

# STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



REVELATIONS  
BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

# ***STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL*** **REVELATIONS**

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

Suspecting that a faction of Romulans is behind the mysterious events of the last few years the *USS Nightfall* is ordered to cross the Neutral Zone and investigate. However, what they find is not what they expected when the Romulans turn out to be just pawns of something far more sinister...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

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

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*i.*

Stardate 66912.4. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 at the Beta Antares shipyards.

“Hold that turbolift!” a familiar voice called out just as Lieutenant Jenna West, operation manager of the *USS Nightfall* had selected her destination. Placing a hand in the doorway to block the doors from closing West waited as Nayal, a Romulan present aboard the *Nightfall* as an advisor on Romulan matters hurried into the turbolift car, “Thanks.” she added.

“Really? That’s what you’re wearing to this?” West asked as she looked at Nayal’s outfit while she removed her hand from the doorway and allowed the turbolift doors to slid shut before it began to move.

“Well you’re not wearing your normal uniform either.” Nayal replied, looking at the clean white tunic West wore in place of the typical black and grey Starfleet duty uniform, “I just thought I’d wear something other than my uniform. Besides can you honestly say that a Romulan military uniform would be the best thing to wear at a Starfleet party?”

“It’s not a party Nayal, it’s a reception to mark the launching of the next two modified akira-class ships of the *Nightfall*’s program.”

“Will there be Music?”

“Probably.”

“Drink? Food? People pretending to be interested in what others have to say while wondering how much force they’d have to apply to get one of those little plastic spikes you human put bits of meat and cheese on to get it to go through the person’s eyeball and into their brain?”

West frowned.

“Yes, yes and oh God I hope not.” she said.

“Then it’s a party. The reception will be the area of the space station we arrive in when we beam over.”

“But do you really think that a bodysuit that leaves very little to the imagination and heels that make you the same height as me are appropriate? And what is that thing made of? Is that some sort of plastic or have you actually gone out and skinned a black -scaled reptile?”

“It’s replicated.”

“So you had the choice of literally tens of thousands of outfits and you chose something that makes you look like you’re trying to seduce someone.”

“Seduce someone? Lieutenant do you find my wearing this outfit to be seductive?” Nayal asked as she slowly slid her hands up and down her body.

“I’m not answering that.” West said as she looked away.

“Because if you do then perhaps I could speak to Bradley and he’d agree to-”

“Oh God I’m not listening to this!” West exclaimed, clamping her hands over her ears and Nayal smiled.

“Humans.” she said to herself, “You’re almost as much fun to annoy as Vulcans.”

West gasped.

“That’s why you picked that.” she hissed, “There are going to be Vulcans at this party. You’re going to try and annoy them by acting this way.”

“A-ha! So it is a party. And will there really be Vulcans there?” Nayal said, “Aside from our own dearly loved science officer Lieutenant T’Lan of course.”

“You know there will be. One of the ship’s being launched is the *Ek’Duv*, Vulcan for eclipse. It’s entire crew are Vulcan and its senior officers will all be there. Nayal, you better think carefully before doing anything that might embarrass the captain. He won’t be happy if you end up offending the Vulcans by mocking their culture.”

Nayal smiled.

“Now where would be the logic in doing that lieutenant?” she said and West groaned.

The reception was being held in a large room that normally served as an officers’ mess aboard the primary space station of the network of such structures that made up the Beta Antares shipyards. This particular room had been chosen because the massive windows that made up the externally facing wall offered a commanding view of the construction docks themselves where starships were under construction. Most significantly the two modified akira-class heavy cruisers that were the reason for this event were positioned in the berths closest to the station so that they could be seen clearly.

As West and Nayal entered the room they found it already filled with people of various species. Like West many of them wore Starfleet dress uniforms but there were also uniforms from the defence forces of several member worlds as well as civilian scientists and engineers who had worked on aspects of the project that had produced the somewhat controversial modified akira-class vessels. The controversy mainly centred

around two aspects of the program, firstly the armament of the vessels had been bolstered by the addition of two large scale mass accelerators that ran for most of the length of the secondary hull that could be put to devastating use for planetary bombardments. Secondly the ships were designed to carry two full companies of dedicated ground troops and while Starfleet had yet to create a force more effective than its lightly equipped ground combat specialists who had proven so inadequate in conflicts against the Klingons and the Dominion this role was being filled by soldiers from several of the core member worlds. The impression this was giving some of the outer worlds of the Federation was that these worlds were being favoured by the Federation and were seeking to impose their will on the others. Given that there were also members of not only the Federation News Service but also other news reporting organisations present West suspected that questions would be raised about this.

A loud cheer from one side of the room made both women look in that direction and they saw a cluster of Starfleet officers gathered around the bar. Among them was Lieutenant Commander William White, sometimes known by his call sign of 'Snowman'.

"I'll lay even money that those are the fighter pilots from the *Umbra*." West commented, referring to the second of the two starships being honoured at the reception as she recognised more of the *Nightfall's* own attached squadron of fighter pilots in the group, "You can spot them a light year away when they get together. None from the *Ek'Duv* though. In fact I don't see many of the Vulcan crew here at all."

"Look, there's the captain. Let's go and say 'hello'." Nayal said suddenly, pointing across the room and she set off, looking to West as if she was picking a path that required her to get as close to as many of the other guests at the reception and squeeze past them. Then West looked at where Nayal had pointed and saw Captain Edwards, the *Nightfall's* commanding officer stood close to the large windowed wall with its first officer Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr, her long red hair making her easy to pick out of a crowd. Then West noticed that they were stood talking to both a human and Vulcan in Starfleet command division uniforms and she realised that these must be the commanding officers of the *Ek'Duv* and the *Umbra*.

"Oh no." she said, her eyes widening as she looked back at Nayal pushing her way towards them and she immediately set off trying to catch up to the Romulan woman before she could do or say anything that may cause problems for Captain Edwards.

Nayal reached Edwards, Carr and the Vulcan captain a few seconds before West and by the time she reached them Nayal had already been introduced to the Vulcan.

"Ah Lieutenant West." Edwards said to her, "I don't think you've met Captain Sannel or Captain Hurst have you?"

"No sir." West replied and she held out her hand in greeting to the Vulcan.

"Vulcan's don't shake hands." Nayal said softly, leaning close to her and West frowned briefly at having her etiquette corrected by the Romulan.

"On the other hand I do." Hurst added and he took her hand and shook it.

"This is Lieutenant Jenna West, my operations manager." Edwards said.

"Lieutenant." Sannel said in greeting. Then he looked back at Edwards and Carr, "Will your science officer be attending this event?"

"T'Lan should be here at any moment." Carr answered, "She'll probably be along with Lieutenant Commander Cole."

"Here's Doctor King though." West added when she noticed the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer entering the room, "Oh and Cole and T'Lan as well." she added before she waved to them.

"Doctor, you've arrived in time for the speeches." Edwards said when the trio reached them and in response King grunted as he looked at Lieutenant Commander Cole, the *Nightfall's* tactical officer.

"See, I told you we should have waited longer." he said.

"There is no logic in missing the formalities doctor." T'Lan replied before Cole could say anything. Then she looked at Captain Sannel and raised her hand with its fingers spread in the traditional Vulcan greeting,

"Greetings captain." she said.

"Greetings Lieutenant T'Lan." he replied, copying the gesture, "There is a matter I need to discuss with you at the earliest opportunity."

"Now is convenient with me captain." T'Lan said before looking at Edwards, "If you would excuse us captain." she added.

"Of course." he replied and the two Vulcans slipped away through the crowd.

"What do you suppose that is all about?" Cole asked, watching them leave.

"Captain Sannel probably wants to ask T'Lan about the *Nightfall's* operations." Carr answered, "She's got the best part of three years of practical experience with the ship."

"Or maybe the captain's reaching that seven year mark." Nayal suggested with a smirk, "You could have competition there Robert." and Cole frowned at her, "Hey, don't shoot the messenger."

Reaching a quiet corner of the room Sannel looked directly at T'Lan.

"I have reviewed the logs of your actions aboard the *USS Nightfall* since its launch lieutenant." he said to her, "Your performance has been consistently excellent."

"Thank you for saying so captain."

"There is no need to thank me lieutenant. It is a simple statement of fact. Too much time among humans appears to be rubbing off on you. An issue that the offer I have for you will rectify."

"What offer?"

"The position of chief science officer aboard the *Ek'Duv* lieutenant. In addition I would recommend you to take the bridge officer's test and promotion to lieutenant commander upon its successful completion."

Surprised by his offer, T'Lan stared at Sannel without speaking.

"My assignment aboard the *Nightfall* is incomplete captain." she said eventually, "It is not logical to abandon it."

"Your assignment is complete whenever you are reassigned or chose to transfer lieutenant." Sannel said, "Logic would indicate that you should accept my offer and the promotion that accompanies it." then he glanced briefly back across the room to where the other seniors officers from the *Nightfall* were gathered, before facing T'Lan again and continuing, "Your reluctance to see this suggests that logic is not what is driving your decision. Instead it is the emotional bond you have chosen to form with Lieutenant Commander Cole."

"That information was not in any of my reports captain." T'Lan replied.

"Nevertheless, you have made no effort to hide it as your captain and first officer have crudely attempted to hide their own relationship."

"Neither Captain Edwards nor Lieutenant Commander Carr has confirmed that they-" T'Lan began.

"That is not at issue lieutenant." Sannel interrupted, "What is at issue is whether you will put an emotional attachment to a single human over the logical advancement of your career in Starfleet lieutenant. I do not require a final answer immediately. I suggest that you reconsider before you give it. Now I believe that your current crew mates will be expecting us to return to them. After you lieutenant."

"As you wish captain." T'Lan replied and she started to head back to the others. Aware that Sannel was following close behind her T'Lan made her way to stand beside Cole and as soon as she reached him she slid her hand into his and gripped it, glancing briefly at the Vulcan captain.

"T'Lan what's-" Cole began before T'Lan interrupted him.

"Because it is logical." she said.

"Told you." Noyal whispered to West, "That Vulcan captain just got knocked back and he's not happy about it."

"So are you going to try your luck instead?" West whispered back, "Or are you afraid of what Bradley would say?"

"Bradley and I aren't an item as you humans would put it. Maybe I will see if I can give him what he so obviously needs." Noyal replied.

"Looks like you're just in time for the speeches T'Lan." Carr said as a Starfleet admiral took to the podium set up in front of the windows and the orchestra stopped playing.

"If I may have your attention please." the admiral announced and all there was a sudden hush as everyone in the room turned to face him, "We are gathered here today to witness-"

"Is this a launch dedication or a wedding?" King muttered.

"Don't worry commander." West added, looking at Carr, "I'll leave you to catch the bouquet."

Just then Edwards felt a tap on his shoulder and looking around he saw another Starfleet admiral standing directly behind him.

"Sorry to interrupt Captain Edwards." he said, "But I need a word in private with you and your first officer. Sublieutenant Noyal should come as well."

"Of course sir." Edwards replied and he looked at Carr and Noyal in turn. In response Carr nodded while Noyal turned to Sannel and leant closer to him.

"Maybe when I get back we can have a private talk." she said softly, "I'm sure you'll find me accommodating."

The admiral led Edwards, Carr and Noyal into a room connected to the mess hall where a second Starfleet admiral was waiting. Unlike the other he wore a standard duty uniform rather than a dress white tunic.

"Captain Edwards." he said, standing up from behind the table he sat at, "Commander Carr. Sublieutenant Noyal."

"We know who we are." Noyal replied, "Who are you?"

"I'm Admiral Preston and this is Admiral Grant." the admiral in duty uniform replied, "Now would you like to sit down? Assuming you can sit down in that without it bursting open sublieutenant."

"An admiral with a sense of humour." Edwards commented as everyone sat down, "This is unusual."

"Nothing about what we are about to discuss here is usual captain." Admiral Grant said, "It is, however, classified top secret. None of you are to discuss it with anyone who doesn't absolutely need to know."

"Ah, so you're from Starfleet Intelligence." Edwards said.

"Can you prove that?" Carr asked, "We've had visitors supposedly from Intelligence before."

"Ah yes, the mysterious Commander Jones." Admiral Preston said, "In fact it is regarding those events that we're here."

"Everything's in our report admiral." Edwards said.

"Yes and it made for worrying reading captain." Admiral Grant said, "Your visit to Iconia suggested that a faction in the Romulan civil war may have gained access to Iconian technology and be using it to not only gain advantage over the other factions but also destabilise the rest of the quadrant."

"Not least by attacking our starbases along the Neutral Zone." Preston added.

"All of that is in our reports as well." Carr said, "What exactly is it you want from us?"

"And can you prove who you are?" Nayal asked again.

"You can check us out if you want." Grant said, "Contact your ship now and have them contact Starfleet Command. They'll give you names and pictures but our assignments will be classified."

"Carr to *Nightfall*." Carr said, tapping her combadge to activate it.

"Mom?" a young woman's voice responded.

"Nikki?" Carr said, surprised to hear her daughter's voice, "Where's Lieutenant Hamilton?"

"Oh Bradley needed to use the bathroom so he let me take the bridge. He said it was fine as long as-" Carr sighed.

"Never mind that right now Nikki." she said, "When Hamilton gets back tell him we need him to contact Starfleet Command and ask for the files on Admirals Grant and Preston. Oh and tell him we'll discuss what duties an intern can undertake when I get back aboard. Okay?"

"Err, yeah. Okay mom." Nikki said before the channel went dead.

"They're professionals." Nayal said, looking straight at the two admirals and smiling at them.

"While we wait we'll explain why we've brought you here." Preston said, staring at Edwards while he did his best to avoid looking embarrassed about Carr's conversation with her teenage daughter.

"Go ahead admiral." he said and Preston picked up a PADD and handed it to Edwards. Looking at the screen he saw that showed a tactical map of part of the Romulan side of the Neutral Zone.

"That map shows the extent of the territory controlled by the Romulan faction closest to Iconia." Preston said, "And frankly we know next to nothing about what's going on inside it, they obviously aren't interested in co-operating with the Federation and refused to even acknowledge the invitation to attend the peace conference last year."

"We believe that this is because they have control of Iconian technology." Grant continued, "We don't think that they have full control over it yet but it's probably just a matter of time. Captain Edwards we need you to take the *USS Nightfall* into Romulan space and evaluate the threat that this group poses to the Federation. If possible you are to bring back any Iconian technology they have obtained and destroy what you can't remove."

"We picked your ship because of your presence sublieutenant." Preston said, addressing Nayal as he spoke, "You're the only Romulan citizen serving aboard a Federation starship. We're hoping that your expertise will enable the *Nightfall* to infiltrate the territory concerned and from there locate any Iconian technology in use."

"Getting into Romulan space at all is going to be difficult." Edwards pointed out, "Let alone into the territory of a faction that is totally isolationist."

"You'll be supplied with all the intelligence we have regarding their border security captain." Grant said,

"Hopefully there'll be enough information in it that you'll be able to find a hole or a way of procuring alternate transport."

"Hijack a Romulan ship?" Carr commented, "That's piracy. An act of war even."

"So was launching simultaneous attacks on our starbases along the Neutral Zone." Preston replied sharply,

"They started this lieutenant commander and now we are in a situation where we need to take such measures to guarantee the safety of the Federation." then he looked at Edwards, "Well captain? Do you think your crew can handle this?"

Edwards smiled.

"Frankly admiral, if they can't then I doubt that there's a crew in Starfleet that can." he said.



"How many times has the admiral used the word 'revolutionary' now?" Cole said as the admiral at the podium continued with his speech.

"Seventeen." T'Lan replied, "Used to describe the vessels' weapon systems, control mechanisms, warp drive and sensors. None of which use any technology worthy of being described as such."

King bit a lump of cheese from a small plastic spike that he had taken from a tray being offered around by one of the mess staff and then held the spike in front of his face.

"You know, it's at times like this I consider how much force I'd need to use to push this through an eyeball. Either the one belonging to the person speaking or even my own just to get it over with." he said and West winced.

"Something wrong lieutenant?" Cole asked.

"No sir." she responded, "Just don't tell Nayal."

"Don't tell me what?" Nayal interrupted as she returned with Edwards and Carr.

"Oh nothing." West said.

"What did the admiral want?" Cole said, looking at Edwards and Carr.

"We've got an assignment." Edwards replied, "It starts as soon as the reception's over."

"Which means I've still got chance to see if Captain Sannel wants to find out what life on the illogical side can be like." Nayal added and she smiled before making her way through the crowd towards where Sannel and several of his senior officers were gathered.

Admiral Grant sat down at his desk and suddenly realised that there was someone sat in the corner of his office where the lights did not reach at their current level. Turning them up revealed an attractive woman dressed all in black, smiling at him.

"Waiting in the dark, that's not creepy at all." he said to the woman.

"Well?" she asked and Grant frowned.

"That's 'Well *admiral?*' commander." he replied sternly.

"Maybe it would be if you could court martial me." Now what did the good captain have to say?"

"Exactly what we expected him to. He's going to follow his orders and take the *Nightfall* into Romulan space. You better be right about this though. I don't appreciate being used by your section like this."

"Oh don't worry admiral. I've seen the crew of the *Nightfall* at work. Some of them may not look it at first, but once you get to know them more you realise just how good they are at what they do."

"It's not funny." Nayal said as soon as the group materialised back in one of the *Nightfall's* transporter rooms, finding not only a transporter technician but also Nikki Carr present to greet them. The young woman wore a science division uniform but there was no indication of rank on her collar as there would be for an officer or enlisted crewman.

