

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

THE PEACEMAKER

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **THE PEACEMAKER**

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

An Iconian appears aboard the *USS Nightfall* claiming to be a representative of the true Iconian government bearing a message of peace. It then falls to the crew of the *Nightfall* this emissary to Earth and protect him from those who appear not to want him to get there...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
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7. Root of all Evil
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Stardate 67943.2. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 berthed at Starbase 12 near the Romulan Neutral Zone.

A mixed line of humans and Andorians stood waiting to leave the Akira-class *USS Nightfall* via one of the umbilical connections to Starbase 12 in the Gamma 400 system. At the front of the queue, standing just inside the hatch were a pair of Starfleet security guards and a tall man in the uniform of an officer of Earth's Military Assault Command Operations service. This was Captain Heart, commanding officer of the company of human ground troops stationed aboard the cruiser to assess the potential for carrying true ground combat troops aboard Starfleet vessels.

"Think she'll be here soon Gary?" the Andorian at the front of the queue asked and Heart looked at his opposite number from the Imperial guard company that made up the other half of the *Nightfall's* troop complement.

"She better had be Shry or I think we'll have a riot on our hands." Heart said, looking along the line and seeing how agitated some of the people in it were becoming.

"Hey captain, do I need to remind you who my dad is?" a young woman called out from close to the front of the line.

"No lieutenant, I know your father is the ship's captain but he'll back me on keeping you all here while we wait for - ah, here she is now." Heart replied before smiling when he saw Lieutenant Commander West, the *Nightfall's* chief operations officer hurrying down the corridor with a tricorder in her hands.

"I'm here, I'm here." she called out, "Sorry I'm late."

"At least you're here." Heart said as West reached him and opened up her tricorder.

"Now what am I looking for?" she asked.

"Our ammunition inventory came up short of one full magazine of six millimetre armour piercing rounds." Heart told her, "Only the ground troops had access to the armoury so it's most likely one of them who has it and we need to find it before-"

"Yes, I know." West interrupted, "Before someone fires off a round aboard the ship and puts a hole in the hull." and she scanned Captain Shry, "Surprise, surprise, no signs of explosives or residue. You may begin your night off." she said.

"Thank you commander." Shry replied, nodding and then he stepped through the hatch onto the starbase on the other side.

One by one the ground troops waiting to leave the ship stepped forwards and West scanned them with her tricorder, looking for either the explosive propellant used in the missing ammunition or the dense metal that made up the armour piercing projectiles themselves.

"Your father will be really mad if it turns out to be you Rebecca." West said when the daughter of Captain Edwards, the *Nightfall's* commanding officer stepped forwards to be scanned. Then when her scan revealed nothing she waved Rebecca past, "Okay you're clear." she added, waving Rebecca past.

More than a hundred of the *Nightfall's* complement of ground troops were leaving the ship to make use of the facilities of the starbase and each of them had to be scanned individually, however by the time the last of them had left the ship the missing ammunition had not been discovered.

"Well that's a relief." Heart said as West was closing her tricorder.

"What that the potentially hull penetrating ammunition is still missing?" West asked.

"No, that no-one has tried to smuggle it off the ship." Heart said, "I suppose I better go and start searching all the training areas now."

"Good luck with that. I'm done for the evening." West replied.

"Aren't you in command while everyone else is off the ship?" Heart asked, knowing that a large number of the *Nightfall's* senior officers had also gone to the starbase to make use of its facilities while the ship was docked there for resupply and maintenance.

"No, not tonight. I'm just on call in case of an emergency so I can't leave the ship." West answered and Heart frowned.

"So who is?" he said, unable to think of anyone else that might be in command instead and West smiled at him.

"Haven't you heard? The King is on the throne." she said and Heart snorted at the mention of Doctor King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer. It was unusual for members of Starfleet's medical division to become qualified to command a starship but Doctor King was one of the exceptions to this rule.

"Is he as particular about bridge operations as he is about the way he runs sickbay?" he said and West nodded.

"Don't you believe it." she answered

"Then hopefully tonight will be as dull as can be and you can relax. In the mean time I have bullets to find." Heart said and he started to walk away.

West was just about to head back to her quarters when a sudden thought occurred to her and she called out to Heart before he could disappear.

"Gary." she said and Heart turned around.

"Yes commander?" he asked and West hesitated, suddenly unsure of herself.

"Since we're both stuck aboard ship while everyone else is off having fun do you want to get together and try to find something fun we can do? Just the two of us?" she said suddenly.

"Whoa. I did not expect that." Heart said, surprised.

"Okay if you don't want to-

"No, I didn't say that. What did you have in mind?"

"Dinner. Maybe drinks after." West said and Heart nodded.

"I'll call you as soon as I'm free." he said.

"I'll be waiting." West responded and then she turned away and started to head for her quarters.

West checked her appearance in the mirror in her quarters. The dress she wore was form fitting and came down to her knees and she smiled, satisfied with how she looked. Then she picked up some lipstick and leant in closer to the mirror as she started to apply it.

"Do you really think that you have a chance of forming a relationship with Gary Heart?" the reflection in the mirror said suddenly, startling West and causing her hand to slip.

"That's none of your business. Go back to being an impotent voice without a body." West said, scowling.

West had become accustomed to the alien intelligence that resided deep within her mind trying to doubt herself while presenting itself as an ally she could turn to for help. In reality she knew that it was the consciousness of one of the ancient Iconian species who had once controlled one of their outposts and that now wanted nothing more than to gain control of her body for itself. The Controller had been able to gain physical control over West in the past, but only while she slept or was otherwise incapacitated and now that West had taken steps to make sure that during the hours she slept the intelligence would be unable to leave her quarters or access the ship's computer system she had limited its actions to taunting her whenever it could.

"And what are you planning for the end of this evening Jenna? Rushing out like a fairy tale princess who needs to be back home before midnight, or will you have him chain you to his bed for the night instead of locking yourself in your bathroom?" The Controller said.

"Now there's an idea." West said, smiling before all of a sudden an alarm went off.

"All hands intruder alert." the voice of Doctor King announced over the *Nightfall's* intercom system.

West quickly reached for her combadge, picking it up off the counter in front of her and tapping it.

"This is West, what's going on?" she asked.

"We've picked up an Iconian aboard." King answered and West looked back at the mirror, concerned that somehow The Controller had been detected. Fortunately King then added more information that set her mind more at ease, "The gateway detector just triggered on deck eight. It looks like they gated in to cargo hold four."

The gateway technology used by Iconian agents to travel enabled them to bypass most defences such as armoured hulls and deflector shields but it had been discovered to create a distinctive energy pattern that made detecting them easy in a monitored environment such as a starship. The Iconians knew that Starfleet and its allies had learned to be able to detect the formation of gateways so it was highly unusual for them to attempt such a thing and to West that spelled trouble.

