men can't explore an entire planet on their own."

"No, but we can clear a corridor for the rest of our ground troops to land via shuttlecraft." Shry replied.

"And then you'll have a beachhead that can cover the approach of the *Nightfall* itself." Heart added.

"That sounds workable to me." Edwards said, "I assume that you'll be wanting to include your armoured vehicles in the second wave?" he then added, looking at the two ground forces officers.

"Definitely." Heart answered and he held up his PADD, "If this is right then conditions on the surface aren't exactly friendly and we'll be able to use the personnel carriers as temporary shelters while we get our own assembled."

"Very well I'll approve all this." Edwards announced, "Lieutenant Commander White, I'll need your squadron ready to launch in full when we drop out of warp. We'll approach the system at an angle to the orbital plane so we can get closer before we have to drop to impulse power and hold at about six million kilometres. Your squadron will make one pass and one pass only and relay your sensor logs back to the *Nightfall*. After that Lieutenants Max and T'Lan and Captains Heart and Shry will decide between them the best place for us to start our search. A first wave of ground troops will land and clear the way for a second wave with armour and air support to cover the *Nightfall* entering orbit."

"Do you want my fighters to join that second wave captain?" White asked.

"No." Edwards replied, "Just in case anything does get missed by the ground forces I want your squadron to escort the *Nightfall* in and maintain a CAP in orbit. The last thing we need is to be surprised by some hidden anti-orbital weaponry that got missed in the earlier sweeps. Then once I'm satisfied that our position is secure we can begin our exploration in full. I want sensor sweeps to confirm likely search spots and our ground forces will move to secure them before engineering and scientific teams either beam down to investigate or take a shuttle in if conditions don't allow beaming."

"What if we come under Romulan attack?" King said, "We're all on our own out here."

"I'm sure that the *Nightfall* and our fighters will be capable of holding off a Romulan assault force long enough to get our people off the surface doctor." Carr replied.

"I agree." Edwards added, "But just in case I want continuous lidar sweeps to watch for any signs of cloaked ships approaching us. I know it's no guarantee but it's the best we can do without a tachyon detection grid. Now are there any more questions or does anyone else have anything they'd like to add?" and he looked around the table. Then when no-one responded he continued, "In that case meeting over. At our current speed we'll reach Iconia in just under two hours I believe and I want everyone ready to go by then."

"Mind if I draft Lieutenant Edwards to help prep our gear?" Heart asked.

"Who's Lieutenant Edwards?" Hamilton asked.

"Oh haven't you heard?" White responded, "The captain's daughter ran off and joined the MACOs." then he looked at Edwards and smiling he added, "She told me on the flight here sir."

"Yes and I've heard about what you told her in return lieutenant commander." Edwards replied, "Be grateful I need you too much for this mission to accidentally test fire the ship's phasers right as you launch." and White's face fell, "Captain Heart you may feel free to draft whatever help you need from personnel that are

not otherwise engaged." Edwards continued, "And T'Lan you had better speak to your father about what help he may be able to offer. In the mean time Lieutenant Commander Carr and I will brief Commander Jones on what we're planning. He's stated that he's here only as an observer but frankly I'm not so sure about that given how intelligence seems to have lured T'Lan's father here. Dismissed."

"Show Commander Jones in when he gets here Lieutenant." Edwards told West as he and Carr headed into his ready room.

"Yes sir." she replied as she took her seat at the operations console near the front of the bridge.

The door to the ready room slid shut behind Carr and she and Edwards made their way towards his desk.

"So Becky joined the MACOs huh?" she said.

"Yes, that came out of the blue." Edwards replied turning around and leaning against the edge of his desk instead of taking his seat on the far side.

"So how do you feel about that? If it was Nikki that had gone off and signed up without telling me first I'd be furious." Carr said.

"The MACOs should be good for her. Of course I'd be happier if she'd joined Starfleet like me but I doubt she'd have met the requirements for a quick commission and it would have taken her another four years to qualify." Edwards said and then he smiled, "Besides you don't know the best of it." he added.

"What?" Carr asked and Edwards tapped his combadge.

"Playback recording." he said.

"You were right dad." Rebecca's voice said and Carr gasped.

"No." she said, "Let me hear that again."

"You were right dad." the recording said again when Edwards tapped his combadge again and then he taped it a third time, "You were right dad."

"How did you manage that?" Carr asked, "I'm a parent and I've never been able to get Nikki to say that."

"You need to be able to do these things when you're a starship captain." Edwards replied jokingly.

"Tell me." Carr said, "I need to know. Do you want me to beg? Because I'll beg, look." and she got down on her knees, "Tell me oh great one. David, I'll do absolutely anything you want."

"Are we disturbing you?" Commander Jones asked from the doorway and both Carr and Edwards looked around to see Jones and West standing there.

"Oh no." Carr muttered.

"Err, you asked me to show the commander in sir." West said.

"Oh yes of course." Edwards replied as he reached down to help Carr back to her feet and then to a seat beside him, "Do come in commander. Take a seat. Lieutenant you may return to your duties."

"Thank you captain." West replied, quickly backing out of the ready room and hurrying back to her post.

"What happened?" Cole asked from the central command chair he occupied while Edwards and Carr were in the captain's ready room.

"Something I'll probably see every time I close my eyes from now on." she answered.

Meanwhile inside Edwards ready room Jones took a seat while Carr did her best to avoid eye contact with him.

"I assume that you've formulated a plan for exploring Iconia captain." he said.

"I have." Edwards replied, "My senior officers have reviewed the data you provided and put together a plan that will allow us to deploy a sizeable force to the surface while still protecting the *Nightfall* against any nasty surprises that may be waiting for us down there."

"Care to let me in on this plan?" Jones asked.

"In time commander." Edwards responded, "But first I have a question for you." and he leant forwards, "Did Starfleet Intelligence intercept the personal communications of one of my officers to lure a civilian to my ship?"

Jones smiled.

"Starfleet Intelligence located an expert on the subject matter and made them available to you." he said.

"Made them available?" Carr exclaimed, "Commander with respect you conscripted someone and didn't even have the manners to tell them that was what you were doing. Aside from the invasion of privacy that goes with intercepting someone's private mail there's no way that you can square that with Starfleet regulations."

"I did what was necessary under the circumstances." Jones replied.

"So the end justifies the means does it?" Edwards commented, "Well we'll see what Starfleet Command has to say about that. Because I'm entering all this in my log and I'll be referring it to the Judge Advocate General's office when we return to Federation territory."

"You do that if you must captain." Jones said, "But until then you have a mission to carry out and I expect you to do just that."

"Oh I take my duties seriously commander." Edwards replied, "And as part of those duties I look out for my crew when I feel they're being unfairly treated."

Jones smiled again.

"I would expect no less of you captain. Now perhaps you could explain to me how you intend to carry out your orders." he said.

Edwards leant back in his chair again.

"Our fighters will conduct an initial sweep to scan the planet while keeping the *Nightfall* at a safe distance. Then we'll insert an initial force of ground troops to clear the way for a follow up wave that will provide us with cover to bring in the *Nightfall*. At that point we'll begin our search according to whatever we find when we get there and the final decision on how the mission proceeds will be mine, not yours. Does that satisfy you commander?" he said.

"Fully captain. As I said when we first spoke I am here purely as an observer." Jones answered.

The insertion pods were laid out in a row in the *Nightfall's* forward torpedo magazine. Each of the pods needed to be inspected individually to make sure that it was fully functional. Even the slightest deviation from the minimum operating thresholds could mean disaster for the unfortunate passenger it carried. Checking the pods was a combined effort between the *Nightfall's* engineering crew and also the ground troops who were expected to use them.

"So have you ever ridden in one of these?" Nikki asked as she looked across one of the pods at Rebecca who now wore her MACO uniform and its lieutenant's rank markings.

"Ridden in one? I've never even seen one before." Rebecca replied, "I only got my commission two weeks ago. Carrying out stealth drops in these are considered a specialist skill. I think I'll stick with assault shuttles thank you very much."

"Everything in order ladies?" Shry asked as he entered the room to see how the preparations for the drop were going.

"Oh captain, I didn't see you there." Rebecca replied, standing up straight as he approached, "We have thirty pods confirmed as ready and two with faults. To save time we're ignoring the faulty ones and just drawing replacements from storage."

"Very good." Shry replied, "Do you know what they say about what happens if one of these things malfunctions in flight?"

"I've got a horrible feeling that you're going to tell us." Nikki replied and Shry smiled.

"If you're in one when it goes wrong no-one will bother digging you out of the hole in the ground you'll make on impact. They'll just treat the pod as your coffin and fill it in on top of you to save time." he said, "In other words, make sure that you get this right."

Iconia had the look of a dead world when observed on the main viewscreen at the front of the *Nightfall's* bridge. There were no oceans, no forests or any sign of habitation. But at some point in the distant past this planet had been the centre of a great empire that spanned the Milky Way galaxy. If current historical theories were correct the technology used by the ancient Iconians had inspired so much jealousy and fear among their neighbours that they had joined together to destroy the Iconians and the damage wrought to Iconia itself was the proof of how effective their attack had been.

The senior bridge officers were at their stations as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp far from Iconia, each of them strapped into their seat and ready to act should the ship come under attack. Given the possibility of encountering Romulan vessels, Nayal sat beside Edwards as she often did but on this occasion there were also two other individuals who were not part of the *Nightfall's* crew present. An extra seat had been set up close to T'Lan's science station so that Saron could sit down as he monitored the sensor readouts along with his daughter. Because T'Lan also needed to monitor some of the *Nightfall's* systems she made use of the headset she like the other bridge officers wore to provide her with this information while leaving her console dedicated to displaying what the ship's sensors picked up. But while Saron got to sit down Commander Jones was forced to stand as he watched over what Cole was doing at tactical. Like T'Lan, Cole had configured his console to show only some of what he needed to see while using his headset for everything else, preferring to keep Jones in the dark as much as possible. News had rapidly spread about how Jones had manipulated T'Lan's communications and as a result the crew were not well disposed to him.

"Lieutenant West give the word." Edwards said as he stared at the viewscreen and took note of the extra data being fed to him via his headset concerning gravity, surface temperature and the increased level of radioactivity compared to an ordinary class-M planet.

"Bridge to hangar." West said, activating the intercom, "Scramble. Scramble. Scramble."

In the *Nightfall's* main hangar the twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters of White's squadron were lined up in two staggered columns. As soon as the order came to scramble White and his wingman, Quarterback, who were positioned at the front of their respective columns triggered the thrusters of their fighters and accelerated out of the hangar. Then once clear of the ship they brought their impulse engines on line and raced towards Iconia. Behind them the rest of the squadron launched in the same way, with each pair of fighters waiting until the previous one was clear before following them out of the hangar.

"Okay good launch guys." White broadcast, "Now form up and stand by to make a single orbit at an altitude of one thousand kilometres. Angle sensors downwards and link the feed back to the *Nightfall*. I don't expect any ground fire but raise shields just in case."

"Copy that Snowman." the pilot known as Quarter responded, "Shields up and ready to start my sweep."

The twelve fighters then arranged themselves into a single line side by side as they flew towards Iconia.

White angled his fighter so that it would pass close by the planet without entering its atmosphere and the rest of his squadron promptly matched his manoeuvre so that their formation was maintained. The fighters then held this course as it took them close enough to Iconia that its gravity began to pull them towards the planet. Thanks to the speed at which they were travelling however, they would not be pulled down into the atmosphere and crash. Instead the gravitational pull dragged them around the planet just as the pilots wanted while their sensors searched down through the clouds of dust that masked so much of the world and the results of the scan were transmitted back to the *Nightfall* in real time.

"We are receiving telemetry from the fighters now captain." T'Lan announced as the first of the data packets began to feed back to the *Nightfall*.

"Engineering this is the bridge." Carr said, "Max are you getting this as well?"

"Affirmative commander." Max responded as he watched the results of the scans from the main engineering console, "Both Captain Heart and Captain Shry are here with me as well." he added without bothering to mention the presence of Nikki and Rebecca on the opposite side of the free standing console.

"Anything catch your eye Max?" Edwards asked.

"Surface temperatures are low. Unsurprising given the amount of dust in the atmosphere to keep out sunlight. The range appears to vary from minus forty to plus five degrees." Max replied.

"So a bit chilly then." Heart said.

"I guess that means my men better go in as the first wave." Shry added, "We're used to low temperatures. On Andoria plus five is a heatwave."

"In addition there appear to be several large magnetic masses that may indicate what were the location of cities captain." Max continued.

"There are no active energy sources captain." T'Lan added.

"By this time both the *Yamato* and the *Enterprise* had triggered the launch of probes from the surface." Saron commented, "Therefore it is logical to assume that the damage inflicted by the crew of the *Enterprise* has not been repaired."

"Lucky for us." Hamilton commented.

"The *Enterprise* detected no other signs of the Iconian civilisation lieutenant." Saron pointed out, "If they destroyed all that remained of this planet's inhabitants then our mission here is a failure. I would not call that lucky."

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman." White's voice announced from his fighter as the squadron appeared from around the far side of the planet and broke away from it using their thrusters, "Sweep is complete, returning to base. We'll take up positions around you in just under three minutes."

"Understood Snowman." Edwards replied, "Good work, we have your sensor logs and are going through them." then he turned to the science station, "So T'Lan, any ideas?"

"Captain I recommend starting at one of the ruined cities." she answered.

"I concur captain." Max added, overhearing the exchange over the open intercom, "Even if there is no functional technology remaining there is likely to be a higher concentration of artefacts that could be reverse engineered in what were the more densely populated areas."

