

# STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



## DARK SCIENCE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



# ***STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL*** **DARK SCIENCE**

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The crew of the *USS Nightfall* are contacted by an old ally with an offer that seems too good to turn down. A method has been found to overcome one of their enemy's greatest advantages – the ability to come and go at will. Unfortunately the means to do this is in the hands of the Remans and doing a deal with them may involve turning a blind eye to war crimes...

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
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13. Cold War
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## *i.*

Stardate 67294.5 *Deletham Aidoann* Outpost on the Romulan/Klingon border.

Four Reman soldiers moved down the tunnel with their disruptor rifles braced against their shoulders, coordinating their movements so that they were able to cover every side passage for signs of an ambush. Though the walls of the tunnel were bare and uneven rock the outpost had been here long enough that artificial lights had been placed at regular enough intervals that the majority of the tunnel system was fully illuminated, meaning that the Remans had no need to carry artificial light sources of their own.

"Target entering section four." a voice said over their communication network and the leader of the Reman unit raised his hand to bring his men to a halt.

From somewhere ahead in the tunnel there came the sound of rapid footsteps in the dirt floor as someone came running towards the Reman unit. All of a sudden a Romulan man appeared at the end of the tunnel and one of the Remans fired a blast from his rifle that struck the tunnel wall close to the Romulan's head. In response the Romulan returned with his own disruptor pistol but the beam went wide of its target and the Romulan backed away.

"Target is retreating back towards section seven." the unit leader signalled with his communicator, "Unit nine is in pursuit." and the four Remans began to run.

The Romulan led them to a larger cave where electronic equipment that hummed with power filled much of the room and as the Remans neared this small devices on their belts started to flash and produce a high pitched beeping sound.

"Level?" the unit leader asked and one of the other Remans lowered his rifle to check a hand scanner.

"Seven parts per billion. We should be fine as long as we aren't here for more than about two kevn." the other Reman replied, indicating a time that to humans would be about twenty minutes.

"Split up. We want this thing alive." the unit commander said before activating his communicator again, "Target is in section seven array base chamber." he said and then he began to creep forwards among the machinery.

The sound of disruptor fire made the squad leader turn and he saw one of his men fall, a gaping hole burned right the way through his chest. Then moments later the Romulan appeared, leaping over the Reman corpse and rushing towards one of the exits from the cave. The Reman leader promptly dropped to his knees and took aim with his rifle before firing a single shot that struck the Romulan in the back of one of his legs, just above the knee. But the blood that came from this wound was not the copper rich green of both Romulans and Remans, instead it was a milky white. The Romulan promptly collapsed and his disruptor fell from his hand, but he did not cry out in pain as most living beings would do. Then, unable to get back to his feet the Romulan tried to drag himself across the cave floor, desperate to escape the three surviving Remans who now strode towards him. Reaching for his dropped weapon, the Romulan had just managed to wrap his hand around the grip when all of a sudden a Reman boot came down on it and looking up the Romulan found himself looking into the face of yet another Reman who had just entered the cave in front of him. The markings on this Reman's uniform identified him as a senior commander while behind him stood another pair of soldiers as well as four Remans in the shiny white clothing of their researchers.

"What's the matter Romulan?" the commander asked, snarling, "Is something preventing you from using your little disappearing trick? Oh well, I'm sure that we'll soon find out what is that's causing that problem." then he took his foot off the Romulan's hand and allowed his two guards to drag him to his feet before he added, "By dissection."

Stardate 67316.2 Starship *USS Nightfall* on patrol along Romulan Neutral Zone.

When Lieutenant T'Lan, chief science officer aboard the Akira-class *USS Nightfall* stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge the first thing she noticed was that Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole, the ship's security chief and second officer was not at his station. Instead there was a lieutenant manning his console and as she walked past him to reach her science station she paused.

"I was under the impression that Lieutenant Commander Cole was to be on duty at this time." she said.

"He is." the red-headed woman sat in the central command chair replied as she became aware of T'Lan's presence on the bridge. This was Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr, the ship's first officer, "He's in with the captain right now. In fact the captain asked me to send you in as soon as you arrived."

"Very well." T'Lan said as she turned around and headed towards the door that led to Captain Edwards' ready room. Along the way she noticed that both the chief helmsman Lieutenant Bradley Hamilton and also the Romulan liaison officer stationed aboard the *Nightfall*, Sub-lieutenant Nayal, were smiling at her. Only

Lieutenant Jenna West, the ship's chief operations officer retained her composure.  
T'Lan pressed the intercom button to make Captain Edwards aware of her presence outside his door.  
"Captain, I was told you wanted to see me." she said.  
"Yes, come in T'Lan." Edwards responded and the door slid open to reveal the captain sat behind his desk and Cole sat in front of it, "Take a seat." Edwards told her as the door closed behind her and he pointed at the vacant chair in front of his desk.  
"Yes captain." T'Lan said as she walked over to the chair and sat down.  
"Thank you for coming T'Lan." Edward said, looking at a PADD that he held, "Now I believe that you recently took the command officer's examination."  
"That is correct captain." T'Lan answered.  
"And I also believe that Lieutenant Commander Cole here assisted you during your studies for the test?"  
"Again that is correct captain. Though at no stage did any of the advice offered by the lieutenant commander contravene the rules concerning the test." T'Lan said.  
"No, I'm not saying that they did." Edwards said, "But I think you really should thank Cole since his instruction has helped you gain a pass on the test on your first attempt."  
"Congratulations T'Lan." Cole added, smiling at her.  
"Thank you." T'Lan replied.  
"But you may want to fix your uniform before you go back out there." Cole told her.  
"I do not understand." T'Lan replied, "My uniform meets Starfleet regulations for science division officers."  
"Not for a lieutenant commander it doesn't." Edwards said and both he and Cole got to their feet and Cole produced a small box that he opened to reveal the rank pin needed to change the pins already on T'Lan's collar from a lieutenant to a lieutenant commander, "T'Lan," Edwards said, reading from the PADD as the Vulcan woman also stood up and turned towards Cole, "by order of Starfleet Command on stardate six-seven-three-one-two point four you are hereby promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander."  
T'Lan stood still while Cole added the extra pin to her collar and then leant down to kiss her briefly. Then he stood up straight and saluted her.  
"Congratulations again Lieutenant Commander T'Lan." he said before T'Lan returned his salute, "Now shall we both actually go out there and do our jobs?"  
"That would be logical." T'Lan replied.  
"Off you both go then." Edwards said, "And well done T'Lan."  
"Thank you captain." T'Lan said before she and Cole headed for the door leading back to the bridge.  
As soon as this opened and T'Lan stepped out the officers already on the bridge looked up and applauded.  
"Your station awaits you lieutenant commander." Carr said, smiling and Cole and T'Lan both made their way around the bridge towards their stations.  
"So cousin will there be a celebration in the officer's lounge tonight?" Noyal asked.  
"It is traditional." Hamilton added.  
"Should time allow it I do not object to such a gathering." T'Lan replied. Then she looked at Cole, "Will you be able to attend lieutenant commander?"  
"Attend my girlfriend's promotion party? Of course. A fleet of Borg cubes couldn't keep me away." he answered.  
"Commander we're being hailed." West said suddenly.  
"Who by?" Carr asked.  
"I'm not sure commander, the signal is a short ranged one but there's no-one out there."  
"Scanning." T'Lan said, flipping the eyepiece of the headset with its built in head up display she and the other bridge officers wore in front of her eye. Then after a few seconds she added, "Confirmed. There are no vessels detectable within five light years."  
"They're asking specifically for the captain." West said.  
"Captain, you're needed on the bridge." Carr said, tapping her combadge.  
"Be right there." Edwards replied and moments later he appeared from his ready room and took the seat that Carr vacated for him, "So what do we have?" he asked.  
"Someone's hailing you by name but we can't figure out who." Carr told him.  
"Activate the communication system." Edwards ordered.  
"On line now captain." west told him.  
"This is Captain Edwards."  
"Greetings Captain Edwards." a gruff male voice responded before adding, "Drop the cloak." and on the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge space blurred before a Klingon Bird of Prey de-cloaked.  
"We're getting a visual feed now captain." West said.  
"Put it through." Edwards told her and the view on the screen changed to show the interior of the Bird of Prey's bridge. Sat in the command seat was a face that Edwards and the rest of the *Nightfall's* crew had not seen for some time.  
"Captain Kurvok." Edwards said, smiling, "You seem to have done well for yourself. The last time we met you

were a freighter captain.”

“A freighter captain without a freighter.” Kurvok replied, “But while I returned home without my ship I had the tale of how we stood shoulder to shoulder and fought back the Borg. My reward was command of the *Glorious Slayer*. The house I serve still sells weapons but now my job is to protect those shipments rather than deliver them and I would like to speak with you regarding one of our customers.”

“A customer in the Federation?” Edwards asked.

“No. We have few customers in your territory. This customer is located in the territory of the old Romulan Empire.”

“You're selling weapons to the Romulans?” Edwards commented.

“Of course. Though we may have been on the same side during the war, there is no love lost as you would put it between my people and the Romulans who have proven themselves untrustworthy and dishonourable. So when it comes to them killing one another we are happy to supply them with the means.” Kurvok explained, “But the customers we just delivered a shipment to were not Romulans, they were Remans. They control a small moon on the border between our space and theirs and while our shipment was being unloaded and inspected I spoke with their commander about the civil war. One of the things he mentioned was encountering Romulan agents who were able to appear and disappear at will even through the outpost's shields and I remembered hearing some similar tales about members of several species doing just that when I was aboard your vessel. Now my customer has a proposition for you.”



Edwards gathered his senior officers together in the *Nightfall's* briefing room when Kurvok was brought aboard so that they could hear what he had to say. The Klingon captain brought with him a metal case that he placed on the table and opened to take out metal goblets that he slid across the table to each person gathered around it.

"First a toast." he said, "To mark our previous victory I brought a bottle of blood wine." and then he took a bottle from the case as well before walking around the table and pouring some of the contents into each goblet. However, he paused when he reached the *Nightfall's* chief engineer, a former Borg drone known as Max to the crew.

"My internal systems can process this liquid." he said, holding up the goblet.

"Good." Kurvok said as he poured Max a drink as well, "Leaving a warrior out of a toast is dishonourable." then as he got to Nayal he added, "Even a Romulan one on this occasion." and he poured her a drink as well.

Then when everyone had a drink Kurvok stood at the end of the table and raised his own goblet.

"To our victory over the Borg." he said, "And to the victories we still have ahead of us." and then he gulped down the drink.

Max copied this motion, downing the contents of his drink in one go whereas the other officers sipped at theirs more cautiously. Even the Andorian Captain Shry who commanded the company of Imperial Guard stationed aboard the *Nightfall* was not brave enough to try and swallow the entire drink in one go. But Kurvok did not take offence at this and he waited for the rest to finish.

"Thank you captain." Edwards said to the Klingon as he lowered his empty goblet, "Now perhaps you can tell us about this offer from the Remans."

"Of course." Kurvok said and he held up the Klingon equivalent of an isolinear chip, "Where can I connect this?" he asked.

"I can access the data and transfer it remotely to the display." Max said and Kurvok smiled before tossing the isolinear chip to the Borg. Max caught it effortlessly and almost immediately the wall mounted display showed an image of a fortified structure of obvious Romulan design.

"This is the outpost that the Romulans built to watch over the border we shared with their empire known as *Deletham Aidoann*." Kurvok said.

"That means Defender Moon." Nayal translated.

"Quite and that is exactly what it was for them." Kurvok said, "It was little more than a massive subspace sensor array that monitored for communication signals and warp signatures for more than fifty light years in every direction. The Romulans used to boast that it a Klingon could not order his bat'leth polished on Qo'noS without them knowing about it. The outpost was well defended with shields and plasma torpedo launchers that made an orbital strike a futile option for a besieging force. In addition it was home to a garrison of over ten thousand Reman troops to deter any ground assault. But when Romulus was destroyed the Reman garrison rose up against their Romulan masters and slaughtered them all before spreading out to secure several surrounding systems. They joined with a number of other Reman factions under the leadership of an individual who now calls himself General Rhatan. Rhatan's turned the *Deletham Aidoann* outpost into a research base, far from the front lines and well defended against attack by his Romulan and fellow Reman adversaries and his faction initially fared well in the conflict."

"Initially?" a man in a MACO uniform asked. Captain Gary Heart commanded the second of the two infantry companies aboard the *Nightfall*, this one drawn from Earth troops rather than Andorian.

"Yes, the expansion of Rhatan's forces was halted by the intervention of Romulan saboteurs who would strike without warning and then withdraw before they could be captured or killed. No starships were ever identified and the Romulan agents were able to penetrate even sealed and shielded facilities without leaving any indication of how they got in or out."

"That could be achieved using Iconian gateway technology captain." T'Lan pointed out and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, it does sound like them doesn't it?" he said and Kurvok smiled.

"I was also told that when these agents were injured they bled white." he added.

"The synthetic flesh." Doctor King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer said.

"I told the Remans of your encounters with these aliens and they want to discuss a pooling of knowledge."

Kurvok continued, "They asked me to deliver their invitation straight to you."

"We can offer quite a lot." Cole said, "We know who the aliens are, how they are able to move around so freely and how to track them. Do you know what the Remans are offering?"

"General Rhatan has agreed to attend the next round of peace talks the Federation is trying to sponsor. But also he is offering the results of their investigation into an agent that they took prisoner." Kurvok said and the

gathered officers exchanged glances.

"They captured one?" the leader of the *Nightfall's* attached fighter squadron responded, leaning forwards towards the Klingon, "That's not possible. They just vanish into thin air. Poof."

"Lieutenant Commander White, it is only impossible for us." T'Lan said, "That is not to say that someone else may not have discovered a means of inhibiting the operation of the Iconian gateway technology." and she noticed West had suddenly straightened up in her chair.

"Being able to stop them pulling that disappearing act of theirs would be advantageous captain." Heart said.

"Perhaps we could finally start to inflict some serious losses on them." Shry added.

"There's no need to try and convince me." Edwards said, "I'll need to run this by Starfleet Command since we'll be leaving Federation territory but I can't see why they'd refuse to give us permission."

"Getting there might be a bit difficult." Hamilton pointed out, "We'd have to cross the Neutral Zone and Romulan space."

"You forget who your allies are." Kurvok responded, "Your ship can pass through Klingon space with the blessing of the House of Mogtan. The *Glorious Slayer* will escort you as far as the Romulan border. Then the *Deletham Aidoann* outpost will be right in front of you."

"Sounds like a plan." Carr said.

"There is one thing I ought to point out." Kurvok said and he looked at Nayal, "I did not mention your Romulan pet to the Remans at the outpost. I did not think that they would look kindly on having her there. I suggest that you find a way to hide her from them."

"I knew there had to be a catch somewhere." Nayal muttered in response.

"I think we can sort something out." Edwards said, "Now I'm going to contact Starfleet but I don't want to waste any time on this so I want each of you to prepare your departments for this mission. T'Lan and West are to compile everything we have on this outpost and its capabilities. If this turns out to be some sort of trap then I want to know what we're walking into. Liaise with Nayal, she's our expert on the Remans. Cole, White, Heart and Shry are to all make sure that their people are ready to defend the ship if we're attacked. Max, I'm counting on you to make sure that we're aware of any Iconian attempts to infiltrate us and Mister Hamilton I want you to plot us a course to the outpost. Captain Kurvok can you give him some details?"

"Of course, I'll have my navigator send you the exact location of the outpost." Kurvok replied.

"Good. In that case I think that everyone has work to be doing. Dismissed." Edwards said.

With their shifts now over, both Cole and T'Lan headed for the turbolift to return to their respective quarters.

"So I guess you'll be requesting new quarters now." Cole said, "To go with your promotion. After all a lieutenant commander is entitled to more living space."

"Actually Robert I had an alternate idea." T'Lan replied, "Turbolift halt." and the turbolift came to a stop.

"What sort of idea?" Cole asked.

"I was considering how it would make sense if we were to request joint quarters."

"You mean move in together?"

"Correct. The benefits are clear. We would be better able to co-ordinate our activities and the time saved from no longer needing to travel between one another's quarters to meet could be put to better use in activities that we both find pleasurable."

Cole smiled. Then he frowned.

"What will your father have to say about it?" he asked, "When we met he did kind of warn me to be careful to treat you right."

"My father will respect my decision. It has been arrived at logically after all. Do you need more time to consider the proposition?"

"Not one second. After all, there's no arguing with logic." Cole said, embracing T'Lan, "Plus you are the best girlfriend ever."

"I am Vulcan. I aim to excel in everything I attempt."

"We may have a serious problem." the young human appearing girl said as she entered the virtual world her people had created long ago when driven from their home world and addressed members of the Iconian ruling council.

"You are the most senior of us to have taken physical form. We expect you to be able to solve problems and tell us about them afterwards." one of the formless council members replied.

"This is something beyond any of us." The Girl said, "Our agent aboard the Federation starship *USS Nightfall* has made contact. The agent we lost at the Romulan outpost *Deletham Aidoann* was not killed as we thought. He was taken prisoner."

"Impossible." another voice from a council member boomed out, "Our gateway technology permits us to travel wherever we can visualise."

"Perhaps, but the technology is not infallible and the Remans who now occupy the outpost seem to have found a method of preventing a gateway from forming." The Girl told them.

"How could such primitives manage this?"

"I don't know." The Girl answered, "I can't even tell you whether their new found capability was something they just stumbled across by accident or developed on purpose."

"We know you." another councillor said, "You have never been one to accept such unanswered questions."

"And I don't intend to start now." The Girl said, "I don't intend to risk any more of our people but I'm hoping that the Federation will come to our aide."

"In what way?"