"That's just two decks down from me. I'm on my way there now." West said before tapping the combadge again to turn it off. With no time to change she simply affixed the device to her dress before taking her phaser from the drawer where she kept it. It was known that stun settings had no effect on the reanimated corpses or synthetic bodies that the Iconians used to give their consciousnesses a physical form so as she hurried from her quarters she altered her phaser's setting to a lethal one.

Exiting her quarters, West made her way to the nearest turbolift and travelled down the two decks to where the cargo hold the gateway had formed in was located and as she ran up to the large doors leading to it she saw a pair of the *Nightfall's* security staff rushing towards her from the opposite direction. Both men were enlisted crewmen and the fact that they were carrying phaser rifles rather than just hand phasers told West that they had come directly from the security section instead of having been patrolling the largely empty corridors of the starship.

West and the security guards came to a halt outside the hold and the guards smiled at one another before turning back towards West.

"Taken by surprise by the alarm were you commander?" one said.

"Oh, the dress. I was getting ready to go out." West replied, "Now what do you think of this door? I'd say it

looks sealed."

"The dress, yes." the guard said and he looked at the door as well. Closed, the control panel beside the door indicated that it had been locked to limit access while the *Nightfall* was in spacedock. This would prevent loading crews from the starbase from depositing cargoes in holds without it being checked and cleared by a member of the ship's crew. That the door was still locked suggested that it had not been opened since the *Nightfall* arrived at Starbase 12 and that whoever had created the gateway was still inside it.

Before the guard could give his opinion of the door being locked there was the sound of more footfalls heading towards the hold, these accompanied by the clanking sound of the body armour worn by the soldiers now approaching. Looking towards the source of this sound West saw Captain Heart and a team of four MACOs running along the corridor in full combat gear with armour and carrying rifles. The weapons the soldiers carried differed significantly from those carried by the *Nightfall's* security guards. Instead of being particle beam weapons they were ballistic assault rifles intended primarily to be used against Borg drones who could not adapt to such attacks. The effectiveness of these weapons against Iconians was limited compared to that of phasers, but to compensate for the limitations of the firearms there were phaser units mounted beneath the barrels of the assault rifles that gave the soldiers a choice of weapon to use.

"The alarm took you by surprise?" Heart asked and West frowned.

"Why does everyone say that?" she responded and the security guard suppressed laughter.

"Take a look at your face." Heart said, taking a polished metal signalling mirror from his webbing and handing it to West. Looking into the reflective surface of this West gasped as she remembered how the sudden manifestation of The Controller had caused her hand to slip while applying her lipstick and now she had a line of it stretching across her cheek.

"Damn it!" she hissed, wiping the side of her face before returning the mirror to Heart, "Okay now how about we deal with this Iconian?"

"After you commander." Heart replied, waving his hand towards the door to the cargo bay.

"Right. The door's still locked so whoever or whatever came aboard is still in there." West said.

"What if they used the cargo transporter to beam out?" one of the MACOs asked but West shook her head,

"They're shut down while in spacedock. Even if they could overcome the lockout any use of the transporter would show up on the system status monitors on the bridge." she explained.

"A hold still gives them plenty of places to hide." Heart pointed out.

"Then we split up into pairs. We can cover more ground more quickly that way. Just call out when you find whoever's in there." West said and she reached down to release the lock on the door.

As soon as West input her access code the doors slid apart to reveal the shelves of supplies inside the cargo hold. Just as Heart had said the multiple rows of shelves along with the free standing cargo containers in the hold made for a large room that contained plenty of places for someone who did not want to be found to hide themselves in. However, rather unexpectedly the intruder was simply sat on a cargo container in full view of the search party as soon as the doors opened.

Most of the Iconians encountered so far by the crew of the *USS Nightfall* had possessed one of two physical forms, either they had been inhabiting reanimated corpses enhanced with a form of synthetic flesh that could be adapted to carry out any function within the body or else they had inhabited large, featureless humanoid bodies made entirely of this synthetic flesh. These two types of Iconian had been nicknamed zombies and golems respectively, although it was known that the Iconians themselves referred to the latter as fleshforms. What the crew of the *Nightfall* were now looking at though appeared to be some form of hybrid of the two commonly encountered types of Iconian. The size and shape of the Iconian were human in appearance, with all of the details that would be expected on a human body such as facial features and even hair. The Iconian also wore clothing, even if this was a nondescript suit that looked as if it could have been replicated anywhere in the Federation. However, every part of the Iconian from his hair and skin to the clothing he wore was the same milky white colour of fleshforms, suggesting that he was made entirely from their synthetic flesh.

"Freeze!" Heart yelled as he and the others around him all pointed their weapons at the Iconian.

"Hello." the Iconian said, raising his hands and smiling at the crew members in front of him, "Were you looking for me?"



"What's the status of the prisoner?" King asked when West entered the bridge to report to him in person.

"He came along quietly." she replied.

"No resistance or attempt to escape?" King said and West shook her head.

"None at all. If he can create gateways like the other Iconians we've encountered can then he should have been able to just vanish into thin air just like that." she said and she snapped her fingers.

"Where is he now?"

"The brig. Gary, err, Captain Heart escorted him down there and Max is going to set up a jamming field to prevent gateway formation." West said.

"How safe is that?" King said, well aware that the means of preventing the formation of a gateway involved the generation of radiation that was harmful after prolonged exposure. Had it not been then every starship and starbase in the Federation would have been permanently bathed in that radiation to keep them safe but as it was the only permanent defence against Iconian infiltration was the use of sensors to detect the arrival of their agents.

"Max has set up localised fields before but we're going to need to change the security guards in the brig regularly to prevent them from getting radiation poisoning. I think Max wants your input on that." West told him.

"Very well." King said, "I've informed spacedock that we have a prisoner but I've not got in contact with any of our crew yet. You might want to take care of that."

"Yes sir, I'll get right on it." West replied as King headed for the same turbolift she had just exited.

As West had said the Iconian prisoner was now sat in one of the cells in the *Nightfall's* brig. As he had been when he had been discovered in the cargo hold he was calm and making no aggressive moves while Lieutenant Maximillian, the former Borg drone who now held the position of chief engineer aboard the *USS Nightfall* worked inside the cell to install the emitters needed to generate the energy field that would block the formation of a gateway within their area of effect. While Max was working in the cell the forcefield across the entrance was down and a group of four security guards armed with phaser rifles stood outside the cell, all taking aim at the prisoner. Significantly these guards were all clad in standard issue Starfleet spacesuits, as was the security officer sat at the control console monitoring all of the cells.