"Captain I would suggest selecting an equatorial city." Saron said.

"Why?" Carr asked.

"From what little we know of the Iconians it appears that they made use of orbital elevators on some of the worlds they colonised." Saron explained, "It is therefore logical to assume that they built at least one on their home world as they developed the technology."

"And orbital elevators only work with an equatorial base station to operate from." Edwards said, nodding in agreement.

"Captain there is one problem still to consider." Max said.

"There always is." Edwards commented, "Go ahead Max."

"Captain this planet has been uninhabited for more than two hundred thousand years. We need to determine the rate at which its orbit has shifted so we can calculate where the equator was located at the time of the bombardment that forced its evacuation."

"How long will that take?" Carr asked.

"I can prepare a computer program to perform the calculation." T'Lan replied, "We know the mass of the planet and its rate of rotation about its axis and the star at the centre of the system. Plus we have the measurements from the *Enterprise's* logs."

"But won't you need a fixed reference point to make use of the *Enterprise's* logs?" Cole asked.

"We have one lieutenant commander." Saron replied, "The facility that controlled the probes that were launched when starships approached the planet."

"I thought that was destroyed." Nayal said.

"It was." T'Lan told her, "But the location of that facility can still be determined by the fallout from the explosion caused by the destruction of the probe hangar." and on the main viewscreen she zoomed in on an

area of the planet that now looked no different to the rest, "This was the location of the probe control facility," she said.

"Okay so how long to write your program and get the results?" Edwards asked.

"I estimate no more than fifteen minutes captain." T'Lan replied.

"That gives my men time to get into the pods." Shry commented.

"Then let's not hang around any longer than we have to." Edwards said, "T'Lan begin your calculations. Captain Shry get your men into their insertion pods and Captain Shry prepare the rest of our ground forces for the follow up wave."

With a total of fifteen torpedo launchers, most of which faced forwards, the platoon of Imperial Guard in their insertion pods could be launched in a matter of seconds. Inside his pod, Shry felt the sudden acceleration despite the inertial dampers designed to minimise this. Glancing down he saw the display that told him the progress of the pod as it shot out of one of the *Nightfall's* torpedo tubes and sped towards Iconia. Icons on the display also informed him of the positions of the other pods that were to deliver his platoon. Given the violent dust storms that appeared to plague Iconia it had been decided that the safest way to land the Andorians on the surface was for their pods to carry them all the way down, firing braking thrusters at the last moment to slow their descent. But for now all any of them could do was wait as the automated guidance systems of the pods steered them towards their landing zone in what had once been an equatorial city at the heart of the Iconian empire.

The pods all approached their target as intended, entering the atmosphere of Iconia on a heading that allowed them to drop in a ballistic trajectory towards the ground. Only when the winds in the upper atmosphere buffeted them off course did they need to fire their thrusters again to bring them back on target. This continued until they were just a few hundred metres above the ground and falling at a speed high enough to smash through even solid rock if they were to impact without first slowing down, at which point their thrusters fired again. But this time it was not a subtle burn intended to make a course correction without making the pods' positions obvious for anyone scanning for them, instead it was a full power burst that the Andorians inside the pods felt just as they had felt their launch only this time in reverse as the pods decelerated rapidly.

Landing vertically, the pods settled on legs that sprang out from their shells to support them as they burst open suddenly to allow their passengers to disembark. The pods were linked and all landed within a handful seconds of one another so that when they opened the Andorian who leapt out did not have to worry about being caught in the down blast of another pod coming in to land.

"Move!" Shry yelled, his voice carried over the platoon's communication net, "Everyone to that ridge to the north. The city should be on the other side of it."

The Andorians hurried towards the ridge that was in fact the edge of a crater left by a bomb dropped two hundred thousand years earlier. Most of the crater's rim had been eroded over the millennia but this small section still retained its distinct shape and it gave the Andorians some cover as they spread out into a line and aimed their weapons over the ridge at what lay beyond.

Had Shry not already been told that he was looking down at what had once been a city he would probably not have realised that that was what he was looking at. Every last structure of the ancient city had been destroyed during the massive orbital bombardment that had ended the Iconian empire and since then with no-one to maintain even the ruins that remained these too had collapsed as the weather took its toll on them over the centuries. Now the area looked just like the barren and uneven wilderness that covered the rest of the planet. Shry dropped the scanning goggles mounted on the front of his helmet down into position and looked around the area, searching for any signs of activity or recent habitation.

"Anybody got eyes on anything?" he asked as his scans produced nothing tangible but all of the responses were negative. At this point Shry activated the communicator built into his armour, "Shry to *Nightfall*," he said, his signal relayed by the booster unit in his insertion pod, "Area is secure, second wave may commence their drop."

Captain Heart's MACO company plus some of the Imperial Guard who had not been part of the first wave were already waiting aboard the six shuttles designed to carry them into battle. Most carried a full platoon of infantry but there were two that were somewhat bulkier even though they carried only a single squad of troops. The reason for the extra bulk was that these shuttles were designed to deliver the ground vehicles used by the troops to the surface. Right now each one held a single wheeled fighting vehicle but there were several smaller vehicles standing by to be beamed down to the surface when the *Nightfall* itself finally entered orbit over Iconia.

"Second wave you are cleared to launch." West's voice announced and just as the fighters had done earlier the troop carrying shuttles now accelerated out of the hangar, engaging their impulse engines as soon as they were clear.

Unlike the insertion pods that had relied on stealth to protect them as they made the trip from the *Nightfall* to

the surface the shuttles had more conventional defences against attack and their pilots raised their shields and armed their weapons. This turned out to be an unnecessary precaution however, the shuttles entering the atmosphere and descending towards the city without coming under attack. Buffeted by the storm activity in the upper atmosphere the shuttles kept on course, guided by beacons set up by the first wave of Imperial Guard troops and as they neared the city there was a flash of light.

"Captain Heart, I have a visual signal from the ground." the pilot of Heart's shuttle told him.

"Good, take us down." Heart replied and he stood up, "Okay men," he announced even though not all of the platoon in his shuttle were male, "this is it. You know the drill." and the other MACOs in the shuttle also got to their feet, steadying themselves on the handholds set into the ceiling.

Facing the main door at the rear of the shuttle the MACOs formed four columns based on the rows of seats in which they had been sat with one row along each wall and two more back to back in the centre. All of a sudden the door at the back of the shuttle dropped open even though the shuttle was still in flight and the MACOs braced themselves. Then as the shuttle hovered just a metre above the ground there was a klaxon and a green light appeared over the door.

"Go!" Heart yelled. He need not have bothered with this order, every one of his troops knew what the light meant and they rushed forwards. Running down the ramp in their columns the MACOs split up into their squads as the platoon command section and Heart's company command section followed them.

"Captain Heart! Over here!" Shry's voice called out over Heart's communicator and he looked around to see a cluster of figures crouched beside what looked like a rocky outcrop, one of whom was waving towards him.

"Shry!" Heart called out in return over the noise of the shuttles that were delivering the rest of his company, "Found anything?"

"You mean apart from dust? No. I'd say that this place is still as dead as it has been for the last two hundred thousand years." Shry answered as he looked around, "Think we should make the call?"

"Give us a few minutes to get set up. The last thing we need is some ancient super weapon coming to life and taking out the *Nightfall* and stranding us here."

Edwards waited nervously for word from the surface.

"Captain, I have Captain Heart on the line." West announced and Edwards breathed a sigh of relief.

"Put him on." he said.

"*Nightfall* do you read me?" Heart's voice asked.

"Loud and clear captain. What's your status?" Edwards responded.

"We've secured the drop zone captain. I've got squads set up with scanners to watch for any signs of activity."

"Are there any so far?" Carr said.

"Not yet commander. It looks like nobody's home. You can begin your approach now." Heart answered.

"Very good captain." Edwards said, "We're on our way in. We'll be with you soon."

"Helm set for geosynchronous orbit above the drop zone." Carr ordered.

"Aye commander, course laid in." Hamilton replied as the *Nightfall* began to move closer to the planet.

"Tactical keep our shields up just in case." Edwards added, "And have phasers ready as well."

"No torpedoes captain?" Jones asked.

"It may not concern intelligence commander," Edwards said without bothering to turn around, "but amongst fleet commanders it is generally considered poor form to engage in torpedo strikes against surface targets when our own people are down there. Our phasers will be enough to protect us if we come under fire and torpedoes can be loaded soon enough if they are needed."

"Basically just sit back and watch." Cole commented, glancing around at Jones, "That is what you're here for isn't it?"

"Of course." Jones replied, smiling.

The sparkling of transporter activity made it easy to spot the away team that beamed down from the *Nightfall*. Led by Carr, it also consisted of Cole, King, Max and T'Lan.

"Welcome to Iconia lieutenant commander." Heart said as soon as the away team had fully materialised, "I'm afraid you've missed the holiday season."

"By several thousand years from the looks of it." Cole commented.

"So have you found anything of interest yet captain?" Carr asked but Heart shook his head.

"No." he replied, "Shry and I have had our men scouring the area for any signs of anything left. But the few fragments we've found have been worn flat over the centuries so we can't tell if they were supposed to be the shape they are now or not."

"What about sub-surface structures?" Max asked as he looked around, making use of his Borg implants to assume the role that T'Lan was putting her tricorder to as she started to scan the area around them.

"Can't tell." Heart answered, "Any entrances that may have existed have been filled in and covered by this damned dust that covers everything here."

"The metallic mass within the ground is disrupting my scans as well." T'Lan added, "It is not possible to tell if I am detecting subsurface structures or what remains of the foundations of those that existed above ground before their destruction."

"I'm more concerned about what's blowing around in these winds." King said as he studied his tricorder, "I'm picking up elevated background radiation and numerous toxic compounds all around us. I wouldn't recommend staying round too long."

"A pity none of the civilisations that did this are still around to tell us what this place looked like before they bombed it from orbit." Cole commented.

"Commander I'm loath to suggest this but we may want to consider using explosives." Heart said.

"Explosives?" Carr replied, "What for?"

"Well if we bury a few charges and trigger them we may uncover something worth finding." Heart told her.

"More likely we'll just throw even more dust and debris into the air." Cole responded.

"Got a better idea?" Heart asked.

"Not at the moment." Cole answered.

"Then we have no choice." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*, come in please." she signalled.

"*Nightfall* here commander." Edwards responded, "Go ahead."

"Captain we can't find anything on the surface. Whatever's left here has been buried whether it started off underground or not and all the metal in the ground is interfering with our scans."

"Understood commander. How do you want to proceed?" Edwards asked.

"Captain Heart has suggested using explosives to see if we can uncover anything." Carr replied.

"Explosives? That sounds a bit extreme to me." Edwards said.

"An explosive shock wave could also damage fragile artefacts captain." Saron pointed out from the science station and Edwards nodded in agreement.

Then he frowned briefly.

"T'Lan what about using the lidar?" he asked.

"Lidar is no more likely to penetrate the ground than our more conventional scans captain." T'Lan replied from the surface.

"But if we triggered a small explosive charge on the surface wouldn't it send a shock wave through the ground that would show up on lidar?" Edwards asked.

"That is correct captain." T'Lan answered.

"And we can monitor the shock wave to see where there are voids underground." Max added.

"How big a charge are we talking about?" Heart asked.

"One of your photon grenades set to level four should be sufficient to trigger a shock wave that can be monitored." Max said, "Though I should mention that this will require the lidar system to be focused on the surface rather than watching for cloaked Romulans."

"I think that's a chance worth taking Max." Edwards said. Then he looked at West, "Lieutenant can you make the changes to the lidar?"

"Yes captain." West replied, "It should only take a few seconds." then she adjusted the lidar system so that the laser beams it emitted were focused downwards rather than sweeping the space around the *Nightfall*.

With this accomplished she then looked up again, "All set captain." she said.

"*Nightfall* to away team, we're all set here." Edwards signalled and Carr looked at Heart.

"Over to you captain." she said and he smiled.

"Okay everyone get clear." he called out as he strode away from Carr, pulling a photon grenade from his webbing and adjusting the yield setting to the one Max had advised. Removing the pin he held up the grenade and yelled, "Fire in the hole!" before he hurled it into an area of seemingly empty ground and dived for cover.

A few seconds later there was a bright flash that was followed by a loud 'boom!' as the grenade exploded. The setting had not been particularly high, one designed to incapacitate rather than kill but it was still enough to send small pieces of debris flying away from the epicentre of the blast. Looking up from where he had taken cover, Heart saw that there was now a thick cloud of dust and smoke where the grenade had gone off. "*Nightfall*, tell me you got that." he transmitted to the orbiting starship.

When the grenade had exploded it had produced vibrations through the ground beneath it. With the beams of the lidar system focused on the ground in the area these vibrations had caused the beams themselves to vibrate slightly as well and it was these vibrations that West now studied to determine areas where a significantly lower ground density had reduced the strength of the vibrations. Such areas would suggest the possibility of an empty space hidden underground and would give the away team and infantry forces on the surface somewhere to begin their search.

"Anything interesting lieutenant?" Edwards asked but West did not reply, instead just staring at her console, "Lieutenant?" Edwards said.

"Hey Jenna!" Hamilton shouted and West jumped.

"Don't do that Bradley." she said.

"If you two are done with the informal chit-chat then maybe West can answer my question." Edwards said, "Have you found anything?"

"Oh, err, yes captain." West answered, "It looks like there are numerous underground structures remaining, probably basement levels for some of the buildings. But there is also a larger complex below these."

"Can you give us a location?" Edwards asked.