"The *Nightfall's* captain has requested permission to pay a visit to this outpost. If that happens then our agent will go along with the ship. Then once we have more information about the method used to trap our agent we can strike, one ship ought to be enough against the outpost and the *Nightfall*."

"You intend to destroy the *Nightfall*? But what of our agent? We still have no others in Starfleet."

"I will warn our agent to evacuate the ship before it is destroyed. We can spare an escape pod or shuttle easily and make sure that the Klingons send a ship to investigate the destruction of the outpost before the Remans can. They'll rescue our agent, repatriate her to the Federation and she'll be placed back aboard one of their starships."

"Do it." another voice said that The Girl recognised as belonging to the most senior of the ruling council, "Use whatever resources you need to. We cannot lose the advantage of the gateways. What once was ours must be ours again."



### 3.

"Admiral may I speak with you? You look like you're about to leave." the woman asked.

"Commander Brown, of course. I can spare you a few minutes but my granddaughter is appearing in a school play that I need to attend. So make it quick." the admiral replied.

Neither the admiral nor the commander wore uniforms since their section only ever bothered with such things when they were trying to disguise themselves as more mundane Starfleet officers.

"Thank you." Brown said, "Admiral the Nightfall has just contacted Starfleet command to request permission to enter Romulan space. The request states that they want to meet with a Reman faction along the Klingon border. The Klingons will escort them as far as the border."

"I suppose Captain Edwards gave a reason for this did he?"

"Yes admiral. According to the Klingons, the Remans want to talk about sharing information." Brown said. "Information about what?"

"Not what. Who. The Iconians. Apparently they have the means to capture their agents and hold them."

The admiral hesitated, taking this information in.

"That would be a significant step forward." he said, "Without interrogating an Iconian first hand we'll never find out exactly what their long term goal is. Has Starfleet command given Edwards permission to take the Nightfall to meet the Remans?"

"No sir. Starfleet command is discussing the matter with the Federation Council since it involves sending a ship into a conflict zone. They are reluctant to be seen to be taking sides which is what sharing information with the Remans could be seen as."

The admiral sat back down and activated the communication system built into his desk.

"Get me the Chiefs of Starfleet Operations and Intelligence." he said. Then he paused and added, "No, never mind that. Get me the Federation President."

West returned to her quarters to access the Starfleet Intelligence files on the *Deletham Aidoann* outpost. She found that given that it was located some distance from Federation territory there was little concrete information available on its history or capabilities and most of what was available came second hand from the Klingons, mainly from the House of Mogtan that was now deeply involved in shipping arms to the outpost for its Reman inhabitants.

"Lieutenant West this is Lieutenant Commander T'Lan." T'Lan's voice said and West sighed.

"She's rubbing her promotion in your face." West thought she heard someone else say and she shuddered as she looked around for the source of the voice that she had heard before. The sound of the voice reminded West of her own but just like on the previous occasion she had heard it she knew that she had not spoken the words.

"Lieutenant West, are you there?" T'Lan asked.

"Yes. Yes I'm here." West replied.

"I have the specifications on the equipment shown in the images of *Deletham Aidoann* that Captain Kurvok provided. Have you accessed Starfleet Intelligence's reports?" T'Lan said.

"Yes, such as they are." West answered.

"Then we should present our information to the captain. I will meet you at the turbolift." T'Lan said.

"She's settled into her new rank well. She's already ordering you around." the voice said.

"I'm on my way." West said before tapping her combadge to close the channel to T'Lan. She then reached for the PADD that she had been copying all of the intelligence reports to and briefly caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror mounted on the wall of her quarters. In that mirror she was certain that she saw another version of herself standing right behind her and West tried to turn in her chair but only managed to overbalance and fell to the floor.

Looking around she saw no-one else in the room and so taking hold of the PADD she got back up, hurried out of her quarters and headed for the turbolift nearest to her quarters and she found T'Lan already there.

Like West she also held a PADD and she nodded at West as she summoned the turbolift. The two women then waited silently for the short time that it took the turbolift car to arrive before stepping inside.

"Bridge." T'Lan said and the turbolift began to move. T'Lan then looked at West, "Lieutenant when we meet with the captain I think that I should give him my report first."

"There she goes again." the voice said, "Her rank makes her more important."

"Turbolift hold." West said suddenly and she turned to stare at T'Lan.

"Is there a problem lieutenant?" the Vulcan asked.

"Oh you bet there's a problem. It's you." West said angrily, "You've been promoted less than a day and already you're lording it over me. Not all of us have a boyfriend who can help us pass that damned test you

know. But it doesn't make what we do any less important."

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

"There you go again. Calling me 'Lieutenant'."

"That is your correct rank." T'Lan pointed out.

"Yes, only because I've failed that test four times now. But you just walk in with Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole to help you and hey presto you're a lieutenant commander. Now why should you get to give your report first?"

"Because my analysis is based on hard evidence in the form of photographic images provided by Captain Kurvok about the defensive and detection systems that the outpost has installed whereas yours is based on conjectural reports that may be significantly out of date. It is logical for me to inform the captain of the resources that we know the outpost has at its disposal before you provide him with our best estimate of how the Remans may be employing those resources."

West hesitated. What T'Lan had said made perfect sense.

"Yes I suppose it does. Sorry." she said. Then she faced the front of the turbolift, "Turbolift continue." she said.

"Turbolift hold." T'Lan said without taking her eyes off West.

"What? I said I was sorry. Can we just leave it there?" West said, looking at T'Lan again.

"No lieutenant we may not." T'Lan said, "Your emotional outburst was highly inappropriate and unprofessional. I am not to blame for your repeated failure to pass the command officer test. Nor does my personal relationship with Lieutenant Commander Cole give you the right to infer that I may have gained promotion through means outside Starfleet regulations. Perhaps you should give me your PADD and I will deliver the entire report to Captain Edwards. You should return to your quarters."

"Seriously? You're sending me to my room? Will I be allowed any supper?" West snapped.

"I am trying to prevent you from making a fool of yourself in front of the captain." T'Lan said, "As a Vulcan I will not hold this incident against you. But if you repeat this behaviour in front of the captain or lieutenant commanders Carr or Cole they are less likely to be as tolerant. Now give me your PADD." and she held out her hand. West glared at T'Lan as she thrust her PADD towards the Vulcan.

"Doors open." West said and the turbolift moved to align with the closest exit point from the system and the doors slid apart, enabling West to storm out of the car. Left alone in the turbolift T'Lan faced forwards.

"Turbolift continue." she said as she looked at the report on West's PADD, wanting to have some idea of what information it held before she had to deliver it to Captain Edwards..

The turbolift then travelled directly to the bridge where T'Lan exited and headed for the captain's ready room.

"T'Lan, come in." Edwards said when he saw her in the doorway, "Is Lieutenant West not with you?"

"No captain. I thought it better if I gave you the briefing myself." T'Lan replied, not bothering to explain the full reasoning behind her decision.

"Very well. But I hope you're not thinking that just because you've been promoted you need to be taking on everyone else's work as well."

"No captain." T'Lan replied, sitting down opposite Edward.

"Okay, so what can you tell me about this outpost Starfleet has given us permission to approach?" he asked and she handed him her PADD.

"The outpost mounts extremely heavy defences captain. Observations by the Klingons indicate multiple redundant shield generators, plasma torpedo launchers and disruptor banks."

"Hardly surprising given its location along the Klingon border." Edwards commented as he looked at the PADD.

"Indeed. But the outpost cannot be thought of purely in terms of its tactical prowess." T'Lan went on, "The sensor systems it mounts are among the best produced by the Romulan Star Empire prior to the destruction of Romulus."

"Given the Klingons' widespread use of cloaking devices, that's hardly surprising either."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied and then she looked at West's PADD again, "According to the information passed to Starfleet Intelligence by the Klingons, the outpost is capable of detecting even most cloaked ships at ranges of up to fifteen million kilometres by their subspace wake. The Klingons have also noticed unusually high tachyon and anti-proton emissions from the outpost that may indicate alternative means of searching for cloaked vessels as well as a magnetic field powerful enough to disrupt transporter operations within a million kilometres of the moon."

"That could be a problem." Edwards commented when he heard about the magnetic field, "I don't like the idea of sending an away team into an area where we can't extract them easily."

"No captain. That is a logical concern." T'Lan agreed, "The Klingons also suspected that prior to the civil war the outpost was used as a base for sending warbirds into Klingon space. The attacks on Narendra Three and Khitomer are both believed to have been launched from here."

"So the Romulans were here for a long time before the Remans kicked them out then." Edwards said, considering the decades that had passed since either of those two incidents had taken place and heralded

the beginnings of the Federation-Klingon alliance that had shaped the Alpha Quadrant since.

"Yes captain and it was because of the number of Reman troops deployed here to protect against Klingon attack that the Romulans themselves lost control of the system. The Klingons estimated that the Remans outnumbered the Romulan personnel by at least twenty to one."

"Kurvok mentioned something about the place being used as a research outpost. Do we know what sort of research is going on there?" Edwards asked and T'Lan checked the PADD again.

"No captain, that information is not given here." she replied, "Though the Klingons have performed numerous long range scans and visited the moon on several occasions to deliver arms shipments they have never been able to penetrate the facility itself. Shipments were offloaded onto Reman cargo shuttles to take them down to the surface. Thus theories about its full purpose remain pure conjecture. Logic would suggest that it was an ideal place to develop and test new sensors or weapon systems. But almost any form of research could be carried out there."

"Well then," Edwards said, leaning back in his chair, "I suppose we'll just have to ask the Remans ourselves when we get there."

"Yes captain. Is that all? Or do you have further questions?" T'Lan asked.

"No, that will be all thank you T'Lan." Edwards answered and T'Lan got up to leave, "Oh T'Lan, one more thing." he added as she was about half way to the door.

"Yes captain?" she asked.

"If you and Lieutenant West are having some sort of trouble getting along, get it sorted before it affects ship operations. Understood?"

"Yes captain."

West was sat reading from her computer when her door chimed to alert her to someone standing outside and she looked up, startled. From the moment she had returned to her quarters she had been studying the material for the command officer's test and lost track of time. Though it felt to her like she had been studying for just a few minutes the time on the computer screen indicated that she had in fact been studying for more than four hours.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Jenna it's Brad." Hamilton's voice replied.

"And Nikki." the voice of Carr's daughter said after this.

West sighed again.

"Come in." she said and the door to her quarters slid open to reveal Hamilton and Nikki. Like Hamilton, Nikki wore a command division uniform but unlike his, hers bore no rank markings. The teenager was enrolled on an internship program with Starfleet and so she held no rank. But as she switched between different departments she still wore the relevant uniform and right now she was assigned to the command division where Hamilton had been teaching her how to pilot shuttles and starships, "So what brings you two here?" West asked, "If you're here to invite me to one of those role playing things you do I'm too busy."

"Actually we were just on our way to the holodeck." Hamilton replied.

"Lieutenant Hamilton was going to give me another flying lesson." Nikki added.

"I thought maybe you could join us." Hamilton continued, "I heard about you and T'Lan getting into an argument and-

"Wait, what about me and T'Lan?" West interrupted.

"Everyone on the bridge noticed that you didn't go and see the captain with her," T'Lan replied, "and someone from engineering saw you getting out of the turbolift looking really mad."

"They're mocking you." the voice only West could hear said and she winced.

"So everyone's talking about me behind my back now?" she said.

"This is a starship. Rumours travel faster than our warp drive." Hamilton replied.

"Oh great. That means Lieutenant Mackey's going to keep me going back even longer." West said, referring to the *Nightfall's* counsellor who continued to insist that West saw him regularly. Then she exhaled deeply, "Look," she said, "thanks for dropping by but I'm studying for the command officer's test and I really need to pass the damned thing. So go do your simulation and let me get on with my studies. Okay?"

"Sure. Whatever." Hamilton said and he turned around and walked away. On the other hand Nikki remained where she was a short while longer.

"You know Bradley was only trying to help." she said, "He thought you might just want to get out of your quarters for a while without worrying about what we were thinking about you." and then she too left West's quarters.

"Oh Jenna." West said to herself when the door slid shut again, "You really screwed that one up."

Then she saw what looked like a reflection of herself sat on the couch on the other side of the room in the mirror and she gasped as it smiled at her.

"Don't worry." the voice said, "I'm looking out for you. I need you as much as you need me." and then the reflection was gone.



## 4.

The hangar bay that stretched the entire length of an Akira-class cruiser's primary hull was the largest internal space aboard the class and like many ships of the class there were numerous small craft here ready to be launched at short notice rather than all being kept in the smaller storage and maintenance hangars that were reached from the main hangar via several large elevator platforms. But in addition to these craft the hangar aboard the *Nightfall* was often filled with ground troops making use of the large open area it offered to conduct training exercises that could not be undertaken in the ship's holodecks because of the sheer number of people involved in them and when both Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr entered the hangar they found a mix of MACOs and Imperial Guard located towards the rear of the hangar where packing cases and lines of tape on the floor were being used to mark out a hypothetical building that squads were practising storming.

"Captain Heart, Captain Shry." Edwards called out as he and Carr approached the armoured soldiers, "Could we have a word?" then he looked to where White and some of his pilots were gathered around a Peregrine-class fighter and shouted to him, "Commander White, could you join us a well?"

"Of course captain. It's your ship." Shry replied as he turned towards the two Starfleet officers. Meanwhile Heart watched as some of his men darted between two sets of crates.

"No!" he shouted at them, "You're still not checking the turning to the left. Do it again and if you can't get it right I'll have Max rig up something that'll really get your attention if you don't deal with it properly." then he looked at Edwards and Carr as well and smiled, "New transfers." he said loudly enough for his men to hear him, "I don't now what they're being taught at West Point nowadays but if this lot are anything to go by standards must have slipped since my day."

"I hope not." Edwards said, knowing that he was not serious. Accusing new recruits of not being up to the job was a common method of pushing them to do better, "Rebecca's there." Rebecca was Edwards' daughter who had joined the MACOs after leaving university and finding her choice of career severely limited because of the course she had chosen against her father's advice.

Heart smiled.

"I'm sure she'll be the exception." he said, "So what does Starfleet need us lowly infantrymen for today?"

"We need you to figure out a way to breach the defences of the Reman outpost we're heading for." Edwards said just as White joined them.

"I thought we'd been invited there." Shry pointed out.

"We have." Carr replied, "I'll be taking an away team down by shuttle since there's a barrier against beaming in and out. But if it is a trap then we're going to need an extraction plan."

"Insertion pods?" Heart said, looking at Shry and the Andorian nodded. The *Nightfall* carried a quantity of single person insertion pods, compact craft just large enough to hold a single soldier and his equipment that could be fired out of a torpedo launcher. They were cramped and uncomfortable, but they did offer a means of getting to the surface of a planet rapidly when transporters were not an option.

"A well targeted platoon could knock out their magnetic field projector and shield generators." Shry said,

"Then they could be beamed out along with the away team."

"I doubt that my squadron will much use against the outpost while its shields are up but we could provide cover for the *Nightfall* and the pods." White added, "That place could have a lot of torpedoes at its disposal. Better to shoot them down before they hit rather than rely on our own shields to absorb the blast."

"Good." Edwards said with a smile and he nodded, "Go over all the information we've got and work together to bring me a full operation plan. I don't like the idea of having Lieutenant Commander Carr and her people in such an exposed position."

"Don't worry captain." Carr replied, "I know you only ask me to expose myself when it's necessary." and then she noticed the smirks on the faces of Heart, Shry and White, "Oh I didn't mean it like that." she exclaimed.

"Of course commander. We all know that." Shry said, still smiling and Carr scowled at him.

"Captain if you don't mind I think I ought to return to my quarters now." she said to Edwards, "I'll be there when you want me for anything." and Edwards winced when he saw the smiles on the faces of the other officers become wider.

As promised the *Glorious Slayer* escorted the *USS Nightfall* through Klingon space, running with its cloaking device deactivated. This lasted until the two ships reached the edge of Romulan space and the *Glorious Slayer* peeled away, fading to nothing as its cloaking device was activated.

"Transmission coming in from the *Glorious Slayer* captain." West announced as the *Bird of Prey* was disappearing from view and without waiting to be told she activated the ship to ship communications.

"Qapla!" Kurvok's voice announced, wishing the crew of the *Nightfall* success in their mission.

"Send Captain Kurvok our thanks lieutenant. Then see if the Remans want to talk." Edwards said. Then he glanced at T'Lan, "Lieutenant Commander I want a scan of the outpost. Pass the information to Lieutenant Commander White and our ground troops as well. They'll need it for our contingency plan."

"Shall I prepare our away team captain?" Carr asked from beside him and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, I think so." he replied.

"T'Lan, when your done with the scan join me in the hangar." Carr said as she got to her feet, "Cole you and Naya are with me as well." then she tapped her combadge, "Dr King, report to the hangar. We're heading down to the outpost."

"Understood. I'm on my way." King's voice responded.

"Me?" Naya said from the seat on the opposite side of Edwards to Carr, "Do you really think it's wise sending me down there?"

"There is a degree of logic in having an expert on Reman behaviour as part of our team." T'Lan pointed out.

"Well in my expert opinion the Remans will take one look at me and insist that they get to skin me alive as part of any deal." Naya said.

"What if they don't realise you're a Romulan?" Edwards suggested, "I'm sure we can rustle up a Starfleet uniform and you can present yourself as a Vulcan."

"Just remember not to show any emotion." Hamilton added and Naya grinned.

"I'll go get changed." she said as she jumped out of her seat.

"Captain I have the Reman commander for you now." West said.

"Visual or audio only?" Edwards asked.

"Visual sir."

"Then wait until Naya's out of sight and put him through." Edwards said and as soon as Naya stepped into the turbolift West activated the main view screen to provide a picture of the Reman commander.