"Expecting a loss in pressure?" King said to Heart who was stood beside this officer but still wore the same combat fatigues and body armour he had when he had arrived at the cargo hold, "In which case where's your suit?"

"I just thought that spacesuits would lessen the effect of the dampening field Max is setting up." Heart replied.

"Good idea." King said as he opened the medical tricorder he had stopped off at sickbay for on his way from the bridge and he began to scan the Iconian prisoner.

"So what is he?" Heart asked, "I mean if he wasn't totally white I'd have pegged him for an ordinary zombie but we've never seen a golem like that before. Could he be some sort of albino?"

"No, he's not an albino." King answered, "Look at his eyes, they're solid white as well. Albinism causes the eyes to appear red because of the blood inside them becoming visible and we've not encountered any Iconians who had totally replaced the blood of their host body yet. What I think we have here is something much closer to our very own Emma."

Emma had started out as the *Nightfall's* emergency medical hologram until Max and T'Lan, the *Nightfall's* science officer had started experimenting with duplicating the Iconians' synthetic flesh and created her a physical body she could operate via a subspace link from the computer her program was run on. Even just occasional use of this body had caused the EMH's program to develop beyond its intended parameters to the point where Emma had become self aware and was now officially part of the ship's crew instead of a piece of equipment.

"Fake flesh?" Heart said.

"Yes and very carefully put together, not like the crude constructions used in what they call fleshforms." King replied.

"But why go to the effort when they could just grab another corpse and reanimate that? Surely that would be easier." Heart said just as Max was exiting the cell. As soon as the Borg stepped across the threshold of the cell's forcefield there was a flash and the energy barrier activated.

"The dampening field is now active doctor. I estimate that the forcefield will reduce the radiation levels on this side by twenty two point four percent." he said.

"I figured a few more percentage points for the spacesuits." Heart added.

"Yes you're probably right. When Lieutenant Commander Cole gets back I'm going to recommend that he changes the guards every four hours. The forcefield and spacesuits should provide protection for twice that long and even then it'll take a few hours for the level of exposure to become dangerous but it's best to be on the safe side." King said.

"Indeed it is." the Iconian prisoner said, "Now might I suggest that you contact your captain, I believe his name is David Edwards and bring him here. It is rather urgent that I speak with him."

"Max take a look at these scans." King said, holding out his tricorder so that Max could see it, "Would you say that this shows the presence of the Iconian gateway generator?"

Max checked the data that King's scan had recorded, comparing them to previous examinations of an intact Iconian agent's body.

"Yes doctor." he said, "From our experience I would say that this individual is capable of forming a gateway just like any other Iconian host or fleshform."

"Of course I am. How do you think I got here?" the Iconian asked.

"So why didn't he just gate out when he could?" Heart said.

"Because I need to speak to your captain." the Iconian added.

"Does Captain Edwards know that the prisoner is here?" Max asked.

"I left West on the bridge with instructions to start recalling crew from the starbase. With any luck the captain will already be on his way back to the ship." King answered.

"So you don't know where the captain or Commander Carr are either?" West said, speaking to Lieutenant Commander Cole, who performed the duties of second officer and tactical officer aboard the *Nightfall*.

"Sorry West. T'Lan and I haven't seen either of them since coming off shift. T'Lan and I are on the surface. We'll beam back up to the spacedock immediately though. We can be with you in about ten or fifteen minutes." he replied.

"Thanks commander. I'll see you then." West said before shutting off the channel.

"Lieutenant commander I have Lieutenant Mackey on the intercom. He's asking if you need support while you've been left in command of the ship." the ensign currently sat at the ops console West usually occupied said and West could not stop herself from scowling. Ever since she had come aboard the *Nightfall* Lieutenant Mackey, the ship's counsellor had insisted on see her regularly to assess the psychological after effects of having been a prisoner of the Cardassians for many years even though for most of the time she had been in suspended animation. Even following her promotion to lieutenant commander and gaining the qualification needed to command a starship Lieutenant Mackey had still refused to sign off on her emotional stability and she was forced to endure two sessions a week with a counsellor who was held in universal disdain by the rest of the *Nightfall's* crew. Now that she was actually having take command of the ship he seemed to think she was incapable of doing the job she was fully qualified to do, even though the *Nightfall* remained in spacedock.

"You can tell that little-" West began before deciding that what she had been about to say would most likely be used by the counsellor to justify keeping her as a regular patient for even longer, "Tell the counsellor that I have the situation in hand and his presence on the bridge is not required. If he is looking for something to do then perhaps suggest that he checks with Doctor King. He is the lieutenant's superior after all."

West suddenly had second thoughts about what she had said. Like her Doctor King resented the contact he was forced to have with Lieutenant Mackey greatly and he was not likely to welcome the counsellor approaching him in search of a way of getting involved. However, facing an angry Doctor King was preferable to West over having to spend any time in the same room as Lieutenant Mackey and so she let the ensign relay her message while she continued to try and locate the ship's captain and first officer.

"*Nightfall* to Captain Edwards, do you read me?" she said, attempting to contact the captain's combadge and when there was no reply she switched to trying to contact Commander Grace Carr, the *Nightfall's* first officer instead, "*Nightfall* to Commander Carr."

"Carr here. Is something wrong?" she responded.

"Commander we've caught an intruder aboard the *Nightfall*." West told her and Carr sighed.

"So call spacedock security and hand them over." Carr said.

"It's an Iconian." West said.

"An Iconian?" Carr exclaimed.

"Yes. He gated in and triggered off the alarms. Then we found him just sat in a cargo hold waiting for us."

"Is anyone hurt?"

"No. He didn't put up a fight, he just surrendered. Max has rigged up a dampening field in one of the cells and we've got him in in the brig right now. He's asking to speak to Captain Edwards but-" West said before she noticed the display built into the arm of the captain's chair showing the name of the officer she was speaking to read 'CPT EDWARDS', indicating that Carr was using the captain's combadge, "But you answered." she added.

"What? Oh right." Carr said, "The captain asked me to look after his combadge while we were at dinner. I'll let him know he's wanted and we'll be with you shortly. Carr out." and then she turned off the combadge. "At dinner." West said to herself, smiling, "Right."

Captain Edwards sat in his ready room looking at the camera feed from the brig where the Iconian prisoner was being held. Carr, Cole and T'Lan watched along with him while West, King and Max stood back and waited.

"His appearance is unconventional." T'Lan said, "To make him appear so human and yet fail to make any effort to disguise the material used in the construction of his body is not logical. I would like to examine him." "I wouldn't advise that." King said, "In your condition even limited exposure to the radiation being emitted by the dampening field could be dangerous."

