

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



THE OMEGA STRATAGEM

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **THE OMEGA STRATAGEM**

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

When the *USS Nightfall* intercepts a shipment of an obscure mineral most of the crew has no idea of its significance. However, Captain Edwards knows that the mineral is the source of one of the greatest dangers known to the Federation and he soon finds himself leading a hand picked team on a mission where there are no rules and every one of them is considered expendable...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
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Stardate 67801.3. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol along the Romulan Neutral Zone.

"T'Lan are you okay?" Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole asked as he stood in the doorway of the bathroom where he had just heard the sound of his Vulcan wife being sick.

"I will be fine." she replied, walking slowly towards him, "The nausea is merely a side effect of my condition." "You know," Cole said, wrapping his arms around T'Lan, "I bet if you just asked King Henry he could prescribe something."

"That will not be necessary. Doctor King has more important thing to be concerned about than my morning sickness." T'Lan said, "Besides the hybrid nature of our child means that none of the typical medications are likely to be one hundred percent effective."

"If you say so." Cole said and he kissed T'Lan's forehead, "But people are going to start noticing that you've arranged your shifts so you don't do any in the mornings soon. We need to think about telling people you're pregnant."

"They will likely become very emotional about the issue. I would prefer to avoid that."

"Well I'll go along with whatever you decide but for now I need to get going. I do have an early shift and I need to give Captain Edwards a security briefing."

"Is it serious?" T'Lan asked.

"A bombing at a minor Starfleet outpost. The news came in overnight. Starfleet security is on high alert just in case there are any further attacks on more high profile targets."

"Very well. I shall see you at the end of your shift." T'Lan replied and she briefly took Cole's hand in hers and rubbed their fingers together in the Vulcan gesture of intimacy before she returned to their bed and lay down. Meanwhile Cole collected his PADD and left their quarters, making his way directly to the bridge. Entering the room he found a woman wearing the same Services Division uniform as he did sat in the captain's chair.

"Still enjoying the power West?" he asked and she smiled at him.

"It took me long enough to get the promotion." she said.

"She's ruling us with an iron fist." the Romulan woman sat beside West added.

"In which case you should be more respectful Noyal, just in case she makes you walk the plank." Cole said and West looked at the Romulan woman.

"Don't tempt me." she said,

"Is Captain Edwards in his ready room?" Cole asked and West nodded, "Thanks." Cole added and he made his way to the ready room door.

"Enter." Edwards said when Cole activated the intercom and the door slid open to reveal the *Nightfall's* commanding officer sat behind his desk, "Ah Commander Cole, take a seat." he said, "I'll be right with you."

"Paperwork?" Cole commented as he entered the ready room and sat down opposite Edwards.

"Reports. Reports. Reports." Edwards said before tapping at his computer terminal in an exaggerated manner and then leaning back in his chair and looking at Cole, "So what brings you here commander?"

"Another report I'm afraid." and Edwards winced.

"Bad news?" he said.

"There's been a terrorist attack on a Starfleet outpost." Cole said, handing his PADD to his commanding officer. Edwards took it and then frowned as he looked at the screen.

"Tor Delta?" he said, "I don't think I've even heard of that outpost. What's there?"

"Back in the Romulan War it was a refuelling station for ships coming from Earth to the front lines. Of course as ships became more efficient and we established the outposts along the Neutral Zone the facility became obsolete. It was mothballed for just under a century before being reactivated as a reserve communications relay station."

"A reserve communications relay station?" Edwards repeated, "What value does an attack there have?"

"None whatsoever." Cole said, "Starfleet operations haven't been affected in any way and according to the damage report the outpost will be up and running again in under forty-eight hours."

"Were there casualties?" Edwards asked and Cole nodded.

"There's no information about that in the report." Cole said and Edwards frowned.

"Odd considering how detailed the rest of the information is." he said and Cole nodded.

"Hopefully it means that the only damage was material." Cole replied before the intercom activated.

"Captain we may have an issue." West said.

"What's wrong commander?" Edwards asked.

"We're picking up a ship in the Neutral Zone. It's running a course parallel to the border and it looks like it's trying to avoid detection. Its emissions are minimal and it's not broadcasting a transponder signal." West

explained.

"I'm on my way." Edwards said and then he and Cole both got up to return to the bridge. As soon as they left the ready room West got up to allow Edwards to take his seat while the officer at tactical did likewise for Cole. Rather than returning to her normal place at operations West instead sat in the vacant seat beside Edwards where Commander Carr, the *Nightfall's* first officer would normally sit while on duty.

"Put the ship on the main viewscreen." Edwards said as he donned a headset of the same type as worn by the rest of the *Nightfall's* command staff. He could have used the heads up display built into this to see the unidentified vessel for himself but it remained common practice to use the main viewscreen for anything that more than one officer could have an interest in.

"On screen now captain." the officer on duty at operations while West was acting as executive officer replied.

"That's not a Romulan design." Nayal said when she saw the vessel.

"Looks like a freighter captain." Cole said from tactical.

"The vessel is travelling at warp three point four." West added as she looked at the console beside her.

"So either they can't go any faster or they're keeping their speed low to try and avoid us picking up their warp signature." Edwards commented.

"Captain by keeping themselves in the Neutral Zone they're making themselves harder to intercept despite their low speed." West pointed out, "If we lay in a course for them then they'll probably read our warp signature and high tail it for the Romulan side."

"Where our standing orders forbid us from going." Cole added.

"What's the status of our fighters?" Edwards asked.

"Two craft on alert, the rest ready at five minute notice captain." West told him.

"Then we launch our squadron into the Neutral Zone." Edwards said, "A brief incursion by fighters shouldn't cause any diplomatic headaches. Then we have them loop around behind the freighter before we go for it at maximum warp. If they see us and try to escape deeper into the Neutral Zone they'll run right into our fighters. If not then we'll get them ourselves. Sound yellow alert."

The yellow alert brought the rest of the command staff to the bridge regardless of their duty status and West returned to her regular posting at ops when Carr arrived on the bridge.

"What do we have?" Carr asked as she took her seat.

"An unidentified vessel skirting the edge of the Neutral Zone. Probably just smugglers but it could be more serious." Edwards told her, "I've ordered our fighters to cut off their escape before we move in."

"Fighters launching now captain." West announced and on the main view screen the *Nightfall's* twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters were shown accelerating away from their carrier ship. Once clear of the cruiser the fighters split into pairs and went to warp, each pair taking a different path so that they would surround the freighter as they passed it before meeting up on the other side again.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman." Lieutenant Commander White, the fighter squadron's leader transmitted using his call sign rather than name and rank, "We're on our way. ETA at rendezvous point twelve minutes."

"Mister Hamilton, what's our time to target at maximum warp?" Edwards asked, looking at the *Nightfall's* helmsman.

"A little over seven minutes captain." he answered and Edwards nodded, "In that case wait for our fighters to report ready before moving in." he said before he addressed White again, "Copy that Snowman. We'll be ready when you are. *Nightfall* out."

Hamilton took the *Nightfall* to maximum warp as soon as White reported that his fighters were in position, forming a screen on the far side of the freighter so that it could not retreat deeper into the Neutral Zone without running into them. Taking any ship into the Neutral Zone was risky, though not as risky as before civil war had erupted in the Romulan Empire following the destruction of Romulus when the Romulan navy could be counted on to react to any incursion by Starfleet. Now the Romulan factions along their side of the Neutral Zone lacked the power of the empire but the Federation still wanted to avoid antagonising them more than necessary and so Starfleet continued to avoid entering it wherever possible.

In order to make itself as hard to detect as possible the freighter was using only passive sensors and the tiny attack fighters had been able to slip around the vessel undetected. On the other hand, the strength of the warp field surrounding the *Nightfall* at maximum speed could not be concealed and the freighter detected the cruiser before it could get within weapons' range. However, the cruiser was still able to get close enough that West could display an image of it on the main bridge viewscreen. This revealed a vessel that appeared to be of Federation origin that had no obvious modifications such as enhanced weapon systems.

"Looks like one of ours." Edwards said and beside him Carr nodded.

"At least that's any complaints about jurisdiction out of the window." she added.

"Captain the freighter's warp field is increasing in strength and it is altering course zero eight four mark one five. That will take it-" T'Lan reported.

"Thank you lieutenant commander." Edwards interrupted, "That's exactly what we expected from them."

"Yes captain." T'Lan agreed.

"*Nightfall* to Snowman," Edwards said, activating the communications built into his chair, "you're about to have company."

"Copy that *Nightfall*. We'll roll out the red carpet for them." White responded before he addressed the rest of his squadron, "Okay you heard the captain, the target's on approach. Power up weapons and raise shields. You know the drill."

The twelve fighters broke into pairs again, with White and his wingman heading straight for the freighter while the other five pairs arranged themselves evenly around them.

"Drummer. Sledgehammer. Target is heading in your direction." White said and then he noticed the readings on his sensors fluctuate in a strange manner, "*Nightfall* I'm getting some disruption to my sensor readings. It doesn't look like any sort of jamming I've seen before but they may be trying to employ some sort of stealth technology."

"We're getting that too." West added, "It's not enough to throw off our sensors entirely but I can't get accurate readings about what's inside."

"T'Lan?" Carr said, looking around at the science station when she heard this.

"Confirmed." T'Lan said, "There is something inside the freighter that has a minor dampening effect on subspace fields. This may be a side effect of their attempts to avoid detection."

"Why not shut it off now that they know we've seen them?" Hamilton said, "Surely it'll be disrupting their own warp field."

"Without a detailed examination I cannot tell you that." T'Lan replied.

"Captain one of our fighter units is about to make contact with the freighter." West announced.

"On screen." Edwards ordered and the main bridge viewscreen changed from an image focusing purely on the freighter to one that also showed the two Peregrine-class fighters closing rapidly with it. All of a sudden there was a flash of red as the freighter opened fire and the beam struck one of the fighters. Fortunately the pilot had raised his craft's shields prior to engaging the freighter and the beam did no damage. However, the attack did cause the pilot of that fighter to break off by dropping to impulse power before it could be followed up by a second while his shields were still recharging.

"No doubt about them being hostile now." Carr commented and Edwards nodded as the second pilot sent a signal.

"This is Drummer, I'm going in." he reported and he fired his fighter's phasers, targeting the closest of the freighter's warp nacelles. The phaser blasts struck their target and easily penetrated the basic shielding of the freighter. The nacelle promptly exploded and the freighter began to turn as its warp field became unbalanced and it rapidly lost speed. This caused the fighter to overshoot its target before it could fire its phasers again. Performing a U-turn in flight was not possible at warp and the fighter could not re-engage. However, the rest of the squadron had already changed their headings to intercept the freighter and now that its speed had been massively reduced by the destruction of one of its nacelles they soon caught up with it.

"This is Squadron Leader Lieutenant Commander White to unidentified vessel, you are ordered to disengage your engines and prepare to be boarded.." White broadcast but the response from the freighter was another blast of phaser fire that passed close by White's fighter, "Okay have it your way." White said to himself before firing his phasers back at the freighter. His shot struck the engineering section of the freighter and there was a large explosion before the vessel's warp field collapsed entirely and it dropped to sub light speed.

"Captain the freighter has lost warp power." T'Lan reported.

"Adjusting course to compensate. ETA now ninety seconds." Hamilton said and Edwards looked at Carr.

"Commander, prepare your boarding party. Plan on facing resistance." he told her and she nodded.

"Heart, Shry, I want two fire teams in transporter room one ASAP. Sickbay I'll need a medic as well." she said after tapping her combadge to activate it as she got out of her seat and hurried towards the turbolift.

In addition to its Starfleet crew the *USS Nightfall*, like the other two modified Akira-class cruisers of the *Nightfall* program carried two companies of ground troops drawn from the armed forces of Federation member worlds. The intention had been that they would eventually be replaced with troops from Starfleet's own ground combat specialists who would have their training updated to match that of these soldiers but like so much else to do with the program Starfleet had yet to commit to this and so the original troops were still stationed aboard the starships and Carr had just completed checking her phaser when the door to the transporter room slid open to allow two teams of four soldiers to enter. One of these was made up of MACOs from Earth led by Captain Heart while his opposite number in the Imperial Guard led the team of four Andorians that accompanied them. All eight soldiers wore body armour and helmets and were armed with ballistic assault rifles that mounted phaser units beneath them for when the more conventional directed energy weapons were called for.

Also arriving with the troops was what appeared to be an ordinary human woman in the uniform of a member of Starfleet's sciences division. However, Carr knew that this woman was in fact constructed of a form of synthetic flesh copied from a material developed by the ancient Iconians and being used to give the *Nightfall's* emergency medical hologram, known to the crew as Emma, a physical form. The core program still ran on the *Nightfall's* computer system but the EMH operated this body by a direct wireless link.

Providing her with a body that allowed her to experience things beyond her original programming had triggered a massive increase in Emma's self awareness to the point where she was now considered sentient and a Federation citizen in her own right but she had chosen to stay on as a medical officer aboard the *Nightfall* so she could remain with the people she knew.

"The King sending you over there with us?" Carr asked as Emma stepped onto the transporter pad beside hers.

Yes commander. I think Doctor King prefers it when I am not in sickbay with him." Emma replied.

"At least it gets you out." Shry commented, "Just remember to duck when the shooting starts. You may not die like the rest of us but I'd never forgive myself if I failed to protect that pretty head of yours."

"Everybody locked and loaded?" Heart asked and the other soldiers all nodded to indicate that they were prepared.

"Energise." Carr then told the technician on duty by the control console and the transporter was engaged.



The boarding party materialised in a corridor located close to the freighter's bridge, chosen for its proximity to the key location while being unlikely to hold any crew members who could offer immediate resistance. The ground troops immediately deployed to cover the approaches from both directions while Carr opened up her tricorder and began to scan the surrounding area.

"I'm picking up two lifeforms." she said softly, "Both in the bridge."

"What about the rear of the ship?" Heart asked.

"I'm not reading anything from back there." Carr replied, "Anything at all. Whatever is causing the dampening effect we saw in our sensor scans of the ship must be affecting the interior as well."

"That could be a problem for me commander." Emma pointed out, "If I am cut off from the control signal from the *Nightfall* then my body will be incapacitated." and Carr nodded.

"Okay we'll secure the bridge first. Maybe then we can shut down the dampening and check the rest of the ship more easily."

"You heard the commander." Shry said, "Let's move out."

The ground troops moved ahead of the Starfleet officers, checking every potential hiding place along the short route to the main bridge before two positioned themselves to be aiming their weapons directly at the door while the others concealed themselves to either side.

"We might want to stand clear." Carr said, pulling Emma aside as well before Heart and Shry nodded at one another.

All of a sudden Shry slammed his hand down on the control to the door and it slid open.

"Imperial Guard!" he yelled, "You are under arrest." and at the same time the two soldiers directly in front of the door charged through the opening while the other troops moved in around the sides.

"Get off my ship!" a voice yelled and there was the whine of a particle weapon being fired. The weapon was an obsolete model of phaser and its pale blue beam struck a MACO in the chest. Ordinarily this would have been a potentially fatal hit but the refractive armoured vests that the troops wore dissipated the energy of the beam before it could do more than burn the MACO's chest. The soldier still dropped his weapon and fell to floor but he was still alive and as Emma rushed to see how badly injured he was the other troops opened fire in unison. Rather than use the phaser units mounted beneath their rifles they used the projectile weapons themselves and the sound of seven such weapons firing on fully automatic echoed around the bridge.

"Stop shooting! We surrender!" another voice called out and a man suddenly stuck his hands up above a console before getting to his feet.

"Get back down you coward!" the first man hissed, "I'll shoot you myself." and he appeared from behind another console with his phaser pointed towards his comrade. However, before he could fire he was hit by a beam from Heart's phaser that stunned him and he collapsed on the spot.

"I'm not armed. He had the only phaser." the other crewman said as a pair of Andorians rushed towards him with their rifles trained on him, "It was him that fired on your ships as well. I just wanted to try and outrun them."

"In a ship that could barely make warp three? Sure you did." Carr said, "How many more are there aboard?"

"It's just the two of us." the man replied.

Meanwhile Heart approached Emma and the injured MACO.

"How bad is he hit?" Heart said as Emma studied the readings on her medical tricorder.

"Looks like second degree burns to his chest. Mind you from the molecular damage to his armour I'd say that the phaser was set to disrupt. If not for the armour then he'd be dead right now." she replied and Heart turned towards the crewman who was being taken into custody.

"Well well." he said with a smile, "That's an attempted murder charge right there. If you co-operate then maybe the Federal prosecutor won't charge you as an accessory."

"You can start by telling us which of these control panels will shut down whatever dampening technology you're using." Carr said as she looked around and took in the amount of damage that had been caused to the bridge, "Assuming it's not full of bullet holes." she added.

"What dampening technology? We can't afford anything like that. We can barely keep this ship running. This cargo was supposed to be a big score."

"What exactly are you hauling?" Shry asked.

"Boronite ore." the man replied and Shry frowned.

"Boronite?" he said, turning to look at Carr, "Do you know what that is?"

"Don't have a clue." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*, are you reading me?" she signalled.

"Reading you loud and clear commander." West responded, "Go ahead."

"*Nightfall*, we've taken a member of the freighter's crew into custody. He claims that the ship is not operating any dampening technology. Instead he says that the sensor disruption is being caused by their cargo. A mineral ore called boronite. I've never heard of it, can you look it up?" Carr explained.