The Reman was shown in what looked like a command centre, standing in a central location while other Remans sat at lowered control stations around him where the commander could look down on them. To humans the Reman appearance was akin to something out of a horror story and Edwards found himself feeling somewhat uneasy at the sight of the pale and hairless, gaunt looking figure.

"Federation starship *USS Nightfall*, welcome to *Deletham Aidoann*." the Reman said, "I am Commander Protas, commanding officer of this outpost."

"We were under the impression that your post is controlled by General Rhatan." Edwards replied.

"The general rules over us yes, but this is my command." Protas replied.

"I see. Do we have permission to approach and beam down?" Edwards asked, hoping that maybe the Remans would shut down their magnetic field to permit beaming in and out.

"You cannot beam down captain. Our location requires that we maintain a defensive posture at all times. Landing is possible only by shuttlecraft."

"Very well. Can you activate a beacon for our pilot to follow?" Edwards said and Protas looked to one side and said something to one of his crew that was not translated. Then he looked back towards the camera.

"The landing beacon is activated captain. We shall expect you shortly." he said. At which point the channel was cut off and the view screen reverted back to a view of the moon on which the outpost was located.

"Not very friendly are they?" Hamilton commented.

"No they aren't." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Hamilton, I want you to go over T'Lan's scans of the outpost as well. Try to figure out the best places to target with our mass accelerators to cause the most damage.

"We'll have to catch them with their shields down for the mass accelerators to have any effect captain."

Hamilton pointed out.

"I know that Mister Hamilton, I'm just keeping our options open." Edwards told him.

"Nikki? What are you doing here?" Carr asked when she and King walked up the ramp at the rear of the shuttle to find her daughter sat in the pilot's seat.

"Err, you assigned me." Nikki replied and she held out a PADD on which the duty roster for shuttle pilots was displayed.

"Looks right to me." King commented. Then looking at Nikki he added, "Just try not to make the ride too bumpy young lady. I didn't bring any travel sickness pills with me."

"Nikki this has you down as being under instruction." Carr said, "Lieutenant Hamilton ought to be overseeing you."

"Well I suppose I'll just have to settle for you then won't I mom?" Nikki said.

"Fine, you can pilot us down." Carr said as she sat down beside her daughter just before Cole and T'Lan arrived.

"What's Nikki doing here?" Cole asked.

"She's flying the shuttle." Carr answered, "If she knows what's good for her she'll do a good job of it as well. Where's Naya?"

"Here I am." Naya responded as she hurried aboard the shuttle wearing the uniform of a Starfleet science

division officer, "So how do I look?" she asked and the Starfleet officers in the shuttle with her looked her up and down.

"That uniform fits well." Nikki commented, "How did you manage to get the size right so quickly?"

"Quickly? Oh I didn't just replicate this." Nayaal said, "I already had it."

"What use do you have for a Starfleet uniform sub-lieutenant?" T'Lan said, "Impersonating a Starfleet officer is a serious offence."

"Only in public." Nayaal said, "Sometimes I dress up like this when Bradley and I—"

"Too much information!" Carr snapped.

"Better than the duck covered onesie." King muttered.

Then Carr noticed the uniform's collar and frowned when she saw three small gold pins that marked Nayaal out as a full commander, outranking three of the genuine Starfleet officers in the shuttle and being equal to Doctor King who technically outranked Carr.

"Oh hell no." she said.

"What?" Nayaal asked innocently.

"No way are you being a full commander." Carr told her, "Get rid of one of those pins. You're a lieutenant."

"If you insist." Nayaal said, reaching for her collar to remove one of the pins.

"Okay if everyone's ready, let's get going." Nikki said, closing the ramp at the rear of the shuttle. Then she activated the communication system, "Shuttle *Halo* to bridge, requesting permission to launch." she said.

"Bridge to shuttle *Halo*, you are cleared for launch." West responded and Nikki smiled as she powered up the shuttle's thrusters. The compact vessel rocked as it lifted off the deck and Cole and King exchanged nervous looks. Then the shuttle accelerated rapidly through the hangar's forward launch door into space.

"Shuttle *Halo*, clear of the hangar." Nikki signalled as she steered towards the moon ahead.

"Nikki, when Bradley taught you to fly this thing did he get as far as keeping it steady?" Cole asked.

"Err, actually he spent most of his time teaching me to fly a starship. He said they're easier to fly because the computer is more forgiving of mistakes." Nikki explained.

"Typical." Carr said, "I think Mister Hamilton and I need to have a few words about his training methods when we get back."

"I've got the beacon." Nikki said when she acquired the Reman guidance signal on the shuttle's sensors and the shuttle rocked as she steered towards it. Loaded to capacity, the shuttle's passengers were somewhat tightly packed and each time Nikki carried out a manoeuvre they were thrown against one another.

"I just hope the landing's smoother than the ride." King commented.

"Well we're about to find out." Nayaal responded as the towers of the outpost grew larger through the forward viewport.

The beacon established by the Remans guided Nikki to an underground hangar located at the base of one of the outpost's larger towers. As the shuttle neared this, the hangar door folded sideways to permit the small Federation craft to enter and this revealed that the hangar's primary purpose was to store numerous Scorpion-class attack fighters.

"I hope they don't decide to use those things on us." Carr said as she tried to count them, "I doubt Snowman's squadron could handle that many." she continued, using White's call sign of Snowman instead of his name.

"Powering down." Nikki said as she decelerated the shuttle rapidly so that it passed through the forcefield that contained the hangar's atmosphere within it when the outer doors were open at a slow pace. She then brought the shuttle to a complete halt before setting it down on the hangar deck and hovered in place for a few seconds before bringing it down to land with a sudden lurch.

"Well, any landing you can walk away from is a good one." she said.

"I beg to differ." King replied as he got to his feet.

Outside the shuttle three Remans waited for the Starfleet away team and Cole noticed that one of them was armed with a disruptor. Of course Nikki was the only member of the away team not to be armed so he was not overly concerned about this but it did give him a clue as to which of the Remans should be considered the most dangerous. Both the armed Reman and one of the unarmed ones were dressed all in black while the third instead wore a long white coat that gave him the appearance of a scientist.

"You are Commander Carr?" the unarmed Reman in black asked, looking at King.

"No. I'm Doctor King, the *USS Nightfall's* chief medical officer." he replied.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Carr." Carr said as she emerged from the shuttle, "First officer of the *Nightfall*. Lieutenant Commander Cole is our chief of security, Lieutenant Commander T'Lan is chief science officer and this is—" and then she stopped as she pointed at Nayaal, suddenly realising that the Remans may recognise her name as Romulan.

"Lieutenant Talvot." Nayaal said, doing her best to avoid any hint of emotion in her voice.

"The lieutenant is here to assist me." T'Lan added.

"I am Commander Protas," the unarmed Reman in black told Carr, "and this is Centurion Darhkan my chief of security and Doctor K'ren."

"I believe you have a prisoner for us to see." Cole said.

"We did." Darhkan replied, "But he attacked a guard and we were forced to eliminate him."

"We still have the body though." K'ren commented, "It is largely intact."

"In that case I'd like to start there." King said, "The only bodies I've been able to examine have all been badly damaged."

"The doctor makes a valid point." T'Lan added, looking at Carr, "Perhaps I should accompany him while Lieutenant Talvot accompanies you commander."

"No, I think the lieutenant should stay with you." Carr replied, "Lieutenant Commander Cole and I can provide the commander with the information we've gathered so far."

"Agreed." Protas said, "Doctor K'ren will take your scientists to our medical facility to examine the enemy agent while we discuss the knowledge that we have both gained."

"Commander." K'ren responded, bowing his head to his superior. Then he looked at the trio of visitors in Starfleet science division uniforms, "Follow me." he told them before turning to leave.

"And we can discuss other matters in my office." Protas added.

"I'll just wait here shall I?" Nikki asked from the shuttle and Carr smiled.

"Yes and don't touch anything in this hangar while we're gone. If you break it you could accidentally start a war." she replied.



"This is wrong." Max said, looking at the large display that White, Heart and Shry were using to plot a hypothetical attack on the Reman outpost.

"What is?" White asked.

"The positions given for the Reman defences. They are inaccurate." Max answered.

"They look good to me." Shry said.

"Yeah, the Klingons made the original scans and our own recently promoted pointy eared pixie confirmed them." Heart added.

"She confirmed the existence of the torpedo launchers but not their operational status." Max pointed out, "Observe this battery here." and he pointed to where the large image created from the *Nightfall's* orbital scans indicated the presence of a plasma torpedo launcher. The launcher consisted of a set of launch doors in the moon's surface, each door concealing a single launch tube. In theory the launcher could be used to fire single torpedoes or fire every tube simultaneously to overwhelm a target with their sheer number while the tubes were reloaded from below ground, "Now observe the thermal readings from that battery." Max added and he used his cybernetic implants to establish a remote connection to the screen and switch to a thermal scan of the area around the launcher.

"It's cold." Shry said when he saw the temperature of the launcher barely differed from the surrounding terrain.

"Plasma torpedoes would be warming the tubes from the inside if they were loaded." White said.

"Precisely." Max replied, "Prior to the destruction of Romulus this outpost was a keystone in the Romulan defences against Klingon invasion and so it was heavily fortified. However, when the Civil War began the primary threat to the Reman faction that controls this moon instead became their rival factions. None of which possess territory that borders this system."

"So they stripped out the torpedoes to arm their ships with." Heart said.

"That would be my conclusion, yes." Max said.

"Well this makes my job easier." White said, "If the *Nightfall's* not in danger from torpedoes then my squadron can concentrate on suppressing the outpost's other defences as soon as the shield is taken down."

"I think we should look at having more of a presence on the surface to begin with as well." Heart said,

"Insertion pods are all very well fer getting people down quickly but they do limit the amount of weaponry that can be carried."

"What were you thinking of captain?" Max asked.

"Oh just a squad or two equipped with spatial charges." Heart said and Shry nodded.

"You're thinking that they could penetrate the shield at ground level and use the charges to knock out the emitters?" he said.

"Yeah, a small force will probably only be able to do so much damage and we'll never hold off the thousands of Reman troops that are inside that outpost for long but it'll make deploying the rest of our troops easier if we can just disrupt the shields in one sector of the outpost." Heart responded.

"They'll be able to drop right inside the perimeter to deal with the rest of the shield and the magnetic barrier." Shry said.

"Problem is how do we get this advanced force to the surface?" White asked, "We can't beam them down and the Remans will notice a ship."

"Not necessarily lieutenant commander." Max said.

"You've found a gap in their defences?" Heart commented, staring at Max and smiling.

"No. The Romulans spent many decades ensuring that there are no blind spots in their sensors. As long as they can see the *Nightfall* they will detect any launch we make. Or at least they can at present. However, should we create a subspace disturbance strong enough then we could use it to mask the warp signature of a small vessel travelling to the surface of the moon."

"Our assault gunships don't have warp drives though." Heart reminded Max, "Impulse power only."

"Quite and a ship running on impulse power would still be spotted. However, I see no reason why a team of MACOs or Imperial Guard could not be deployed using a runabout."

"That means using a Starfleet pilot." Heart said, wincing.

"I am sorry. I see no other way of achieving your aim captain." Max said.

"How will you achieve the necessary subspace disturbance though?" White said, "Surely you'd need the *Nightfall's* own warp drive to be running to manage that?"

"Correct. All four warp cores will have to be operating at full power and directing their output towards the outpost in order to blind its sensors. Our own sensors will be disrupted as well but we will still be able to rely on our lidar system for close range detection." Max explained.

"And does your plan go as far as explaining to the Remans why we're actively jamming their sensors?" Shry asked.

"No. Unfortunately it does not." Max replied.

The body of a mundane looking Romulan man lay out on a slab. However, it was clear that the body had already been closely examined from the numerous lines of crude surgical sutures that could be seen on the torso and head.

"I see you've already cracked this guy open." King said to K'ren while he inspected one of the lines of sutures.

"Yes, as soon as he was killed I performed a full autopsy." the Reman answered.

"An autopsy that included removing all of his limbs and reattaching them?" T'Lan said, noticing how where each of the dead Romulan's limbs met his body there was a ring of sutures running around it.

"These intruders have demonstrated superior strength and resilience. I was hoping to determine the reason for this." K'ren said.

"You found the synthetic flesh they use then?" King said, glancing up at the Reman.

"Yes. It was present in every limb as well as intertwined around the spinal column. This in turn led me to a mass inside the skull that did not show up on my initial scans."

"No it wouldn't." King said, "It just shows up as ordinary tissue unless you can physically probe it. That's what makes them so damned difficult to spot unless they get injured or do something they shouldn't be able to. Like vanish into thin air." then he stood up, "I take it that you recorded the autopsy?"

"Of course. Commander Protas insisted on it."

"Good. Then I'd like to see it." King said. Then he looked at T'Lan, "Lieutenant commander, would you mind staying here and examining the samples of the synthetic flesh that Doctor K'ren took? I want to know if there are any differences between them and the ones we've taken aboard the *Nightfall*."

"Certainly doctor." T'Lan replied.

"Feel free to make use of any of my equipment." K'ren added.

"Your sick bay seems very well stocked for such a remote outpost." Nayal said, noticing the large variety of medical devices in the sick bay.

"This is a research facility. The instruments are here to be used for that research." K'ren told her.

"And what exactly is the research being carried out here doctor?" Nayal asked and the Romulan hesitated before answering.

"Fertility enhancement." he said eventually, "Only a relatively small number of female Remans remain. Our research is to try and increase their capacity bear children by increasing the chances of conception and promoting multiple births."

King snorted.

"Sounds like pretty standard IVF treatment to me." he said.

"Perhaps so." Nayal said, "But such research was not a priority of the Romulan government." then she suddenly realised that what she had just said indicated knowledge of Romulan society, "Or at least that is according to the reports I have seen." she added quickly, looking at K'ren.

"Lieutenant Talvot is correct." the Reman confirmed, "The Romulan government saw much medical research that is taken for-granted by the Federation as a waste of resources."

"Never mind that now." King said, "Show me the recordings of this autopsy." and then he followed K'ren out of the room.

"You must be more careful when speaking in front of the Remans." T'Lan said to Nayal as soon as K'ren was gone, "Your slip could have revealed your true nature."

"Oh don't panic cousin." Nayal said, "I handled it just fine. Just like I thought up a name that wouldn't mark me out as Romulan in the hangar."

"Do not call me cousin. Also it means 'germ'." T'Lan commented.

"What?"

"Talvot means germ in the Vulcan language." T'Lan told Nayal and the Romulan's face fell, "No Vulcan would react like that." T'Lan pointed out.

Carr and Cole were shown into what had once been the office of the outpost's Romulan commander but had been taken over by Protas when the Reman garrison revolted against their Romulan masters and both Starfleet officers proceeded to sit down.

"Can I offer either of you a beverage?" Protas asked, "We still have a stock of kali-fal left over from when we drove out the Romulans."

"No thank you." Carr replied, remembering the times she had drunk Romulan ale and become rapidly intoxicated.

"I wouldn't mind." Cole added and Protas placed a bottle of the blue liquid and a metal cup in front of the *Nightfall*'s second officer. Then placed a second cup in front of his own seat

"Perhaps some fruit juice?" Protas asked Carr.

"Go on then." she said, not wanting to appear rude and he handed her another cup and a different bottle of a more purplish liquid.

The Reman then sat down and poured himself a drink of ale after Cole had put the bottle back down.

"To business then." he said, "We both have information that can be of use to the other. We have managed by chance something that the Federation has failed to do despite around three years of effort, but you have much deeper knowledge of the enemy we face. General Rhatan is willing to acknowledge that the sum total of information in your possession is more valuable than our ability to prevent the enemy from escaping and as such we will also agree to enter into Federation-sponsored peace talks in good faith in exchange for all of the information you have."

"That is acceptable to the Federation." Carr responded before taking a small sip of the fruit juice Protas had given her and smiling when she found it quite pleasant, "Mmmm. That tastes good." she commented.

"Feel free to keep the bottle. We grow the fruit in our airponics facility in the caverns beneath the outpost." Protas said and Carr smiled again.

"You know I never thought I'd be talking about fruit juice with a Reman." she said.

"My people have a reputation as soldiers and remorseless killers." Protas said, "But remember that the Romulans used us a general slave labour. Who do you think grew the crops that they turned into these drinks?"

"Of course. I'm sorry." Carr said.

"There is no need to apologise lieutenant commander. We are all here to learn after all." Protas said.

"Speaking of which, here is everything we have on the Iconians." Cole said and he slid his PADD across the desk.

"Iconians?" Protas commented as he picked up the PADD and looked at it, "I thought that they were extinct as a civilisation."

"Apparently some of them escaped to somewhere." Carr replied, "When the Civil War began the Romulans closest to Iconia attempted to make it a base of operations and attracted their attention though. Now they seem bent on stirring up trouble everywhere."

"Once again the Romulans make life difficult for the rest of us. Before we realised the extent of our own losses in the disaster, many Remans celebrated the destruction of Romulus." Protas said.

"The Iconians have developed their gateway technology to the point where each of their agents can effectively carry a version of it inside their own body. That's what allows them to penetrate our defences and escape so easily." Cole explained.

"The agent we captured was a Romulan with their devices implanted in his own body." Protas said and Carr nodded.

"The Iconians appear able to reanimate dead flesh, merging it with their synthetic creation." she said, "That allows them to replace people in key positions they want to infiltrate."

"The problem for them is that the dead flesh of their host can be detected as well." Cole added and he pointed at the PADD, "There are notes on there about that as well. Plus details of how we were able to replicate the Iconians' synthetic flesh."