"Oh yes it is." Cole replied.

"He's right Nayal, it is." White added, the fighter pilot having returned to the *Nightfall* with the rest of those present at the reception.

"What happened?" Nikki asked.

"Nayal tried seducing the captain of the *Ek'Duv*." West replied, "And failed. Badly."

"Was it the outfit?" Nikki said.

"Not so much the outfit." King answered, "More his wife, who happened to be stood right next to him when Nayal grabbed his hand and-"

"She doesn't need to know doctor." Carr said suddenly before he could finish.

"I don't think the outfit helped any either." West said, "I knew it meant trouble the moment I saw it."

"I think Nayal could cause trouble in whatever she wore." Cole commented.

"Send her to sickbay." King replied, "I'll fit her for a jacket that will keep her from causing trouble."

"One that fastens up the back?" White asked and King smiled.

"You got it." he said.

"I don't." Nayal responded.

"Will someone just tell me what happened?" Nikki asked, "I'm bound to find out sooner or later anyway."

"Then we'll make it later. Much later." Carr said sternly, "Now do you have the information I asked for?"

"Right here mom." Nikki replied, holding out a PADD towards her mother. Taking the device, Carr and Edwards stepped to one side of the transporter room.

"You're all dismissed." Edwards said, looking back over his should, "Commander Carr and I need to check this out." then he and Carr began to review the information on the PADD.

"Just as the admiral said." Carr commented, "There's a record of their being in Starfleet but their assignments are classified."

"Looks like they were on the level then." Edwards added, nodding in agreement.

"They certainly have more credibility than we were left with after Nayal's little escapade." Carr said, "It wouldn't have been so bad if she'd been in uniform. Perhaps we ought to insist she wears hers to all official functions so she matches the rest of us."

"I don't know Grace." Edwards replied, "Knowing her she'll find some reason why all you ladies have to wear something like that." and Carr snorted.

"If you're going to enforce that rule then I expect your help getting in and out of something that tight." she said, "And a lot of lubricant as well probably."

"I'm guessing you haven't noticed I'm still here." Nikki said suddenly and both Edwards and Carr whirled around to see her leaning against the transporter control console, "Oh and for the record I'd just like to add 'Yuck'."

"Nikki what are you still doing here?" Carr exclaimed.

"Lieutenant Hamilton asked me to check if you needed anything else." Nikki said, "When we ran the names you gave us most of what Starfleet had was classified. Hamilton figured you may want him to try something else to get the information you were after."

"Well this is all we need." Edwards replied and then he looked at Carr, "I need to let Heart and Shry know to have their men ready." he told her, "Can you take care of getting us underway?"

"Yes captain." Carr answered, "Plus I need to have a little word with Lieutenant Hamilton." and she glanced at her daughter as she said this.

"Mister Hamilton would you care to explain why you gave an intern command of a starship?" Carr asked as she and Nikki both exited the turbolift onto the bridge and Nikki smiled nervously at the lieutenant occupying the captain's chair located in the centre of the room.

"I was only gone five minutes." Hamilton replied, vacating the seat so that Carr could take it.

"Five minutes? Hamilton you know how rapidly things can happen aboard a starship."

"With respect commander we are currently orbiting a Starfleet shipyard, surrounded by sentry ships and sensor drones so an attack is highly unlikely and if there was a technical issue then Lieutenant Maximillian would become aware of it even before anyone on the bridge did while Costas and Kruger were on hand if there was some other emergency." Hamilton replied and he indicated the two other officers currently on the bridge before he continued, "T'Lan cleared Nikki to be on the bridge and so I thought that since I was in command I would broaden her experience."

Carr sighed, knowing that since Hamilton had been left in command of the *Nightfall* he was perfectly entitled to assign any member of the crew he wished to take his position on such a temporary basis. However, that did not change the fact that having Nikki respond when Carr had contacted the ship had made both her and Captain Edwards look somewhat foolish in front of the two admirals.

"Just be careful lieutenant." she said, "We were with two admirals when I called so the impression they got was that we had a child in charge of the ship."

"Hey! I'm eighteen." Nikki protested, "Besides, it was you and the captain that got me this internship to start with."

"I bet it wasn't as bad as Nayal stroking-" Hamilton began before Carr interrupted.

"yes, we all know what Nayal did."

"I don't. No-one will tell me." Nikki commented.

"Never mind that now." Carr said, "I need to get our course laid in." and she walked over to the vacant helm station and sat down. As the *Nightfall's* chief helmsman Hamilton frowned and started to walk after her, "Sorry Bradley, this is classified." Carr said when she noticed this, "You'll be briefed with the rest of the senior staff when the time is right but until then everything's on a need to know basis."

"Excuse me commander, but as the ship's senior helmsman won't I need to know where we're going?" Hamilton asked.

"We're heading back to our usual patrol area. That's all you need to know for now. The computer will fly us as close to the target area as possible and by that time you'll have been briefed." Carr said as she finished inputting a set of co-ordinates located along the Federation border with the Romulan Neutral Zone and then placed a seal on the entry that limited access to herself or Captain Edwards, "There." she said as she got back to her feet, "All done." and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to Edwards."

"Edwards here."

"Captain our course is laid in. We can initialise it at any time."

"Great. I'm just about to speak with Heart and Shry."

"In that case I'm heading back to my quarters to get out of this uniform. Can you catch up with me after?"

Carr said and Nikki winced as the other officers on the bridge just looked directly at Carr, "Oh not like that!" she exclaimed.



"Is there a problem commander?" Edwards asked, the channel having been left open.  
"Only that our crew have dirty minds captain." Carr replied, "Carr out." and she tapped her combadge again.

The two companies of ground troops stationed aboard the *USS Nightfall* were drawn from Earth's MACOs and the Andorian Imperial Guard and Edwards found both company commanders exercising together in the ship's gymnasium along with several other members of their companies. Officially it was for this 'training' that the two officers had missed the reception but deep down Edwards guessed that it had more to do with Heart's dislike of Starfleet protocol and the lingering animosity that could sometimes flare up between Andorians and Vulcans.

"Gentlemen it appears we will be needing your skills." he told them.

"A ground assault?" MACO Captain Heart asked.

"What's the target?" Shry added.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you yet." Edwards answered, "But I can tell you that we'll likely have to undertake a ship to ship boarding action against a fortified target."

"A warship?" Shry commented and he looked at Heart, "Sounds like an anti-piracy operation to me." he added.

"Pirates wouldn't need information to be so classified that we can't be told what the target is. This is a black op." Heart replied.

"Well whatever it is we'll be ready captain." Shry said, turning back towards Edwards, "A time scale would be nice though."

"Some time after we reach our usual patrol area." Edwards said, "There'll be a full briefing for the senior officers then. In the meantime you'll need to make sure that all the equipment you need is already aboard the ship before we leave or can be replicated en route."

"Shouldn't be a problem." Heart said, nodding, "We carry that sort of stuff as standard. I do have one question though."

"I can't promise to answer it."

"Why us? I'd have thought you'd have preferred to use Cole's security detail for a ship to ship action."

"I need soldiers, not security guards. Besides, it's possible that we'll be under fire from other vessels and I'll need Lieutenant Commander Cole at tactical." Edwards said, "More than that I can't say."

"Okay then, we'll get right on it." Heart replied and beside him Shry nodded in agreement.

"Excellent." Edwards said, "In that case I'll leave you to get on with it."

The two military officers watched as Edwards left the gymnasium before they spoke again.

"A fortified target along the Neutral Zone that will likely be protected by other starships?" Shry commented, "Sounds to me like there's another system thinking about seceding and Starfleet wants to spike their guns before they do."

"Like Prestus tried?" Heart replied, remembering the system that had attempted to secede from the Federation because of the influence of the alien force now known to be making use of Iconian technology.

"Could be it's Prestus again. Those aliens were tapping into anti-Federation sentiment that already existed. Maybe we missed some of the ships they were hiding last time and now we need to finish the job without word getting out and making them even angrier."

### 3.

Sat in his ready room some time later Edwards was reviewing the data that had been sent to him by Starfleet Intelligence. Unfortunately the information regarding the Romulan faction in question was littered with words such as 'estimated', 'possible', 'probable' and 'theoretical' while any definitive information was scarce. There was a chiming from the direction of the door leading to the bridge and Edwards looked up.

"Come in." he said, blanking the display in front of him temporarily to prevent it from being seen by whoever was outside. But when the door slid open it was Carr and Nayal that entered, both carrying PADDs.

"Ah ladies, please sit down." Edwards said, indicating the chairs on the opposite side of his desk as he reactivated his display screen, "I take it you've both been reviewing the intelligence packet supplied to us?"

"You humans have an interesting definition of the word 'intelligence'." Nayal said, holding up her PADD, "If a Tal'Shiar agent submitted a report like this they'd likely end up being shot."

"It can be summed up with the phrase 'we're just not that sure.'" Carr added.

"Well this is what we've got work with." Edwards replied, "Now I noticed that this particular Romulan faction is known to patrol an area of space beyond its borders."

"Raiding groups." Nayal said, nodding, "Small ships looking for targets of opportunity. If they find a vulnerable target they attack. If they find a stronger but still important one then they follow it while they wait for reinforcements. Normally in the form of a proper warship but it could be a larger group of smaller ships if there aren't any available. It's a tactic practised by more than one faction captain, my own planet did it before the Remans drove us out."

"You're thinking of seizing one of those ships?" Carr asked and Edwards nodded.

"I was thinking that we could use an asteroid field as cover to force the ship close enough to us that our lidar would pick it up. Then we could beam aboard while their cloaking device prevents them from raising their shields and seize their ship."

"You make it sound easy captain." Nayal said, "But even if we manage to get aboard the crew will resist. And getting aboard is by no means certain. A small scout ship is unlikely to attack a target the size of the *Nightfall*."

"But you said that they might follow us." Carr pointed out, "Would we be considered a target worth monitoring?"

"I'm not sure about how worthy they'd consider us but they'd be curious at least to find out why we're on the wrong side of the border." Nayal responded.

"And what happens after we've got this ship?" Carr asked, "These reports don't give any hint of where the Romulans could be hiding their Iconian tech. Will they keep it at their capital or tuck it away somewhere more secret?"

"Most likely the latter." Nayal replied, "Though they won't put it too far away from the centre of their power just in case whoever they trust to look after it decides to take control of it for themselves."

"So somewhere in the same system." Edwards suggested and Nayal nodded.

"Where those in power can keep an eye on it." she said.

"We'll have to speak to Max about detecting the technology." Edwards said, "Hopefully the same indicators of the Iconian gateway technology will enable us to pick up their base."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they had a functional gateway running captain." Carr replied, "After all that seems to be their favoured Iconian technology."

"It would be logical." Nayal added and then her eyes widened and she shuddered, "Please don't tell T'Lan I said that." she said.

"How long until we reach the Neutral Zone?" Edwards asked, looking at Carr.

"About four hours captain." she answered, "The autopilot's keeping us on course but the crew are asking a lot of questions. Perhaps we ought to consider letting them in on what's going on."

"No." Edwards replied and he shook his head, "I want to leave that until the last possible moment. We can't afford any security leaks."

"You're referring to the spy?" Nayal said. It had been revealed that someone aboard the *USS Nightfall* was providing information to the enemy but so far there was no indication of who it was. But what was known was that they had the technical skill and clearance to cause major problems for the ship if they chose to.

"I am." Edwards said, "I wouldn't be surprised if the ship suffered a mysterious breakdown or two if the spy found out what our mission was. Heading right into the heart of enemy territory would provide them with a convenient way off the ship after sabotaging it before their superiors sent them back into Federation territory as the only survivor."

"And I thought she was paranoid." Carr commented, glancing at Nayal.

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't stop someone slitting your throat while you sleep." Nayal said, "In fact

a paranoid person is more likely to have security to stop their throat being slit while they sleep.”  
“Yes we get it.” Carr said. Then she looked at Edwards again, “Do you want to talk to Max or shall I?” she asked.  
“I’ll do it.” Edwards said, “You just keep an eye on things on the bridge. For now though I think we’re done here.” and he got up out of his seat, turning off his computer as he did so to prevent anyone from coming into his ready room and seeing what was on it.  
Carr and Nayal got up to leave as well, following Edwards to the bridge. As soon as the door slid open however, all three halted when they saw Cole and Hamilton both standing behind West and leaning over her to look at her operations console.  
“What’s going on here?” Edwards asked.  
“We were just checking-” Hamilton began before Carr interrupted him.  
“Oh I think I know what the three of you were checking.” she said, striding towards the console and looking down at it, “Just as I thought.” she said, looking back at Edwards, “Attempting to gain a positional fix by running an inertial back trace to Beta Antares.”  
“Let me guess,” Edwards said, “You’re using the operations console because T’Lan wouldn’t help you.”  
“Logic suggested that you would not have approved captain.” T’Lan responded from her station towards the rear of the bridge with Nikki sat on a chair that had been set up just behind her.  
“At least you had the good sense not to go along with this Nikki.” Carr said to her daughter.  
“Actually I was just waiting to see what they came up with.” Nikki replied with a grin and Carr sighed.  
“Just keep an eye on them commander.” Edwards told Carr before heading for the nearest turbolift.  
“Everyone back to your stations.” Carr said as the captain left the bridge and she headed for the command chair while Nayal took one of the vacant seats beside her, “This ship isn’t going to run itself.”  
“Actually lieutenant commander,” T’Lan said, “given that you set the autopilot to take us to our destination it-”  
“Not now T’Lan.” Carr exclaimed before the Vulcan could finish.

Lieutenant Maximillian, the *Nightfall*'s chief engineer was a former Borg drone who had been freed from the control of the Collective. However, he still retained all of his Borg implants and that made him an extremely capable engineer who was able to interface directly with any technology he encountered. Prior to the launch of the *Nightfall* he had been a key part of the program that was intended primarily to provide the Federation with the means to defend against the Borg. His appearance could make some people nervous but after almost three years aboard the *Nightfall* with him Edwards was long past any sub-conscious discomfort.  
“Max I need to discuss a technical issue with you in private.” he said as he approached the Borg.  
“Of course captain.” Max replied, “We may discuss it in here.” and he indicated for Edwards to follow him to a work area adjacent to the main engineering compartment. Then as soon as the door slid shut behind them he added, “I take it that this has to do with our heading towards the Neutral Zone close to the Prestus system.” and Edwards frowned.  
“How do you know that?” he asked.  
“How could I not captain? You may have locked the crew out of the autopilot and navigational controls but the ship's nanite hive cannot be kept out of it and in turn they are linked to me, making me aware of everything.”  
“Sorry. I still manage to overlook just how much you know about this ship.” Edwards said.  
“You do not need to worry captain, I have no intention of divulging the information to the rest of the crew. You and Lieutenant Commander Carr know that I can be trusted to-”  
“Yes, yes, we know.” Edwards interrupted.  
“So how may I help you captain?”  
“We need a way to detect Iconian technology at a distance.” Edwards said simply before expanding on the point, “Starfleet is sending us to try and locate whatever was taken from Iconia so being able to detect it at a distance would help us greatly.”  
“Tricky.” Max replied as he considered this, “We may have the means to detect the Iconian gateway technology but so far that is all. Plus the gateway technology can only be detected from relatively close ranges and while in operation.”  
“Is there any way you could improve on this?” Edwards asked and Max paused to consider it.  
“Possibly.” he said, “Our detection system is a passive one, monitoring specific emissions of the active technology. However, it may be possible to create an active variant using the same emissions we currently watch for. If these encounter a gateway, even an inactive one, they may produce a detectable variance as they interact with the focusing components that such technology must employ.”  
Edwards smiled.  
“I knew I could count on you.” he said, “Get working on it. But I’d rather you didn’t bring anyone else in on it for now to preserve secrecy. There’ll be a full briefing of the senior officers when we reach the Neutral Zone and after that you can bring in all the help you want.”  
“Of course captain. I can make the initial adjustments myself while leaving the major hardware changes for

later.”

“In that case I'll let you get on. If you have anything to report then bring it to either myself or Lieutenant Commander Carr directly. Don't use the intercom just in case.”



When the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp it was in interstellar space, with no star systems within a light year. Ahead of it was the official no-man's land of the Romulan Neutral Zone and to go further meant a violation of the treaty that had ended the Romulan War fought two centuries earlier. But with the collapse of the Romulan Empire following the destruction of Romulus itself there was little more than habit to keep Starfleet from crossing the Neutral Zone. The possibility of various Romulan factions uniting to fight the Federation did exist but was largely discounted. Now Starfleet avoided crossing the Neutral Zone in the hope that whatever faction eventually won out in the ongoing Romulan civil war would see the Federation as being willing to abide by its agreements. However, when the occasion demanded it Starfleet was more than willing to cross the border.

And this was just such an occasion.

"Helm reading all stop captain. We have dropped out of warp." Hamilton reported.

"Sensors indicate we are along the edge of the Romulan Neutral Zone." T'Lan added.

Edwards tapped his combadge.

"All senior officers report to the briefing room immediately." he said, "The ship is to go to yellow alert until further notice." and then as he tapped his combadge again he got to his feet and, followed by Carr and Nayal he headed for the briefing room.

"Do you really think we need to go to yellow alert?" Carr whispered.

"The enhanced alert status will make things more difficult for the spy to report on our activities." he replied, "And I want to make things as difficult as we can for them."

The senior bridge officers joined Edwards and Carr in the briefing room just a few seconds later while it took several minutes for the others to gather from all over the ship. Only Max did not sit, his Borg implants made standing a more natural position for him so he stood back from the table that dominated the room instead while Edwards began to speak.