"Boronite?" West repeated and all of a sudden she had the feeling that the word was triggering a memory before she realised that it was not her memory at all. Instead it belonged to the Iconian intelligence known only as The Controller that, unknown to the rest of the crew lay deep within her. The Controller had done its best to integrate its consciousness into West in an effort to take control of her body entire but it had never managed more than a few moments of control while she remained conscious and she had gone as far as arranging to confine herself to her quarters and denying herself computer access while asleep to prevent it from making use of her then. Now though it seemed that she had been able to pluck information from The Controller rather than the other way around. This was not the first time that this had happened but West had no idea of how to do it reliably.

"Commander Carr," T'Lan responded, "boronite is an obscure mineral known to have minor subspace dampening effects. However, it's rarity makes it of little practical use. There are simply not enough sources to make it worth exploiting."

"If it's rare then does that make it valuable cousin?" NayaI asked from her seat, looking around Edwards towards T'Lan.

"Must I remind you again that we are not related?" T'Lan replied, "To answer your question though, no boronite is not considered valuable. The ore is not regarded as aesthetically pleasing by any species so is not desirable."

"Well the crew of this ship were being paid to haul it." Carr said, "So it must be worth something to someone. Perhaps we should."

"Commander I want you to beam back aboard the *Nightfall* immediately." Edwards ordered before she could finish, "Then I want a security team beamed over there to visually inspect every last cargo container aboard it while West and Max take a look at the navigation and communication logs. T'Lan, you'd better go over there as well to identify the cargo for the security team. The crew are to be placed in the brig and no-one is to have any contact with them until I've spoken with Starfleet."

"Captain is something wrong?" Cole asked, "As chief of security I should."

"I'm sorry commander," Edwards said as he got up from his seat, "there's nothing that I can tell you. You have the bridge until Carr returns. I'm going to talk to Starfleet." and he strode from his chair to his ready room before going inside and closing the door behind him. Before making his way to his desk Edwards turned and made sure that his door was locked.

"Computer," he said as he took his seat, "open communications channel omega."

"Authorisation requested." the computer responded.

"Edwards, Captain. Omega authorisation code delta four four six omega one."

"Authorisation confirmed. This transmission will not appear in any logs." the computer announced and the emblem of Star Fleet security appeared on the monitor in front of Edwards for a few moments until a man in an admiral's uniform appeared.

"Edwards, don't tell me you're invoking the Omega Directive." he said.

"Not yet sir no, but I need to alert you to the possibility that it will become necessary soon. The *Nightfall* has just intercepted a freighter that was acting suspiciously. It fired on our fighters when they intercepted it and we were forced to disable the vessel. One of the crew told the boarding party that they were hauling boronite ore." Edwards explained.

"Boronite? How are you proceeding Edwards?"

"Since the ore is disrupting our scans I'm sending over a security team to visually inspect the cargo and I'll have my engineer examine the ship's computer. I understand that the Borg have knowledge of the omega molecule so I'll brief him privately. If we do uncover evidence that someone is attempting to synthesise omega particles then I'll need you to deploy an Omega Team."

"Edwards the Omega Team covering your sector can't be deployed. They were stationed at the outpost on Tor Delta." the admiral replied.

"The outpost that was bombed? Is that why there was no mention of casualties?" Edwards said.

"Yes. The entire team was killed. The deaths of officers whose assignment doesn't officially exist can't be included in an ordinary security report."

"All of a sudden it's not looking like such a random attack." Edwards said.

"No it's not. Look Edwards, someone obviously wanted that team out of the way which means not only do they know about omega but they know about the Omega Directive as well and that sort of knowledge can only come from within Starfleet."

"How do you want me to proceed if I need to invoke the Omega Directive?" Edwards asked and the admiral hesitated.

"You'll have to assemble a team from among your own crew. Keep it as small as possible and don't brief them until after the appropriate non-disclosure documents are signed off. Ideally don't let them know what's

going on until after you've left your ship. After that you know what the Omega Directive states. You locate the source and take it out by any means necessary." he said eventually, "I'm sorry to have to do this to you but there's no other way."

"I understand." Edwards said, nodding, "*Nightfall* out."

"So do I get a phaser?" Nikki Carr, the daughter of Commander Carr asked as Cole handed out PADDs to the security team that was assembled in the transporter room ready to beam over to the freighter. When Nikki had failed to get into college she had instead remained aboard the *Nightfall* and joined a Starfleet internship program. This involved placements with each of the ship's departments in turn and she had just begun her time with security.

"No." Cole replied.

"But everyone else has a phaser." Nikki pointed out, looking along the line at the security guards and their sidearms.

"Everyone else has gone through a full training program in close quarters combat Nikki. Your role with security is to observe the organisational side of it, not charge into battle." Cole said and Nikki frowned.

"Captain Heart let me fire his rifle." she commented.

"Well the MACOs aren't running this operation, I am." Cole said and then when he came to the end of it he he looked along the line as well to address his men, "Okay you all know what we're doing. Every crate aboard that ship needs inspecting visually. Log the contents and then apply a seal to the crate so that we can see which ones have been checked. If you find anything other than boronite ore then report it immediately. Are there any questions?"

Nikki raised her hand.

"I don't know what boronite ore is. How am I supposed to know it when I see it?" she asked.

"T'Lan will beam over with us to identify the ore. Just make sure that everything looks like what she tells it should." Cole said and Nikki raised her hand.

"So you don't know either? What is this boronite for?" she said.

"That's classified." Cole said.

"But you know, right? So why do we need T'Lan? Or don't you know either?"

"The captain has not chosen to-" Cole began.

"He doesn't know." the security guard stood to Nikki's side commented and Cole frowned.

"Everyone into the transporter." he said, ignoring the comment, "T'Lan is already aboard the freighter."

The transporter was set up to deliver the security team to the freighter's bridge where T'Lan and West were already aboard. All three working to assess the extent of the damage caused by the gunfire from the boarding party.

"Wow those troops really made a mess." Nikki said when the security team materialised and she saw the consoles riddled with bullet holes.

"That is a correct assessment." Lieutenant Maximillian, the *Nightfall's* chief engineer said. Known to the crew as Max, he was a former Borg drone from an unknown species from somewhere in the Delta Quadrant where the Collective originated. Unlike some of the drones who were able to escape the Collective, Max had retained all of his implants that enabled him to interface directly with most advanced technology, "Fortunately I do not require the interfaces that humans do in order to search the ship's logs for the information needed."

"T'Lan, are you ready to show us what we need in the hold?" Cole asked, approaching his wife.

"I am." she replied, "Have your team follow me."

Cole followed T'Lan closely as she led the security team from the bridge, leaving West and Max there alone. Max had connected himself to one of the damaged consoles and was busy searching through all of the freighter's computer files and this left West waiting for him tell her if he needed anything. As a lieutenant commander she outranked the former Borg drone but his knowledge and abilities made him of more use in searching for the desired information while West just acted as second pair of eyes.

"Max, I'm feeling like a dunsel here." West commented now that she found herself without even T'Lan to speak with and Max worked in silence, "Are you sure that there's nothing I can do?"

"A dunsel? Ah yes, a slang term used by Starfleet midshipmen for any part that serves no useful purpose." he replied, "No thank you lieutenant commander. My work is progressing."

"How far has it progressed?" West asked.

"I have traced the freighter's path back to a mining colony within the borders of the Klingon Empire.

However, the ship's navigation was being handled manually and there is no final destination logged in the computer. It may be necessary to seek details of the destination from the prisoners instead."

"What if they don't know?" West said and Max looked at her.

"How could they not know where they were going?" he responded.

"Back when I was in the Maquis we'd avoid giving our suppliers of weapon shipments a location for a meet before they left port so that we could be certain that they wouldn't either pass the information onto Starfleet or the Cardassians or be followed right the way to us. The two clowns flying this ship might not have known

their final destination yet. Everyone seems so keen to keep this omega stuff quiet that it wouldn't surprise me."

Max suddenly looked around at West and she wondered what had triggered this reaction.

"Did I just say something stupid?" she asked.

"I am just surprised about the extent of your knowledge Lieutenant Commander West." Max said. Then after a moment's pause he added, "Perhaps if you could check the subspace communication logs we could see if the ship's crew were in contact with anyone during their flight."

"Okay which console is that?" West asked, looking around the bridge of the freighter. Unlike a modern Starfleet vessel where any console aboard the ship could be reconfigured to serve any function the controls aboard the freighter were far more limited, with each one serving just a single dedicated function.

"The communications console is damaged." Max replied, "You will need to examine the logs from the main transceiver module itself." and West nodded.

"Sure thing Max." she said and she headed out of the bridge, leaving Max on his own. As soon as the door closed behind West, Max activated his combadge.

"Max to Captain Edwards. Are you free to speak?" he said.

"Yes, I'm alone in my ready room. What have you found Max?" Edwards responded.

"Nothing on the destination as of yet captain. The crew were flying the ship manually so there is only a record of where they have already been as well their next waypoint."

"So why are you calling?"

"It concerns Lieutenant Commander West. She has knowledge of omega."

"How?" Edwards exclaimed.

"I do not know. I did not ask just in case I revealed more than she already knows, but she specifically mentioned omega when we were alone together and commented on your efforts to keep it secret. I do not believe that she realised what she was saying." Max said.

"Where is Lieutenant Commander West now?" Edwards asked.

"I requested that she check the communications log at the main transceiver. I already know that it is empty but it provided me with a means to get her off the bridge while I contacted you." Max told him.

"Very good. As soon as she returns I want both of you back here in my ready room. We'll find out what she knows and how then. In the mean time try to make sure that she doesn't go mentioning omega to anyone else. The last thing we need is this spreading to the entire crew. Secrecy is key here Max. Edwards out."

3.

A swarm of robots worked to assemble vast machinery while a figure that seemed Reman watched them from a gangway overhead. He snarled as he sensed the arrival of a familiar individual and he spoke with looking around at her.

"What do you want?" he asked the young human girl who had just appeared out of thin air without the use of a transporter.

"I have news for you Shintar." The Girl said.

"That is Lord Shintar to you." Shintar responded, turning to stare at The Girl, "Or have you forgotten your disgrace?"

"A temporary setback." The Girl said, "But if it makes you happy then I have news for you *Lord* Shintar." and she emphasised the word 'Lord'.

"You may speak." Shintar said.

"Your plan has suffered a setback Lord Shintar. The *USS Nightfall* of all vessels has intercepted a boronite shipment and the tap placed in the vessel's secure communications system by our agent indicates that Captain Edwards has contacted Starfleet directly. Combined with your clumsy decision to take out the local omega team, Starfleet will be watching." The Girl told him.

"One shipment less does not matter." Shintar replied, "We have already received seven and when the assembly of this facility is completed we can begin the process of refining omega molecules. There will be no more of you limited covert actions. With one single blow I shall bring this entire galaxy to its knees. We alone shall be able to travel over interstellar distances using our gateways while the other primitive societies that dare to think they can rival our greatness will find their primitive warp drives useless."

"There are those of us who do not share your optimism Lord Shintar." The Girl said.

"Perhaps not, but the council endorsed my proposal over your objections. You have failed them too often now. Just be grateful that I have allowed you to stay on as my intermediary to them." Shintar said.

"Oh I don't know, giving up my physical form and returning home might not be so bad." The Girl replied.

"What make you think that is the only alternative?" Shintar asked as a smile appeared on his gaunt face, "I think my image with the primitive species I must debase myself to deal with would be enhanced were I to be dragging a chained slave girl around with me at our meetings. Who knows, some of my glory may even rub off on you if you stay close enough."

The Girl frowned.

"I think not Shintar. The council may have approved this little endeavour of yours but given what it is costing us in resources they won't accept you taking unnecessary risks. If you can't assure them this project is likely to succeed then you can easily be replaced by someone who will make better use of them."

"You have an agent aboard the Federation starship." Shintar said, "Tell them that your superior needs to know what Starfleet knows and is planning."

"That may be difficult." The Girl said, "Communication with our agent has been sporadic recently. The host is fighting back."

"Then the failure will be yours." Shintar said, turning away from The Girl, "Now be gone. Find a way to contact your agent and bear in mind that if you return without the information I want then I will have you stripped and chained before you can even beg for my forgiveness."

"I'll be back Shintar." The Girl hissed, "But mark my words, it won't be to beg for anything." and then she too turned around and in the process she vanished into thin air.

"Captain it is Lieutenant Maximillian and Lieutenant Commander West." Max said as the pair stood outside the door to Edwards' quarters. Edwards had deliberately returned there instead of waiting in his ready room to keep West away from the ship's other senior officers until Edwards could determine exactly how much she knew about omega.

"Enter." Edwards replied and the two officers walked into his quarters when the door opened and then he added, "Do take a seat."

"Thank you captain but I shall remain standing." Max said, his Borg implants making sitting and lying down unnecessary for rest.

"Captain I thought we'd be reporting to you in your ready room." West added as she accepted the invitation of a seat.

"I wanted to keep this discrete." Edwards said and it was only then as he sat opposite West that she noticed that he was wearing a phaser, "Tell me what you know of omega." he added.

"Now you've done it." West heard the voice of The Controller say inside her head, "You gave away the knowledge you took from me to the Borg. Now the captain knows that you know about the Federation's dirty

secret. The only way out is to take his phaser and use it.”

West suddenly remembered using the word 'omega' when speaking to Max, though she had not done so purposely at the time. Instead it had just been something else that she had been able to pluck from the knowledge of The Controller at random.

“Not much.” West said, knowing that this was the truth, “I just heard the term from an ex-Starfleet captain I met in the Maquis. He thought it could be something that we could use against the Cardassians.”

“Yet you chose not to mention it on the bridge when everyone was discussing the boronite ore?” Edwards asked.

“Take the phaser.” The Controller's voice said again, “The longer you keep lying the easier it will be for them to trap you.”

“I knew it was top secret.” West said, “Besides, apart from there being a link between boronite and omega I don't know anything.”

Edwards then reached to the table beside him and picked up a PADD.

“I need you to read this and sign it.” he said.

“Your confession.” The Controller said to West but when West took the PADD from Edwards she saw that the text on the screen was a non-disclosure agreement, the terms of which were simple: She was forbidden from discussing the omega molecule, Omega Directive or any subject relating directly to either under penalty of prosecution for treason. There was a stylus clipped to the side of the PADD and without a second thought she used this to sign her name at the bottom of the document and then placed her index finger over a dot on the screen that read her fingerprint to confirm her identity at the same time as the stardate was appended to the signature and the whole document became read only.

“There you go captain.” she said, handing the PADD back to Edwards and she smiled, not intending to show how co-operative she was being to the captain but in satisfaction for defying The Controller again and daring the entity to take the revenge it had threatened her with before.

“Thank you commander.” Edwards said, “Unfortunately the team that would respond to attempts to synthesise omega molecules in this sector were recently killed in a terrorist attack. Therefore, if as it appears likely someone is trying to synthesise omega molecules then then I'll be adding you to our team to deal with it.”

“Do you really think I'm qualified for that captain?” West said nervously. Though she was becoming ever more successful in keeping the influence of The Controller in check she did not know how she would fare on an extended mission.

“The number of people aboard who know the truth needs to be kept to a minimum so since you already have some knowledge you're an ideal choice.” Edwards answered.

“If you say so captain. If you don't mind me asking, how many people have you brought into your confidence?”

Edwards looked up at Max and then back at West.

“They're all in this room Jenna.” he said.

“The Borg know of omega and its assimilation is considered to be of the highest priority. Any cost is enough. My knowledge of the molecule is a remnant from my time in the Collective.” Max added.

“So basically I can't tell anyone anything. Don't worry captain, I know how to keep a secret.” West said.

“Very good lieutenant commander, you are dismissed. Max, you too.” Edwards said and he got to his feet to show them out.

He escorted the pair to the door and opened it for them to leave. However, as the door slid open it revealed Carr standing in the corridor outside. She had been just about to press the intercom button and was looking down at a PADD in her other hand. Looking up she saw Edwards and smiled at him.

“David,” she said, “I thought we could try-” and then she stopped when she saw Max and West standing behind Edwards and her eyes widened as she quickly concealed the PADD behind her back, “I'm sorry I didn't realise you had company.” she said, “I'll come back later to discuss the changes to the shift patterns.”

“That's alright.” Edwards said, “West and Max were just leaving.”

“That's right. We've done with our preliminary report and were about to head back to the freighter.” West added in mock agreement, “You can discuss the shift patterns freely.” and then she walked out into the corridor, looking down to see whether she could see the PADD display. However, it remained obscured from her view and she could not see what was displayed on it. Max followed West into the corridor and it was then that Carr darted inside Edwards' quarters and the door closed behind her.

“That so was not anything to do with shift patterns.” West said, pointing back towards Edwards' quarters, “Just wait until the others hear about this.”

“Is this about the supposed relationship between Captain Edwards and Commander Carr?” Max asked.

“Of course.” West answered, “Don't you think they're in a relationship?”

“He is the captain. She is his first officer. That is all I will say.” Max responded.

“Spoken like someone who's signed a non-disclosure agreement.” West said.



The freighter crewman stunned by the boarding party gasped as he opened his eyes and the sound attracted the attention of Dr King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer.

"Ah, so you're awake." he said as he emerged from his office.

"I can't move." the man said.

