

# STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

## THE LONG WAY HOME

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



# ***STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL*** **THE LONG WAY HOME**

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

Worried that Starfleet's possession of the body of one of their agents will enable the Federation to reverse engineer their technology, the Iconians despatch a force of ship to intercept the *USS Nightfall* before it can reach the safety of a starbase. The crew must use all their cunning to find a way of escaping this trap or their mission may end just as they have hope of victory...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

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

All available online at:  
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

Copyright notice:

Star Trek is the intellectual property of CBS/Paramount. Star Trek: Nightfall is unofficial and has not been authorised or endorsed by the copyright holders in any way.

*i.*

Stardate 67538.9. A cafe somewhere in San Francisco, Earth.

"Admiral, have you heard about the *Nightfall*?" the woman asked as she sat down at the same table Admiral Schmidt and Commander Jones were sat at.

"Something wrong Commander Brown? I thought that the *Nightfall* was supposed to be taking part in Operation Unimatrix." the admiral responded, having heard nothing about the controversial Starfleet cruiser since it was assigned to a war game officially to test Federation defences against a Borg incursion.

"Did they actually manage to overcome the operation being rigged against them?" Jones added.

"The *Nightfall* never took part in the exercise. Neither did the *Ek'Duv* or the *Brilliant*." Brown told the two men, "Something happened aboard the *Brilliant* that killed the entire crew. The *Nightfall* put an away team aboard and found something, some material that looks to be important to the other side."

Brown was careful to keep all mention of the Iconians out of her statement in a public place. Officially the section of Starfleet that the three officers worked for did not even exist.

"I take it that they are transporting whatever it is to a secure location." Admiral Schmidt said.

"Of course. They're on schedule to reach Starbase Ten in about three days." Brown replied, "But you haven't heard the best of it yet. They didn't just intercept a cargo and the other item they're taking to the starbase is far more significant to us."

Stardate unknown. Location unknown.

What appeared to be a young human female closed her eyes and entered the virtual world where she had existed for many centuries before taking on a physical form so that she could consult with her superiors. The Girl sensed the presence of the other Iconians immediately, having warned them that she had an urgent matter to discuss with them.

"Speak." one of the gathered Iconian intelligences told her.

"Our agent transporting the latest mineral shipment was intercepted by Starfleet." she said.

"Yes, we know. Another must be arranged."

"There is a bigger issue." The Girl added, "Our agent was forced to transit to the main computer of the Starfleet vessel that intercepted him and according to our source in Starfleet this was destroyed, taking with it the consciousness of our agent."

"His sacrifice will be remembered." another of the gathered intelligences said.

"His body remained intact." The Girl pointed out, "Starfleet has it."

"Impossible." one of the other intelligences exclaimed.

"Intolerable." another added.

"If they are able to reverse engineer the technology then it will give them the capability to replicate our gateways. This must not be permitted." a third said to The Girl, "You are to take whatever steps are necessary to recover the body. This mission has absolute priority, you may expend any resource necessary."

"Any resource?" The Girl commented, "It may be necessary to sacrifice our only asset within Starfleet to get the body back."

"If that is what is required then do it." the most senior of the gathered intelligences said.

In the physical world The Girl opened her eyes and immediately brought the communication system set into the room online.

"I need to send a signal." she said, "Enable the link to the *USS Nightfall*."

Stardate 67540.3 Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 en route to Starbase Ten.

"My daughter the MACO." Captain Edwards said, looking across the dinner table at his daughter Rebecca as she ate hurriedly.

"The rest of them are the same." the red haired woman sat beside Edwards added. This was Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr, the *Nightfall's* first officer and opposite her sat her own daughter, Nikki who also wore a Starfleet uniform, however hers lacked rank markings on her collar owing to her position as an intern rather than a commissioned officer or enlisted crewman.

"Sorry dad." Rebecca said as she lowered her fork, "I suppose I'm still not used to being deployed and during training the instructors liked to interrupt mealtimes with surprise drills. Then when you got back your dinner was cold. Eating as much as you could as quickly as you could was the only way to get a hot meal."

"And indigestion." Nikki added.

"That was a risk but with MACO mess meals you were pretty much guaranteed that anyway." Rebecca said and she smiled at her father, "At least you can use a replicator properly."

"Why else do you think I find an excuse to have dinner here regularly?" Carr commented, picking up her glass of wine and taking a sip.

"I thought it was because you and the captain were – Ouch!" Nikki said and she glared at Rebecca who had just kicked her in the shin as she was about to mention the widely rumoured romantic relationship between Edwards and Carr, "I was about to say they were discussing crew performance." she lied.

"Sure." Rebecca responded.

"Speaking of crew performance." Edwards said and he got to his feet and walked away from the table to his desk where he picked up a black box small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, "I think it's about time that someone at this table had her performance recognised formally." and as he held out the small box towards Carr, Nikki gasped. Then Edwards opened the box to reveal a tiny circular gold rank badge, "Congratulations on your promotion Commander Grace Carr." he said.

"Seriously?" Carr said and Edwards nodded.

"I put the paperwork in about a month ago." he told her as she started to remove the black badge from her collar so that she could replace it with a third solid gold one.

"Promotion?" Nikki said, "But I thought he was going to ask you to ma – Ouch!" and both Edwards and Carr frowned at her briefly while she glared at Rebecca who continued to eat her meal but more slowly than previously.

"The confirmation came through this morning." Edwards said as he sat down again, "So I thought that tonight's dinner would be the best time to present it."

"Why didn't you tell me you'd recommended me for this?" Carr asked.

"To be honest I wasn't entirely sure that Starfleet Command would approve it." Edwards answered, "I know you deserve it but there are people in Starfleet Command that would rather see this ship and the entire program it's part of cancelled."

"Is that why that war game was rigged?" Rebecca asked. The *Nightfall* had recently been assigned to a war game simulating a Borg attack on the Federation. With its twin mass accelerators, the modified Akira-class *Nightfall* had been specifically designed to take on Borg vessels but all the ships of the program had been deliberately deployed where they could do the least good. As it happened two of the ships, the *Nightfall* and the *Ek'Duv* had been pulled away from the war game but it had made no difference to the outcome and the Admiral commanding the Starfleet forces, Burrows, had been glowing in his praise of the more conventional ships while the third modified Akira-class cruiser, the *USS Umbra* as well as the Nebula-class *USS Pacific* had sat on the sidelines and played no role in the operation.

Edwards sighed.

"We can't prove it was rigged." he said, knowing that Admiral Burrows had had a long career in exploration rather than tactical assignments. The capability of the modified Akira-class ships to undertake planetary bombardment made them controversial and their supporters tended to come from Starfleet's tactical departments rather than its scientific and exploration ones. Then his expression lightened, "By the way, could you let me have that pin you've just removed Grace?" he asked Carr, "I'll need it for another piece of news I need to deliver."

Carr frowned.

"Who?" she asked.

"Our helmsman." Edwards replied.

"Bradley?" Nikki exclaimed, "You're joking."

"Nikki, manners." Carr said sternly.

"No I'm not joking." Edwards said, "As of the start of his next shift Bradley Hamilton will be Lieutenant Commander Bradley Hamilton."

"That just leaves one other person." Carr said "West. But how many times has she failed to be promoted now? Unless she can pass that test then she's going to stay a lieutenant until she quits or reaches retirement age."

"Don't worry." Edwards said, "I have a plan for that."

Lieutenant West walked along the corridor towards a storage room where her passage was blocked by a pair of armoured soldiers. Rather than Starfleet uniforms, these troops wore the uniforms of the Andorian Imperial Guard and carried rifles designed to fire solid projectiles rather than phasers, though smaller phaser emitters were mounted beneath the weapons' barrels should the capabilities of directed energy weapons be required. "Stop right there lieutenant." one of the Andorians said, holding up his hand for West to stop while she was still several metres away though for now both troops kept their weapons lowered, "This area is off limits to all personnel. What are you doing here?"

West opened her mouth to answer but all of a sudden she realised that she had no idea what she was doing in that corridor at that moment. Her duty shift was long over and the last thing she remembered was sitting

down in her quarters and closing her eyes for a moment. However, she had no intention of saying that so instead she looked at the door to the storage room.

"I just wanted to check that everything was secure." she said. As chief of operations for the *Nightfall* it was her responsibility to make sure that everything ran smoothly on the ship and that resources were correctly allocated so her statement did have some validity to it.

"All secure." the Andorian answered, looking back at the door to the storage room, "The door is sealed and the jamming system is running."

"That hasn't been tested yet." West pointed out.

"No, but the detection system has." the second Andorian replied, "If the Iconians are able to bypass the jamming and form a gateway then we'll know about it."

"Besides, that body's sealed inside a duranium coffin." the first Andorian added, "I doubt even one of their golems could smash through that."

More accurately known as fleshforms, the golems that the Andorian referred to were massive humanoids constructed entirely from a milky white synthetic flesh that were used as alternate hosts for Iconian consciousnesses when inhabiting a corpse modified with the same material was not considered suitable.

"Very good." West said, nodding, "Inform me immediately if there are any anomalies in the security system no matter how minor."

"Yes lieutenant." the Andorian in front of her said and then West turned around and started to walk away.

"That body will bring doom on this ship." a voice inside West's head said and she realised that she had ended up in that corridor thanks to the actions of the Iconian intelligence that inhabited her mind. The Controller had commanded a covert Iconian facility that had been destroyed by the *USS Nightfall* and, unable to return to the Iconians' own realm it had instead downloaded itself just before the outpost's destruction into a storage device that had been implanted in West during her time spent as a captive before coming aboard the *Nightfall*. The Controller had begun by taking limited control of West's body while she slept and occasionally influencing her conscious actions but more recently it had begun to openly communicate with her, attempting to solicit her co-operation. West had considered bringing the existence of The Controller to the attention of the rest of the crew but there she was not one hundred percent certain that it really existed rather than being a sign of psychological trauma suffered as a result of her captivity much like the claustrophobia she now suffered from. Instead she just did her best to ignore the voice and get on with her life her own way, "The others will do whatever it takes to make sure that it cannot be studied."

"Then they'll fail." West said softly, not wanting the Andorians to overhear her, "We've beaten you before and we'll beat you again."

"They only need to be successful once. Help me to dispose of that body and maybe we can save your crew." The Controller said and West scowled but did not respond. Instead she stopped in front of a turbolift and pressed the button to summon it. Inside she asked the turbolift to take her back to her quarters.

"Deck three. Section four." she said and the turbolift began to move. When the door opened the corridor was not empty though, instead Lieutenant Commander Cole the ship's second officer as well as its tactical officer and security chief was standing right outside the turbolift. West gasped when she saw the phaser he carried and for a moment she thought that he was here to detain her.

"Jenna, did I scare you?" he asked.

"What did you expect?" West replied, "Lurking around outside turbolifts."

"I was looking for you." Cole said and West glanced back down at his phaser, looking for any indication that he was about to draw the weapon.

"I was just about to turn in for the night. How can I help you commander?" West asked.

"Turning in already?" Cole said, surprised, "It's still early evening."

West suddenly realised that she had lost track of time since finishing her shift and feared that she may have made Cole suspicious.

"I'm just not feeling that great, that's all." she said, "Plus I've got another session with the councillor tomorrow. That's never good."

"I'll bet. Mackey's about as dense as a neutron star. But what I'm here about may help you out with him."

"How?"

"Look, I was sceptical when the captain said I was to make you my first officer instead of Bradley when he and Carr went aboard the *Brilliant* but you performed the role admirably. When the captain first told me to use you as first officer he also suggested that I ought to coach you through the command officer's test. I've been through your performance with him and we've agreed to proceed with that. Assuming you're agreeable of course."

West's eyes widened. For more than two years she had attempted to pass the test required of officers who wanted to be approved as starship commanders and for operations division it was considered an essential qualification if she wanted to be promoted to lieutenant commander or higher. Then her face fell.

"What does your wife think about this?" she asked, "I did kind of suggest to her that the reason she passed first time was because of your help."

"T'Lan will be fine. Vulcan's don't tend to hold grudges. But I wouldn't repeat the accusation if I were you, that would make things more awkward." Cole said.



The Girl stood on the hillside flanked by a pair of fleshform guards as two men came scrabbling up the hill towards her. Unlike The Girl who wore a form fitting jumpsuit that appeared shiny and new both men wore clothing that was battered but practical and they wore scarves around their necks that could be raised to protect their faces in the event of a sandstorm, marking them out as locals on this barren frontier world near the Romulan Neutral Zone. Both men carried phasers of an obsolete type tucked into their belts but this did not disturb the unarmed Girl. She knew that they would not dare use them to threaten her.

"Well?" The Girl asked as the two men came to a halt in front of her.

"We planted the charges just like you said." one of the men replied, "But I don't see how devices that small are supposed to take out targets that big. You'd need a photon torpedo to get through the armour."

"Let me worry about that." The Girl said, "All that matters is that the charges are in place."

"So how about you pay us?" the second man said and The Girl glanced at one of her fleshform guards.

"Pay them." she said and the silent figure reached down to pick up a metal case from the ground. Then it made its way towards the two men, towering over them both and holding out the case. The first man took the case that was offered with just one hand by the fleshform and even using both hands to hold it barely managed to avoid dropping it on his foot. As the fleshform retreated the man opened the case and both he and his partner looked at what was inside.

"You'll find the equivalent of two bricks of gold-pressed latinum in there, in smaller denominations of course, along with two kilograms of dilithium crystals, ten thousand Klingon darseks and fifteen thousand Cardassian lek. With that you should be able to buy or barter passage to anywhere in the quadrant you want to go."

"Not bad." the man said as he closed the case, "Now how about you double it?"

The Girl stared at him.

"If that is some sort of joke then-" she began.

"It's no joke." the second man interrupted, "The outpost has extensive defences including multi-spectrum dampening fields to prevent explosives being triggered remotely."

"Yes and we managed to get a look at the system protocol." the first man said, "So if you want those explosives to go off then you'll pay us for them."

The Girl smiled and looked at the outline of the Starfleet outpost on the horizon. Almost immediately there were two sudden flashes of light and seconds later the sound of the double explosions reached the hill on which they all stood.

"What the hell?" the second man said when he saw this, unable to believe that the explosive charges he and his partner had planted had been triggered remotely.

"Oh look at that." The Girl said, "The charges went off. Now remind me again, what do I need either of you two for now? Oh yes, nothing." then she looked at her bodyguards, "Kill them." she said.

Both men reached for their phasers but the fleshforms moved deceptively fast for their size and their weapons were knocked from their hands before they could be fired. Meanwhile The Girl turned around and began to walk away, the sound of the men's dying screams in her ears as she simply vanished into thin air.

"What's happening?" Edwards asked as he and Carr exited the turbolift onto the bridge together. Alert sirens were sounding and monitors indicated that the ship was at red alert.

"Multiple explosions have been reported at the Starfleet monitoring station on Beta Larris captain."

Lieutenant Commander T'Lan, the *Nightfall's* chief science officer told him as she got out of the central captain's chair to make room for him.

"What's our ETA?" Carr asked as she sat down beside Edwards.

"Four and a half hours commander." Hamilton answered from the helm station.

"Do we have any further information about the nature of the explosions?" Edwards said.

"Only that they appear to be the result of a terrorist attack." T'Lan said, "There are no reports of injuries yet though."

"We better be prepared just in case there are." Edwards said and he activated the intercom, "Doctor King, are you there?"

"This is sickbay." a man's voice replied, "I'm here. What's the situation?"

"Possible terrorist bomb attack on Beta Larris. Can you have sickbay ready to receive casualties if there are any?"

"Understood captain. I'll replicate supplies for dealing with blast and fragmentation injuries. Sickbay out." King said.

The door to the turbolift opened again and this time it was Cole and West who stepped out, both of them making their way to their stations and relieving the junior officers currently there. West quickly checked the

*Nightfall's* sensors and immediately noticed something amiss.

"Captain I'm picking up a lot of subspace activity for this region of space. None of it is directed at us but there's a lot of chatter." she reported.

"Like a larger terrorist network attempting to co-ordinate their actions?" Carr suggested.

"At least we're equipped to deal with large scale surface operations." Hamilton commented.

"Perhaps so lieutenant, but we require the permission of local planetary authorities before we can deploy Terran or Andorian ground troops." T'Lan pointed out.

"Captain I'm getting a distress signal." West said suddenly, "No wait, make that three – no four distress signals. Transport ships all reporting explosions. Three are internal and one has hit a mine."

Before Edwards could respond to this there was another alert from the tactical station.

"Captain the Neutral Zone sensor net is picking up multiple disturbances." Cole announced.

"Romulans?" Carr said, "Or Remans? Could they be behind these attacks?"

"Captain, a cloaked mine could theoretically be deployed across our border and not be picked up by the tachyon detection grid owing to its size." T'Lan pointed out.

"I need to speak to Starfleet command. Lieutenant West, get me a priority channel." Edwards said, "Continue on course for Beta Larris for now. Commander Carr, you have the bridge."

Edwards got out of his chair and headed for the ready room that adjoined the bridge. In there he sat at his desk and immediately activated the terminal on his desk. West had already established contact with Starbase Ten and not one but two admirals were ready to speak with him.

"Admiral Scott." Edwards said to the one of the pair that he recognised.

"Captain Edwards." he responded and then he looked at the Vulcan beside him, "I don't think you know Admiral Sarr do you? He commands the Fifth Fleet but was here to oversee the recent war games."

"We haven't met, no." Edwards said, "Admiral are you aware of the number of attacks reported in this sector? Plus the suspicious readings from the Neutral Zone?"

"Starbase Ten is the command centre for this region captain." Admiral Sarr said flatly, "We have detailed tactical readouts on everything that happens."

"We've received more than two dozen distress calls." Admiral Scott added, "I'm launching every ship we've got but we're still coming up short. I've put in a request to Admiral Janeway. I'm hoping that some of the ships involved in the war game are still close enough to be able to turn back. What is the *Nightfall's* status?"

"We should be at Beta Larris in just over four hours admiral." Edwards said, "But one of the distress signal's we've received suggests that there could be a minefield out there. Possibly laid by the Romulans or Remans sending them over the border."