"Okay I'll start off by apologising for not being able to brief you earlier." he said, "But this mission is classified and it comes direct from Starfleet intelligence."

"So that's why you had me run those two admirals?" Hamilton asked, "You were making sure they and their orders were legit."

"Exactly." Edwards replied, "After what happened with the mysterious Commander Jones or whoever he really was we weren't taking any chances. Now I'm sure you're all waiting to hear why I've gathered you here now."

"Was it Colonel Mustard in the transporter room with the disruptor?" Hamilton said and some of the other officers present smiled. On the other hand Carr glared at him briefly while West sighed and Edwards acted as if he had not heard the comment, instead carrying on with the briefing.

"Starfleet Intelligence has reviewed the information we recovered from Iconia and come to the conclusion that the Romulan faction right on the other side of the Neutral Zone to Iconia has been able to recover Iconian technology and is using it to destabilise the rest of the Alpha and beta Quadrants. Our mission is to cross the Neutral Zone, penetrate their space, locate any Iconian technology and report back with details of what they have. If possible we are to either acquire it for ourselves or alternatively we are authorised to destroy their research facilities."

"I take it you think at least part of what we're looking for is aboard a ship. Or could easily be moved to one." Shry said, "That's why you asked us about being ready for a boarding action."

"Actually the boarding action will come sooner than that." Edwards said and he activated the briefing room's main display, "As you can see this map indicates that the Romulans we're dealing with patrol several systems around those they fully control. Of particular interest to us is this system here, simply referred to as JX-four-one-six. It's a dwarf star and has no real planetary system but there a dense asteroid belt that orbits one point four AUs from the star that is the ideal hiding place for approaching ships. Our intention is to enter the field and wait for a Romulan patrol to close with us. At that point we'll send a force over to seize control of it so we can use it to infiltrate the nearby Hylasia system where the Romulan faction has its capital." then he looked at Max, "How are the plans for detecting Iconian technology going lieutenant?" he asked.

"I can have a system in place aboard the *Nightfall* in four hours captain." Max replied, "But if you need a second one installing aboard a Romulan ship that may take longer. I can't confirm how easy it would be to interface with Romulan technology until I try."

Edwards nodded.

"According to Nayal the Romulans will have placed any Iconian tech somewhere in their primary system but its unlikely to be on their capital world so the team we send in will have to look for other likely places."

"Do we have much information on the system?" Cole asked.

"No." Carr replied, "Long range scans have confirmed that the second planet in the system is a class-M world and there are numerous planets and moons where settlement is only possible with artificial life support."  
"Sound like good places to put a secret research facility." West said, "Easy to hide the equipment needed to keep projects going when you can make it look like ordinary life support machinery."  
"And remote enough to avoid contamination if there are any unfortunate accidents." Doctor King added.  
"I want to slip across the border without attracting too much attention." Edwards said, "So we'll have to limit our speed to minimise our warp signature. Now does anyone have anything they want to add?"  
"I see why they targeted Prestus now." Heart commented and the others present looked at him.  
"Why's that captain?" Carr asked.  
"Well look at that map." Heart said, pointing to the display, "They control everything for nine light years around on the Romulan side of the border. If Prestus had seceded from the Federation under their influence it would have allowed them to control all the approaches to Iconia itself. Then they could have established a permanent presence there and plundered everything that they had to leave behind the first time."  
"He's right." Cole said, looking at Edwards, "Being able to fortify the Neutral Zone itself would have prevented other factions from disrupting their activities at Iconia."  
"That's good news isn't it?" White said, "It means they don't have everything yet."  
"With fully functioning gateway technology they ought to be able to move back and forth between Iconia and Hylasia Two easily." West said.  
"The key words there being 'fully functional'." Max commented, "We still don't understand gateway technology and there could be limitations to it that the Romulans have to overcome."  
"Besides," White added, "a gateway can only move objects of a certain size through and when we went to Iconia I don't recall seeing anything big enough to allow a warbird through. Does anyone else?"  
"Either way the aim of this mission is to curtail or even eliminate the Romulan's capability to make use of Iconian technology at all." Edwards said, "As of this moment the *Nightfall* is on full communications lock down and I want all departments to report on their readiness within the hour. Mister Hamilton set a course for the JX-four-one-six system, warp six."

Most of the illumination on the scout ship's bridge came from the display screens that covered every wall and console.

"Vessel closing at warp seven centurion." one of the Romulan crew announced.

"Show me." the small vessel's commanding officer ordered and the main screen changed to show the *USS Nightfall* as it crossed into space formerly belonging to the Romulan Star Empire, "Ah, so the mighty Federation flouts its treaty yet again." he added, "Sublieutenant, I want this transmitted back to fleet command on Hylasia Two. Then engage the cloak and take us closer. We can't afford to let them escape us."

In a luxuriously decorated office on Hylasia Two the self appointed Praetor of the Romulan Star Empire sat behind his desk that was an exact replica of the one used for generations by praetors on Romulus itself reviewing the reports that came with being the supreme dictator of what was only a fraction of the empire he sought to build for himself.

"I hear we have guests Praetor Trexen." a voice said unexpectedly and Trexen looked up to see a young human female now stood on the opposite side of his desk, despite the door remaining sealed and there having been no announcement from any of the guards stood outside, "A Starfleet heavy cruiser."

"It's nothing." he told The Girl as she sat down, "Just one ship. One of our scouts picked it up and is following it right now. A pair of warbirds has been sent to deal with it. They'll be more than a match for one starship, even including its fighters."

"I've had the warbirds called back." The Girl said, "The scout ship can stay to keep an eye on them though."

"You did what?" Trexen replied, "But one scout-"

"One scout can tell you what they're up to. The warbirds are only of use if you intend to destroy the ship.""

"And why shouldn't we?" Trexen exclaimed.

"Because we can't be certain that that cruiser intends to come here." The Girl answered calmly, "It is heading for a system outside of this territory." and Trexen scowled.

"The whole of the Romulan Star Empire is our territory." he hissed, "As it stood before the Vulcans and their precious Federation abandoned our home world to its destruction. You've never had an issue with this course of action before."

"This ship is special praetor." The Girl said, "It cannot be destroyed on a whim. Action must only be taken if it is absolutely necessary and even then every effort must be made to minimise crew casualties."

Trexen smiled.

"You managed to put someone aboard didn't you?" he asked, "You actually managed to penetrate Starfleet security. But if you can do it once you can do it again. Besides, your agent ought to be able to leave whenever they want."

"This is a special case praetor." The Girl replied, "As much as I'm loath to admit it our agent got aboard the

ship only by chance and is unable to extract themselves in the usual manner. A second opportunity to insert an agent in this way is unlikely to occur. That is why I called off the warbirds."

"And if they are intending to head for us? What then?"

"Then the scout ship that is following them will alert us if the ship manoeuvres to enter this system or any others under your immediate control. Then action can be taken. But for now let the crew think that they remain unnoticed by us."

Trexen scowled.

"I ought to have my guards drag you from this chamber and throw you in a dungeon to rot for the way you presume to speak to me." he said, but in reaction to this The Girl smiled.

"You won't do that will you praetor? And not only because you know that I'd be out of that dungeon in a matter of seconds." then she got to her feet, "Amongst other reasons of course." and then she turned away from the praetor's desk and took a single step away, vanishing into thin air as she did.

The *Nightfall* dropped out of warp before entering the asteroid field in the JB-416 system, the risk of collision was far too great for the crew to enter it at warp. Just as Edwards had said, the asteroid field was relatively dense, with the spacing between the asteroids no more than a million kilometres. Only the finely balanced mass all around the star had prevented the asteroids from being drawn together and forming true planets.

"Take us in Mister Hamilton." Edwards ordered, "Keep us at no more than one quarter impulse though."

"Yes captain." Hamilton replied.

"T'Lan can you guide us to the optimum location?" Carr asked.

"Scanning the field now lieutenant commander." T'Lan answered, "There appears to be a suitable position at three two four mark one seven."

"Steering three two four mark one seven. One quarter impulse." Hamilton said as he guided the *Nightfall* into the asteroid field. The flight controls of the *Nightfall* were among the systems modified from the standard Starfleet equipment. The standard touch sensitive control console was still included but the primary controls were a pair of manually operated joysticks combined with pedals that allowed a helmsman such as Hamilton to make rapid changes to the *Nightfall's* heading using simple hand and foot movements. Combined with the heads up displays built into the headsets based on Dominion technology that the bridge crew wore Hamilton knew the exact heading and speed of the *Nightfall* at any moment and could control it without needing to find the correct part of a console and it was by using the improved response time this offered that Hamilton was able to guide the *Nightfall* through the asteroid field using impulse power rather than just thrusters.

The spot picked out by T'Lan as being suitable was a volume of clear space just over half a million kilometres across and Hamilton positioned the *Nightfall* at the very centre of this.

"In position now captain." he announced as he brought the starship to a halt.

"Confirmed." T'Lan added, "We have at least point eight light seconds all around us."

"Engage lidar." Carr ordered, "Set to sweep mode."

At Carr's command two small turrets extended from the *Nightfall's* saucer section, one from the top and the other from the bottom. Both of these were equipped to emit carefully modulated laser energy and detect the reflections produced when this struck a nearby object. This provided the *Nightfall* with an effective if short ranged detection system that was not dependent on subspace technology but its true benefit came with the way in which it could be used if the turrets were set to emit continuous beams of laser energy rather than the brief pulses used for lidar detection. Too weak to be effective as a weapon, the beams could still be aimed at another vessel and used to create a link between them. Any sound aboard the target vessel would produce vibrations in its hull and these would in turn create a measurable disturbance in the beam that would allow the *Nightfall* to pick up this sound. Furthermore the beams could be directed into empty space and any ship passing through them would create another measurable disturbance, even if it was cloaked.

"Lidar active lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Sweep commencing."

"The Federation vessel has come to a halt centurion."

"What are they doing?" the scout ship's commanding officer asked.

"Nothing sir. I detect no unusual subspace emissions and their weapons are offline."

"They don't know we're here." the centurion said and he leant forwards in his chair, "Helm, take us in closer."

"By your command centurion." the helmsman replied and he fired the ship's thrusters to advance cautiously through the asteroid field.

"Contact." T'Lan said suddenly, "Single vessel thirty-eight thousand kilometres to stern."

"ID?" Carr asked.

"Uncertain." T'Lan replied, "But from the level of disturbance I would estimate that it is a scout vessel."

Edwards smiled.

"Keeping tabs on us." he said. Then he looked at Nayal and added, "Go."

Yes captain." Nayal said, leaping out of her seat and hurrying towards the nearest turbolift, "Level six

transporter room." she told the turbolift as soon as the doors slid shut behind her and she waited as it took her down to the access point closest to the transporter rooms. As soon as the doors slid open again NayaI ran out into the corridor and headed straight for the transporter room where she found Captain Shry and a force of his Imperial Guard waiting. Every one of the soldiers wore an armoured vest and when he saw NayaI appear Shry handed an extra one to her.

"Take this." he said, "It'll make sure we don't mistake that uniform of yours for one of the other side's."

"Thanks." NayaI replied as she quickly donned the vest, "I'll need a phaser."

"Right here. Standard Starfleet issue." Shry responded as he also handed her a weapon that had been prepared for her. As Shry had said it was a standard issue Starfleet type two phaser. The Andorians were all armed with their standard issue weapons which aboard the *USS Nightfall* consisted of a ballistic assault rifle that mounted a phaser weapon equivalent to a Starfleet type two unit beneath the barrel. Like so many of the systems aboard the *Nightfall* this was designed for use against the Borg, their drones being unable to adapt to solid projectiles while also retaining the flexibility and hitting power of a modern directed energy weapon. NayaI and the Andorians took their places on the transporter platform and positioned themselves ready to cover all directions when they materialised. Shry then looked at the Starfleet crewman stood by the control console.

"Energise." he ordered.



"Centurion, the Starfleet vessel has activated its transporters." the Romulan operations officer announced and the commanding officer frowned.

"How far are they from the nearest asteroid?" he asked.

"Approximately two hundred and forty thousand kilometres centurion."

"Then where are they beaming to?" The centurion said, "The only thing closer to them than that is – Is us! They know we're here. Drop the cloak! Raise shields! Now!"

"Too late. Transporter signatures on deck three. We are being boarded."

The Andorians materialised in a storage room filled with stacks of cargo containers but empty of crew.

"Nayal to *Nightfall*." Nayal said, tapping the Starfleet combadge she wore, "Transport successful, team one is in place."

"Move!" Shry snapped and the boarding party headed for the only door out of the hold, positioning themselves either side of it.

"When the door opens we need to head right." Nayal said, "That will take us towards the bridge." and Shry nodded.

"Do it." he then said to the Andorian beside the door controls.

The Andorian promptly tried to open the door but there was just a harsh buzzing and the doors remained closed.

"They know we're here." Nayal said.

"Then company's coming." Shry responded, "Get that door open and everyone be ready to use your respirators if they try to introduce gas into the air system."

The Andorian by the door controls acted quickly, pressing a device designed to override door security seals against the panel and triggering it so that the door opened. Even as the doors were still moving apart the Andorians advanced into the corridor. To start with they covered both directions to make sure that a Romulan security team was not about to appear and attempt to drive them off the ship. But when no-one appeared they all turned towards the bridge and advanced rapidly down the corridor.

At the same time as this was happening a second boarding party consisting of MACOs and led by Captain Heart and Max materialised in what was obviously a machine shop where replacement parts that could not simply be replicated could be crafted. Like the cargo hold in which the first team had materialised the door to this compartment had been sealed as soon as the Romulans had detected the transporter signatures. But these seals proved of no use when Max walked up to the door and held out his arm with his fist clenched. Two small tubes then extended from between his fingers and connected themselves to the panel before injecting a swarm of adaptive nanites into the system. Before Max could even return his arm to his side the door was already opening.

"Go!" Heart yelled and his MACO team charged through the doorway into the scout vessel's main engineering section.

There were cries of alarm from several of the Romulans present and when one raised what looked like a weapon there was the roar of gunfire as Heart fired his rifle, opting to make use of the projectile weapon rather than his phaser to avoid having a particle beam accidentally strike the warp core. This was followed by more gunfire as the other MACOs opened fire to drive the Romulans back to where they could be contained while Max headed for the nearest control console and plugged himself in as he had done with the door.

"Accessing." he said, "The ship is on full security lock down. All decks are sealed and security teams are assembling on deck two."

"Ready to come down and deal with us." Heart said, "How about we reverse all this?"

"Agreed captain." Max replied, "Accessing security control systems now. Sealing deck two armoury. Releasing door seals between cargo hold and bridge. Deactivating counter intrusion systems."

"Will the bridge be aware of any of this?" Heart asked.

"Of the tampering itself, no." Max answered, "But the crew will doubtless report some of the effects." Heart activated his communicator.

"Heart to Shry, engineering is ours and Max has dealt with the ship's security systems. You've a clear path to the bridge but I suggest you hurry. It may not take long for the command crew to figure out what's going on."

"Understood Captain Heart." Shry responded and he looked at his men and added, "Hurry it up, we're on the clock here."

The scout ship's commanding officer looked at the security displays in a state of confusion.

"If everything is working as it should then why are the intruders advancing towards us?" he asked, "Look,

they've already reached deck two."

"I'm sorry centurion, but the security lock down ought to have kept them on deck three."

"Ought to? I know what it ought to have done sub-lieutenant. I want to know what it's actually doing. Now can you tell me that?"

"No centurion."

The centurion frowned.

"Never mind." he said, "Release the gas."

"But sir, our own people are in some of those sections." another of the bridge crew protested and the centurion glared at him angrily.

"Better to lose them than the ship!" he hissed, "Now release the gas."

"Yes centurion, releasing nerve gas now." the sub-lieutenant said but then he frowned.

"What's wrong now?" the centurion asked but before the sub-lieutenant could answer the doors to the bridge suddenly opened to reveal Shry and his Imperial Guard team.

"Don't touch that dial!" he yelled at the sub-lieutenant.

The centurion reached for the disruptor holstered at his waist but before he could draw it Nayal fired her phaser and shot him in the chest.

"Everyone get away from their consoles." she called out as she made her way towards the command chair, "This ship has been seized by Federation commandos. Co-operate and you'll be well treated."

At first the Romulan command crew remained where they were as the Andorians continued to enter the bridge and spread out around them. But then one of them slowly got to his feet and stepped away from his console, raising his hands in the air. This proved to be the catalyst that prompted the rest of the bridge crew to follow suit.

"Make sure they're disarmed." Shry ordered as his men rushed to take the Romulans into custody and he noticed that some of the bridge crew wore sidearms, "And make sure that they're all secured." then he looked at Nayal, "I guess it's up to you now sub-lieutenant." he added and she smiled as she sat down at one of the consoles.

"Looks like Max did his work well." she said, "The crew are trapped and we can deal with them in small groups. There are about half a dozen in the armoury who may be able to put up a fight"

Shry activated his communicator.

"Shry to Heart, what's your status?"

"Engineering is under control and I've sent a fire team to sweep the rest of the deck. What about you?"

"We've taken the bridge without casualties. The Romulan commander is stunned but the rest surrendered without a fight."

"Then the ship's effectively ours. Can you tell how many of the crew are still at large?"

"Well according to Nayal, Max's stunt with the doors has left them sealed in instead of us. Though some of them are inside the armoury." Shry said, looking at the display that showed the positions of the remaining Romulan crew. The scout ship had a total complement of about sixty, most of whom were scattered about the vessel in ones and twos while larger clusters were evident on the bridge, in engineering and around the armoury.