"About two hundred metres north of the away team's position." West answered.

"Commander Carr, West has found something." Edwards signalled to the away team, "Head north about two hundred metres and try digging there."

"Understood captain." Carr responded.

Accompanied by Captain Heart, the away team headed in the direction indicated by Edwards.

"Doesn't look any different to me." King commented as he looked around.

"Nowhere does doctor." Heart replied, "But this is where Captain Edwards told us to dig. I'll get some men on it right away."

"Actually I'd advise against that." King said and he looked at Carr, "Lieutenant commander, the more we exert ourselves the more of the toxins in the atmosphere we'll inhale. It'll still take some time for the exposure to be dangerous but it's all cumulative."

"Then what do you suggest?" Carr asked.

"How about we just use our phasers?" Cole suggested.

"That should do." King said.

"We should take care to avoid any refractive minerals." T'Lan pointed out.

"So we just back up a bit." Cole replied as he drew his phaser. Then the team backed away and both he and Heart took aim at the ground in front of them before firing their phasers. Both men maintained the beams from their weapons as the ground in front of them first glowed brightly and then disintegrated entirely.

"That's it!" Heart called out as he saw the glow from the phasers break open in the middle as the beams penetrated down to the subterranean chambers below. Then the team rushed forwards to see what they had uncovered.

The phasers had burrowed down at an angle until they reached the complex beneath them and given the lack of light sources from inside the newly dug tunnel now that the phaser beams had been shut off it was in pitch blackness. Heart raised his rifle and pointed it down the tunnel, activating the compact flash light mounted on the side of his weapon and shining it down into the hole.

"Well there's definitely something down there." Carr said.

"And the air's probably cleaner." King commented, "We should get down there and see what we've found."

"I'll have my men split into fire teams to cover as much area as possible." Heart added.

"One moment captain." Max said and he looked at Carr, "Lieutenant commander, searching the underground complex is one matter but making sense of what is found is another."

"Lieutenant Maximillian is correct." T'Lan added, "We will need science and engineering personnel from the *Nightfall*."

"Very well." Carr said, nodding, "Captain Heart's men can begin to map the complex while Shry's continue to explore the surface. Max you go back to the *Nightfall* and put together engineering teams."

"I would recommend bringing my father down here as well." T'Lan added, "He may be able to assist us with

understanding what we find.”

“Is bringing a civilian down here safe?” King asked.

“We'll assign him a minder.” Cole replied, “Max can use a couple of my security staff for that.”

“Yes lieutenant commander. I will make the appropriate arrangements.” Max said.

“Good.” Carr said, “Oh and don't forget to bring back plenty of palm beacons. I'm sure I'm not the only one who finds having my way lit by those little lights on the MACOs' weapons creepy.”

“So how did you end up doing this anyway?” Rebecca asked as she set down an equipment case in front of Nikki.

“Ah.” Nikki replied, “I wanted to go to university but that idiot of a ship's counsellor we've got told them I was some sort of juvenile delinquent and they all turned me down flat. So mom and Captain Edwards signed me up as an intern. A couple of years of this and I can try again for university. So how did you end up as a soldier?”

“What you mean dad hasn't played you his recording?”

“What recording?” Nikki asked.

“The recording he made when I told him he was right about how I should have taken chemistry instead of art.” Rebecca replied and Nikki frowned.

“You admitted your dad was right?” she said, “Oh great, you do realise that now my mom is going to expect me to admit when she's right as well?”

“Sorry. I wasn't thinking.” Rebecca said, “By the way, what is going on between your mom and my dad? Are they together or something? Because I can't get a straight answer out of dad.” and Nikki groaned.

“It's so obvious they're an item.” she said, “But they keep dancing around behind everyone's backs. Did you know they were found naked and handcuffed together in bed?”

Rebecca winced.

“Good grief, that's an image that's going to stick with me. Thanks a lot.” she said.

“Call it getting my own back.” Nikki said and then she moved to stand beside Rebecca, “Now tell me what you think of that.” she said and she pointed towards a closed doorway.

“It's a door.” Rebecca answered, frowning.

“Yes but it's closed.” Nikki said, “It's always closed. In fact if you go up to it it stays closed.”

“Then it's broken.”

“No it isn't. If it was broken then it would be in the schedule to be repaired and it isn't.” Nikki told her, “Look, the ship's schematics say that behind that door is a workshop but no-one can say what sort of tools are in there. I asked around and the last time anyone saw it open was during the *Nightfall's* maiden flight when Nayal brought something aboard. A gift from her captain or something. Whatever it was she showed it to your dad and Max in there.”

“Nayal's that Romulan woman isn't she? A crate full of Romulan ale perhaps?” Rebecca suggested.

“That's what some people say but I'm not so sure. The captain has several bottles of that stashed in his quarters. Whatever is in there is something that the captain and Max are worried about enough to keep it locked away but think it important enough to hang on to.”

“Miss Carr I need you to join my engineering team.” Max's voice suddenly called out from behind Nikki and Rebecca and both young women spun around to face him.

“Me? I get to join the away team?” Nikki asked in response.

“Yes. We need as many personnel as we can get to join us.” Max replied.

“Will that include me?” Rebecca asked.

“I think not Lieutenant Edwards. Captain Heart already has his entire company of MACOs to call on and you are not fully trained in the use of their weapons.” Max said, “However, if you were to discuss it with Captain Edwards-”

“No.” Rebecca interrupted, “He'll only freak out if I ask to beam down to some weird alien planet.”

Then Max turned to Nikki.

“I expect you to be in transporter room one in ten minutes.” he told her.

7.

When Nikki entered the transporter room with a tool kit slung over her shoulder she found Saron already there with a pair of security guards. Then the door slid open behind her again, Max and West entered and Nikki noticed that both of them were carrying phasers.

"Do I get one of those?" she asked.

"Have you passed the weapons handling test?" West replied.

"No but-" Nikki began.

"Then no." West said as they all stepped onto the transporter pad.

"It's not fair." Nikki muttered.

"But it is logical." Saron commented before the transporter operator engaged the transporter and the interior of the *Nightfall* vanished to be replaced by the surface of Iconia.

Both Nikki and West flinched when they materialised, surprised by the amount of dust blowing about in the air. On the other hand the two security guards seemed to take the harsh conditions in their stride while both Max and Saron appeared totally unaffected by them.

"This way." Max said, "The complex is underground." and advanced towards where Cole and Heart had blasted their way into the underground complex.

Work had already begun to turn the chamber that the tunnel to the surface connected to into a command post with lights being erected around the room and computer and communication equipment being set up in the middle.

"I brought a copy of the lidar scan results." West said as she approached Carr and she held out a PADD.

"Great." Carr replied, "Captain Heart's men are already trying to map this place but having some idea of how far it stretches for would be a definite advantage."

"Lieutenant Commander Carr." Saron then said, "Is there anything that requires my attention?"

"Yes as a matter of fact there is." Carr said, "T'Lan is looking at some markings on the walls that don't match anything that we've got in the Iconian language files that Commander Jones provided us with. Perhaps you can figure out what they mean."

"Of course." Saron said, "Just tell me in which direction she is located."

"And in the mean time I ought to join in the exploration." Max added, "Perhaps Lieutenant West and Nikki should join me."

"Nikki?" Carr said, frowning, "What's she doing here?"

"My job." Nikki replied, "I thought I wasn't to be treated any different to any other Starfleet intern."

"Okay go." Carr said, still obviously displeased that her daughter was present in the underground complex.

"According to the lidar scan there are several larger chambers on a lower level that may be worth a look." West commented.

"Has a way down been located yet?" Max asked.

"A MACO fire team found a shaft that runs down pretty far that way." Carr replied, pointing, "But no-one's been down it yet to see what's at the bottom."

"Then we shall be the first." Max said and he turned to walk towards the shaft.

In space around Iconia, White and his squadron continued to patrol around the *Nightfall*. Despite the cramped interior of his fighter it was perfectly capable of maintaining life support for several weeks, though few pilots would be able to operate for that long alone.

White continued to scan not only nearby space but also the surface of Iconia and he was just starting to consider ordering some of his pilots back to the *Nightfall* to rest when he noticed an unusual reading on his terrain mapping system.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman." he transmitted.

"Snowman this is *Nightfall*. Go ahead." Edwards replied.

"*Nightfall* I'm sending you something I'm picking up. I didn't notice it before but it looks more obvious from this angle. It's located about six kilometres from the drop zone." and he sent a copy of what he was looking at back to the *Nightfall*.

Edwards had the image brought up on the main viewscreen and almost immediately he, Hamilton and Noyal realised what it was that White had discovered.

"Oh this can't be good." Edwards said as he looked at the raised area of ground.

"Noyal is that what it looks like?" Hamilton asked as he looked away from his instruments and towards the Romulan woman.

"I can't be certain you understand." she replied, "But yes, it looks to me like that's one of my people's scout ships buried under the dirt there."

"Captain are you going to investigate that?" Jones asked.

"Of course I am." Edwards replied, "Though I thought you were here just to observe, not interrogate me about my strategy."

Like the rest of his company, Captain Shry had wrapped a scarf around his face and pulled goggles over his eyes to help protect them from the dust being blown about in the atmosphere. Respirators would have kept them from breathing in any of the toxins known to be present but the reduction in awareness that came with wearing the face covering masks was not considered worth the benefits offered. According to Doctor King there was little to worry about so long no-one remained on the surface too long.

His company was deployed to search through what remained of the city, now mostly long buried beneath yet more dust. But here and there some small fragment had survived the millennia and the Andorians recovered it, logged its location and placed it in storage to be shipped back to the *Nightfall*.

"Captain Shry do you read me?" Edwards signalled from the orbiting starship.

"Right here *Nightfall*." Shry replied, "Go ahead."

"Captain we've picked something up about six kilometres from your location. I need you to go and take a look." Edwards told him.

"Care to elaborate captain?" Shry asked.

"It's something odd that showed up on Commander White's terrain mapping. It looks like it could be a Romulan scout ship. I'm sending Nayal down to assist you just in case it turns out some of her people are down there. She'll have the precise location for you." Edwards told him.

"Understood *Nightfall*. I'll put together a platoon to check it out. The best way to do this will be to use the utility vehicles to get us there while one of our shuttles does a low level pass to see if they can make anything more out. I'll leave the armour and the other shuttles here with the rest of my men just in case there are people hanging around elsewhere." Shry said.

"Understood captain. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said before the signal was cut off.

Shry then turned to his men.

"Number one platoon mount up in the utility vehicles. We have a suspected Romulan target to investigate. We wait for Sub-lieutenant Nayal to arrive and then we roll out." he called out. Then he activated his communicator, "Shry to shuttle one. Come in."

"Shuttle one here captain." the shuttle's pilot replied.

"Sergeant I need you to get the co-ordinates of a suspected Romulan vessel from the *Nightfall* and perform a low level pass over that area. I'm taking a platoon in on the ground to investigate and I want you to cover us."

"Understood captain. I'll be your eyes in the sky."

It was then that Shry saw the glow of a transporter signature as Nayal beamed down to the surface. Like T'Lan and Saron before her, the dust did not seem to bother her, Romulans possessing the same inner eyelid as Vulcans despite the fact that before its destruction Romulus had been a far more hospitable planet than Vulcan.

Sub-lieutenant!" Shry called out, "Over here, we're just waiting on you before we leave." and Nayal hurried towards him before both climbed into one of the lightweight utility vehicles that had been beamed down from *Nightfall*.

"This is where you need to go." Nayal said as she handed a PADD to the Andorian sat in the driver's seat.

The driver looked at the PADD and then nodded before starting the engine and the vehicles began to move off, all falling into line behind the one carrying Nayal and Shry who knew where it was that they had to go. As they drove towards the suspected scout ship they heard the roar of an engine overhead and looking up they saw one of the assault shuttles that had brought the second wave of troops to the surface fly low overhead and start to circle some distance in front of the column.

"That must be the target site." Shry said before his communicator came to life.

"Shuttle one to Captain Shry."

"Shry here. Go ahead shuttle one."

"Captain there does seem to be something buried under the dust here but I can't tell if it's an attempt to conceal it or if the wind just buried it naturally."

"Understood shuttle one. Are there any signs of life?"

"Negative captain. If there's anyone at home down there then they're keeping a low profile."

"Understood. Thanks shuttle one. Over and out."

The column of vehicles came to a halt about a hundred metres from the scout ship and their Andorian passengers rapidly disembarked along with Nayal. The Romulan woman was armed with a standard issue Starfleet phaser-II while the Andorians carried their assault rifles. But on this occasion they were not prepared to fire the projectile weapons that had been designed to be used against Borg drones, instead they advanced towards the scout ship with their fingers on the trigger of the phasers mounted beneath the barrels of their rifles. With all the dust in the air the energy weapons were not prone to jamming like the larger rifles were.

From the ground it was obvious that there was a relatively small starship hidden under a thick layer of dust. While the upper surface of the ship and the side facing where most of the wind had come from were covered and blended in against the ground the underside of the ship and the sides facing away from the wind were still exposed, though the typical green Romulan paint scheme was starting to come away.

"Captain we have an open hatch over here." one of the Andorian squad leaders signalled and Shry looked at Nayal.

"That's not normal." she told him, "But then I'm surprised that the crew landed their ship here to being with rather than staying in orbit and beaming down."

Lifting the protective goggles from his eyes, Shry dropped his helmet mounted scanner back into position and started to study the Romulan vessel more closely.

"I don't see any signs of damage." he said, "Other than to the paintwork that is."

"And no tracks leading to or from it." Nayal added.