"No, that will be the restraint field." King said as he checked the monitor beside the biobed on which the man lay, "It's really meant for keeping patients still so that they don't injure themselves further or twitch during surgery but it makes a useful method of keeping hardened criminals from trying to escape. Now how's your head? A lot of people stunned report headaches when they wake up. It's caused by all the water molecules in their brains being scrambled about."

"It hurts." the man said.

"Good." King responded, "You tried to kill a man so I've no sympathy at all." then he tapped his combadge, "King to Captain Edwards. You asked to be informed when the prisoner was awake and ready to answer questions. He's regained consciousness and his vitals are strong."

"Thank you doctor." Edwards replied, "I'll be there shortly."

"Don't you feel lucky? The captain is on his way own to see you personally." King told the prisoner, "I suggest you use the time it takes him to get here to think up a good excuse for why you fired on our ships and boarding party."

When Edwards arrived he was accompanied by a pair of security officers and he looked at the prisoner on the biobed.

"Doctor King can he be moved?" he asked.

"I don't see a problem with that. I'd like to check on his vitals every few hours though, just to make sure there's no permanent damage from the phaser."

Edwards nodded.

"That's acceptable." he said and then he looked at one of the security guards, "Bring him." he said simply.

King released the restraint field and the security guards immediately handcuffed the prisoner before they pulled him along behind Captain Edwards. They took the prisoner directly to the *Nightfall's* security section where he was placed in a holding cell next to the one that was occupied by the other prisoner taken from the freighter.

"Give me the room." Edwards ordered, looking at the the security guards who had brought the prisoner here and also at the guard on duty at the monitoring station.

"Captain, standard procedure calls for-" the guard at the monitoring station began.

"I know the procedure crewman." Edwards interrupted, "Now give me the room."

Obediently the three security guards exited the room, leaving Edwards alone with the two prisoners and the captain went to the monitoring station himself.

"Computer shut down all brig monitoring. Authorisation Edwards delta four four six omega one." he said.

"Override accepted." the computer responded, "Monitoring deactivated. Doors sealed."

"Very good." Edwards said, moving to stand so that he could see both of the prisoners in their cells, "Now gentlemen today is a lucky day for someone and not so lucky for someone else. Both of you are going to spend the rest of your lives in prison. For one of you though that will be much, much longer than for the other. You see one of you will be serving your sentence at a Federation prison colony while the other will be extradited to the Klingon Empire to be placed on death row for the offences you have committed in Klingon space. Now who wants to go first?"

"You're bluffing." the prisoner just brought from sickbay said.

"Try me. There's a Captain Kurvok in the Imperial Klingon Defence Forces that owes me a big favour. I'm sure he'll be only too happy to come and collect you both and he'll probably get the answers I want out of you in his own fashion by the time you get to the nearest Klingon prison." Edwards said.

"It was a Reman." the other prisoner exclaimed suddenly.

"Keep your mouth shut!" the first yelled, "He'll kill us both."

"So will the Klingons." the other responded, "I'm not getting executed because of you or that Shintar."

"Did you say 'Shintar'?" Edwards asked, recognising the name of an Iconian intelligence that masqueraded as a senior Reman commander. Starting with the *Nightfall's* maiden voyage he had been involved in the various Iconian plots to destabilise the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

"That's him. Remans aren't welcome in the Klingon Empire so he paid us to collect a shipment of ore and take it to his processing plant, bypassing Federation and Romulan inspections."

"Now listen to me carefully because this is important." Edwards said, approaching the force field that isolated the holding cell that contained the prisoner, "Where is Shintar's base of operations?"

"Sector thirty. In the Neutral Zone close to the Federation border. That's all I know. Shintar's people were to transmit final co-ordinates when we were on approach." the prisoner said and Edwards nodded.

"Thank you. You made the right decision." Edwards said as he walked over to the nearest control console and entered his access code to restart the usual security monitoring and communications systems. Then he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to Lieutenant Maximillian I need to see you in the runabout hangar immediately."

"Yes captain, I will be right there." Max responded before Edwards shut off his combadge and exited the security section.

The main launch bay was the largest internal space aboard an Akira-class heavy cruiser like the *Nightfall* but it spent much of its time empty. The array of auxiliary craft such as shuttles, fighters and runabouts were generally stored in dedicated hangars on a lower level that was accessible via heavy duty lift platforms set into the launch bay floor. Two runabouts, the *USS Thames* and *USS Severn* were kept in one of these hangars and just as he had requested Edwards found Max waiting for him when he arrived.

"Captain, did you get the answers you were looking for?" the Borg asked.

"Yes. In fact I got more than I was bargaining for. The Iconians are behind this." Edwards told him.

"The prisoners know of the Iconians?" Max said but Edwards shook his head.

"No. I don't think they know any more about the Iconians than they do about the omega molecule but one of them told me that they were hired by a Reman called Shintar." he explained.

"The Iconian agent?" Max said.

"That's what I think, yes." Edwards said, "Max, you know about the effects of omega on warp travel. Would it affect Iconian gate travel in the same way?"

"That is uncertain captain, but from our experience of gateway travel I think that it would still be possible to travel to and from a place where omega molecules have been destabilised." Max said.

"Which would leave the Iconians as the sole interstellar power in whatever region of space they released omega into." Edwards commented, "Everyone that depends on warp drive would be reduced to isolated colonies only capable of communicating at the speed of light and travel at impulse speeds."

"Indeed captain. The Iconians could then concentrate their attacks on one system at a time and overwhelm each one before help could arrive. Any system strong enough to resist could be ignored in the knowledge that the threat was contained."

"Max it looks like the Iconians are processing the boronite somewhere in sector thirty in the Neutral Zone."

Edwards said and then he slapped his hand against the hull of the *Thames*, "How long will it take you to reconfigure this runabout for a long range tactical operation with four crew? I want the best possible firepower you can give me."

"The mission module can be exchanged for a tactical unit loaded with eight quantum torpedoes in four hours captain. I assume that the crew will include the two of us and Lieutenant Commander West. Who will be the fourth member?" Max said.

"We'll also need a gravimetric device with which to destroy any omega molecules we locate. It needs to have the biggest yield possible while still being portable. We're going to need a tactical officer to handle all this ordnance as well." Edwards said, "It has to be Cole."

"You are not thinking of either Captain Heart or Captain Shry?"

"No. This has to remain a Starfleet operation. I can't ask a member of a planetary defence force to sign the necessary non-disclosure document." Edwards said, "I want you to prepare the *Thames* for departure. I'll start putting together an inventory for the equipment we'll take with us. Oh and Max there's one more thing."

"Yes captain?" Mas asked.

"We know that there's a spy aboard the *Nightfall* and it's possible that they are responsible for passing information how Starfleet deals with the omega molecule. In addition to the modifications to this runabout I've already requested I want to be one hundred percent certain that it won't be giving us away to the Iconians."

"Of course captain. I shall run a full level one system diagnostic as part of the upgrade."

As Edwards was leaving the runabout hangar he encountered Cole coming towards him.

"Ah Lieutenant Commander Cole, I was just about to come looking for you." Edwards said.

"And I need to speak with you as well captain." Cole replied.

"Of course. I'm guessing that you want to know why I shut down the monitoring system when I questioned them?" Edwards said and Cole nodded.

"Yes captain." he said, "Regulations are quite clear on the matter. All interrogations must be recorded to avoid having evidence deemed inadmissible in court."

"That won't be a problem I promise you. Nothing about this case will ever come to trial. I've seen the files on those two and they are already wanted for enough crimes to make sure neither of them ever gets released from prison." Edwards told him.

"Captain there are still rules that must be followed." Cole said.

"Yes, I realise that commander and I will fill you in fully I promise. For now though all I can say is that everything about it is need to know. I need you to assist me in putting together an equipment package for a

tactical mission. The team will consist of the pair of us, West and Max.” Edwards explained.
“Captain if I'm going to be organising a mission that I'm going on then I need to know what's going on.” Cole pointed out.

“I can't give you any more information until after we're aboard the *Thames* and on our way. You will need to sign a binding non-disclosure agreement as well. That will be provided once we're underway as well.” Edwards said.

“Secrecy is that important?” Cole said, surprised that Starfleet would have any secrets that were so restricted.

“I'm afraid so. Obviously I can't order you to join the mission but it would go a lot easier with someone with your skill set along with us. So are you in or do I need to find an alternative?” Edwards asked.

“I'll join you captain. But I must insist that if you are going to question prisoners that I'm responsible for then I need to be present as well.” Cole said.

“I think I already have everything I need from them but I'll agree to your condition.” Edward said.

“In that case I'll just ask what sort of equipment you want loading aboard the runabout.” Cole replied.

“Combat is highly likely so I want each person carrying as much firepower as possible.” Edwards told him.

“Phaser rifles and grenade launchers?” Cole suggested and Edwards nodded.

“We may also need photon grenades, spatial charges, a quantity of thalmerite explosives, thermal breaching charge capable of cutting through an armoured hull and at least one isomagnetic disintegrator.” he said.

“You are expecting trouble.” Cole replied when he heard this list.

“The worst kind. I'm sorry about this commander, but there's a real chance that some of us won't come back from this even if we're successful.”

“Captain if the situation is that serious then why just the four of us? Surely Starfleet would permit the crew to be granted clearance to simply allow us to use the *Nightfall* and all of her resources.”

“I'm afraid not commander. I won't even be telling Commander Carr where we're going. That information will be left in a secured file to be transmitted back to Starfleet if we fail to return. Ordinarily we wouldn't be going but recent events mean that the personnel who have been trained specifically to deal with this sort of situation are not available.”

“The bombing?” Cole asked, remembering the report he had given to Edwards.

“I can't answer that. At least not yet.” the captain responded, “How long do you think it will take for you to organise the equipment I've asked for?”

“Less than an hour. Most of it is held in our armoury but I'll have to replicate the isomagnetic disintegrators.”
“Then get to it commander. We leave in four hours.”

Cole was the last of the team to arrive aboard the *Thames* as it sat in a launch position in the *Nightfall's* launch bay, pointing towards the large forward launch door. None of the gathered Starfleet officers wore standard duty uniforms. Instead they had replaced these with nondescript black fatigues designed to maintain a degree of anonymity. Even their combadges had been replaced with commercial designs that could not be easily linked to Starfleet.

“So how did T'Lan take it?” West asked, looking over her shoulder at Cole as he sealed the external hatch behind him.

“She's Vulcan.” Cole replied as he sat down behind her and Edwards, “She saw the logic in my being included in a highly classified tactical mission.”

“I bet Commander Carr wasn't as understanding.” West added with a smile as she glanced at Edwards but he ignored the comment.

“Max are the systems ready?” he said.

“Yes captain.” Max answered from the console at the rear of the cockpit that he was stood at, “I can initialise them as soon as we are clear.”

“Then let's get this done.” Edwards said and he activated the runabout's communications, “*Thames* to *Nightfall*. We're ready to depart.”

“Confirmed *Thames*.” the officer filling in for West at operations replied, “You are cleared for launch. Good hunting.”

Edwards immediately powered up the runabout's thrusters and the compact craft lifted up off the hangar deck and accelerated out into space.

“We're clear captain.” West announced and Edwards nodded.

“Max, activate the spike now please.” he said.

“Yes captain. Transmitting override code.” Max responded as he connected himself to the *Nightfall's* computer.

“Whoa!” Hamilton exclaimed when he watched the *Thames* simply vanish from his head's up display.

“T'Lan what just happened?” Carr exclaimed when she saw the same thing on the main viewscreen.

“Did they activate a cloaking device?” Nayaal suggested.

"That is an illogical statement." T'Lan said, "Cloaking devices are prohibited under Federation law. The captain could not have obtained one."

Nayal snorted.

"Yeah. Right." she said.

"T'Lan why can't we see them?" Carr asked.

"The Thames has been removed from our sensors captain." T'Lan said, using Carr's temporary position as commanding officer of the *Nightfall* rather than her true rank.

"What do you mean cousin? How has it been removed?" Nayal said.

"A good question." Hamilton added.

"We received a transmission from the *Thames* just before the runabout vanished. This included the *Nightfall's* prefix combination and the specific command code to filter all readings of the vessel from our sensors, including visual ones." T'Lan explained.

"Wow, they really don't want us knowing where they went." Hamilton said.

"How long will it take for you to override the filter T'Lan?" Carr said.

"I do not believe that that is either possible or advisable captain." T'Lan said, "Captain Edwards would not have ordered this done if not for a good reason."

"What, your husband goes flying off without you and you're just going to sit there and say it's all for the greater good cousin? If Bradley vanished like that I'd be more worried than you are and we're not even a proper couple." Nayal said, looking at Hamilton.

"That is because you lack the ability to set aside your emotions for logic." T'Lan said, "You are also not my cousin."

"So now do I find out what's going on?" Cole asked after the *Thames* was safely at warp.

"Yes commander, you do." Edwards answered and he handed a PADD to Cole that had the same non-disclosure agreement that West had signed on its screen. Cole read this quickly and began to sign it.

"Omega?" he commented.

"Max, explain it to him." Edwards said.

"The omega molecule is a highly energetic particle that is synthesised from boronite ore. Each individual molecule contains a similar amount of energy as a warp core and a civilisation able to master omega molecules would have an almost limitless source of energy. Unfortunately omega molecules are also highly unstable and when they break down they damage the layer of subspace used for warp travel and faster than light communications, preventing both from taking place within a large volume of space surrounding the point of detonation."

"A failed experiment with omega molecules in the late twenty-third century rendered the Lantaru Sector impassible at warp." Edwards added.

"The Lantaru Sector? I thought that was supposed to be an unexplained natural phenomena." Cole said.

"It's obviously neither." West commented.

"Ever since then Starfleet has operated the Omega Directive." Edwards explained, "Any hint that anyone is attempting to synthesise omega molecules requires a Starfleet captain to immediately notify Starfleet, ignoring all other considerations. In theory a specialised team would then be deployed to deal with the situation by any means necessary. Unfortunately the team covering Sector Thirty was based at Tor Delta and they were all killed."

"So now we get the job." Cole said.

"Exactly." Edwards replied.

"Lucky us." West added.

"Bear in mind that we really are to use any means necessary to put a stop to anyone attempting to synthesise omega molecules commander." Edwards continued, "That includes violating any other law or regulation, including the Prime Directive itself."

"And do we have any idea who's behind this captain?" Cole asked.

"I'm afraid so, yes." Edwards said, "One of the prisoners identified the individual who hired them to smuggle the boronite out of the Klingon Empire as a Reman calling himself Shintar."

"Oh great." Cole said, "Not only have I signed up to a suicide mission, I've signed up to a suicide mission against the Iconians."

Edwards, Cole and West were in the rear of the runabout, eating when the runabout reached Sector Thirty, leaving Max monitoring the flight controls alone.

"Captain Edwards," he announced, "we have reached Sector Thirty."

"We're on our way." Edwards responded and shortly after the three officers returned to the cockpit, "Anything out there?" Edwards asked.

"I have detected no signs of omega molecules so far captain." Max answered as the others took their seats.

"I'm not reading any other ships either." West added as she checked the sensors.

"This area's dead." Cole commented, "It has been even since before the Borg hit the outposts either side of the border." and then he glanced at Max, "No offence."

"None taken lieutenant commander. I as much as anyone appreciate how destructive the Collective is." Max replied, "However, the lack of any settlements does not necessarily mean that the area is abandoned."

Captain, I recommend that we launch our probes."

"All three?" West asked.

"Correct." Max said, "We should configure two to use purely passive detection while the third should switch to active scanning after a distance of a light year. Furthermore by adjusting this probe's warp signature I can make it appear to be another Danube-class runabout."

"A decoy?" Cole said.

"Correct." Max replied, "In all likelihood the Iconians will detect the probe and act to destroy it."

"Then we track their attack back to its source. Very good." Edwards said, nodding and he turned his chair to face his console, "Okay I'm going to set the probes to move out with twenty degree spreads."

"Understood captain. I will configure the probe that will run closest to the Federation border as our active scanning decoy." Max said.

West suddenly noticed that while she had been focusing on the exchange between Edwards and Max one of her hands had drifted towards the controls that would have switched the runabout's own sensors from

passive to active, immediately giving away their position to anyone with subspace detectors of their own. Recognising this as the influence of The Controller she smiled as she pulled her hand away from the console.

"Oh no you don't." she muttered softly.

"Excuse me?" Cole said, hearing her speak but unable to make out what she was saying.

"Just talking to myself. Sort of." West replied, "Sensors running in passive mode."

"I have reconfigured the probe captain." Max announced, "You may deploy them when ready."

"Launching probes." Edwards said.

The three probes carried inside the runabout's upper equipment module launched simultaneously. One shot straight ahead of the runabout while the others spread out evenly to either side. The runabout had already been travelling at warp speed and the probes accelerated even further, exceeding warp eight as they raced across the sector.

"Probes launched and running captain." West reported, "I'm receiving passive telemetry from them all. If all goes to plan then the decoy probe ought to switch to active tracking in six hours."

"Very good. West and I will monitor the feeds. Cole go back and prepare our weapons. Max, you've been on duty for twelve hours straight. I suggest you take the opportunity to regenerate." Edwards said and Cole nodded.

"Yes captain." he said.

"Yes captain." Max added and the pair of them left the cockpit.

"So now we wait." Edwards said, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands behind his head.

"Report." Shintar said as he entered the command centre.