"I guess it's time to let Captain Edwards know we have his ship for him then." Heart replied.

"Sub-lieutenant Nayal is calling from the Romulan vessel captain." West announced, looking up from her console. Having de-cloaked as its crew attempted to assume a more defensive posture, the scout ship was shown on the main viewscreen as well as being visible on any of the bridge crew's headset displays. But rather than attempting to escape or even attack the *Nightfall*, the scout simply held its position to the Starfleet vessel's stern. Alert to the possibility that there could be other Romulan ships in the area waiting to attack the *Nightfall*, the heavy cruiser had raised its shields and powered weapons as soon as the boarding parties had beamed aboard the Romulan scout.

"Put her through." Edwards replied.

"Nayal to *Nightfall*. Captain we have taken the Romulan ship." Nayal's voice announced.

"Are there any casualties?" Carr asked.

"Negative commander." Nayal answered, "We stunned some of the Romulan crew to take the bridge but Captain Heart's men used their rifles in the engine room to avoid damaging the warp core so there are more serious injuries to the crew down there. There's still a small group holed up in the armoury as well but Captain Shry is taking a squad down there now to deal with them. I believe his exact words were 'A couple of stun grenades speak louder than a polite request to surrender.'"

Edwards smiled and looked at Carr.

"You know I heard that the Andorians don't have a word for 'subtle.'" he said.

"Actually captain, " T'Lan responded before Carr could say anything, "the Andorian word for subtle is-

"T'Lan it was a joke." Cole told her before she could finish. Then he looked towards Edwards and Carr,

"There are still no signs of any other Romulan vessels captain." he said.

"As far as I can tell from these communication logs, this ship was acting alone captain." Nayal added, "If reinforcements were on the way then no-one bothered to tell them."

"Let's not take any chances just yet." Edwards replied to them both before he addressed Nayal over the communication link, "Sub-lieutenant can you pilot that ship?"

"Err, I think so captain. Though not very fast." she replied.

"That's alright you don't need to go far. Just get the ship outside of the asteroid field. We'll follow and as soon as we're clear we can begin transferring the crew while our fighters cover us." Edwards explained.

"Understood captain. Nayal out."

There was a short break between Nayal closing the communication channel and the Romulan vessel starting to move off. Unsteadily at first, it turned away from the *Nightfall* and lurched forwards to head back the same way it had entered the asteroid field. Fortunately, even a relatively dense asteroid field such as this left more than enough room for the scout ship to pass between the drifting lumps of rock with enough room to spare that Nayal made it out of the field and into clear space. Behind it the *Nightfall* followed, though its flightpath was far more steady as Hamilton's superior piloting skill and responsive flight controls allowed him to navigate the asteroid field with much greater ease.

As soon as the heavy cruiser cleared the asteroids fully its forward hangar door opened and the squadron of peregrine-class fighters it carried emerged in pairs.

"Snowman to squadron. Spread out and form a perimeter." White broadcast to his squadron, "Give the *Nightfall* a half million kilometre safety zone. Remember that any approaching ships could be cloaked so watch out for even the slightest disturbance and call it in."

The fighters spread out, circling both the *Nightfall* and the Romulan scout ship to establish a defensive perimeter around them, their progress monitored from the bridge of the *Nightfall*.

"Perimeter established captain." T'Lan said, "No signs of further Romulan vessels in the area."

"In that case," Edwards said, "I think that some of you are expected in sickbay."

**6.**

"Ouch!" Carr exclaimed as she sat on the edge of the biobed and she glared at King, "You hit me. Again."  
"Well stop picking at it then." he replied sternly and Carr frowned.

With little time available to make the team that would be infiltrating the Romulan facility once it was found actually look like Romulans King had kept his cosmetic surgery to the bare minimum necessary, placing synthetic implants beneath the skin of their ears to make them appear pointed and implanting fake eyebrow hair while removing some of the team's actual eyebrows to give them a more angled look. But Carr was finding the changes made to her ears irritating and was continuously scratching at them, much to Doctor King's annoyance.

"They itch." she said.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr," he said, "if you keep picking at the prosthetic then eventually you will break through the layer of skin holding it in place and it will simply drop out and expose you as a spy. Now how do you think what the Romulans will do to you will compare to a bit of an itch?"

"Fine." Carr said, "I'll try."

"No don't try not to pick at them. Don't pick at them." King said. Then he looked at where Cole was sat on another biobed and looking at himself in a handheld mirror, "See? Commander Cole doesn't need to pick at his ears."

"That's because I'm still smarting from having half the hair on my face ripped out at the root." Cole responded and King sighed, "I better still have eyebrows when this is all over. People without them just look - look -"

"Peculiar? Everyone's a damned critic. I'm a doctor, not a make up artist. I tell you what though, if you want me to I can give you a nice goatee beard to go with those ears and eyebrows." King said and he cracked a smile while Cole frowned.

"In what parallel universe would I want a goatee?" he said.

"One where neat facial hair is considered superior to what some may refer to as 'designer stubble' but I just call messy."

Cole curled his lip.

"I'll pass." he said.

"Oh well." King replied, shrugging and he turned to Carr, "What about you commander? Can I interest you in a goatee?"

"Oh no." she said, "I think the captain would be much happier if I remain free of significant amounts of hair anywhere other than on the top of my head." and Cole and King exchanged glances.

"If that makes him happy." King said and Carr groaned.

"Oh not like that!" she exclaimed.

"Hey, I'm not judging." King said, holding up his hands defensively just as the doors to sickbay slid open to admit T'Lan and Nikki. In place of her usual Starfleet science division uniform T'Lan instead wore a replica of a Romulan military uniform while Nikki carried two more such replicas neatly folded.

"What's so funny?" Nikki asked when she saw her mother scowling at the two male officers who obviously found something amusing.

"Oh your mother was just explaining the personal grooming she undertakes to keep the captain satisfied." King said and Nikki winced.

"Oh mom! Gross." she said, "Look, here are the uniforms you wanted. Now can I get back to the bridge?"

"Of course Nikki." T'Lan replied, "Your services will not be required here any further."

"Thanks." Nikki said and she set the uniforms down on the nearest biobed before hurrying out of sickbay. Meanwhile Cole stood up and smiled at T'Lan.

"So how do I look?" he asked and she looked at him.

"A ridged forehead would be more effective." she replied, "But given the time constraints we are under your appearance ought to be acceptable."

"Acceptable my eye." King muttered, "It's a damned near miracle that their ears are even staying on given how much she keeps picking at them. Without my superior work these two would look like a pair of nerds dressing up as elves for one of Bradley's role playing sessions."

"The facial hair may be an issue, however." T'Lan added.

"I thought you liked it." Cole protested as King smiled.

"I have no personal objection your choice of style. However, I do not recall ever having seen a Romulan male displaying such facial hair." T'Lan said.

"Okay, we'll have to sort out the beard." Cole replied reluctantly.

"Do you know what the status of the scout ship is T'Lan?" Carr asked.

"The crew have been transferred to the *Nightfall* and placed under guard in the brig." T'Lan replied,

"Lieutenant Maximillian has confirmed that the vessel is operable and Sub-lieutenant Nayal is refreshing her knowledge of its systems. They will meet us there along with the rest of our crew."

"I'd rather have Hamilton at the controls." Cole commented as he rubbed the hair on his jaw and looked at it in the mirror he held, knowing that it would shortly be removed.

When the three Starfleet officers now fully disguised as Romulans beamed aboard the scout ship they were met in its transporter room by Nayal and Shry, both of whom grinned and exchanged glances when they saw the trio.

"You seem to find our appearance amusing." T'Lan commented, "But it is entirely logical that we should make ourselves look like Romulans for the duration of this mission."

"Oh we're not amused by everyone's ears cousin." Nayal replied, "It's Cole's face."

"You mean you don't like the goatee?" Cole asked and there was a brief pause.

"It's very formal." Shry said with a grin, "It's just that – that –"

"Come on spit it out." Cole said.

"You look like an evil super villain from one of Bradley's comic books." Nayal exclaimed and Cole frowned.

"Best not tell West." Shry said, "She may rush out and dress up as a totally inappropriate character again."

"Let's just get this over and done with okay?" Carr said as she stepped off the transporter pad and she reached up to scratch one of her ears again, "Damn it." she muttered as she realised what she was doing.

Nayal and Shry led the newly arrived officers to the bridge where they found more of their crew manning some of the supporting duty stations. Unlike the three new arrivals these crewmen wore standard Starfleet duty uniforms and had not been cosmetically altered to appear Romulan. Given that they would not be joining the away team when they beamed down to wherever the Iconian technology was being kept disguising them was not seen as being required. Carr immediately sat in the central captain's seat while Nayal made her way to the helm directly in front of this and Cole and T'Lan took the stations that matched their duties on the *Nightfall*.

"Are we ready?" Carr asked.

"All systems reporting on line." Nayal replied.

"Cloaking device available on your command." Cole said and then after a slight pause he added, "I think."

"Which of these is communications?" Carr said, looking down at the controls built into the arms of her chair.

"Right arm. Blue button." Nayal told her.

"Thanks." Carr replied before pressing the button, "Carr to *Nightfall*." she transmitted, "We're all set and ready to go."

"Understood commander. Good luck. *Nightfall* out." Edwards replied.

"Helm lay in a course for Hylasia, warp eight." Carr ordered, "Engage the cloak."

"Engaging cloak." Cole replied and there was an alarm as the scout ship's cloaking device activated to alert the crew to the vessel's changed status. Then all of a sudden the scout ship lurched forwards and most of the bridge crew remained at their posts only by grabbing hold of their seats or consoles for support. Carr on the other hand fell forwards and landed sprawled on the floor between her seat and Nayal's.

"Sorry about that commander." Nayal said, looking down as Carr lifted her head and glared back at her, "It's been a while since I last did this."

"Now I realise how useful the seat harnesses aboard the *Nightfall* are." Carr muttered as she got back up and sat back in her seat. Then holding tight onto its arms she added, "Warp eight when you're ready sub-lieutenant." and she let go of her grip as the scout ship accelerated more gently this time and the view of the stars outside changed to streaks of light as it entered warp.

"You're scratching again." Cole commented.

"God damn it!" Carr hissed.

"Yes what is it admiral?" Trexen asked when his office door opened and a pair of Romulans in military uniform entered. One of them wore the markings of a centurion while the other the more ornate ones of an admiral.

"Praetor we have lost contact with the scout ship that was shadowing the Federation vessel in the JB-four-one-six asteroid belt." the admiral replied, "I'd like to send a warbird to investigate."

Trexen sighed, remembering the warning given to him by The Girl about attacking the *Nightfall*.

"No." he said, "Unless the Federation vessel enters this system it is not to be engaged and even then all effort is to be made to allow the crew to escape."

"Her?" the admiral said and Trexen nodded.

"She explained that she has an agent aboard the ship that is too valuable to lose." he answered.

"More valuable than a ship and its loyal crew?" the admiral said, "If you ask me we are giving that individual and her associates far too much influence over our actions. They still haven't delivered us the rest of the Empire we were promised when they returned from Iconia."

"And what would you have me do admiral? Arrest her? Have her executed? You know as well as I do that it is

not an option and she would undoubtedly take her services to one of the other sides in this war. I don't know about you but I'm much happier having her on our side than someone else's."

"Huh." the admiral replied in a somewhat unprofessional manner, "There are times I doubt that she's even on our side now. Especially when she can so easily disregard the deaths of Romulan soldiers."

"Lieutenant commander I recommend dropping to impulse now." T'Lan announced.

"Really? This far out?" Carr replied, turning her seat towards the Vulcan.

"Given our unfamiliarity with the operation of the cloaking device I believe it prudent not to take any chances on being detected. The sensor system Lieutenant Maximillian has developed is an active system that may reveal our location but by maximising the distance from the Romulan sensors we reduce the chances that a sentry vessel will be able to pinpoint our location before we can alter it.

Carr nodded.

"Nayal drop to impulse here." she said and just in time she grabbed hold of the arms of her chair when the ship lurched again as Nayal deactivated its warp drive abruptly.

"Out of practice?" Cole commented and Nayal smiled.

"I was never a helmsman anyway." she said, "I just flew shuttles every now and again."

Carr frowned briefly before getting to her feet.

"I'll be in engineering to see how Max is getting on with his detection system." she said, "Cole, you have the conn."

"Yes captain." he replied, making use of the Starfleet convention whereby the commanding officer of a vessel was always referred to as 'captain' rather than by their actual rank if it was lower and Carr smiled.

"Captain." she said, "I've always liked the sound of that." then just before she exited the bridge she paused and turned to look at Cole, "Oh and Cole?" she added.

"Yes captain?"

"Try not to send any signals demanding that the Romulan government of this system give in to your demands on pain of you using your latest secret super weapon, okay?"

"I'll try." Cole replied.

Carr made her way down to the scout ship's engineering section and she noticed a few amused looks on the faces of the Starfleet crew she encountered when they saw her Romulan disguise. On the other hand when she entered engineering Max did not react to her unusual appearance at all.

"Captain." he said in acknowledgement of her presence.

"Max is your detection system ready to put into use?" she asked in response.

"It is. Though I am uncertain of its effectiveness at this range."

"T'Lan seemed to think that we're safer out here than in the heart of the system." Carr explained.

"I concur with her analysis." Max replied, "Though we may have to make a choice between maintaining maximum security and actually completing our mission."

"Then I suggest we give it a try from out here and if it doesn't work we can move in closer and try again." Carr said.

"That seems logical." Max said and he reached out to the console in front of him and pressed a short sequence of buttons, "The system is now engaged captain." he said, looking at Carr, "When Lieutenant T'Lan engages it from the bridge this ship's deflector array will emit an energy pulse modulated to mimic the one created when Iconian gateway technology is used. We ought to be able to detect the interaction between this pulse and the gateway being operated by the Romulans."

"How long will it take to get results?" Carr asked.

"It is a subspace pulse so is not limited to the speed of light. We will have the result almost immediately after emitting the pulse rather than hours after."

Carr nodded and tapped the combadge on her uniform. Internally this was a standard Starfleet device but it had been modified to have the appearance of the Romulan equivalent.

"Carr to bridge. You may emit the pulse at any time."

"Understood captain." Cole replied and on the bridge he looked at T'Lan who at that moment was looking at a PADD she had brought from the *Nightfall*, "Now lieutenant." he said.

"Yes lieutenant commander." she replied, setting down the PADD and activating the modifications Max had made to the scout ship's deflector array, "Pulse emitted." she added and then she reached for the PADD again.

"What's with the PADD cousin?" Nayal asked from the helm.

"Please refrain from calling me cousin." T'Lan replied.

"Okay, sister then since you're pretending to be Romulan. But you didn't answer my question."

"Neither are we sisters. My only siblings are male."

"What is on the PADD T'Lan?" Cole asked, suddenly curious about it himself.

"It is information regarding the Starfleet bridge officer's test." T'Lan replied and Cole straightened up in surprise.

"You mean the test that Captain Sannel wanted you to take?" he asked, "T'Lan are you thinking of leaving us?"

"Of course not. However, it has occurred to me that I could take the test while still remaining aboard the *Nightfall*. In order to gain the promotion to lieutenant commander I would of course need the recommendation of-" T'Lan began and Cole smiled and relaxed.

"Consider it done." he told her, "I'll speak with Captain Edwards when we get back."

"You do not object then?" T'Lan asked.

"Of course not. Why should I?" Cole responded but before T'Lan could speak again there was a chirping sound from her console.

"Lieutenant commander, we have the return from the energy pulse." she said, looking at her console, "Or rather returns."

"Cole to engineering." Cole said, activating the intercom built into the command chair, "Max's gateway detector just got a hit. Multiple hits in fact."

## 7.

"Praetor we have a problem."

The sudden appearance of The Girl in his office could still take Trexen by surprise.

"The Federation vessel?" Trexen asked in response, "Our long range sensors have detected no unauthorised vessels approaching this system. As far as we know it's still right where it was."

"As far as you know? Well I'll tell you what I know shall I Praetor Trexen? Somebody in this system just created a subspace energy pulse that reacted with every one of our transport devices. Every last one. Now I know that no one in this system's military would be stupid enough to try and pinpoint the location of all of my agents so that only leaves the possibility that someone else has come here looking for us and the crew of the *Nightfall* are the only likely candidates. I suggest you start a search for a probe or something similar that they could have slipped through your security perimeter without you noticing."

"And the Federation vessel itself? I take it that you still want it to remain unmolested?"

"Of course praetor." The Girl said sternly, "I've explained my reasons and I expect your co-operation. Unless of course you'd rather I stopped co-operating with you. Now find that probe praetor." and then she turned around and disappeared.

"Uh-oh." Nayal said, looking down at her console, "Do you see this too sister?"

"What's wrong?" Cole asked.

"I think that Max's modifications may have attracted some attention." Nayal said.

"Detecting six launches from the orbital facility around Hylasia Two." T'Lan said, "They appear to be heading in this approximate direction."

"Nayal get us out of here. Nice and slow if you can, I'd rather not have them following our drive trail." Cole ordered before activating the intercom, "Cole to engineering, Commander Carr are you there?"

"Right here Cole." Carr's voice replied, "Max and I were just going over the results of the scan. They're interesting to say the least."

"Well we seem to have attracted some interest as well." Cole told her, "Interest of the worst possible kind. We've got half a dozen warbirds coming our way. Nayal's going to try and avoid them but there are no guarantees."