"Interesting." Protas said as he set down the PADD and then he picked up a similar Romulan device, "I took the liberty of placing details of how we were able to capture one of these Iconian agents on this.

Unfortunately it is not very detailed. We did not plan on being able to block his escape, it was simply good luck that it occurred."

Sat in his chair in the centre of the *Nightfall's* bridge, Edwards studied the proposal from his officers for the deployment of additional forces to the moon's surface.

"This is risky," he said, looking up from the PADD, "If the Remans find you down there then they may decide to call off our agreement and retaliate against our people in the outpost."

"Captain, it was your idea to be able to deploy extra forces." Max pointed out.

"Yes lieutenant, I am aware of that. But I hadn't had it in mind that we would effectively be striking first.

Especially now that we know the outpost's defences aren't all they're cracked up to be."

"We also don't know how to get the Remans to ignore our jamming." White said.

"Frankly captain, the poor state of the outpost defences make having boots on the ice even more important." Shry said, "The Remans don't know that we know about the defences but they'll know how the balance of firepower looks to be with us and if they are going to try anything then their best first move would be to take our away team hostage."

"We'll have to produce some erratic subspace emissions before launching the runabout." Edwards said, nodding in agreement with Shry's assessment and he looked at Max, "Can you vary the power output of our warp cores randomly to produce a fluctuating subspace signal?"

"Yes captain." Max replied.

"Good. Do it. I want the Remans to think that there's something wrong with our warp drive. Then I'll contact them to explain that we're having trouble and need to ramp up the power for a few seconds to reset our system. That's when we'll launch the runabout."

"Captain there's still the problem of piloting the runabout itself." Hamilton said, looking over his shoulder.

"My pilots are used to flying ships that need careful handling." White responded.

"Maybe so Snowman." Hamilton said, "But you're carrying out impulse turns and rapid warp acceleration and deceleration. This needs the runabout to be steered using the warp drive as well as propelled."

"Faster than light, no left or right." West commented, repeating the phrase often repeated at Starfleet Academy to cadets when being taught about the forces that a ship moving at warp could be subjected to when attempting to change its course. These could be so powerful that they would tear starships apart.

"Exactly." Hamilton said, "The runabout needs to be flown at a sub-warp velocity using the warp drive. I can do that."

"Very well." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Hamilton will pilot the runabout and take a squad of MACOs down to the surface. Captain Shry will equip a reserve force to be deployed by insertion pod and Lieutenant Commander White will have his squadron ready to launch and provide cover and Max will provide us with an excuse to generate the subspace pulse we'll need to cover the runabout. Now get to work."

When King returned to the mortuary he was alone.

"What happened to Doctor K'ren?" Noyal asked.

"He was called away on some emergency." King replied, "I said I wanted to head back here to see what you'd found."

"I believe that this individual was killed by means of a sharp implement inserted into the back of his head just below the skull and directed upwards." T'Lan told him.

"She means re-killed. Don't you cousin?" Noyal said, "After all he was dead before the Iconians made him one of their agents."

"That is one way of putting it Lieutenant Germ." T'Lan responded and Noyal scowled.

"Germ?" King commented.

"It is how talvot translates from Vulcan into English." T'Lan answered and King smiled.

"Are you making a joke lieutenant commander?" he asked.

"Vulcans do not joke." T'Lan said.

"Of course not. Now has this body told you anything new?" King asked.

"Perhaps." T'Lan said and she picked up a sample container that held a piece of the Iconian synthetic flesh, "This is a component that we have never been able to inspect intact before. In every corpse that you have inspected it has either burned out or been damaged by physical trauma."

"You're thinking that this could be their gateway?" King said as he took the sample from T'Lan.

"Possibly. Certain of the cells appear to have refractive properties that could be used for focusing energy." T'Lan explained and King set the sample jar down before taking out his tricorder, "My scans have not been able to identify the material commander. As with other examples of the synthetic flesh it does not register properly on a tricorder scan."

"I'm not scanning the sample T'Lan," King said, "I'm scanning the room."

"Do you think that there are more samples we don't know about?" Nayal asked, looking around.

"No. But there could have been listening devices monitoring us." King answered as he put his tricorder away again.

"You suspect something is wrong?" T'Lan said and King nodded.

"Haven't either of you noticed anything about this place?" he said and T'Lan and Nayal looked at one another.

"No. Should we?" Nayal said.

"K'ren said that this place was researching fertility treatments." King said, "But how many pregnant Remans have you seen around? In fact have either of you seen even a single female Reman here at all? Now unless they're trying to figure out a way of reproducing without females that strikes me as odd."

"You think that the Remans are hiding something?" T'Lan said.

"Of course they are. They're Remans." Nayal responded, "They're dishonest and treacherous."

"Look who's talking." King muttered.

"If the Remans are trying to conceal the true purpose of this facility then it is safe to assume that it's nature is something that the Federation would object to." T'Lan said.

"And that means we need to find out what that is. Because if they're lying about what they're doing here then they're probably lying about joining peace talks as well." King said.

"You're about to suggest that we try and find out exactly what is going around here aren't you?" Nayal said.

"Actually I was going to suggest that the pair of you try and figure it out. Take a wander around and see what you can find. T'Lan rig your tricorder to keep running broad spectrum passive scans." King told the two women.

"And what exactly do we do if we get spotted by the Remans?" Nayal asked.

"Just tell them you got lost looking for the hangar so you can retrieve something from the shuttle." King said, "Oh that reminds me." he tapped his combadge, "Doctor King to Nikki, do you read me?"

"Right here doctor." Nikki's voice responded, "Not that there's really anywhere to go."

"What's your status?" King asked.

"Bored. Why?"

"Because I'm not convinced that we're being told the truth about what use this outpost is being put to. I want you to seal yourself inside the shuttle and be ready to raise its shields. Do you know how to do that?"

"Sure. Bradley showed me how to operate the shield controls, just not the phasers. Oh, should I get a phaser from the locker?"

"No, absolutely not. You're not trained to use one." King said.

"Captain Heart taught me to shoot one of the MACOs' rifles and the phaser attachment." Nikki pointed out.

"Young lady, taking a few pot shots at rocks in the desert is a lot different from knowing the correct time to use a phaser. Now seal the shuttle and stay away from the weapons locker. King out." King told her, tapping the combadge again to shut the device off, "Well?" he said to T'Lan and Nayal, "What are you waiting for?"

"So the Iconian wasn't in the outpost itself?" Carr commented as Protas told her and Cole about how his men had managed to capture the intruder disguised as a Romulan.

"No. There exists a deep network of caverns beneath us and it was there that he was discovered. The first guards to find him gave chase and we eventually cornered him."

"Your report mentioned some equipment." Carr said, leaning towards Cole and looking at the Romulan made PADD he held as Cole scrolled to the point she was thinking of.

"Yes, a lot of the outpost's key systems are built primarily underground for additional protection. The Iconian was eventually cornered close to the particle focusing unit of one of our primary sensor arrays."

"You patrol these caverns then?" Cole said, "What's down there that needs guarding?"

"A precaution only." Protas replied, "Given how often we have been targeted by these Iconian spies Centurion Darhkan felt it prudent to extend our security down there. Though aside from the foundations of the outpost and its systems there is nothing of note in them."

Just then the door to Protas's office opened and another Reman entered, then walked across the room to stand beside the Reman commander and leant down to whisper in his ear.

"Really?" Protas commented.

"Something wrong commander?" Carr said.

"Perhaps." Protas replied, "Though not with my outpost. It seems that the warp field around your vessel is becoming unstable."

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

"Neither do I." Carr replied and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*."

"*Nightfall* here commander." West's voice replied.

"Lieutenant the Remans have picked up something wrong with the ship's warp field. What's going on up there?"

"Commander Carr, it's Edwards." the captain's voice then said, "Max says we may have pushed the drives a

bit too hard getting here and the cores are out of synch. He's trying to balance them again."

"Is it serious?" Carr asked. What Edwards had told her made no sense. The *Nightfall* was easily capable of outpacing the Klingon ship that had escorted it through their space, while the nanites that swarmed through the vessel monitored its systems continuously as well as making minor adjustments to prevent them from becoming unstable. Plus there was the simple point that the captain's statement about the *Nightfall's* four independent warp cores becoming unsynchronised was blatantly false. The cores were designed to be genuinely independent and so damage to one could not affect the others. In fact the *Nightfall* was quite capable of operating with just a single functional warp core, though its maximum speed under such circumstances would be severely limited. That meant that Edwards had to be up to something and making the Remans believe that the *Nightfall* was experiencing difficulties was key to that.

"Not really." Edwards said, "Though we won't be able to go to warp until we can get it fixed."

"Your vessel is welcome to remain in orbit for as long as is needed." Protas said, his voice being picked up by Carr's combadge.

"Thanks." Edwards said, "Hopefully that won't be necessary though. *Nightfall* out."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Edwards smiled.

"Well that's our cover story planted. Now we'll give it a few minutes and then emit the subspace pulse to cover the runabout's launch." he said.

T'Lan and Nayal tried to look casual as they wandered the corridors of the outpost.

"Does it strike you odd that we've hardly seen anybody while we've been here cousin?" Nayal said when she watched a single Reman pass out of sight in the otherwise deserted corridor.

"Please refrain from calling me cousin." T'Lan replied, "But in answer to your question yes, given the information available to us I would have expected to see far more Remans than we have done."

"Well hopefully it's a good sign." Nayal said. Then she frowned, "Though frankly right now I'd just like to know where the bathrooms are."

"That is strange." T'Lan said suddenly and she came to a halt at the top of a flight of stairs.

"What, that I need to pee? Don't Vulcans go to the bathroom, or does logic not permit it?" Nayal said.

"Vulcans produce bodily waste just as other humanoid species do. Though we do not generally boast about it." T'Lan said, "But what I was referring to is the doorway at the bottom of these stairs. The level we occupy at present is on the surface of the moon. This would suggest that there is more to the outpost than visible from above ground."

"Underground is always a good place to hide something you don't want others to know about." Nayal commented.

"Then it is logical that we should investigate." T'Lan said and she started to descend the stairs.

"Okay that's long enough." Edwards said, "Lieutenant West, get me the Remans."

"Yes captain, putting you through now." West said as she established a connection to the Reman outpost.

"*Deletham Aidoann* this is the *USS Nightfall*." Edwards said.

"Go ahead *Nightfall*." a Reman responded.

"*Deletham Aidoann* we need to purge our system of polluted antimatter to restore the reaction balance in our warp cores. This will cause a large subspace surge that may overload your sensors temporarily. My chief engineer assures me that the disruption will not last more than about thirty seconds." Edwards told the Reman and then he waited for the reply.

At first there was just silence and West stared at Edwards.

Do you think they're buying it captain?" she asked.

"I hope so. Because if they don't then we're back to square one." he answered.

"Attention *Nightfall*," the Reman voice said suddenly, "you are cleared to proceed. *Deletham Aidoann* out."

"Bridge to engineering." Edwards said as the connection to the outpost was terminated, "You are clear to proceed. Inform Lieutenant Hamilton when you are ready."

"Understood captain. Charging the main deflector now." Max replied and in engineering the Borg began transferring power directly from all four of the *Nightfall's* warp cores to the ship's main deflector dish. Then he activated the intercom to connect him to the hangar where Hamilton, Heart and a squad of MACOs were waiting inside the runabout *Thames* with as much equipment as they could carry, "Max to *Thames*, stand by for launch."

"*Thames* here Max, standing by." Hamilton responded. Hamilton had been ready for this and so the runabout was already fully prepared for launch and all he had to do was power up its thrusters to take the compact craft out of the hangar before engaging its warp drive. Unusually the runabout was positioned at the rear of the hangar, just inside the two smaller doors used for approaching craft to land rather than the large launch door at the front of the ship. Using the large door would mean that the runabout would emerge in plain sight of anyone looking out of a window in the outpost below while exiting the hangar through the rear doors

meant that the nightfall's two secondary hulls would offer cover from observation until the runabout went to warp.

"Discharging deflector in five." Max announced, "Four. Three. Two." and Hamilton's hand moved to the thruster control, lifting the runabout off the hangar deck to hover in mid air, "One. Mark."

As soon as Max said the word 'mark' he activated the *Nightfall's* main deflector dish, using the powerful energy emitter to produce a massive subspace wave that temporarily blocked out all of the subspace based sensors not only on the *Nightfall* itself, but also on the Reman outpost on the surface of the moon hundreds of kilometres below.

At the same time Hamilton fired the runabout's thrusters to propel the ship out of one of the rear hangar doors.

"We have clearance Clarence." he said.

Then before the Thames could reach the very rear of the *Nightfall* he engaged the craft's warp drive. However, he kept the power to the drive as low as he could and although the runabout accelerated rapidly it did not reach the speed of light, instead remaining at a speed that could be matched by most modern starships operating on impulse power alone. This allowed him to react quickly enough to turn the runabout towards the moon, using its curvature to conceal it from visual detection while the outpost's subspace sensors were blinded. The runabout's warp drive was not intended to be used in this fashion and the vessel shook beyond the ability of its inertial dampers to compensate for as the engines strained to try and go faster, but Hamilton made sure that the power available to them remained low enough for the runabout's speed to be kept manageable.

"I've got our vector Victor." Hamilton said to himself.

Fortunately the moon on which the Reman outpost was built lacked an atmosphere and that meant that there was no easily detectable thermal trail created as the runabout descended from space. However, once Hamilton was satisfied with the runabout's trajectory he cut the power to the warp drive entirely, allowing the vessel to continue in a ballistic path until it was just a few hundred metres above the moon's surface, just over the horizon and out of sight of the outpost.

"Here we go." Hamilton announced, "Firing thrusters." and the runabout lurched again as the thrusters fired to slow the ship's descent, "Hold on. This is going to be bumpy." he added

"Bumpy? Are we going to-" Heart began before the Thames struck the surface of the moon while still moving forwards.

The cockpit was filled with alarms as the runabout bounced across the surface of the moon, still decelerating as Hamilton fired its forward thrusters and behind him he heard some of the MACOs cursing. Then the runabout came to an abrupt halt and most of the alarms were silenced.

"Check status." Hamilton said, "Is anyone hurt? Is the hull breached? No? Good. In that case thank you for flying Hamilton aerospace, the captain has turned off the seatbelt sign and you may now move about the cabin."

Heart looked at him from the seat beside his and snarled.

"You better believe I'm leaving you a one star review online for that flight." he said and Hamilton smiled.

"Yeah, I get that a lot." he said.

"Okay, so where are we in relation to the outpost?" Heart asked.

"About eight kilometres." Hamilton answered, "That's as close as I could get us without risking them being able to detect us."

"That's about a four hour walk in these conditions." Heart said and he turned his chair to face the other MACOs in the cockpit, "Okay men, grab your gear and suit up. We're going for a stroll." then he looked back at Hamilton, "What about you?" he asked.

"I'll come with you." Hamilton replied, "Nayal's over there and she may be big on us not being a couple but that doesn't mean I'm going to risk abandoning her."

"Then you can suit up and grab a phaser as well." Heart told him, "I hope you're in good shape because if you're too slow then you're getting left behind."

## 7.

Carr, Cole and Protas had been joined by a Reman that Protas identified as Sollir, the outpost's chief engineer and they gathered around a large wall mounted monitor as the two Starfleet officers went over some of the technical information the crew of the *Nightfall* had obtained regarding the Iconians.

"We found this when the Iconians tried a frontal assault on our star bases along the Neutral Zone." Cole explained, "Their ships appear to use a drive system derived from their gateway technology, theoretically making it incredibly fast. Their assault failed because they tried to use a computer virus to disable our ships and leave the bases defenceless. But when we were able to fix the damage they were spread too thin and retreated before they could lose any ships."

"But the sensor readings we managed to get as they pulled out gave us something to hunt for." Carr added, "Now we can spot signs of them using their gateways to try and infiltrate our facilities."

"This signal trace here?" Sollir asked and the Reman engineer pointed to one of the numbers in the set of diagrams and tables shown on the display.

"That's the one." Carr answered, "Our own engineer could probably explain all this better, but-" and then she trailed off.

"But what lieutenant commander?" Protas asked.

"Let's just say that a lot of people get nervous when they meet him. There's an air about him that they find off putting." Cole said, "That's why he didn't join us on this away mission."

"It shouldn't take much to adjust our sensors to search for these disturbances commander." Sollir said, looking at Protas.

"And then we can deploy our new found jamming technology to keep them trapped." Protas added.

"I'd like to see the equipment that prevented the Iconian from escaping." Cole said, "Your report indicates that it was underground. Perhaps there was some environmental factor as well that we need to tack into account."

"That is not my decision." Protas said and Carr and Cole exchanged glances, "We do have our military secrets after all," he went on, "and I'm sure that you do not share all of you technology with your Klingon or Gorn allies."

"Then perhaps you could find out from someone who can give us permission." Carr said.

"I will contact General Rhatan. In the mean time Sollir will see to the modification of our sensors. You may wait here and I will have whatever refreshment you wish brought to you." Protas replied.

"That would be nice, thank you." Carr said, "We could do with contacting our ship."

King had taken thin slice of tissue from the strange growth that was suspected to be key to the Iconians' use of their gateway technology without the need for larger static devices. Using the Reman equipment he was able to examine this closely, visually inspecting the strange crystalline pattern to the cells. Then he heard someone come into the room and he looked up, hoping to see T'Lan and Nayal returning with news. But instead it was K'ren.

"This sample is remarkable." King said as K'ren stopped and looked around.

"Where are the Vulcans?" he asked.

"Oh I sent T'Lan and the lieutenant back to the shuttle for some instruments I left there. I thought you might be them getting back." King answered.

"How long have they been gone?" K'ren said.

"Oh I don't know. But I was starting to think that they'd got lost or something."