"Sorry T'Lan." Cole said, taking his wife's hand.

"There is no need to apologise. The safety of our child must take priority over my own curiosity." T'Lan replied and she placed a hand on her stomach where her pregnancy was just beginning to show.

"The prisoner has been asking to speak with you captain." Max said.

"I don't like it. It could be a trap. The Iconians have targeted you before captain." Cole pointed out and Edwards nodded.

"Nevertheless I can't help but wonder what he has to say." Edwards said and he looked at Max, "Max do you think that the cell is secure?"

"The dampening field prevents the prisoner from forming a gateway and the forcefield will keep him confined." Max responded.

"In that case I see no reason not to go down there and see what he wants." Edwards said. Then he looked at King and added, "Will I need to suit up?"

"No captain. The suits are just a precaution for the security guards. As long as you're out of there within about an hour you should be fine." King told him.

"And if it is a trap?" Carr said.

"Then you get promoted to captain." Edwards replied and Carr smiled.

"First thing I'm doing is redecorating this office." she said.

As the *Nightfall's* chief of security Cole accompanied Edwards to the brig to speak with the prisoner and both officers had phasers holstered at their waists as the doors to the brig slid open.

"He giving you any trouble?" Cole asked, looking at the officer sat behind the nearby control console.

"No sir, he just sits there looking at us." the officer responded, "It's kind of creepy though. Most prisoners do their best to avoid eye contact. With him it's like he's trying to keep it."

"Hopefully that's a good sign. He may want to talk." Cole said, looking at Edwards and the two men walked across the room to stand in front of the forcefield preventing the Iconian from leaving his cell.

"My name is-" Edwards began as the Iconian prisoner got to his feet and looked directly at him.

"You are Captain David Edwards and you are the commanding officer of the *USS Nightfall*." the Iconian interrupted.

"You know of me?" Edwards asked.

"I know enough. I was well briefed before being sent here, although the rank markings on your uniform clearly show that you are the captain." the Iconian replied.

"What about you? Do you have a name?" Cole said.

"Of course I do. Though this body is ill suited to pronouncing it properly. While I am in this form I suggest that you call me Adam." the Iconian answered.

"Very well Adam, what is your mission here?" Edwards said and the Iconian now calling himself Adam smiling.

"I am here to save you Captain Edwards. I am here to save you all." he said.

"Save us from what exactly?" Edwards asked.

"Oh come now captain, the precautions you have taken to keep me here in this cell prove that you know I am an Iconian and I know that your ship has been instrumental in defeating the attempts by some of my people to destabilise the galaxy prior to their return. But no matter how hard you try you will always be at a disadvantage. Two thousand centuries of exile may have limited our ability to develop but I assure you that the technology of my people is far beyond anything you have at your disposal. Right now only your numbers prevent an all out invasion and that is an advantage that will be useless if the others of my kind wanting to invade are able to prevent you from organising your defence against it." Adam explained.

"I take it that you oppose this invasion then?" Edwards said.

"That is correct captain. Perhaps it would be better if I gave you a bit of a history lesson. Then you might be able to understand why I have come here." Adam said.

"Do go on." Edwards told him.

"Very well. It all starts roughly two hundred thousand years ago when my home world of Iconia was surrounded by a fleet made up of thousands of starships from races that had grown to fear our capabilities. Iconia was well defended of course, we had ships that could destroy dozens of our enemies' warships in one go and powerful orbital and ground defences as well but despite having an empire that was spread across the galaxy we were never a very numerous people and through sheer weight of numbers our enemies were able to break through our defences. That is when the great schism in our people happened. Some made use of our gateways to flee to other worlds, abandoning much of our technology so that they would not attract the attention of those who feared us for it but there were also those among us who sought to make use of an alternative escape route. For a long time our scientists had been researching how a living consciousness might be uploaded into a computer system and there had been a great deal of success in this. Of course once stored in this way the consciousness could be downloaded again into an artificial body whenever the need arose and so some of us sought to escape Iconia in a manner that would allow us to wait out however long it took for our enemies to vanish before returning to our home world and rebuilding it's former glory. We placed ourselves aboard a great ark and launched it through a gateway, travelling to the outer reaches of the galaxy to wait and watch for when the right time to return arose but we were not the only ones who chose to make use of this technology to escape. A large number of Iconians preferred to stand and fight to the last, basing themselves aboard one of our orbiting space fortresses together with the last of our fleet. It was a hopeless fight of course and eventually even these fanatics were forced to see that their cause was a lost one. Unwilling to give up their technology they opted for a similar strategy to my own group, uploading themselves into the computer system of their fortress before making use of one of the last remaining gateways to escape. However, rather than travelling away from our home world like we did they modified the gateway to project the fortress into a subspace domain where they would be safe from attack. There they waited, planning their return to retake Iconia and build a new Iconian Empire that will avoid the fate of the last one by enslaving or destroying all of the civilisations that could threaten it. On the other hand my own people would want to coexist with our neighbours in peace, avoiding a repeat of the past by being more open and if needed sharing enough of our science that they would have no need to fear us." Adam said.

"So you're here to give us the technology to beat this other Iconian faction?" Edwards replied.

"No, it's not quite that simple captain. You see before we can provide you with the means to defeat the Iconians who want to destroy you my people need to be certain that this technology would not then be turned against us. We need certain guarantees that you cannot give." Adam said.

"So why come here if we can't give you what you need?" Cole asked.

"Because if I simply appeared in your Starfleet headquarters or the office of your President then I would probably be shot on the spot. On the other hand by arriving here on the edges of Federation territory then I have at least had the chance to explain myself first and you can now decide whether or not to allow me to meet with the leaders of the Federation." Adam answered.

"And what if we just say 'no' and decide to cut you open to see how much technology we can get from you?" Edwards said.

"Then you will learn nothing that we do not know you already know but my people will know that you cannot be trusted and we will leave you to your fates." Adam told him.

"You aren't really giving us much to trust you on." Edwards said.

"Really captain? I am offering far more than you would offer me were our situations reversed. Your Prime Directive does forbid the transfer of advanced technology to primitive civilisations does it not?" Adam pointed out and Edwards nodded.

"It does." he said, "Okay then, I'll take your offer to my superiors. They can decide how we'll proceed."

3.

"Thoughts?" Edwards asked when he had all of his senior officers gathered in the *Nightfall's* briefing room so that they could watch a recording of the conversation he had just had with Adam. In addition to the officers who had been in his ready room he had also brought in Max, both of the ground troop company commanders as well as the ship's chief helmsman Lieutenant Commander Bradley Hamilton, the leader of the ship's attached fighter squadron Lieutenant Commander William White and Sublieutenant Noyal, a Romulan advisor permanently assigned to the ship.