"Perhaps it would help to take the modified deflector offline." Max suggested, "If the modifications have given away our position then disabling them ought to remedy the situation."

"Do it." Carr said, "Cole, I'm on my way back." and then the channel went dead as Carr closed it and started to hurry back to the bridge.

As soon as the doors to the bridge slid open to admit Carr, Cole vacated the command chair.

"Status?" Carr asked.

"The warbirds are spreading out." Cole replied.

"Their formation appears haphazard." T'Lan added, "It is as if they do not know exactly what they are looking for."

"T'Lan's right." Nayal added, "The Romulan Navy trains its officers in procedures for hunting cloaked vessels and what we're seeing doesn't match them at all. I'd say that they know there's something out here but they think it's something they'll find with an ordinary sensor sweep."

"So they won't see us then?" Carr asked.

"I doubt it. Not unless we use the deflector again. Maybe not even then. There was a considerable delay between our using it last time and those warbirds launching." Nayal replied.

"That assumption is not based in logic." T'Lan said, "It may be that the Romulans are now monitoring for the energy emissions used in the modified deflector and they will be able to pinpoint our position more precisely with each subsequent use of it."

"Okay, we'll err on the side of caution." Carr said, "We'll keep the deflector offline. In the mean time Max has determined that the heaviest concentration of Iconian gates is on Hylasia Two itself. Nayal, I want you to take us in closer under cloak. Put us in orbit if you would."

"A standard orbit could be risky." Nayal replied, "With all the civilian traffic about we'd have to keep adjusting our position to avoid a collision. A higher orbit would be safer."

"Can you keep us in transporter range of the surface?" Carr asked and Nayal nodded.

"I think so. If I keep us at about forty thousand kilometres altitude we can use the transporters while staying out of the orbital shipping lanes."

"Forty thousand kilometres puts us on the very edge of transporter range." T'Lan pointed out.

"Well the only other option would be to go lower sister." Nayal said, "And if we do that we risk hitting the upper atmosphere. This ship may be atmosphere capable but the cloak won't do a thing for us on entry into



it, far too much heat to dissipate.”

“Forty thousand kilometres will do just fine sub-lieutenant.” Carr said, “Take us in. Lieutenant Commander Cole I want you to stand by on shields and weapons. If the Romulans do spot us then we need to drop the cloak and engage our defences.”

“Captain,” T'Lan said, “our tactical capabilities do not match that of the Romulan warbirds that have been despatched. If they can trap us between themselves and Hylasia Two itself then the chances of our escaping are less than eight percent.”

How much less?” Nayal asked.

“Seven point six three two-”

“I was joking sister.”

“Please do not call me sister. Or cousin. We are not related in any way.” T'Lan responded, “In addition I fail to see the humour in your question.”

“You wouldn't see humour if it stood right in front of you and wore orange.” Nayal said. Then she looked at Carr, “You realise that that could be a major issue when we beam down don't you? I mean your red hair is uncommon but not unheard of among my people and Professor Evil over there has a buzz cut that's shorter than typical but neither is going to attract too much attention to us. But T'Lan's attitude is a clear giveaway. She only needs to open her logical little mouth once and she'll tell the entire planet that she's Vulcan.”

“She won't stand out as much as Max will.” Cole pointed out, “And we need her technical expertise to identify any Iconian technology we come across.”

“Yes, I get that you want your girlfriend by your side for this but she could be the reason we all end up standing in front of a firing squad. What will you do then?”

“Demand the right to a final statement.” Cole answered, “Then make it last long enough that either Shry can launch a rescue mission or I die of old age.”

“T'Lan goes with us.” Carr said, “That's final. Like Cole says, we need her knowledge on this one.” then she looked at T'Lan, “But do try not to act too much like a Vulcan T'Lan.” she added.

Moving at half impulse it took several hours for the scout ship to reach the orbit of Hylasia 2, during which time it passed by the warbirds heading for the outer edge of the system without being noticed. Wanting to make full use of their active sensor arrays it would not have been possible for the warbirds to use their cloaking devices as well, the strong energy emissions from their sensors would have given their positions away to other vessels anyway. Instead the six mid sized warships remained visible as the scout was able skirt around them, avoiding detection completely.

“Entering orbit over Hylasia Two now captain.” Nayal reported.

“Thank you sub-lieutenant.” Carr replied and she reached for the intercom, “Bridge to engineering. Max what can you tell me about those gateways?”

“I am not certain that the original belief that there are multiple gateways in operation was accurate captain.” Max answered.

“But you confirmed that we got hits from multiple locations.” Carr pointed out, remembering the discussion they had had about the results of the scan.

“Correct captain. However, on closer analysis I have observed widely varying strengths of the return signals. There is a single large spike and numerous far smaller ones. Many of these are in close proximity to the main source and may represent some ancillary components that resonate the same energy as the gateway itself.”

“You said most are clustered around the main source.” Carr said, “What about the others?”

“There are a handful located in what appears to be the planet's primary population centre captain. A city of approximately twelve million inhabitants.” Max said.

“It's unusual to have a secret research facility among such a large population.” Nayal commented.

“Then maybe they aren't conducting research.” Cole suggested.

“That is logical.” T'Lan replied, “Since it appears logical to believe that the Romulans have learned to operate the Iconian gateway technology it is also logical to believe that they may have implemented a system for their own use. I would suggest that the smaller traces located in their capital may represent the termination points of a localised gateway network.”

“So they step through one and the main gate takes them to the destination of their choice?” Cole asked and T'Lan nodded.

“Correct.” she answered.

“Then it's the primary source we need to target.” Carr said, “Take that out and the rest become useless.”

“There may be an issue with that captain.” T'Lan said, “The primary source is located beneath a body of water. Transporting into such a facility may prove troublesome. The water will distort the targeting sensors and the risk of materialising within a solid object will be significantly increased.”

“Define significant.” Cole said.

“A seven percent chance for each individual transported.” T'Lan replied.

“So based on a four strong team that's a twenty-eight percent chance that one of us would be killed.” Carr

said.

“Not necessarily captain. There is also the chance of only partially materialising inside another object or a failure to fully materialise that would lead only to mutilation rather than death.” T'Lan explained.

“Well that's still not something I want to deal with.” Carr said, “We need another way in.”

“What about using the gateway itself?” Cole suggested, “We head down to the capital and gain access to one of the termination points then see if we can use it to gain access to the main facility.”

“That idea sounds logical.” T'Lan replied.

“Yes it does.” Carr said, “Nayal adjust our orbit to take us over the capital. Then hand the helm over to Ensign Rogers. Max will have command while we're on the surface. Away team is to draw weapons from the armoury and we'll need Romulan tricorders loaded with the locations of the gateway terminals.”

**a.**

The away team materialised in an alleyway where they would not be noticed but that did not stop all four looking around to double check that they had not been observed.

"Okay T'Lan, which way do we need to go?" Carr asked and T'Lan took out her tricorder.

"The nearest source of gateway activity was detected eight hundred metres west of this location." she replied.

"Nayal this is your territory. Kindly lead the way." Carr told the only genuine Romulan among them and Nayal smiled.

"I've never actually been to this planet before." she commented as she set off.

"Maybe not," Cole said, "but at least you know how to act. We'll just follow your lead."

Walking calmly, Nayal left the alleyway and mingled effortlessly with the crowd present on the streets at this time of day. As a trained security officer Cole studied the passing Romulans carefully and noticed that more than a handful gave the group nervous looks as they passed. At first he considered the possibility that there was something about the away team that marked them out as not being Romulan. Perhaps the fact that not one of the four had the forehead ridges that were common among the population of this planet or maybe some aspect of their behaviour.

"Everybody's looking at us." Carr whispered when she too noticed the attention they were getting and her hand moved towards the disruptor at her side.

"Because we're armed military officers." Nayal replied quietly, "If the government here follows the practices of the old star empire then we have the authority to haul in anyone we wanted to be handed over to whatever the local equivalent of the Tal'Shiar is. They're afraid that we're on the prowl for signs of disloyalty. Trust me this is good. Everyone will look at us, but none of them will look too closely just in case we see them staring and decide to start watching them right back."

"The source of the energy reflection is just up ahead." T'Lan said, checking her tricorder.

"That's weird." Cole said, "Look around, we're obviously in a commercial district. Why would there be a gateway here?"

"Perhaps we could learn more by watching the building that it is located in." T'Lan suggested, "Look, there is an establishment that serves food and drink opposite. We can enter that and wait."

"Good idea." Nayal replied with a smile, "Though might I recommend that neither Lieutenant Commander Carr or Lieutenant Commander Cole samples the ale? I doubt these people are ready for badly sung karaoke yet." and Carr frowned.

"Are you ever going to let that go?" she hissed, "It was three years ago."

"Ah yes, I remember that." Cole said, "The transporter technician on duty told me that while Nayal and T'Lan were taking an unconscious West back to her quarters you collapsed into Captain Edwards' arms and proclaimed what a cute couple you both make."

"That's decided then." Carr said sternly, "For the duration of this trip it's water only for us all." and now it was Nayal's turn to frown.

"Just because she's a lightweight I don't see why T'Lan and I need to suffer." she muttered.

The away team crossed the road and entered the restaurant through the wide open front face of the establishment. There was a free table at the front of the restaurant and so they took this and almost straight away one of the staff approach.

"Jolan tru officers." she said, "May I take an order?"

There was a menu positioned centrally on the table but it was written in Romulan and so Carr looked at Nayal.

"Why don't you order for us sub-lieutenant." she said, "Keep it simple."

"In that case we'll have four jumbo molluscs. Oh and osol twists to follow." Nayal said.

"And to drink?"

"Just water." Carr said.

"And a bottle of kali-fal to go." Nayal added.

"Nayal." Carr commented.

"I said to go. I'll take it back with us." Nayal responded.

"It can't do any harm." Cole said and Carr sighed.

"Oh go on then. But if anyone needs carrying home drunk they're going on report." she said.

The team remained in the restaurant and as they ate they watched the building for any signs of unusual activity. Occasionally T'Lan would glance down at the tricorder in her lap as she scanned for energy emissions that did not match those coming from the surrounding structures.

"I think they'd have shielded the building from scans." Carr commented when she saw T'Lan check her

tricorder again.

"That may work for concealing whatever is inside from orbital scans lieutenant commander," she replied, "but at this range it would be noticeable that the emissions that are coming from inside the building do not match those coming from the neighbouring ones, especially when doorways are opened as we have witnessed several times now."

"And is there anything odd about the building?" Cole asked.

"Not as far as I can tell." T'Lan answered, shaking her head, "The structure appears to be perfectly mundane."

Carr sighed.

"We're going to need another scan from the scout ship's deflector." she said.

"From orbit?" Nayal responded, "Are you sure that's wise?"

"There is a significant risk of discovery." T'Lan added.

"I'm hoping Max will have a way around that." Carr said and she got up and calmly walked away from the table, searching for a quiet spot in which to contact the orbiting scout ship. She found this in the form of a set of public communication booths and she stepped inside one before closing the door behind her and tapping her combadge as the transparent walls clouded to provide her with privacy, "Carr to scout ship, Max are you there?"

"Max here commander, have you located one of the gateway terminations?"

"Negative. We've got one of the locations under surveillance but we're not observing anything out of the ordinary. It looks like an office building. Is there anyway you can run another scan using the deflector from orbit without being detected?"

"Possibly commander." Max replied, "Though just in case I would recommend that we first retreat to a range of a million kilometres and only then emit a lower energy pulse. Hopefully the Romulans will mistake this for a second scan from long range and not realise that we have entered orbit."

"Okay do it." Carr said, "Send the results to T'Lan tricorder as soon as you have them. Carr out."

Carr then exited the communication booth and returned to the table where the rest of the team waited.

"Dessert's arrived." Cole said, smiling as he held up a brightly coloured piece of candy about ten centimetres in length and four wide.

"Good, I could do with something sweet to finish off that meal." Carr said as she sat back down and she picked up an osol twist from the plate in the centre of the table.

"Actually commander-" T'Lan began before Cole interrupted.

"Let her enjoy her dessert in piece T'Lan." he said, "That's an order."

"Yes sir." T'Lan replied.

"Thanks." Carr said, "I hope this doesn't have too many calories though, it'll play havoc with my diet. So do I bite it or what?"

"You place the end on your tongue and lick it." Nayal replied, "Your saliva makes it dissolve in your mouth."

"Thanks." Carr said with a smile and she inserted the osol twist into her mouth. The instant it touched her tongue she felt a sudden sharp taste that made her eyes widen and the fizzing sensation continued even as she pulled it from her mouth and reached for the jug of water only to find it empty.

"A bit tart commander?" Cole asked and Carr snarled.

"It's so sour." she gasped, "I need water."

"Here." Nayal replied, turning to the empty table behind her where she had placed the full jug from their own while Carr was gone and she passed it to Carr who poured out a cup and gulped it down.

"So what's Max going to do?" Cole asked while Carr poured herself another cup of water.

"He's going to carry out a second scan at lower power. But he'll do it from a million kilometres to make it look like the ship is further away. Then he'll send the results to T'Lan's tricorder."

It was just a few minutes later that Carr's combadge chirped and she tapped it.

"Max here commander." Max's voice said, "Are you free to talk? All of you if possible."

"Hang on Max, I'll get back to you." Carr replied and she looked around, "Okay there are some comm booths out the back. We can take one each and network our combadges."

"Let's go." Cole added, nodding and all four got up and made their way to the communication booths.

However, when they reached them only one was vacant.

"Okay so now what?" Nayal asked.

"We will have to find another location." T'Lan said but Cole shook his head.

"Obviously neither of you two had the benefit of a high school senior education." he said.

"You can't be serious." Carr said, rolling her eyes.

"Deadly." Cole said.

"When was the last time you did this?" Carr asked.

"At the academy actually. There were sixteen of us and it was a portable latrine." Cole answered.

"I do not understand. What are you suggesting?" T'Lan asked.

"Everybody in." Cole said and he opened the door to the booth and held it for the others.

Carefully the entire away team squeezed into the booth before Cole closed the door behind them and the transparent walls became opaque.

"This is not something the Romulan military teaches." Naya! said as she pressed herself into a corner, "I think I'm losing circulation already. I can't even feel myself squeezing my leg."

"That's because it's not your leg." Cole replied.

"Oh right." Naya! said.

"So are you going to move that hand?" Cole asked.

"I just did." Naya! told him.

"So who's hand is that?" Cole said.

"Apologies lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded.

"That's okay T'Lan."

"Let's just get this over with." Carr said and she carefully moved her arm so that she could activate her combadge, "Okay Max we're all here What's the situation?"

"Commander we have repeated the scan and returned to our original altitude but there is an issue with the results." Max answered.

"What sort of issue?" Carr asked.

"Though the primary return source is in the same location none of the others are. In fact the total number doesn't even match the original scan. There are seven fewer than originally recorded."

"How is that possible?" Naya! asked, "We know that gateway technology allows individuals to reach locations other than those with a fixed terminus but there are no physical traces left afterwards that we have detected."

"Hang on a minute." Cole said.

"A minute?" Carr commented, "In here even ten seconds is too long."

"I didn't quite get that commander." Max said.

"Never mind Max. Cole carry on." Carr replied.

"Well what if the enemy agents we've witnessed using Iconian gateway technology aren't just having a gateway opened for them remotely? What if they carry the ability to open a gateway inside them as part of the modifications made to their bodies?"

"An interesting hypothesis." T'Lan said, "That would make for a very efficient system."

"It also means we could identify their agents using the same scan technique that Max has developed for pinpointing the Iconian gateways." Cole added.

"So we could find the spy aboard the *Nightfall*?" Naya! asked and Cole smiled.

"Potentially, yes." he said.

"That's all well and good but we still don't have a way of reaching the primary gateway to disable it." Carr said.

"Commander, I would suggest that infiltrating the Romulan capital building would be a good start." Max suggested.

"I agree." T'Lan said, "The government must have some way of reaching what is obviously an important facility for them."

"Okay so how do we do that?" Carr asked, "They'll have security and there are only four of us so just shooting our way inside isn't going to work."

"I would recommend having biometric data matching Sub-lieutenant Naya! and myself entered into their security clearance database." T'Lan replied, "Once inside we can locate an alternative entry point for yourself and Lieutenant Commander Cole. A transporter room perhaps."

"Okay we've got a plan." Cole said, "Now how do we get T'Lan and Naya!'s data into their system?"

"I ought to be able to carry out the process from here lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "I can make use of the communication hard line in this booth to establish a direct connection between my tricorder and their computer system."

"Did you say booth?" Max asked, "Where are you?"

"Don't ask." Carr replied, "But it was Cole's idea."

"It worked didn't it?" Cole asked and Carr frowned.

"Max, we'll get back to you when we have more information. Carr out." she transmitted before deactivating her combadge and looking at T'Lan, "Okay T'Lan, get to work." she said.

"Yes commander." T'Lan replied and she took out her tricorder, squeezing her arms between the others as she lifted it up to perform a scan of her and Naya! to create the profile she would insert into the Romulan computer network, "Now I must connect this tricorder to the data port near the floor." she said and slowly she began to lower herself down.

"T'Lan there isn't exactly a lot of room in here for you to do that." Cole commented.

"Oh like you don't enjoy that." Naya! responded with a frown.

"I am aware of the lack of space for performing this action." T'Lan said, "However, there appears to be no alternative."

"The three of us could have got out first." Naya! suggested.

"We can't take the chance on anyone knowing we're all in here until we're finished." Cole said and then all of a sudden he was tugged sideways, "Whoa!" he exclaimed, "T'Lan what's going on down there?"