"Wait here. I must see if they can be found. They should not be wandering the outpost alone." K'ren said and he turned around and hurried back out of the room. King watched him leave and then tapped his combadge.

"T'Lan can you read me?" he signalled.

"I can doctor." T'Lan replied.

"Have you found anything yet?"

"Not yet doctor. Though we have observed a marked lack of personnel for an outpost that was supposed to have a garrison of thousands of troops. We are currently exploring the network of tunnels located beneath the outpost." T'Lan told him.

"Tunnels huh? I'm not sure I like the sound of that." King said, "But you may have a problem. K'ren came back and saw you weren't here. I told him that you'd gone to fetch something from the shuttle and that maybe you'd got lost. Now he's gone to find you. He may call in help and I doubt that you'll be able to explain why you headed down into any tunnels while looking for the way back to the hangar."

"Understood doctor. We will take all necessary precautions to remain out of sight." T'Lan replied.

"Be sure that you do lieutenant commander. King out."



Protas was in the outpost's command centre after sending Carr's request to his superiors when K'ren walked in.

"What do you want doctor? Why are you not in the medical facility to watch our guests?" he asked.

"I was called away. An accident in the lower levels while I was showing their doctor the records of my examination of the spy. He returned to the medical facility but when I got there the two Vulcan women were gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" Protas demanded.

"I do not know commander. Their doctor claimed that he had sent them to retrieve equipment from their shuttle but I do not know whether to believe him. I walked all the way to the hangar and saw no-one."

Protas snarled and then tapped his combadge.

"Centurion Darhkan." he said.

"Yes commander?"

"The two Vulcan women are missing. Find them before they can discover too much." Protas ordered.

"Yes commander. But what if they have found their way down into the tunnels?" Darhkan asked.

"That depends on whether they have seen what is going on down there. If they haven't then they can be removed and returned to the medical facility where they should be."

"And if they have commander?"

"Then they cannot be allowed to leave the tunnels to tell anyone." Protas said.

"I have permission to kill them?"

"If that is what you wish. But they are Vulcan. You may keep them for yourself if you wish." Protas replied.

"What are you looking at cousin?" Nayal asked when T'Lan stopped to examine the walls of the tunnel network yet again, "It's rock. Everything down here is rock."

"I was attempted to determine what made these tunnels." T'Lan answered, "This moon does not appear to have had any volcanic activity in its history so it cannot be lava. It is also too cold naturally for liquid water to be present to erode the rock. Nor are there any of the markings that I would associate with the flow of any other sort of liquid."

"Can you change the subject by any chance?" Nayal said, "Talking about flowing liquids just reminds me that there aren't any bathrooms down here it seems."

"I think these are tool marks." T'Lan said, ignoring Nayal's comments and moving her hand over the surface of the rock face she was studying, "These tunnels appear to have been dug by hand. But that is illogical. Machinery could cut this tunnel far more rapidly."

"Maybe so cousin, but remember that this is or was a Romulan outpost. The Romulan government always had a ready source of free labour. They brought thousands of them here as cannon fodder just in case the Klingons attacked. This tunnel was probably dug by Reman slave labour."

T'Lan took out her tricorder and looked at it.

"My passive scans have found nothing unusual so far." she said, "I think that it is time to risk an active scan instead."

"The Remans might pick up on that cousin." Nayal pointed out, "This installation was designed to detect Klingon ships hiding behind cloaking devices. Do you really think they won't pick up on that thing when you start broadcasting everywhere."

"That may be so but if I keep the scan as brief as possible then we may remain undetected." T'Lan said and Nayal sighed.

"In that case can I at least recommend that we try and find some kind of technology down here? That way we at least have a chance that when the Remans detect you using your tricorder we'll stand a fair chance that they'll just think they're just picking up something coming from their own gear and ignore it." she suggested.

"Your reasoning is logical." T'Lan said and Nayal grinned at her and raised her hand in the Vulcan salute.

"Of course it is cousin." she said.

"We are not related." T'Lan responded before continuing to walk down the tunnel and as soon as her back was turned Nayal changed from making the traditional Vulcan salute to a human one intended as an insult to the person to whom it was directed.

"Are you free to speak?" Edwards asked when Carr contacted the Nightfall.

"Yes captain." she answered, "Protas left us to consult with General Rhatan and Cole has done a counter surveillance sweep. There are no active surveillance devices in the room. So do you mind explaining what all that business with the warp field was?"

"I've deployed a squad of MACOs to the surface. We needed to generate a subspace wave to temporarily blind the Reman sensors though. A problem with our warp drive gave us the excuse and Hamilton's brought a squad down via runabout."

"What's the reason for the extra deployment captain?" Cole asked.

"Max determined that the outpost isn't all it's cracked up to be. A lot of the weapon emplacements are empty and frankly they probably have trouble taking on the *Nightfall* and our fighters with what we've seen. Their best gambit would be to take you hostage as a defence against an orbital strike. This way we've already got our people on the ground to respond. If it comes to it they'll try and take out the outpost shields and magnetic field so we can beam you straight back to the ship. Now what can you tell me about what's going on down there?"

"It appears that the Remans' capture of an Iconian agent was accidental." Carr told Edwards, "There was some interference created by some piece of equipment that blocked the formation of the gateway. Unfortunately they weren't able to interrogate the Iconian, he resisted and they killed him. Doctor King is with T'Lan and Nayal studying the corpse now."

"What sort of equipment are we talking about?" Edwards said.

"We're not sure. But it has something to do with the outpost's sensors. We asked to be able to inspect it but it's classified. That's why Protas has gone to speak with his superiors. They'll be able to give him permission to allow us access." Carr explained.

"Mind you, Commander Protas has been quick enough to accept all of the information we've offered to them." Cole added.

"What about the Remans themselves? What's your opinion of them?"

"Frankly I'm not sure captain." Carr said, "This is my first time dealing with the species and our exposure has been limited to just a few individuals. Protas seems on the level but he could be outright lying about everything and I'd never know. Perhaps you should ask Nayal."

"Who will no doubt tell me that they aren't to be trusted." Edwards said, "Oh well, just carry on as you are but be aware that there's back up available if you need it. *Nightfall* out."

The MACO squad advanced across the surface of the moon cautiously. The uneven terrain offered many hiding places for a potential ambusher as well as for automated defence systems. The soldiers were all armed with projectile firing assault rifles, most of which mounted a phaser unit beneath the barrel but two of the squad were instead armed with grenade launchers in place of the phasers. In addition every MACO carried a bandolier of spatial charges powerful enough to blast through the armoured hull of a starship and one of them also carried a specialised piece of equipment designed to override the electronic locking mechanisms found on most airlocks. Despite his equipment being much lighter Hamilton still found that he struggled to keep up with the MACOs though part of the reason for this was his unfamiliarity with the armoured space suit he wore. The standard Starfleet space suit was coloured bright white, useful for situations where knowing exactly where other members of an EVA team were but a significant liability when attempting to approach a target on an airless grey moon stealthily. Therefore, Hamilton was wearing a camouflaged MACO space suit that included the energy and impact dissipating armoured plates that MACOs wore into battle. Unlike his space suit however, the phaser rifle he carried was the standard Starfleet pattern, as was the phaser holstered at his waist. Quite simply there was no time to properly train him with the MACO weaponry for him to adopt it for this mission.

"Wait!" he called out suddenly. The MACO space suits were currently connected by a communications network that operated by means of short range magnetic induction rather than more conventional wireless transmissions, meaning that the chance of the Remans detecting the signals was insignificant.

"What?" Heart asked, "Are we moving too fast for you?"

"It's not that." Hamilton responded as he knelt down and reached out a hand to scoop up a handful of dust from the surface, "I don't think is natural." and he held out the dust for Heart to see. In Hamilton's hand Heart saw that the dust appeared to sparkle in what light was available and he frowned.

"What's causing that?" he asked.

"I think that this is raw dilithium ore." Hamilton replied, "This mound is a spoil heap from a mining operation."

"Mining operation? Nobody said anything about mining operations." Heart replied.

"Well somebody's been mining for dilithium here though quite how recently I can't say without using a tricorder. There's no atmosphere or wind to tarnish these micro crystals so this sample could be a few days old or it could be older than the Federation. But if there is a hidden mine around here somewhere then triggering spatial charges in the wrong place could cause a collapse."

Heart sighed.

"They say no plan survives first contact with the enemy." he said, "This one hasn't even made it that far." then he looked at his men, despite not needing to be looking at them for the communication system to broadcast his words to them, "Okay men, take what the Starfleet officer has just said into account. Be careful with those spatial charges. We may not have enough rope to pull you out of an open mineshaft if you're not."



Edwards and West stepped out of the turbolift into engineering where they saw Max and headed straight for him.

"Captain. Lieutenant." the Borg said, "How may I help you?"

"I've spoken with Lieutenant Commander Carr." Edwards replied, "She says that the Remans were able to capture the Iconian agent thanks to some quirk with their sensors. I want to know if you can use that information combined with what we already know about Iconian gateway technology to determine how that was achieved."

"I've sorted out the readings we took using our sensors about theirs." West added.

"That could help." Max replied, "But it may not have been the sensor emissions themselves. It is possible that the operation of the sensors produces some other form of interference that was responsible."

"I was afraid that you'd say that." Edwards said, sighing, "Unfortunately the outpost's sensors are more than just scaled up versions of those found on their starships and the Remans consider their equipment to be classified and there are no guarantees that they'll allow us to inspect it. We need you to see if you can determine what the cause of the failure of the Iconian's gateway was. Lieutenant West can assist you."

"Very well captain, I shall endeavour to give you the answers you want. But what if I cannot determine what the cause of the interference was?" Max said.

"Then we just need to hope that the Remans will allow us to inspect their sensors." Edwards replied.

"There may be another way around that captain." Max said, "Though it does carry some risk with it."

"Go on." Edwards said.

"If we could infiltrate some of our nanite hive into the outpost then they could hunt for the equipment and analyse it covertly." Max suggested.

"How would we get them close enough?" West asked, "They can't exactly move very far outside of the *Nightfall's* systems."

"If provided with the correct medium they are quite mobile. Fortunately the correct medium for this is also the most efficient means for them to locate the equipment in question. The nanites should be introduced into the outpost sensor control systems. They can then find their way along the hard wired connection to the sensors themselves and carry out their analysis. I do not foresee the Remans being able to detect such an infiltration so the only risk comes from the possibility that the energy emissions of the sensor could disable the nanites." Max explained.

"I'm not sure about that Max." Edwards said, frowning, "I know we need the information but the only way we can do what you're suggesting is to send down another shuttle with someone inside to physically transport the nanites into the Reman command centre."

"I'll do it." West said suddenly and for a moment she thought it had been someone else, not realising that she had just volunteered herself somehow.

"Lieutenant West is a sound choice captain." Max commented, "As our operations manager she will at least be able to identify the Reman sensor controls and deploy the nanites."

Edwards paused to consider this for a few moments. Meanwhile West desperately wanted to say that she had made a mistake in volunteering but could not bring herself to get the words out.

"Very well. But we'll need to explain to the Remans why we're sending you down West." Edwards said.

"Perhaps as a liaison to oversee their efforts to configure their sensors to detect Iconian gateway activity." Max suggested.

"Sounds credible. Though having almost my entire command crew down on the surface makes me uneasy." Edwards said, "Max can you configure the nanites quickly?"

"Yes captain. It will take a few minutes at most." Max replied.

"Then do it. Now let's see whether we can get the Remans to agree." Edwards said and he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to bridge. I need to speak with Commander Protas."

"Putting you through now captain." the bridge officer replied and moments later Protas spoke.

"Captain Edwards, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"Commander how are you doing with adjusting your sensors to detect the Iconian gateways?" Edwards said.

"Our efforts are proceeding well captain. Though we have not completed the process yet."

"Would it help if I sent my operations officer down to assist you?" Edwards asked, smiling, "She is familiar with the method and can offer you advice."

"Thank you captain, that will be most useful. We will await her arrival." Protas said.

"You're welcome. She'll come down by shuttle as soon as possible. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said, tapping his combadge again to close the channel. Then he looked at West and smiled, "Well lieutenant, it's up to you now." he told her.

The *Nightfall's* hangar was a crowded place when Max arrived to deliver the nanites to West. As well as the shuttle that she was to fly down to the surface of the moon, all twelve craft of the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron were arrayed in the hangar, ready to be launched at a moment's notice.

"So these are them?" West asked as Max handed her an equipment case and she opened it to reveal the single empty-looking vial that it contained, "Doesn't look like there's anything in it Max."

"The vial contains five hundred nanites. Once inserted into the Reman systems they will replicate and spread throughout it until they locate the sensors. They will then cluster around these as they conduct a detailed analysis that they will rely back to the hive here on the *Nightfall*."

"What happens when they're finished?" West asked.

"As with any other nanite whose function has come to an end they will self destruct." Max told her.

"Not explode I hope Max. The Remans night notice that."

"No lieutenant, they will simply cease functioning in a manner that will render them permanently inert."

"Kind of sucks for them huh?"

"Much like the drone I once was they are part of the larger hive. As long as the hive survives they live on. Now you must be very careful with them lieutenant. They are vulnerable to sudden spikes of voltage or current. They should be kept away from anything likely to produce such spikes. The equipment case is shielded but you will likely have to remove the vial from it to transport the nanites to the Reman command centre. Do you understand?"

"Sure." West replied, "Assuming I can even tell what equipment down there would produce anything like that." and she closed the lid of the case. Max then stepped back to allow West to close the shuttle's hatch and watched as she piloted it out of the hangar.

West followed the same beacon that had guided Nikki to the surface and entered the same hangar where she saw the large force of Scorpion-class fighters only now there was a Starfleet shuttle in the hangar as well with its hatch sealed and seemingly lifeless. Powering down the shuttle, West got up from her chair and turned towards the rear of the craft.

All of a sudden she found herself standing over the open equipment case, uncertain of how she had got from the pilot's seat to where she was standing now and in her hands she held not only the vial of nanites that Max had given to her but also her phaser. Meanwhile Nikki was banging on the shuttle's viewport with her hand.

"Jenna! Are you okay in there?" she called out.

"Nikki?" West responded and she holstered her phaser and set down the vial before rushing to open the shuttle's hatch.

"I tried signalling but you didn't answer." Nikki said as she walked around the shuttle, "Then when I looked inside I saw you standing there with the phaser."

"I'm fine." West said, "I was just making sure everything was set."

"What are you doing here anyway?" Nikki asked.

"I've been sent to help the Remans adjust their sensors." West told her, "Why are you still here rather than with the others?"

"Mom ordered me to wait in the shuttle." Nikki said, "Which I guess I ought to get back to doing." and then she turned around and started to walk back towards the other Starfleet shuttle. Meanwhile West went back inside the shuttle to fetch the nanites and as she picked up the vial she noticed her reflection in the main flight console appearing to smile at her.

"She saw you with the phaser, she's going to tell the others. You have to kill her." the voice in West's head told her, the lips of her reflection seemingly moving in time with the words.

"You aren't real." West hissed before turning around and striding out of the shuttle.

One of the outpost's Reman crew arrived just as West was closing the hatch of her shuttle and he escorted her to the command centre. The Reman did not attempt to initiate any conversation along the way and neither did West. All she could think of was Max's warning about the destructive effects of sudden energy spikes on the nanites and wondering whether she had fired the phaser in her holster. A quick check of the charge readout would confirm this to her but there was no way to do this without drawing her weapon and dealing with the consequences of such an act.

Instead West allowed the Reman to lead her to the outpost's command centre where there were numerous other Remans at work, though Commander Protas was not among them.

"This is our primary sensor station." the Reman guide told West, directing her to one of the consoles where another Reman sat while Sollir looked over his shoulder.

"You have come to assist us with modifying our sensors?" Sollir asked and West nodded.

"I have." she replied and she casually leant on the edge of the console, hiding the fact that she had the vial in her hand and without the Remans noticing anything she opened the vial. West knew that all it would take was a few seconds for the nanites to exit the vial and enter the console but she had no firm way of knowing exactly when that would be. More importantly though, right now she had no way of knowing whether the

nanites were even still functional.

“General Rhatan is unwilling to sanction giving you access to our sensor arrays.” Protas told Carr and Cole. “Did you tell him how important it is that we know what effect your equipment had on the Iconian?” Carr asked.

“Yes, but that does not change his decision. We are willing to continue with our agreement, exchanging what information we have but you will not be permitted access to our sensor antennas. General Rhatan does however, wish to assure you that once we have determined how to replicate the jamming effect we will share this with you.”

Carr sighed.

“Perhaps we can find a way around this.” she said, “Perhaps we could discuss a joint research project.”

### 3.

"Over here cousin." Nayal said, pointing down the underground tunnel to where a Romulan designed life support unit was mounted against a cavern wall, "This produces heat and gravitational disturbance. It'll shield your scans from being identified."

Without speaking T'Lan hurried to stand beside the humming life support unit and opened her tricorder.

"Strange." she said, "There appear to be a large number of lifeforms deeper in the tunnels than we are. I am reading two main clusters."

"The Reman crew that isn't in the outpost where they should be?" Nayal suggested, "But what would cause them to head deep underground? I get that that's how they used to live back on Remus but they didn't exactly have much choice then."

"I cannot be certain." T'Lan said, "The life signs do fall within the expected parameters for Remans, but that could also apply to both Romulans and Vulcans."

"Neither of which ought to be here in large numbers cousin. In fact we should be the only ones." Nayal pointed out.

"We should investigate." T'Lan said, "The presence of so many lifeforms in one place is likely to be related to the true purpose of this facility." and then she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to Doctor King."

"King here." he replied, "T'Lan be careful, K'ren came back and was none too happy that you and Nayal had gone for a stroll. I expect there are search parties out there looking for you right now."