"That doesn't mean much." Shry pointed out, "All this dust and wind will have covered our tracks within an hour of us leaving."

Nayal sighed.

"I suppose we'd better go inside and take a look then." she said.

Shry's command squad hurried towards the open hatch and Shry himself was the first inside. He found himself inside an air lock that had a liberal covering of dust on the floor, obviously blown in through the open hatch. The inner door remained closed and Shry was about to try and open it when he suddenly paused with his hand just centimetres from the control panel.

"Nayal." he called out, "This thing won't be trapped will it?"

"I doubt it." Nayal replied as she squeezed past some of the other Andorians to stand beside Shry, "Though if the crew did rig up something I wouldn't be surprised if they rigged it to trigger when a non-Romulan tried to get in." and then she suddenly reached out and pressed the button to open the inner door.

"Well at least there's power." Shry said as the door slid open and he found himself looking into a lit corridor.

"So how do we do this?" Nayal asked.

"What do you mean?" Shry responded.

"I mean do your men just sneak about and see if any of the crew are left aboard or do we introduce ourselves?" Nayal explained.

"This ship isn't part of the mission." Shry said, "So we may as well announce ourselves just in case there's anyone aboard that needs help."

Nayal then walked over to a nearby panel and activated it before speaking into it clearly in her own language.

"This is Sub-lieutenant Nayal." she said, "I am here with the crew of a Federation starship. Anyone aboard should identify themselves to me immediately." looking at Shry she added, "That should do it."

"I'll take your word for it." he replied.

They waited a short time for anyone to answer Nayal's call but there was no response.

"Well that's long enough." she said eventually, "I don't think that this panel is damaged so that means either there's no-one aboard or if there is they either can't or won't reply."

"Then we secure this ship the old fashioned way." Shry replied and he activated his communicator, setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon that he had brought with him, "First squad will come with me and my command team towards the front of the ship. Second and third squads make for engineering. Fourth squad keep and eye on the air lock and our vehicles. I'd rather not end up stuck out here."

The Imperial Guard platoon split up to explore the Romulan ship, spreading out from the air lock to cover both the fore and aft sections. Everywhere they went the story was the same though. The ship was deserted, with no sign of the crew or explanation for why they had landed their ship on Iconia instead of staying in orbit.

There were no signs of violence either. There was no visible damage to any part of the ship and when one Andorian fire team broke into the armoury they found all but a handful of the disruptors still in their storage racks. However, all of this changed when Nayal and Shry's command squad reached the bridge.

When Nayal attempted to open the she found it sealed and her first reaction was to try pressing the button again.

"It's not working." she said.

"Could be someone doesn't want us going in there." Shry replied.

"We'll have to force it." Nayal said, standing back and looking at the door. Like many of the doors to major sections of the ship, the one leading to the bridge consisted of two halves that opened by sliding apart in opposite directions, "Do your troops have something they can wedge between these two halves?"

"Yes, but if someone is in there waiting for us they'll be ready when the door opens. We'll need to knock."

Shry said.

"How will that help?" Nayal asked and Shry smiled.

"Depends how you knock." he told her. Then he banged on the door with his fist, "Imperial Guard! Identify yourselves!" then he waited. In the absence of a reply he looked at the two of his squad members stood closest to him, "Entrenching tools." he ordered, "I need a ten centimetre gap."

The two Andorians slung their weapons and took the entrenching tools they carried for digging defensive positions from their webbing, unfolding them and locking them so that the blades were at right angles to the handles. They forced these between the two halves of the door and looked at Shry, waiting for the order to proceed. Meanwhile Shry took a stun grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin.

"Stand back." he told Nayal who nodded and leapt back from the door. Then Shry looked at the Andorians waiting for his order and nodded at them, "Now." he said.

The Andorians promptly twisted their entrenching tools to open up a gap between the two halves of the door and when it was large enough Shry stepped forwards and pushed his stun grenade through it. Immediately the Andorians leapt away from the gap and moments later there was the sound of the grenade going off on the bridge, accompanied by a flash of light through the gap in the door. Then the Andorians rushed forwards again only this time they did not insert their entrenching tools into the gap. Instead they just put their hands into it and pulled the two halves of the door apart while the rest of the squad raised their rifles and as soon as the gap was big enough they stormed onto the bridge.

"Clear." one called out and Nayal and Shry stepped through the gap as well.

The scene on the bridge was one of mayhem. The control panel beside the door had been ripped from the wall and the exposed circuitry smashed, explaining why it had not opened when Nayal operated the controls on the other side. Meanwhile several other consoles had also been destroyed by disruptor blasts and several of the weapons lay strewn around on the floor along with the broken bodies of their Romulan owners. Most of the Romulans appeared to have been beaten or strangled but as Nayal walked further into the room she came to the chair occupied by the ship's commanding officer and she realised that there was someone sat in it. Turning the chair so that she could see its occupant she gasped as she saw the hole burned through the dead woman's chest with a disruptor.

"I think there's blood under this one's finger nails." Shry said as he crouched beside one of the bodies, "Green blood."

"You mean he did all this?" Nayal asked.

"Maybe." Shry said, "Or maybe he was defending himself against someone else with copper rich blood."

"Either way we better get these bodies back up to the *Nightfall*. Then I'll take a look at the computer banks and see whether I can find out what this ship was doing here." Nayal replied.

a.

"Can you say that again *Nightfall*?" Carr asked as she tried to make sense of what Edwards was telling her. Unfortunately the high metal content of the ground above the chamber being used as a command centre was interfering with communications and the repeater system that had been set up by one of Max's engineering teams had failed when the conditions on the surface damaged the antenna.

"I said we need Doctor King back here immediately." Edwards said loudly. This time the signal came through clearly and Carr flinched.

"What's wrong?" she asked, "Is someone hurt?"

"No. But White found a Romulan scout ship several kilometres from your position and there were bodies on board. We've beamed them back up to the *Nightfall* and I want King to take a look at them." Edwards told her, "Also you should warn everyone to be on the look out for more Romulans. The number of bodies recovered from the scout ship doesn't match the usual crew compliment for a vessel of that type so the rest have to have gone somewhere. They could be down there with you."

"Understood captain." Carr replied, looking across the chamber towards King who looked back at her, "I'll send him up immediately. Carr out." and then she tapped her combadge to close the channel.

"I heard." King said, picking up the medical kit he had set down on a nearby table, "At least poking about in dead bodies gets me away from all this damned dust."

Beaming back up to the *Nightfall*, King was met in the transporter room by Rebecca.

"So your dad's got you running around doing errands has he?" King asked as he stepped off the transporter pad.

"I volunteered." Rebecca replied, "I couldn't just sit around while everyone else was getting involved." and King snorted.

"Take my advice young lady," he said, "just because someone asks you to volunteer for something doesn't mean you have to and if no-one asks it definitely means you don't have to. Ignore me and one day you may find your retirement interrupted by being deployed the ass end of space as well. Now show me these bodies I'm supposed to cut open."

"Contact!" the MACO leading the advance of Heart's search team called out, indicating that they had discovered something that they considered a threat. Normally this meant the presence of hostile troops but Iconia had been dead for thousands of years so Heart was puzzled as to what this could mean.

The entire team came to a halt the moment that the warning was called out and dropped into crouching positions as they looked around for any signs of an ambush. But Heart chose to hurry forwards, making his way to where the MACO who had given the warning was located.

"What's going on corporal?" he asked.

"Up ahead sir. I can see them waiting for us." the MACO replied, looking down the sights of his weapon. Heart looked ahead as well and in the beam cast by the flash light mounted to the corporal's weapon and his eyes widened when he saw the four armed machine caught in the beam. Pointing his own weapon in the same direction, Heart moved it from side to side so that he could see what else was ahead of his team and he saw that the robot was not alone.

A previous expedition that had taken the crew of the *Nightfall* into an underground complex had resulted in them facing a force of combat robots just like those that were lined up the chamber ahead of the MACOs but for now at least these appeared to be inactive.

"Forward by sections." Heart ordered and the MACOs began to advance in small groups while the rest covered them. This continued until the first rifle section reached the chamber in which the robots were located and Heart moved forwards to join them. Looking around the chamber he could see that there were hundreds of the deadly machines lined up, all of them connected to the ceiling by tethers that Heart guessed were probably used to either recharge or refuel them as well as connecting them to a computer network that would issue the command for them to activate. He could just picture the ancient Iconians having prepared these machines to fight off an invasion by their enemies who had instead settled for blasting the planet from orbit.

"Okay these things are dead." he said and then he turned to the leader of the rifle section with him, "Sergeant keep your section here." he ordered, "Make sure that no-one goes anywhere near any of those things. The last thing we need while we're wandering around down here is any of them waking up and coming after us."

"Over here!" West called out as she shone her palm beacon into yet another underground chamber. But unlike most of the others that her team had discovered this had not been emptied prior to the complex being

abandoned. Instead there was what looked like some sort of free standing computer console in the centre of the room while more equipment lined the walls.

"What have you found?" Max asked as he and Nikki approached.

"I don't know, but it looks important." West replied as the others followed her into the room.

"Wow." Nikki said, "Reckon any of this still works?"

"The crew of the *Enterprise* were able to locate functional technology on their visit and the probe launching system was only disabled by causing one of the probes to destroy the others." Max said, "So there is no reason why any of this should not work as well." then he paused before he added, "Providing we can locate a suitable source of power."

All of a sudden the lights in the room came on and the consoles started to come to life, running start up sequences that had not been initiated for thousands of years.

"What happened?" Nikki exclaimed as she looked around.

"On switch." West replied from beside a small panel on one of the walls.

"Interesting." Max said, "Lieutenant West, how did you know that that control would restore power to this room?"

"I-" West began before she stopped and frowned, "I don't know." she said, "In fact I'm not sure I even remember pushing the button."

"Are you feeling alright Lieutenant?" Max asked.

"You mean am I having another claustrophobic panic attack?" West responded, "No, I feel fine."

"Aside from sudden unexplained memory loss." Nikki commented, "Maybe we should call Doctor King."

"I do not believe that Doctor King would appreciate being bothered with a brief lapse in memory." Max said, "Instead I suggest we just focus on what we can learn from this equipment."

Cole could do little other than just sit back and watch while T'Lan and Saron worked to translate the markings on the wall. These looked to have been printed on a large panel that had then been fixed to the wall at its corners. All that Cole could tell was that the blocks of text were short, just a dozen or so characters in each block and that they were arranged into a neat pattern of rows and columns.

"I believe that this is some sort of directory." Saron said.

"How can you tell?" T'Lan asked, "We have not been able to translate any of the words despite the dictionary that you have been able to build up in your studies."

"T'Lan you should consider this logically." her father told her, "The dictionary that I have built up is based on the one created by the crew of the *Enterprise* and has been added to over the last twenty years by studying not only new archaeological finds but also by studying the languages of the civilisations that are offshoots of the Iconian one. But at its heart, the dictionary lacks one key element that cannot be translated easily."

"Proper nouns." Cole commented and Saron looked towards him.

"Correct lieutenant commander." he said, "This could be a list of places accessible through the Iconian gateway network from this complex or even a list of Iconians who worked here before their empire fell. In either case no translation is possible because we do not know how they created their names for people and places. I suggest that we try continuing our search."

"Cole are you there?" Carr's voice said from Cole's combadge and he tapped it. Thanks to the metallic deposits in the ground being concentrated in the uppermost layers while the ground deeper down around the complex was relatively free of them, it was easier to get a combadge signal from one underground chamber to another than it was to communicate with the surface.

"Cole here. Go ahead." he replied.

"Cole, Max has found something. Some sort of control room it looks like. I need T'Lan and her father to get down there and give them a hand."

"Understood commander. Where are they?" Cole asked.

"Down on the lowest level we have mapped. According to Max they've marked their way so they should be easy to find. Heart's on his way down as well with a platoon to help search the rest of the level." Carr said.

"Understood. Cole out." Cole responded and he deactivated his combadge, "Well it looks like someone's found something worth your time looking at." he said to the two Vulcans, "Shall we go see what it is?"

"A rhetorical question I assume." Saron said.

"I believe so father." T'Lan commented.

"You obviously understand humans well." Cole responded as they all started to head towards the shaft that would allow them to reach the lower levels of the complex.

"My own father was a part of our diplomatic mission to Earth." Saron explained, "He taught me what he learned of your people."

"Dealing with humans and Andorians?" Cole said, "T'Lan's grandfather got around quite a lot didn't he?"

Nayal had managed to access the scout ship's tactical station and was going through the files in its directory system in the belief that whatever the vessel's mission had been would be mentioned somewhere in it. All of

a sudden Shry placed a drinking glass down in front of her and as she looked up at him he held a bottle of blue liquid out.

"Kali-fal." Noyal said.

"My men found a couple of cases down in the hold." Shry said, "I'm guessing that someone aboard this ship thought it worth bringing along rather than just relying on whatever their replicators could come up with and since you've been sat staring at that console for more than a hour non stop I thought you could do with a quick break."

Noyal smiled and picked up the glass, holding it between her and Shry so that he could pour a small amount of the liquid into it. Then Noyal placed the glass under her nose and sniffed it.

"That smells so good." she said and Shry reacted by sniffing the opening of the bottle itself. Then Noyal sipped at the drink, "And it tastes good as well." she said, "It must be a good vintage. Or maybe I've just gone too long without. Most of what gets into Federation space isn't very good."

"Really?" Shry asked and then he suddenly gulped down a mouthful straight out of the bottle. Then he gasped as he pulled the bottle away from his mouth and winced, "That's strong." he croaked and Noyal smiled again.