"Unfortunately my hair appears to be caught in your belt." T'Lan replied, "I require you to loosen it."

"Oh this just gets better and better." Cole said as he reached down.

"T'Lan, can you still get the job done?" Carr added.

"I believe so. I have established a remote connection with the Romulan computer network and it appears that this tricorder is set up to interface with it." T'Lan answered.

"How much longer?" Nayal asked.

"Perhaps five minutes."

"Uh-oh." Cole commented, "Any chance you could hurry that up?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Carr asked.

"Oh it's just that that mollusc thing Nayal ordered isn't sitting too well."

"Lieutenant Commander Cole don't you dare." Carr hissed.

"Don't what?" Nayal asked and then her eyes widened, "Oh no. Cousin please hurry."

"I am almost finished." T'Lan replied.

"Here it goes." Cole said. Then he relaxed, "Wait, actually I don't think it's-" and then he stopped, "I think the problem's over." he added.

"I disagree." T'Lan said.

"What?" Nayal said and then she sniffed, "Ugh that's bad." she said as she grasped her nose.

"I don't-" Carr began, her sense of smell being less sensitive than that of either T'Lan or Nayal but then she wretched, "I take it back." she gasped, "T'Lan, hurry."

"Excuse me." Cole said and Carr glared at him.

"Not funny." she hissed.

"I am finished." T'Lan announced.

"And not a moment too soon." Nayal replied and she pushed her way towards the booth's door.

"Hang on Nayal," Cole said, "perhaps we should-" but before he could finish Nayal was able to open the door and all four of the away team fell through it. During the fall T'Lan's hair came free of Cole's belt but in the process the trousers of his uniform were pulled down to his knees and she still managed to land face down in his lap while Carr and Nayal landed in a heap on top of the pair of them.

Looking up Cole then saw that this had been witnessed by several nearby Romulans including members of the restaurant staff.

"It's not what it looks like." he said.

"There's a perfectly reasonable explanation." Carr added as she got to her feet and then reached down to help Nayal up.

"Budget cuts." Nayal said, "The power cells in our communicators all died at the same time and we needed to make a conference call." Meanwhile Cole and T'Lan got back to their feet also while the crowd looked on and Cole adjusted his clothing.

"We'll be leaving now I think." Carr said, looking at the other team members.

Sure, I'll just grab that bottle of kali-fal from the table and we can be off." Nayal added.

As the away team hurried from the restaurant T'Lan glanced back over her shoulder.

"I do not believe that they will have accepted Nayal's explanation." she commented.

"Of course they won't." Nayal replied, "No-one in the galaxy would be stupid enough to believe what I told them. But the important thing is that not one will believe that there is even the slightest chance that we are planning to break into the capital building."

### 3.

The capital building on Hylasia 2 was heavily guarded and even before the away team reached it they noticed the tell tale signs of shield generators and disruptor banks intended to protect it from direct attack. However, none of these were able to prevent the team from walking right up to the front of the building. "Okay this is where we split up." Carr said, looking at the entrance to the building, "T'Lan, Nayal head inside. Cole and I will find somewhere to keep out of the way until we hear from you."

"Understood lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded.

"See you soon I hope." Nayal added and the pair headed for the doors.

An armed Romulan stood guard either side of the main doors and they watched the two women closely as they approached. Nayal led the way and walked up to the sensor built into the wall beside the door, placing her face directly in front of it. There as a brief green light as the sensor scanned her face and matched it to the entry made in the database by T'Lan and then there was a chime as the doors slid open automatically. Then as Nayal proceeded inside T'Lan presented her face to the sensor and again there was a chime as the computer identified her as having clearance to enter the building.

"Well done cousin." Nayal said softly as they walked across the lobby, "To be honest I wasn't sure if you'd be able to pull that off."

"There is no logic in self congratulation before our task is complete." T'Lan replied, "Do you know where we can locate a transporter room?"

"Just take a complement when it's offered cousin. And there'll probably be a transporter room up on the executive levels. Will our clearance get us up there?"

"We are listed as security inspectors." T'Lan told her, "I believed that would provide us with maximum access without us needing to concern ourselves with excusing our presence at any particular location."

"Very good. Okay, here's the turbolift." Nayal said, pointing out the nearby turbolift access and they entered the first that became available, "Level sixteen." Nayal said out loud and then she leant closer to T'Lan before whispering, "I read the level number off a sign in the lobby."

The turbolift took the pair straight up to the sixteenth level and when they exited it they looked around for some indication of where the nearest transporter room might be.

"I believe that is the Romulan translation of 'transporter'." T'Lan said, looking at a nearby sign.

"Right first time cousin." Nayal replied and the two women headed in the direction it pointed. This took them to a lounge area with a reception desk where two Romulans busied themselves with administrative tasks. Off to one side there was a door marked with the same wording as the sign that had led T'Lan and Nayal here and they went towards it. It had been their hope that the room would have been deserted but there was a single technician on duty and he stood at attention when they entered.

"How may I assist you " he asked and Nayal looked at T'Lan.

"Let me handle this." she said and she approached the technician, "What is your name and rank?" she demanded.

"Nortus. Technician, second class."

"Well Nortus," Nayal said, "unless you want to become a third class technician I suggest you-" but at that point the technician suddenly crumpled as he dropped to the floor with T'Lan standing right behind him and withdrawing her hand from the base of his neck.

"Speed may be of the essence." she said and as she looked at the transporter panel she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to Lieutenant Commander Carr, we have gained control of a transporter. Are you ready for beaming?"

"Ready T'Lan." Carr responded, "Beam us whenever you're ready."

"I've got a lock on their position." Nayal said from beside her.

"Energise." T'Lan ordered and Nayal activated the transporter.

Carr and Cole materialised on the transporter pad and stepped down.

"Good work." Carr said and T'Lan nodded in response.

"What are we going to do with him?" Cole asked, looking at the unconscious Romulan transporter technician.

"Well T'Lan gave him the pinch," Nayal replied, mimicking the action on her own neck, "so he ought to be out for an hour or so."

"That's not enough time to guarantee we'll be out of here." Carr said.

"We could place him in transporter suspension." T'Lan suggested.

"Are they likely to check the console for that?" Cole asked, looking at Nayal.

"I'm not sure. But I can tell you that if anyone comes in here they're bound to notice him lying on the floor like that even if we tie him up to stop him raising the alarm as soon as he comes to."

"Do it." Carr said.

"Okay Nayal, give me a hand with him." Cole said and the pair of them lifted the unconscious Romulan onto the transporter pad while T'Lan adjusted the controls so that the system would de-materialise him and then store his pattern inside its active memory rather than sending him to another location. "System set." she announced as Cole and Nayal stepped clear, "Energising." and the technician vanished. "Well cousin? Did you manage to avoid simply disintegrating him?" Nayal asked. "The process was successful." T'Lan answered, "But I shall request once more that you refrain from calling me 'cousin'."

"Never mind that now." Carr said, "Let's find how the Romulan government gets itself to the gateway facility and use it to get use there ourselves." and she strode towards the door and opened it. But as she stepped into the lounge outside the transporter room she came to an abrupt halt as she saw a familiar figure walking along a corridor. "Praetor!" The Girl called out to where Trexen and an aide were walking away from her, "A second scan has been performed. Why have your ships not dealt with the probe?" "Back!" Carr hissed as she backed up into the transporter room. "What's wrong?" Nayal asked, peering out of the transporter room and scowling when she saw The Girl, "Hey, that's that little veruul that woke me up in the middle of the night and attacked me." "I guess there's no doubt about this being their base of operations now is there?" Cole commented. "No there isn't." Carr replied, "But did you hear how she addressed that Romulan she was heading towards?" "As 'praetor.'" T'Lan replied, "He must be the head of the government." "In which case he's likely to know how to get to the gateway." Carr said. "And be heavily guarded." Cole pointed out. "We have already penetrated their security." T'Lan responded, "I believe that providing we do not draw attention to ourselves getting to the praetor will simply be a matter of walking up to his office and asking to be admitted." "We are security consultants after all." Nayal added and both Carr and Cole stared at her. "It is how I listed Nayal and myself in the Romulan database." T'Lan explained. "Okay then, just as soon as that little brat who can ID us is gone that's where we're heading." Carr said and she looked at T'Lan and Nayal, "See if you two can get us a floor plan of this place. I'd rather not be caught wandering around at random." "Yes commander." T'Lan replied and she returned to the transporter console, using its interface to call up a floor plan of the building that she could transfer to her tricorder.

With a floor plan in their possession all the away team had to do was wait until The Girl was no longer outside the transporter room before they left and casually walked away. To begin with they headed away from the praetor's office before they circled back around towards it. As expected the praetor's personal office was guarded by a pair of armed Romulans as well as there being a civilian secretary. The away team walked towards the office slowly to give themselves chance to study this arrangement while not attracting any undue attention to themselves.

"Follow my lead." Nayal said softly before she walked up to the secretary, "We are here to speak with the praetor." she announced. "The praetor is not seeing anyone." the secretary replied without looking up and Nayal reached out and placed her hand beneath the secretary's chin to lift her head. "He'll see us." she said, "This is a security matter." and then she placed her free hand on a nearby palm scanner used to identify guests. Thanks to the modifications to the Romulan database carried out by T'Lan this immediately triggered the secretary's computer to bring up an image of Nayal along with a fictional security clearance and a description of her as a security expert, "Now how about you announce us or we can tell the praetor about how you stopped us alerting him to a major flaw in the building's security?" The secretary frowned before activating the intercom.

"There is a security team here to discuss an urgent issue with you praetor." she said, "They are quite insistent on seeing you."

"Urgent? Oh well, show them in then." Trexen's voice replied.

"You may enter." the secretary said to Nayal, who smiled in return.

"Thank you." she said before leading the team into the praetor's office.

Inside the office Carr made sure that the doors slid shut behind them properly while T'Lan took out her tricorder to scan the room and Cole and Nayal approached Trexen as he sat behind his desk at the far side of the room.

"What can be so important that you disturb me now?" he demanded, "Do you know what sort of day I've had?"

"Did it include being assaulted because of a catastrophic failure in security?" Cole asked and Trexen scowled.

"Who the hell do you think you are to speak to me like that?" he said.



"The people who have penetrated your security." Nayal replied just as she reached Trexen's desk and before he could shout a warning to his guards she drew her disruptor and pressed the muzzle under his jaw.

"You'll never get away with this." Trexen hissed, "Whatever faction you represent my forces will take their revenge on you. Your cities will burn and for what? Killing me?"

"Oh we're not here to kill you praetor." Nayal replied and then she laughed, "Ha! Praetor? What were you before Romulus burned exactly? I don't remember seeing your name in Senatorial minutes."

"Besides, once we've taken care of your little research project I doubt you'll be bombing anyone." Cole added and Trexen frowned.

"Let him sit down Nayal." Carr ordered, "His head needs to still be on his shoulders if he's going to tell us how to reach the lab."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"It is our intention to destroy the Iconian technology you recovered from Iconia." T'Lan replied.

"You're Vulcan." Trexen said, staring at her. Then he looked at Carr and Cole, "But I'm guessing each of you is a human disguised to look Romulan." he added before turning towards Nayal, "You however-

"Oh I'm Romulan." she interrupted, "Only not one who creates monsters from dead bodies and uses them to spread terror around the quadrant."

Trexen sighed.

"You don't have a clue what's going on here do you?" he asked.

"We know your people went to Iconia and unearthed technology that had remained hidden since the fall of their empire. Now you're using it yourselves." Carr said but Trexen shook his head.

"I wish that were so." he said, "But you really don't understand a thing."

"Then perhaps you could enlighten us." T'Lan said.

"I admit that I ordered a survey team to Iconia." Trexen said, "How could I not? A nearby world that had lain almost untouched for thousands of years that could serve as a base for our forces? It was too good an opportunity to miss and when the reports came back that some of the Iconian technology had actually survived I was ecstatic. If we could reverse engineer any of it then we would have a decisive advantage over not only the other factions but the Federation and the Klingons as well. The Star Empire would be reforged anew right here on Hylasia."

"Why do I sense that there's a 'but' coming?" Cole comment.

"But we lost contact with the survey team." Trexen said, "All of a sudden they stopped answering any messages. At first we suspected a rival faction, a scout ship belonging to one had been detected but we thought it had been dealt with. Then all of a sudden the survey team returned somehow."

"Somehow?" Carr asked.

"They didn't come by ship." Trexen said, "They simply appeared back here. What's more they didn't seem like the same people I sent to Iconia. I knew some of them well, but what returned were strangers. My people had become hosts for something else." then he paused for a moment before adding, "Auroto." using the Romulan word for an undead monster, the equivalent of a zombie or ghost to a human.

"Are you saying that someone else figured out how to work Iconian technology before you did?" Cole asked.

"No human. I'm saying that the Iconians themselves have returned." Trexen said, "The survey team disturbed something that attracted their attention and brought them back to their ancestral home."

"But the Iconians are not believed to have been a generally hostile civilisation." T'Lan said, "It was jealousy of their technology that led others to resent and fear them."

"Well maybe that was true once but those that have returned are as hostile as it is possible to be. As far as I can tell they are a group that fled through their gateways into some sort of subspace realm when their world came under attack and they've been hiding there ever since. Now though they think that the time is right to recreate their old empire and they've started right here on Hylasia Two with us."

"You are saying that your planet has been subjugated by the Iconians?" T'Lan said, "To what purpose?"

"They needed host bodies." Trexen answered, "Whatever they looked like thousands of years ago they abandoned their physical forms some time after they left their home world and existed as virtual beings in some kind of computer system. If they needed a physical body for any reason then they would create a mechanical one or grow one from a form of artificial flesh they developed. But to move undetected among other civilisations they needed to use different methods."

"The zombies." Nayal said, "Like that little brat."

"You've met her?" Trexen said, looking at each team member in turn.

"We've encountered her yes." Carr replied.

"Then you're lucky to be alive. She may look weak but she's a killer. From what little I know even her own kind fear her." Trexen said.

"So what about the gateway on this planet?" Cole asked.

"The Iconians wanted a base in this universe so they had us build them one somewhere out of the way. Then when they wanted anything from us they could just appear here to demand it and we could deliver it to them." Trexen explained.

"Did you not consider refusing to aide them?" T'Lan asked and Trexen laughed.

"Resist? To quote the Borg, resistance is futile." he said, "They can come and go at will. Anyone who spoke out was dead within a day, their throats slit while they slept with spouses right next to them."

"If they're so powerful then why not just attack the rest of the quadrant?" Nayal asked.

"Because there aren't many of them. They know that we can't reach their new home but if they tried to attack this universe openly then they'd lose through sheer weight of numbers. All of the chaos and war going on at the moment, that's them. They're escalating conflicts wherever they find them and provoking them where they don't. They'll bring each of the major powers to their knees in turn and then strike all at once when everyone is too weak to resist."

"A logical strategy." T'Lan commented.

"I'm so glad it has your approval cousin." Nayal added sarcastically.

"I was not attempting to evaluate the morality of the plan, merely its likely effectiveness." T'Lan replied.

"I've got news for you praetor," Cole said, resting his hands on Trexen's desk and leaning towards the Romulan, "resistance isn't futile. We've fought these Iconians and we've beaten them. Now maybe if you help us we can beat them here as well."

"All we need is for you to get us into their base." Carr added.

"That's not possible." Trexen replied, shaking his head, "The base is underwater and we send whatever they demand via submersible and they scan everything. And beaming in is out of the question because they've established some sort of transport scrambler that we've not been able to beat."

"You say that your people constructed the base for the Iconians." T'Lan said, "Does that mean that you have a design schematic that you can show us?"

"I'll need to use my computer." Trexen replied.

"Okay." Carr said, "Nayal make sure he doesn't try summoning his guards." and Nayal nodded before positioning herself behind Trexen as he started to access his computer.

"Here it is." he said after a few moments and he turned the display so that Carr, Cole and T'Lan could see it, "As you can see there are no approaches that are undefended."

"What about this cavern system here?" T'Lan said and she pointed to a network of caves shown beneath the Iconian base on the seabed, "They appear to connect to this larger system leading from the shore."

"They do." Trexen replied, "We used them during the construction phase to ship materials down there. But the entire network was sealed and flooded. The only hatches are monitored and there's no way of making another. A phaser or disruptor would boil the water around anyone who tried and them along with it while explosives would bring the roof in."

"What if a transporter pattern enhancer were to be placed against this narrow point here?" T'Lan said and she indicated the narrowest point between the two separated sets of caves.

"I see." Cole said, smiling, "The transport inhibitors may prevent a detailed pattern lock but with the enhancer there we could still rip the rock out of existence and dump it into space."

"What about the water?" Nayal asked, "Won't the Iconians notice when their base suddenly starts to flood?"

"We could set up a portable air lock." Carr said, "It doesn't need to be anything fancy, just something to block the flow of water into the facility when we put a hole in it."

"Of course we'll have to use scuba gear to get down there." Cole said.

"That's going to limit the size of our team." Carr commented, "I'd like to take along a squad of Imperial Guard as well but I doubt Shry's men are rated for the equipment."

"That should not hinder us too greatly commander." T'Lan responded, "All we need to do is locate the transport scramblers and disable them. Then we can use our combadges as beacons to allow Captain Shry's troops to be beamed in to complete the destruction of the facility."

"You'll have to be quick about it." Trexen said solemnly, "The Iconians can flood that facility with reinforcements if they have to. All it takes is for one to raise the alarm and they'll use their gateways to bring in all the troops they need."