"That would be a dangerous situation captain." Admiral Sarr said, "There have been intermittent raids into our territory by various Romulan and Reman factions during the course of their civil war but they have not attempted to mine shipping routes yet. Such action would undoubtedly lead to the Federation responding against them."

"Admiral I'd like to deploy my fighters to deal with the minefield." Edwards said, "They can set up a localised tachyon detection grid using probes and pick off the mines with their phasers. I'll send a runabout with them to deal with the ship itself."

"What about the *Nightfall* itself captain?" Admiral Sarr asked.

"We'll continue to Beta Larris to see what help we can be there." Edwards replied, "But if there is a cloaked fleet in the Neutral Zone we'll need help to fight it off without our fighter squadron."

"I'll send what help I can send but we're short handed captain." Admiral Scott said, "Beta Larris is your priority though. Don't risk taking on a squadron of warbirds alone."

"Understood admiral. But could you call ahead and try to get us permission to deploy our troops as soon as we arrive? It'll save time." Edwards said.

"Consider it done captain. Watch yourself out there." the admiral replied and then the transmission was ended.

Edwards got up to return to the bridge and as soon as he entered it he looked at Carr.

"Commander I need you to take a runabout to help the ship that reported striking a mine. Take Sublieutenant Nayal with you to advise on whether this is a result of a Romulan weapon and a couple of medical personnel to deal with any wounded but I'll need King here to help out at Beta Larris." he said, "Lieutenant West, please inform Lieutenant Commander White that his squadron is to escort Commander Carr's runabout to the transport and then undertake mine sweeping operations."

"Some EOD specialists could come in handy if there are more mines than the fighters can't deal with." Carr pointed out and Edwards nodded.

"Speak to Captain Heart." he said, "The MACOs have a team and I'm sure he can provide you with the men you need."

"Yes captain." Carr replied, getting out of her seat and heading for the turbolift as Edwards sat down.

The Girl had no need of bodyguards aboard the warbird given that she was here to meet another Iconian.



Her only concern was avoiding being seen by any other members of the Reman crew and the large size of fleshforms made them almost impossible to conceal. However, by coming here alone all she needed to do was sit in a chair with a high back and align it so that she faced away from the door to the compartment she waited in. This also allowed her to reveal her presence in a more dramatic manner when the agent she had come here to meet returned to his quarters.

"Shintar." she said, spinning the seat around as soon as she heard the door slid shut behind him.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed.

"Not pleased to see me then?" The Girl asked as she got out of the chair and walked up to the agent inhabiting a Reman body and she brushed her hand against his arm.

"My ships were ready to strike a decisive blow against the Romulans." Shintar said, "I could have stopped four factions from signing a peace deal."

"Oh Shintar you really do throw yourself into the role don't you?" The Girl said, "We can always assassinate a few Romulan diplomats later on to keep the war going. What we need right now are ships to draw out the *Nightfall* and you have them."

"Only three and this is the only major warship. The other two ships are destroyers. An Akira-class cruiser and its fighter squadron could-" Shintar began.

"The *Nightfall* has already been separated from its fighters and with any luck we'll be able to separate it from its ground troops as well. That will make dealing with it far easier." The Girl interrupted.

"What is it you want me to do?" Shintar asked.

"Why nothing really Shintar. Just have your ships hang around here, close enough to the Federation border that they'll be able to detect you on their tachyon detection grid. Maybe even with some of those gravitic sensors Starfleet has left lying around all over the place. When the time comes I'll signal you to cross the border and reveal your presence to local shipping. The *Nightfall* is the only Starfleet vessel within a dozen light years and that will bring it racing to the rescue. Of course you'll be long gone by the time they get here, having turned back across the border into the Neutral Zone."

"My crew may not like that." Shintar said, "They are eager for a fight and lurking around in space and doing nothing more than scaring freighter captains will not satisfy their blood lust."

"And what will Shintar?" The Girl asked.

"The *Nightfall*." he answered, "End all this protecting of the vessel because of your agent. If it's fighters have been drawn away then get them off the ship and let us destroy it."

"There is more than just our agent aboard that ship Shintar. The crew of the *Nightfall* have been able to take the body of another agent intact. If they study it too closely then the Federation could gain an understanding of our technology. Destroying the *Nightfall* is one option but we need to be certain that the body is aboard when it happens. Our first objective is to try and recover it but unless our agent aboard the ship can get it for us that requires a boarding party. Do you think you can explain to your Reman crew why they are being asked to steal a corpse only to hand it over to someone else?"

"No I could not." Shintar said, "But they need a victory. The Romulans are starting to settle their differences with one another and Reman worlds are suffering."

"Especially those home to the breeding camps when Romulan females are forced to bear the children of their Reman rapists I bet." The Girl commented and Shintar let out a low growl, "Just carry out your orders Shintar. Or I'll find someone else who will." and then she took a step backwards and disappeared into thin air.

"One day." Shintar said to himself, "I'll see that you regret taking a physical form again." then he activated the intercom.

"Yes Lord Shintar?" his first officer asked from the bridge of the warbird.

"Take us closer to the Federation border." Shintar ordered, "I want a better look at what is going on."

"But my Lord, Starfleet probably already knows that we are here. If we go closer-"

"I don't care about Starfleet!" Shintar snapped, "I said take us closer. Or should I find a new first officer who will carry out my orders?"

"I will do as you ask Lord Shintar." the first officer replied and Shintar abruptly shut off the intercom.

Captain Heart, the commanding officer of the MACO company stationed aboard the *USS Nightfall* stood in the ship's massive hangar watching the four man explosive ordnance disposal team loading their equipment onto the runabout.

"Thanks for this captain." Carr said as she walked up behind him accompanied by a pair of the *Nightfall's* junior medical staff and also a woman in a Romulan military uniform, "We'll get them back to you as soon as possible."

"Still alive hopefully. But based on this ship's history I wouldn't bet on it." the Romulan, Nayal, added.

"Don't worry. I'll be along with you to keep them and you safe." Heart replied and Carr looked at the medical officers.

"Get your equipment aboard." she told them before turning back towards Heart, "Captain I only need your EOD team."

"Maybe. But if you need a rifle squad then at least you'll have someone to lead it." Heart said.

"What about Beta Larris? Won't you be needed there?" Nayal asked.

"That relief mission? Shry's quite capable of taking command of both companies. My MACOs will happily follow an Andorian's orders. They are Earth's oldest allies after all."

"That's not what T'Lan says." Nayal responded.

"Oh yeah? Well next time she says that it's Vulcan you have my permission to ask her how many Vulcan ships tried to help defend Earth against the Xindi or during the later conflict between the Andorians and the Vulcans which side it was that fired on an Earth ship." Heart said and Nayal smiled.

"Don't." Carr said, sighing and she looked at Heart again, "Why can't you stop winding up T'Lan? Either of you?" and she looked back at Nayal

"Because it's fun?" Nayal said.

"And it wasn't the idea of the MACOs or Imperial Guard to name a dog after her." Heart added, prompting Carr to wince.

"I wasn't being serious." she said, "I just thought that-"

"Hey look," Nayal interrupted, "as much as I enjoying hearing suggestions on how to wind up my Vulcan cousin I'd really like to get this mission over with. Bradley and I need to celebrate his promotion properly."

"Good idea." Carr said and she started to walk towards the runabout before coming to a halt and without looking around she added, "Getting on with the mission I mean. Not Nayal and Hamilton's private activities." then she continued on her way while Heart and Nayal followed him.

"So are you and Bradley an actual couple now then?" Heart asked and Nayal snorted.

"Me and Bradley? No, of course not. I'm just using him for his body." she said.

"So not the massive collection of mint condition action figures?"

"No, not the action figures." Nayal replied but then she smiled and added, "Except the one of The Raptor. I like that one."

"Yeah, we all saw your costume from the convention." Heart said.

Exiting the *Nightfall* from the forwards launch door, Carr piloted the runabout into the middle of the the formation made up of the cruiser's twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters.

"Snowman we're in formation and ready to go." she signalled to Lieutenant Commander White, addressing the squadron leader by his call sign rather than his name and rank.

"Copy that commander." White responded from the cockpit of his fighter, "All torpedo launchers are loaded with probes for mine sweeping and our course is locked. We can go to warp five as soon as you give the word."

"The word is given Snowman. Warp speed." Carr replied as she reached out to the flight console in front of her and the runabout along with the fighter squadron jumped to warp.

"Runabout and escort squadron now at warp five captain." West reported and Edwards nodded.

With Carr gone Cole now occupied her usual seat while one of his subordinates filled in for him at tactical.

"Are we ready for warp?" he asked, looking at the helm station occupied by Hamilton.

"Yes commander. Course locked in and all systems ready." he replied.

"Engage." Edwards ordered and Hamilton smiled as he used the manual controls of his station to take the *Nightfall* to warp so rapidly that even the ship's inertial dampeners could not quite eliminate the acceleration force.

### 3.

In his office in sickbay King looked up from the scanner he had been looking into and sighed as he shook his head.

"Hamilton's obviously at the controls." he said to himself before he went back to looking into the scanner. Beneath the scanner lay a tiny device that was not of Federation origin. Made from the synthetic flesh King had removed this from the remains of an Iconian agent. That agent had been captured by Remans who had inadvertently discovered a means of preventing the Iconians from making use of their gateway technology to withdraw and it was King's belief that this was the device that enabled them to create their gateways.

Unfortunately even with an example of this device in his possession and with the assistance of Lieutenant Maximillian or Max for short, the *Nightfall's* Borg chief engineer, King had been unable to determine how it functioned. However, with full access to a complete corpse he was not beginning to make progress.

"We're ready for casualties." a female voice said from behind King and he looked over his shoulder to see the ship's emergency medical program standing in the doorway of his office. King preferred not to make use of the program where possible but with two of his staff sent on an away mission and with his research on the gateway device taking up a great deal of time he had opted to make use of it, "I was wondering," the EMH continued, "will I be needed on the surface of Beta Larris as well?"

"Absolutely not." King replied sternly, knowing that she was hoping to be transferred to the physical body that had been constructed for her by Max by T'Lan as an experiment with the Iconian synthetic flesh. By linking this to the computer running the EMH program she was able to operate in areas of the ship that lacked holoemitters or even leave the ship entirely as long as the link could be maintained. However, it was well known that advanced artificially intelligent systems such as and EMH could potentially become self aware if exposed to too much stimulus outside their specific area of expertise. Because of this Captain Edwards had ordered that the physical body was only to be used when absolutely necessary though he had stopped short of ordering its destruction, "I'll lead the medical team to the surface myself. You can stay here and deal with any cases I send up to you."

"Do you need any help with your research then?" the EMH asked, peering around King at the scanner,

"Perhaps my advanced processing could-"

"Computer deactivate emergency medical hologram." King said and the EMH vanished. The EMH's interest in being transferred to its physical body was not a good sign from the point of view of attempting to prevent self awareness and King made a mental note to inform Edwards when he made his next report but for now he had other things to be doing and he looked into the scanner again.

Something about the Iconian device was defying all his attempts to scan it. Probing it physically confirmed that there was a tiny solid core made from something other than the synthetic flesh. But whatever it was, the scanner could not lock onto it. Increasing the power of the scanner, King tried again but all that he got in response was an odd distortion on the scanner readout that became progressively worse as time went on. This reminded King of something and he shut off the scanner before tapping his combadge.

"King to T'Lan." he said.

"T'Lan here doctor. What can I do for you?" T'Lan responded.

"T'Lan I need your help with the gateway device. I'm having trouble scanning it and I thought you might be able to help."

"I shall be with you shortly doctor." T'Lan replied.

True to her word it was less than five minutes later that T'Lan entered sickbay and appeared in the doorway to King's office.

"Ah T'Lan, prompt as ever." he said, "Come and take a look at this." and he waved her towards the scanner.

Then as she sat down in front of it he reactivated the device and focused it as he had done before, letting the distortion build up.

"Interesting." T'Lan said.

"Look familiar to you T'Lan?"

"Yes doctor." T'Lan said as she lifted her head away from the scanner, "The manner in which the scanning signal is refracted and fed back is reminiscent of the block of silicon that was aboard the *Brilliant*."

King smiled.

"I thought so." he said, "Perhaps now we know why the Iconians wanted that stuff."

"Perhaps the material is used to help distort space to create a gateway." T'Lan said.

"But it still doesn't explain why I can't get this thing working." King replied, "Max identified the power input and I can turn it on. But the thing never triggers."

T'Lan frowned.

"Interesting." she said again.

"Yes, everything's interesting." King said, "It'd be a lot more interesting if it actually worked though."  
"No doctor, you have reminded me of an issue that Max and I had when we created the physical body for Emma." T'Lan said, using the nickname originally coined by Nikki that most of the crew now used to refer to the EMH. Doctor King was a notable exception to this though.  
"Seriously? Even you're calling the EMH that?" he said.  
"It is a useful means of relating to her." T'Lan replied and King sighed.  
"Those pills you're taking to try and get pregnant are turning you soft." he said, "So what does that body you and Max made have to do with this? You can't have tried to build a gateway system into it."  
"You are correct doctor, we did not." T'Lan said, "But we did examine the samples of synthetic flesh we had in as much detail as possible. The difficulty was that our most concentrated scans were disrupted by an unidentified component that seemed present throughout the bodies."  
"You think it was this stuff?" King asked and T'Lan nodded.  
"That is a logical conclusion." she said, "Perhaps the reason this device will not function is because it is incomplete."  
"It's just the control mechanism." King said as a smile spread across his face, "It needs to be plugged into the rest of the system to be able to generate a gateway."  
"Perhaps we should investigate this in relation to the complete body we have in secure storage." T'Lan suggested, "Though we will need the permission of Captain Edwards."  
"I'm game if you are." King responded.

"How does he do that?" Nayal asked, turning her chair around to face where Heart sat. The MACO officer's head was bowed and his eyes were closed despite the runabout being in flight.  
"Rebecca Edwards said something about being able to grab food and rest whenever possible just in case you have to go without either for an extended period." Carr replied, glancing over her shoulder at the motionless Heart.  
"Pass me that pen. I want to give him some glasses and a moustache." Nayal said, smiling and she pointed to a marker pen that rested on the flight console.  
"Nayal, don't." Carr said, wincing, "That's a permanent marker."  
"Permanent? You humans with your limited lifespan don't know permanent. It'll wear off as his skin cells die and get replaced." Nayal replied and with Carr refusing to hand her the pen she went to pick it up herself, "I'll just give him a small moustache anyway. Just under his nose like that ancient leader from your planet. He was called Heil something. He had a small moustache and shouted a lot."  
"Hitler?" Carr said, "Nayal, he was also responsible for the deaths of millions."  
"That's it. Heil Hitler." Nayal said, kneeling down in front of Heart and Carr sighed.  
"He was called Adolph, not Heil." she said.  
"No, people in the documentary I saw were definitely calling him Heil when they waved at him." Nayal said before she removed the pen cap with her teeth and leant in closer to Heart's face, "Mind you I wasn't paying too much attention to it. Bradley and I were-"  
"Surprise." Heart said as he unexpectedly opened his eyes and looked right at Nayal. In response the startled Romulan woman fell backwards, squealing for a moment before she coughed as she landed on the floor, "Are you okay down there?" Heart asked.  
"I swallowed the lid." Nayal gasped, "And the rest of the pen is inside me as well."  
"Serves you right for trying to sneak up on a MACO." Heart said, "Just because I look asleep it doesn't necessarily mean that I am."  
"I get it." Nayal said as she got back to her feet, the pen now in her hand again, "Now if you two will excuse me I need to go and see those two medical officers about expunging a pen lid."  
"Just bring it back. I don't have a spare." Heart called out after her as she left the bridge and Carr glared at him.  
"You left that on the console on purpose." she hissed, "You knew she'd try something like that." and Heart grinned at her.  
"Maybe I did." he said, "Or maybe someone else just left it there by accident and I had nothing to do with it. Of course now I've planted the idea in Nayal's head it'll drive her nuts trying to figure it out."  
"Thames this is Snowman." White's voice announced from the communication panel before Carr could respond to Heart and she reached for it.  
"Thames here Snowman. Go ahead." Carr said.  
"Commander I've got the transport on my sensors now. Looks like she's holding position." White told her.  
"Confirmed Snowman, I see it too. I'll try hailing them." Carr said as she saw the damaged transport ship on the sensor readout and then Carr attempted to hail the transport, "This is the *USS Thames*, do you read me?"  
"Yes *Thames*, this is the transport *Nolte*."  
"What is your situation *Nolte*?" Carr asked.

"We have struck a gravitic mine. Our hull is compromised and we have several minor casualties. The mine does not appear to have detonated but the captain has ordered us to hold position until we can be sure that it has been disarmed and there are no more mines in striking range."

"Understood *Nolte*. I'll have our fighters begin mine sweeping now." Carr said before switching back to the channel established with White's fighter, "Snowman are you ready to begin mine sweeping?"

"Affirmative commander." White replied, "Commencing now."

In the cockpit of his fighter White brought the vessel's weapon systems on line. Normally the fighter carried a pair of phaser emitters and an internal magazine of photon torpedoes. However, for this mission the torpedoes had been replaced with automated probes that could be controlled by the launching fighter. Launched en masse, these probes could produce a web of directed tachyon transmissions between them that would reveal any cloaked objects that disrupted the beams of the web.

"This is Snowman to all fighters." White broadcast to his squadron, "Deploy probes."

All twelve pilots immediately launched all of the probes carried aboard their fighters. These spread out to form a pattern more than half a million kilometres across before the tachyon emitters activated and the detection grid went live.

"*Thames* this is Snowman. Tachyon detection grid is deployed and transmitting. I'll let you know if we find anything." White signalled.

"Understood Snowman. We need a path to the *Nolte*. How long before that can be achieved?" Carr asked in response and White checked his instruments.

"The probes should reach her in about three minutes. If there are no mines between here and there you'll be free to proceed." White told her.

The swarm of probes sped towards the stationary transport ship, projecting their tachyon streams and feeding the results of the sweep back to the following fighters. If there were any disruptions in the streams or if any of the probes actually struck a mine then the fighters would be ready with their phasers to destroy it. However, as the probes closed in on the transport and then passed right by it they picked up nothing out of the ordinary, only the transport itself causing any disruption to the tachyon beams.