"He's lying." Noyal said before anyone else could speak, "Kill him."

"Romulan paranoia is insufficient reason to justify an illegal execution." T'Lan commented.

"And Vulcan logic won't stop you from being taken advantage of cousin." Noyal responded.

"We are not related. I shall ask you again to stop calling me your cousin." T'Lan said.

"if we could stay on topic." Carr said, knowing that Noyal would never stop calling T'Lan 'cousin' in her ongoing attempt to solicit an emotional response from the Vulcan. Then she looked at Edwards and added, "I was watching the feed from the brig and he didn't seem to give us much to go on."

"Apart from a summary of what happened to the Iconians." King added.

"He's lying." West said without thinking, echoing Noyal's warning.

"Care to explain your opinion commander?" Edwards asked and West hesitated. Her response had been a result of another of the occasional flashes she had of The Controller's knowledge. The problem was that not only could she not explain how she had obtained the knowledge that Adam was not being completely truthful without revealing the existence of the Controller, she also did not know exactly what it was that he was hiding or why.

"Just an instinct." she said.

"Going to call her paranoid as well cousin?" Noyal commented.

"Captain, the prisoner is secure and we have no way of proving one way or the other whether or not he is being truthful." T'Lan said, "If he is then he represents a massive step forwards in our ongoing conflict with the more militaristic Iconian faction we have encountered up until now. On the other hand if he is lying then Starfleet command will be better suited to uncovering his lies and determining how he should be dealt with." "T'Lan is right captain. Negotiating with a representative of a foreign government like this is way above our pay grade." Cole added.

"What a surprise. You agree with your wife." Noyal said.

"I agree with T'Lan as well captain." Carr added, "This is too big for us." and Edwards nodded.

"Yes that was my thinking as well. I just wanted to get people's opinion before I took this to Starfleet just in case anyone had any thoughts that I'd missed. For now I'm going to assume that Starfleet Command will agree with us as well and order us to take this Adam back to Earth. We know that there's an Iconian agent aboard the ship so if he is on the level then we need to assume that they'll try and do something to stop him from getting there. I want the guard around him doubled and the rest of the ship to remain on yellow alert around the clock."

"For more than seventy days captain?" Hamilton asked, aware of how long it would take the *Nightfall* to reach Earth at the ship's maximum cruising speed of approximately warp seven.

"Max what can you do to keep us at high warp for a longer period of time than we can normally manage?"

Edwards asked, "Even keeping us at warp nine would cut our travel time in half."

"I do not think that there is anything I can do to keep us at warp nine for more than a day or two captain. After that we would have to slow down considerably to avoid damage to the engines." Max replied.

"What if we didn't mind burning out the engines as long as we make it to Earth?" Hamilton asked.

"A bit drastic don't you think lieutenant commander?" King said.

"Not if it helps us put a stop to what the Iconians are doing once and for all." Shry replied.

"It may be possible to keep us at warp eight for the whole journey captain." Max said, "However, that will require considerable effort from the engineering department. We will need to be able to run on just three of our four warp cores at any time while the fourth is serviced. This will place significant stress on all four and we will need to conduct a full overhaul on them all after we reach Earth. The increased power output will also radiate a much stronger warp field that will be easier to detect and may violate the regulations intended to prevent damage to subspace."

"None of the sectors we must pass through to reach Earth are known to be particularly prone to subspace damage captain. Any that we cause will naturally heal itself over time." T'Lan added.

"Warp eight means my fighters can keep up if we need to launch." White pointed out, "Not that I'd like to chance launching at warp speed and I certainly don't want to try making a career landing at it."

"It could still matter. Dropping out of warp briefly to launch fighters would be worth it if we come under

attack." Edwards said, "Okay Max make whatever preparations you need to. I want to be ready to go the moment Starfleet Command gives us the go ahead. T'Lan I want you be prepared to transfer as many of your staff to engineering as you can afford to lose. Commander Cole, Captain Heart and Captain Shry, I want all of your personnel issued weapons when we depart that they are to keep with them at all times until we reach Earth. If we're boarded then they may not have the chance to get to an armoury. In fact the same goes for all Starfleet personnel. I want the entire crew issued with phasers as a precaution."

"Does that include medical staff captain?" King asked and Edwards nodded.

"Yes doctor. I know I can't force anyone to fire a phaser but I want to ensure that no-one is short of one if they need it." he said before turning to look at lieutenant Commander White, "Snowman I want four of your squadron ready to launch within two minutes at any time. That will give us chance to drop out of warp to deploy your fighters." Edwards adding using White's call sign to address him.

"That's doable." White replied, nodding his head, "I'll have to keep rotating the pilots if they're going to be sat in cockpits for hours on end but an overall shift length of six hours shouldn't prove too tiresome."

"Good." Edwards said, "Now unless anyone has anything else they want to add then I'm going to tell Starfleet Command what our guest has had to say and see what their response is."

"Have you seen this?" the man known as Jones asked, holding out a PADD when he and a woman called Brown entered the room currently being used by his superior, Schmidt.

"You mean the signal from Captain Edwards about his prisoner? Yes I have." Schmidt replied.

"So what do you intend to do about it admiral?" Brown asked.

"We need to get our hands on that prisoner." Jones added.

"Jones is right." Brown said, "To be able to assess a live Iconian is too good an opportunity to pass up."

"You needn't worry." Schmidt told them, "I have already spoken with the Chief of Starfleet Operations and he agrees with us, the *USS Nightfall* will be ordered to bring the Iconian to Earth where he will be interrogated. Unfortunately our section will not be able to conduct any private examinations of him, however if Captain Edwards' report is correct then this is intended only to be an initial meeting to discuss further contact. With any luck that will provide us with more opportunity to obtain more than they intend to share with us of their own accord."

"Will I at least be able to observe him in person when he gets here?" Brown asked.

"I think that can be arranged. Though not while any of the *Nightfall's* crew are present. They know both your faces and having them recognise either of you would lead to questions our section does not want to have to answer."

In a featureless room the Iconian inhabiting a Reman body known as Lord Shintar met with another of his people who appeared as a human girl.

"The council summoned you as well?" Shintar asked.

"Of course." The Girl replied, "Your strategy depends on my intelligence network after all. I hope for your sake that-

"I am not interested in your concern for my well being. Let us see what the council has to say." Shintar interrupted and then both Iconians abandoned their physical bodies to enter the virtual realm where most of their kind resided.

"Lord Shintar," the voice of one of the Iconian council began, "are your forces ready?"

"Almost. Their ships are gathering but they still await the details of time and place for their attack." Shintar answered.