"Okay so our first stage will be done by stealth. Then Shry comes in loud and hits them hard." Cole said.

Nayal looked at Trexen and smiled.

"Then after we take all the risks and do all the hard work he gets his little empire back." she said, "Doesn't seem like much of a trade to me."

"Save my people and the Federation border will be secure." Trexen said, "I don't care about expanding the Star Empire across the Neutral Zone, I only want what is rightfully mine."

"Then I guess we have a plan." Carr said.

"So you're just going to trust him?" Nayal asked, "How do you know he won't just rush off and tell the Iconians, if that's who they really are what we're planning on doing?"

"Because there is nothing in it for him." T'Lan replied, "The Romulan reputation for deception is well deserved and in this instance he cannot lose out by allowing us to continue with our actions. If we succeed then as you have pointed out he regains full control of his territory, while if we fail we cannot be linked to him. The fact that Lieutenant Commander Carr and Cole are humans disguised as Romulans will suggest that we are both

Vulcans and that we are part of a covert Federation team. Which of course we are.”  
“Basically we're doing his dirty work for him.” Cole added.

Returning to the scout ship in orbit, the away team prepared to beam down into the cave complex adjacent to the Iconian base. Breathing apparatus had to be replicated but Max had had the foresight to bring along a complete set of replicator patterns for Starfleet field equipment that included scuba gear and the transporter pattern enhancer that would enable the team to breach the base defences. The diving suits they donned were of an obvious Starfleet pattern, as was all of the other equipment they carried with them. The Romulan appearing uniforms, weapons and communication devices were all discarded just in case the attack failed and the team was compromised. In such a situation the team would not be linked to the local government at all and Praetor Trexen would have plausible deniability of his involvement.

Given that the team would be beaming directly into a water-filled environment they were required to don their breathing apparatus before being transported to the planet while any equipment not suitable for use underwater was stored in sealed bags that were fixed to the oxygen tanks on their backs.

"Comms check." Carr said as she sealed her helmet over her head and linked it to her combadge.

"Copy." Cole responded.

"Reading you clearly lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Same here." Nayal added and Carr turned to Max as he stood at the control console and gave a thumbs up.

"Stand by." he announced, using his Borg implants to broadcast on the communication frequency used by the away team's combadges. Then he added, "Energise."

From the point of view of the away team they were taken from the brightly lit transporter room via the glow of the transport sequence before being plunged into the cold and dark of a water-filled tunnel and it was not until they activated the lights built into the outside of their helmets that they got a look at their surroundings. The away team had materialised in a narrow passageway that was totally flooded with water and small aquatic life forms scattered from the beams of artificial light that were totally alien to this place.

"This way." T'Lan said as she studied the waterproofed version of a tricorder that was mounted on her arm and she pointed along the tunnel, "The target location is approximately thirty metres away."

"Lead the way lieutenant." Carr responded before the team started to swim, led by T'Lan and the map on her arm.

"I don't suppose any of the local wildlife is dangerous is it?" Nayal asked as particularly ugly fish swam past her faceplate.

T'Lan led the rest of the team to the location that had been identified as the narrowest gap between the cave system leading to the surface and the system beneath the Iconian base where she came to a halt.

"This is the location." she said as she took a transporter pattern enhancer that had been modified for use underwater and fixed it to the cave wall while behind her both Carr and Cole unpacked the portable barriers that they had brought with them to seal off the cave either side of the breach they intended to create. These were little more than large sheets of flexible plastic that were strong enough to hold back the pressure of the water on the other side. Initially these were placed across the cave and pinned in place using spikes fired through the plastic and into the rock. But this left an imperfect seal and the process of blocking the cave needed to be completed by Nayal who carried with her a dispenser of an adhesive that set when submerged in water.

"How will we know if the seal is good?" Nayal asked as she squirted the adhesive around the edge of one of the plastic sheets.

"There is a current within the cave." T'Lan told her, "When the seal is in place that will no longer be detectable to my tricorder."

"Well the glue's in place." Nayal commented, retreating away from the plastic sheet in front of her and Nayal looked at the underwater tricorder on her arm.

"Current strength is already down by ninety percent." she announced, "Ninety five percent. I am reading no current, the seal is in place." and Carr tapped her combadge.

"Carr to Max. The barriers are in place and the pattern enhancer is operating. You may commence transport when ready."

"Understood commander." Max's voice responded, "Energising now." and the cave was filled with a glowing light as the wall dematerialised right in front of the away team.

The sudden disappearance of the wall separating the two cave systems resulted in the water trapped between the two plastic barriers suddenly flowing into the newly exposed cave and had the members of the away team not been prepared for this and bracing themselves for the sudden rush of water, then they would have been swept along with it. The amount of water involved compared to the size of the cave system on the far side of the wall meant that the water rapidly vanished, collecting in small pools here and there while not causing any significant flooding at all that would alert the Iconians to their base having been breached.

The away team detached the swim fins from their feet before stepping through the hole in the cave wall and setting down their equipment bags before they began to remove their helmets and oxygen tanks. Cole went further than this, unzipping his suit and starting to peel it off before Nayal stared at him and frowned.

"Are you planning on continuing this mission naked?" she asked.

"Of course not." Cole replied as he pulled down the suit to reveal the trunks he wore underneath, "I have a uniform in my bag." then he looked at the other three team members, "Am I seriously the only one who brought a change of clothes for this part of the operation?"

"I saw no logical reason to bring any clothing other than this suit." T'Lan replied.

"The idea just didn't occur to me." Carr added, "Besides I'm not wearing anything under this suit either so I'm not taking it off."

"And despite the fact that Lieutenant Commander Carr is the only person here who hasn't already seen me naked I'm not taking mine off." Nayal added. Then she looked at T'Lan, "I tell you what though cousin, if you can get Robert here to finish this mission in his trunks I'll do anything you ask."

"Would that include refraining from ever calling me 'cousin' again?" T'Lan asked and Nayal frowned.

"Damn." she replied, "You called my bluff."

"Can we just get on with this?" Carr asked as she unpacked her own equipment while still sneaking a glance at Cole as he took a sealed plastic pack containing his uniform from his bag.

The team unpacked their equipment quickly, donning belts that mounted holsters for phasers and tricorders while Cole also unpacked the phaser rifle he had brought with him. T'Lan opened her tricorder and started to scan the caves, comparing the readings to the data provided by Praetor Trexen. Their advance was cautious, not only because they were watching for any indication that their presence had been detected but also because all but Cole were barefoot and needed to be careful of standing on anything sharp on the cave floor.

"The cave system does not appear to have been altered significantly by the Iconians." she said, "The nearest entrance to the main base should be approximately forty-five metres in this direction." and she started to walk away, holding her tricorder up in front of her. Cole followed and darted around the Vulcan so that he could aim his phaser rifle ahead without any fear of hitting her by accident and from behind him T'Lan guided him towards the entrance to the Iconian base.

A simple hatchway marked the end of the caves and the start of the base itself but this stood wide open and beyond it the walls changed from natural stone to a flatter and more polished surface.

"Think this means that there's someone in the caves behind us?" Cole asked softly as he leant through the doorway to inspect the corridor on the other side.

"More likely the hatch is sealed only when there is a specific need to do so." T'Lan replied, "If you recall the installation on Lasner Two was fully automated." she added, referring to an Iconian outpost that the crew of the *USS Nightfall* had investigated some time previously. On that occasion they had assumed that another species had taken it over after the Iconians vanished rather than suspecting it to still be under Iconian control.

"And well defended." Carr commented, "Any signs of life?"

"Nothing so far lieutenant commander." T'Lan answered, "However, I am reading several distinct energy sources. One of them I believe to be the gateway facility and the largest is most likely the primary generator while the others could be the source of the transporter scrambler or just more mundane equipment involved with the operation of the base."

"That's what we need to take out." Carr said, "How many possible targets are we looking at T'Lan?"

"Three. At these locations." and T'Lan showed the tricorder display to the rest of the team.

"Okay we split up." Carr said, "T'Lan you take the closest one on this level. Nayal and I will take the one at the north side of the base and Cole can take the remaining one."

Something was wrong. The intelligence that directed the undersea base had noticed a brief negative variation in temperature that could not be accounted for by the equipment in operation at that time. Significantly the variation was centred on the cave system located beneath the base. However, there was no evidence of any security breach at this time. All of the perimeter sensors were functioning and had detected nothing approaching the base. Even the local aquatic wildlife kept their distance thanks to the sonic barrier around the base that emitted a discomforting sound through the water that drove the fish back. Even if someone had been able to bypass the sensors they could not have entered the base without damaging its hull or overriding an external hatchway, all of which would have triggered an alarm.

The logical answer to this was that there was a technical glitch somewhere on the lower level of the base that had caused something to reset but not tripped any of the diagnostic systems. The brief pause in operation had resulted in lower energy consumption that in turn had led to the slight drop in temperature. This reset could be a forewarning of a larger failure yet to come, especially since it had not been detected as it happened so the source would need to be identified. The solution to this was simple. Some of the fleshforms hosting other intelligences in the base would be directed to investigate the possible sources of the

fault, using their ability to interface directly with systems to study them without needing to rely on the base's data network.

Satisfied that the situation would soon be remedied, the controlling intelligence turned its attention back to its usual tasks.

The lower level of the Iconian base was unusually warm for an facility located deep under the ocean, a clear sign of large amounts of energy being dissipated by the equipment in operation. As she crept through the gloomy passageways T'Lan held her phaser in one hand and her tricorder in the other. Operating in a passive mode, the tricorder guided her towards the nearby energy source without producing any emissions of its own that could be detected by whatever internal sensors may be present. She folded the tricorder shut as she approached a large doorway that her readings indicated to be all that separated her from the energy source she was to investigate and gripping her phaser in both hands she leapt through the opening, searching the room for any signs of an Iconian presence.

The room on the far side occupied a large area over at least three levels judging by the walkways criss-crossing over T'Lan's head and was filled with machinery of designs and functions unfamiliar to the Vulcan. Her experience of Iconian technology was limited to what she had been able to study during a brief visit to Iconia itself and all of that had been hundreds of thousands of years out of date compared to what she was looking at now. This in itself posed a challenge to T'Lan. She was looking for a very specific piece of equipment, the transport scrambler, and she had no concrete way of identifying it yet. However, what she did have was her belief in logic and a set of parameters that she knew the equipment she sought would have to conform to. Most significantly it would have to be emitting either energy waves or a particle field that could interfere with an annular confinement beam and secondly it would have to be able to spread this far enough to cover the entire facility. It was this second point that T'Lan now counted on as now that she knew she was alone she swapped her phaser for her tricorder and opened it up again. Like any energy emissions, the field created by the transporter scrambler would become weaker the further away from the emitter it got so all she had to do was take multiple readings of the signal strength to determine the epicentre of the signal.

The problem T'Lan had in doing this was that she was not totally certain of what sort of emissions she was looking for. Though her earlier tricorder scans had picked up the energy sources within the base they had not picked up the scrambling field itself, suggesting that it was a low energy system that relied on a reaction with transporter energy to function rather than simply overpowering the operation of a transporter. However, she hoped that if she was in close proximity to the scrambler itself then its emissions would be strong enough to register to her scans against all of the interference created by the machinery around her.

As soon as she began to scan the room T'Lan picked up several different emissions that could in theory be used to disrupt transporter operations and she knew that she would need to investigate each of them in turn. This took her up into the overhead walkways and it was while she was up here that she realised she was no longer alone. Eight figures walked into the chamber, all of them humanoid in form but lacking any identifying features. Instead their milky white flesh was totally sealed and gave them the appearance of mere silhouettes of a humanoid form. T'Lan knew these to be what the Iconians termed fleshforms, artificial bodies created from a synthetic tissue to house one of their consciousnesses and she also knew how strong and resilient they could be.

None of the fleshforms carried any sort of weapon that they could use against T'Lan but she knew their ability to employ gateway transport would allow them to reposition themselves ready to strike at her with their bare hands if they discovered her presence. This made it unlikely that T'Lan could take them all out on her own with her phaser. Retreat was also out of the question. T'Lan had found no other exits from the chamber other than the doorway she and the fleshforms had come in through and slipping past them did not look like it would be possible. The flesh forms had split up and now looked as if they were inspecting the equipment in the room. It did not seem as though they were here specifically to hunt for T'Lan but the way in which they were moving meant that they would inevitably discover her. T'Lan shut off her tricorder and drew her phaser again as she looked around for some means of escape.

She found what she thought would offer this in the form of a bundle of thick cables running vertically down the wall beside the walkway she was currently standing on. From her scans she knew that these carried inside them a form of plasma-based energy that was used to power the equipment in the chamber. But unlike conventional electrical wiring there was no current return path included in the bundles, the flow being entirely one way. This suggested to T'Lan that the return path must be via the machinery itself and so if the energy within the cables made contact with the metal plating of the walkways it would have to flow into the machines via the conductive plating. Of course since the plating was not a perfect superconductor a portion of the energy would also flow through anyone standing on top of it providing they made contact with it in more than one place. By standing on it with two or more legs for example. The one problem facing T'Lan was that she needed to be able to insulate herself from the flow of energy or her plan to channel the energy of the cables into all of the fleshforms at once would result in her death as well. Not an outcome she regarded as favourable.

Fortunately her diving suit was made of a material that was insulated and despite there being some moisture left on its surface that could provide a conductive path she was confident that it would boil away before a lethal amount of energy could reach her.

Quickly T'Lan retreated upwards, putting as much distance between her and the fleshforms as she could while making sure that she remained close to one of the cable bundles. Once she reached the uppermost walkway level T'Lan glanced over the side and saw that as she had expected the fleshforms were now beginning to move up into the walkway as well, with six of the eight now standing on the metallic plating. Quickly she removed her equipment belt and then began to peel off her diving suit, detaching the combadge from it and pressing it to the belt instead before she folded the diving suit and placing it on the plating at her feet so that it formed an insulating cushion that she could stand on top of. Taking another quick look over the side of the walkway T'Lan saw that all eight fleshforms were now on the walkways and she acted quickly, grabbing hold of one of the energy carrying cables in one hand while placing the muzzle of her phaser against it further along the direction of the flow of energy and with the weapon set to a low thermal setting she fired a short burst.

The particle beam blasted through the cable just as T'Lan had expected it to and before any of the fleshforms could react to the sound of phaserfire she ripped the cable she held away from the wall, pulling it downwards so that the conductive core was pressed against the metal plating of the walkway.

The effect of this was immediate and obvious. There was a crackling sound as purple lightning spread out over the walkways, finding every possible path down towards the equipment on the lowest level and where the fleshforms stood it flowed into them as well. T'Lan even felt the diving suit she was standing on heating up from the power running beneath it. Meanwhile the fleshforms convulsed as the power continued to flow through them and as T'Lan stretched to peer over the side of the walkway while still holding the end of the cable in place she saw the synthetic flesh that made up their bodies starting to melt away, reducing their humanoid bodies to melted goo that dripped down through the grating of the walkways to form pools on the floor of the chamber.

When all eight of the fleshforms had been reduced to nothing T'Lan used her phaser again, slicing through the cable she held further up so that she was left holding a short, inert section that she tossed onto the walkway. Stepping back and lowering herself into a crouching position, T'Lan reached down to retrieve her diving suit. But as she looked down at the suit she saw that although the diving suit had performed its role in preventing her from being electrocuted the heat produced in the plating had melted the polymer just as it had done to the fleshforms and now was nothing but a misshapen lump of the polymer that was fused with the walkway.

"Oh dear." she said to herself, "Perhaps I should have worn something beneath my diving suit after all."

## *ii.*

Making his way across the base, Cole paused repeatedly to check his progress on his tricorder before putting it away again so that he could focus on keeping his phaser rifle at the ready. The energy source was just a few metres away when he heard the sound of footsteps and ducked into a side passage just in time to avoid being noticed by the pair of fleshforms that he watched walking past. He darted back to the end of the passageway and pointed his phaser in the direction that the two bulky humanoids had gone. Cole found himself looking at the backs of the two fleshforms and from this angle he knew that he could take both of them out before they could react. However, he had no way of knowing how long it would be before they were missed and since there did not appear to be any danger of them noticing him he allowed them to depart unmolested. Then waiting until they were gone he started to move towards the energy source he had been ordered to investigate.

The energy source turned out to be the base's auxiliary power supply. Located at the bottom of the ocean, the planet's crust was relatively thin beneath the base and shafts had been sunk down that allowed water to be pumped down far enough to be turned into steam by the molten mantle. Fully operational the geothermal plant would have put out far more energy than had registered on any of the tricorder scans but at present it was in a standby mode only, reducing its energy output to a mere trickle that kept it operating.

It was obvious to Cole that the transporter scrambler that needed to be disabled before a full scale assault could take place was not located here. But that did not mean that he could not do any good while he was here. The theory on which a geothermal power plant operated was simple by the standards of the twenty-fourth century and Cole knew just how to disable one without making the damage obvious until it was too late. Double checking the corridor outside, Cole made sure that there were no further fleshforms or any of the reanimated corpses that the Iconians used as infiltrators approaching. Then he set down his phaser rifle and unslung the equipment bag he still carried over his shoulder, placing it on the floor beside his rifle. From the bag he took a reel of heavy duty tape and took it to the two clusters of pipes used to pump water down into the seabed and bring the steam back up. Simply by feeling the two clusters of pipes he could tell which of them were used for liquid water and which for steam by the temperature. Of course the unused pipes in each cluster were at room temperature and it was these in the steam cluster that Cole was interested in. Taking his hand phaser from its holster he adjusted it to a thermal setting and used it to cut slots along the unused pipes where they would not be seen unless someone gave them a close inspection. Then holstering his phaser Cole tore off lengths of the tape and used them to seal the slots he had cut in the pipes. These seals would allow a limited amount of steam to come up the pipe but if the pressure grew too high, if the generator were pushed to full power for example, then the steam would burst through the tape and flood the entire room in a reaction that would hopefully destroy the machinery.