"really? I find it rather mellow actually." she said.

"Well you're welcome to it." Shry replied, putting the stopper back in the bottle, "Add it to the rest."

"What rest?" Noyal asked, "Like I said, I haven't had any kali-fal for a while."

"So what about that crate full you and the captain have stashed in engineering aboard the *Nightfall*?"

"Nothing to do with me." Noyal said and she shrugged.

"So the pink skin's hogging it all huh?" Shry said and then he looked at the console Noyal was studying, "So what have you found so far?" he asked.

"Nothing that makes sense." Noyal replied and she sipped at her drink again, "The ship's mission logs are encrypted so I haven't been able to just read what the crew's orders were. But I have been able to open some of the files they created after they got to the system."

So what's in them?" Shry asked.

"They're all image files so far." Noyal told him, "Some were taken in space and show other Romulan starships either on the surface or in orbit. Then the later ones just show Romulan troops in environment suits working out there on the surface. I'd say that they were intending on staying a while, hence the environment suits to protect them from the poisons in the atmosphere."

"Let me see." Shry said and Noyal transferred the images to the bridge's main viewscreen, "Interesting." he commented.

"What is?" Noyal asked.

"The way these images were taken." Shry said, pointing towards the display, "I'd say that whoever took them was doing their best to avoid being seen by the people in them. Look, in this one you can see that part of the lens was obstructed by the cover they were using. It looks to me like we're dealing with more than one group of Romulans here, one spying on another."

"And given that the date stamp is a little over two years old by Federation reckoning it's probably two different factions during the early days of the civil war. Any older and it would have to be the Tal Shiar spying on a military operation. Or less likely the other way around."

"So that still leaves us with the question of what the group that was being spied on was doing here." Shry said.

"And what happened to them." Noyal added, "After all, no-one's reported seeing any signs of them so far."

3.

"This is another reference to energy output." Saron said as he compared the lettering on the display he was stood in front of to the notes on his personal PADD.

"So this is a power plant control room." West commented, "Geothermal?"

"Your interpretation of the equipment in this room is remarkable." T'Lan said and West smiled.

"Put it down to my time in the Maquis." she replied.

"How did that help?" Nikki asked.

"Based in an old Iconian outpost were you?" Cole added.

"No. But we ended up with all sorts of kit that had been cast off by its original makers and a lot of it came as job lots without instructions. You never knew if you were holding a disruptor or a hair dryer."

"I would think that the answer would become rapidly obvious when you turned it on." Max said.

"Yeah, especially if you end up with a sudden bald spot." Cole added with a smile. Then he adopted a more serious expression as he glanced nervously at Saron who was staring directly at him.

"Returning to Lieutenant West's question, I believe that she is correct to say that this is a geothermal power plant." Max said, "I doubt that any other form of fuel source would remain usable for the length of time that this facility has been dormant."

"Unfortunately I have been unable to determine what it is that any of this is meant to provide power for." Saron said.

"I would suggest that whatever it is, it requires a great deal of power." T'Lan said as she scanned the instruments along one wall and her father raised an eyebrow.

"Why is that daughter?" he asked.

"Logical deduction father." T'Lan answered, "I am detecting conduits running behind this wall and from the number and material composition I can calculate the amount of energy that they are capable of carrying before they fail."

"Interesting." Max said, "Can you share your scan data with me?"

"Of course." T'Lan replied and she tapped at her tricorder, enabling its wireless connections so that Max could access the results of her scans directly using his Borg implants.

"So just how interesting are we talking here?" Cole asked, "Enough to operate a gateway?"

"Unknown commander." Max replied, "Since we do not know exactly how much energy it takes to activate such a device. But even allowing for a significant factor of safety being built into the system I would say that the conduits behind that wall are capable of carrying more power than the *Nightfall* is capable of generating at maximum output from all its sources."

"So that means there has to be something in this place that requires a lot of power to operate." West said, "I just hope it's not something that will unleash it all on us as soon as we find it."

"Spread out. Two columns, one each side." Heart ordered as his search team entered a massive chamber that stretched far ahead. The MACOs obediently split into two groups, each one advancing single file along one of the walls to either side of the entrance. The flash lights mounted to their rifles could only illuminate so much of the room at once but Heart soon found himself able to build up a picture of what it looked like in its entirety. It appeared that each of the long walls his men were advancing along was lined with wide alcoves, each one surrounded by some sort of frame. Heart paused and pointed his rifle at one of these frames so that the beam from his flash light shone over it. Up close the frames looked to be more than just decorative, being lined with identical protrusions that reminded Heart of the energy emitters he had seen on a variety of devices from phasers to deflector shield generators. The first thing he thought of was the force fields used to seal modern holding cells but it was doubtful that the room was any sort of prison or secure storage area, each alcove was only a few centimetres deep and would not provide enough room to keep anything in. But then Heart remembered what the Iconians were famous for, their vast network of gateways that connected the planets that they had visited and he realised what this place was.

"These are gateways." he said as he looked around, trying to count how many of the interplanetary travel portals there were in the massive chamber before he activated his communicator, "Lieutenant Commander Carr this is Captain Heart, are you there?"

"Right here captain." Carr responded.

"Commander you need to get down here and see this. You'll want to bring science and engineering personnel as well. I think I've found what we're looking for."

"Copy that captain. I'm on my way." Carr said before the channel went dead.

"Okay spread out." Heart ordered as he reached into his webbing for a chemical glow stick, "Commander Carr is going to want to see everything in here clearly so we'll need glow sticks in each alcove." and then as

if to demonstrate he bent the glow stick he held until he heard the 'snap' of the barrier separating the two reactive chemicals from one another and shook it to produce a bright white light before tossing it into the alcove beside him.

One by one the other inactive gateway portals were all illuminated by MACOs tossing glow sticks into them and the combined light cast from both sides of the chamber served to light up the whole space. This revealed that the portals stretched for the entire length of the chamber along each side while the two shorter walls at each end were blank except for a single doorway set into the middle of each one. But if there had ever been any sort of control mechanism for any of these gateways present in the chamber it was not there now.

"Sergeant Hayes!" Heart called out and a woman rushed towards him, stood at attention and saluted, "At ease sergeant." Heart said as he returned the salute and the other MACO relaxed, "I want you to take your section and continue that way. See if you can find any indication of a control room for this lot. But don't get too far ahead. Stop when you can't see the light from these glow sticks any more and check in."

"Yes sir." Hayes replied and as she turned she waved to the members of her squad to accompany her further into the complex.

Then as the squad hurried towards the doorway at the far end of the chamber Heart looked around at the MACOs remaining with him.

"Don't think you're getting off easy." he announced, "I want every bit of this place checked to make sure we haven't missed anything. Look for power conduits, control lines or anything that looks like writing. Starfleet has a language database and if we get lucky we may just be able to hand them an instruction manual."

"Wait go back." Shry said suddenly as he watched over Nayal's shoulder while she continued to study the images stored on the Romulan computer.

"What?" she asked, scrolling back to the previous picture, "What's wrong?"

The image showed several environmental suited Romulans standing around an excavation of some sort with a lightweight lifting rig set up over it.

"I know that place." Shry said, pointing to the horizon behind them, "We passed it on the way."

"It's not where the *Nightfall* uncovered the complex the crew are exploring." Nayal commented.

"No it's not." Shry agreed, "So that means it's something new."

"Then we need to check it out." Nayal said, "If my people found something then it could be important."

"My thoughts exactly." Shry said and he activated his communicator, "All personnel fall back to the hatch we came in through. I want squad three to stand guard over this place while the rest of the platoon comes with me. We may have uncovered what the Romulans were doing here."

Nayal and Shry's Imperial Guard troops hurried back to the air lock they had used to gain entry to the Romulan vessel and leaving one squad behind to watch over it the rest of them made their way back to the vehicles that had brought them here and started to drive back towards the drop zone. But rather than heading all the way back there they stopped about a third of the way back under Shry's instructions before disembarking and spreading out.

"It was over here." Shry said as he looked around, hoping to find some sign of the excavation. But during the two years since the Romulans had been and gone the hole they had dug had been covered over. Whether naturally or because someone had deliberately filled it in did not matter, the result was the same and Shry could not find it even when he dropped his scanning goggles into position and used them to study the ground at his feet.

"What about using the trick with a grenade and the *Nightfall's* lidar again?" Nayal suggested.

"I've got a better idea." Shry replied as he took a photon grenade from his webbing and adjusted its yield to maximum, "Everyone take cover." he announced, "This is going to go with a bang."

The Andorians hurried to take whatever cover was available while Nayal just stood beside one of the transports with a puzzled look on her face.

"Wait you can't be-" she began before Shry tossed the grenade towards where he suspected that the old Romulan excavation was located and then charged towards her, tackling her and pushing her behind the vehicle before there was a loud explosion that threw rock and dirt into the air with a 'Boom!'

"Are you trying to kill us all?" Nayal exclaimed as she pushed Shry off her and got back to her feet.

"No." Shry replied, "I'm trying to get whatever filled in that hole to collapse and it looks like I was successful. Look." and he pointed to where a large hole had been opened up by the force of the detonation.

"*Nightfall* to Shry." Hamilton's voice suddenly said from Shry's communicator, "What's going on down there? We just monitored an explosion."

"Oops." Shry commented, looking at Nayal, "Perhaps I should have warned the ship before I did that."

"You think?" Nayal replied and then she tapped her combadge, "Hi Bradley." she said, "Captain Shry was just doing a bit of landscaping. We're all fine here. How are you?"

"Who is this? What's your operating number?" Hamilton responded and Nayal frowned.

"Bradley it's me. You better know me given the number of times we've-"

"Sorry." Hamilton interrupted, "Bad time for a movie quote."

"Lieutenant," Shry signalled, "it looks like we've uncovered an area that the Romulans were investigating." "Not the crew of that scout ship though." Nayal added, "Tell captain Edwards that it looks like two different groups came here." then she smiled and added, "Maybe tell that creepy guy from Starfleet Intelligence as well."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Hamilton was sat in the central command chair while one of his subordinates filled his usual position at helm. With Captain Edwards off the bridge and the other officers more senior than him on the surface of Iconia he had been left in charge. Looking over his shoulder, Hamilton looked directly at where Commander Jones was stood close to the science station where he could see the results of the sensor scans that the ship was continuing to run.

"Don't worry Nayal." he said in response to her last sentence, "He knows."

Unlike the tunnel dug by Cole and Heart's phasers, the open ground exposed by the grenade blast was not at a gentle angle that the Imperial Guard platoon could just walk down. Instead a vertical shaft had been opened up and Shry and his men gathered around it.

"So how deep is this?" Nayal asked and Shry used his sensor goggles to peer into the darkness.

"A long way." he replied, "Too deep for these to see the bottom." and then he took a glow stick from his webbing, activated it and dropped it into the hole.

The glowing bar of light tumbled as it fell until finally it came to a halt as it reached the bottom of the shaft.

"That is a long way." Nayal said, "I don't suppose you were counting how long it took for that to get all the way down were you?"

"Of course I was." Shry replied, "About fifty metres or so. We can either rappel down there or set up a crane system using the winches on the transports." and he glanced back towards the winch mounted on the front of the off road vehicle that he and Nayal had ridden here in.

"Well given the choice I'll go with the winch." Nayal said.

"Fair enough." Shry said, "But setting it up will take time. So I'll go on ahead and see you down there."

With their rifle slung over their shoulders, Shry and one of his men stood side by side and leant backwards over the shaft supported by the lines secured to one of the vehicles and then thrown down the shaft. In unison they jumped back into the hole, sliding a short way down their lines before coming to a halt and swinging back against the side of the shaft. They repeated this time after time, bouncing off the wall as they made their way down to the bottom of the shaft where the glow stick provided illumination. As soon as they were able to, the two Andorians released themselves from their harnesses and quickly unslung their rifles. The Romulan shaft had been sunk down into a small, empty chamber with just a single doorway as an exit. Obviously there had either been no power to operate this or it had been locked when the Romulans arrived because someone had cut a hole in it large enough to allow a typical humanoid to pass through without having to struggle.

"The shaft's clear." Shry signalled to the troops waiting on the surface, "Proceeding inside."

Cautiously he stepped through the hole in the door, using the flash light of his rifle to light his way. Behind him the second Andorian followed and once they were both through the door they turned in opposite directions. It was obvious that rather than a passageway the door led to a much larger chamber that was still furnished with several rows of tables. These looked as if they had once been fitted with electronic equipment that had at some point been ripped out to leave only the wiring in place. Shry and the other Andorian move slowly across the room, more worried about anything in the dark that could trip them or fall on them than the prospect of being attacked, but they held their rifles at the ready just in case.

As he neared the opposite end of the room Shry realised that most of the far wall was transparent and looked into yet another chamber that was accessed by a door at one side of the wall. Like the door from the shaft this had been cut through.

"Over here." he said, "Looks like the Romulans found something to interest them."

"I'm not sure what could interest my people in a mess like this." Nayal commented as she stepped into the chamber from the shaft, accompanied by another Imperial Guardsman.

"Then come take a look at this." Shry replied, keeping the beam from his flash light trained on the doorway leading into the next chamber.

Nayal began to make her way across the room, holding up a palm beacon for illumination. But despite the superior light it offered compared to the rifle mounted flash lights she still managed to strike her shin against something in the dark.

"Ouch!" she hissed, scowling and rubbing her leg.

"Need me to come over there and carry you?" Shry asked.