"*Thames* you are cleared to approach the transport." White reported, "We'll continue our sweep."

"Understood Snowman. Good hunting." Carr responded and then she looked at Heart, "Go tell the others to get up here. We'll beam over and see what we can do to help." and Heart nodded as he got out of his seat.



"Let me get this straight." Edwards said as King, T'Lan and Max all stood in front of him on the bridge, "You want to shut down the jamming field protecting the corpse, the only complete example we've ever had our hands on, so that you can try and trigger its gateway device?"

"That is correct captain." Max said, "Doctor King and T'Lan believe that they have discovered the key to the device's operation."

"Which is?" Cole asked.

"The mineral that was recovered from the *Brilliant*." T'Lan said, "There may be small amounts of it spread throughout the body contained within the synthetic flesh used to enhance its capabilities."

"It looks like the stuff is good for more than just being used as a data conduit." King added.

"This may also explain why the jamming technology discovered by the Remans functions." Max said, "The energy emissions resonate within the material in a specific way that prevents the intended distortion of space-time."

"How do we know whether or not the Iconians will detect your activating the gateway?" Cole said.

"Good point. I'd hate to have them be able to seize the body right back." Edwards added.

"Captain I propose only deactivating the jamming field for a short period of time." Max replied, "Our initial tests will involve searching for the distinctive resonance created by a tricorder. If that is present then a physical probing may reveal more."

"Does that mean someone will have to be in the room while the jamming field is active?" Edwards asked, well aware that prolonged exposure to the energy field required to disrupt Iconian gateway technology was hazardous.

"I will be the only one inside the field while it is active captain." Max replied, "I can shield myself against the radiation and if there is any cellular damage then my nanites can repair the damage before it become too extensive."

"Captain, our understanding of the jamming technique we obtained from the Remans is limited." T'Lan added, "There is also the possibility that if we can increase our understanding of how the Iconian gateway technology functions then we could also determine a safer method of disrupting it."

"Not flooding the ship with potentially deadly radiation is a definite plus point." King commented.

"Very well. You have my permission to access the body." Edwards replied.

"Perhaps we should increase security. Just in case we get some uninvited guests." Cole suggested and Edwards nodded.

"Co-ordinate with Captain Shry to provide as many guards as you think are needed." he said and Cole got to his feet to join King, T'Lan and Max as they headed for the turbolift.

"Captain I've got a priority signal coming in from the border detection grid." West announced suddenly,

"Three cloaked vessels just tried to run the net."

"Did they get through?" Edwards asked and West nodded.

"They ignored the automated warnings and carried on through to our territory." she said.

"Any ID on them?" Edwards said.

"No captain. But the readings indicated one larger vessel and a pair of smaller ones." West answered.

"A raiding party?" Hamilton commented, "Captain, there are a number of commercial vessels operating in the area that would be defenceless against those ships."

"Damn." Edwards muttered, "Lieutenant West, get me the government of Beta Larris."

"Yes captain, putting you through now." West replied and moments later the main viewscreen dominating the front wall of the bridge changed from the star field ahead of the *Nightfall* to the interior of an office where a senior member of the government on Beta Larris sat. Edwards frowned when he saw the low quality of the picture and he looked at West.

"Can you do anything about that interference?" he asked.

"No captain, the problem is at their end. There must be a problem with their long range communications." she replied.

"It'll just have to do then." Edwards said and he turned his attention back to the image on the main view screen, "This is Captain Edwards of the *USS Nightfall*."

"Edwards, I'm Minister Fall, I'm in charge of our planetary security ministry. The Prime Minister isn't available now but he has authorised me to speak with you." the woman in the office said.

"Minister can you tell me what the situation is there?"

"Stable. We've had no further attacks but there was a lot of damage. We need your personnel to help with the relief operation captain." Minister Fall told him.

"Minister I want to be able to deploy our contingent of ground troops to your planet for the duration of the

operation.” Edwards said and the woman stared back at him from the screen.

“These aren't Starfleet personnel are they?” she said.

“No minister. I have one company from Earth and another from Andoria.”

“Starfleet warned us that you might be deploying them for short periods where needed. Having the presence of foreign troops on the streets more permanently could prove destabilising.” the minister said, “The media will take it as a sign that the investigation is being handed over to the core worlds rather than being dealt with by us.”

“I realise that it may pose some difficulties minister,” Edwards replied, “but we've got reports of unidentified vessels crossing into Federation territory from the Neutral Zone close to us and there are no other Starfleet vessels in the area that can deal with them. By deploying my troops to your planet entirely I can take the *Nightfall* to deal with them before they can threaten shipping.”

“I tell you what captain, there's an orbital facility you can transfer your troops to. They can deploy from there as needed.” Minister Fall suggested, “Will you be able to provide them with shuttles?”

“They have their own drop ships.” Edwards replied, “We'll leave them with you as well.”

The gravitic mine was caught against the hull of the *Nolte*. When the transport ship had come close enough to the cloaked mine it had used a tractor beam to latch onto the vessel and pulled itself in at high speed so that the sheer force of the impact had punctured the hull and damaged some of the systems inside. However, the warhead that ought to have been powerful enough to tear the entire ship wide open and kill all of its crew had failed to detonate on impact as it was designed to do and now the mine was wedged within the hole it had created.

The bulk of the mine remained outside the ship and so the team from the *Nightfall* made their way across the hull in space suits, those worn by the MACOs including more armour plating than the Starfleet versions worn by Carr and Nayal. As they approached they could clearly see the main body of the mine embedded in the ship's hull with its short duration warp drive located behind the warhead. Only the forward section that consisted of targeting system and tractor beam were out of sight, hidden by the *Nolte*'s hull.

“It's a Romulan mine alright.” Nayal said, “My planet laid thousands of these to defend ourselves. Not that it did much good mind you, we still had to evacuate.”

“Perhaps they were faulty as well.” Heart commented.

“What do you mean faulty?” Nayal asked.

“I think he means that this was supposed to explode.” Carr answered before Heart could say anything.

“Let's just be thankful it didn't.” Heart said and he looked at the EOD team, “Okay, check it out. Tell me why we can stand here barely five metres from this thing without it having gone off.”

The EOD team moved forwards slowly and began to study the mine. Just in case the electronics inside the mine reacted to any active scanning beams the initial inspection was carried out using only basic physical probes and handheld magnifying lenses that required no power. This revealed no active electronics inside the mine at all.

“There's no power here captain.” one of the EOD technicians reported.

“That can't be right.” Nayal said, “There has to be something to keep the warhead contained.”

The gravitic mine was little more than a photon torpedo warhead fitted with a cloaking device, warp drive and a tractor beam. This meant that it required a stable magnetic field to contain the antimatter that fuelled its warp drive as well as providing the explosive power for its warhead.

“Nayal, could this thing have expended all of its antimatter in getting here?” Carr asked.

“No.” Nayal replied, “As you can see the impact force alone of the mine is insufficient to destroy a ship.

Therefore, the mines will always conserve enough antimatter to produce a sizeable detonation.”

“Sergeant I want the computer core of this removed.” Heart said but then he looked at Nayal and added, “Is this type fitted with any booby traps?” he asked her.

“Of course.” Nayal replied, “But they all work by triggering the warhead.”

“Okay you heard the lady.” Heart told the EOD team, “Get to work.”

Now that they were confident that the mine was not about to explode the EOD team worked quickly to open up the casing and remove the main computer core. Heart took this from the team leader and it turned handed it to Nayal.

“There you go sub-lieutenant.” he said, “See what you can make of that.”

Leaving the EOD team to dismantle the mine, Carr, Heart and Nayal returned to the waiting *Thames* where Carr and Nayal began to study the computer core taken from the mine.

“I thought you two ladies might want something to eat and drink.” Heart said, entering the runabout's cockpit with a tray in his hand.

“Thank you captain.” Carr replied with a smile, “Your timing couldn't be better.”

“I have raktajino for the commander,” Heart said as he handed Carr a mug of steaming liquid, “and hot mollusc soup for the sub-lieutenant.”

“What, no hot chocolate or kali-fal?” Nayal asked as she took the mug offered to her by Heart and he smiled.

"No, I didn't think getting you drunk was a good idea." he said.

"Whatever Bradley has told you is a vicious lie." Nayal replied.

"So how is this going?" Heart asked as he took the third mug from the tray for himself and then set it along with the plate of food still on it down on an inactive console.

"The mine's log indicates that it had a full load of antimatter when it was launched." Carr told him, "But for some reason it ejected all of its remaining fuel at the exact moment that it activated its tractor beam and de-cloaked."

"Its targeting system must have been modified as well." Nayal added, "If your bomb disposal people can manage to remove it intact then I'd like to see it."

"Modified how?" Heart asked.

"Its range has been massively extended." Nayal told him, "Plus there's a secondary targeting routine in here that I don't fully understand."

"It looks more like torpedo guidance than a mine." Carr added, "I don't think that this ship just happened to wander into the targeting range of a cloaked mine. I think that the mine was deliberately launched towards it."

"Why? I've seen the manifest. There's nothing aboard this ship worth targeting it for." Heart pointed out. Then he groaned, "Unless someone deliberately wanted to bring us here." he added.

"To separate us from the *Nightfall* while it went to Beta Larris." Carr agreed and she reached for the runabout's communications, "Snowman do you read me?" she transmitted.

"This is Snowman, reading you loud and clear." White responded.

"Commander, how's the sweep looking?" Carr asked.

"It's looking blank." White told her, "We haven't found a single mine within a million kilometres of the freighter. I think we could be looking at a stray here commander."

"Trust me Snowman, that mine was anything but stray." Carr responded, "At maximum warp how long would it take you to get back to the *Nightfall*?"

"The *Nightfall* was moving much faster than us commander." White pointed out, "At warp eight it would take half an hour just to get back to where we left them and they'll be at Beta Larris at any moment. On the other hand it'll take us at least another twelve hours or so to get there. Longer if we're escorting you."

"Whatever someone has planned I doubt one runabout with the few of us inside is going to make much difference." Heart commented and Carr nodded in agreement.

"Then we'll just have to sit this one out." she said before returning to the communication channel to White's fighter, "Snowman break off your sweep and head for Beta Larris at maximum warp."

"What about you commander?" White said.

"We'll remain here to help the crew of the *Nolte* get their ship up and running again." Carr responded.

"Acknowledged commander. Squadron returning to base, Snowman out." White said and then the channel was cut off.

Meanwhile White switched to his squadron communication net and addressed the other fighters.

"All ships break off, this looks like a trick to draw us away from the *Nightfall*. We're heading back to the ship now. Set course one nine six mark zero four and accelerate to warp eight on my mark." he ordered.

"But Snowman, we're not carrying torpedoes. Our magazines were loaded with probes for this op." one of the other pilots pointed out.

"I'm aware of that." White responded, "If the *Nightfall* is already engaged then we'll just have to do what we can with our phasers. Now lay in that course and engage at warp eight."



"All the equipment is loaded and the troops will be aboard in about five minutes." Captain Shry said as the Andorian stood with Edwards watching the Imperial Guard and MACOs boarding their assault shuttles. There were only enough of these to transport half of the ground troops stationed aboard the *USS Nightfall* so the rest were to be transported the final leg of the journey to Beta Larris aboard the heavy lifting shuttles meant for transporting their surface vehicles as well as an assortment of Starfleet shuttles also carried by the *Nightfall*. The remaining runabout, the *USS Severn* had been configured for use as a mobile surgical unit and all of Doctor Kings staff apart from himself and the EMH would be travelling with the ground troops to Beta Larris to help with the relief effort. Unlike the ground troops, the Starfleet medical personnel would be able to land directly on the planet without needing the specific permission of the local government.

"All MACO personnel and equipment loaded and ready to go." Rebecca Edwards reported as she marched up to the two senior officers and saluted.

"Excellent." Shry replied, "It looks like the Imperial Guard aren't far behind so we'll be launching soon. Pass the word."

"Yes captain." Rebecca replied. Then she looked at Edwards and smiled at him, "With your permission captain." she added.

"Permission granted lieutenant." Edwards responded and as she turned away and headed back towards her shuttle he looked at Shry, "So how's she doing?" he asked.

"Your daughter is doing just fine captain. You can afford to be proud of her." Shry told him.

"More proud of myself." Edwards said, "I warned her about her educational choices but she chose the arty route instead. Still, at least she listened to me about getting a shuttle pilot's licence. Plus I've got this now as well." and he tapped his combadge, "Computer replay audio file Edwards One. Hangar PA system."

"You were right dad." Rebecca's voice suddenly said from the speakers inside the hangar and Rebecca winced as she was climbing into her ship. Looking around she saw Edwards smile and wave at her.

"Is it considered mutiny to use this ship's weapons to shoot my father?" she asked her co-pilot and the man in a sergeant's uniform shrugged.

"I'm not sure lieutenant." he answered, "We're not Starfleet so it might not count."

The *USS Nightfall* dropped out of warp on the outer edge of the Beta Larris system about three and a half light hours away from the primary inhabited planet. In the hangar the various shuttles were already arranged in a launching pattern allowed them to speed out of the front of the hangar into space as soon as the massive forward doors were opened. On the *Nightfall's* bridge Edwards monitored the deployment, watching the small craft fly away from the cruiser on the main viewscreen while the heads up display of the headset he wore gave him a running tally of launches. Each pilot in turn confirmed their exit from the hangar and Edwards smiled when he heard his daughter's voice come through clearly.

"Clear of hangar. Course locked in for Beta Larris. Engaging full impulse power." she said.

After the rest of the *Nightfall's* auxiliary craft had left the hangar West looked up from her console.

"All craft clear of the hangar captain." she reported and Edwards nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Hamilton, is our course set?" he said.

"Yes captain. Course for the Neutral Zone set. ETA at warp nine is three and a half hours." Hamilton said.

"Engage at warp nine commander." Edwards ordered and Hamilton smiled as the *Nightfall* accelerated rapidly.

As the ship went into warp West glanced down at her own console and noticed a small section of it that had been isolated from the rest. Like all Starfleet control interfaces her console was fully customisable and many officers created their own console layouts that reflected their specific duties and personal preferences but West could not remember adding that particular section to her preferred layout. The set of controls contained within it obviously related to the *Nightfall's* communication system and at the bottom there was a simple status report.

TRANSMISSION SENT.

Glancing around to see whether anyone was taking an interest in what she was doing West then deleted this part of her display layout.

With the *Nightfall's* ground troops all deployed it fell to the ship's contingent of Starfleet security to protect the body of the Iconian agent and there were four of them armed with phaser rifles standing guard outside the storage room where it was kept when King, T'Lan and Max arrived. All three officers also carried phasers just in case their experiments triggered a response from the Iconians.

"Commander Cole told us to expect you." one of the guards said as he turned around and began to enter a

security code into the keypad beside the sealed door.

"I will proceed inside alone." Max said to King and T'Lan, "I recommend that you set your terminal up over there and I will transmit my observations to it." and he pointed to a table opposite the doorway. T'Lan nodded in response and as Max went inside the storeroom and the door closed behind him she placed a portable computer terminal on the table and activated it.

"Terminal access to ship's data network confirmed." she said.

"Good." King replied and he tapped his combadge, "Okay Max, we're all set up here. You can start when ready."

"Understood commander." Max responded from inside the storeroom and he looked down at the body. The temperature inside the storage container housing the body had been kept low to prevent the already necrotic tissue of the agent's host body from decaying and when Max opened it up there was a hiss of escaping air and a rush of cold from inside, "I am shutting down the jamming field now." he added, linking his Borg implants directly to the storeroom's environmental control systems.

"Confirmed." T'Lan said, "Jamming field is now deactivated. Radiation emission levels are at normal background levels."

"I am beginning my scans now." Max said and he reached down to the body to lift up one of its arms. He then leant in closer to the hand and began to focus the scanning apparatus that had replaced one of his eyes on it. Immediately Max saw minor fluctuations in the returns where minute parts of the synthetic flesh that ran throughout the body defied his implant's ability to scan it. On earlier occasions when Max had been studying the make up of the synthetic flesh he had ignored what he took to be a trivial level of noise but now he focused his scanning implant on the source of this distortion and increased the strength of the scans. Max flinched as all of a sudden there was a power spike inside his implant and he felt a jolt of pain.

"Doctor, lieutenant commander, can you tell me what you made of that last scan?" he asked.

"Yes lieutenant," T'Lan replied, "the distortion was reminiscent of that I encountered aboard the Brilliant when using my tricorder to try and scan the block we recovered. What did you discover?"

"That the distortion created is capable of bypassing my implant's built in buffer systems to create a mild synaptic shock." Max said and King smiled.

"Take two aspirin and call me in the morning." he commented.

"Do you really think he requires medical attention doctor?" T'Lan asked.

"I believe that that was the good doctor's attempt at humour." Max told her and King frowned.

"Wow. Tough crowd." he said, "I'll leave the jokes to Hamilton instead."

"Lieutenant Maximillian, perhaps you should proceed with the next phase of the test." T'Lan suggested.

"Understood." Max replied, "I am interfacing with the control mechanism now." and a pair of narrow tubes extended from his fist to connect with the back of the body's head. These injected a stream of nanites into the body which proceeded to make their way to the part of the brain that housed the suspected gateway control mechanism and once there they connected to the input terminals, "Powering up now." Max said. Right away an alarm sounded and behind Max the door slid open to reveal the four security guards all aiming their phaser rifles towards him.

"Max I think you just triggered the gateway detection system." King said.

"Agreed." T'Lan added, "This suggests that our hypothesis about the functionality of the control unit and the silicon structure is correct."

"T'Lan what's going on down there?" Cole's voice asked from her combadge, "We just got a warning that there was a gateway forming. Is everything okay?"

"The situation is perfectly satisfactory lieutenant commander. Lieutenant Max has successfully powered up the gateway system inside the body. That is the source of the alarm" T'Lan explained.

"Good." Cole said, "I was just on the verge of sending the rest of my security staff down there."

"That will not be necessary lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "Now that we have confirmed the relationship between the silicon material and the gateway technology we shall continue with our study of it. T'Lan out." and she deactivated her combadge before looking at Doctor King, "With your permission of course commander." she said.

"Be my guest." King replied.