"My lord we have detected a Starfleet vessel in the Neutral Zone." an Iconian inhabiting the body of a Tellarite told him and he pointed to a screen that showed a single sensor contact travelling close to the Federation side of the Neutral Zone.

"Can you identify it?" Shintar asked, wondering whether the crew of the *Nightfall* would bring the starship itself to attack his base of operations.

"No my lord. But it is travelling at a speed of warp five." the Tellarite agent answered.

"So it could just be a runabout." Shintar said, "Just the sort of craft suited to delivering a small strike team over interstellar distances."

All of a sudden The Girl appeared in the command centre.

"Having problems Shintar?" she said.

"What are you doing here?" Shintar said without turning away from the display.

"You think the council doesn't know everything that's going on?" The Girl said and she glanced at the Tellarite, indicating that he had informed the Iconian leadership about the sensor contact.

Shintar made a mental note not to trust the Tellarite with any confidential information after this but he acted as if he was unconcerned.

"Well if you were expecting to watch me fail then your spy has wasted your time." Shintar said and he tilted his head upwards, mimicking the way he had seen members of the Reman groups he had infiltrated when they interacted with computer systems using verbal commands, "Status of weapon systems." he said, addressing the Iconian intelligence that had direct control of the base systems.

"All weapon systems available." it responded.

"Activate a gate missile and lock onto the Starfleet vessel." Shintar ordered.

"Missile armed. Enemy vessel targeted. Missile ready to deploy." the controlling intelligence announced.

"Deploy missile." Shintar ordered and then he turned to The Girl and added, "Problem solved."

The long range missiles held in the base armoury did not launch in the same way as the photon or quantum torpedoes used by the civilisations that currently inhabited the galaxy. Instead they used the same gateway technology that the Iconians used for interstellar travel. This meant that the armed weapon simply vanished from the launcher through a gateway before materialising at its target, in this case the probe launched from the Thames that was currently scanning the space around it with its active sensors. The missile appeared in front of the probe so that its own momentum caused the two to collide before the warhead detonated and the probe was vaporised in an instant.

"Target destroyed." the Tellarite announced as the contact disappeared from the screen.

"There." Shintar said, "Now you can return to the council and tell them that my operation is continuing as planned."

"See that? That's the fate that awaits you if you can't find a way to turn around." The Controller said inside West's mind.

"Captain the probe has been destroyed." West said, ignoring the alien intelligence.

"That was quick." Cole commented.

"The Iconians appear to have delivered a weapon using their gateway technology." Max said, "The

destruction of the probe was total.”

“The weapon was likely designed for attacking targets much larger than a probe.” Edwards said, “Can we track the weapon to its source?”

“Not precisely captain.” Max answered, “The weapon did not follow a linear path through space along which it could be tracked. However, since it appeared several hundred metres from the probe it did follow a straight trajectory before impact. If we extrapolate that back we can perhaps estimate the weapon's point of origin.”

“You're assuming that gateway travel is in a straight line.” Cole pointed out.

“It is.” West said before realising that she had just picked up on another piece of information from The Controller that she could not explain knowing.

“How do you know that lieutenant commander?” Edwards asked and West shrugged.

“Just a guess Captain.” she said, “When we improvised a gateway to transport the *Nightfall* we travelled in a straight line. Besides, isn't gate travel instantaneous? That means there's no time for the weapon to turn to track target.”

“Lieutenant Commander West's reasoning is sound.” Max said.

“Okay Max. Extend the weapon's trajectory back and see if you can identify the source.” Edwards said, nodding.

“Projecting.” Max said and on the displays in front of each of the other Starfleet officers he called up a star chart and marked on it a line that represented the vector along which the Iconian weapon had travelled.

“There's only one system inside the Neutral Zone along that vector.” Cole said, “System GR one-six-four. Two point five light years from here.”

“Captain according to our records that system has no planets of any sort, let alone anything habitable.” West said.

“So what is there?” Edwards asked.

“Not much. It's a red dwarf system and GR one-six-four itself barely even counts as a star. Point one solar masses and its surface temperature would barely melt our hull. Aside from that there's not enough mass orbiting it form a planet, just a few asteroid fields at between point five and six AUs distance. The total mass of all of these is estimated to be less than half that of Earth.”

“At our top speed the system is a little over four days away captain.” Cole said, “Assuming that we can mask our warp signature enough to avoid having the Iconians launch another of those weapons against us.”

“I believe that it is possible to create a countermeasure against the weapon captain.” Max said, “As you know we are able to temporarily block gateways from forming within a given area.”

“Yes, temporarily because the radioactive emissions are lethal with prolonged exposure.” West added.

“Quite so lieutenant commander.” Max agreed, “However, it will not be necessary to expose anyone inside the runabout to the radiation. Instead we can use our navigational deflector to project it ahead of the vessel. Any attempt to use a weapon against us by such means would then fail.”

“How long will it take Max?” Edwards asked.

“Not long at all captain. I can have the deflector ready in under an hour.”

“In that case let's do it.” Edwards said, “I'll lay in a course for the GR one-six-four system and we'll see what we can find.”

With more than four days travel time to their destination West was faced with the dilemma of how to keep the existence of The Controller hidden from the other officers aboard the *Thames*. Aboard the *Nightfall* she had taken to locking herself in the bathroom of her quarters at night, setting the door on a timer and deactivating her command access codes while she slept on an inflatable mattress of the floor. To further limit the ability of The Controller to act while she slept West even handcuffed herself, leaving the keys on her bed so that The Controller would have only a limited range of movement if she attempted to break out of the bathroom. The Controller had once threatened to kill West if she did not co-operate, even if it meant the Iconian intelligence's own destruction but West had called The Controller's bluff and dared it to kill her. The fact The Controller had made no such attempts convinced West that the intelligence was not as strong as it attempted to portray and she had continued to defy it. However, aboard the runabout she shared bathroom facilities with Edwards and Cole while Max had no need of such facilities.

The continual use of stimulants to remove the need for sleep was one option but West knew that this was risky. The side effects of drug use, in addition to the risk of addiction, would reduce her effectiveness on the mission and also the computer would report the fact that she had replicated the stimulants to Doctor King as soon as the *Thames* returned to the *Nightfall* and she would have no excuse for this.

West instead opted for a technological solution and Cole looked at her in a puzzled fashion when he entered the sleeping compartment where the bunks they would sleeping in were located to find her placing something under her mattress.

"What are you doing Jenna?" he asked.

"Placing mass sensors under my bed." she said, leaving Cole none the wiser.

"Worried you'll gain weight while sleeping?" he said.

"No. I've had some trouble with sleep walking in the past. Doctor King tried giving me something to help me sleep deeper but I didn't think medication would be a good idea on this mission so I'm putting these sensor under the mattress instead. That way if I try to get out of bed at night they'll send a signal to my tricorder and an alarm will sound that will wake everyone up."

"Everyone?" Cole commented.

"Hey, if I'm about to start wandering around a runabout while still asleep I want someone to stop me before I make it as far as an airlock." West replied and Cole sighed.

"Fine, but if I were you then I'd consider which is worse – Spacing yourself in your sleep or waking up Captain Edwards in the middle of the night." he said.

"Don't worry." West said as she glanced at a mirror mounted on a nearby bulkhead and she thought she saw an alternative version scowling of herself scowling back at her and she smiled in the knowledge that she had beaten the alien intelligence again.

"I'm not used to being summoned like this Shintar. Your new rank has its limits, remember that before you overstep them." The Girl said as she appeared in an observation chamber that overlooked a laboratory space being operated by Iconians that inhabited robotic bodies designed specifically for the task they had been assigned. In this case that task being the refining of omega molecules from the boronite ore being delivered here by various suppliers from across the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

"I just thought that you might like to be present as we move into the next stage of our operation." Shintar replied without looking at The Girl, instead watching the laboratory through the transparent barrier as the machines worked, combining various mineral substances in precise quantities before placing them in a sealed chamber. There then followed a crackling of energy as the molecular structure of the other contents of the containers was used to stimulate the boronite into breaking down into an omega molecule.

"Behold." Shintar said, "Omega."

"Yes very good." The Girl replied as the , "You've created a single omega molecule. At the rate you're going you should have enough to carry out your plan in about sixty thousand years. Still I'd suggest you be careful with it Shintar, if it goes critical it would still crack this entire facility open like an egg."

"Your warning is not needed." Shintar said, "Look, even now the molecule is being stabilised for storage and that was just a test to see how well the equipment worked." then in a loud, clear voice he added, "Report."

"Omega synthesised and stabilised." the voice of one of the Iconians in the laboratory said as if out of nowhere, "No flaws detected in process. Recommend production increased at a rate of one hundred percent per hour until reaching maximum capacity."

"When will that be?" The Girl asked.

"Maximum theoretical production rate of one hundred and thirty thousand molecules per hour can be reached in seventeen hours." the voice said and Shintar finally turned away from the observation window to

look at The Girl.

"And how do you intend to distribute these molecules around the galaxy Shintar? The council will never allow you to use our gateways. Omega may not be able to reach our subspace realm normally but if there's an accident during transit then we'll be cut off as well as all the lesser civilisations."

"Our agents among those civilisations will carry out the distribution." Shintar replied, "Even now I have ordered that ships equipped with transwarp or quantum slipstream drives be procured and when we have the ships and the omega molecules in sufficient quantities it will only be a matter of days before we have this galaxy on its knees."

Just as West had said the star known only by its catalogue number of GR one-six-four had no planets orbiting it. The tiny, dull star also produced little energy by which the limited and isolated fields of rocky debris that did orbit it could be detected. On the other hand though, this made any artificial energy emissions in the system much easier to detect.

"Captain I think I've got something." West said, "It's not much but its a repeating EM signal."

"A beacon?" Cole asked.

"No, I don't think so." West answered, "It's not strong enough. I think it's more likely to be the side effect of some sort of equipment."

"Sloppy of the Iconians not to shield it." Cole commented.

"Who would pick it up?" Edwards said, "An EM signal would take years to reach the nearest outpost or inhabited system and there isn't exactly much passing traffic around here. I'm taking us in at one quarter impulse for a closer look, hopefully without us being seen. Max, West, I want to know the moment either of you can confirm the presence of the Iconians or omega molecules."

Edwards piloted the *Thames* towards the source of the EM signal and unsurprisingly this took the runabout towards one of the asteroid fields in the system.

"I'd say about two hundred asteroids at sizes of one to six hundred metres across captain." West said, "Plus several thousand in the sub one metre size range. Mean distance between asteroids appears to be just over six thousand metres."

"That's pretty dense but easy enough to fly through if we're careful." Edwards commented.

"That EM signal could be the emissions from a low level deflector shield set up to prevent collisions with asteroids." Cole suggested.

"The requirement to keep it operating with full coverage one hundred percent of the time would also mean that such a deflector shield could also be limiting the Iconian's ability to run sensor scans captain." Max added, "The resonance of the shield would mask low level emissions from outside it."

"That explains how come we haven't been spotted yet then." West said. "Unless we do something stupid like power up any high energy systems like our weapons or warp drive up close they won't be able to see us."

It was then that an alarm sounded in the cockpit.

"What's happening?" Cole said as he looked at his console.

"I set an alarm to trigger if the sensors picked up any signs of omega molecules or the process used to create them." Edwards told him.

"Let me guess," Cole said that was the alarm." and Edwards nodded.

"Yes it was. It looks like my hope that we could get here before the Iconians could manufacture any omega molecules was in vain." he said.

"The Iconians must have had more than one supply route." West said.

"But do they just have one or two molecules or millions of them?" Cole said.

"There is no way to tell." Max said, "Though given that the readings we are getting are currently constant it implies that a production line is currently in operation."

"Damn." Edwards said, raising his hand to his forehead.

"Do we abort?" West asked.

"Yes." The Controller said inside her mind, "Retreat is the only chance you have of survival."

"No." Edwards replied, "We came here to do a job and we're going to do it. Caution is most definitely advised here though." and he looked at the sensor readings of the surrounding volume of space, "Our current course takes us past the asteroid field at a distance of about six million kilometres."

"Six point four eight captain." Max corrected him.

"Very well, six point four eight million kilometres. Now I want us to keep watching that field with every passive sensor we've got while we drift past. Then when we reach the cover of this second asteroid field here," and he pointed to another asteroid field marked on the chart of the system shown on another monitor, "that's when I'll fire our thrusters to slingshot us around one of the bigger ones and send us hurtling back towards our target field as rapidly as possible."

"What about our countermeasures against the Iconian gateway weapons?" West asked, "Will they detect the emissions from that?"

"That is a possibility." Max said, "Captain at this close range I recommend shutting down our jamming

system.”

“That leaves us open to attack Max.” Cole pointed out.

“How rapidly can you reactivate them if you detect signs of a gateway forming?” Edwards asked.

“The speed of activation is of secondary importance captain. We still do not fully understand the technology and have no way of knowing for certain how long after it is activated the jamming is strong enough to be effective. If the Iconians choose to deploy the same sort of weapon against us as they did against our probe then I doubt the jamming can be restored in time to protect us. In any case, they likely have other weapons for use at shorter ranges.” Max answered.

“You mean like that lightning we’ve seen their ships use?” West added.

“Possibly. Though they may have other weapons we have yet to observe.” Max replied.

“Okay Max, shut down the jamming. We’ll rely on stealth to stop us from being shot down on approach.” Edwards ordered. Then he took his hands away from the flight controls as he allowed the *Thames* to continue along its current course without his influence, “Now we wait.” he added.

It took several hours for the *Thames* to loop around an asteroid in the second nearby field and drift back towards the field where the Iconian base was located and during that time there was no indication that the compact vessel had been detected.

“Captain I’m picking up an impulse drive signature.” West said suddenly just as the runabout was entering the target asteroid field.

“A patrol ship?” Cole suggested.

“I can’t tell. It’s not a very strong signal, though it is close and it’s getting closer.” West responded.

“Firing thrusters. All stop.” Edwards said, “Cole, stand by on our tactical systems. If we’re seen I want our shields up and weapons armed.”

“Yes captain, tactical systems standing by.” Cole said.

“Captain I’ve got a visual contact.” West announced and she brought up an image of the craft that had been detected. It had the appearance of a type of Federation shuttle pod, however this particular version had been heavily modified with its cockpit removed and replaced by enhanced sensor receptors and a set of eight mechanical arms. Four of these were currently folded along the side of the shuttle pod while the other four were being used to hold a battered looking cargo container in front of it.

“Looks like someone’s modified that for cargo handling.” Cole said, “Can we tell what’s inside it?”

“From the magnetic resonance of the container I would suggest that it is being used to transport mineral ore.” Max said.

“Presumably back to the Iconian base.” Edwards commented.

“Captain I’m picking up more identical drive signatures elsewhere in the field.” West added.

“Looks like the Iconians are mining it. Probably for the materials they need to construct their omega refinery.” Edwards said.

“How big will this refinery be?” Cole asked.

“There is no way to be certain of that lieutenant commander.” Max said, “The Federation scientists who refined the omega molecule in the Lantaru Sector had a large space station while the Borg Collective carried out its research aboard cubes. On the other hand the Iconians may have a means of creating omega molecules using much smaller equipment.”

“Captain I’m picking up that EM signal again. It’s very close by now.” West said, “Less than a hundred kilometres. Seventy-six mark twenty-two.”

“That’s right on the other side of this asteroid.” Edward said.

“If we go around it they’ll see us at this range.” Cole pointed out and Edwards nodded.

“Okay time to suit up.” he said, “Cole you and I are going to beam down to this asteroid and walk around it to see what’s on the other side. Then we’ll decide the best way to proceed.”

“Yes captain.” Cole responded, “What weapons do you want us to take with us?”

“Full basic load out for us both.” Edwards said, “Sidearm, rifle and grenade launcher. If the Iconian base is close then they may have sentries on the surface.”

7.

The gravity of the asteroid was almost non-existent and Edwards and Cole relied on the artificial gravity field generated by their spacesuit boots to enable them to walk normally across its surface. Measuring little more than a kilometre across, the asteroid's horizon appeared unusually close to the two Starfleet officers and it did not take them long to reach a point where they could see around to what lay on the far side to the runabout.

"I'm guessing that's the Iconian base." Cole said as they stared at the artificial construction on the other side of the asteroid.

The Iconian base of operations was a space station that consisted of a central spherical module with a diameter that looked similar to the length of the *Nightfall*, about five hundred metres. Several smaller modules were attached to this via connecting cylindrical sections that pointed straight out from the centre of the globes. Only one section differed significantly from any of the others, being embedded in the side of an asteroid even larger than the one Edwards and Cole were standing on the surface of.

"That's how we'll make entry." Edwards said, pointing to the asteroid that the Iconian structure was connected to, "We'll take the *Thames* around the other side and land it on the asteroid. Then we'll do an EVA to get to the base without being seen."

"The Iconians could have surface mounted sensors." Cole pointed out.

"They're also bound to have sensors suitable for detecting our runabout in flight." Edwards said, "We'll need some sort of portable airlock as well though. When we blast through into the base I don't want to start setting off decompression alarms."

"Having a fight in a vacuum isn't my favourite option either." Cole added and Edwards nodded, "Okay, let's get some scans of the target and then get back to the *Thames* and tell the others what we've found."

"It is a pity that we cannot determine the functionality of any of these modules captain." Max said as he and West studied the sensor scans and recorded images of the Iconian facility.

"Yes, unfortunately the shield that they're using to protect themselves against asteroid impacts also disrupts their energy emissions to the point where passive scans can't be made.