"We are no longer in the outpost itself doctor." T'Lan told him, "Nayal and I have discovered a tunnel network beneath it and there are large concentrations of life signs. I was calling to inform you that we intend to investigate them."

"We?" Nayal commented.

"Very good." King said, "But stay in touch. I want updates at least every quarter of an hour."

"Very well doctor. T'Lan out." T'Lan said before tapping her combadge again. Then she looked at Nayal, "Follow me." she said.

Having memorised the bearing and distance to the nearest concentration of lifeforms in the tunnels T'Lan was able to rapidly find a path towards them. But as they approached the location she and Nayal found their way blocked by a metal bulkhead with a hatch set into it.

"Well this doesn't look natural." Nayal said as she examined it.

"These symbols," T'Lan said as she looked at the bold green Romulan writing that stood out against the white of the bulkhead, "they relate to medical facilities do they not?"

"They do." Nayal answered with a nod, "Though who'd put a hospital down here?"

"We have seen the Remans' hospital." T'Lan pointed out, "What ever this is, it is something different."

"So are we going to take a look or not then cousin?" Nayal asked, staring at T'Lan and the Vulcan drew her phaser and positioned herself right beside the hatch.

"Open it." she said.

Nayal drew her phaser as well and positioned herself on the opposite side of the hatch from T'Lan. Then she reached out for the hatch control and pressed it. The hatch was not sealed and it slid open immediately. The two women waited to see if there would be a reaction from whatever lay beyond the hatch but there was none and both cautiously peered through into the chamber beyond.

"Lihursa!" Nayal exclaimed in her own language when she saw the contents of the room.

Unlike the tunnel, the interior of the chamber beyond the hatchway was wholly artificial, being made of the same painted metal as the bulkhead surrounding the hatchway. Stretching for about fifty metres ahead and to the sides, the clean white room had a clinical smell to it and was filled with row after row of biobeds and on almost every one of them lay a Romulan woman. Each of the women lay face down with their head angled to the side and wore a simple gown while being connected to the biobed by a series of tubes and wires.

"What's going on here?" Nayal said, holstering her phaser as she rushed up to the nearest of the occupied biobeds and started to roll the occupant over.

What she saw made her gasp.

She had seen the obvious scarring on the back of the woman's neck that indicated some surgical procedure had been carried out on her but Nayal did not expect to see that further surgery had been carried out on the woman's throat, a tube having been inserted as if to help her breathe but preventing her from speaking.

Worryingly to Nayal as she looked at the Romulan woman on the biobed she saw that her eyes were open and she moved them to look back at Nayal, her mouth opening and closing as she tried in vain to speak.

"What's going on here?" Nayal said, looking at T'Lan as the Vulcan followed her.

"The Remans appear to have been practising some kind of surgery on these women." T'Lan replied, noticing the same scarring on the backs of the necks of the other nearby Romulans, "Though for what purpose I

cannot say.”

“Well I can hazard a guess.” Nayal said, scowling, “They’re researching better ways of killing us.”

“Oh far from it Lieutenant Talvot, if that really is your name.” Darhkan said as he stepped through the hatchway behind them, followed by a Reman security team armed with disruptor rifles, “This place is not about death, it is about life. These Romulan females are to become the mothers of the next generation of Remans.”

The anger obvious in her expression, Nayal drew her phaser again and took aim at Darhkan but the Reman retained his composure and just stared back at her while his security team took aim at both Nayal and T’Lan and slowly began to spread out.

“What have you done to them?” Nayal yelled, “Tell me now or I turn you to ash.”

“Such an emotional outburst for a member of such a logical species.” Darhkan said, “But you’re clearly not a Vulcan at all are you? Starfleet used this opportunity to smuggle in a Romulan spy. Well is this what you were looking for?”

“I said tell me what you’ve done to them.” Nayal repeated, “I will shoot you where you stand.”

“Then it appears I have no choice.” Darhkan said and he looked around the room at the rows of motionless Romulan women, “You see the problem we Remans have been having in replacing our numbers is that the Romulan females we use to produce our offspring have shown a worrying tendency to harm themselves and their unborn children. They can be kept restrained of course, but this also carries risks of injury as they fight against them. On the other hand a little surgery to the top of the spine paralyses them nicely from the neck down. Then a simple tracheotomy prevents all that annoying screaming and makes force feeding so much easier. They are in no pain and we get the children we need. It’s all far more civilised than they deserve for the way we were treated for generations by your people. Now if you’re going to shoot me you may want to consider how my men have been able to deploy themselves while you’ve been distracted listening to me.”

Nayal looked around and she saw that the Reman troops had all positioned themselves behind more of the biobeds and crouched down to use them as cover. If either Nayal or T’Lan attempted to fire their phasers at the Remans then there was the very real danger that they could hit one of the helpless Romulan women instead.

“Nayal the logical course of action is to surrender.” T’Lan said.

“What? And wind up like them?” Nayal responded, waving at the biobeds around her, “Never.”

“If we surrender we have hope of rescue. If they kill us we have none.” T’Lan pointed out and then she removed the holster from her waist and slowly placed on a nearby biobed before stepping away raising her hands. Meanwhile Nayal snarled, still aiming her phaser at Darhkan. But then she deactivated the weapon and dropped it to the floor and raised her hands as well.

“Excellent.” Darhkan said as he men rushed forwards to remove the two women’s combadges as well, “Now secure them.”

“This had better work cousin.” Nayal hissed as the pair were dragged across the room and forced to sit down in two chairs.

The Remans then began to bind them with thick tape, wrapping it around their forearms to secure them to the arms of their chairs and covering their hands in the process to guarantee they could not unpick the tape. Likewise their legs were spread apart just far enough that they could be secured to the chair legs and as a final touch a length of tape was used to gag each of them.

“Comfortable?” Darhkan asked, looking down at Nayal and stroking her hair and she tried to pull away from him, “The females you see here are all promised to associates of General Rhatan.” he started to explain, “On the other hand both of you have been promised to me and you needn’t worry about being operated on like they were Romulan whore. I want to hear to scream and feel you fight. It’ll make our time together so much more entertaining.” then he turned Nayal’s chair around so that she faced T’Lan and signalled for one of his men to do the same with T’Lan’s chair, leaving the two women facing one another, “Let’s go.” he told his men, “Commander Protas will need to be informed of our new guests.”

Nayal tried to yell something at the Remans as they left and tugged at the tape binding her to the chair. But her cries were muffled and unintelligible while her limbs remained stuck fast and Darhkan and his men ignored her as they left the chamber.

Max was in engineering when the computer alerted him to an incoming transmission from the surface. His Borg implants meant that he was quite capable of processing the received data internally and so he had no need to approach a display screen to review it. It was immediately clear to him that the data stream came from the nanites he had configured to infiltrate the Reman systems, telling him that West had successfully deployed them. But the amount of data being sent by the nanites was greater than Max had expected. The nanite hive aboard the *USS Nightfall* was self-aware and this meant that the nanites were easily capable of expanding their mission parameters on the basis of new information they were exposed to and it seemed that they had come across something very interesting.

As the nanites had spread throughout the Remans’ systems they had come across the main computer core

and searched through the key operating files. During this search they had uncovered the true nature of the work being carried out at the outpost and determined that this was vital information that had to be communicated to the *Nightfall*. In turn Max realised that he needed to inform Captain Edwards of it immediately so he could warn the crew members down on the surface.

With most of his command staff off the ship, Captain Edwards was having to spend a lot more time on the bridge in person and that was where he was when Max contacted him."

"Captain it's Max, I have urgent news for you."

"Are we getting a feed from the nanites?" Edwards asked.

"We are and that is what I need to discuss captain." Max replied.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Captain not only have the nanites located one of the Reman sensor arrays, they have also managed to infiltrate their main computer core and uncovered information that has serious ramifications to our presence here." Max explained and Edwards frowned.

"Go on." he said.

"Captain the outpost is functioning as a prisoner of war camp for Romulans captured in the fighting."

"So how come no-one's seen them yet?"

"Because they are all being held in an underground facility, many metres below the surface of the moon."

Max told him, "The male prisoners are being used as slave labour to dig for dilithium while the females are being forced to undergo surgery to disable them before being shipped out for use in the Reman breeding program we have previously heard about. Captain, this goes against everything the Federation and Starfleet stand for. We cannot."

"I know." Edwards interrupted, "I need to warn Grace."

Carr and Cole were making little headway in getting Protas to agree to a joint operation to study the reasons behind the Reman sensors blocking the Iconian gateway technology when Darhkan entered the office.

"Commander I have news." he said and then he glanced at the two Starfleet officers and added, "May I speak with you privately?"

"Of course." Protas replied before he too looked at Carr and Cole and added, "If you will excuse me." and he got up and left the office. Once he and Darhkan were alone in the corridor he looked at his chief of security, "Well?" he asked.

"We have found the missing Vulcans." Darhkan told him, "Or rather, the Vulcan and the Romulan spy."

"They brought a Romulan here?" Protas hissed.

"They did. We found them in the recovery ward examining one of the females." Darhkan answered, "We found them before they could warn anyone else though and they have been secured."

"Then as promised they are yours. I trust you will make the Romulan pay for every humiliation her kind visited on us?"

"Of course commander. But what of the humans?"

"They must be detained." Protas said.

"It would be easier to just kill them." Darhkan pointed out.

"Perhaps. But then their vessel would attack and our defences may not be able to hold them off long enough for reinforcements to arrive. You know as well as I that the Klingons keep a squadron on high alert on their side of the border. That could be here in under twelve hours if the Starfleet vessel requested aid. Our nearest reinforcements are more than three days away. We need hostages and the five humans are worth more than an entire squadron of warbirds. Now go gather your men and inform Doctor K'ren to move the Romulan females to the transport while your men deal with the males. We will have to abandon this facility now and I have no intention of leaving a valuable labour force behind. I will contact General Rhatan and tell him what has happened."



While Protas was still in the corridor outside Carr's combadge activated as Edwards made contact.

"Lieutenant commander, are you able to talk?" he asked.

"Yes captain." she responded, "Commander Protas is outside with his chief of security."

"Commander you and the rest of the away team need to get out of there. The Remans are using the outpost as a mining operation using slave labour. We also have evidence that female captives are being operated on without their consent as part of the Reman breeding program. I'm calling off the assignment and the deal is off."

Carr and Cole looked at one another.

"We'll need to find the others." Cole said and Carr nodded.

"Okay captain." she said, "We'll locate the rest of the away team as fast as we can and return to the shuttle. Is Captain Heart's team in position to take down the defences if we need it?"

"I hope so. I want the shields taken down anyway. I'm not just abandoning the Romulans and I doubt that the Remans will be willing to negotiate for their freedom so that only leaves us with a direct assault to liberate them as an option."

"You'll need better information on the outpost layout." Cole pointed out.

"Max is on that. There are nanites in the Reman systems feeding us information." Edwards said, "Shry's men are already working on an assault plan."

"Very well captain, we're on our way out." Carr said and she tapped her combadge to deactivate it, "Come on," she then said to Cole as she reached down to pick up her drink from the table, "we need to go." and she lifted the goblet to down the contents in one just as Cole was reaching out to try and stop her. At which point her eyes widened and she coughed.

"That was mine." Cole said, wincing as he realised Carr had just downed almost a full cup of Romulan ale.

"I know." Carr gasped, "Now can we try and get to the shuttle while I can still stand?"

Cole drew his phaser and walked over to the office door, then he held his weapon out of sight as she opened it. But when he looked into the corridor outside it was empty and he waved at Carr to follow him as he stepped through the doorway.

"Cole to King." he said as he activated his combadge.

"King here. Go ahead."

"We're leaving. This place is just a slave labour camp so the captain's calling off the deal. Where are you?" Cole asked.

"Still in the Reman sick bay, it's about fifty metres from the hangar. I'm alone by the way. K'ren's not here and I've still not heard back from T'Lan or Nayal." King told him.

"I don't like the sound of that." Cole commented, "Stay put. See if you can contact West, T'Lan or Nayal. Lieutenant Commander Carr and I will be there shortly. Cole out."

West was still watching the Reman technicians attempting to modify their sensors when she noticed two more of them enter the command centre. But unlike any of them already present, including the pair of security guards on duty the new arrivals were armed with rifles and as West turned towards them they both took aim at her.

"Surrender human." one said sternly and West noticed the Reman technicians close by her drifting further away.

Then as the two security guards drew their own disruptors and pointed them at West the second Reman soldier activated his communicator.

"We have her." he said.

"Not yet you don't." West replied and she dived aside, reaching for her phaser.

There was a rapid volley of disruptor blasts from the two soldiers' rifles and West felt the pain of being hit just before she landed heavily on the floor and everything went black.

The two Reman soldiers then advanced towards her cautiously, keeping their weapons pointed in her direction. West was lying beside one of the control consoles in the command centre and her phaser was still in its holster so crouching down beside her, one of the soldiers reached out to disarm her. But just as he took hold of the phaser's grip West's eyes suddenly opened and she smiled at him as she clamped her hand over his to grip her phaser.

"Surprise!" she exclaimed and before the Reman could react she pulled her phaser free of its holster and fired it into his chest from point blank range. The beam burned right through the Reman and before he could even cry out the energy enveloped his entire body and vaporised most of it, leaving only parts of his arms and legs remaining.

West quickly disposed of the severed hand on her phaser, tossing the appendage aside before firing again and striking the other soldier in the head and killing him instantly. The two security guards then returned fire, both shooting at her with their disruptors set on stun. One missed, the energy blast striking the console behind her harmlessly. But the second shot hit West not far from where the earlier rifle blast had done. But although the shot was powerful enough to disable a typical humanoid for an hour or more West appeared unharmed and she turned her phaser on the two guards. Rather than two separate blasts, West instead held down the trigger of her phaser and fired a prolonged beam that she swept across both of the guards, incinerating the pair of them and causing system readouts behind them to explode as the beam burrowed its way into them.

But West was not done yet and with all armed opposition in the room dealt with she turned her phaser on the unarmed technicians, shooting them dead one by one until only Sollir remained, crawling towards where one of the Reman disruptors had landed. But just as he reached out for the weapon West shot it with her phaser and there was a bright flash as it exploded before Sollir could grab hold of it.

"What are you?" the Reman asked in astonishment, having just witnessed West shrug off several disruptor hits before proceeding to kill the entire control staff.

"The future." she replied before she shot him dead as well.

Now West was alone in the command centre and surrounded only by dead bodies she returned her phaser to its holster and calmly strode over to the communications console that she had taken care to leave intact. She made several rapid adjustments to the transmitter's configuration, increasing how far into subspace any signal sent would penetrate. Ordinarily this would be counter-productive, causing a message to be lost forever in subspace. But she was not attempting to contact anyone in the real universe.

"It's me." she said when the adjustments were made and the transmitter active, "My host has been disabled but I have a way to escape on my own. Give me a couple of hours to get clear and then send in your attack force. But don't leave it too long after that. I wasn't able to prevent the Starfleet crew from deploying a means of obtaining information on how to jam our gateway technology. You can't let them escape with it."

"Well done Controller." The Girl's voice responded, "You have two hours."

Without bothering to shut off the channel The Controller then stepped back from the communications console and drew West's phaser again before using it to destroy the console and eliminating all evidence of her tampering.

Nayal was still tugging at the tape holding her to the chair when the door to the chamber in which she and T'Lan were being held opened again and several Remans entered. First among these was K'ren and he was followed by several other Remans dressed in white and pushing double layered trolleys in front of them.

"Hurry." K'ren told his men as they started to load the helpless Romulan women onto the trolleys, "The transport is being prepared. We need to get all of these females loaded."

"What about them?" one of the other Remans asked, looking at T'Lan and Nayal.

"They go last." K'ren told him, "These females belong to General Rhatan, those two are just for Centurion Darhkan's pleasure. He will take them aboard personally."

In the Reman medical facility King was gathering up the samples that had been taken from the Iconian agent and placing them inside his medical kit. He made sure that the first sample to be stowed safely inside it was the suspected gateway device. He knew that unlocking the secrets of this would be a major boost to the fight against the Iconians now plaguing the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

Hearing the door to the sick bay open King ducked and drew his phaser. Peering around the side of the desk he was behind he saw that a pair of armed Remans had just entered the room and were now looking around. The pair then split up and started to search the room, their disruptor held at the ready.

Although he was a medical officer, King had served in Starfleet long enough to know when someone was hunting for a person will ill intent and everything about the way that the two Remans were acting told him that being caught by them was a very bad idea. But he also knew that he could not remain hidden here forever.

"Looking for me? He said as he stood up and before either Reman could react he stunned one of them with his phaser. Then he ducked again, just in time to avoid the return fire from the second Reman.

Lying flat on the floor, King could see under the desk and he saw the Reman's feet as the alien advanced towards his position. King took aim beneath the desk and fired again. His field of fire from under the desk was limited but the phaser beam still struck the Reman in his foot. This was not enough to incapacitated him, but it did paralyse the nerves in his leg up to his knee suddenly enough that he collapsed in a heap on the floor as he lost the use of the limb. Seeing his chance King then leapt up and fired over the desk, hitting the prone Reman and rendering him unconscious as well. Then he tapped his combadge.

"King to Cole. I've just had visitors. I'd say that the Remans know something's up and are moving against us. I've dealt with these two but I doubt they'll be the last that are sent here and I could do with some back up. How far away are you?"

"Right here doctor." Cole said as he entered the Reman sick bay, supporting Carr at his side.