"It's not funny." Nayal replied as she hobbled onwards, "It really stings. You know I'll have to go and see Doctor King when I get back to check whether it's infected with some ancient Iconian super bug."

Shry smiled.

"I bet King Henry will be so impressed with that as well." he said sarcastically, using one of the crew's

nicknames for Doctor Henry King.

"Won't he just?" Nayal said as she reached the doorway where Shry also stood and she shone her palm beacon into the next room, "What are those?" she added.

Illuminated in the light of the palm beacon were several large cylinders, each one about two metres long and a metre in diameter. Made of some translucent material, the cylinders permitted the light to pass through in a limited fashion and it became immediately obvious that there was a mysterious shadowy form in each of them that appeared to be floating in some sort of fluid. The end of each was marked in the Iconian alphabet but without access to the translation database there was no way to tell what any of it meant.

"In my time in the Imperial Guard I've taken part in raids against all sorts of illegal laboratory set ups," Shry began as he and Nayal made their way closer to the nearest cylinder, shining both of their lights directly at it, "but none of them have been as creepy as this is." he finished.

"What's the matter captain? Need me to hold your hand?" Nayal asked before there was a 'Crack!' as she hit her shin on something again, "Llusra!" she snapped, cursing in her own language as she hopped backwards, "Who put that there?"

"What is it anyway?" Shry asked as he pointed his rifle towards the object that Nayal had narrowly avoided falling over. The object looked to be some sort of metal frame and Shry looked back at the cylinders lined up in the room, "Hang on," he said, "does that look like what these things are resting on?"

"You mean aside from my blood pouring down it? Yes it does." Nayal answered. Then she and Shry looked directly at one another, "So what happened to the cylinder from on top of that one?" she asked.

"My guess would be that your people took it to study its contents." Shry answered.

"Then we need to get one out of here ourselves." Nayal said, studying the nearest cylinder more closely.

From this distance she could see that the shape of the object inside appeared humanoid and she frowned, "I think it's a body." she said and she looked up at Shry, "Could this be one of the ancient Iconians preserved in this thing?"

"We better get one of these back to the *Nightfall*." Shry said, "Doctor King is going to have to take a look at this."

"We still need to get one to the surface though." Nayal pointed out, "I don't see the transporters working down here with all the refracting minerals in the ground above us."

"Good job we've got the winches then." Shry replied.

"Come in." Edwards said when someone pressed the intercom of his ready room door and the door slid open to reveal Hamilton, "Yes lieutenant?" Edwards asked.

Hamilton stepped inside, followed by Jones before the door could close and Edwards noticed Hamilton wince. Obviously the helmsman had been hoping the door would close before the intelligence officer could follow him through.

"Captain Shry has signalled us from the surface sir." Hamilton said, "His men located a second underground complex not far from the Romulan ship. It's smaller than the one Lieutenant Commander Carr is surveying but his men have located a biological sample that they want to beam aboard."

"What sort of biological sample?" Edwards asked. The beaming aboard a starship of any unknown biological sample was allowed only in very tightly controlled circumstances and the ship's captain had to give his personal permission for it to be done.

"Something that looks to have interested the Romulans." Jones said, "Captain this could-"

"Commander Jones I thought you were here strictly to observe?" Edwards interrupted, "So observe me doing my job."

"Don't just stand there looking like you're about throw up young lady, give me a hand with these." King said to Rebecca. The young woman had stood back and allowed the doctor to inspect each of the bodies in turn for a cause of death and in several cases King had opened up the partially decayed bodies to inspect their internal organs, "I thought MACOs were supposed to have strong stomachs."

"Not this MACO." Rebecca replied as she approached the body King had been examining while he pulled a cover over it, "So where are we putting these?"

"The morgue's over there." King said, looking towards an nearby door, "We can store them all in there until Starfleet can take them off our hands."

The pair then began to move the body towards the morgue when all of a sudden the doors to sickbay slid apart and a pair of Imperial Guard entered pushing a cylinder between them.

"What the hell is this?" King asked.

"Brought you a souvenir doc." Shry commented as he followed the troops pushing the cylinder, helping Nayal along and King frowned.

"The tube or the cry baby?" he asked.

"Hey!" Nayal exclaimed, "It really hurt when I did this and I may have some nasty alien infection."

"One that wasn't picked up by the transporter's bio-filters?" King asked, "Oh come on then, let me see. Captain Shry, get her over to this biobed if you would."

Shry helped Nayal to the biobed while his men moved the cylinder into an open area of the sickbay.

"Dismissed." he told them and both exited the sickbay just as Hamilton arrived.

"Nayal are you okay?" he asked and she smiled.

"You were worried about me." she replied, "If we were dating that would be so romantic." then she looked at King who was running a medical probe over the cuts to her legs, "So, what's the story doc?" she asked.

"I'm going to right you a prescription." King said as he returned the probe to its holder and picked up a PADD.

"So there really is something wrong with me?" Nayal replied.

"Too much to list sub-lieutenant." King said as he tapped at the PADD and Nayal's face fell, "I'm writing you a prescription to get out of my way and a recommendation that Lieutenant Hamilton over there removes you from my sickbay and takes you back to your quarters to indulge in whatever freaky activities you two get up to while you're busy not being in a relationship."

"Two insults for just one patient. Nice." Shry said.

"I do try." King replied as he turned towards the cylinder, "So what have you brought me here then?" he asked.

"Not sure. But it looks like there's another body inside." Shry told him.

"Plenty of those to go around." King said, approaching the cylinder and scanning it with a tricorder, "It's hard to tell through this container but I'd say there's definitely something organic inside." he added. Then he stopped scanning and looked at the writing on the end, "I take it that this hasn't been translated yet." he said and Shry shook his head.

"We wanted to get it back to you as quickly as we could." he said.

"We just love that bedside manner of yours." Nayal added.

"Well I think we should get someone in here that knows what this says." King said and he looked at Rebecca,

"Could you go and tell your father that we could do with Saron back up here?"

"Yes commander." she replied before leaving sickbay.

"And in the mean time I suppose you lot want to find out what's in here as well don't you?" King said, looking towards the others who remained in sickbay.

"You've got to admit it's interesting." Hamilton said.

"Yes it is lieutenant. Yes it is." King said and he crouched down slightly so that he could inspect the material of the cylinder more closely, "I can't see any signs of an opening." he said, standing up straight again, "I'll have to cut it open."

"Shouldn't you get an engineer to do that?" Hamilton asked.

"Since I'm in no mood to accidentally slice my own fingers off with a laser cutter, yes I should." King replied and he tapped his combadge, "Sickbay to engineering."

"Engineering here."

"Engineering this is Doctor King, I need an engineer with a laser cutter in sickbay immediately. I have a container that requires opening."

An engineer arrived soon after with a portable laser cutter and King showed him the cylinder.

"You can see that there's some sort of fluid that comes up to here." he said, running his finger along the cylinder where the surface of the fluid in which the body floated appeared to come up to.

"Yes sir, I'll cut about a centimetre above it." the engineer replied and he knelt down and pressed the cutter against the cylinder. There was a pulse of light as the cutter energised and began to slice through the material of the cylinder. Meanwhile King stood back and opened up his tricorder again while the others just watched.

All of a sudden there was a sloshing sound from inside the tube and a small quantity of the fluid spurted out through the cut that the engineer had made so far.

"What the hell?" Hamilton exclaimed moments before the figure floating in the fluid moved.

Extending a limb upwards rapidly it punched right through the material of the cylinder, ripping a large hole in it and the startled engineer fell backwards as the cylinder tipped over and spilled the entire contents out onto the floor. The figure that had been floating inside the cylinder was now revealed for everyone to see. Vaguely humanoid its limbs were out of proportion and malformed while its head was leant to one side and fused to its shoulder by a mass of tissue. But most significantly was what the figure was made of. Entirely white, the figure was obviously made of the same synthetic flesh that the crew of the *Nightfall* had witnessed their mysterious foes use to make more convincing humanoid warriors that they called fleshforms.

"Golem!" Hamilton snapped, using the slang term coined by the *Nightfall's* crew prior to their learning the name given to the figures by the aliens themselves.

"Everybody get back!" Shry yelled as he reached for his sidearm, having had his rifle returned to the armoury upon his return to the ship. But Shry was not fast enough on the draw to prevent the malformed fleshform from reaching out and grabbing hold of the hapless engineer, picking him up and hurling him across sickbay where he flew right into Shry and sent him flying backwards and his phaser clattering across the floor.

"King to security." King said as he activated his combadge again, "We have an urgent situation in sickbay. We need an armed team here on the double." then he looked at Hamilton and Noyal, "Out!" he shouted, "Help them." and he pointed to the engineer and Shry.

"Go." Hamilton told Noyal as he rushed to help Shry to his feet and while Noyal headed for the exit Hamilton picked up Shry and King ran to the engineer. But as King crouched down beside the engineer it became obvious that the man was dead, his neck snapped by being hurled across the room. Instead he helped Hamilton drag Shry towards the exit from sickbay while the fleshform occupied itself with smashing apart whatever furniture came within reach behind them.

As soon as they were in the corridor outside sickbay King looked upwards.

"Computer." he said, "Seal sickbay door." and the door slid shut behind them and locked itself.

"Sickbay sealed." the computer's voice stated.

"What's going on?" Cole called out as he came hurrying around the corner with the rest of his group from within the underground complex and Rebecca.

"We were told you needed a translation." T'Lan added.

"Right now we need those phasers of yours." King replied, looking at the phasers the Starfleet officers in the newly arrived group were still armed with.

"What's going on?" West asked as she drew her weapon.

"One of those golems is loose in sickbay." Hamilton answered and he held out his hand towards T'Lan, "Give me your phaser." he said and she handed him her weapon just as there was a hammering sound from the other side of the door to sickbay as the fleshform inside tried to force its way out.

"Oh that sounds bad." Nikki said, staring at the door.

"Just stand back." Cole replied as a pair of security guards came hurrying towards them with phasers already drawn, "Okay everyone without a phaser get clear." Cole ordered, "Everyone with a phaser stand by for Doctor King to open the door. Remember, these things aren't affected by a 'stun' setting so you'll have to set your phasers to a lethal level."

"Sixteen ought to do it." West commented.

"Seven is just fine lieutenant." King said, "I may need my sickbay after you're all done shooting it up."

"Seven it is." Cole added as he adjusted his weapon, "If you see it just shoot, don't bother calling out." and then there was another loud 'Bang!' as something struck the other side of the door.

"I don't think finding that thing will be a problem." Nikki said as she backed further away from the door.

"Okay doctor, whenever you're ready." Cole said, raising his phaser.

"Computer release sickbay door seals and open." King said and the doors to sickbay promptly slid open. But rather than the fleshform that the Starfleet personnel stood outside had been expecting they saw only the wreckage of a biobed that had been ripped out of its mounting and hurled at the door lay on the floor just within sickbay.

"Careful." Cole said, creeping towards the doorway along with the security guards, "It's can't have escaped."

All of a sudden the fleshform came charging across sickbay holding a trolley above its head, "Look out!" Cole yelled as the trolley was hurled towards the doorway and the security guards scattered. One leapt back and behind the door frame for cover while the other dived forwards and rolled. But although this move took him out of the path of the flying trolley it also took him closer to the fleshform and as he was getting back to his feet the malformed humanoid swung an arm at him that picked him up off the floor and sent him flying into

the wall behind him.

All of a sudden there was a flash of red and the characteristic whining sound of a phaser as West fired. The beam struck the fleshform just below its elbow and its lower arm exploded, scattering lumps of synthetic flesh all around. Lacking any form of mouth or vocal chords the fleshform remained silent but still spun around to face this threat and with its one remaining arm held out in front of it, it charged.

Cole and Hamilton fired together, both phaser beams striking the fleshform in its chest and burning right through. Against almost all humanoid life forms such injuries would have been instantly fatal but the fleshform lacked any form of cardiovascular system upon which it depended so instead it carried on coming. Max rushed forwards, pushing the ruined biobed out of his way and firing his phaser on the move. The beam cut through one of the fleshform's legs, not inflicting enough damage to destroy the limb but doing enough to ensure that it would no longer support the weight of the fleshform and it dropped to one knee. Max promptly dropped his phaser and reached out with both hands to grab hold of the fleshform's neck and using all the strength that his implants provided him with he twisted the fleshform's head around.

There was a tearing sound as artificial skin and muscle was ripped apart and this was followed by a sudden 'Snap!' as the rigid support that stood in for the fleshform's spine snapped. With this broken there was little to hold the fleshform's head on its body and Max simply decapitated it.

"Wow Max, wouldn't it have been easier just to use your phaser to finish it off?" West said as she looked at the twitching body of the fleshform on the floor at Max's feet.

"Disabling it by hand was the logical course of action after it was rendered immobile." T'Lan commented.

"How so?" Hamilton asked.

"Because this way there is more left for T'Lan and I to study." Max replied.

"Why didn't it just beam out?" Noyal asked, peering around the door frame, "We've seen them do that plenty of times."

"This is hardly a typical example." T'Lan pointed out.

"It's downright freaky." Nikki added, "What do you think happened to make it this way?"

"Maybe the writing on the cylinder can offer us a clue." King suggested and everyone turned towards Saron. Without speaking, the Vulcan stepped through the doorway into sickbay and looked at what remained of the cylinder that the fleshform had been brought aboard the *Nightfall* inside. The lettering on the end was still clearly visible and having already spent many hours translating the Iconian language he did not even need to consult his PADD to determine what the simple wording he was looking at said.

"It says 'Danger: Unstable.'" he said and King turned towards Noyal.