"Why did you summon me?" The Girl asked when she re-entered the virtual world to address her superiors.

"A gateway was detected." one of the gathered intelligences told her, "It was imperfect and unstable but it was obviously an attempt to form a gateway."

"The Federation must already be learning to use our technology." another of the intelligences added.

"You were ordered to prevent this." a third said.

"Yes and I'm working on it." The Girl replied, "We have successfully separated the *Nightfall* from its fighter support and also most of its ground forces. Now Shintar is drawing the ship towards the fringes of Federation space where our dreadnoughts can deal with it."

"Our dreadnoughts are valuable." an Iconian intelligence pointed out.

"It was this body that told me use whatever resources I needed." The Girl pointed out, "I have three dreadnoughts on standby to deploy as soon as we can be sure that the *Nightfall* is beyond help. They'll disable the ship and then we'll send a boarding party aboard."

"We expected you to simply board the ship with overwhelming numbers." one of the intelligences said.

"According to our agent aboard the ship the crew have put in place both a detection system to warn them of gateways as they form and also a jamming system that can block them. Without knowing how long it takes between detecting a gate and disrupting it we cannot risk sending a boarding party directly aboard the ship. A force of combat constructs and fleshforms can be deployed from a dreadnought instead once the *Nightfall* has been disabled. They will make sure that the body of our agent is recovered."

"Why not just destroy the *Nightfall*?"

"Because we need visual confirmation that the body has been destroyed." The Girl answered, "Nothing else will do. Our agent has indicated that the body is probably still aboard but has not been able to confirm this by sight. The crew know they have a mole aboard and so I cannot discount the possibility that there may have been some subterfuge and the body secretly removed. If we destroy the ship then we will never know if the body was destroyed with it or if it was never aboard to begin with. My way we will know for certain that the job is done. Also although you told me to expend any resource necessary I am not willing to waste anything unnecessarily. My plan is to leave a handful of the crew alive. That way our agent aboard the vessel can be spared and Starfleet will not be suspicious that they were the only survivor."

"Very well. You have our permission to proceed." one of the intelligences said and The Girl opened her eyes to find herself back in what passed for the real world to the Iconians.

Shintar felt something vibrating in his pocket and he knew that it was the device he had set up to alert him if a gateway formed in his quarters. Only one individual ever dared to come aboard his vessel unannounced and he snarled at the thought of having to deal with her again. He was tempted to let The Girl wait while he oversaw the approach of his squadron to the Federation shipping lanes where several civilian vessels had been detected. Long range sensors had also detected a Starfleet Akira-class cruiser heading towards the Neutral Zone at high speed and Shintar knew that this vessel was the *USS Nightfall* that was the target of The Girl's current scheme. Already some of his bridge crew had voiced their eagerness to engage a Starfleet vessel and Shintar knew that they would not take it well when they were inevitably told to withdraw.

"Lord Shintar, where are you going?" the warbird's first officer asked when Shintar got his feet and headed for the exit from the bridge.

"The bridge is yours." Shintar told him, "Maintain our course and speed and let me know if the Starfleet vessel does anything."

Exiting the bridge, Shintar made his way directly to his quarters and made his way inside. As soon as he sealed the door behind him The Girl stepped into view from in his bathroom.

"Well?" Shintar asked.

"The crew of the *Nightfall* are running tests on the gateway system in the body of our agent." she told him.

"Let me guess, you're here to tell me to be ready to return to the Neutral Zone at short notice." Shintar replied, "My ships could destroy the *Nightfall* and take that body back. I'll destroy it myself."

"No Shintar, our own forces will carry out the attack. Yours are merely bait. I want you to draw the *Nightfall* towards the Kerous system. It's only two light years from here."

"Kerous is unstable." Shintar pointed out.

"Yes I know. The emissions from the star will limit its ability to call for help." The Girl replied.

"They will also interfere with our cloaking devices. Our ships will be visible to their sensors." Shintar said.

"Which since you won't be engaging them shouldn't a problem." The Girl said, "Now go and tell your little Reman minions to find the nearest Federation freighter. Make it look like you're going to attack but withdraw giving the crew the opportunity to track your course to Kerous." and then before Shintar could respond she turned around and disappeared once more.

Shintar snarled and then unlocked the door to his quarters, returning to the bridge again.

"What is the nearest Federation transport ship?" he asked.

"There is a class three neutronic fuel tanker here at two four six mark twelve Lord Shintar." his first officer replied, pointing to a large tactical display, "But its course is taking it away from us at warp four point six. That means that we will be able to intercept this vessel sooner." and he pointed to a stationary trace.

"What is that ship?" Shintar asked.

"A freighter. It's transponder identifies it as the *Nolte*." the first officer said, "I think that it is the ship that our gravitic mine targeted but I do not understand why it was not destroyed."

Shintar remained silent, not wanting to reveal to the crew the alterations he had made to the mine's operating system that had rendered it almost useless as a weapon. However, he also knew that the purpose of attacking the freighter had been to draw the *Nightfall's* fighters away from the cruiser. Then he smiled as he realised that the presence of a squadron of fighters would give him all the excuse he needed to withdraw his ships.

"Lay in a course for this *Nolte*." he said, "Let us see if there is anything aboard worth taking."

Dropping out of warp in the Beta Larris system, White and his squadron not only detected no signs of the *USS Nightfall* but also no indications of trouble. There was considerable shuttle activity in the upper atmosphere and low orbit as the vessels zipped back and forth moving personnel and supplies needed for the task of repairing the damage done during the recent bombings.

Having been flying for a long time by this point White ordered his pilots to make for the primary space station that orbited the primary planet of the Beta Larris system and they were given immediate clearance to land aboard it. As he climbed out of his fighter's cockpit White was approached from behind by Captain Shry.

"We weren't expecting you commander." Shry said.

"The mine was a dud." White replied, "Intentionally so it looks like and there was just the one so Commander Carr figured that it was a trick to separate us from the *Nightfall*. She ordered us back here at full speed while she stayed behind to help out with what little damage there was to the freighter."

"Well the *Nightfall*'s gone to investigate a force of cloaked ships that crossed the border." Shry told White, "Captain Edwards left all of us ground troops here to help out with the relief effort and then took the *Nightfall* to the border."

"I don't like the sound of this." White said, "We were sent off on a wild goose chase after a minefield that doesn't exist and now the *Nightfall* has abandoned most of its fighting troops. We need to get a message to the captain."

Shry snorted.

"Can't." he said and White frowned.

"Why not?"

"Because amongst the targets hit by the terrorists was the planet's long range communications system. We can send a signal about three or four light years at most. If the *Nightfall* was trying to initiate communications and established a subspace link then that could be boosted by a light year or two but right now the ship is out of range. We can't even reach the nearest subspace relay station." Shry explained and White groaned.

"And let me guess," he said, "the ship left at maximum speed."

"Near enough. Warp nine." Shry said.

"Which means that since my fighters aren't equipped for long range communications either, unless they change course in just the right way then they're moving way too fast for us to catch up with them." White replied.

"Lord Shintar the freighter is within weapons range." Shintar's first officer reported as Shintar studied the image of the helpless freighter on the screen. With its hull breached the ship could not maintain a stable warp field and there were crew members in space suits visible at work attempting to repair this. More significant though was the presence of a second much smaller vessel on the far side of the freighter from the warbird. This was too small to make out clearly but it was obviously another ship.

"Show me that other vessel." Shintar said and the image on the screen shifted to show the *Thames*, "A Starfleet runabout." he hissed, annoyed that the expected squadron of fighters was nowhere to be seen, "What is its status?"

"Its weapons are offline and its shields are lowered." the first officer said, checking the nearby tactical panel, "Should we destroy it?"

Shintar smiled, knowing that this offered him the chance to give his crew a taste of blood without disobeying his orders.

"Yes." he responded, "Destroy that ship and prepare to board the freighter."

The *Thames* was positioned just a few hundred metres away from the *Nolte* and its occupants were taking turns in monitoring the process of making repairs to the freighter. Bored with what had become a tedious task, Nayal supported her head in her hands as she watched the sensor readouts and sighed. However, it was then that she noticed an odd variation in the sensor readings. Recognising this as the tell tale signature of a cloaked vessel deactivating its cloaking device in close proximity to the runabout and instinctively she slammed her hand down on the control to raise the runabout's shields.

Nayal was just in time and even as the runabout's shields went up the space in front of the runabout blurred as a massive D'deridex-class warbird de-cloaked and fired its disruptors at the tiny vessel. The impact of the energy blasts caused the runabout to shake as the warbird flew overhead so close that Nayal could make out the warning signs printed on the hull near key systems and emergency access points.

"Llhusra!" she snapped, "Where did that veruul learn to fly?"

"What's going on?" Carr exclaimed as she and Heart burst into the cockpit.

"We've got guests. Look." Nayal responded and she pointed out of one of the side viewports to where the warbird was circling around, "They shot at us."

"You got our shields up." Heart commented and Nayal nodded, "That was some quick thinking."

"I noticed the distortion just as they were de-cloaking. I think that they've been running their cloak too hot. Too much power consumed and the excess can't be hidden properly." she said.

"I'm transferring power to weapons." Carr said as she also engaged the runabout's impulse drive and the ship moved forwards.

"Err, you do know that warbird is about two hundred times our size don't you?" Nayal said and Carr smiled.

"Plus they've got company." Heart added as two smaller vessels, each one about half the size of the *Nightfall* appeared.

"Yes but their shields are still down and that gives me an idea." Carr replied, "Remember the ending of that movie Hamilton had us watch when it was his last turn for crew movie night?"

"You mean the one with the soldiers wearing that white armour he's got a set of in his quarters? Nayal asked and Carr nodded.

"That's the one." she said.

"Oh no." Nayal replied as she saw Carr was flying the runabout directly towards the D'deridex-class warbird.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Heart added just as Carr piloted the runabout into the large gap between the upper and lower hulls of the warbird. The tiny vessel then lurched again as Carr performed a sharp turn, bringing it around to match the warbird's heading.

"Let's see them try shooting at us now." Carr said, smiling, "Just don't tell Bradley I did this, okay?"

"Agreed." Nayal replied, "Problem is that if we shoot at them we'll just blow up along with them."

"Not if we target those destroyers." Heart suggested.

"My thoughts exactly." Carr said.

One moment the runabout had been right in front of Shintar's warbird and the next it was gone

"What happened?" Shintar demanded, "Where did that Starfleet vessel go?"

"My lord, it appears to be sheltering within our superstructure." the first officer reported.

"What? Which krelidanni fool allowed that to happen? Why weren't our shields raised?" Shintar demanded furiously.

"My lord, we were cloaked. I did not think-" the crewman responsible for the warbirds defensive system

began but before he could finish Shintar launched himself across the bridge at him, grabbing him by the throat and pressing him up against the bulkhead behind him.

"No, you did not think." Shintar said just as he plunged a blade into the abdomen of the Reman, aiming for his heart.

"Lord Shintar! Look!" the first officer suddenly called out and Shintar dropped the dead Reman to the floor as he turned around to see the distinctive red of a Starfleet phaser beam on the main view screen as it shot towards one of the destroyers in Shintar's squadron.

Unlike Shintar's warbird, the destroyer had its shields raised when it was struck by the phaser beam and although the point of impact glowed brightly the ship came away without any structural damage.

"Are we supposed to allow Starfleet to attack our ships while we shelter them?" Shintar yelled, "Get us away from that ship."

"Yes my lord." the helmsman responded.

The warbird shifted suddenly around the runabout as it began to move off and Carr reacted quickly to try and follow this manoeuvre.

"I think they know we're here." Heart said.

"Yes but I can't keep us here forever." Carr replied, "But at least their attention is focused on us rather than the *No'te*. Maybe we can keep it that way." and she suddenly transferred as much power as she could to the runabout's impulse drive. Rather than matching the manoeuvres of the warbird this caused the runabout to shoot out from inside its superstructure, directly towards one of the destroyers and before the warship's crew could react Carr performed a strafing run along the entire length of it.

With its shields raised the destroyer was able to withstand most of the phaser blasts but by the time the runabout reached the stern of the ship its shields had been weakened by the repeated hits to the point where a shot got through and struck the destroyer's hull close to its impulse drive. The runabout then shuddered as a disruptor blast from the other destroyer struck its aft section and Heart looked at the console in front of him. "If I'm reading this right then the port side nacelle is venting plasma." he said.

"That's going to compromise our warp capability." Carr replied, "Hang on." and she performed another sharp turn that pressed the occupants of the runabout into the padding of their seats. The turn took the *Thames* around the hull of the damaged destroyer, keeping the tiny craft within a hundred metres of the warship so that the other ships would have difficulty targeting it.

"Lord Shintar, the pilot of that runabout keeps his vessel too close." the warbird's weapons' officer said and Shintar knew that this was his opportunity.

"It's warp drive is damaged." he said, "We will withdraw." and the bridge crew looked at him in amazement.

"My lord there is only one Starfleet vessel and-" the first officer began before Shintar interrupted him.

"One Starfleet vessel that could become many. The damage to our destroyer was a fluke and we will inevitably destroy that runabout eventually. But there is no guarantee that we will be able to accomplish that in time to be able to seize the freighter and steal its cargo as well before Starfleet reinforcements arrive. That Akira-class cruiser could be carrying fighters as well and they would be a match for us." Shintar said forcefully. Then he called out a star chart on a nearby display and gave the appearance of studying all of the viable destinations in the area when in fact he already knew that he would be ordering his ships to Kerous, "There." he said, pointing out the Kerous system to his first officer, "We will go there."

"But my lord, conditions at Kerous are harsh. Our cloaking devices and shields will-" the first officer began.

"Is every one of my orders to be questioned?" Shintar yelled, "You forget your place. Now engage the cloak and lay in a course for the Kerous system at warp eight. Have our destroyers do the same."

The first officer was about to recommend that the squadron's speed be kept to warp six or less to guarantee that they could not be tracked but given Shintar's apparent mood and the fact that he had already killed one of the bridge crew he had second thoughts.

"Signal the squadron. All ships set course to the Kerous system. Warp eight." he said.

"What are they doing?" Heart said when he saw all three enemy vessels turn in the same direction.

"Their shields are dropping." Carr added.

"They're about to cloak. They're retreating." Nayal said and right on cue all three attacking ships blurred and then faded into nothing.

"I've still got them on sensors." Carr said, "They're pulling away at warp eight."

"Warp eight?" Nayal exclaimed, "What are they thinking. At that speed they must know that we can track them."

"Where are they heading?" Heart asked.

"Back towards the neutral Zone sort of." Carr told him, "Their heading is one-four-one mark thirty. That will take them to the Kerous system."

"I'm not familiar with that system." Heart replied, "Is it inhabited?"

"No. Definitely not." Carr answered, "The star is highly unstable. It'll probably go nova within the next couple of thousand years. There are no planets worth settling and no minerals worth mining in any of the debris in the system."

"So why head there then?" Heart said.

"I don't know. But I doubt it's for anything good. We need to get a message to the *Nightfall*." Carr said.

"*Thames* this is the *Nolte*. What's happening out there?" a panicked sounding voice said over the communication system before Carr could use it to try and establish contact with the *Nightfall*.

"*Nolte*, the Romulans appear to have withdrawn." Carr responded and Nayal frowned.

"Those may not have been my people." she muttered.

"How long until you are warp capable?" Carr asked, ignoring Nayal's comment.

"At least an hour *Thames*."

"Okay, we'll hang around just in case those raiders," and at this point Carr glanced at Nayal who smiled back at her, "decide to come back. *Thames* out." Carr sighed as she shut off the channel and she looked at the others in the cockpit, "Now let's hope the *Nightfall* is in range."

"Captain I've got a signal coming in from Commander Carr." West reported.

"Probably a report on the mine sweeping." Edwards said, "Put her through."

"Yes captain." West replied.

"Commander," Edwards said, "what's the situation with that minefield?"

"There is no minefield captain." Carr responded, "There was just a single mine and it was a dud."

"I'm sorry commander, did you just say that it was a dud?" Edwards repeated.

"Yes captain. Did Lieutenant Commander White not explain this to you?"

"Is he not with you?" Edwards asked.

"No captain. He left to rejoin you some time ago. He should have reached Beta Larris by now." Carr told him.

"The *Nightfall* left Beta Larris as soon as we arrived there. We only stayed long enough to drop off troops and medical personnel to help with the relief effort."

"What's happening?" Carr asked.

"The tachyon detection grid along the border picked up three cloaked ships entering Federation space on a course for shipping lanes. We're moving to try and intercept them." Edwards explained.

"I think you're too late captain." Carr said, "We just encountered a D'deridex-class warbird and a pair of destroyers. They didn't identify themselves but they did attack briefly. We were able to damage one of the destroyers' impulse drives and then they withdrew."

"Withdrew? But there was no way you could have held them all off." Cole said in astonishment.

"I know that. Their actions made no sense. All I can assume is that they didn't want to hang around for any longer than necessary. But that's not all that's odd." Carr said.

"Oh really? You do surprise me Grace." Edwards commented and Hamilton smirked when he used Carr's first name.

"They withdrew at warp eight captain. Too fast for their cloaking devices to fully mask their trails. We were able to track them long enough to plot their destination."

"Excellent. Where?" Edwards said eagerly.

"The Kerous system." Carr said.

"Helm, set course for Kerous." Edwards ordered.

"Captain." T'Lan said suddenly from the science station, "There is no logical reason why the Romulan vessels would head for Kerous."

"Hey! I heard that cousin." Nayal snapped, "Commander Carr already said that we don't know who they were."

"A fair comment. I apologise if I offended you." T'Lan said, "However, perhaps I ought to remind you that I do not appreciate being called your cousin." then she continued with her previous point, "As I was saying captain, logically the cloaked vessels should avoid the Kerous system. The star itself is a red hyper giant that produces powerful solar winds and flares with great frequency. Our understanding of cloaking technology suggests that this sort of disturbance will render their cloaking devices ineffective as well as placing additional pressure on our shields and disrupting long range communications and sensors."

"So we'll be able to see them as long as we can get close enough?" Cole said.

"Correct." T'Lan replied.

"Captain, they'll still be tactically superior." Cole pointed out.

"But they might not know that." Edwards replied, "Remember they won't know that we don't have our fighters aboard."