"We did manage to get one brief scan though." Cole added and he called up a video clip and accompanying scan that showed the approach of one of the modified shuttle pods to the station bearing a cargo container, "You can see the shield open for a moment right here." Cole said, pointing to the video display just before there was a brief pulse of light indicating that a hole in the deflector shield had been opened to permit the craft to dock.

"Their shield is modular." Max commented.

"Could we use that to get inside?" West asked, "Adjust our engine signature to match one of the shuttle pods perhaps?"

"We picked up communication between the station and the shuttle pod before the shield opened. Most likely a coded request for the opening." Edwards told her.

"Even if we knew the code all they'd need to do is run a visual scan to see we weren't who we were pretending to be." Cole added.

"A pity we didn't bring the *Nightfall*. We could have modified one of our own shuttlepods." West said.

"With the firepower of the *Nightfall* we could have just bombarded this entire asteroid belt from the edge of the system." Cole added.

"Right up to the point where the Iconians bring in one of their warships to destroy us." Edwards said, "No, this has to be done the way we're doing it. Covertly."

"So how are we going to get inside captain?" West asked.

"Our point of access will be this module here." Edwards said and he indicated the globe that was embedded in the asteroid, "Just as Cole and I did on our scouting EVA, we'll position the *Thames* on the far side of this asteroid and walk around it. Providing we can avoid detection we should be able to create a way under the shield and get to the external wall."

"Then it's just a case of making a hole." Cole commented.

"We'll need a portable airlock of some sort of course." Edwards said and he looked at Max.

"I should be able to rig something up captain." the former drone said, "Might I suggest something made from the same self sealing fabric as your spacesuits over a metal frame that we can assemble on site?"

"Those were my thoughts exactly." Edwards replied, nodding.

"May I ask a question captain?" West said.

"Of course." Edwards responded.

"When you say 'create a way under the shield', what exactly do you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly what I said lieutenant commander." Edwards answered, "The deflector shield likely extends all the way to the surface of the asteroid but it can't penetrate it. To get through we'll need to create a short tunnel that passes beneath the shield so we can penetrate it."

"A phaser would make short work of rock but the Iconians could detect the beam at the level of discharge required for the necessary vaporisation of mass captain." Max said, "I recommend that we prepare some of our explosives as shaped charges. A phaser on a lower level can be used to create a suitable hole to position it."

"Won't the Iconians pick up the blast?" West asked.

"Even if they did it would just look like some sort of seismic event." Edwards said, "I'm sure they get plenty of those here from asteroid collisions on the other side of the one their base is built on."

"Captain your plan for entering the facility appears sound. However, once inside how will we locate our target?" Max said.

"As soon as we're inside the base we'll start to use our tricorders to scan for omega molecules and hope we can navigate through the interior without a map." Edwards said.

"You don't think we'll be able to hack their computer?" West said and Edwards shook his head.

"No, I'm pretty certain that we won't. In fact given what little we know about Iconian technology I'm pretty sure that attempting to connect to one of their computers is the easiest way of giving ourselves away." he said.

"I agree captain. It is possible that the station itself may be host to one or more Iconian consciousnesses." Max said.

"So basically we wander around aimlessly until we find where the Iconians have their stockpile of omega molecules and hope that they don't find us before we find it." West said, "You know I'm starting to have second thoughts about volunteering for this mission."

"Really? I'd have thought you'd relish the chance to avoid your ongoing sessions with our highly respected ship's counsellor." Cole commented and West frowned.

"Respected my perfectly shaped ass." she muttered.

"Enough of this." Edwards said, "Time to suit up."

The range of Borg implants that Max had retained enabled him to survive for an extended period of time even in an environment as harsh as the cold vacuum of space and the added strength they gave him also meant that he bore the brunt of carrying the heavy equipment the assault team needed, including the portable air lock and also the gravimetric warhead that would be used to destroy the omega molecules that the Iconians had already managed to manufacture. Even with his enhanced strength Max could not have managed this if not for the extremely low surface gravity of the asteroid. Like active scans with tricorders, portable anti-gravity generators were unusable until the Iconian perimeter had been penetrated because of the risk of their operation being detected from the energy field they would emit. This meant that the anti-gravity generators themselves also became equipment that needed to be carried but this weight was split between the human Starfleet officers, with each of them carrying a single generator.

Carrying this bulky equipment left Max unable to wield a weapon as well and so the team arranged itself in a triangular formation with Max in the middle, Cole at the front and then Edwards and West to either side of and slightly behind Max to protect him if they were ambushed.

The distance by which the Iconian station extended out from the asteroid meant that the uppermost globe module came into view well before the one that the assault team planned to breach.

"I've got visual on the target captain." Cole announced when he first saw this module.

"Okay from here we move in pairs." Edwards said, "Cole and West, you move forwards while Max and I cover you. Then we'll move while you cover us."

"Hundred metre sprint captain?" Cole asked.

"If you can sprint in this gravity with this gear then be my guest." Edwards replied and Cole set his suit to inform him when he had travelled a hundred metres from his current location.

"Okay West, let's move." he said and as Edwards and Max watched the horizon for any sign of a response from the Iconians to their presence Cole and West continued to advance as quickly as they could. After they had gone a hundred metres the alarm Cole had set beeped and he dropped into a kneeling position behind the closest piece of cover he could find on the irregular surface of the asteroid. Seeing him do this West copied him, crouching beside him and waiting as Edwards and Max began to move.

"Think they'll spot us?" West asked but Cole did not respond, "Hello? West to Cole. Are you there Robert?" she added and Cole's eye's widened for a moment.

"Sorry." he said, "Watching that station I kind of zoned out for a moment there."

"Something bothering you?" West said, "Wishing you had T'Lan here to help us?"

"My wife's skills would be useful in this situation." Cole said, "I just wish she could be given the clearance to know what we're doing here. As it is I have to keep all of this from her when we get back." then he smiled and added, "Plus she looks great in a spacesuit."

"That's the thing about these suits. They do show off your figure." West replied.

"Yes, though T'Lan would never do an EVA now. Not while she's-" Cole said before stopping as he realised what he was about to say and West frowned.

"Now she's what?" she said.

"Never mind." Cole responded, "Just keep watching that outpost."

West turned her attention back to the part of the Iconian outpost visible over the horizon but in her mind she considered what Cole had just said and the obvious reason why a woman would be prevented from carrying out an EVA came to her.

"Oh my God, T'Lan's pregnant." she exclaimed and Cole winced, "She is isn't she?" West added, "How far along is she?"

"Just a few weeks. She doesn't want anyone to know yet. Interspecies pregnancies can be difficult at the best of times so-

"It's okay. I won't tell anyone." West interrupted, glancing over her shoulder to see Edwards and Max hurrying towards them, "All clear captain." she said as the pair joined her and Cole in hiding.

"No movement at all?" Edwards asked and inside his helmet Cole shook his head.

"If the Iconians know we're here they haven't given any indication of it." he replied.

"Good. Carry on commander." Edwards said and Cole and West emerged from their hiding place to move forwards another hundred metres before seeking cover again.

The assault team repeated this process several times as they made their way towards the partially buried globe that served to connect the Iconian base to the asteroid.

"The shield meets the surface there captain." Max said, pointing ahead of them when he and Edwards caught up with Cole and West close to the globe. The other three team members looked at where Max was pointing and saw that he was indicating a smooth line that appeared to be etched into the otherwise irregular surface of the asteroid where the energy barrier that was visible only to Max thanks to his Borg ocular implants had burned into it slowly over time.

"Okay so now all we need is a suitable way under it." Edwards said, looking from side to side.

"That rock formation over there captain." Cole suggested, looking towards a large rocky protrusion from the surface that was similarly scarred by the deflector shield. This stood just over a metre tall with a shallow sloping upper surface that was several metres wide.

"That appears suitable captain." Max added, "By placing a small charge beneath that rock we should be able to clear a passage under the shield while the rock itself will hold it back over us."

"Get to it Max. We'll keep you covered just in case." Edwards ordered and while he, Cole and West all aimed their phaser rifles towards the shield ahead of them Max put down most of the equipment he carried and made his way over to the other rock. Drawing his hand phaser, Max aimed it at the surface of the asteroid just in front of the rock and fired it briefly, burrowing a narrow hole that sloped under the rock. Then he ceased fire and paused.

"No reaction from the Iconians Max." Edward said after waiting to see if the Iconians would give any indication of having detected the phaser blast and recognised it for what it was.

"Confirmed captain, the shield status remains unchanged. I shall continue placing the charge." Max responded, studying the energy pattern of the shield and not detecting any changes that would suggest either it was being strengthened to protect the base from attack or weakened to permit more detailed scans of the area. Then he crouched down as he took a preprepared explosive charge from a pouch fixed to his chest plate and pushed this into the hole he had just bored beneath the rock. Retreating away from this Max took one last look around before he signalled to the others, "Fire in the hole."

"Quite literally." West said as she and the others took cover before Max triggered the explosive charge.

"Lord Shintar we have just detected a minor seismic disturbance." one of the Iconian intelligences that controlled the base systems told Shintar while he studied the latest production reports in his private quarters.

"What scale and where?" he asked, looking up as he addressed the formless intelligence.

"Scale point two. Location shield grid nine." it responded.

"At the shield?"

"Affirmative. Surface disturbance located at shield perimeter." the intelligence said.

"Point two is nothing to worry about though. What is the status of the shield?"

"Unaffected."

"Then it's probably just debris from the asteroids. Ignore it." Shintar said. Then a thought occurred to him and he smiled, "No wait, I shall assign someone to investigate it myself."

"Confirmed." the intelligence said before returning to its regular duties. Meanwhile Shintar used the implants within his skull to establish a link with the Iconian headquarters and moments later The Girl appeared in front of him.

"What did I tell you about summoning me Shintar?" she said.

"And what did I tell you about getting used to it and addressing me properly?" he replied, "I have a job for you?"

"Bad news you need delivering to the council? Afraid to tell them in person just in case they decide your promotion was a mistake?" The Girl said, smiling.

"No. There has been a seismic disturbance at the shield perimeter. It's trivial but I want it investigating properly just in case it heralds something bigger."

The Girl frowned.

"You want me to go and look at your shield?" she said, "Your base staff-"

"Are busy." Shintar interrupted, "You on the other hand have been assigned to my command and are available. All the data on the disturbance will be in the computer. Now go and find out what happened."

"Oh very well Shintar." The Girl said, "But I wouldn't count on getting away with this forever."

The blast from the shaped charge had been directed both towards and away from the Iconian base and had blown a tunnel just over a metre wide that ran beneath the rock lying in the path of the shield. Max was peering into this as the rest of the team hurried towards him as fast as the added weight of the equipment he had left with them that they now carried between them would allow.

"The tunnel appears stable captain." Max told Edwards and he nodded.

"Excellent. Cole, you go first." he ordered, "Then we'll pass you the equipment and follow."

"Yes captain." Cole replied and he lowered himself into the hole. The size of it forced him to crawl under the rock before he emerged on the other side of the shield. Pausing, he stood in the hole and holding his rifle at his shoulder as he made sure that it was safe for him to climb out. Then he gave a thumbs up signal to avoid making a wireless transmission within the shielded area around the Iconian base where it was more likely to be detected.

"Okay let's get this gear through." Edward said and he started to drag the gravimetric device needed to safely destroy the omega molecules the Iconians had already produced. Edwards had to climb into the hole himself to push this beneath the shield where he and Cole worked together to lift it back onto the surface.

The portable air lock was next and this time Edwards climbed out of the hole as well while he and Cole waited for West and Max to emerge behind them. Now that all four of the team were through the shield Edwards reduced the power of the communicator built into his suit so that it could reach only about a metre and would require a direct line of sight.

"Adjust your communication power to minimum until we're inside." he told the others, "It'll reduce the odds of us being detected." and he watched as they followed his instruction.

"So is there anywhere in particular we should attempt to get inside from?" Cole asked without addressing the question to anyone in particular as soon as he had adjusted his communicator.

"If there is any particular location that is more suiting to being breached then I do not have that knowledge lieutenant commander." Max answered, "Any place on the exterior could be unusually thick or thin."

"Can you tell if we get closer Max?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain. A low level ultrasonic pulse will enable me to determine the relative strength of the hull at any point." Max explained.

"Then we start with the closest point. If it's weak enough for us to force an entry there we'll go in. Otherwise we'll keep moving until we find somewhere suitable." Edwards said.

Walking right up to the hull of the Iconian base, Max took a tricorder from his belt and pressed the end against it so that the ultrasound wave he set it to emit could pass into the hull despite the vacuum that surrounded it. Then he monitored the return signal, using this to determine the density and thickness of the hull.

"Well, is this our way in?" Cole asked.

"Unfortunately not lieutenant commander. I am detecting the presence of fluid lines on the other side of this bulkhead. Opening a hole here will puncture these." Max answered.

"So we either trigger an explosion if the contents are volatile or a detectable drop in line pressure if they're not." West commented.

"Precisely Lieutenant Commander West." Max replied as he move around the globe slightly before running another scan. This time he turned to look at Edwards, "Captain this is a suitable location for entry." he said.

"Okay let's get the air lock set up then." Edwards responded.

The air lock as Edwards referred to it was a simple air tight plastic bag designed to fit around a frame that the team erected beside the globe so that the edges of the opening of the bag could be fixed to the surface of the globe using a rapid setting adhesive. No mechanism for pumping air into the bag was included, this would come from inside the globe itself when it was breached. As soon as Max confirmed that the adhesive was set and the seal intact Cole began to unravel a length of thermal cutting charge.

"Unless the hull's made from some material unlike anything we've encountered before this should burn through in about a second." he said.

"The hull is made of the same material we have encountered the Iconians using on prior occasions." Max said, "The charge will penetrate though I expect the burn time will be longer. Two point one seconds for full penetration."

"Will the charge last that long?" Edwards asked, well aware that such explosives had a limited duration before their charge was used up.

"It's good for five." Cole said, nodding as he fixed the explosives to the globe while Max attached a hand grip to the centre of the area that was to be cut free, "I wasn't sure if the Iconians might be using neutronium laminated materials."

"And what if they were using solid neutronium?" West asked.

"Then we couldn't carry enough explosives to get through it and we'd have to look for a pre-existing door."

Cole said, "Now I would say stand back but that's not really an option here."

"Do it." Edwards said and with Max holding onto the grip Cole triggered the explosive charge.

Even through their insulated space suits the three Starfleet officers felt heat of the thermal charge as it rapidly melted through the hull of the globe. The moment that the first hole appeared all the way through there was a rush of air into the airlock until the pressure was equalised with that inside the Iconian base and Max braced himself, knowing that it would not be long before the charge had finished its work. This happened less than a second later and Max felt the weight of the hull section pull at his arms as it attempted to fall inwards.

"Ready." Cole said, pointing his rifle towards the loose section of hull and as Max carefully lowered it to the floor inside the globe Cole watched for any signs of Iconian activity, "Clear." he said before jumping through the hole. Edwards followed close behind him and the pair looked around the compartment they had emerged into, hunting for access points and places where Iconian agents could be concealing themselves. Behind them West and Max came through the hole and West took out her tricorder, running a scan of the hull that they had just cut through.

"Remember to keep the scan level under five hundred milliwatts." Edward said. Now that they were inside the Iconian base active energy emissions could be hidden among those from the equipment within the base itself as long as the spikes were not too large.

"It's okay, I didn't even need that much." West responded as she completed her scan. Then while Max was propping up the section of hull cut free against the inside of the hull West used her scan data to create a holographic file that she downloaded into a compact projector. Placing this on the floor in front of the hole, West activated the projector and the cut out section as well as the hole itself both vanished behind the projection.

"No." Edwards said suddenly as West reached to release the seals of her helmet so that she could remove it, "We'll keep our helmets on and use our internal life support. I don't want to take the risk of the Iconians doing anything to the air in here. They don't need to breathe, remember? Even the organic bodies their agents use are already dead."

"Yes captain." West replied, remaking the seal she had just released at her neck.

The only task left to be carried out before the assault team could begin to explore the Iconian base was to ready the gravimetric warhead for transport. The portable antigrav units that would nullify its mass had already been attached to the warhead before leaving the *Thames* and now all that Max had to do was activate them all and watch as the weapon rose up off the floor to hover at about waist height. Max could now push this along with just one hand while he held his phaser rifle in the other, making use of the enhanced strength provided by his Borg implants to maintain the rifle's balance with a one handed grip.

"I am ready captain." he said.

"Okay let's move out." Edwards said, "West can you scan for traces of omega molecule production?"

"Yes captain." West replied, swapping her rifle for her hand phaser and taking out her tricorder again before starting to scan. This time she pushed the scan power up to the maximum Edwards had previously recommended to ensure the best possible coverage, "Nothing right now." she said.

"Very well, we'll have to move deeper into the base and see if we can find somewhere that we can get some readings from." Edwards replied.

"Captain I suggest that we make our way towards the central section. It seems logical that a facility built for the purpose of creating omega molecules would be built around the equipment required to carry out that task."

"That area is also going to be crawling with Iconians I bet." West commented.

"That's why we brought phasers with us." Cole replied.

The Girl stood the middle of a data retrieval pod, watching as streams of information from various sources scrolled past her. The sensors had registered a brief disturbance that Shintar obviously thought was nothing worth bothering about. His order for her to investigate it was based purely on the dislike that they had built up during previous operations where she had overruled his opinions. However, The Girl had noticed something that had escaped the various Iconian intelligences monitoring the sensors and Shintar had not even bothered to check up on.