"Sub-lieutenant," he said, "next time you or sleeping beauty over there bring me a present read the damned label first."

ii.

Edwards was in the transporter room to meet Carr when she beamed back aboard along with Captain Heart. "So how would you rate your first day?" he asked.

"Promising." Carr replied, "We've identified a power control hub and a gateway cluster. I left engineering and science teams studying them both."

"Along with enough security and ground force personnel to make sure nothing suspicious happens to them overnight." Heart added.

"So how are things going up here?" Carr asked, "I heard there was some excitement."

"Well Commander White's fighters are switching to a single pair for the CAP in rotating four hour shifts."

Edwards said, "So far there's been no sign of any Romulan activity and I'm hoping we'll get away without any trouble from them. But yes, there has been some trouble. Captain Shry and Nayal located another underground complex that the Romulans had been excavating and they brought back one of those fleshforms. It came to life in sickbay and we have a couple of casualties. Max and T'Lan are examining it now."

"It didn't do a vanishing act?" Heart asked.

"No. For some reason this one hung around long enough for Max to disable it. I was just about to head down to engineering and see how they are getting on." Edwards answered.

"Mind if I join you?" Carr asked.

"Of course not. What about you captain?" Edwards said, looking at Heart.

"Maybe another time." he answered, "Right now I just need to get out of this armour and into my bunk." and then he headed for the exit from the transporter room.

"Then if you'd like to accompany me commander we'll go and see what our engineering and science officers have uncovered." Edwards said and Carr smiled.

"Lead the way captain." she replied.

Carr and Edwards made their way to the nearest turbolift that would take them to engineering section where the remains of the fleshform were being examined. While in the turbolift Edwards noticed that Carr was squirming, continuously flexing her shoulders.

"Something wrong Grace?" he asked.

"All that wind and debris in the air down on the surface." she replied, "Something's got into my uniform and I can't get rid of it." then she frowned, "Oh I've had enough!" she exclaimed, "Turbolift halt." and when the turbolift stopped moving she moved her hair over her shoulder she then reached for the zip that ran down the back of her uniform, opening it just enough to retrieve a narrow shard of metal, its edges worn smooth by millennia of erosion by the elements and she held it up, "Oh that's so much better." she said and then she went to fasten the zip again. At which point her eyes widened, "Oh no." she said.

"Oh no." Edwards repeated, wincing as he realised what was wrong.

"It's not my fault, there must be something else caught in there." Carr said as she struggled to try and close the zip.

"Do you need a hand Grace?" Edwards asked.

"If you wouldn't mind David." she replied, nodding.

"Shouldn't they be here by now?" Rebecca asked, looking at Nikki. The pair were watching as Max and T'Lan studied the fleshform closely, fetching the tools they requested and monitoring the array of sensors that had been set up to ensure that nothing was missed as the fleshform's body was dissected. The transporter technician had called engineering as soon as Carr and Edwards had left to warn them that the ship's two most senior officers were on their way.

"Yeah, it's only a two minute journey to the transporter room." Nikki replied.

"If it concerns you so much then perhaps you should go and meet them." T'Lan suggested, looking up from the remains of the fleshform laid out on the workbench in front of her.

Sure you'll be okay?" Rebecca asked.

"I think we can manage without you for a few minutes." Max answered without looking up from the fragment of synthetic flesh taken from the fleshform's head that he was examining.

Both Nikki and Rebecca left the workshop, making their way through engineering until they reached the turbolift that Nikki believed was the one most likely to be the one used by Carr and Edwards to make their way there from the transporter room.

"That's weird." Nikki commented when she looked at the turbolift status monitor beside the door, "The turbolift's not moving."

"Could it be faulty?" Rebecca asked as Nikki looked at her PADD, connecting it to the turbolift control system.

"I'm not sure. Here, I'll try setting it going again." Nikki responded and then she smiled as the PADD indicated that the turbolift was back in motion.

Inside the turbolift neither Edwards nor Carr were prepared for it to start moving again and despite leaning against the wall for support, Carr overbalanced when it began and dragged Edwards down with her. Both officers landed in a heap on the floor and Carr rolled over, ended up on top of Edwards who was still holding onto her zip that as a result was pulled down rather than up just as the door slid open.

"Mom?" Nikki exclaimed.

"Dad?" Rebecca added.

"Who started the turbolift?" Edwards demanded as he picked himself up while Carr fastened her uniform, the zip no longer jammed.

"Sorry dad. We didn't know you were otherwise occupied." Rebecca replied as Edwards reached down and helped Carr to her feet.

"My zip was stuck." she said.

"Sure, that makes sense." Nikki said, "So are you going to take a look at this thing Max and T'Lan have been cutting up?"

"I think that's probably for the best." Edwards answered, "So where is it?"

"This way. We'll show you." Rebecca told him.

Nikki and Rebecca led Carr and Edwards to the workshop where Max and T'Lan were examining the disabled fleshform.

"Ah captain." Max said when they entered the room, "I am pleased you are here."

"Yeah, there was a mysterious delay with the turbolift." Rebecca muttered and Edwards briefly scowled at her.

"What have you found?" he asked, turning back towards Max and T'Lan.

"This appears to be somewhat different to the fleshforms we have encountered before captain." T'Lan replied.

"Well it certainly looks different." Carr commented, looking at the remains on the workbench, "Even without the holes that have been shot in it I can see that this one wasn't fully humanoid like the others."

"I think that may have been accidental rather than a part of the design lieutenant commander." Max said, "The structure of the material used to construct this body does not appear as refined as the other samples we have been able to recover."

"In fact it bears more resemblance to the material we were able to replicate in order to produce a physical body for the EMH." T'Lan added.

"Emma?" Nikki commented, using the name she had given to the EMH when younger that had subsequently been adopted by most of the rest of the crew as well.

"Correct." T'Lan replied, "However, although the material is similar in both cases this example has successfully used the synthetic flesh for artificial neural circuitry as well."

"Meaning?" Edwards asked.

"Meaning that while our EMH's physical body is reliant on conventional isolinear circuitry for controlling the synthetic muscle tissue this body is not. Also the programming is self contained rather than stored remotely so that control signals must be broadcast to it wirelessly." Max told him.

"Did you find anything that looks like a wireless transceiver?" Carr asked.

"No commander." T'Lan answered, "As far as we can determine this body is incapable of wireless communication."

"That may also explain why it did not use make use of a gateway to escape." Max added, "I cannot tell whether the fleshforms we have already encountered communicate with a home base to request the formation of a gateway in a similar manner to how we would request to be beamed up to a starship or if they are capable of generating such gateways themselves, but it seems certain that this body can do neither. It is entirely self contained."

"So radically different to what we've faced before." Edwards said.

"Yes captain." Max responded, "Captain, it is the opinion of T'Lan and I that this fleshform represents some form of prototype. An early model used during the development of the technology."

"So the fact that it's malformed is a result of imperfections in the manufacturing process then? Carr asked.

"Correct commander." T'Lan replied, "Perhaps some of the other examples Sub-lieutenant Nayal and Captain Shry reported seeing would be more properly formed."

"Hang on." Edwards said, "Didn't Nayal say something about there being at least one of these missing from the facility this was found in?"

"Correct. She also said that the facility had been excavated by the Romulans." Max replied.

"While others watched them doing it." Nikki added.

"Correct." T'Lan said, "Captain, logic suggests that technology from Iconia has been recovered by one of the factions in the Romulan civil war and that they are employing it against not only their rivals in their former empire, but also against neighbouring civilisations."

"So that's it?" Carr asked, "The Romulans are responsible for everything we've seen over the last two and a half years?"

"That is what the available evidence suggests commander." Max replied.

"I don't buy it." Edwards said.

"Then who else do you consider it to be captain?" T'Lan asked, "The Iconians themselves are long dead. Iconia is a wasteland and the splinter civilisations that grew up out of what remained of their empire have never returned here. Nor as far as we can tell have any other species visited the planet."

"Except for the Romulans." Carr said.

"And the Federation." Max added, "And I think we can agree that the events we have witnessed are not the result of some shadowy conspiracy from within the Federation itself. On the other hand Romulans are well known for their secretive ways. Even Nayal."

Edwards looked at T'Lan.

"I'd like to speak with your father." he said.

"Of course captain." T'Lan replied, "He is in his quarters resting."

"I am not sure that I understand the question captain." Saron said as he looked at Edwards and T'Lan who now sat opposite him in the quarters he had been assigned aboard the *Nightfall*, "Why would I possess knowledge of events on Iconia?"

"I was hoping that some of the civilisations you've studied would have had records of what happened after Iconia was bombarded. Especially if any of the victors decided to take advantage of their victory to plunder what was left." Edwards explained.

"Illogical captain. The Iconians' neighbours may have started out envious of their technology but that envy turned to fear and hatred. While any of the civilisations that banded together to attack Iconia may have been interested in seizing control of some of that technology for themselves the others would not have permitted it. Any civilisation that obtained Iconian technology would most likely have been viewed in the same way as the Iconians and attacked by the others." Saron responded, "Captain, from what you and T'Lan have told me I must concur with T'Lan and your engineer. Logically the Romulans are the most likely suspects for what has happened."

West yawned as she climbed into bed. Searching through the underground ruins of Iconia had not been as stressful as the Iconian outpost she had previously helped investigate, but only because on that occasion the outpost's defences had attempted to bury her and the rest of her team alive.

"Computer set alarm for oh six hundred." she said.

"Confirmed. Alarm set for oh six hundred hours." the computer voice replied and West turned out the lights and closed her eyes.

Sleep came to West quickly but mere moments after she had fallen asleep her eyes snapped open again and she smiled. But this was not really Jenna West. Instead her unconscious state had allowed the alien intelligence that now nested within an implant placed in her brain while she had been a prisoner of the unknown alien force to take control of her body. The Controller had once been assigned to watch over an outpost of the ancient Iconians that had been destroyed by the crew of the *Nightfall*, residing within its computer, but upon the outposts destruction it had fled to the only place it could – the implant it had detected within West. Now 'she' watched the crew of the *Nightfall*, becoming active only when West was asleep and unable to exert control. The Controller had on occasion already been able to influence West's behaviour while awake and she hoped that this was something she could build on, but for now she took advantage of whatever she could.

The Controller dressed quickly, not in West's normal Starfleet uniform but in an all covering black garment that hugged her figure and allowed for maximum freedom of movement. Then she collected a Romulan manufactured disruptor and PADD from the same draw she kept the black garment in and stowed the phaser in a holster built into her outfit before pulling her hood over her head. The hood covered her entire head, including her face and was made of a fabric that concealed her features yet allowed her to see through it from the inside. Finally The Controller activated her PADD, entering a set of co-ordinates on the surface of Iconia.

"Computer, activate program Control Six to these co-ordinates." she said.

During her time aboard the *USS Nightfall*, The Controller had made use of her skills to implant several computer programs within the ship's network. Several of these allowed anonymous use of the ship's transporter system, allowing her to beam from place to place or even to a nearby vessel or planet without there being any record of it happening.

Immediately the *Nightfall's* transporter energised, transporting The Controller from West's quarters to the surface of Iconia not far from the entrance to the underground complex that West had been exploring during the day. Carefully she crept closer to the entrance to the complex and as she had expected she saw two sentries on duty, each with a scarf wrapped around their face and goggles to protect their eyes. With her

disruptor The Controller could easily have disabled both sentries from her vantage point before either could react but the energy pulse could easily have alerted the *Nightfall* in orbit above. Instead she continued to move steadily closer to the tunnel entrance until she was within throwing distance of it and the sentries. Picking up a piece of debris that fitted her hand The Controller hurled it over the sentries so that when it landed they both looked away from her. Then she watched as they moved in that direction, apparently searching for the cause of the sound.

This was the opportunity that The Controller needed and she rushed to the tunnel entrance and made it inside before the sentries returned. Now inside the tunnel The Controller headed deeper into the underground complex, remaining in the shadows as much as possible where her outfit would let her blend in. Fortunately for her, the complex was only sparsely lit, while only a handful of Starfleet and military personnel remained on the surface to investigate what had been found. The Controller headed towards the power plant control room that West had been amongst those to discover. As she approached the chamber The Controller heard voices as the Starfleet team discussed their task. The Controller could hear three distinct voices coming from inside the chamber and she drew her disruptor, setting it to a lethal level. Then she hurried to the doorway and fired through it, hitting the first Starfleet officer she saw in the chest. The other two The Controller had expected stared at their dead colleague in shock and she took advantage of the situation to shoot both of them in rapid succession. But there was a fourth Starfleet crewman present and she reacted by hurling a toolkit towards The Controller. This burst open in mid air and forced The Controller to duck as she was showered with tools from inside it. In turn this distraction enabled the crewman to charge at The Controller and tackle her, knocking her to the floor while both women wrestled for control of the disruptor. At the same time the Starfleet crewman reached out to rip The Controller's hood away from her face and when she saw West's face she gasped in surprise.

"You." she said and The Controller smiled.

"Her." she responded as the other woman's surprise caused her to relax her grip on The Controller's disruptor long enough for The Controller to press the muzzle against her chest and fire. Pushing the body from on top of her The Controller got up and hurried to a nearby console, putting her hood back in place just in case anyone else came along and managed to raise the alarm before she could act.