"The captain's point is logical." T'Lan agreed, "Whoever is controlling those ships will likely want to confirm that they are superior to us before attacking."

"And while they're doing that we take them out." Hamilton said.

"I'm glad to see your new rank has made you so eager lieutenant commander." Edwards replied, "But I think

caution will still be warranted. Take us to Kerous at warp nine point six but drop to impulse just outside the system. I don't want to rush in there blind." then he turned his attention back to the link to the *Thames*,

"Commander Carr, how soon will you be able to rendezvous with us?"

"I'm sorry but not for some time captain." Carr told him, "One of our warp nacelles took a hit. I doubt that we could maintain warp three right now."

"Very well commander." Edwards replied, nodding, "Make what repairs you can and then proceed at best speed to Beta Larris. We'll meet you there when we're done."

"Yes captain. *Thames* out." Carr replied and then the channel went dead.

"Course set for Kerous captain." Hamilton announced and Edwards nodded.

"Engage." he said and the *Nightfall* promptly went back to warp.

"T'Lan, I want to see you and Max in my ready room in five minutes." Edwards said, getting to his feet,

"Commander Cole, you have the conn."



## 7.

"So we're going to be here a while longer then?" NayaI commented when Carr shut of the channel to the *Nightfall*.

"Got somewhere more important to be?" Heart asked.

"Like I said, I want to celebrate Bradley's promotion. We're less than a tenth of the way through that list of T'Lan's fantasies." NayaI replied, referring to a list of intimate fantasies that the *Nightfall's* science officer had compiled after reading an earth magazine article about maintaining interest in a marriage. NayaI had taken the PADD on which these were written down in great detail and now there were numerous copies being circulated on the *Nightfall*.

"Are you seriously trying out every one of them?" Carr said.

"Well I doubt Cole and T'Lan will try even half of them. It would be a shame to waste all her effort." NayaI answered, "You and the captain should try some."

Carr's eyes widened.

"The captain and I are not in that sort of relationship." she said.

"If you say so." NayaI replied, "Besides we can't try the entire list anyway. There's a section of the list that's encrypted and I'm guessing that's where all the really good stuff is."

"You asked to see me captain?" Max said as he entered Edwards' ready room where T'Lan was already sat in front of the captain's desk.

"Yes Max." Edwards said, "I'd ask you to sit down."

"But I prefer to stand captain." Max responded. With Borg implants replacing both his legs, Max had no need to sit down to rest or be more comfortable and he generally remained standing in meetings. He only kept chairs in his quarters for use by guests.

"As I expected. Now down to business." Edwards said, "I want to know what we can do to make the conditions of the Kerous system work for us and how we can avoid any of the difficulties they present."

"The greatest threat in terms of the damage that can be inflicted on the *Nightfall* will be from solar mass ejections in close proximity to the star." T'Lan replied.

"Our sensors will still give us warning about those even given the disruption the star itself will cause." Max added.

"Yes and our shields will hold for a few seconds as well captain." T'Lan agreed, "However, I would advise staying as far from the star as possible. No less than one astronomical unit if at all possible."

"The drawback there is that whoever is controlling those ships could chose to risk going closer." Edwards pointed out, "Would we be able to detect them if they did?"

"That would depend on their exact position relative to the star captain." Max answered, "We would have no way of detecting them on the far side relative to us and directly between us and the star could be difficult as well, especially if there is an active flare or other period of greater emissions."

"Ironically the task of detecting them would be made easier if they were attempting to make use of their cloaking devices close to the star captain." T'Lan added, "The interaction of solar activity and the cloaking field itself would create a resonant signal that we could track."

"I expect they'll be aware of that problem though." Edwards said.

"Perhaps not captain." T'Lan replied, "As NayaI pointed out we do not know who is in control of those ships. Despite it appearing that the Romulan civil war is coming to a close there are still many different factions, some of whom may be willing to sell ships to support their economies. The vessels Commander Carr encountered could be being operated by crews who are novices in the use of cloaking technology."

"I hadn't considered that." Edwards commented and he leant back in his chair, "What about all the extra radiation in the system? Are we talking about levels that could be hazardous to the crew?"

"Only if they perform an EVA captain." Max told him, "Our hull will protect us from it indefinitely otherwise."

"It is the pattern of the radiation rather than the intensity that causes so many problems captain." T'Lan added.

"Very good. Now what about the system can we make work for us?" Edwards asked.

"There is a considerable amount of debris captain" T'Lan answered, "If we can separate the enemy vessels then we will be able to engage them one at a time rather than as a squadron."

"It also gives us somewhere to hide from them if we need it." Max added.

"Indeed. There are numerous points within the system that will magnify the disruption caused to sensors."

T'Lan agreed, "There are two gas giants in the system, the only true planets present, that are also considerable sources of radiation. In addition there are numerous asteroid fields of unusually high density that are known to feature certain ores that will help mask our presence if we are in close enough proximity."

"Could the crews of those ships be mining those ores?" Edwards asked.

"Unlikely captain. All of them are available in far more hospitable systems and in greater quantities." T'Lan replied.

"Okay then." Edwards said, nodding, "When we drop out of warp I want to launch a spread of class two probes towards the planets and asteroid fields. If we can use them to conceal our location then those other ships can as well. I also want to send a pair of class four probes towards the star. How long do you expect them to last?"

"Class four probes are specifically shielded against stellar radiation captain." Max commented, "Providing that they are not caught within a coronal mass ejection then I would expect them to continue functioning until they run out of fuel and are pulled into the star by its gravity."

"Okay then that's what we'll do. I want the probes ready by the time we drop out of warp. Dismissed." Edwards ordered.

"I was expecting you before now." Shintar told The Girl when she appeared out of nowhere in his quarters.

"I have a lot to co-ordinate." she replied, "Now what's your situation?"

"We reached Kerous three hours ago." Shintar told her, "As expected our cloaking devices are not functioning effectively so I have ordered them deactivated and our shields raised instead while we wait to see if there are any signs of pursuit."

"Lower your shields and engage your cloaking devices. Then move your ships closer to the star." The Girl told him and Shintar scowled.

"Are you mad?" he hissed, "The solar radiation will make us visible across the entire system. When the *Nightfall* gets here they'd have to be blind to not detect us in a heartbeat."

"That is exactly what I want Shintar. I want the *Nightfall* to find you and I want them to come after you. When the *Nightfall* gets close our ships will open gateways and deploy to engage her. When they do, your ships will turn and run back into Romulan space."

"And my crew will try to kill me before we make it as far as the Neutral Zone." Shintar said, snarling.

"What's the matter Shintar? Are you going native? Planning on staying to rape a few pretty Romulan women? You won't be fathering any future generations. That body can't any more than mine can carry a child. You're not a Reman, Shintar. When they try to kill you, you will simply open a gateway back home." The Girl said.

"My role here has brought us results. You are throwing that away." Shintar replied, glaring at The Girl.

"Another role will be found for you, don't worry about that. We all share the same ultimate goal Shintar. What once was ours." she said and Shintar let out a low growl.

"Will be ours again." he responded.

"And don't you forget that." The Girl said before taking a step and vanishing from Shintar's quarters again.

"One day." he said, "One day it will be my turn to give you orders."

Shintar then strode out of his quarters and headed straight for the warbird's bridge. As soon as he entered his first officer walked up to him to deliver his report.

"Lord Shintar, I have deployed the squadron among the asteroids." he said, "Our shields are raised and we are watching the system for signs of pursuit using passive sensors only. So far we are alone here."

"Cloak the squadron." Shintar said.

"But Lord Shintar, the radiation in this system—"

"I know of its effects on our cloaking devices." Shintar interrupted, "Engage the cloaking device and take us to within fifty million kilometres of the star."

"Lord Shintar—" the first officer began and Shintar lashed out at him, striking him hard enough that he staggered back.

"Do as I command!" Shintar bellowed as he drew his disruptor and aimed it at the first officer, "Or shall I promote our navigator to your position?"

"No Lord Shintar." the first officer replied and he stood up straight to address the crew, "Send to squadron. Lower shields and engage cloaking devices. Set course for the centre of the system. I want us as close to the star as is safely possible."

There was a brief pause as the bridge crew considered this order, all of them knowing that it meant surrendering any advantage that they had gained by arriving in the system before any Starfleet vessels caught up with them and being able to hide themselves among the debris. After a few moments of hesitation it was the helmsman that broke the silence, remembering how Shintar had already executed one officer for failing him.

"Course laid in my lord." he said.

"Lowering shields. Engaging cloaking device." the newly appointed tactical officer added.

"My lord our destroyers are requesting confirmation." another officer added nervously, hoping that Shintar would not opt to kill the bearer of bad news.

"Put me through to them." Shintar responded and the officer nodded.

"Channel established." he said.

"This is Lord Shintar to all ships. I expect my orders to be followed to the letter. Engage your cloaking devices and follow my vessel to the centre of the system. We will draw Starfleet in and destroy their ships there."

Shintar then waited, watching the two destroyers on the main viewscreen. Just as had happened on the bridge of his own warbird there was hesitation at first and both destroyers held position. Then all of a sudden one of the two smaller warships cloaked. Ordinarily this would have made it invisible even to the warbird's sensors but in the conditions of the Kerous system there remained enough of a sensor signature that it could be detected at the short distance between the two vessels. This was copied by the second destroyer just as he first began to move off. This second ship was even less successful at concealing itself as its still damaged impulse drive leaked easily detectable energy in its wake.

"What is our ETA?" Shintar asked, now looking towards his helmsman.

"At full impulse we will reach minimum safe distance from the star in three point five tarim." the Reman officer answered. A tarim was approximately twice as long as a human hour which put the centre of the system about seven hours away.

After that Shintar could only hope that he could keep control of his crew long enough for the next stage of The Girl's plan to come to fruition.

The star Kerous was easily identifiable on the *Nightfall's* main viewscreen. The hyper giant was so bright that even on the outermost edge of the system its light was easy to spot. The rest of the system was just as barren as Edwards had expected. The only real planets in the system were gas giants that orbited their parent star at a considerable distance while the more solid matter in the system was scattered so widely that gravity had never been strong enough to draw it together to form even a single terrestrial planet or moon.

"Secure from warp captain." Hamilton announced, "Current location is nine light hours from the star itself."

"Status on probes?" Cole asked.

"Torpedo launchers loaded lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Ready for immediate launch."

"I don't suppose that there are any ships on our sensors now are there?" Edwards asked, "If we don't need to use the probes then there's no sense in wasting them."

"Negative captain." West told him, "Though I am picking up some odd concentrations of ionised gas in a trail from one of the asteroid fields that appear to lead deeper into the system. Or possibly coming from closer to the star and heading into the asteroids."

"That could be a plasma trail left by an impulse drive captain." T'Lan suggested.

"You mean like one damaged by a runabout?" Hamilton commented.

"That is correct lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Make sure that we have a probe targeted on that asteroid field." Edwards said.

"Affirmative captain. Class two probe assigned to scan asteroid field as a matter of priority." T'Lan said.

"Launch probes." Edwards ordered.

Like all Akira-class cruisers, the *USS Nightfall* mounted a total of fifteen torpedo launchers that were capable of firing Starfleet standard photon or quantum torpedoes as well as deploying probes and it took just seconds for a total of forty-three probes to be launched into the system. Most of these were targeted towards the various asteroid fields as well as the gas giants present while the single class four probe included in the mix steered towards the star itself. Though each probe could transmit its findings back to the *Nightfall* in real time over a distance the size of a single star system none of them were fully warp capable and so it would take several hours for many of them to reach their target destinations. In the meantime the *Nightfall* began to circle the system at impulse power, using its active sensors to conduct scans as best as possible in the difficult conditions.

**a.**

Shintar remained on the bridge of his warbird while he waited for the *USS Nightfall* to arrive. Alone among the crew he knew exactly what was coming and he did not want to risk delegating command of the ship to his first officer. He knew that the crew was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with events and a mutiny was becoming increasingly likely. However, for a mutiny to stand any chance of success it would require the support of a large number of senior officers and by keeping them under direct supervision Shintar hoped to stop them conspiring together long enough to finish his assignment.

"Lord Shintar," his first officer reported. Shintar had tasked the first officer with personally monitoring the ship's sensors. The ongoing nature of that task made sure that he would have little time to plot to usurp Shintar.

"What is it?" Shintar asked.

"My lord I'm picking up an odd intermittent reading. It looks like a warp signature but it just suddenly appeared within the system without being anywhere before that." the first officer explained.

"A result of the interference from the star?" Shintar suggested.

"No my lord. It just suddenly appeared. Wait, now it is gone again."

"Watch for it reappearing." Shintar ordered and then there was a bleeping from the console the first officer was monitoring, "What now? Another mysterious warp signature?"

"No Lord Shintar. A Starfleet probe approaches."

"Specify it." Shintar hissed.

"Class four. Stellar probe. My lord if it continues on its current course it will detect the emissions of our cloaking devices very soon." the first officer said and Shintar smiled.

"Tactical, prepare to disengage the cloak and transfer power to disruptors." he ordered.

"Standing by. Ready to transfer power at your command my lord." the tactical officer replied.

"Sub-commander," Shintar said, addressing his first officer by rank, "You will give the command to attack when the probe is in optimum position."

"Yes my lord." the officer said and he focused his monitor on the approaching probe, "Stand by." he added when the probe entered weapon range, "Disengage cloak and attack in six, five, four, three, two, one. Now!" The warbird promptly appeared from behind its cloaking field, the visual distortion in space caused by its operation in the unstable environment dissipating to reveal the huge warship. It took just over a second for the tactical officer to use the power consumed by the cloaking device to power up the warbird's weapons instead. During this period he was already aiming the ship's disruptors at the approaching probe, doing his best to compensate for the interference caused by the proximity of the star.

Bolts of green energy erupted from the warbird's forward disruptor, narrowly missing the probe and the tactical officer adjusted the aim point while maintaining the disruptor fire so that the stream of energy blasts was swept across the path of the probe. Designed for attacking other starships, it took just one hit from the disruptor to totally annihilate the probe and the Reman tactical officer ceased fire.

"Target destroyed my lord." he announced.

"Excellent." Shintar said, "Engage the cloak. Sub-commander, stay alert. Now that we have destroyed their probe, Starfleet will know that we are here."

"Captain I'm getting the first probe telemetry in now." West reported.

"Anything interesting?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not sure captain." West replied, "There's what looks like a warp signature and transponder from an asteroid field about half way between the star and the innermost gas giant but they look like Federation signatures."

"Lieutenant West is correct captain." T'Lan replied as she studied the probe telemetry herself.

"Could whoever is in command of those Romulan ships have hijacked a Federation vessel?" Cole suggested.

"Possible. But that would not fit with what I am seeing here lieutenant commander." T'Lan answered.

"And what are you seeing exactly T'Lan?" Edwards asked.

"Captain, if these readings are correct then I am looking at our own transponder inside that asteroid field." T'Lan said.

"It must be a reflection." West said, "Something in those asteroids that our emissions are bouncing off and the probe is picking up."

"The lieutenant's assertion is logical captain." T'Lan said in agreement and Edwards nodded.

"Maybe at some point in the future we travel back in time and hide there." Hamilton commented.

"That suggestion is not logical." T'Lan said.

"Well it's more likely than at some point in the past we travelled forwards in time and hid there. We'd have remembered doing it." Hamilton pointed out.

"I think we'll stick with what we can prove for now Mister Hamilton." Edwards said, "What about the other probes?"

"Not much from any of them." West replied, "This is a dead system captain, just lumps of radioactive rock and gas."

"What about the class four probe sent to the star?" Cole asked, "Has that picked up anything useful?"

"No commander. In fact I'm not getting any telemetry from it at all." West replied.

"Order it to report status." Edwards said and West transmitted the command.

"No response sir." she said when the command failed to have any effect at all.

"Captain, while it is not out of the question that the probe could be unable to communicate with us due to interference caused by its proximity to the star there is also the possibility that it has been shot down." T'Lan pointed out.

"That's where those ships are hiding then. Using the star to try and avoid detection." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton, what's the best way to approach the star?"

"I'd say low warp above the orbital plane and then drop to impulse for final manoeuvring." Hamilton said.

"We'll likely have to get closer than the one astronomical unit T'Lan recommended." Cole pointed out.

"We should suffer no radiation damage while our shields hold." T'Lan responded.

"Then that's what we'll do." Edwards said, "Raise shields and take us in. All crew to red alert."

"I've got a new bulb right here." Hamilton muttered, smiling as he keyed in the course to the centre of the system. Then in a much clearer voice he added, "Taking us to warp two." and the *Nightfall* began to accelerate.

Taking the *Nightfall* out of the system's orbital plane meant drastically reducing the chances of the ship colliding with another object and so it was possible to safely use warp drive to travel as far as the centre of the system safely. Travelling at just warp two it took less than two hours for the *Nightfall* to reach the star at the heart of the Kerous system and the moment Hamilton brought the ship out of warp it lurched suddenly as he positioned it in orbit around the star just a few million kilometres away.

"Our orbit is stable captain." West announced, "Hull temperature is increasing."

"Tactical status?" Cole said.

"Phasers charged and full spreads of quantum torpedoes loaded in all launchers." the tactical officer replied.

"What about the mass accelerator cannons?" Hamilton asked.

"The mass accelerators won't work against shielded starships." West pointed out.

"Perhaps not lieutenant." T'Lan replied, "However, if the vessels we are hunting are indeed making use of their cloaking devices then they will be vulnerable to the projectiles."

"Bring the mass accelerators on line as well. Just in case. Slave them to Mister Hamilton's station." Edwards ordered and Hamilton smiled, his thumbs moving gently over the triggers built into his manual control system.

"New heading captain?" he asked.

"Take us around the star at one quarter impulse." Edwards told him, "All weapons on stand by."

"Yes captain." Hamilton said and the *Nightfall* began to move again, circling around the star.

"What are your orders for engaging the enemy captain?" Cole said while the *Nightfall* circled the star, the massive ball of energy filling much of the bridge's main viewscreen and making it impossible to spot anything else visually because of the glare involved. Instead the bridge crew relied on the tactical feed to their headsets even though there was nothing more shown on these either at present.