"What happened to her?" King asked, staring at the obviously unsteady Carr.  
"I just had a teeny weeny drink. That's all." Carr responded, her words slurred and she lifted one hand with her thumb and forefinger extended close together  
"She picked up the wrong cup and downed a Romulan ale." Cole said and King sighed.  
"I've still not heard from any of the others." he said, "The last signal I had from T'Lan said that she and Nayal had gone down into a network of tunnels under the outpost."  
"In that case that's where we're going." Cole said.  
"But David said we should leave, didn't he Robert?" Carr said.  
"Not without T'Lan and Nayal." Cole replied.  
"What about West?" King asked.  
"We'll find her later." Cole answered, "Hopefully she's managed to evade capture and will be able to find her own way back to the hangar."

"Target, fifty metres ahead." Heart said when he saw the shield generator array appear over the top of a ridge close to the outpost.  
"Any signs of movement?" Hamilton asked.  
"None. Doesn't look like the Remans have figured out we're out here yet." Heart said as he looked down the optical sight of his assault rifle and using it to survey the ground ahead for signs of Reman forces. Then he looked around to where two of the MACOs had positioned themselves, "Go." he told them, "We'll cover you. I want charges on that shield emitter set to blow on my command."  
The two MACOs emerged from their hiding place and rushed forwards, covering several metres with each bound in the low gravity of the moon outside the artificially maintained gravity of the outpost before skidding to a halt beside the shield emitter. There they slung their rifles over their shoulders and each unpacked one of the spatial charges they both carried, set them to detonate upon receiving the correct coded signal and fixed them to the emitter before giving Heart a thumbs up.  
"Okay charges are set." Heart said, "Now let's see how many more we can find."

"One of them did this?" Protas said when he saw the bodies scattered around the command centre, "Are our soldiers that ineffective?"  
"We do not know exactly what happened commander." Drahken replied, "But the pair from your office and the doctor have both vanished."  
"What about the two you took prisoner in the ward?" Protas asked.  
"Still secure sir." Drahken answered, "Doctor K'ren is evacuating the patients now."  
"Then concentrate on trying to locate the missing Federation personnel. In the mean time I will contact their vessel and-"  
"Commander!" another Reman called out, "The main communication console has been destroyed."  
"What?" Protas exclaimed as he and Drahken rushed to see the burned out console for themselves, "This makes no sense." he added, "All we need to do is reconfigure another console."  
"It makes sense if this console was used to send a message that required specific configuration of the communication system." Drahken pointed out, "Recovering that would take significantly longer."  
"Never mind that now" Protas said, "Go and find the missing Federation personnel. I suggest you send a squad to the main hangar as well to take out their shuttles."  
"Yes commander." Drahkne said before he hurried out of the command centre.  
Meanwhile Protas looked around at the other Remans now taking the places of the dead command staff and checking to see if there was any other damage.  
"Get me the Starfleet vessel." he commanded.  
"Putting you through now commander." one of the Remans replied and on the main view screen an image of Captain Edwards sat on the bridge of the *Nightfall* appeared.  
"Commander Protas." Edwards said, "This is a surprise. How may I help you?"  
"I have the Romulan spy you sent captain." Protas said, "Plus the Vulcan and very soon the rest of your crew. If you want to keep them safe then you will withdraw from this system."  
"Will I indeed?" Edwards asked, "What happens if I refuse?"  
"Then I destroy your vessel captain."  
"Is that so commander? Well maybe you weren't aware but the *Nightfall* is rather well equipped for planetary assault. I have multiple torpedo tubes loaded with quantum torpedoes, the best phasers Starfleet has to offer and a pair of mass drivers that make even some Federation planets uneasy about this ship's capability to rain down destruction on the surface of a planet. Plus of course I have a squadron of fighters and two companies of professional ground troops to add to that. What do you have? I know that most of your plasma torpedo launchers are empty. What happened to your ammunition exactly? Was it taken to rearm more important ships and bases while you sit and cower behind the lines trading the Klingons?"  
Protas smiled and glanced towards one of his men.

"Lieutenant, raise shields and lock disruptors on the *Nightfall*. Then fire at will." he said and then he gestured for the communication channel to be shut off.

"Shields up! Red alert." Edwards ordered as soon as the bridge viewscreen switched back to a view of the outpost as viewed from orbit and just seconds after the entire ship shuddered under the impact of the first blast of disruptor fire from the outpost, "Damage report." he ordered.

"Shields raised just in time captain. But that blast was powerful. Shield strength down to seventy-five percent."

"Captain Heart this is the *Nightfall*." Edwards said, activating the communications system set into the arm of his chair, "We're under fire."

"Yes captain, we saw the disruptor fire from here." Heart replied.

"Can you take down the shield and magnetic barrier yet?" Edwards asked.

"The shield yes, we've got charges on three emitters. But we haven't located any of the magnetic field projectors." Heart replied, "Oh and captain if you could limit any return fire to phasers only while we're out on the surface it would be appreciated. I'd hate to be killed in a quantum torpedo blast or from the debris one of those mass accelerator rounds will kick out."

"Understood. As soon as the outpost's shields drop we'll target our phasers at their weapon arrays. *Nightfall* out." Edwards replied. Then he shut off the communications and turned his chair to give him a better view of the lieutenant manning the tactical station in Cole's absence, "Did you get that? Lock phasers onto their weapons and fire as soon as their shield drops."

"Okay here goes." Heart said as his men took cover and he held the remote detonator for the spatial charges in his hand. Then he took one last look at the last shield emitter to have been rigged with a charge before ducking his head and triggering the charges.

In unison the three spatial charges exploded and all three of the rigged shield emitters exploded along with them.

## ii.

"Fire phasers." Edwards ordered and the *Nightfall's* phasers fired on the outpost, picking out the disruptor banks that had targeted the Starfleet ship before moving on to the other weapon emplacements that had been declared inactive but could still pose a threat if the analysis had been wrong.

"Shry to bridge." Captain Shry's voice said over the intercom, "I've got a platoon waiting to go here captain. Do you want us to deploy?"

"Not yet captain." Edwards responded, "I want to know where I need you to deploy to first. But alert the rest of your company and the remainder of the MACOs to report to transporter rooms and the hangar. We may need to send out more men than we can manage with the insertion pods alone."

"Understood captain. Shry out."

Nikki gasped as she felt the outpost shake under the phaser barrage from orbit.

"What the hell is that?" she said to herself before all of a sudden the internal hangar door slid open and a squad of heavily armed Reman soldiers came rushing in. Nikki watched as they lined up in front of the shuttle that West had flown down to the outpost, raised their rifles and opened fire on it. The rapid pulse of energy soon weakened the hull and canopy enough that they cracked and all of a sudden the empty shuttlecraft burst into flames.

"Uh-oh." Nikki said as the Remans then turned away from the burning shuttle while it was encased in a force field by the hangar's fire suppression system to starve the flames of oxygen. Nikki then ducked beneath the level of the viewport for cover moments before the Remans opened fire. However, rather than hearing the sound of volleys of disruptor blasts striking the shuttle's hull she instead heard a crackling sound as they hit only the shuttle's shields and Nikki smiled as she looked up, "Ha! Can't penetrate the shield can you? Do your worst." But then there was a chiming sound from the console in front of her and she looked down to see that the shield strength was dropping under the sustained disruptor fire, the shuttle's shields were not designed to be used while the craft was landed and having them in contact with the hangar floor was weakening them enough that the Reman fire was having an effect. The shield strength was only down to ninety-five percent so far but that meant that eventually it would collapse and then the shuttle Nikki was sat inside would become another flaming wreck just like the other one had.

But then West appeared in the doorway behind the Remans with her phaser in her hand and she opened fire while their backs were still turned. The beam from her phaser cut through two of the Remans before they even knew that she was there and another two burned up before they could take cover. But the remaining Remans then returned fire and West was forced to dive for cover, rolling behind one of the scorpion-class fighters as a plasma conduit exploded on the wall behind her. West darted to the other side of the fighter before emerging just enough to fire her phaser around it at the surviving Remans and in a matter of seconds she had cut down all of them. At which point she ran straight towards Nikki's shuttle.

Acting quickly, Nikki lowered the shuttle's shields and then rushed to the hatch at the rear to open it for West and just as it touched the floor she came running into the shuttle.

"You're hurt." Nikki said, noticing that the sleeve of West's uniform was torn and covered in blood.

"It doesn't matter." The Controller replied, the pain of the injury meaning nothing to her. But as she sat down in the pilot's seat and began the process of readying the shuttle for take off Nikki rushed to the first aid kit and took out a hypospray loaded with a mix of a pain killer and a stimulant to counteract the effects of shock. Hurrying over to where West sat she pressed this to the injured arm and triggered it before The Controller could react.

West gasped, her eyes opening wide as the effect of the stimulant brought her back into control of her own body once more.

"What happened?" she said as she tried to remember how she had come from being under attack in the outpost command centre to sitting in a shuttle and looking at dead Remans in the hangar outside.

"You saved me, remember?" Nikki said, "You killed all the Remans out there."

"I saved her." the voice of The Controller told West, "You as well. Now I suggest you kill the girl and get as far from the outpost and the *Nightfall* as possible."

"Powering weapons." West said, "If any more Remans try taking us on they're going to find out that this shuttle packs a punch."

Cole supported Carr as they and King descended into the tunnels beneath the outpost and King took out his tricorder.

"What are you scanning for doctor?" he asked, "Won't Remans appear the same as a Romulan and a Vulcan."

"Pretty much, though there are some differences." King replied, "But I'm searching for Starfleet combadges. Even if the Remans deactivated or destroyed T'Lan's and Nayal's then the antennas in them may still produce a resonance that I can detect." then he smiled, "In fact there it is. Two combadges in close proximity. Hopefully those are our people. Let's go."

"Hey!" Carr exclaimed, "I'm in charge here. I'm first officer."

"You're drunk." King replied, "Besides I outrank you lieutenant commander." then he looked at Cole, "Now come on, we've got a location so let's go and see what we can find."

"Yes sir." Cole said as King started to advance along the tunnel, his tricorder in one hand and phaser in the other.

They reached the metal wall and doorway blocking the tunnel without encountering any Remans and King studied his tricorder closely.

"Just two life signs on the other side. They could be our people." he said and then he reached out to jab the door control with the muzzle of his phaser. As soon as the door slid open King stepped into the chamber on the other and smiled, "What the hell?" he said as he saw T'Lan and Nayal still bound to the chairs and gagged.

"T'Lan!" Cole exclaimed when he saw T'Lan looking back at him and he quickly rested Carr against the closet biobed and ran across the room to the two bound women before ripping the tape from over T'Lan's mouth, "Are you okay?" he asked her.

"We are both unharmed." T'Lan answered. Then looking at where Carr was struggling to stand she added, "What is wrong with Lieutenant Commander Carr?"

"I just had a teeny drink. That's all." Carr responded, holding out her thumb and forefinger close together to represent a small amount.

"Our first officer is a lightweight." King commented.

"Let me untie you." Cole said as he crouched down beside T'Lan.

"No." she replied, "There is no time. The Remans have removed the Romulan females they were holding in here to a transport ship located somewhere in these tunnels. You have to stop them. We will be fine here until you get back."

"Okay." Cole said and he quickly kissed T'Lan before rushing back towards the door, grabbing hold of Carr to help her stay upright as they and King left the chamber.

Meanwhile Nayal attempted to shout out to them but failed to attract their attention. Instead when they were gone she glared at T'Lan, scowling at her.

"I take it you disagree with my decision to have him leave us tied up here while focusing on rescuing the Romulan females?" T'Lan said and Nayal nodded slowly, "Is your need to relieve yourself becoming more urgent?" T'Lan added and Nayal nodded slowly again.

Then Nayal started to tug at the tape binding her to the chair again, using all the strength she could muster.

"Nayal, that may not be very wise." T'Lan warned her when she noticed the chair start to rock, "You could cause your chair to fall over-" but Nayal ignored her, continuing to rock back and forth until all of a sudden her chair tipped forwards and she fell with it. The path of her fall took her straight towards T'Lan and she only came to a halt when her head landed between T'Lan's legs and became stuck.

"I did try to warn you." T'Lan said as she looked down at the back of Nayal's head between her legs. Nayal attempted to say something in response but the tape over her mouth prevented whatever she had to say from making any sense.

"Captain the Remans are loading prisoners onto a transport to take them from the outpost. We're hunting for it now but we don't have an exact location." Cole reported and Edwards frowned.

"Bridge to hangar." Edwards said, "Snowman I want your squadron in the air immediately.

"Confirmed captain. What's our target?" White replied.

"No target yet. I want a full blockade of the moon. The Remans may attempt to launch a transport ship and I want it stopped. But shoot to disable only understood? The ship is carrying prisoners."

"Understood captain. Target engines only. Snowman out."

Edwards then adjusted the intercom.

"Captain Shry I want you to report to a transporter and stand by. I may want you to carry out a ship to ship boarding. Be aware that this will be a hostage situation so keep all phasers on stun and use no hull-piercing weapons."

"Understood captain. I'm on my way now." Shry told him.

The electronic lock pick overrode the security of the outpost airlock in just under a minute and the MACO squad stormed into the facility with their rifles held at the ready. Ahead of them a pair of armed Remans appeared and started to raise their weapons. But before they could take aim there was the deafening rattle of assault rifles firing in unison and the Remans' bodies jerked under the repeated projectile impacts before they collapsed.

"Clear." Heart said as he ejected the spent magazine from his weapon and inserted another.

Hamilton then tapped his combadge.

"This is Lieutenant Hamilton to all Starfleet personnel in the outpost, where are you located?"

"Bradley it's Nikki. Jenna West and I are in the main hangar. The Remans destroyed one of the shuttles and Lieutenant West is injured but we're both safe inside the other."

"Hamilton," Cole responded after this, "I'm with Lieutenant Commander Carr and Doctor King. We're in the tunnels beneath the outpost. The Remans are trying to evacuate their Romulan prisoners in a transport they've got stashed down here somewhere. T'Lan and Nayal are both tied up in a chamber closer to the surface. You may want to check on them. Nikki I want you and West to get back to the *Nightfall* now."

"Copy that, we're on our way." Hamilton said.

"What about you? How will you get out of here?" Nikki asked.

"Once the magnetic field and shield are dealt with we can just beam out." Cole told her.

"There's still the Thames on the surface as well." Hamilton added.

"Good, we'll call that plan 'B'." Cole said.

"Understood commander." Hamilton responded before tapping his combadge to deactivate it. Then he looked at Heart, "So where do you think the Remans would keep the entrance to some underground tunnels?" he asked.

"Max to Captain Edwards, I believe I have located the source of the magnetic field surrounding the outpost. I'm sending you the co-ordinates now." Max announced over the intercom. "Unfortunately it is located in a part of the facility that is still shielded."

"Understood Max. I'll see if Lieutenant Commander White can assist us." Edwards responded. Then he switched to the *Nightfall's* ship to ship communications, "*Nightfall* to Snowman. Can you get in under what's left of the outpost shields to strike a target?"

"Negative captain." White responded, "The approach to the co-ordinates your giving me is too tight. The best we can try is a torpedo run to knock out the shield."

"That's no good Snowman, we can't risk a torpedo strike while we still have people on the surface." Edwards said.

"Nightfall this is Lieutenant West, I may be able to help you out." West's voice interrupted, "I can use my shuttle's phasers to strike the target if you send me its location. We're already underneath the shield layer."

"Transferring them now." Edwards replied.

"Confirmed, I have them now. Watch for the fireworks." West said before the channel went dead.

"Are we really going to attack the outpost?" Nikki asked as the shuttle rose up inside the hangar.

"No. You don't have time for this. Kill the girl, get out now and get as far away from here as you can." The Controller said but West just frowned as she turned the shuttle to face the hangar's outer door.

"Okay then, let's see how well Romulans build their outposts." she said and she fired the shuttle's phasers. At first the twin beam just made the area around their impact with the doors glow. But this spread across them as West kept the energy flowing until all of a sudden the door shattered and fragments were blown outwards by the force of the air inside the hangar escaping.

"Hold on." West told Nikki and she accelerated the shuttle out of the hangar, turning it sharply to align it with the source of the magnetic field. She fired the phasers again as soon as the emitter came into view and her first shot blew it clean off the side of the tower it was mounted on. Then West banked sharply turning the shuttle to face away from the outpost entirely and accelerating again, "Let's just hope the *Nightfall* took out all of the outpost's weapons." she said.

"Why? What about our shields?" Nikki responded.

"Oh they may have held against small arms, but against planetary defence weapons? They'll crack us wide open." West told her.

As soon as the shuttle's sensors told West that it was no longer beneath the remains of the outpost's shield she lifted its nose and put as much power into its thrusters as was possible. Then as soon as it had gained enough altitude to guarantee that the exhaust blast would not risk any damage to the outpost that still had members of the *Nightfall's* crew in it she brought the shuttle's impulse drive on line and it surged forwards, heading rapidly away from the moon and towards the orbiting *Nightfall*.

"Shuttle to *Nightfall*, any chance of letting us in?" West asked.

"No. You must get away from the ship." The Controller told her.

"Confirmed lieutenant." the current officer at operations said in reply to West's question, "Shield will be dropped to allow you to dock. Commence your approach now."

West flew the shuttle towards the rear of the *Nightfall*, watching for the cruiser's deflector shields to drop and allow her to land the shuttle in its hangar. Just as promised the shield was lowered and West flew the shuttle between the two secondary hulls, shutting down the impulse drive and switching back to thrusters just before passing through the force field covering the port side landing doorway.

Bringing the shuttle to a rapid halt, West and Nikki were met by a member of the hangar ground staff as well as one of Doctor King's medical staff as they disembarked. The ground crewman hurried into the shuttle so that he could move it out of the way just in case any of White's fighter squadron needed to land in an emergency while the medic moved to look at West's arm.