Satisfied that he had done all he could, Cole was just picking up his rifle when his combadge chirped.

"T'Lan to Cole, are you there lieutenant commander?" T'Lan's voice asked quietly.

"Right here T'Lan." Cole answered, "Go ahead."

"Lieutenant commander I am in need of your assistance. I would be grateful if you could meet me as soon as possible."

"Understood T'Lan. Where are you?"

"I am still at the location of the energy source Lieutenant Commander Carr assigned me to investigate." T'Lan told him.

"Okay, I can be there in about ten minutes. Can you hold on that long?" he asked in response.

"I am unlikely to be going anywhere lieutenant commander." T'Lan said before the channel went dead and Cole hurried out of the auxiliary power plant.

As quickly as he could, Cole retraced his steps back to the entrance to the cave system below the base before checking his tricorder to determine the best path towards T'Lan's reported location. From here he moved in the same way as he had when approaching the geothermal power plant, stopping periodically to check on his location until the entrance to the chamber where T'Lan had told him she was was directly in front of him.

The first thing that Cole noticed was an acrid smell coming from inside and he guessed that T'Lan had damaged something inside that had melted. However, as he entered the chamber he saw no signs either of T'Lan or of any damaged equipment among the vast amount present. The only thing that appeared out of place were a number of pools of a thick white goo visible in several places on the floor.

"T'Lan?" he said quietly and then when there was no reply he repeated himself only more loudly this time, "T'Lan?"

"I am here Robert." T'Lan responded as she stepped out from behind some nearby machinery and Cole froze in surprise when he saw her, "I apologise for my state of undress." she continued, "But I suffered an



unfortunate wardrobe malfunction.”

Carr and Nayal progressed through the base more rapidly than either Cole or T'Lan. By moving one at a time they were able to quickly check their progress while providing cover for one another and be ready to advance along the correct path when it was their turn to move. The result of this was that they crossed the entire base and made it to their destination in not much longer than it took Cole to reach his on his own.

“If I'm reading this right then I'm picking up a fluctuating electromagnetic field that could disrupt a transporter lock.” Nayal said as they paused just outside their destination.

“Okay let's move then.” Carr replied before darting through the open doorway to find herself in what looked like a control room of sorts. There were computer consoles lined up along each side of the room while at the far end a raised platform had a throne-like chair with more controls built into looking down at the rest of the room. Fortunately all of these terminals were unmanned at present and the two women were alone in the room.

“The emissions are coming from beyond that chair.” Nayal said, pointing at the chair on the platform.

“Check it out.” Carr replied, “I'll cover you. But don't touch anything until we know what it does.”

Nayal nodded and advanced along the room towards the platform and once there she climbed up onto it.

“This is it.” she called out when behind the chair she found a sphere mounted on a single support that was the epicentre of the electromagnetic disturbance, “One quick phaser blast should do the trick.” and she aimed her phaser at the sphere.

“Nayal no!” Carr called out, “I want to be sure that we're ready to act the moment the scrambler goes offline. We don't know what sort of other defences this place could have.” and she tapped her combadge, “This is Carr. Cole, T'Lan, are you there?”

“We're here commander.” Cole responded.

“Well Nayal and I have located the transporter scrambler.” Carr said, “Get here as quick as you can. Wait, did you say 'we're here'? Why are you and T'Lan in the same place?”

“It's complicated.” Cole replied with a sigh, “You'll see when we get there. Cole out.” and then he shut off the channel.

“Are they coming?” Nayal asked from the far end of the room.

“Yes. But something strange is going on.” Carr replied, “And I get the feeling I'm not going to like it.”

With T'Lan now wearing his uniform and directing, Cole led the way towards Carr and Nayal's position. Twice they were forced to either pause or divert their path because of the presence of fleshforms moving around the base but they made it to the control centre without being detected and Cole hurried in first.

“Whoa!” Nayal exclaimed when she saw that he was now wearing only his trunks while T'Lan was in his uniform, “What have you two been up to while we've been working?”

“T'Lan's diving suit was damaged.” Cole explained, “So I gave her my uniform.”

“It was the logical solution.” T'Lan added.

“Of course it was dear cousin and I'm sure Robert would have stripped off for either of us as well.”

“Never mind that now.” Carr said, “Show Cole the transporter scrambler. We'll use his rifle to destroy it and I'll signal the ship for Shry and his Guardsmen to beam in to finish this place off.”

“This way.” Nayal said, beckoning Cole towards the far end of the room and as he followed her Carr tapped her combadge.

“Carr to Max, do you read me?”

“Max here lieutenant commander. What is your situation?”

“We're about to take down the transporter scrambler.” Carr told him, “Are Shry and his men ready to beam down?”

“They're just waiting for your signal commander.”

“In that case send them in as soon as the scrambler is taken out. Lock onto my co-ordinates to a target point.”

“Understood commander. Max out.”

Carr then looked across the room at Cole.

“Okay Cole, do it now.” she told him.

“You couldn't have asked for a spare uniform while you were at it?” he muttered to himself as he brought his rifle up to his shoulder, set it to maximum and took aim at the transporter scrambler.

There was a flash of red as he fired, maintaining the beam for as long as it took to burn through the casing of the scrambler and vaporise the contents. Almost immediately after this a klaxon started to sound.

Something was very wrong now. The transporter scrambler protecting the base had gone off line and internal sensors had just detected a massive energy discharge from within the auxiliary control station. Bringing the full array of sensors online, the controlling intelligence detected a cluster of four humanoid lifeforms in the control station and rapidly determined that they were responsible for disabling the scrambler. How they had

managed to penetrate the base's outer defences was unimportant at this point. What really mattered was how to deal with them and with this in mind the controlling intelligence sent out a signal to all of the agents that operated from this base, instructing them to return immediately.

"I think they know we're here." Cole commented as the klaxon continued to sound.

"We will not be the only ones for long." T'Lan added as she looked down at her tricorder and saw the first indications of multiple transporter signatures. Then all around them heavily armed and armoured Andorian troops materialised.

"Captain!" Carr called out when she saw Shry and she hurried towards him, "Have your men studied the layout of this installation?"

"Yes commander and we've got enough spatial charges to put enough holes in it to-"

"Contact!" an Andorian voice yelled from the doorway and there was the sound of automatic weapons fire as he fired his rifle at the Iconian flesh host he had just seen in the corridor outside.

"Okay they know we're here." Cole called out, "We need to get those charges in place and get out of here before they can bring in enough reinforcements to swamp us."

Shry looked at Cole and frowned when he saw how he was dressed.

"What the hell happened to- You know, never mind. Tell me later." he said. Then he looked around at his men, "You heard that Starfleet officer. We've got a job to do and all the explosives we need to do it. Let's move!"

Accompanied by the away team, the Andorians spread out from the control centre and headed towards the outer sections of the base. Many of the Andorians carried a spatial charge in addition to their usual equipment that, if the information they had about the base was accurate, was powerful enough to punch a hole through its hull. Along the way they started to encounter more Iconians. At first these were mainly unarmed fleshforms that would either charge directly at the Andorians only to be shot down by massed phaser fire or would suddenly appear amongst them and lash out, striking the Imperial Guard troops before they could respond. But it did not take long for more Romulan appearing flesh hosts to begin to appear and many of these were armed with Romulan disruptors.

The directing intelligence monitored the movements of the intruders and scanned them thoroughly. Most of them were obviously Andorian but two registered as human despite appearing cosmetically to be Romulan while a further two were either Romulan or Vulcan. Given that the other intruders were of Federation origin it made sense to believe that they were Vulcan and thus not associated with the local government. However, one scan of the intruders was able to pick up the image on a PADD being used for navigation and the image it showed was clearly taken from the original construction blueprints, something that only the local Romulan government had access to.

More worryingly though was the way in which the Andorians had split up into small groups, all of which were heading for the base's outer hull. Scans indicated that many of them carried explosive devices with a yield more than capable of creating breaches in the hull that would lead to flooding of large sections of the base if not its total destruction. However, the base was also equipped with shields that could be used to seal any such breach and the directing intelligence decided to take the precaution of activating the shields before the any of Andorians could reach the outer hull. But in order to do this more power would be needed that was presently available and so the directing intelligence first brought the auxiliary geothermal power plant up to full output.

Just as Cole had planned the pressure of the steam coming up the pipes in the geothermal power plant ripped off the tape covering the slots he had cut. In addition to this the force of the escaping steam split the metal of the pipes around the slots where it had been weakened and fragments were hurled in all directions like shrapnel from an exploding grenade. In turn this shrapnel tore through the casings of other nearby machinery, creating gaps through which the high pressure and temperature steam could enter, overheating components and causing shorts between high voltage terminals. Exposed to such conditions the machinery in the power plant exploded violently and the entire base shook.

"Looks like they didn't find my modifications to their power plant." Cole commented as he steadied himself against a nearby wall, "I wonder what they needed the extra power for?"

"Never mind that now." Shry replied, "Cover me while I set this spatial charge." and he slung his rifle and produced a spatial charge from a pouch on the side of his pack. Pressing the back of the charge against the inner wall of the hull he armed the device and stepped back.

"Okay let's get out of here." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Max, our charge is in place. Beam us up."

Moments later there was the familiar sensation of a transporter sequence as Max beamed the group back up to the scout ship and they saw that they were not the first to return.

"How are we going?" Carr asked as she stepped off the transporter platform and approached the control console.

"Almost half of the fire teams have now returned after placing their charges commander." Max replied, "Though I also pulled one team out after all but one member was incapacitated."

"Shry to all teams." Shry signalled, activating his communicator, "You have ten minutes to place your charges. After that you will be withdrawn anyway. Shry out."

"I have another team signalling for extraction." Max added, "They have placed their charges and are under fire."

"I'll be on the bridge." Carr said, "Keep me up to date on the situation."

"And I'll go and put some clothes on." Cole added, "I'll join you as soon as I can."

Carr and Naya hurried to the bridge where Carr took her place in the command chair and Naya headed for the operations station.

"Report." she said simply.

"Cloak is stable and we appear to remain undetected." Naya replied.

"That could be because the locals are deliberately not looking for us." Carr commented, "What about the Iconians?"

"Sensor data is limited by the amount of water between us and them." the officer currently occupying the science station responded, "But we are getting ID signals from the spatial charges set by the Andorians. We can trigger them all at once or in any combination you specify."

"Not just yet lieutenant." Carr replied, "We still have people down there. Is there any indication of unusual activity anywhere else on the planet that could indicate an Iconian presence we weren't aware of before?"

"None." the science officer answered, "Though I'm not certain I could identify such activity."

"Max to bridge." Max's voice said over the intercom.

"Carr here. Go ahead Max."

"Captain, the last of the Imperial Guard troops are aboard. You may trigger the charges whenever you chose."

Carr's head suddenly turned back towards the science station.

"Do it." she snapped, "Detonate all charges now."

The combined force of more than twenty spatial charges detonating in unison was not only powerful enough to punch through the base's hull at the points where each charge had been applied but also sufficiently weakened the hull that fractures appeared elsewhere as well and without a shield to hold it back, the pressure of the water outside forced these open and the ocean poured in.

To the directing intelligence all of the alerts coming in at once were overwhelming. There were a number of fleshforms and flesh hosts still within the base but they were too few to be able to contain the damage, especially given the lack of auxiliary power keeping the shield off line. This left only one option open to the directing intelligence: Withdrawal.

First the intelligence alerted the Iconians still at large in the base to depart and monitored them as they opened gateways and retreated into subspace. Then the intelligence turned its attention to what remained of the base. There was still a considerable amount of equipment that would be invaluable to anyone who

examined it, not least the primary gateway that could be used to access the Iconian home dimension. This could not be allowed to fall into the hands of any of the governments of the alpha or beta quadrants so the directing intelligence set in motion the base's self destruct procedure, in effect using the main power generators to finish the work begun by the Andorians with their spatial charges. Once the countdown to destruction had begun the directing intelligence gathered all of the data it had collected regarding the assault on the base before using its subspace transmitter to transfer not only this data but its own consciousness as well back to the Iconian's home dimension. But upon arrival the intelligence found itself not within the main core where its kind dwelled but in an isolated section where it was confronted by a consciousness that it knew all too well.

"I take it you have a very good explanation for your failure." The Girl said.

The detonation of the base's main power core produced a spout of water that rose more than two thousand metres into the air before falling back into the sea and only then did Carr relax.

"T'Lan?" she said, looking at where the Vulcan now sat at the science station.

"The base has been totally destroyed commander." she replied, "I am monitoring high levels of radioactive contamination in the surrounding area."

"Well the Romulans will have to deal with that." Carr replied, "Helm, lay in a course to take us back to the *Nightfall*. Warp seven. Our job here is done."

"So we're leaving then?" Nayal asked as she returned to the bridge after having gone to get a warm drink and Carr smiled.

"We've done all we set out to do." Carr replied, "The Iconian base is destroyed and we managed to gather useful information in that we now know exactly who we're dealing with." then she smiled, "But I think you've got the right idea about warming yourself up. sub-lieutenant" and she suddenly reached out and took the mug of steaming liquid from Nayal. Before the Romulan woman could protest Carr then downed a large mouthful and winced, "God this is bitter Nayal." she exclaimed, "What do you call this stuff?"

"Actually it's coffee made using one of your own replicator patterns." Nayal replied, "Just with an extra special ingredient added." and she produced the bottle of Romulan ale she had brought back with her, "About a fifty-fifty mix to be precise."

"Vessel de-cloaking to stern captain." West announced.

"Shields up." Edwards ordered, "Yellow alert."

"Captain it's our scout ship." Nikki said from the science station where she was filling in, watched closely by another of the *Nightfall's* science officers."

"Stand down from yellow alert." Edwards said, "I'll meet them in transporter room one. Nikki with me. Mister Hamilton you have the conn." and he got up and rushed to the turbolift, followed by Nikki.

They reached the transporter room just in time to see the first group beam over from the scout ship. This consisted of Carr, Cole, Max, Nayal, Shry and T'Lan.

"Do you need a hand?" Nayal asked, looking at Carr as she rocked slightly.

"No thank you sub-lieutenant." she replied loudly as she began to step down from the transporter pad, "I can manage myself." but then she suddenly overbalanced and squealed as she fell forwards. Instinctively Edwards leapt forwards and caught her before she could hit the floor of the transporter room and she looked up into his face and smiled.

"I think I tripped." she said, "The floor must have moved." then she patted Edwards on his shoulder and rested her head against his chest, "At least you were here to catch me David. You're always here to catch me. I like that."

"Mom?" Nikki commented, "Are you drunk?"

Edwards looked at the rest of the team that had just beamed over.

"What the hell happened while you were gone?" he asked.

"Robert farted on me." Carr said in response before any of the others could speak, "Then he and T'Lan got naked together and everything exploded."

"The lieutenant commander sampled some of the local beverages." Nayal said and she lifted her hand to mime someone drinking.

"Now I feel really, really sleepy." Carr added, "Take me to bed." then she looked up at Edwards again, "My ears are itchy. Can you scratch them while I get undressed?" she added before her head fell forwards as she fell asleep leaning against the captain.

"Oh mom." Nikki said, wincing as Edwards just looked around embarrassed.

Three Iconians appeared in Trexen's office without warning. Two were fleshforms but between them stood a mechanical construct. Humanoid in form this mounted energy weapons on its arms and its eyes glowed as it stared at the praetor.

"Guards!" he yelled, "Get in here now!"

The door opened and the two Romulan guards who stood outside Trexen's office burst in with their weapons drawn. But before they could act to defend their praetor the mechanical construct spun around to face them and raised its arms. Twin beams of energy leapt from the weapons it carried and they struck the two Romulans, both of whom screamed briefly as their bodies were disintegrated as Trexen looked on in horror. Then the two fleshforms strode towards him and grabbed hold of his arms, preventing him from escaping. "Release me!" he yelled, "I am the praetor!" but the fleshforms did not react.

The next thing Trexen knew was he felt like all of the air was sucked from his lungs and there was a blinding light that made him flinch as the two fleshforms triggered their gateway system, dragging him along with them. They materialised in a plain white room with doors on opposite walls. The fleshforms then dragged Trexen towards one of these doors and it opened automatically to reveal The Girl standing in a similar room. "Where have you brought me?" Trexen asked, "What do you want from me?"

"I haven't brought you far and I only need you to watch praetor." The Girl replied and behind her the wall split apart, the two halves sliding away from one another to expose a viewport that looked down on Hylasia Two. Trexen saw a massive cylindrical vessel orbiting the planet close by and he guessed that he was aboard a similar craft. Then he gasped as he saw the wreck of a warbird drift by.

"We know that you helped the Federation attack our base praetor." The Girl said, "So as far as we are concerned our alliance is at an end."

"Alliance? What alliance? You treated us like slaves." Trexen said, scowling.

"Because that is what you were." The Girl replied, "But the thing is you weren't our only slaves and we need to send a message to the others that we do not tolerate dissent such as yours." and as the words were a pre-arranged signal, the two Iconian vessels opened fire at that moment, sending a barrage of torpedoes down towards the planet below.