Shintar had established a system whereby different aspects of the base's scanning capability were monitored by different Iconian intelligences but he had failed to integrate their operations properly. This meant that the co-ordination between different sensors during normal operation was poor. The Girl quickly found the spike triggered by the supposed minor asteroid impact but when she compared these to the other sensor scans being carried out at the same time she discovered a discrepancy.

Although a small asteroid appeared to have crashed into the deflector shield around the base it had not appeared on any sensors before this. Either the asteroid was made from some material that was invisible to

sensors, something that in itself would be very valuable, or there had never been an asteroid in the first place and the seismic disturbance had been caused by something else altogether.

"Shintar you fool." she said to herself, "Now your operation depends entirely on me. You may be an effective warrior but you're no project leader and you never will be."

The Girl's next move was to examine the alleged impact point itself and this meant going outside the base. She could just use her personal gateway system to travel there but before leaving the confines of the base she still put on a space suit to protect her host body from the risk of damage due to exposure to the vacuum of space.

Materialising outside the deflector shield and just over twenty metres from the impact point The Girl saw what looked like a small impact crater, lending credence to the idea that it had been an asteroid impact. However, as she walked closer she saw that the hole was not the right shape for an impact crater. Rather than having rounded sides and with debris thrown in all directions the hole was too straight, though it did appear to taper as it got deeper while all of the debris had been hurled away from the shield surrounding the base instead of being thrown in all directions and coming to a halt when it struck the shield. The solution to how such a hole could be created was obvious to The Girl.

Someone had triggered a shaped charge beneath the surface.

The Girl strode towards the hole and peered into it. It was immediately apparent that this was more than just some hole someone had gone to a lot of trouble to blast in the surface of the asteroid. Instead it was a tunnel that, by using a large rock to prevent a collapse, bypassed the deflector shield surrounding the base. The surface of the asteroid was too solid for footprints to form but the use of an explosive to create the tunnel had left debris within the tunnel itself and as The Girl looked into it and shone the lights mounted on her helmet at the floor she saw the impressions left behind by whoever had created it. The footprints had two different styles of tread and The Girl recognised them both right away. The first was the standard tread pattern of a Starfleet space suit boot while the second was the imprint left behind by a Borg drone.

"Captain Edwards." The Girl said to herself, "So you're here with your Borg engineer are you? I suppose that make sense but who else did you bring with you?"

The Girl then took another step and vanished from the exterior surface of the asteroid and appeared in Shintar's private quarters where she found him with a hand around the throat of a Romulan woman who was holding her torn clothing against her chest while Shintar grinned at her and stroked the side of her face.

"Am I interrupting an important meeting my lord?" The Girl asked sarcastically as she removed her helmet and Shintar turned his head to face her and snarled.

Then he released his grip on the Romulan.

"Leave us. I will send for you when I want you again." he ordered as he stepped back and she ran for the exit from his quarters. As the door closed behind the Romulan he looked at The Girl again, "What do you want here?" he demanded.

"Merely reporting in after following your very explicit orders to investigate the seismic disturbance detected by the shield perimeter." The Girl replied.

"How is that worth interrupting me?" Shintar said.

"Abusing a slave is hardly worthy of your time while there are more important matters to deal with Shintar. You shouldn't even have her here. She's a security risk." The Girl replied.

"Are you volunteering to take her place perhaps? Ready to experiment with what your body can offer in the way of physical pleasure?" Shintar said and The Girl curled her lip.

"I don't think so." she said.

"So tell me what you do want. What is so urgent about an asteroid impact that inflicted no damage on our facility or its shield."

"It wasn't an asteroid Shintar." The Girl said, "Not unless an asteroid can set a shaped charge and leaves footprints identical to Starfleet issue boots."

"Starfleet?" Shintar exclaimed, "Impossible. I destroyed their omega team and the vessel we detected."

"Well obviously they didn't get the message about how effective your defences are because Starfleet is here on the asteroid. It's Captain Edwards." The Girl said, "He would be cleared to know about omega and he has that Borg engineer with him as well. From the tracks I saw I'd say that they aren't alone either. There were at least three sets of Starfleet footprints. Possibly as many as five."

"Where are they now? I'll lead a team to kill them myself." Shintar said.

"Worried Shintar? You failed to prevent a Starfleet team landing and now you can't be certain about what else you missed. That team could just be the advanced party of an entire task force lurking just beyond sensor range." The Girl said, finding Shintar's reaction amusing.

"Just tell me where they are." he hissed, drawing the disruptor he kept holstered at his side.

"I don't know. I didn't waste my time searching for them and risk being killed by a bunch of humans. I came right back here to warn you."

"Then get out of my way." Shintar said, pushing past The Girl on his way towards the exit, "I have intruders to catch."

The Girl watched as Shintar left his quarters, smiling at him.
“Yes you do Shintar.” she said.

3.

The nature of the Iconians as digitised intelligences able to act within a virtual environment meant that the various corridors were largely empty. However, even with West scanning for signs of movement the risk of remaining out in the open was considered too great and the team acted quickly to locate an access point to the utility crawl ways that were the Iconian equivalent of Jefferies Tubes, used to isolate power conduits and key system access nodes from the more public areas of the base. Although cramped, there was still enough room for the assault team and their equipment to move around not only on the level they were on but also between them, ascending to the point where the tube connecting the globe to the next one up from the asteroid was located. This too featured crawl ways with handholds that allowed the team to climb up to the next globe.

"Which way West?" Edwards asked when she came to a sudden halt at the end of the vertical shaft where a junction gave them the choice of three different ways to go.

"I'm not sure captain." she replied.

"You are not detecting omega molecules yet lieutenant commander?" Max asked.

"No. Plus there's some weird feedback when I try scanning for energy sources." West replied.

Max let go of the gravimetric warhead, leaving it floating weightless in the shaft beside him as he opened up his own tricorder while still keeping a grip on the ladder and ran a scan for himself, keeping the power level low as well to avoid detection.

"Well?" Edwards asked.

"Captain I have seen this sort of feedback before." Max answered.

"Where?" Cole asked.

"Aboard the *USS Brilliant*." Max said.

"The ship taken over by an Iconian?" Edwards responded, remembering how an Iconian intelligence had been able to enter the main computer of the starship *Brilliant* before killing its entire crew by venting all of the internal atmosphere into space.

"Yes captain. The feedback pattern is almost identical to that caused by the refractive silicon material we discovered aboard the smuggling vessel being used by the Iconian who then hijacked the *Brilliant*." Max explained, "However, the signal appears more widespread than with that example."

"Max that stuff turned out to be key to the Iconian gateway technology." Cole said.

"Mining shuttles." West said.

"Mining shuttles?" Edwards repeated.

"The shuttlespods we detected captain." West answered, "The Iconians must be mining that mineral in this asteroid field."

"That is a reasonable assumption captain." Max added, "We are relatively close to Iconia and it makes sense that their technology would have relied on a mineral they could source locally. Captain we expended our supply of the mineral when we improvised a gateway of our own. We should consider the benefits of obtaining more of it."

"We didn't come here to collect rocks Max." Edwards pointed out.

"I understand that captain. However, if we are to effectively combat the Iconians then being able to assimilate their technology is important." the former drone replied and Cole winced.

"I hate it when he says 'assimilate.'" he said.

"Maybe, but he's right." Edwards said, "Our priority has to be to destroy whatever omega molecules the Iconians have already manufactured and their capability to make more but we also need to get hold of as much of that mineral as we can and get it back to the Federation."

"Narrowing the scan field of our tricorders should enable us to trace where the mineral is being stored captain." Max said and Edwards nodded.

"I get it." he replied, "When we point the tricorder at the mineral the scan will be disrupted, while it will function just fine if pointing away."

"Precisely captain." Max said.

"Okay, now I want to locate the omega molecules first and the mineral second." Edwards said, "West, narrow your scan field and try searching again."

"And if I still find nothing captain?" West asked.

"Then we keep heading for the centre of the primary globe. Sooner or later we're bound to find what we're looking for." Edwards answered.

Although the Iconians had developed their gateway technology to the point where it could be made to fit within a humanoid body being inhabited by one of their consciousnesses they still made use of larger fixed

gates for mass transportation and Shintar stood in front of the gate located inside the Iconian base as it activated. Along one wall there were stacks of containers that held the mineral essential for gateway travel but the gate had not been activated to send another shipment back home, instead it was being used to bring something to the base.

One after another, pairs of roughly humanoid mechanical constructs marched through the gate as Shintar watched and lined up in front of him, only the second pair of arm that each possessed varied from that body layout. Each of the constructs was armed with weapons built into the larger pair of arms each was fitted with and their bodies were covered in enough armour that none of their working parts were exposed.

From a raised walkway The Girl watched the arrival of these troops, noting that Shintar had summoned reinforcements in more destructive mechanical host bodies instead of fleshforms made entirely of the same synthetic flesh that was used to enhance the bodies of Iconian agents such as herself and Shintar.

"Fourth Regiment. Second Company. First Platoon. Reporting as ordered." the Iconian warrior standing directly in front of Shintar said.

"Excellent." Shintar responded, "Have you been briefed on the situation?"

"There was no time prior to transfer to these mechanisms. We have been given the schematic of this facility but that is all." the warrior told him.

"Then know this, the operation we are undertaking here will grant us near total control of the galaxy in one fell swoop and it must be protected at all costs. A team of Federation commandos is believed to have gained entrance to this facility. Your purpose in being here is twofold. Firstly you will secure the vital areas of the facility and protect its command staff." Shintar began and above him The Girl smiled, noticing that he had just made his own safety a priority, "Secondly you search every part of this facility for intruders. When you find them I want them killed if necessary but captured and brought to me if possible. Then I shall deal with them myself."

The Girl pondered this for a moment. In theory this was a sound decision, enabling any prisoners to be properly interrogated. However, The Girl doubted that Shintar was thinking this far ahead. He was obsessed with the idea that his plan would end all resistance to an Iconian return to and reconquest of the galaxy, going beyond even the original borders of the old Iconian Empire. This meant he did not believe that any intelligence about how the governments of the Milky Way galaxy would try to defend their territory was needed, all of it would be rendered obsolete once his plan came to fruition. The Girl expected that Shintar's interest was not in interrogating any prisoners taken but in killing them personally for daring to try and thwart his plan, probably in the longest and most drawn out manner possible.

"Deploy your men commander." Shintar ordered, "I will personally lead one of the search teams."

"Yes Lord Shintar." the warrior responded and without him needing to express his command verbally the troops behind him began to disperse according to deployment orders broadcast wirelessly. A group of half a dozen of the mechanical warriors led by their commander remained in place.

"Ready for your orders Lord Shintar." the commander said.

"Very good commander. Follow me. We are going to start our search where the Starfleet agents will have gained entry to this facility. At the asteroid it is constructed on."

"Captain I've got something." West said suddenly as her tricorder alerted her to an energy pattern it had been preprogrammed to monitor for, the pattern created during the creation of omega molecules.

"What is it West?" Edwards asked.

"I've got an energy signal that matches the defined pattern for omega production in that direction." she answered, pointing in the rough direction of the centre of the globe.

"Confirmed captain." Max said as he used his tricorder to run the same scan, "The energy level indicates that the Iconians are currently manufacturing several thousand omega molecules per hour."

"Will our gravimetric warhead be enough to destroy them?" Cole said.

"Yes lieutenant commander. I designed it to be self sustaining rather than a single pulse device. The energy source should last long enough to consume everything within a thousand metres under optimal circumstances." Max told him.

"So why not just trigger it here?" West suggested, "The source of this energy pattern is much closer than that."

"Because the circumstances are not optimal lieutenant commander." Max responded, "The structure of this facility will delay the destructive pattern. Whatever containment system the Iconians are using will likely be destroyed before the omega molecules themselves can be consumed, causing them to become unstable and triggering the very disaster we are seeking to prevent. To guarantee safe destruction we must ensure that all of the omega molecules are within the same area of this facility as the warhead."

"Which means we press onwards." Edwards said, "First we pinpoint the exact location of the omega molecules and then we find the mineral the Iconians use for their gateways. Hopefully after we plant the warhead we'll be able to make use of the portable antigravs to carry the stuff back to the beam down point for the *Thames*."

"Captain the portable antigravs should function with the mineral." Max said, "However, we cannot use the transporter to beam it up. A pattern lock is not possible."

"No but when we beam up to the runabout we can then land it on the asteroid and pick up the mineral." Edwards said, "Assuming we aren't being chased by a hoard of angry Iconians of course."

"Of course." Cole repeated and then he brought his rifle up to his shoulder and pointed it down the narrow access shaft in the direction closest to the one identified as the source of the omega molecule production, "I guess I'm on point from here." he added.

"Airlock log confirms no activity." the voice of one of the Iconian intelligences said as Shintar and the squad of mechanical warriors inspected the area around the last of the four airlocks that permitted direct access to the surface of the asteroid.

"Then they must not have made entry yet." Shintar said.

"Are you so sure about that?" The Girl asked as she stepped out from behind a large piece of machinery, still wearing her spacesuit although she carried its helmet beneath her arm.

"What do you know?" Shintar replied sternly.

"Oh just how Captain Edwards and his team came inside. You'll find it about thirty metres down that way." and she pointed along the corridor.

"We came that way." Shintar said, "We saw nothing."

"No, I'm sure you didn't. Edwards would have been careful about that but his team didn't do such a good job of hiding what they left outside fixed to our hull. They fixed a portable air tent in place and then probably cut a hole in the hull." The Girl said, "Come on, I'll show you."

Shintar let out a low growl as he and the warriors followed The Girl down the corridor until she came to an abrupt halt and looked around.

"This should be it." she said.

"I see no hole. Look." Shintar said, walking up to the hull and slapping it with the palm of his hand.

"Perhaps not, but it's there." The Girl replied as she continued to look around and then she smiled when she saw what she wanted, "Ah yes, here it is." she said and she drew the weapon she had taken from the base armoury, firing it at the tiny holographic emitter West had left behind. The device exploded in a flash and shower of sparks when the beam struck it. Instantly the stream of photons and gravitons sustaining the false image of the undamaged hull disappeared and the true extent of what the assault team from the *Nightfall* had done to get inside the base was exposed.

"Commander alert your men!" Shintar snapped as The Girl grinned, "They'll be heading for the omega plant. Make sure they don't reach it."

A hatch blocked access to the vertical shaft that the assault team needed to climb but they already knew that this type of hatch was easily opened using the control panel beside it. Positioning themselves beneath the hatch, Edwards and Cole pointed their rifles upwards before West activated the control. The hatch slid open instantly and the two Starfleet officers found themselves looking up the shaft at an armoured mechanical Iconian warrior climbing down towards them, bracing itself against the sides of the shaft. As soon as the hatch opened the Iconian took one of its weapon bearing arms from the wall and pointed it downwards. However, both Edwards and Cole were already prepared and they fired first.

Two pulses of energy shot up the shaft and struck the Iconian warrior. Although armoured the Iconian could not resist the two near-simultaneous high energy blasts and its body exploded, sending burning debris tumbling down the shaft.

"Back!" Edwards snapped as the debris came tumbling towards the assault team but West was quick enough to close the hatch again before there was a loud 'crash' as what was left of the Iconian's mechanical body smashed into the other side, "If the Iconian sensors are as good as ours then they know we're here now and they'll be converging on our location. We need to find another way around."

"Captain might I suggest that we now exit these access shafts and use the facility's main corridors?" Max said.

"It would allow us to make better use of our weapons." Cole pointed out.

"We passed an exit point right back there." West added and Edwards nodded.

"Okay you don't need to convince me." he said, "Let's move."

"All stations alert." the voice of one of the facility's directing intelligences announced, "Weapons discharge in prime module."

"Deploy to the prime module." Shintar ordered the troops behind him and then he vanished, making use of his personal gateway system to relocate himself directly to the facility's command centre, "Report." he ordered as the command crew turned to face him.

"The system has detected energy discharges on level six in the utility network my lord." one of the other Iconian agents present responded, "I am unable to contact one of the warriors sent in to patrol it."

"Have you checked the system for a consciousness transfer?" Shintar asked, hoping that the missing warrior might have been able to escape whatever fate seemed to have befallen his body by transferring himself into the facility's virtual environment.

"There is none my lord." another agent answered, "But we have troops converging on that spot now."

"No!" Shintar snapped, "The Starfleet team will not remain where there were. Have our troops form a perimeter to isolate that entire section. In the meantime I want you to evacuate the atmosphere from the prime module entirely. Leave only this command section pressurised."

"My lord that will mean the deaths of your personal slaves." an agent pointed out to Shintar.

"I will get more." Shintar responded, "Now do as I have ordered."

"Yes my lord."

The assault team backed down the access tunnel until they reached the nearest exit point and as soon as West opened it Cole rolled through the opening and checked the corridor outside for signs of an Iconian presence.

"Clear." he told the others and they followed him out into the passage, Max bringing up the rear as he carefully manoeuvred the gravimetric warhead through the hatchway.

"The lab's that way." West said, pointing along the passageway.

"How do you know that?" Cole asked and West suddenly realised that the only reason she knew the direction of the omega molecule production line was that there was a sign at the end of the corridor that was written in the Iconian script and The Controller had been able to read what it said.