"They've already fired on one Starfleet vessel." Edwards replied, "I don't intend to give them the opportunity to fire on another if I can help it. We'll open fire as soon as we can identify them."

"Captain the targeting systems are reporting errors." the officer at tactical said suddenly.

"Let me see." Cole responded and he got out of seat, walked around the intervening science station and looked at the tactical console for himself. When he saw the readouts he frowned, "It's the star." he said, "It's acting like a jamming suite."

"T'Lan, can you do anything to compensate?" Edwards asked.

"Negative captain. The star's emissions do not conform to a predictable pattern that can be filtered out." T'Lan told him.

"Then we'll have to use manual targeting." Edwards said and he turned to look over his shoulder at the tactical station, "Cole, I need you to take over at tactical as well as being first officer."

"Yes captain." Cole said and he looked at the officer who had been filling in at tactical and added, "You are dismissed lieutenant."

"Captain I think we've got something." West said suddenly, "Unusual EM signature about eight hundred thousand kilometres from the star."

"Confirmed captain. Three localised disturbances not connected to solar emissions." T'Lan added.

"Those could be our warbirds." Cole suggested.

"I've got them." Hamilton said, "Moving to intercept."

"Don't focus too much on them. They could just be ghost readings." Edwards reminded his crew, "T'Lan you focus on these readings. West keep an eye out for anything else."

Hamilton studied the readings from ahead of the *Nightfall* carefully, using his headset to give him a clear view that was devoid of the glare from the star and he noticed that on an enhanced visual scan one of the flickering shapes differed from the others in a significant way.

"Captain I've got what looks like plasma from a leaking impulse drive." he said.

"Captain, logic suggests that is the vessel Commander Carr reported damaging." T'Lan added.

"Okay I take that as positive ID." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander Hamilton, take us in. Weapons free."

Hamilton smiled.

"Yes captain." he said as the rest of the bridge crew checked their safety harnesses were fastened properly.

The *Nightfall* surged forwards as Hamilton increased the power to the ship's impulse engines, lining the vessel up directly to what looked to be the stern of the already damaged destroyer from the way the emissions from its leaking engine were trailing. It took mere seconds for Hamilton to get the *Nightfall* into position directly behind the damaged destroyer and as soon as his headset targeting display had the trail of leaking plasma right at its centre he pulled back on the triggers set into his twin control joysticks.

The twin mass accelerators that ran long most of the length of the *Nightfall's* secondary hulls were designed to hurl solid duranium slugs at Borg vessels. Against a manoeuvring and shielded starship they were virtually useless, not only being too slow to strike a target over the vast distances usually involved in starship combat but also unable to penetrate the energy barriers that surrounded them. However, with the Reman vessels running cloaked their shields were down and they were at such close range that it would take too long for their crews to react even if their sensors were able to pick up the projectiles before they impacted on their targets.

Hamilton held down the triggers for just over a second, unleashing a burst of projectiles from each of the massive weapons and these raced straight ahead of the *Nightfall*. Just as Hamilton had hoped for, the projectiles slammed into the destroyer's stern before its crew had the chance to take any emergency measures. Striking an unshielded target allowed the duranium rounds to punch right through the destroyer's outer and inner hulls before continuing along much of the length of the ship. The force of multiple impacts such as this was sufficient to tear the ship open lengthways and for a few brief moments it appeared fully from behind its cloaking field before exploding in a massive ball of flame just as the *USS Nightfall* raced past it.

"Firing phasers." Cole said as he quickly picked out one of the other cloaked warbirds and fired. However, he did not have long enough to aim manually and the bright red beam passed over the top of Shintar's own D'deridex-class warbird.

"Damage report!" Shintar yelled as his personal warbird rocked under the impact of debris from the exploding destroyer. The *Nightfall* had rounded the star so quickly that by the time Shintar's crew had alerted him to its presence the cruiser had already unleashed its deadly projectiles.

"Multiple impacts from debris my lord." the first officer reported, "The *Aehallh* is gone. The Starfleet vessel is armed with some sort of projectile weaponry that does not require a target lock."

"Well we know that they are here now." Shintar said, "Disengage cloaking device and transfer power to shields and weapons."

The two Reman vessels lowered their cloaking devices as they started to give chase to the *Nightfall* and both ships opened fire as soon as they were able. However, they suffered from the same inability to make use of their automated targeting systems and as Hamilton took full advantage of his ability to perform sudden and unexpected manoeuvres the disruptors blasts and plasma torpedoes fired towards the *Nightfall* passed harmlessly by. This did not deter the Remans from continuing to try, however and another torpedo fired from Shintar's vessel struck the *Nightfall's* aft shields.

"Shields holding captain." West reported, "But their strength is fluctuating in these conditions."

"Bridge to engineering, Max can you strengthen our shields?" Edwards asked over the intercom.

"I'm trying my best captain." Max responded, "But I'm already drawing power away from our phasers to keep them at even their current strength. I push the system too much further I could burn out the lines entirely."

"Acknowledged Max, just do your best." Edwards said, "Commander Cole, have you sorted out targeting yet?"

"I'm getting used to it captain. But the way we're moving about is making it harder." Cole answered.

"If we fly straight and level then those warbirds will be able to hit us." Hamilton pointed out.

"They seem to be chasing us." Edwards commented, "If we get further away from the star will that improve our targeting?"

"Undoubtedly captain." T'Lan said, "The reduction in the strength of the interference will be proportional to

the square of the-

"In other words 'yes'." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton, take us to eighty-nine mark two. Full impulse."

"Coming to eighty-nine mark two, full impulse." Hamilton acknowledged as he steered the *Nightfall* away from the nearby star.

With an advantage in numbers over his opponent Shintar was confident that he could have completed the task of destroying the *Nightfall* with ease. The problem with this though was that it went directly against the orders presented to him by The Girl in that she specifically intended for Iconian forces to deal with the ship and so with this in mind he activated a transmitter within his own body to send a signal to his home realm that would inform them of the situation.

An alarm on the bridge confused Edwards for a moment as he tried to determine what it was warning him of. "Are we hit?" he said.

"Negative captain." T'Lan answered, "The detection system for Iconian gateways is picking up multiple gateways forming."

"What decks?" Cole asked.

"Not inside the ship ." T'Lan told him, "I am picking up three distinct gateways forming outside the ship. Massive ones."

"On screen." Edwards said and the bridge's main viewscreen changed to show an empty region of space that suddenly began to blur as the gateways formed to allow a trio of massive starships to arrive in the system. Each vessel was an enormous cylinder just over three thousand metres long and ignoring the Reman vessels entirely all three of them moved towards the *Nightfall*.

### 3.

"Fall back!" Shintar snapped when his startled crew saw the Iconian dreadnoughts materialising.

"What are they?" his first officer exclaimed in amazement.

"Those are the war vessels of the ancient Iconians." Shintar replied, "They have come for the Federation vessel. If we leave now we escape with our lives."

The warbird's helmsman needed no further persuading and Shintar's vessel turned away, breaking off the pursuit of the *Nightfall* and instead making for the Neutral Zone.

Standing on the observation deck of one of the dreadnoughts, The Girl smiled as the interior of the Iconian hangar transitioned into the star field of the Kerous system and the familiar shape of the *USS Nightfall* was right in front of the vessel. The two Romulan made warships giving chase to the Starfleet vessel abruptly turned away from the *Nightfall* and began to race out of the system.

"Very good Shintar." she said to herself.

"Target vessel in firing range and acquired. Energy transfer cannons primed." the calm sounding voice of the Iconian intelligence that controlled the dreadnought announced.

"Open fire." the Girl ordered and lightning erupted from the prow of the dreadnought.

The whole of the *Nightfall* shook as the lightning from the dreadnought struck its shields.

"Shields down to fifteen percent!" West exclaimed.

"T'Lan! I want that jamming field active across the entire ship." Edwards ordered.

"Captain prolonged use of -" T'Lan began but Edwards interrupted her before she could finish her warning.

"The risks are lower than allowing the Iconian to board us." he snapped.

"Yes captain, initiating shipwide gateway jamming." T'Lan said.

"Return fire on those battleships." Edwards added and Cole looked at the weapons console.

"Firing phasers." he said. Still too close to the star for the *Nightfall's* targeting system to function properly

Cole was forced to use manual targeting again but the massive size of the Iconian dreadnoughts combined with the close range at which they were located meant that even without the benefit of computer assisted targeting he was able to place the phaser beams right on target. However, the shields of the massive vessels held against the attack.

Using data from the phaser attack to plot a firing solution, Cole then launched a spread of five quantum torpedoes at the nearest dreadnought but before any of them could strike the massive vessel another storm of lightning came from its weapons array and all of the torpedoes exploded harmlessly as they were engulfed while still only part way to their target.

A third burst of lightning then struck the *Nightfall* again and this time the cruiser's shields were overwhelmed and breached. The energy storm surged through the gap opened up and spread out along its starboard side nacelle.

In engineering there was an explosion as the energy fed back towards the four warp cores that provided the ship with its primary power. The built in safety systems isolated the warp cores before the energy could reach them and cause catastrophic damage that would have consumed the entire ship in one giant matter/anti-matter explosion but the fact that the path to the cores exploded meant that the distribution of power from them was severely compromised.

"Bridge this is engineering." Max reported, using his Borg implants to activate his combadge automatically,

"I'm going to have to take the warp cores offline."

"All four?" Edwards responded, "Max we can't go toe to toe with three Iconian ships. We need warp power to escape."

"I can leave one on line for a short time but the more it is pushed the faster the plasma conduits will burn out." Max said.

"Hopefully it'll be enough." Edwards said and he looked at Hamilton, "Lieutenant Commander Hamilton, get us out of here. I don't care how you do it."

"Yes captain. Everyone hang on." Hamilton responded and he promptly performed a sharp turn that was just in time to avoid the ship taking the full brunt of another lightning storm fired by one of the dreadnoughts. The three Iconian ships now began to move apart, obviously trying to box the *Nightfall* in but Hamilton saw what they were doing and turned the ship around again, flying directly between two of them so that they could not fire their weapons at the cruiser without risking hitting one another. However, this lasted only until the *Nightfall* emerged from between the two massive ships at which point the third opened fire again and the *Nightfall's* primary hull was hit.

"Hull breach. Deck five, section seven." West reported.



"Bradley quit playing with these guys and get us out of here." Cole added.

"I can't get us an opening to use the warp drive." Hamilton replied, "If I don't get us out range first time then the warp core will probably blow and we'll never get away from them."

"Captain the Iconians appear to be trying to drive us closer to the local star. They obviously know that it will cause greater disruption to our systems."

"Yeah, a disruption that doesn't seem to be affecting them much." West commented.

"Towards the star." Hamilton said and he twisted the control joysticks again, changing the *Nightfall's* course from one that was taking them further from the star at the centre of the system to one that was heading right for it.

"Hamilton what are you doing?" Edwards demanded, "Didn't T'Lan say that heading towards the sun was what the Iconians wanted us to do?"

"Which may mean they'll back off long enough for us to get away." Hamilton replied. Then he activated his intercom and connected to engineering, "Max I hope that warp core is ready because I'll be wanting warp nine point six very soon."

"Lieutenant commander," Max replied, "I do not recommend that. The warp core will not tolerate that sort of stress for more than a few minutes."

"Not long enough for us to escape." T'Lan added when she heard this.

"Trust me." Hamilton said, grinning, "We've got all the time in the world."

With the star now dead ahead of the *Nightfall*, Hamilton flew the ship towards it at full impulse power, taxing the engine as much as he could and the entire cruiser began to vibrate from the stress he was putting on it.

"Mister Hamilton diving into a star may prevent the Iconians from catching us but it won't let us escape."

Edwards said.

"Trust me captain, I know this works out just fine." Hamilton said, "Engaging warp drive in five. Four. Three. Two. One. Now!" and with the star filling the entire viewscreen, Hamilton pulled away from it at the same exact time as he engaged the *Nightfall's* warp drive at full power.

Still caught in the star's gravitational pull the *Nightfall* was dragged around it at steadily increasing speed until it had built up enough that it tore the *Nightfall* away and hurled across the system at which point the ship was filled with light and everyone aboard blacked out.

"Captain are you okay?"

Edwards opened his eyes suddenly to find that he had been taken from his seat and laid out on the floor of the bridge with Doctor King standing over him.

"Doctor? What happened?" Edwards asked.

"T'Lan, can you explain it?" King said, looking across the bridge to where T'Lan sat cradling the still unconscious Cole.

"Captain, it appears that Lieutenant Commander Hamilton used a slingshot manoeuvre to take us through a time warp. From the differences in planetary positions I believe that we have travelled three hours and thirty-eight minutes into the past, ending up about fifteen billion kilometres from where we entered the time warp."

"He did what?" Edwards exclaimed upon hearing how Hamilton had managed to escape the Iconians,

"Where is he?"

"Over there." King said, nodding to where Hamilton had been laid out beside the helm station, "Taking us through a time warp knocked everyone out. T'Lan recovered first and came down to sickbay to revive me. Given the urgency of the matter I've allowed the EMH to activate her body and I've got her helping revive people."

"Technically Lieutenant West regained consciousness before I did captain." T'Lan said, "However, she remains incoherent."

"I'd like to get her down to sickbay and check her out." King said, "There may be other injuries among the crew."

"What's the status of the ship?" Edwards asked.

"Intact but without mains power. Max was correct captain, taking us to a high warp factor overloaded the final core." T'Lan said, "Unfortunately the high level of stellar emissions in the system is also blocking our long range communications so we cannot send for help, even if there were any other starships close enough to arrive in time."

"Wake up Hamilton." Edwards ordered, "Let's see if his plan included anything for how to get us away from here now."

"Yes captain." King said and he went over to where Hamilton had been lay out and injected a stimulant into his neck, at which point he opened his eyes.

"Ensign Hamilton." Edwards said.

"That's a test isn't it?" Hamilton replied, "To see if I can remember who I am. I'm Lieutenant Commander Bradley Hamilton."

"Not for much longer mister." Edwards said sternly, "Not unless you can explain why I shouldn't have you up

before a court martial for risking the entire ship with that stunt.”

“There was no risk captain. I already knew we succeeded. We all did.” Hamilton replied.

“The warp signature and transponder code from the asteroid field.” T'Lan said and she looked at Hamilton, “Lieutenant Commander, I apologise for dismissing your suggestion that it was a result of time travel. Clearly you were correct. All of the usual complex calculations required to enter time warp were not needed.

Causality guaranteed that whatever random decision Lieutenant Commander Hamilton made would work.”

“You mean our probe picked us up in that asteroid field?” Edwards said.

“It would appear so captain.” T'Lan replied, “Therefore, in order to avoid a paradox that could disrupt the timeline we should proceed there with all haste.”

“Are you fit enough to pilot this ship?” Edwards asked Hamilton.

“I'll be fine.” he answered, nodding but then he flinched and gasped, clamping a hand to his forehead, “As long as I don't move my head too much.”

“Then do it.” Edwards said, “Doctor King see if you can revive Cole. If not take him to sickbay with West and T'Lan can have the conn.”

“Where are you going captain?” T'Lan said.

“To engineering. We may have escaped the Iconians for now but we know that they'll be arriving back in the system in a few hours and I've got the feeling that hiding among a few asteroids isn't going to hide us from them forever.”

The *Nightfall's* engineering section was a hive of activity when Edwards arrived. Max had summoned every available engineer, including the handful of civilian workers aboard the vessel to help with the repairs to the warp drive. Given that her internship had begun with a period of duty working in engineering, this included Nikki as well and she was the first to greet Edwards when he exited the turbolift.

“Captain, what's going on?” she said, “Max said something about time travel.”

“Yes, Hamilton was able to hurl us back in time to a point before the Iconians arrived to attack. But without warp drive we won't be able to escape the system before they get here and we'll be back in the same situation all over again in a little over three hours time.” Edwards told him.

“I am sorry but there is no question of having warp drive back on line in that amount of time captain.” Max said, “Observe.” and he used his Borg implants to direct a nearby monitor to display a diagram of the *Nightfall* that highlighted all of the damaged systems, “As you can see the starboard nacelle was severely damaged, taking a direct hit from one of the Iconians' weapon blasts. In order to restore sufficient balance to our warp field to be able to maintain warp speed for more than a few minutes at most the entire structure will need repairing. We can obtain all the materials we need within this asteroid belt and we still have sufficient power to replicate the components themselves but the key issue is time.”

“How long?” Edwards asked, sighing.

“At least eighteen hours captain.”

“So what can you give me in three?” Edwards said.

“I am confident that the functionality of the three warp cores taken off line can be restored in just over two hours. Though the single core used for our time warp will not be back online for at least another six.”

“Well see what needs doing and compile me a list of everything we'll have available. Then meet me in the briefing room in fifteen minutes. I'm calling a meeting of the senior staff to discuss our next move.” Edwards told him.

“Of course captain. I will meet you there.” Max replied.

The briefings for senior officers aboard the *USS Nightfall* were usually larger than this, Edwards thought to himself as he sat down in the ship's briefing room. However, with Carr, White, Heart, Shry and Nayal all off the ship there were several empty seats on this occasion.

"Okay I'm sure you're all aware of our situation." he said to the handful of officers who were present, "So I won't waste time going into too much detail. Suffice to say that thanks to clever deductive reasoning from Lieutenant Commander Hamilton we have gained ourselves just over three hours of respite before the Iconians will attack us again."

"Three hours and nine minutes captain." T'Lan commented.

"Thank you." Edwards responded.

"You are welcome captain." T'Lan added, not understanding the nature of his reply.

"So my question to each of you is what can we do in that time that will allow us to escape?" Edwards went on.

"Helm is fully responsive captain." Hamilton answered first, "The impulse engines and thrusters are all reading functional. Though we'll have to be outside this asteroid field if we're going to try using our manoeuvrability to avoid being hit again."

"That didn't prevent us from being hit by the Iconians fire last time." Cole pointed out. Then he looked at Edwards, "Captain our weapons are on line as well but I doubt they'll do us much good. Those Iconian ships are too well protected. Though I would like to recommend that we plunder the stores of photon torpedoes for our fighters as well as all of our remaining probes. We can use them as decoys mixed in with our quantum torpedoes."