"I'm fine." West said, waving the medic away from her, "It's not as bad as it looks. I need to get to the bridge and I'll go to sickbay later." then she ran to the nearest turbolift and leapt inside, "Bridge." she said and the turbolift began to move.

"Get to an escape pod. You don't have much time to escape." the voice of The Controller said and West frowned.

"I'll do what I want." she hissed just as the turbolift doors slid open again to reveal the bridge and Edwards turned to look at her.

"Problem lieutenant?" he asked.

"No sir, just talking to myself.

"Good. Take ops. I want to know what's going on down there."

"Yes sir." West said as she walked over to the operations console and took the place of the ensign who had been filling in for her during her absence.

The explosion caused by the phaser strike on the magnetic field emitter was felt inside the command centre and Protas snarled.

"Report!" he snapped.

"Commander the magnetic field is no longer active. Parts of the outpost remain shielded but there are already Federation troops inside. I've lost contact with sections four through eight and the main surface hangar has been exposed to vacuum." one of his staff told him.

"What about the slaves?" Protas asked.

"The transport is almost fully loaded commander. But without cover launching it will be suicide."

"Then get pilots into the fighters. I don't care how it's done, just get those craft into the air. We need a clear path for the transport to escape." Protas ordered.



Unlike Cole and his security personnel, Hamilton had not trained with any of the ground troops stationed aboard the *Nightfall* and he found it somewhat confusing to watch them continuously moving around him as they advanced through the tunnels they had located beneath the outpost. These were just as empty as the corridors of the outpost above and the only signs of habitation were the lights mounted on the walls. The MACOs did not seem to trust these, however and they all activated the compact flash lights mounted on the sides of their rifles to provide extra illumination that they had full control over.

"Captain," the lead MACO said suddenly, dropping to his knees at a junction and looking down the sight of his rifle.

"What?" Heart replied.

"Something up ahead, some sort of structure."

Hamilton and Heart moved forwards to the tunnel junction where the kneeling MACO was positioned and they saw that the tunnel ahead of him was blocked by a metal wall with a door set into it.

"This could be it," Hamilton said and he started to rush forwards before Heart grabbed hold of him and held him back.

"It could also be a trap," he said, "Let my men clear the way."

The MACOs then split into two groups that advanced along each side of the tunnel together, all focusing their attention on the door set into the wall. When they reached it Heart stood directly in front of the doorway while one of his men stood by the control. Then with a nod from Heart the other MACO opened the door and allowed the rest of the squad to charge through it.

"What the hell?" Heart exclaimed when he saw both T'Lan and Naya taped to chairs while Naya's face was buried between T'Lan's legs and he looked over his shoulder at Hamilton, "Lieutenant, what is your girlfriend doing?"

Hamilton looked through the doorway and then pushed past the MACOs, rushing to where T'Lan and Naya were bound."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"We are unharmed," T'Lan replied, "Though I believe that Naya's position may be somewhat uncomfortable."

Hamilton pulled Naya upright again and then ripped the tape from her mouth.

"Ow!" she cried as she gasped for breath. Then she stared Hamilton in the face, "Bradley get me out of this damned chair and into a bathroom before I wet myself and I swear that every night for the next week I will come to your quarters and do whatever you want."

Hamilton quickly set his rifle down and drew the MACO issue knife that was tucked into the scabbard built into his suit before using it to slice through the tape holding Naya to the chair. Meanwhile Heart hurried over to free T'Lan.

"Have you got this?" Hamilton asked, looking at Heart and he nodded.

"Go," he said and Hamilton tapped his combadge.

"Hamilton to *Nightfall*, can you get a transporter lock on my position?" he transmitted.

"Affirmative," West responded, "You're outside the shielded area. We've got a clean lock."

"Then Naya and I need beaming back to the ship immediately."

"Understood. Stand by for transport," West said and Hamilton and Naya stood side by side before the air around them began to sparkle as they were beamed back up to the *Nightfall*.

"Captain we should try to locate Lieutenant Commander Cole and his party," T'Lan said as she was finally freed from her bonds and she retrieved the combadge, tricorder and phaser that had been left nearby.

"Do you know where they went?" Heart asked.

"Only that it was down," T'Lan replied.

"Then get behind us lieutenant. We'll lead the way," Heart told her.

"I've got life readings about fifty metres ahead," King said, studying his tricorder, "Lot of them."

"Romulans? Or Remans?" Cole asked.

"Can't tell, there's something interfering with the readings. Could be mining equipment or just something in the rock. But whoever they are there are a lot of them."

"Then we need to be careful," Cole said. Then he looked at how unsteady Carr remained and turned to King again, "Are you sure there's nothing you can give her?" he asked.

"Oh wait, let me check my medical kit for any cures for intoxication that may have been invented and magically transported into it in the last hour or so," King said, scowling, "No, I don't."

"Okay, I only asked," Cole said, "Lieutenant Commander, perhaps you ought to wait here."

"I think that may be a good idea," Carr replied, wincing at the sound of his own voice, "I don't think this tunnel

is entirely stable. If it collapses one of us should be able to go and get help.”

“Sure.” Cole said as he waited for her to lean against the nearby wall instead of him before continuing onwards in the direction of the life readings picked up by King.

As the two officers advanced they heard the sound of shouting as well as the noise of spacecraft thrusters idling and both men lifted their phasers as they approached an opening at the end of the tunnel. This opening turned out to overlook a massive cavern that was dominated by the Romulan transport ship that was using it as a hangar. The cavern curved upwards as it went along, giving the impression that it led up to a concealed launch door somewhere on the surface of the moon. There was an automated conveyor set up to carry mined ore into the hold of the transport but this had been retracted away from the ship to allow the armed Remans in the cavern to drive the lines of chained Romulan workers into the hold instead.

“That’s a lot of Remans.” King commented.

“Too many for us to deal with on our own in a straight fight.” Cole agreed, nodding. Then he tapped his combadge, “Lieutenant Hamilton, are you there?” he signalled.

“Lieutenant Commander Cole,” T’Lan’s voice responded, “Lieutenant Hamilton has returned to the *Nightfall* with Nayal. I am currently accompanying Captain Heart and his men. We have picked up your trail and are approaching.”

“Excellent.” Cole said, “Because a squad of heavily armed MACOs is just what I need right now. Tell Captain Heart and his men to double time it.”

“Quarter back to Snowman, are you seeing this? Looks like we’ve got company.” White’s wingman transmitted at the same moment as White himself saw the unmistakable signs of multiple launches from the surface of the moon.

“Yeah I see it. *Nightfall*, things just got a whole lot more crowded out here. I’m reading multiple Scorpion-class fighters heading for us. Looks like they’re going to try and run our blockade.”

“Confirmed Snowman, we see them too.” West responded, “We’re moving in to support.”

“Understood, but don’t count on there being too many left to engage by the time we’re done.” White said.

“Negative Snowman.” Edwards’ voice added, “If they’re trying to run the blockade in those fighters then they may be trying to divert our attention from elsewhere. We’ll deal with the fighters, you maintain the blockade.”

“Understood.” White replied and he sighed as he closed the channel, annoyed at the thought of being left out of the action.

The twelve Peregrine-class fighters withdrew as the Reman attack craft approached them, spreading out to allow the *Nightfall* to race through the centre of their formation. As soon as the Starfleet fighters were out of the *Nightfall*’s line of fire the cruiser opened fire with its phasers. Small and agile, the Scorpion-class fighters made hard targets. But the power of the *Nightfall*’s phasers was such that even the slightest glancing hit was enough to collapse their shields and tear through their hull to reduce the tiny craft to nothing more than glowing debris. Meanwhile White and his squadron spread out, hunting for signs of the transport they knew was hidden somewhere beneath the surface of the moon.

The first that the Remans knew they were under attack was when the sound of multiple assault rifles echoed around the massive cavern, audible even over the sounds of the transport’s thrusters. Heart and his MACOs fired at the clusters of Reman guards from above while Cole, King and T’Lan rushed in from the side and picked off individuals who had been driving the male Romulan prisoners aboard the transport.

“Get down!” Cole yelled at the startled Romulans but he was not in time to prevent a rifle armed Reman from turning his weapon on the prisoners and firing a rapid burst of disruptor blast that cut down half a dozen of them. However, in doing so the Reman also removed the only obstacle that was preventing King from firing on him and the doctor did not hesitate to direct his phaser towards him.

“Try picking on someone who can shoot back.” he hissed as his phaser blast took the Reman off his feet.

Then he pointed to where the Reman landed and shouted at the Romulans, “One of you grab that rifle.”

Though chained together, a group of the Romulans was close enough to the downed Reman guard to be able to retrieve the rifle and one of them used it to shoot through the chains binding him. Then he passed the weapon to another of the group while he pulled the dead guard’s sidearm from its holster.

With their prisoners now in revolt and under fire from Federation forces, the Remans fell back towards the transport, rushing aboard it ahead of the trio of Starfleet officers trying desperately to reach it in time to prevent it taking off.

“Cole, be advised that we can’t stop that transport safely.” Heart transmitted, “Our grenade launchers may be able to do enough damage but there’s no guarantee that they won’t trigger an explosion internally or externally.”

“Neither of which sounds good to me.” Cole replied, “Just keep picking off any Reman that sticks his head up.”

“Commander! The transport is under attack.” one of the command staff informed Protas, “Federation troops

are freeing the slaves and moving towards the transport.”

“Are the females all loaded?” Protas asked.

“Yes commander. They are all aboard but the workers and-”

“Tell the transport to go now.” Protas interrupted, “Tell them to get out of here as quickly as possible and ignore all other concerns.”

“Yes sir.”

The access points to the transport suddenly slammed shut while the Starfleet officers and a small group of armed Romulans that had joined them were still a few metres away and Cole realised what was about to happen.

“They’re launching!” he yelled, “Get back and take cover.”

The Starfleet officers and Romulans immediately began to flee away from the transport, while the handful of remaining Remans instead ran towards the ship, hoping that the occupants would open a hatch to let them in rather than abandon them. But this was a forlorn hope as the transport’s thrusters engaged, lifting the ship off the cavern floor and enveloping the remaining Remans in flames. Then the ship began to move off, heading towards the surface.

“King to *Nightfall*.” King said, activating his combadge, “Be advised, Reman transport is escaping. We have been unable to liberate the captives aboard it. Use extreme caution when engaging.”

“*Nightfall*, this is Snowman. I have eyes on the target now. Starting my run.” White transmitted when he saw the Reman ship appear over the moon’s horizon. Building up speed as rapidly as he could White and his squadron soon caught up with the lumbering transport that had only just switched from using thrusters to its impulse drive. A bleeping sound told White that his sensors were attempting to lock onto the Reman vessel and he selected one of the warp nacelles as his primary target. Without warp drive there was no chance that the transport could escape the *Nightfall*. Even if the ship was equipped with a cloaking device it could only hide for so long.

The bleeping suddenly became a continuous tone and White fired his fighter’s phasers as he passed by the transport. The beams struck the warp nacelle just as White had intended, ripping it open along its entire length before it exploded and what was left dropped away from the transport, falling back towards the moon’s surface below. Moments later another of White’s squadron passed along the other side of the transport and struck at the second nacelle and this too exploded, leaving the ship incapable of going to warp and trailing enough flames that any cloaking device with which it was fitted would be rendered useless.

“Snowman to *Nightfall*, target’s warp drive is destroyed. I say again target’s warp drive is destroyed. You may move in when ready.”

“Captain Shry, are your men ready?” Edwards asked as Shry stepped onto the transporter pad.

“Affirmative captain. Ready and willing.” he replied. Then the Andorian looked at the transporter technician, “Energise.” he added.

The Andorians materialised amidst a scene of chaos as Remans struggled to deal with the damage done to their vessel by the Federation attack fighters. The Remans rapidly realised that they were being boarded though and they reacted quickly. Most of the bridge crew were unarmed, but the species was physically strong and they rushed to try and overpower the Andorians. But the Imperial Guard trained its troops well and Shry’s men reacted just as quickly, firing their phasers into the Remans. Though they carried the same style of assault rifle as the MACOs aboard the *Nightfall*, the Andorians were trying to avoid inflicting any further damage on the vessel. Therefore, even though they had loaded their rifles with fragmenting ammunition that would not pierce the hull accidentally they used their phasers on a stun setting exclusively to prevent any damage to the control systems.

With surprise on their side the Andorians swiftly overpowered the Remans and they rushed to the various control consoles to assess the state of the ship.

“Shry to *Nightfall*. The bridge is secure.”

Edwards smiled when he heard this.

“West, what’s the status of our people on the surface?” he asked.

“Safe sir. We’re almost all the way through beaming the Romulans up and Lieutenant Commander Cole indicated that his group and Captain Heart’s would follow afterwards. We’ve also recovered the *Thames* from the surface. It’s in cargo bay two.”

Edwards frowned.

“Cole’s group? What’s happened to Lieutenant Commander Carr?”

“She’s already aboard sir, in transporter room one. She was among the first to be beamed up. Lieutenant Commander Cole’s orders apparently.”

“Is she hurt?”

"I don't know sir I-" West began but Edwards was not listening to her. Instead he jumped up from his seat and ran towards the turbolift, "Hamilton, you have the conn." he called out as the turbolift doors slid shut. When the turbolift stopped close to transporter room one Edwards ran to the transporter room where he found a line of dishevelled looking Romulans being escorted out of it by members of his crew. Pushing through them he entered the transporter room to see Carr supporting herself on the transporter control console while Nikki stood beside her, averting her gaze.

"Hello captain." Nikki said when she saw Edwards, "I'm afraid my mom may not be able to come to work right now. It appears she can't tell the difference between fruit juice and Romulan ale."

"Oh no." Edwards said just as Carr looked at him and smiled.

"David!" she exclaimed and she took a single step before falling forwards only for Edwards to leap and catch her.

"There you go again, catching me when I fall." Carr said, patting him on the shoulder, "That's why I love serving under you. I know you won't let anything happen to me. There's no-one I'd rather be under." and then she tilted her head forwards to lean on Edwards' chest and went limp while Edwards just looked at Nikki and smiled nervously while she just frowned back at him.

"Bridge to Captain Edwards." Hamilton said over the intercom, "I think you ought to get up here. I think we've got company."

"Remans?" Edwards responded.

"No sir. Iconians." Hamilton told him.

"I'm on my way." Edwards said as he set the unconscious Carr down beside the transporter control console and he ran back to the turbolift.

As soon as he returned to the bridge West looked up from her console.

"We're picking up readings that match Iconian gateway activity captain." she said, "I think there's – yes, single contact. Range four million kilometres. Sir it's an Iconian ship."

"On screen." Edwards ordered as he sat down and the main viewscreen switched to show the massive cylindrical shape of an Iconian warship heading straight for them, "How are we doing with beaming our people up?" he asked.

"Last group from the surface aboard now sir." West told him, "But our fighters are still out there and we still have a boarding party aboard the transport."

"Snowman, we've got an Iconian warship closing on our position. Can your squadron tow that transport at warp?" Edwards said as he activated the ship to ship communications.

"Yes captain, but we'll have to take it slow. I doubt we'll be able to do any better than warp three."

"Just give us your best speed commander. We need to get out of here now."

"Commander, the Federation ships are withdrawing and they're taking the transport with them. They appear to be using their fighters to tow it." one of the Reman command staff told Protas.

"Retreating? But why? We can't harm their ships." Protas said.

"There is another contact moving towards us commander. Perhaps they are trying to escape from that."

"Show me." Protas said and an image of the Iconian ship appeared on the command centre's main screen, "That's not one of our ships." he added.

"Perhaps it is a Klingon vessel of some sort commander."

"Does that look like the Klingons made it? Besides, why would Federation ships run from Klingons?" Protas said. Then another of the Remans looked up from his console.

"Commander, the unidentified vessel is launching torpedoes. They're coming right for us. What should we do?"

Protas stood silently and watched the viewscreen that showed the torpedoes racing towards the outpost while his men continued to ask for orders. But Protas had still issued none by the time the first torpedo slammed into his command centre.

"Captain, may I come in?" Carr asked, standing in the doorway of Edwards' ready room.

"Of course. Take a seat commander." he replied.

"Thank you. Captain I just wanted to apologise for-" Carr began.

"Grace you don't need to apologise." Edwards interrupted, "Cole explained exactly what happened. I'm not going to bring you up on any charges for being intoxicated on duty."

"Well that's a relief." Carr said, relaxing, "So what did I miss while I was in my drunken stupor?"

"Doctor King has advised that we take the Romulans with us into Federation space." Edwards told her, "He thinks that we'll be able to do more for those women the Remans were operating on than the Romulans themselves can manage. Captain Shry's men were able to pull the transport's intended destination from its main computer. Given that it was loaded with Romulan women to be used for forced breeding then there could be more being held there."

"So are we going to try and rescue them?" Carr asked but Edwards shook his head.

"No. It's too deep in enemy territory. But we are going to pass the location to every Romulan faction we have contact with. I'm sure they'll be only too happy to try and rescue any women being held there. Also Max is looking at the data we managed to recover from the Reman outpost. He hopes to find out how we can disrupt the Iconian gateway technology from it. Also Doctor King has brought back what could be an example of the device used by the Iconians to create the gateways."

"That's incredible." Carr said, "If we could duplicate that it would allow us to travel all over the galaxy in moments."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves just yet Grace. We may be closer to understanding how the Iconian technology works but we're not there yet. Mind you, I'd still call this a win for the good guys."

West winced as she removed her uniform and stood in front of her mirror, studying her reflection. There were several large bruises on her body that she recognised as being typical of the injuries inflicted by disruptors set to stun and when she gently pressed one with her finger she gasped as she felt a sudden jolt of pain. "You see?" her reflection said suddenly and she stepped back in surprise, "I saved you. Now do you believe that you can trust me to protect you?"