"You have given yourself away." The Controller said to West, "Use your phaser. Escape and surrender to the security force protecting this base."

"I've been reviewing Starfleet's files on the Iconian language." West lied, ignoring The Controller's suggestion, "I don't know much but I know that sign is pointing towards a laboratory. What else would the Iconians need a laboratory for here if not for making omega molecules?"

"We've no time to stand around and discuss linguistics." Edwards said, "Cole take point again and follow that sign. West keep scanning for omega molecules and Iconians."

"Captain I'm picking up a drop in pressure." West reported.

"The Iconians appear to be extracting the atmosphere." Max said, "They are perhaps unaware that you are still wearing space suits."

"Will you be okay in the vacuum Max?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain. I have replenished my internal oxygen supply and can last longer in a vacuum than you will be able to given how much of your life support you have already consumed."

"In that case let's get a move on. I don't want this mission to fail simply because we ran out of oxygen." Edwards said.

The team advanced with both Edwards and Cole aiming their rifles ahead of them while West and Max used their free hands to hold hand phasers while their rifles remained slung.

"I've got energy signatures heading towards us." West reported suddenly as the team neared a junction and just then they heard the sound of mechanical footsteps from around one of the corners.

"They're right on top of us." Edwards said, "Rifles."

While Edwards and Cole both moved to the sides of the passageway and took aim at the source of the noise West quickly put her tricorder away and swapped her hand phaser for her rifle. Meanwhile Max simply put his hand phaser down on top of the floating gravimetric warhead while he unslung his rifle as well.

The moment that the first Iconian warrior stepped into view Cole fired his rifle but the pulse of energy was absorbed by the warrior's thick chest armour and it was only when Max fired his rifle on a beam setting that the Iconian collapsed as a hole was burned through its armour.

Another warrior leant around the corner and fired an energy blast back at the Starfleet assault team and Cole and West threw themselves out of the way at the last moment.

"Fire in the hole!" Edwards called out and he retaliated by reaching for the grenade launcher mounted beneath his phaser rifle and launching the single grenade he had loaded into it before the team beamed down from the Thames. This was a shaped charge round that Edwards had thought might come in useful for taking out some of the machinery used to produce omega molecules. Now though it proved useful in blasting a fist sized hole right through the corner that the Iconian was using for cover as well as the warrior's own armoured housing. The warrior was thrown backwards by the explosion, knocking a second warrior off its feet before another hurried around the corner with its arm mounted weapons firing rapid pulses of energy towards the Starfleet team. These were aimed high and another blast from Cole's phaser rifle destroyed one of these arm mounted weapons but the other continued to fire as the Starfleet officers ducked below the blasts while the Iconian warrior continued to charge towards them.

West fired her own rifle at the charging warrior and the beam hit the weapon mounted on one of its shoulders. This contained several small explosive projectiles and the energy of the phaser beam triggered several of them while still inside the launcher. This created a chain reaction that destroyed the entire shoulder and ripped off the still functional weapon arm as well as causing the Iconian to topple sideways into the adjacent wall.

Max quickly identified the hole in the warrior's armoured body caused by the explosive amputation of one of its major limbs and he aligned his rifle with this before firing his rifle again, this time on a pulse setting and several blasts of phaser energy tore through the exposed electronics before hitting the inside of the armour and being reflected back inwards where they caused even more damage that shut down the warrior's

mechanical body entirely.

Only the warrior that had tripped over the wreckage of the first now remained of this particular group and as it righted itself it took aim with one of its weapon arms, pointing it directly at Edwards. Fortunately Edwards was already pointing his rifle at the struggling Iconian warrior and he got the first shot in. Seeing how heavily armoured the Iconian warriors were he had adjusted his rifle to its maximum output level as well as the operating mode to a continuous beam rather than individual pulses. This meant that when he pulled the trigger his rifle emitted a steady stream of energy for as long as he held it down. This struck the centre of the Iconian's heavily armoured chest plate and the energy spread out from there, consuming the entire warrior as Edwards maintained the beam long enough for the machine to be disintegrated entirely, leaving nothing behind except for a scorch mark on the floor where it had been just moments before.

"Somehow I doubt that none of those things were able to report in before we took them out." Cole said and Edwards nodded.

"We need to keep moving and stay alert. The Iconians know this facility much better than we do." he said.

"I'm getting strong readings for omega molecules captain." West said when she opened her tricorder again, "The service ducts must have been partially shielded."

"Which way?" Edwards asked.

"Ahead and up, about fifty metres in a straight line." West told him.

"Let's go." Edwards ordered, "Cole, you're on point again."

"Yes captain." Cole replied, bracing his rifle against his shoulder as he advanced along the corridor, sidestepping what remained of the Iconian warrior bodies.

"Unit four has reported engaging the intruders my lord." the Tellarite agent said.

"I want to speak with the unit leader." Shintar responded, "I need to know the enemy strength."

"I have a visual feed my lord." the Tellarite said.

"On screen." Shintar ordered and a large screen in front of him immediately changed to show the Starfleet team firing at the unit of warriors. However, before Shintar could say anything the feed was abruptly cut and the screen went blank, "What happened?" he demanded.

"The feed was cut at source my lord." another agent told him.

"Then switch to another of the team." Shintar said.

"I can't my lord, none of them are responding. The intruders must have-"

"Impossible!" Shintar snapped, slamming a clenched fist down on the edge of a nearby console.

"My lord I have a report from one of the team." another agent announced and Shintar spun around to face him.

"Put it on screen." he said.

"Apologises my lord but it is not a visual feed. The warrior was able to upload to our network before his combat form was destroyed."

"Put him through." Shintar said, snarling.

"Reporting as ordered Lord Shintar." the voice of the disembodied warrior announced via the command centre's communications system.

"Tell me what happened." Shintar commanded.

"We located the intruders and engaged them. As per your orders we used suppressive rather than destructive fire to try and effect capture of the intruders. They were better armed than we expected and the combat forms of my entire team was destroyed. Only I managed to escape, the rest have been lost forever." the Iconian warrior intelligence explained.

"You failed. Almost a million years of experience between you and you failed." Shintar hissed, "Return home. I do not need your help to bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion."

"Yes my lord." the warrior replied but Shintar ignored this as he turned back towards the Tellarite agent.

"Show me where the intruders were last seen." he ordered and the other Iconian called up a schematic of the entire facility, zooming in on the large central globe where the omega production lab was located. A pulsing green dot indicated precisely where the recent engagement had taken place.

"That is right next to the omega core." Shintar said, "Show me the locations of our other forces in that area."

More dots now appeared on the schematic display, these blue to indicate the positions of other warrior patrols and sentries. Given that Shintar had ordered the section where the Starfleet assault team was known to be the Iconian warriors were spread out over several decks to cover all possible avenues of escape and now that a unit had been destroyed there was a gap in this perimeter that would allow the intruders to break through it. Just as Shintar had said the exact location of where the warrior unit had just been destroyed was very close to the core of the facility where omega molecules were being manufactured. Shintar was about to order a general recall to reinforce the sentries protecting the only way into the core when he realised that this would not be enough to guarantee that the production lab remained secure. Iconian technology relied on a form of linear particle accelerator to synthesise omega molecules and in the case of this facility the accelerator had been constructed vertically within the primary globe module. With the end point of the

accelerator and all of the stabilisation and storage equipment located at the top of this accelerator, it had to stretch down through several decks and although there were no access points into the core anywhere but on the uppermost level it was conceivable that the assault team would be able to penetrate the outer wall to gain direct access to their target.

"Having trouble Shintar?" The Girl said as she suddenly appeared in the command centre.

"Everything is under control." he replied.

"Really? Then perhaps you can explain why a warrior has just returned home after the body he was inhabiting here was destroyed. The council is concerned that this facility is at risk." The Girl said, "They want answers Shintar."

"Tell them that the facility is secure. We have located the intruders and I am about to destroy them." Shintar said.

"With your forces scattered like that?" The Girl said, looking at the schematic highlighting the deployment of the Iconian warriors.

"Order all units to redeploy to cover area fourteen on levels six through fourteen of the primary module." Shintar ordered and then he glared at The Girl, "There. Now tell the council that their fears are unfounded."

"You better hope they are Shintar. The council is not known for its forgiving attitude." The Girl warned him.

"No, that's why you're just a courier now isn't it?" Shintar replied without the slightest hint of emotion.

"The omega signature is almost directly above us now captain. About thirty metres." West reported.

"About six decks then. So how do we get up to it?" Cole asked.

"Captain if the Iconian turbolift shafts are like ours then they ought to include handholds for emergency ladders." Max suggested.

"It's an idea I suppose. We'll have to find some way of disabling the turbolift system itself to make sure the Iconians can't just crash a car into us." Edwards said.

"I recommend disabling a turbolift car at our starting point captain." Max said.

"Movement!" West suddenly exclaimed before Edwards could respond to Max's suggestion and she pointed ahead of them.

"Get back." Edwards ordered and the assault team retreated back around a corner and waited to see what was approaching.

They soon heard the sound of multiple mechanical footsteps as another patrol of Iconian warriors neared their position. This came to a brief halt not far away and Edwards risked peering around the corner to see what was happening on the other side. There he saw another four strong unit of Iconian warriors in their mechanical bodies clustered together at the end of the corridor where it met another one that ran past perpendicularly. Then as he watched three of the four Iconians began to move again, continuing on the path they had been taking before coming to a halt while the fourth remained where it was as if protecting something.

"That's odd." Edwards said softly, "One of those machines is waiting at the end of the corridor."

"Do you think they know we're here?" West asked nervously.

"If they did then why leave just one on guard while the others headed away?" Edwards responded.

"Is there anything there that they could be protecting?" Cole asked.

"I didn't see any doors at the end of the corridor." West reminded him.

"The lab." Edwards said to himself.

"That's above us isn't it?" Cole said, "About half a dozen decks above us."

"The part where the omega molecules are, yes." Edwards said and he looked at Max, "Max could the production facility stretch all the way down to us here?"

"Quite easily captain." Max answered.

"In that case we have our way into the primary target and up." Edwards said, "We use explosives to blow the wall and then use whatever the Iconians have put in place to permit movement between the different levels inside. But first we have a sentry to deal with." and he raised his rifle.

"Just taking him out is likely to attract attention." Cole pointed out.

"We don't have time for anything fancy." Edwards replied, "Max how long to get through the wall?"

"One moment captain." Max said and then he took a quick glance around the corner, using his Borg optics to gather as much detail about the wall behind the sentry as he could, "The thermal properties of the wall suggest that phaser fire will be ineffectual within a reasonable time frame. We will have to use explosives."

"Prepare a charge." Edwards ordered, "As soon as the sentry is disabled West and I will set it while Cole covers us. Max, you'll wait here with the warhead until we trigger the charge."

"Yes captain." Max replied and he quickly set to work preparing a set of spatial charges that were rigged to detonate together, each one creating a localised blast that would, if Max was correct, tear open the bulkhead around the laboratory without spreading the blast out so far as to be a danger to the assault team themselves, "Ready captain." Max said when the eighth charge was prepared, "Place these no more than sixty centimetres from one another. When you are ready stand back and I will set them off."

"Got it." Edwards said as he and West began to stuff the prepared charges into pouches on their spacesuits.

"Ready?" Cole asked when the last charge had been stowed and Edwards looked at him.

"Ready. Let's do this." he said.

Cole leapt around the corner with his phaser rifle braced against his shoulder. With the weapon set to emit pulses rather than a continuous beam he fired several rapid shots that were aimed at the level of the warrior's head and shoulders. While most of these failed to penetrate the warrior's armoured body one of them did hit the mounting for one of its shoulder mounted projectile launchers and the weapon was blasted clean off.

The Iconian turned to face Cole and as it did so he dived across the corridor, disappearing down the opposite side passage. The Iconian turned to follow this movement, raising its weapon arms in readiness to fire. However, while it was focused on where Cole had just gone both Edwards and West emerged from hiding where he had come from and both of them fired their phaser rifles at the same time. The two bright red beams almost converged as they hit the Iconian's heavily armoured chest plate. This glowed as it as heated up as the phaser beams burrowed through it and all of a sudden the mechanical construct collapsed as its primary systems were destroyed.

"Go!" Edwards yelled and he and West ran down the corridor with Cole following behind them.

Edwards already had the first spatial charge in his hand when he got to the wall and he pressed the explosive up against it where it stuck in place. He and West then continued to plant the remaining charges in a roughly oval pattern larger than a person.

No further Iconians appeared while the charges were being set and Edwards and West both backed away as quickly as possible when this had been done.

"Max now." Edwards ordered when they had both taken several steps.

"Yes captain." Max replied and there was an explosion from the end of the corridor as Max triggered the spatial charges. Just as he had promised these were able to blow right through the internal wall around the omega production facility without filling the entire corridor with shrapnel.

"Move!" Edwards yelled and he was the first to dive through the hole into the omega production lab.

He winced as he landed and felt something sharp dig into him before rolling out of the way of the hole. A quick glance downwards showed that his knee had landed on a piece of debris but fortunately his spacesuit had maintained its integrity and he instead looked around at what was in the compartment the team had just forced its way inside.

Dominating the chamber were two massive cylindrically shaped pieces of machinery. Even with the lab depressurised like most of the facility now was Edwards could feel the vibrations from one of the machines merely through his contact with the deck plates on which it was mounted. The reason for this was easy to see when Edwards saw a transparent panel in the side of one of several storage containers fixed around the base of the machine and saw that it held a dull brown dust.

"Boronite." he said.

"What was that captain?" West asked as she followed him through the hole.

"This machine is refining the boronite." Edwards told her, "That means that this other one must be the particle accelerator used to actually create the omega molecules. That's why you were reading them from above us. The accelerator goes all the way to the top." and the pair of them looked up the narrow compartment towards the top.

"We've got incoming." Cole said as he helped Max manoeuvre the gravimetric warhead through the hole behind them, "I think it's the rest of the sentry's unit.

"Max, West, get climbing." Edwards ordered, pointing to the handholds set into the wall not far from where they had blown the hole. These appeared to run all the way to the top of the compartment and West began to climb.

"What about you captain?" Cole asked.

"We take cover and wait." Edwards told him, "Behind this ought to do." and he crouched behind the particle accelerator, pointing his phaser rifle towards the hole in the wall.

"What is this thing?" Cole asked as he joined Edwards, taking cover on the other side of the accelerator.

"If my guess is right then it's the particle accelerator the Iconians are using to manufacture omega molecules." Edwards told him and Cole's eyes widened.

"Seriously? What if this thing takes a hit?" he asked.

"Then it will probably explode quite violently." Edwards said, "Plus if there are any omega molecules in it at the time they will probably be released and cause untold damage as well."

"Then should we really be using it for cover captain?"

"Of course. Would you shoot at it?" Edwards said with a grin and Cole smiled as well.

"I guess not." he said just as the first of the three Iconian warriors outside appeared through the hole.

Cole was ready for this and he immediately fired his grenade launcher, using a shaped charge round to punch a hole all the way through the combat form's chest. While Cole was reloading his grenade launcher Edwards then fired his phaser rifle through the hole into the corridor before another target presented itself,

using rapid pulses of energy to dissuade the remaining two Iconian warriors from trying to force their way inside the laboratory.

This had the desired effect as one of the warriors raised a weapon arm in readiness to return fire only for part of his body's control system to present him with a warning against using ranged weapons in proximity to the equipment inside the laboratory.

ii.

"Intruder warning. Aliens have breached the production facility." the voice of one of the Iconian intelligences controlling the production of omega molecules reported.

"What?" Shintar yelled furiously, "How has this happened?"

"My lord it appears that the Starfleet team destroyed one of the sentries set to defend the lower part of the production facility from attack and then used an explosive charge to gain entry. Exactly as you predicted they would." an Iconian agent answered.

Shintar was furious, despite having been able to predict the behaviour of Captain Edwards and his team precisely his efforts to keep them from the production facility had failed utterly.

"What is our security doing about this?" he demanded.

"My lord the other troops from the sentry's unit are outside the breach but cannot engage because of the risk of hitting the particle accelerator. The units assigned to defend the entrance are still in place outside."

"Order them in. All of them." Shintar said, "We must do whatever it takes to regain control of that section."

West had just reached the top of the ladder and was climbing up into what looked like a control and monitoring station for the production process when the large main doors to the section slid open and a unit of Iconian warriors marched through the open doorway. None of the mechanical warriors fired though, their control systems alerting them to the danger of doing so. Instead one of them charged towards West as she was still pulling herself up from the ladder. West had to roll aside quickly as the Iconian warrior brought an arm crashing down toward her. Then she scabbled across the floor as the warrior came after her, looming above her as it calculated its next strike. In following West the warrior came very close to the shaft she had just scaled itself and as it brought a foot down beside the hole it was suddenly alert to a fault in its ankle. Looking down the Iconian warrior saw Max with his arm reaching out towards the warrior's leg, his fist clenched and two narrow tubes extending from between his knuckles to meet the warrior's ankle.

"Resistance is useless." Max said simply before the warrior collapsed and began to convulse uncontrollably as the nanites injected into its leg began to spread, accessing the warrior's control systems and corrupting them. Realising that its mechanical body was about to fail the Iconian warrior attempted to withdraw, transferring its consciousness back into the base's main computer system but even this proved impossible. The nanites were spreading throughout the body and attacking it both at a physical as well as a coding level. This left large parts of the control systems corrupted and the base's own network security system recognised this corruption and blocked access to itself to prevent the corruption from spreading. As the warrior felt its body shutting down it realised that its many thousands of years of existence had just come to a permanent end.