"And when will this information become available?" another of the council asked.

"Probably not until the *Nightfall* departs from Starbase twelve for Earth." The Girl responded, "Then our agents will be able to observe its heading and we can extrapolate the course that Captain Edwards intends to take."

"If your spies were more efficient then perhaps I would not be forced to operate at such short notice." Shintar added and The Girl snorted.

"Short notice? Shintar it will take weeks for the *Nightfall* to reach Earth using their warp drive. That should be plenty of time for your forces to get into position." The Girl replied sternly.

"It better had be." another of the council said, "The *USS Nightfall* carries aboard it the only means by which the Federation could put up any resistance to us. That must be destroyed and the Federation brought to its knees. They are the only government that can unify the others against us and that must be prevented."

"It shall be. I swear it." Shintar said.

"It better had be Shintar." the first council member said, "Your previous failure cost us greatly. Fail us now and you will feel our wrath."

With that both Shintar and The Girl were sent back out of the virtual world and into the bodies their consciousnesses inhabited.

"Well Shintar," The Girl said, "it looks like your future could be in my hands." and Shintar snarled.

"Each of you are to keep your issued hand phasers with you at all times until we reach Earth." Cole said, watching as each security guard in the line was handed a phaser rifle from the *Nightfall's* armoury, "Rifles will be issued to every patrol and duty station. In addition to this you will be joined by MACOs and Imperial Guard who will also be issued with weapons. Anyone found in an area of the ship where they should not be is to be detained if they cannot explain their presence there. Remember that stun setting have no effect on Iconians whether they're zombies or golems so you'll have to keep phasers set on levels four and above. Remember this when you're dealing with any security incidents that aren't to do with Iconian incursion, I'd rather not have any fatalities because someone forgot their weapon was set to kill when they fired it."

Cole stopped speaking when a familiar young woman reached the front of the queue to be issued with a weapon and smiled at him. Unlike any of the other security staff her uniform showed no rank insignia on its collar, whether commissioned or enlisted. This was Nikki Carr, one of the few civilians aboard the *USS Nightfall* and the daughter of the ship's first officer who after failing to gain admission to a university had instead taken up an internship with Starfleet that involved serving a short period with each department aboard the ship. Right now she was most of the way through her service with the security department.

"I'll need a hand phaser too." she said.

"I don't think so Nikki." Cole replied.

"Why not?" Nikki asked and Cole sighed.

"Because you're just an intern." he reminded her, "You aren't qualified to be issued a phaser."

"I'm doing the course." Nikki said, "I've only a few sessions left to go."

"Maybe but you're still not a full member of Starfleet which means you won't be sitting the final exam." Cole said, "Now get back to your station before the ship gets into warp."

"I don't get why we're using warp drive anyway." Nikki said, "What about all that stuff you and the captain brought back from your secret mission. I thought that was supposed to let us open a gateway."

"In theory yes it can." Cole replied, "But Max still doesn't know how to control the formation of a gateway properly. We could find ourselves thrown halfway across the galaxy with no way of getting home. Have you ever heard of a ship called the *USS Voyager*?"

"No but-" Nikki began before Cole continued.

"Besides which we can't form a gateway with the prisoner aboard. The dampening field set up to prevent him from escaping also prevents us creating a gateway that the ship can pass through. Now get going. You're supposed to be on duty at the main security desk." he said.

"Yes sir." Nikki responded, turning around and walking out of the armoury. Returning to the main security desk she sat down beside the officer on duty with her, a junior grade lieutenant who smiled at her, "Anything happen while I was gone?" Nikki asked and then before the lieutenant could reply she added, "Thought not."

"Approaching the outer system now captain." Hamilton announced.

"Sensors show no obstructions. We can go to warp any time you want." West added.

Edwards took another quick look around the bridge before doing anything else. As usual all of the control stations were manned but now every officer present had a phaser at their waist and in addition to the usual bridge crew there were four guards present, two of Cole's security staff armed with phaser rifles and a pair of Andorian Imperial Guard wearing body armour and carrying their ballistic assault rifles. To limit the damage that firing projectile weapons aboard the ship could cause all of the ground troops had been issued with frangible ammunition designed to fragment on impact with a hard target instead of the duranium tipped armour piercing ammunition intended to be used against armoured targets such as Borg drones.

"Bridge to engineering," Edwards said into the intercom, "what is the status of our warp drive?"

"Ready to engage captain." Max responded, "Cores two through four are operating at one hundred percent. We should be able to make warp nine point four but I recommend keeping our speed to warp eight point two or less."

"Understood. Thank you lieutenant." Edwards replied as he turned towards Hamilton, "Commander Hamilton is our course to Earth set?" he asked.

"Yes captain. Ready to engage on heading one-four-four mark thirteen." Hamilton replied.

"Tactical?" Carr added.

"No threatening vessels detected." Cole said, "Holding at yellow alert. Shields ready, phasers are charged and quantum torpedoes are loading in all launchers."

"Then I think we're ready to go." Edwards said, "Helm, engage at warp eight and maintain course and speed until ordered."

"Aye captain, flooring it." Hamilton responded, smiling as he twisted the manual controls he used to fly the *Nightfall* in place of the more traditional console and the cruiser leapt forwards, rapidly accelerating from impulse speed to more than a thousand times the speed of light.

4.

The Breen warship was one of several that had made their way through Federation territory to take up a position between the Romulan Neutral Zone and Earth, waiting for the *USS Nightfall* to arrive. This squadron had been spread out over several light years just in case the *Nightfall* was able to leave Starbase 12 without being observed by spies working for the Iconians to increase the likelihood that at least one of the warships would detect it on its way to Earth.

"Staying aboard a Breen warship Shintar?" The Girl said as she materialised out of thin air inside the room that Shintar was using as his quarters aboard the warship, "Aren't you worried that the Breen will try and kill you?"

"The Breen hate the Romulans almost as much as the Remans do." Shintar answered, "To them we share a common enemy. It has made it easy for the captain to explain my presence aboard his ship."

"Then the captain is one of us?" The Girl asked.

"He is. He has served me loyally in both Romulan and Reman guises before taking on the role of a Breen officer. I take it that you have brought me the information about the *USS Nightfall*?"

"I have." The Girl said, "The ship left-"

"Perhaps I should bring Captain Gan in here." Shintar said and he reached out for the intercom located close to his chair. Moments after activating it there was burst of electronic sound that was the processed Breen speech, "Captain may I see you in my quarters?" Shintar asked and there was another burst of sound, "He'll be right with us." Shintar told The Girl.