"How are our ammunition stocks looking?" Edwards said.

"Good." Cole replied, "We didn't fire that many torpedoes in the last engagement but the Iconians have shown themselves to be very efficient at intercepting torpedoes before they can hit."

"Fortunately doing so prevents them from using their main weapon array against us." T'Lan said, "However, whether, we can force all three enemy vessels onto the defensive simultaneously is uncertain."

"How much cover can we expect from the asteroids?" West asked.

"There is insufficient data regarding the effectiveness of Iconian weapons on asteroids." T'Lan answered, "However, my expectation is that they will offer only minimal cover for us."

"What about for torpedoes?" Cole said, "Captain, we could lay them like mines. Perhaps if we can hit the shields of those ships with enough debris then they'll weaken enough for our phasers to become effective."

"Our accelerator cannons will be pretty efficient at smashing open a few floating rocks as well." Hamilton added, "If we limit the mines to the ones further out then I can take out the ones closer to us."

"That could work." Cole added, "Using the mass accelerators to destroy an asteroid that we were hiding behind would shower an enemy ship with debris right at the moment we get a clear line of fire at it."

"Captain, I should remind you that these vessels have only been successfully engaged by Starfleet using multiple vessels backed up by the defences of a starbase." T'Lan said, "We may be able to destroy one such vessel using the methods discussed but it is not logical to expect the Iconians to fall for the same tricks three times. It is far more likely that they will simply turn their own weapons on the asteroid we are using for cover so that we are forced to expend energy in maintaining our shields instead."

"Well if ambushing and destroying the enemy ships isn't practical then what about our options for retreat?" Edwards said and he looked at Max.

"As we discussed in engineering we will not have full warp power for at least eighteen hours yet captain."

Max said, "However, there may be another way for us to escape. It is, however, somewhat risky."

"As risky as taking on three Iconian ships on our own?" King commented.

"Perhaps doctor. It will also be difficult to execute, requiring the assistance of yourself, Lieutenant Commander T'Lan and Lieutenant West to implement."

"What are you planning Max?" Cole said.

"From the findings of our study of the corpse of the Iconian agent, it is my belief that the refractive silicon material recovered from the *Brilliant* is the key to their gateway technology. If exposed to sufficient energy it will literally bend space around itself." Max explained.

"And I've got a massive block of the stuff in my quarters." Hamilton added. The large black block resembled an object in an old science fiction film and so when it had been brought back to the *Nightfall* with no idea of what it was for it had been left in his quarters as a joke.

"If my calculations are correct then by breaking that block up into numerous thin sheets it should be possible to generate enough energy to trigger the formation of a gateway large enough to permit the *Nightfall* to pass through." Max continued.

"A gateway to where exactly?" Edwards asked.

"Earth captain." Max answered.

"A logical choice." T'Lan said, "Earth's defences are likely strong enough to deter or fight off three Iconian warships while at the same time it allows us to deliver the body of the Iconian agent directly to Starfleet command for study."

West listened closely to this discussion of using the Iconians' own gateway technology against them but then a familiar voice spoke to her from inside her own head.

"They'll just end up killing themselves more likely." The Controller told her, "Do not let them try it."

"Do we have any guarantee that it won't just tear the ship apart?" she said out loud.

"That lightning weapon of theirs can manage that as well." Hamilton responded.

"Damn it Bradley this isn't one of your science fiction stories." West exclaimed, "We can't be sure that the heroes are going to win at the end. I'd like to know what's going to happen when we turn this thing on before staking my life on it. I mean does Max even know how to aim or steer or whatever you call it when using this tech?"

"Captain the Iconian gateways bend space so that two distant points become connected briefly and the object being transport literally just swaps its location for the target one without travelling in between." T'Lan said, "If we are inside the gateway field as it forms then our sensors ought to be able to detect where the end point is positioned."

"And what about positioning the other end of the gate?" West said.

"I will need to study the body of the Iconian agent further but it is my expectation that the energy used to create the gate is directed towards the target location." Max said, "Furthermore it is reasonable to assume that the range is determined by the amount of power used. We can use the main deflector dish to direct the energy ahead of the ship while regulating the amount of power used to modify the range."

"How long will this take?" Edwards asked.

"The cutting of the silicon material must be done either with a physical blade or a pressurised fluid jet. The energy from any form of cutting torch will be refracted and could cause significant collateral damage." T'Lan said.

"I can replicate a suitable tool." Max added, "The cutting will take no more than twenty minutes. Installing the sheets to the inside of our hull as well as a triggering piece directly to the deflector dish will take between one and two hours."

"That's cutting it pretty close." Cole said, "Even after you've fitted everything in place you'll still have to test the system."

"There is also the matter of the jamming field captain." Max went on, "We will need it active if we are to prevent the Iconians from deploying troops to the ship but I doubt that our own gateway will form while it is operating. We will need to shut it down completely, even the compartment where we are storing the body will be left vulnerable to incursion."

"Cole I need you to distribute phasers to the entire crew. Type-two phasers for everyone as well as phaser rifles for as many of our security personnel as possible."

"I can equip about half my staff with them." Cole replied, nodding. Then he looked at Max, "Unless you can spare any replicator capacity to produce more of them." he added.

"Another forty or fifty phasers shouldn't impede our repair efforts." Max responded.

"Do it." Edwards said, "We need to be able to defend the ship long enough to get the gateway system up and running. Hamilton I need you to organise the laying of the mines. Pick us a good hiding spot and fortify it as best you can. Now are there any other questions?" and he looked around the table. None of the other officers present gave any indication that they had any questions and Edwards nodded, "Then let's bring this meeting to an end and get started with our plan. You are dismissed."

When the meeting broke up West headed back to her quarters to fetch the phaser she kept there and as she fitted its holster to her waist she glanced towards her mirror where it appeared as if her reflection was standing with its arms folded and glaring at her, causing her to draw her phaser instinctively.

"That won't work." The Controller said, the lips of West's reflection moving in synch with the words, "You'd have to blast your own head off to get rid of me. Now put that weapon away before you hurt both of us and do exactly as I say."

"I'm not doing anything you want." West responded, turning away from the mirror as she holstered her phaser again.

"Look at me!" The Controller snapped and West was unable to prevent herself from spinning back around to face the mirror again, seeing her own angry expression looking back at her, "Jenna you'll do exactly what I tell you if you know what's good for you. Haven't I already proven that I'll take care of you? You know that this plan to create your own gateway is doomed to fail. At best it will blow up in your face but you could end up being torn apart and having your molecules spread across space from here to Earth. On the other hand if you sabotage the system then the *Nightfall* will be trapped here. Those three dreadnoughts out there will

then be able to board and recover the body of our agent. After that I'm sure some way will be found to let you escape. Now are you going to behave yourself or do I need to find another way of convincing you to be a good little girl?"

"Leave me alone!" West screamed and she picked up a lamp from a nearby table and hurled it at the mirror, shattering the reflective surface into hundreds of pieces, each one showing her her own scowling face.

"Don't I get a phaser?" Nikki asked when Cole entered engineering and began to distribute weapons to all of the Starfleet personnel there.

"No." he replied.

"Captain Heart taught me to shoot one." Nikki pointed out, "He also taught me how to use the assault rifles the MACOs and Imperial Guard carry."

"Nikki you're just an intern. A bit of target shooting is one thing but I'm not sending you into battle." Cole told her.

"So what if we're boarded?" she said.

"Then duck. There will be plenty of other people around with phasers to protect you on the bridge." Cole answered.

"But we're in engineering." Nikki said.

"That's another reason for me coming down here." Cole said, "The captain has assigned West to assist Max in getting the gateway system up and running. He wants you at ops."

"Me? But what about the other operations officers?" Nikki said, surprised at being assigned to a major position aboard the ship at such a time.

"All better used elsewhere." Cole said, "All you need to do is activate whatever systems the captain or I tell you. Now get to the bridge, I think Captain Edwards wants to brief you."

"Yes sir." Nikki replied with a smile and she hurried to the nearest turbolift, commanding it to take her straight to the bridge and when she stepped out of it she saw Edwards standing with Hamilton by the tactical console discussing the deployment of mines in the asteroid field outside, "You wanted to see me captain?" she said.

"Ah Nikki, yes. Could you join me in my ready room?" Edwards responded and Nikki nodded.

"Yes captain." she said and she followed him from the bridge into the adjoining ready room.

"Has Lieutenant Commander Cole told you that I want you at ops?" Edwards said as they sat down.

"Yes captain. He said that all of the operations officers were better suited to other roles." Nikki replied.

"Quite. There's a lot of work to be done to prepare the ship to create a gateway. On the other hand if you don't feel up to the role I can still use one of them and it won't reflect on you as an intern."

"Captain I won't let you down." Nikki said and Edwards smiled.

"No, I don't think you will." he said, "Now I take it that Cole didn't issue you with a phaser."

"No captain."

"I thought not." Edwards said and from beneath his desk he produced a tiny hand phaser that was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, "Do you know how to use this?" he asked.

"Not that model no." she answered.

"Well it's easy. This is the safety. This controls the setting and this fires it." Edwards told her, pointing out each control in turn, "Now this is set to kill. Stun settings are ineffective against the Iconians so be careful with it. I don't want you to use it unless absolutely necessary. Oh and I'd be grateful if you didn't mention this to your mother if possible." and Nikki smiled at him.

"I'll try not to." she said.

"Good. In that case get to your station. Max ought to be updating the system status regularly and I want to be kept up to date with how the modifications are going."

"Yes captain."

The block of refractive silicon had been carefully cut into many pieces using a pressurised water jet. A block had been removed from one end that was now being carved in a way that was hoped would optimise its refractive properties and envelope the entire ship in the energy needed to form the proposed gateway. Meanwhile the remainder of the block had been sliced into many thin sheets that would be affixed to the inside of the outer hull layer.

"I want to be able to monitor the condition of each of these sheets simultaneously." Max said to West and she nodded, "Unfortunately the ship's nanite hive will not be able to monitor them for me owing to their location against the hull."

"That should be possible." she replied, "There are passive pressure and thermal sensors dotted all over the outer compartments. I can combine the feed from them all in a way that you'll be able to access directly."

"Careful positioning will be key." T'Lan said. We need to place each sheet so that it will refract energy as far as the next one along until the entire ship is enveloped."

"I have already determined a suitable equidistant spacing." Max replied just as Doctor King entered the room with a PADD in his hand.

"Well I've run some more tests on that control device." he announced and he held the PADD towards Max, "Now that I know what I'm looking for I was able to find a pattern in the emissions produced when it's fed power." he added.

"A triangular wave of sixty one point four megahertz." Max commented.

"Possibly the resonant frequency of the material itself." T'Lan suggested.

"I was thinking that you may get the best results if the deflector was configured to emit at that frequency." King said.

"Logical." T'Lan commented.

"I agree." Max said, "If forming a gateway is keyed to an energy field of that frequency then removing the potential for harmonic distortion should increase efficiency."

"Dissuade them." West heard The Controller say inside her head, "Tell them that it could lead to positive feedback that would destroy the ship." and West smiled, knowing that this meant they were on the right track.

"I should run a check on our other systems." she said, "Anything producing unshielded emissions at other frequencies will need to be shut down. Of course that will include our shields."

"That's going to make us very vulnerable isn't it?" King asked, "What about adjusting the frequency of our shields to the same as the gateway system?"

"You are correct to say that lowering our shields will make us vulnerable doctor, but adjusting them to a frequency of sixty one point four megahertz to match the gateway system is something that the Iconians may be likely to predict and they will retune their weapons accordingly." T'Lan responded, "Ordinarily I would say that Lieutenant Commander Hamilton may be able to keep us out of the line of fire long enough for us to form a gateway. However, any deviation in our flight path is likely to radically alter the termination point."

"A last minute course correction may be adequate." Max said, "As long as we can be sure of the distance we will travel then our heading should only matter at the moment the gateway becomes fully formed and we enter it."

"Well if anyone can pull that off it's Bradley." West said. Then she hesitated before adding, "Please don't tell him I said that."

"I shall see to the installation of the silicon lens on the main deflector." Max said, "Lieutenant Commander T'Lan, I suggest that you oversee the installation of the panels inside our hull while Lieutenant West reviews our other systems for potential interference. When everything is in place I will control the gateway from engineering."

"Your suggestion is logical lieutenant." T'Lan replied, "I will inform the captain of our intentions."

As she walked down the corridor away from engineering, West smiled.

"You may think you've won," The Controller said to her, "but you haven't escaped yet and I can assure you that there will be consequences for your defiance."

West then halted at the door to a turbolift and waited as it slid open before stepping inside where she was alone. Then as the doors closed again she replied to the threat.

"Consequences my ass." she said.

## ii.

Given his unique ability to regenerate damage caused by radiation Max worked alone to fit the carved lens over the *Nightfall's* deflector dish. This lens was mounted on a four pronged frame fixed to the rim of the deflector emitter so that the centre of the lens was located in perfect alignment with the centre of the emitter. If this arrangement performed as Max had calculated it would then the energy from the deflector dish would be directed all around the ship instead of just focused ahead of it.

"Max." Cole's voice said suddenly, Max being able to hear this even in the vacuum of space thanks to his direct connection to his combadge, "Are you finished yet?"

"Yes commander." Max responded, "I am on my way back inside now. Is something wrong?"

"Our time's up." Cole told him, "Those three Iconian warships just arrived to ambush us."

The Girl watched as the *Nightfall* dived towards the red hyper giant star at the centre of the system.

"You think committing suicide preferable to being boarded by us Captain Edwards? Or do you perhaps think that you can lose us in the interference created by the star?" she said to herself, "Well you're wrong about that." she added.

All of a sudden the *Nightfall* veered off and despite one of its nacelles trailing fire behind the vessel there was a bright flash of light as its warp drive came online, propelling the ship faster than light. The massive gravity of the star dragged the starship around at such a speed that the flash of the warp drive's activation was duplicated on the other side of the star as the *Nightfall* reappeared instantaneously. However, before even the Iconian intelligences that controlled the three dreadnoughts could engage the *Nightfall* as it reappeared, the ship just vanished.

"No!" The Girl cried out, "What happened?"

"The enemy vessel no longer registers in predicted target zone." the dreadnought's directing intelligence told her.

"Where did they go?" The Girl demanded.

"Unknown. There is no warp trail."

"Impossible." The Girl said but then she remembered how a sling shot manoeuvre could be used as a form of primitive time travel and she smiled, "You do surprise me Captain Edwards. I never thought that you would be so desperate as to try something so dangerous. Now when did you go to? The past or the future? If you travelled to the future then you would have no way of knowing what was waiting for you so it must be the past. Not too far though or you would have been able to get to your base already."

"Your orders?" the dreadnought's intelligence asked.

"Search the system." The Girl ordered, "The *Nightfall* is still here somewhere. They've probably had several hours to try and hide from us so make sure you check all the possible hiding places."

"Confirmed." the intelligence replied, "Executing full sensor sweep."

The Girl remained stood at the viewport as the dreadnought turned around to face away from the star, looking into the seemingly empty blackness of the Kerous system.

"Where are you Captain Edwards?" she muttered, "And why isn't West doing anything to give us your location?"

"Sensor sweep completed." the dreadnought's intelligence announced, "Single Federation vessel detected. Akira-class."

"That's them." The Girl said, "Where are they?"

"Located in an asteroid field. What are your instructions?"

"All ships engage gateways. We'll take them by surprise and show them that a few rocks aren't going to keep them hidden from us."

Thanks to his connection with the hive of nanites that swarmed through the *Nightfall*, Max already knew the status of the physical systems aboard the ship when he returned to engineering but with the conduits carrying the microscopic machines not going near the outer hull where the silicon sheets were being placed he still had to ask West for an update on this.

"We're about half way through." she told him, "If we can carry on at this rate then we'll have everything in place in half an hour. An hour tops."

"And what about the monitoring systems?" he asked, "I know they are functioning but are they reliable?"

"They aren't really designed for what we're doing but they should work." West said, "Plus I've made sure that any system that could cause any interference has been shut down. That includes all of our combadges by the way so we'll all have to use fixed intercom panels and the command crew won't be able to use their headsets to get data remotely. Both of those points include you Max."

"That will not be a problem. I can tap into the system physically if needed." Max responded, "Are there any other major systems that you have had to disable?"

"Firefighting and a lot of our security." West answered, "Basically anything that creates a forcefield that could disrupt the formation of the gateway."

"That could cause us great difficulty if we are forced to enter combat." Max commented.

"I know." West agreed, "But I can't exactly put them on a simple on-off switch. There'll be some residual power in the circuits if we try pulling the plug on them all at once and even if the forcefields aren't being generated the emitters may still interfere with what we're trying to create here."

"Agreed." Max replied and then he held out his arm to the main engineering console and extended tubes from his fist to establish a physical connection, "Max to T'Lan. The lens is in place and Lieutenant West reports that we are well underway to having the silicon sheets in position, "What is your level of progress with the navigational program?"

While Max spoke with the bridge West stood beside him and watched before noticing that subconsciously she had placed her hand on her phaser and release the safety.

"Kill him. Kill him now." The Controller told her and West scowled as she re-engaged her phaser's safety system and then folded her arms, consciously keeping them far from her sidearm.

"Without knowing what we can expect from a partially formed gateway I have been unable to establish a fixed set of parameters for setting our destination." T'Lan responded, "However, I have been able to create a subroutine that will allow you to sweep through the full range of passive EM and subspace sensors. My recommendation would be to begin by searching Federation hailing frequencies that identify their origin as being with in the Sol system and with a time stamp matching ours."

"Understood." Max said, "Please inform the captain that I hope to be able to begin preliminary operation of the gateway system in half an hour."

"Affirmative Max. Though I expect the captain would appreciate any time that you can shave off that. According to our sensors there are three gateways forming six million kilometres away. It appears that the Iconians have been able to find our location already."

"Are they the same dreadnoughts?" Edwards asked.

"Err." Nikki responded as she stared at the ops console, "I think so. I can't tell if the gateways originate near the local star but their energy profiles matches the ones I have on file for the ones that attacked us earlier."

"Mines armed and ready captain." Cole reported.

"Same for the mass accelerators." Hamilton added.