This gave West all the breathing space she needed to unsling her phaser rifle and fire it at the next Iconian warrior to have come through the door. The beam blew one of the weapon mounting arms off and it clattered to the ground. The warrior ignored this damage however, having no use for the energy weapon array while in this part of the base and it kept on coming.

"Give up." The Controller said, "You can't destroy them all."

"I don't need to." West hissed and she lowered her rifle to aim at the warrior's foot. She fired the weapon just as the warrior was placing that foot on the deck in front of it and the beam struck its target right where West wanted it to. The armour around the joint was thinner than that protecting the key systems in the head and chest and the phaser beam quickly burned through, causing the ankle to explode and the warrior to fall forwards. This fall took it straight into the shaft that ran down the chamber and the warrior began to plummet towards the bottom, bouncing repeatedly between the wall, boronite processor and particle accelerator.

"Look out!" Edwards yelled as he felt the impact of the tumbling Iconian warrior against the particle accelerator.

Cole looked up to see the warrior coming right at him and he dived out of the way just in time for it to smash into the floor where he had been just moments earlier. Hoping to use the demise of their comrade, the two warriors still lurking outside the hole at the bottom of the shaft attempted to come through. However, Edwards was still covering the hole and he fired his phaser rifle at the head of the first warrior to show itself as it leant through the hole. Hitting the head three times in rapid succession, Edwards saw the warrior decapitated. However, the warrior's core consciousness was not stored here and all this achieved was to destroy its primary sensor receptors. The warrior now paused, blocking the hole as it raised one of its weapon mounting arms, intending to use the targeting sensors built into that to track the two Starfleet officers instead of its ordinary senses. The field of view offered by these sensor receptors was narrow, however and as the Iconian was still hunting for the two Starfleet officers Edwards took advantage of it being stationary to fire a continuous beam from his phaser rifle that burned a hole right through the centre of its torso. The beam

struck one of the warrior's power cells and this promptly exploded.

"Climb." Edwards told Cole as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and headed for the ladder.

With the wreckage of the burning warrior now blocking the hole in the wall the two officers were able to climb the ladder without worrying about the final warrior pursuing them. Meanwhile at the top of the ladder Max had drawn his hand phaser to be able to support West at the same time as he pulled the gravimetric warhead from the shaft and began to manoeuvre it away from the doorway to keep it away from the remaining Iconian warriors. Both officers fired their phasers at the closest Iconian warrior, the two attacks hitting the warrior at the same time and bringing it crashing to the floor as well.

The final remaining warrior charged towards Max and leapt through the air towards him at the last moment.

"Max look out." West shouted moments before the bulky warrior slammed into the former drone and sent him flying backwards, the gravimetric warhead drifting away from him. Max's phaser was also knocked from his grasp and to protect himself he reached up to grab hold of the two weapon mounting arms that the warrior was attempting to align on him from point blank range as they grappled together on the floor. With Max's arms occupied on holding these two limbs pointing away from him the Iconian warrior was able to use its smaller manipulating arms to reach down and grab him by the throat. Choking Max was an exercise in futility but by lifting his head from the floor and then slamming it back down the warrior hoped to inflict injury through blunt force trauma.

However, being focused on Max meant that the warrior did not notice as West ran up to it and pressed the muzzle of her phaser rifle against the neck joint of its armour, the weapon aimed down into the warrior's chest cavity. Then as the warrior looked up at her West pulled her trigger and there was a flash from within the warrior as its central processing core was destroyed, taking with it the Iconian intelligence inhabiting the body.

"Need a hand up Max?" West asked.

"It is appreciated." Max replied as West helped him back to his feet.

"What's the situation up here?" Edwards asked as he reached the top of the ladder.

"We've dealt with the Iconians up here captain." West replied.

"Good, the hole down there is blocked now." Edwards added, "Max what do you think of this equipment?"

"It is more advanced than anything in my knowledge concerning omega molecules captain," Max replied, "but I think that this is the primary monitoring console." and he walked up to a nearby console.

"Cole get that door shut and locked if you can." Edwards told Cole, pointing towards the open doorway before he joined Max by the console.

"Captain this is most unexpected." Max said as he studied the various displays that had been provided just in case anyone other than an Iconian intelligence that operated only virtually wanted to check on the production process, "According to these readings the omega molecules the Iconians have manufactured are stable."

"How is that possible?" Edwards asked, "Omega is inherently unstable."

"Nevertheless captain, these molecules have bonded together in a stable form." Max replied, "They are being stored in those cylinders over there." and he looked towards a set of metal cylinders lined up along one of the laboratory walls.

"Will that make a difference to destroying them?" West said.

"No." Max answered, "The gravimetric warhead will still draw in the molecules and consume the energy of their destruction in the singularity."

"Set the device Max." Edwards ordered, "Place it where it can do the most damage. I want all of the omega molecules as well as this production facility destroyed."

"Yes captain. Setting the warhead against the storage cylinders will be most efficient for that task. I recommend that the device is triggered by means of a remote signal, coupled with secondary triggers based on a repeating status request and also a motion sensor. If I we do not specifically cancel the detonation every five minutes or if any attempt is made to move the warhead then it will detonate."

"Will movement include transporter operation?" Cole asked, "It's no good if the Iconians can just use a transporter dispersion to destroy the device."

"The warhead can detect signs of a transporter energising as well as the formation of an Iconian gateway anywhere within five metres." Max said.

"Good." Edwards said, nodding, "Max set the bomb and then let's get out of here."

"My lord the intruders have destroyed the warriors sent against them. They have taken the production laboratory." an agent reported.

"What?" Shintar bellowed furiously as he spun towards the agent.

"The consciousness responsible for the facility is still in place though and we have a feed from inside." the agent added before Shintar could take out his anger on anyone else in the command centre.

"Show me." Shintar ordered and he turned to look at the main viewscreen as the agent brought up the visual feed from the laboratory. This showed Edwards and Max stood beside the control console while Cole secured the room and West just waited with her rifle in her hands. Apart from Max all of the assault team

were wearing space suits but they could still be identified through their faceplates.

"I cannot hear anything." Shintar said.

"You ordered the atmosphere removed from the rest of the facility my lord." another agent pointed out, "The intruders are communicating wirelessly."

"Can't you intercept this communication?" Shintar asked.

"Yes my lord but it is encrypted." the agent at the communications console told him.

"Then decrypt it. Put every available resource into it. I must know what the intruders are planning." Shintar said.

"My lord does that include the consciousness currently in the laboratory?" the communications agent asked.

"Yes, every available resource. Do it now." Shintar ordered.

"Captain the warhead is armed." Max announced, "It will request our status at intervals of ten minutes and if we fail to respond to any of them it will auto detonate. Responses to these requests and the specific command to detonate should be sent on communication channel bravo by combadge or tricorder."

"Very good Max." Edwards replied, "West do you have a fix on where that mineral the Iconians use for their gateways is being kept?"

"Yes captain." West answered as she looked at her tricorder and pointed, "It's in that direction and probably on the same level as we are."

"How much do you intend for us to take?" Cole asked.

"Max how much will those antigravs lift?" Edwards said, pointing to the four portable antigrav units that Max had detached from the warhead casing and now had hanging from his waist.

"Each one is capable of nullifying up to one hundred kilograms of mass captain." Max answered.

"Then we take four hundred kilograms plus whatever we can carry without the antigravs. That stuff is too important for us to ignore and we don't know when we may get another chance to obtain any." Edwards said. The assault team formed up beside one another just inside the door and Cole reached out to open it. The door slid open to reveal only an empty corridor outside and the Starfleet officers dashed from the laboratory with their rifles held to their shoulders. West waved towards a side passage that seemed to match the direction of the disruption to her scans caused by the presence of the refractive mineral and the team headed that way.

"Lord Shintar the Starfleet team have left the production laboratory." one of the Iconian agents in the command centre announced and without needing to be instructed to he brought up an image of the now empty laboratory. Empty that was apart from the gravimetric warhead that had been left beside the omega molecule storage units.

"What is that?" Shintar asked.

"The Borg Starfleet officer placed it there my lord. According to our scans it appears to be some sort of gravity manipulating device.

"A gravimetric bomb. So that is how they intended to destroy our omega molecules." Shintar said, "I want personnel qualified in ordnance disposal in that laboratory as soon as possible and make sure that the Starfleet team does not leave the facility. If that weapon is powerful enough to destroy our omega molecules then it will be powerful enough to destroy the entire station and I doubt the intruders will be willing to set it off while they are still here."

"Behind us!" Cole exclaimed when he glanced behind the assault team and saw the first of another unit of Iconian warriors appear through a large doorway and he fired his phaser rifle at the machine. The beam just clipped the Iconian and did no real damage. In response to this the Iconian raised an arm and opened fire just as the assault team was taking cover. The rapid stream of energy pulses forced all four officers to stay down where they could not directly return fire but as the Iconian warrior advanced, now joined by three more of its kind Max quickly took another spatial charge from the kit bag he still carried and primed it.

"I suggest everyone remains in cover." he said as he also injected a cluster of nanites into the charge before he tossed it around the strut he was hiding behind.

The charge landed in the middle of the corridor and began to roll along it towards the advancing Iconian warriors. Even while he remained out of sight of both the Iconians and the charge Max was still able to see exactly where they were in relation to one another thanks to the nanites in the charge feeding him visual data. Thanks to this feed Max was able to see when the first Iconian came within the blast radius of the charge and he triggered it immediately.

Even with no atmosphere to carry the blast wave the yield setting of the spatial charge still proved devastating within the confines of the corridor. The explosion tore a massive hole in the floor right in front of the lead Iconian warrior and it toppled forwards through it. Meanwhile the short lived blast of heat enveloped the other three Iconians and all of them staggered back as it overwhelmed their sensors.

"Move!" Edwards yelled before the Iconians could recover and the assault team broke into a sprint along the corridor.

"Through there captain." Max called out as they approached another large doorway, "Something in there is disrupting the emissions of the local power grid."

"The mineral?" Cole said.

"What else?" Edwards replied as he reached the doorway first and slammed his hand on the control to open it.

As soon as he raced through the open doorway he found himself facing another pair of Iconian warriors standing either side of a large archway set into the wall at the end of the chamber. Both of these raised their weapons but Edwards fired before they could take aim and his phaser beam blasted the head from one of them. The damaged machine staggered as it switched to the arm mounted targeting sensors to try and determine Edwards' location but the Starfleet captain followed this initial attack up with a shot from his grenade launcher that struck the centre of the Iconian warrior's chest plate and blew it wide open.

Alerted by the weapons fire to the presence of more Iconians, Cole came through the door already searching for a target and he opened fire as soon as he had acquired the second Iconian warrior, holding down his trigger to fire a rapid series of energy blasts towards it. The Iconian staggered back as these blasts of energy struck it despite none of them penetrating its armour and it was only when Max came through the door and fired a sustained beam from his phaser rifle that burned a hole deep into the warrior that it too collapsed in a lifeless heap.

"Are all these full of the mineral?" West asked as she entered the chamber last and took the time to look around at the stacked rows of drums marked up in the Iconian script.

"Most likely lieutenant commander." Max replied.

"This must be their main storage area." Cole added.

"I think not Lieutenant Commander Cole." Max said, "This compartment is not a warehouse, it is a transit waypoint. Look." and he pointed towards the arch at the end of the chamber.

"Max, is that a gateway?" Edwards said.

"I believe so captain. Most likely controlled from this console here." Max said as he walked over to the nearby control console, "From here I can open a gateway to any point within range."

"And from what we know of Iconian gateway tech that could be anywhere in the galaxy." West said.

"Does that include the *Thames*?" Edwards asked.

"In theory, yes captain." Max answered.

"Good. Then I want you to open up a gateway to the *Thames*." Edwards ordered.

"Captain what are you thinking?" West said.

"I'm thinking that instead of carrying a few of these drums around to the other side of the asteroid while the Iconians hunt us down we can just load up the runabout with them from here." Edwards explained.

"Captain I should warn you that travel through the gateway will be one way only. If any of us steps through then we will not be able to come back." Max said.

"In that case we'll just have to roll the drums through. West you'll go through the gateway with one of the antigravs and stack the drums as Max and I send them."

"What about me captain?" Cole said.

"You watch the corridor outside. If anyone tries to come anywhere near the door you shoot them and warn us." Edwards responded.

"Lord Shintar the intruders have penetrated the gate room. They are activating the gateway."

"Can you stop them?" Shintar asked.

"No my lord. The Borg has isolated the controls."

"What is the status of the bomb?" Shintar asked.

"Our specialists have determined that it has multiple redundant triggers my lord." another of the command centre agents reported, "They have yet to determine a safe way of defusing it."

"Send every warrior we have to the gate room. Captain Edwards must not be allowed to escape. Send them now!" Shintar ordered.

The interior of the *Thames* suddenly appeared through the archway and West hurried towards it, using one of the portable antigravs to carry a drum filled with the refractive mineral with her. Stepping through the gateway she suddenly found herself in the rear compartment of the *Thames* and she paused to look around as if unsure as to whether or not she had really got aboard the runabout simply by stepping through the arch. A quick glance at the atmospheric monitor on the sleeve of her space suit told West that the air around her was breathable, seeming to prove Max's claim that travel through the gateway was one way only. Had it not been then the air aboard the runabout would have been sucked through into the vacuum inside the Iconian base.

"Captain I'm aboard safely." she said, hoping that the signal from her space suit's built in communicator would reach Edwards but also turning around and waving towards where she thought the end of the gateway was located.

"Okay she's ready." Edwards told Max, "Let's get as many of these drums through as we can."

Using the portable antigravs that they still had with them, Edwards and Max began to move more of the drums to the gateway, laying them down on their sides so that they could then be rolled through to the Thames where West then used her own portable antigrav to lift them up and begin stacking them. They had successfully moved a dozen of the drums through the gateway, three times what they could have carried when Cole called out to them.

"Contact!" he shouted as he fired a burst of energy blasts and a grenade down the corridor towards the Iconian warriors who were rushing towards the doorway.

"Seal the door." Edwards ordered and Cole backed away from the doorway, closing it and then adjusting his phaser rifle to emit a high energy thermal beam that he used to fuse the two halves shut.

Meanwhile Edwards and Max continued to move drums of the refractive mineral through the gateway. Joined by Cole they kept this up until there was a pounding at the door that they felt through the deck plates beneath their feet. Looking around they saw large dents appearing in the door as the Iconian warriors attempted to break it down.

"Captain I estimate that they will penetrate the door in less than a minute." Max said and Edwards nodded.

"Then let's get out of here." he said.

"I will be right behind behind you captain." Max said, "Someone must trigger the gravimetric warhead."

"Don't be too long Max." Edwards told him before he and Cole stepped through the gateway themselves.

Max waited by the active gateway alone, his back to it so he did not see the other Starfleet officers all frantically waving for him to follow them. Instead he focused on the doorway, waiting until the very moment that one of the Iconian warriors on the other side tore a hole in it and looked through.

"You are too late." he said, broadcasting his words on a frequency he knew the Iconians would be able to detect and at the same moment as he stepped back through the gateway he triggered the gravimetric warhead.

Watching the feed from the warriors trying to break into the gate room Shintar saw Max standing in front of the gate as the door was finally breached and he saw the Borg step backwards to reach the waiting Starfleet runabout.

"You are too late." Max's voice said as he words were relayed to the command centre and Shintar knew exactly what was about to happen.

Without saying a word to any of the other Iconians present Shintar engaged his own personal gateway system and vanished just as the gravimetric warhead went off.

Aboard the *Thames* the four members of the assault team hurried to the runabout's cockpit. Expecting to have returned to the ship while being pursued by the Iconians, all of the vessel's flight systems had been left active and Edwards was able to rapidly engage its thrusters.

"Raise shields." he ordered, "We need to see how effective our mission has been."

"Shields up captain. Powering phasers." Cole replied as Edwards flew the *Thames* around the asteroid so that they could see what was happening at the Iconian base on the other side.

"It's started." West said as they rounded the asteroid just in time to see the main central globe collapsing in on itself as the gravimetric warhead created an intense gravitational field at the core of it.

"Captain I am not picking up any signs of omega molecules." Max reported from the console at the rear of the cockpit, "The warhead was successful."

"I've got a shuttle pod closing from one six four mark seventeen," West reported, "and another at two four nine mark twenty one."

"The mining shuttles." Cole said, "We can deal with them easily."

"I think not." Edwards responded, "It will just slow us down and we've already achieved more than we hoped for when we left the *Nightfall*. Let's go home." and he turned the *Thames* away from the collapsing base and closing shuttle pods, setting a course that took them out of the asteroid field as quickly as possible at which point he engaged the runabout's warp drive.

"Ah Shintar," The Girl said as Shintar appeared, "you made it out alive I see."

"The facility was destroyed." Shintar said, "Starfleet—"

"Yes we know. Starfleet detonated a gravimetric device that destroyed not only the outpost you were responsible for but also the entire production run of omega molecules that we put so many resources into creating. Now come with me."

Shintar snarled.

"You can't give me orders." he hissed.

"Not for the time being perhaps." The Girl replied, "However, the order comes from the council. They want your report about how you allowed this to happen and I should warn you that they are not in a good mood right now."