Shortly after the doors to Shintar's quarters aboard the Breen vessel slid open and an armoured Breen entered the room. Like all Breen he wore a suit that covered his entire body, supposedly to protect him from the different environmental conditions that the species required in comparison to other humanoid species in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. This was despite the environment aboard their ships being suitable for other species and rumours from the Cardassian Union that their home world in fact had a temperate climate.

The Iconian masquerading as a Breen stopped just inside Shintar's quarters and after the doors slid shut behind him he looked at The Girl and produced another burst of sound.

"She is here with news of our target captain." Shintar replied and both he and Captain Gan turned back towards The Girl, "Go on, tell us." Shintar added.

"The *USS Nightfall* left the Federation's Starbase twelve along the Romulan Neutral Zone four days ago." The Girl said.

"And you're only coming to us with this now?" Shintar commented after Gan had produced another burst of sound.

"The ship's course was uncertain at first. My agents needed to monitor it to determine exactly what path they were likely to follow." The Girl said and she held up an isolinear chip, "Where can I connect this?" she asked and when Gan spoke and pointed out a suitable socket she nodded, "Thank you." she said before plugging the isolinear chip into the socket. This immediately brought up a star chart on a nearby display on which the positions of Starbase 12, Earth and the Breen warships. In addition to this there was a line extending out from the location of Starbase 12 towards Earth that became broken after a short portion of the distance, "You can see here the latest position we have for the *Nightfall*'s location." The Girl said, pointing to where the line went from solid to broken and Gan produced another burst of sound.

"I agree." Shintar said, "If they travelled that far in just four days then they must be exceeding their normal maximum cruising speed."

"They are. The *Nightfall* is holding at warp eight." The Girl said, "That will bring them to your location twice as fast as we expected, in six days time instead of twelve. Can you have your ships ready by then?" and Gan responded with more random seeming sound. Unable to understand this The Girl looked at Shintar instead.

"The captain says that he can get all of his ships in position to attack before the *Nightfall* arrives." Shintar said as Gan made more sound, "He will force the ship out of warp and his squadron will then attack."

"And they know what is required of them when they board the *Nightfall*?" The Girl asked.

"I have told Captain Gan of the importance of this mission, yes." Shintar answered, "I am sure that he has in turn told his crew all that they need to know and nothing more. Too much knowledge, after all, could be a dangerous thing."

"Quite." The Girl said, "Six days Shintar, you have that long to prepare." and then she took a step forwards and vanished into thin air.

With The Girl gone Shintar got out of his chair and walked up to the display showing the progress of the *Nightfall* in comparison to the position of the Breen ships.

"Have your ships prepare for battle," he told Gan, "and begin preparing your boarding parties. Make sure

they have all studied the technical details of the *USS Nightfall*. We will have only one attempt at this." Gan then produced more sound before turning around and departing from Shintar's quarters, leaving the other Iconian to study the star chart that The Girl had left them with.

"Captain I am picking up warp signatures in our path." T'Lan reported.

"More than one? How many?" Carr asked.

"Three in total. All at an oblique heading that will bring them close to our path." T'Lan reported.

"Can you identify them?" Edwards said.

"I'm not picking up any transponders." West said.

"The warp signatures appear to be Breen." T'Lan said.

"They're a long way from home." Carr commented.

"Yes and Breen straying outside their territory is rarely good." Edwards replied.

"Captain I've not had any reports of Breen raiders in this sector." Cole said, "In fact I think the last time they were seen this deep into Federation space was during the war."

"When they attacked Earth directly." Carr added.

"Commander West, what are the closest Starfleet vessels to our location?" Edwards said and West checked her console.

"I have the *USS Citadel* nine light years away and the *USS T'Pran* fourteen light years away." she said.

"Neither of those ships will be able to reach us before we encounter the Breen captain." T'Lan added.

"Any idea what sort of ships we're talking about here?" Carr said.

"Comparing the strength of the warp signatures against their velocity indicates that the three vessels are destroyers commander." T'Lan said.

"That's something at least. I wouldn't want to be facing three cruisers even with our fighters for support."

Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander West please try hailing the Breen. I want to know what they're doing in Federation territory."

"Yes captain, opening hailing frequencies." West responded as she activated the *Nightfall's* communications,

"This is the Federation starship *Nightfall* calling unidentified Breen vessels. You have entered Federation territory and are in violation of the Treaty of Bajor." she said. Then when there was no response she looked at Captain Edwards and added, "Captain they aren't-" but then she was interrupted by a sudden squealing sound coming from the communication system, "Captain all subspace frequencies are being jammed!" West exclaimed.

"Those Breen ships are too far away to be jamming us." Hamilton pointed out.

"Captain I am picking up a fourth Breen warp signature to stern." T'Lan announced, "Closing at warp eight point five."

"Never turn your back on a Breen." Nayal said.

"Shields up." Carr ordered.

"Take us to red alert." Edwards added and sirens began to sound moments before the Breen vessel behind the *Nightfall* opened fire.

The energy pulse fired by the Breen destroyer was designed to disable the power grid of a starship and when first introduced during the Dominion War it had proved devastating against Federation and Romulan vessels. The capture of an example had enabled the Federation to develop countermeasures against the weapon but even though it was no longer the devastating weapon it had been it still had its uses and when the blast hit the *Nightfall* the bridge crew were all thrown against their safety harnesses as the cruiser's warp field collapsed and it dropped to sublight speed while the Breen destroyer that had fired the energy blast at them sped on past at more than a thousand times the speed of light.

"Damage report." Edwards said.

"All systems operational captain." West replied, "We just lost our warp field temporarily."

"If we go back to warp they'll just hit us with that thing again." Carr pointed out.

"Are communications still being jammed?" Edwards asked and West nodded.

"Yes captain. All long range communications are blocked." she said.

"And here come the Breen." Hamilton added as the Breen destroyers detected ahead of the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp nearby.

"They are powering weapons captain." T'Lan reported.

"Fire phasers." Edwards ordered.

"Firing main phasers." Cole responded, locking onto one of the destroyers and firing one of the *Nightfall's* phaser arrays at the vessel.

There was a bright flash of light as the phaser beam pierced the destroyer's shields and struck a power conduit. In response to this the Breen captain gave the order for his ship to break off but as it did so it fired a volley of plasma torpedoes that struck the *Nightfall's* shields and once again the ship was violently rocked.

"West can we get our fighters out there?" Edwards asked as the heads up display he and the other bridge

officers were informed him that the torpedo hits had severely weakened the *Nightfall's* shields on that facing. "Hangar reports four fighters ready to launch captain. But we'll have to drop our shields." West replied. "Do it. Hamilton, take evasive action until our shields are back up. Commander Cole keep firing." Edwards ordered.