"Secure all systems for silent running." Edwards ordered, "They may know that we're somewhere in this asteroid field but it's still possible that the Iconians don't have an exact fix."

"Confirmed captain, switching all sensors to passive mode." T'Lan replied and at the same time the lights on the bridge dimmed as the general power usage of the *Nightfall* was reduced all across the ship in an effort to make it invisible inside the asteroid field.

"Tactical on screen." Edwards said and the image on the main view screen of the asteroid field surrounding the *Nightfall* was replaced by a map showing the Federation vessel itself at the bottom while the three Iconian dreadnoughts were represented at the top. Between them was the asteroid field, littered with obvious red dots that represented the photon torpedoes that had been laid as mines as well as several blue ones to indicate the probes that had been deployed so that the mines could be triggered without having to send a direct transmission from the *Nightfall* itself. Instead a visual trigger signal would be sent to one of the probes that would then relay that onto another and so on until the command reached one of the mines and it exploded, shattering the asteroid on which it had been laid.

The drawback to lying in wait inside the asteroid field was that most of the asteroids were less than one hundred metres across while fewer than one in a hundred were more than five hundred, meaning that once the Iconians knew for sure that the *Nightfall* was somewhere inside the asteroid field there would only be a handful of places that it could be hiding.

As the bridge crew watched the symbol representing the three Iconian dreadnoughts began to split apart, one of them remaining on a heading that would bring it very close to the *Nightfall* while the others gave the impression of wanting to circle around the asteroid field.

"They're trying to surround us." Cole said.

"A logical move." T'Lan commented.

"Yeah, which is why I had some mines laid out near the edge of the field." Hamilton replied.

"Commander Cole, are they in range yet?" Edwards asked.

"Vessel on the left flank approaching mine delta-four-two." Cole replied and Edwards smiled.

"Let them know they aren't welcome here commander." he said and Cole sent the command to trigger the mine.

From her vantage point aboard her dreadnought *The Girl* saw the flash of the exploding mine and she turned



to see one of the asteroids breaking apart and sending debris flying into the shields of one of the other dreadnoughts.

"Report." she said.

"Detonation confirmed." the dreadnought's intelligence replied, "Starfleet photon torpedo. Two hundred isotonne yield. Our vessel reports a temporary reduction of shield strength but no physical damage."

"Was a launch detected?" The Girl asked.

"Negative. Suspect remote detonation."

"So the crew of the *Nightfall* have laid a minefield have they?" The Girl commented, "Well we'll soon see about that." then in a louder voice she gave her next order, "All ships commence fire. Close on the target and destroy the asteroids between us at a distance."

"Captain I am reading an energy spike from the Iconian ships that corresponds with their weapon arrays powering up." T'Lan announced right before the three Iconian dreadnoughts opened fire on the asteroid field. The storms of lightning emitted by the Iconian weapon systems tore through the asteroids and all three massive vessels turned directly towards the *Nightfall's* position

"I think they know we're here captain." Nikki commented when she saw the courses that the Iconians were following converged on the *Nightfall*.

"Nikki is correct captain." T'Lan added, "Enemy vessels are closing on our location. However, they are advancing into the debris created by their own bombardment. This is reducing their shield strength at the same time as their weapons are occupied firing on the asteroids."

"Fire torpedoes." Edwards ordered, "Target at your discretion Commander Cole."

"Aye captain. Launching torpedoes." Cole responded as he fired all of the *Nightfall's* torpedo launchers at once, emptying the stored stocks of quantum torpedoes in just under two seconds.

Guided using sensor data relayed by the lurking probes, one hundred and fifty quantum torpedoes rounded the asteroid that the *Nightfall* was using for cover and began to weave their way towards the dreadnought that had already been caught in the mine blast. The Iconian intelligence commanding this vessel detected the approaching swarm of torpedoes and attempted to target them. However, given that its weapons were already occupied in destroying asteroids that could be concealing mines it could not dedicate its full firepower to defending itself. Added to this the number of torpedoes moving rapidly between the asteroids made tracking individual targets difficult and so barely a half of the total number were shot down before they struck the dreadnought. The giant vessel's shields had already been weakened by having to protect against the constant bombardment of asteroid debris and the almost simultaneous impact of more than seventy quantum torpedoes was more that they could now stand up to. The hull of the dreadnought was breached in several locations and there were detonations from inside as volatile systems exploded. However, although damaged the dreadnought was not out of action yet and it continued to blast at the asteroids as it continued towards the *Nightfall*.

"Enemy now less than one hundred thousand kilometres away captain." Nikki announced.

"Max, the Iconians are right on top of us. How long until we can try this gateway?" Edwards asked over the intercom.

"At least fifteen more minutes captain." Max responded.

"Okay we're going to have try and put some more distance between us." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton, go."

"Aye captain." Hamilton said and he fired the *Nightfall's* mass accelerator cannons into the asteroid right in front of them. The force of the multiple impacts on the asteroid shattered it into thousands of pieces of debris that flew towards the approaching dreadnoughts and under the cover of this cloud Hamilton accelerated forwards and turned the *Nightfall* sharply, taking it past the already damaged dreadnought. Cole took maximum advantage of this and fired the *Nightfall's* phasers, splitting his targeting between the dreadnought itself and also some of the larger pieces of nearby debris in an attempt to send more of them towards the enemy vessel.

"They're running." The Girl said as she watched the *Nightfall* weaving between asteroids, "What is their defensive status?"

"Target vessel's shields are down." the dreadnought's intelligence answered and The Girl frowned.

"Not worried about being shot at Captain Edwards?" she commented, "Open a channel." she added.

"Confirmed. Matching standard Starfleet hailing frequencies."

"Captain we're being hailed." Nikki announced and Edwards frowned.

"Starfleet can't have got reinforcements here." he said, "There were no other ships close enough."

"Captain I believe that the transmission originates aboard one of the enemy vessels." T'Lan said as she tracked the source of the hail, "This could be a trap intended to upload malicious code to our ship via the communication channel."

"Surely they know we're wise to how they do that." Edwards said.

"They must be." Hamilton agreed, "But my name's not Shirley."

"Let's hear them out." Edwards said, ignoring Hamilton's joke, "T'Lan, watch for any signs of data transfer on sub-channels."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

"Putting them through now captain." Nikki said and all of a sudden The Girl's young looking face appeared on the main viewscreen.

"Hello Captain Edwards." she said, "Or may I call you David? Is Grace not with you? I do hope nothing untoward has happened to your dear lady friend."

"I think we should keep things more formal Miss Sanchez." Edwards replied, using the name of the original human girl whose body The Girl now inhabited and she smiled.

"Ah, so my dear father gave me away." she said.

"Actually he killed himself before he could be placed in custody but we found more than enough information on who you used to be Miranda."

"So much for formality." The Girl said, "Captain I have thousands of fleshforms at my command. I think we should discuss a surrender."

"Sorry." Edwards replied, "But we just can't handle that many prisoners. If you've had enough then you'll just have to tuck your tail between your legs and run away again."

"Very well captain. Have it your way. But don't say I didn't give you and your crew a chance to escape this." The Girl said and then the channel was abruptly closed.

"I think we're going to have company." Edwards said.

"I'd like to see them try." Hamilton added and he performed another sharp turn before the Iconians could transfer any of their troops aboard the ship.

This situation did not last long, however and the same alarm that had heralded the arrival of the three dreadnoughts sounded to warn the crew that the *Nightfall* itself was being boarded as all over the ship fleshforms stepped through gateways to board it.

One of the fleshforms materialised on the *Nightfall's* bridge and Cole quickly released his safety harness and grabbed hold of the phaser rifle he had positioned right next to him. Configured to one of its more powerful lethal settings Cole fired the phaser at the fleshform and it was promptly incinerated, not even giving the Iconian the opportunity to make use of a gateway to retreat as many were known to do.

All around the bridge the crew released their harnesses despite the way in which Hamilton was performing one sudden manoeuvre after another. For their part the Iconians continued to try and send more fleshforms aboard the ship but the speed and frequency with which Hamilton changed the *Nightfall's* course and speed made it difficult for them to establish a fix on the ship and establish a gateway to it. This meant that although The Girl had indicated that she could flood the cruiser with troops the number able to get aboard was limited and their deployment was scattered.

In engineering the crew stood with their backs to the warp cores as they fired their phasers at the fleshforms that materialised in the large chamber while a mixed team of engineers and security guards with phaser rifles protected the doors from more of the synthetic Iconian hosts that attempted to force their way inside.

On the other hand Max remained connected to the engineering console as he monitored the progress being made by the teams putting the silicon panels in place. West stood beside him with her phaser in her hand to protect him but as one of the fleshforms charged at her she found herself unable to fire the weapon, The Controller's influence stopping her. Luckily for her, all of the fleshforms invading the *Nightfall* had been informed that she was host to an Iconian intelligence and so they were just as unwilling to harm her as she was incapable of harming them and rather than attacking her the charging fleshform shoved her out of the way as it moved to assault Max. In response Max reached out with his free hand and grasped the fleshform by its throat. Against most humanoids this would be a disabling strike as they were forced to try and break his grip or choke but the fleshform did not breath and it lashed out at Max who was saved thanks to the reinforced nature of his Borg implants. Disconnecting from the console Max then plunged the same tubes he used to establish a data connection into the fleshform and nanites swarmed into it in their thousands.

Immediately they began to spread and consume the fleshform from within, creating a pattern of grey lines across its otherwise milky white surface. The fleshform began to shudder and Max released his grip, allowing it to stagger backwards as it tried to find a way of escaping. For the intelligence using the synthetic body there was no way to leave it while still aboard the *Nightfall* and so it opted for the only option left open to it, opening a gateway that led back to its home dimension and retreating from the ship altogether. No longer under attack, Max plugged himself back into the engineering console and immediately saw that all of the silicon panels were now reported as being in place and the gateway system was ready to test. "Max to bridge, I am powering the gateway system now."

"Bradley look out!" Nikki yelled as another fleshform appeared on the bridge three of them had already appeared in a cluster at the back of the bridge and Cole and T'Lan were firing on them with their phasers but this one had stepped through its gateway close to Hamilton's helm station. Unable to get out of his seat quickly the *Nightfall's* helmsman made an easy target but as the fleshform brought its arm down there was a flash of phaser fire when Nikki snatched her compact weapon from under the ops console and fired it. The beam struck the fleshform just below the shoulder and the arm that would have cracked Hamilton's skull wide open was instead blown off. The surprised fleshform staggered away from Hamilton and this gave Edwards the opportunity to draw his phaser and use it to blast a large hole in the fleshform's chest. It was then that Max's message came through on the intercom.

"Max to bridge, I am powering the gateway system now."

"T'Lan, system status." Edwards ordered and T'Lan returned to her console.

"Deflector on line captain. Emitting sixty one point four megahertz signal. I am detecting the resonance from the silicon lens." T'Lan said as a gateway began to form.

"Captain the system is working. A gateway is forming ahead of us." Max reported

"Confirmed captain." T'Lan said.

"Helm, bring us on a heading to Earth." Edwards ordered, "Stay on it as long as possible."

"Turning to two five one mark fourteen." Hamilton responded as he turned the *Nightfall* again, aligning it towards Earth.

"Unable to transfer further troops." the dreadnought's intelligence announced.

"Why not?" The Girl demanded.

"Target vessel is forming a gateway. System disruption extends nine hundred metres all around vessel." The Girl's eyes widened.

"A gateway. They can't" she said, "They haven't had enough time to master the technology."

"Presence of gateway confirmed. Target vessel has adjusted course towards Earth."

"Forget boarding them. Destroy that vessel. We'll pick the body out of the wreckage if we have to. Just don't let them escape."

The *Nightfall* lurched suddenly as Hamilton took evasive action to avoid the next storm of lightning from the Iconian dreadnoughts.

"Captain we need to hold our course long enough for me to get a fix on Earth." Max warned from engineering.

"If I keep us on that course we'll be lucky to be flying half a ship through the gateway." Hamilton pointed out.

"We also need to be heading the right way when we use the gateway Mister Hamilton." Edwards commented.

"Okay hang on. Coming back to two five one mark fourteen." Hamilton said, "I can probably give you another ten seconds."

In engineering Max adjusted the flow of energy being emitted by the *Nightfall's* deflector dish and monitored the forward sensor readings closely. The gateway that had been formed so far was just a few millimetres across but this was enough for the ship's sensors to determine what lay beyond it and as Hamilton turned the cruiser back towards Earth, Max was able to determine how far the gateway extended.

As he worked West began to recover after having been thrown aside by the fleshform and she reached to pick up her phaser.

"Kill him." The Controller ordered her, "Kill him now. This is your last chance." and subconsciously West raised her phaser and pointed it at Max's back. However, rather than fire the weapon she instead tossed it aside at the last moment and slumped back against the wall behind her, "You fool. You will pay for this." The Controller hissed.

"I win." West said softly.

"Earth hailing signals detected." Max announced suddenly, "Expanding gateway."

Modifying the focus of the emissions from the deflector dish turned the gateway from a tiny one just ahead of the *Nightfall* to a distortion of space and time that dragged the entire ship forwards into it and the entire ship began to shake violently.

"What's happening?" Nikki said, "Why haven't we travelled to Earth?"  
"We appear to be caught on the event horizon of the gateway." T'Lan said as she studied her console, "Gravitational forces are increasing exponentially." and then there was a groaning sound from the *Nightfall* itself.  
"How much more of this can the ship take?" Cole asked.  
"Hull failure in two minutes." T'Lan said.  
"What if we reinforce the structural integrity field?" Edwards asked.  
"Structural integrity already at maximum captain." T'Lan answered.  
"Max why aren't we breaking through?" Edwards said.  
"We don't have the power captain." Max told him, "The resonant waves are attenuated too rapidly between adjacent silicon panels. Perhaps if we had more of them."  
"Well we don't." Cole said.  
"Shields." Edwards said suddenly.  
"Of no use captain." T'Lan replied, "Gravitational forces too strong."  
"No. I mean set them to sixty one point four megahertz. Will that boost the resonant field?" Edwards said.  
"It might captain." T'Lan replied.  
"Then it's worth a try." Edwards said.  
"Adjusting shield frequency to sixty one point four megahertz." Cole said, "Raising them now." and the next thing the crew of the *Nightfall* experienced was a brilliant flash of white light before blackness consumed them.

"Grace?" Edwards said as he woke up on a biobed and saw Carr sitting beside him, "Where am I?"  
"Starfleet medical captain." Carr told him, "It looks like everyone blacked out when the ship passed through the gateway."  
"I should be getting used to that now." Edwards commented, "So what happened? Did everyone make it?"  
"Everyone who was on the ship when it passed through the gateway made it through to this end." Carr said, "Of course you managed to panic Starfleet Command into thinking that Earth was about to be attacked by the Iconians and they launched the entire Second Fleet to intercept you."  
"So we made it." Edwards said.  
"Yes but unfortunately it seems that the process of travelling through that gate caused all of that silicon to break down" Carr explained, "So unless we can come up with another supply of the stuff we won't be doing that again."  
"Fine by me." Edwards said as he rubbed his head, "Romulan ale doesn't leave a hangover this bad. What about the body?"  
"I don't know captain. I've tried asking about it but it looks like Starfleet Intelligence took it from the *Nightfall* before the crew were evacuated. Whatever they did with it, they're keeping it quiet. No-one seems to know where it is."  
"Well they better take good care of it. We risked a lot to get it here." Edwards said.

"So this is it?" Admiral Schmidt said as he and Commander Jones looked down at the body on the slab. There were several other corpses of various species in the room but none of them were intact like this one was.  
"Looks perfectly normal." Jones added.  
"Of course it does." Brown said from the opposite side of the mortuary slab, "But it's just like all of the others. It has that synthetic flesh running everywhere through it and thanks to the research done by Commander King, Lieutenant Commander T'Lan and Lieutenant Maximillian we know how it forms a gateway. Give it to me a month and I'm sure I'll be able to find all sorts of other interesting things out about it."  
"My dear, you can have it for as long as you like. This belongs to our section now." Schmidt told her.

The Iconian leadership made The Girl wait before it summoned her to explain the *Nightfall's* escape.  
"You failed." one said.  
"I know. The crew of the *Nightfall* were able to-" The Girl began.  
"We are not interested in your excuses." another Iconian interrupted, "You promised us that you would recover the body of our agent before Starfleet learned how to replicate our technology."  
"You failed." the first intelligence repeated.  
"It was unavoidable." The Girl protested.  
"That is not what everyone assigned to the operation believes." another intelligence said and all of a sudden The Girl became aware of another presence, one very familiar to her now as Shintar joined the virtual meeting.  
"Speak." one of the Iconian leaders told him.  
"My squadron was powerful enough to destroy the *Nightfall* in open battle but my ships were wasted." he

said, "Had I been allowed to attack the Starfleet vessel then I could have arranged for the body to be taken. Now my crew have mutinied and I have no power among the Remans. I will need to start my infiltration again."

"Not yet." another intelligence said, "Perhaps your skills would be better served elsewhere. Strategic planning perhaps."

"I don't need his help." The Girl said.

"We were not thinking of having him help you." the intelligence responded, "Now leave us while we discuss our next move." and The Girl found herself suddenly expelled from the virtual world and back in her human body.

"Damn you Shintar." she hissed.

As soon as she was released from Starfleet Medical, West returned to her quarters aboard the *Nightfall*. The ship was now located at the Utopia Planitia shipyards in orbit around Mars while it was being repaired and she was content to allow the shipyard workers to get on with the task while she got some rest. She fell asleep almost as soon as she got into bed but just a few seconds later her eyes snapped open as The Controller took control of her sleeping body.

Getting back out of bed The Controller crossed the room to where West kept her phaser and set it to maximum. Then The Controller sat down in front of the newly repaired mirror and picked up a hair brush from the counter. The Controller pressed the muzzle of the phaser to West's temple and jabbed the handle of the hairbrush into her thigh so that the sharp pain roused her from her sleep and she found herself looking at herself in the mirror with her phaser held against her own head.

Gasping in shock she tossed the phaser aside, seeing that it was set to a level that would have disintegrated her entirely if she had fired it at that moment. Then her reflection grinned at her.

"See? It's that easy. Do as I say or I've got nothing to lose by killing us both." The Controller said.