Like the control consoles aboard a Federation starship, the consoles in the Iconian complex could be configured to a variety of tasks and The Controller adjusted the one in front of her from power regulation to communication. Then she prepared two signals to be sent. One was basic in its content, more a beacon than a message while the other contained more detail. Then with these ready she loaded them into transmission buffers. The basic signal ran into a long range subspace antenna that the console indicated remained intact if buried beneath more than a thousand tonnes of rock, while the second was for internal broadcast only. But as of yet The Controller did not send either signal, instead she switched the console back to its previous function and she checked the status of the geothermal power plant that lay beneath the control room. All of the monitors indicated that this had managed to survive the millennia of disuse intact enough to provide the power that she required for her purpose and so she brought it on line.

The moment this happened lights began to come on around the complex and the Starfleet work teams began signalling one another to try and determine what was happening. This included signals sent to the combadge of the Starfleet team that The Controller had just killed and she knew that it was only a matter of time before someone realised that they were not responding. Fortunately even when they realised something was amiss they would be unable to warn the *Nightfall* thanks to the ongoing communication difficulties caused by the mineral content of the ground above the complex. The Controller diverted power to the subspace antenna array, bringing the ancient communication system to life and sent it the pre-prepared message. Then she also activated the charging system for the regiment of combat robots that had stood waiting since the time of the original attack on Iconia and as the army of machines came on line she sent them the second of the messages she had prepared.

With everything as she needed it The Controller then ran from the control room, heading back the way she had come towards the tunnel to the surface. Along the way she heard voices as Starfleet crewmen and soldiers attempted to find out what was happening but she managed to avoid all contact with them right up until she reached the tunnel leading back to the surface. Here she found the two sentries who had been guarding it on the surface now walking down it towards her and The Controller opted to try and confuse them. Drawing her disruptor she set it to its maximum possible setting and then held the weapon behind her back while she lowered her hood before calmly walking into the tunnel towards the two soldiers.

"What's going on?" she asked, "Has the *Nightfall* called in?"

"Lieutenant?" one of the two soldiers replied, "What are you doing back here on the planet? Wait, what happened to your uniform?"

Realising that she was on the verge of being exposed The Controller suddenly produced the disruptor from behind her back and fired it at the soldier who looked most prepared to return fire. Then while the second was still raising his rifle she shot him as well. The armoured vests worn by the soldiers were designed to protect them from attack by both physical impacts and energy blasts but the high setting of the disruptor

proved too much even for their armour to withstand at such short range and both soldiers were disintegrated by the blasts, leaving the way clear for The Controller to rush back to the surface where she took out her PADD and activated.
“Activate return transport program.” she said before she was automatically beamed back aboard the *Nightfall*.

"Captain we have a problem." Cole's voice said from the intercom just as Edwards was preparing to turn in for the night.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Sir there's a subspace beacon being broadcast from Iconia. It's directed towards Romulan territory." Cole told him.

"I'm on my way." Edwards replied, "Sound yellow alert."

"Yes sir."

Edwards hurried to the bridge where the rest of the *Nightfall's* senior officers were also starting to gather in response to the yellow alert. Even Commander Jones had arrived to observe and as always was lurking at the rear of the bridge.

"What's our status?" Edwards asked as Cole vacated the command seat.

"The subspace beacon is still transmitting and we've lost all contact with the surface." Cole replied, "But we are monitoring an energy build up from somewhere underground."

"Let me guess." Edwards said, "The geothermal plant." and he looked at the science station where T'Lan was just sitting down.

"One moment captain." she replied before consulting her instruments. Then she looked back at him, "Much of the energy is thermal in nature." she told him.

"So someone's turned the power plant on." Carr said as she arrived in time for the report and took her seat next to the captains.

"Sir I'm receiving a signal from the surface." the officer currently at ops said and Edwards frowned briefly, wondering where West was.

"Put them through." he said.

"*Nightfall* can you read us?" a voice called out, "*Nightfall* we need immediate beam out."

"This is Captain Edwards, what's going on down there?" Edwards responded just as the turbolift door opened and West hurried onto the bridge.

"Nice of you to join us lieutenant." Cole commented.

"We're under attack." the crewman signalling from the surface and Edwards and Carr exchanged nervous glances.

"Attack? Who's attacking?" Edwards asked.

"The robots. The robots that we found in the underground complex. Someone killed the team in the power plant and activated them. As many of us as possible have evacuated to the surface but if those things follow us up here then there's no-where for us to go now that the ground forces' vehicles have been beamed back aboard the *Nightfall*."

"Stand by. We'll get you all out of there as quickly as possible." Edwards said and he nodded towards West who immediately alerted the ship's transporter rooms to begin an evacuation, "Ideas?" he added, looking around.

"Captain our position is compromised." Cole said.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole is correct." Nayal added, "You can bet that at least one of the Romulan factions along the Neutral Zone will send a ship to investigate and if we're still here when they arrive—"

"Then we'll end up in the middle of a fight where no-one will have a clue who they're shooting at." Carr interrupted.

"Mister Hamilton plot us a course back to Federation territory." Edwards ordered, "And Lieutenant West I want you to reel in the CAP."

"Captain Edwards are you really going to abandon this planet to the Romulans?" Jones asked.

"I don't see that I have much of a choice commander." Edwards replied, "But I don't intend leaving much for them to find." and he looked at T'Lan, "T'Lan I need a firing solution for the mass accelerators to inflict maximum damage to the search area and as much ground around it."

"Yes captain." she replied then after rapidly using her console to carry out the necessary calculations she added, "A six round burst targeted directly at the geothermal plant should rupture the crust and trigger a volcanic eruption that would consume everything in a two thousand metre radius. Combined with a spread of twenty four further projectiles in two offset clock face patterns will trigger sufficient seismic disturbance to collapse any underground structures of the quality we have seen so far."

"You're going to destroy it all?" Jones asked.

"Yes commander. Every last bit of it." Edwards replied, "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No captain. I was just wanting to confirm how far you're willing to go." Jones said.

"Lieutenant T'Lan, pass your calculations to Lieutenant Commander Cole. Cole I want you to unleash the full

salvo as soon as we've finished the evacuation and our fighters are back aboard. Mister Hamilton, the moment the salvo is fired get us out of here. Full impulse until we're out of the orbital plane and then maximum warp. Understood?" Edwards said and there were responses that indicated the crew understood their roles fully.

"Captain the last of our fighters is back in the hangar and the evacuation is complete." West announced and Edwards smiled.

"Shields up." he said, "Mister Cole you may fire when ready."

In rapid succession each of the *Nightfall's* two mass accelerators fired three rounds that smashed into Iconia's surface directly above the geothermal power plant, triggering an eruption of magma from the thousand metre wide crater the bombardment produced. Then another two dozen rounds impacted in two rings around this causing cave-ins and landslides all around the ruins of the ancient city.

"Now Mister Hamilton." Edwards added, "Get us out of here."

"Yes captain, going to full impulse." Hamilton replied.

"You may want to hang onto something." Cole said to Jones as Hamilton accelerated the *Nightfall* and turned the ship sharply, causing Jones who was not strapped into a seat like the rest of the bridge crew to have to suddenly reach out and steady himself.

The *Nightfall* then headed out of the system, moving perpendicular to the orbital plane to get the ship to where it could safely go to warp as soon as possible and at that moment Hamilton engaged the warp drive to get as far from Iconia as possible before the Romulans could arrive.

"Commander Jones." Edwards said, releasing his safety harness and getting to his feet, "I think that this means our mission is now over."

"Yes I suppose it does." Jones replied, "Not the rousing success Starfleet was hoping for but at least we've got some clues about who we're up against."

"I'm so glad you agree." Edwards said, "So you must also agree that your role here as an observer is over now that there's nothing left to observe. So get the hell off my bridge before I have you removed."

"Of course captain. I'll be in my quarters when you need me." Jones said as he turned to leave.

"I have come to say goodbye." T'Lan said as she entered the quarters assigned to Saron, "It was agreeable to see you even if it was a ruse by Starfleet Intelligence."

"And it was agreeable to see you as well T'Lan." Saron replied, "Even if we did not have the opportunity to talk much about anything other than your work."

"What else would you have discussed father?" T'Lan asked.

"Your relationship with the human Robert."

"You disapprove?" T'Lan said, "You would rather I found a Vulcan mate?"

"T'Lan it is the way of our people for our parents to select our mates while we are still children and it was obvious to your mother and I that we chose poorly in your case." Saron said. Then before T'Lan could reply he continued, "You and your husband were apart more than you were together before he was killed and I have always considered that you blamed yourself for his death."

"He was killed in action during the war with the Dominion." T'Lan pointed out.

"But he did not have to be in Starfleet did he? He could have remained on Vulcan after your wedding.

Instead he returned only when one of you was due to enter pon farr." Saron replied, "T'Lan what I am trying to say is that if you have found someone with who you can be truly happy then I approve of your choice. But I will give you one warning. The life span of humans is fleeting compared to ours. If your relationship with Robert continues then you will eventually find yourself a widow once more. You should ensure that you will not be left alone when this happens."

"I do not understand father. What?"

"A child T'Lan. Have a family. I can tell you from experience that it is well worth the effort." Saron said, "Now I believe that my transport is waiting." and he picked up his case from where he had set it down.

As Saron and T'Lan left his quarters they met Cole in the corridor outside.

"Ah, I caught you just in time." he said with a smile, "I thought I'd come and see you off."

"If you consider it necessary." Saron replied.

Cole then led the two Vulcans to the transporter room and watched as Saron and T'Lan touched their fingers together before he moved towards the transporter pad. But before he stepped up onto the pad Saron turned around and stood face to face with Cole.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole." he said flatly, "I should inform you, I have four sons but only one daughter. Should you make her regret selecting you as a mate then I can assure you that I and my sons will seek redress for her. Am I understood?"

"Loud and clear." Cole replied, nodding and then Saron stepped onto the transporter pad.

"Energise." T'Lan said and she watched as her father vanished from view.

"I really don't think he likes me T'Lan." Cole said when he knew Saron was gone.

"But you know that I do. Isn't that all that matters?" she replied, taking hold of his hand in hers.

"Come in." Edwards said as he sat at his desk in his ready room and when the door opened he saw Rebecca standing there in her MACO uniform.

"Hi dad." she said as she entered the room and headed for the couch at the side of the room, "I just came to say goodbye. My ride back to earth is alongside now."

"I'm sorry we didn't get to spend that much time together Becky." Edwards replied, getting up from his chair and sitting beside her on the couch.

"That's okay." Rebecca said, "I mean I got to tell you about me joining the MACOS. Are you sure you're okay with it?"

"Of course I am. What father wouldn't be fine with this?" Edwards asked before tapping his combadge and adding, "Computer Playback recording Becky one."

"You were right dad." the recording said and Rebecca winced.

"That's never going to get old." Edwards said.

"Yeah sure." Rebecca replied, "Look dad there's something I need to know from you before I leave though."

"There is?" Edwards asked with a puzzled frown, "What?"

"I need to know the truth about you and Lieutenant Commander Carr." Rebecca told him.

When Rebecca left Edwards' ready room she headed straight for the turbolift that took her to the level where the transporter room was located. But when the turbolift stopped and the doors opened the corridor was not empty. Instead Heart, Shry, Nayal, White and Nikki all stood waiting outside the turbolift.

"Well?" White asked, "Did it work?"

"Of course." Rebecca answered as she produced a compact PADD from a pocket in her uniform, "Dad's not the only one who can make audio recordings."

"So you got him to admit what's going on?" Nayal asked and Rebecca nodded.

"The whole story from the moment he came aboard." Rebecca replied.

"Okay so hand it over lieutenant." Heart said and Rebecca held out the PADD towards him. But as Heart reached out to take the device she withdrew it suddenly.

"There is just one thing I need to do first." she said.

"No!" Shry exclaimed as he saw what Rebecca was about to do but he was too late to prevent her from pressing down on the button on the display that was marked 'DELETE'.

"Next time do your own dirty work." Rebecca said handing over the PADD, "Now if you don't mind I've got a flight to catch." and she walked past them, heading for the transporter room.

"I don't believe it!" White exclaimed, "We were so close to having proof."

"There'll be another time commander." Shry replied.

"And there'll be time to get our own back on the lieutenant if I have anything to say about it as well." Heart added.

"Captain there's a transmission coming in for you from Starfleet Command." West told Edwards over the intercom.

"Put them through." Edwards replied and he turned towards the display on his desk, "Ah, admiral." he said when an image of a Starfleet admiral appeared on the screen.

"Edwards what's the meaning of this report I've got from you about Starfleet Intelligence?" the admiral asked.

"It's all there sir." Edwards said, "Commander Jones of Starfleet Intelligence was a party to illegally intercepting the private communications of my crew so he could lure a civilian to my ship before taking us into the Neutral Zone."

"Look captain I spoke with Starfleet Intelligence. They didn't send anyone called Jones to your ship. In fact they don't have any agents by that name within thirty light years of your current position. As for going into the Neutral Zone, I've reviewed our sensor logs and according to them your ship never deviated from its assigned patrol route. Your transponder was picked up by more than half a dozen listening posts along the border." the admiral explained.

"I'm sorry admiral I have to go." Edwards said, "I'll call you back later." and he shut off the communicator.

Then as he leapt to his feet he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to security, I want a security team to meet me outside Commander Jones' quarters. Edwards out."

Edwards hurried as fast as he could to the quarters that had been assigned to the mysterious Commander Jones and he found Cole and two security guards waiting for him.

"Get that door open." Edwards ordered.

"Computer release door." Cole said, "Authorisation Cole delta four." and the door slid open.

Edwards, Cole and the two guards then rushed into the room but there was no sign at all of Commander Jones. Instead there was just an active PADD lay on the bed and on the display was a message left for the crew of the *Nightfall*.

'A JOB WELL DONE, I THINK. BE SEEING YOU.'