Hamilton put the *Nightfall* into a sharp turn away from the Breen destroyers before turning back towards them and it was at that moment that two pairs of Peregrine-class fighters sped from the ship's forward hangar doors.

"Snowman to *Nightfall*," White transmitted from his fighter, "I have contact with the Breen. We're making a run on the target to port."

"Cole focus our fire on the starboard destroyer." Carr said.

"Yes commander. I'm locked on. Firing phasers." Cole replied and again he fired the *Nightfall's* phasers at the Breen. This time however, the beam failed to penetrate the destroyer's shields and it retaliated with a disruptor blast that struck the *Nightfall* head on.

"Hull breach on deck sixteen." West reported.

"Captain I can't get our shields back up." Cole added.

"That disruptor blast hit deflector control." West said.

"Bridge to engineering, we need our shields if we're going to live through this." Carr said.

"Yes commander." Max responded, "However, the energy disruptor the Breen used to force us out of warp also disabled our nanite hive. Our damage control capability has been severely compromised."

"Do whatever it takes Max. I want those shields back up." Edwards said and then he turned to West again, "How long until we can get the rest of our fighters out there?" he asked.

"Hangar reports four more pilots getting into their ships now. The final four should be ready in five minutes." she told him.

"Get them out there as quickly as possible. Hamilton keep taking evasive action." Edwards ordered.

With the *Nightfall* relying on its ability to evade fire rather than its shields to absorb the damage there was little in the way of fire support for White and his three fellow pilots as their craft sped towards the Breen destroyer.

"I've got a lock. Fox one." White broadcast to the other fighters as he launched a single photon torpedo at the destroyer.

"Fox one." another pilot repeated as he too opened fire and the two torpedoes sped towards the destroyer and struck it one after another. The first impact weakened the destroyer's forward shields and when the second torpedo struck almost the same spot it was able to penetrate and the resulting explosion destroyed the ship's forward weapons arrays.

"Break!" White ordered as the other destroyer shifted its attention away from the *Nightfall* towards his fighters and the four small craft split up, each heading in a different direction before circling around to rendezvous as they set themselves up for another attack run.

With the attention of the Breen elsewhere the *Nightfall* launched a second wave of fighters. However, right as these emerged from the hangar the fourth Breen destroyer, the one that had fired the energy disrupting pulse, dropped out of warp in front of the *Nightfall* and immediately opened fire with its disruptors. One of the fighters was struck before its pilot could raise his shields and his ship exploded in a ball of flame but the other three fighters were able to evade the incoming fire long enough to engage their defences and sped off to join White and the other fighters launched in the first wave. Rather than attempt to pursue the fighters the newly arrived Breen destroyer veered off and it and the *Nightfall* came within less than a hundred metres of one another as they passed by.

"Hamilton!" Carr snapped, "I'd be grateful if you didn't get us so close that we could try and shake hands with the enemy."

"Captain the Breen have lowered their shields." T'Lan suddenly announced.

"I'm picking up transporter signatures." West added, "Captain we're being boarded."

A glow from the side of the bridge heralded the arrival of a pair of armed Breen and before any of the crew could react one of them fired his disruptor, the blast striking one of the security guards on the opposite side of the bridge. This was followed by a sudden roar of projectile fire as the Andorians opened fire with their rifles. The frangible rounds their weapons were loaded with broke up when they hit the Breen's armoured suits and the aliens staggered back under the force of the impacts even though the bullets could not penetrate their armour. However, this did delay them long enough for the other security guard to bring his rifle to bear and a phaser blast punched right through one of the Breen's armour. Moments later there was another phaser shot as T'Lan was able to draw her phaser while still sat down and she shot the second Breen before he could recover.

"All sections intruder alert." Carr announced, tapping her combadge to speak to the entire ship, "The Breen

have boarded the ship."

Knowing that Akira-class heavy cruisers were frequently used as carriers for fighters the Breen had assigned a full squad of soldiers to take the *Nightfall's* hangar and pilots and ground crew scattered when they materialised and began shooting. There were none of the *Nightfall's* security officers in the hangar but since Captain Edwards had ordered all crew members to be armed at all times the ground crew were able to return fire against the Breen and these were joined by not only the four fighter pilots who had been prevented from boarding their ships but also the MACO and Imperial Guard assault shuttle pilots, including Rebecca Edwards who were on hand to defend the hangar as well.

The ferocity of the defence put up by the *Nightfall's* crew took the Breen by surprise and two of them were cut down almost immediately, forcing the others to take cover behind shuttlecraft and the equipment used to service them while they exchanged fire across the hangar.

Although the *Nightfall* had been boarded the greater threat to the ship still came from the now four strong force of Breen destroyers outside and as soon as the ship that had just deployed the boarding party was far enough away for the *Nightfall* to use its weapons against safely Cole fired the ship's aft facing phasers and his first shot hit the destroyer before it could restore its shields, severely damaging its impulse drive.

"Target reduced to one quarter impulse." T'Lan said as she studied the sensor readings of the destroyer.

"Excellent shooting Commander Cole." Edwards added, "What about the other ships?"

"One remains undamaged captain." T'Lan told him, "The third has lost its forward weapons array while the fourth is suffering from a general power distribution problem that is affecting its shields and weapons."

"Lock quantum torpedoes onto that vessel. I want a three round spread." Edwards ordered.

"Yes captain. Target locked. Firing port torpedoes." Cole responded and three quantum torpedoes burst out of the *Nightfall*'s port launcher, speeding towards the already damaged Breen destroyer. The first torpedo took down the destroyers shields entirely, leaving the ship vulnerable as the remaining two slammed into the hull one after another in rapid succession. The combined explosive force of the two torpedoes split the Breen vessel wide open in a brief fiery blast.

"Captain this is Lieutenant Maximillian." Max's voice announced over the intercom, "I have been able to reroute deflector control through engineering. I can give you shields again but only at sixty percent."

"That will do Max." Edwards responded, "Raise shields."

"Shields up captain." Cole said.

"That should stop us from having any more unwanted visitors for a while at least." Carr commented.

After informing the bridge that the ship's shields were operational again Max heard the sound of phasers firing in the corridor outside engineering and then a door slid open to reveal a security guard.

"Everyone take cover. The Breen are-" and then he was shot in the back by a disruptor blast before a Breen appeared in the doorway.

"Engineering to security, we have intruders." Max said, tapping the combadge on his chest.

"I'll pass the word on." Nikki responded from the main security office, "But there are Breen all over the ship."

"Understood. We will do what we can to hold them back." Max said.

Meanwhile the Breen who had just killed the security guard charged through the doorway into engineering.

As was the case everywhere else aboard the *Nightfall*, the staff in engineering were armed with phasers.

However, they could not risk firing them in main engineering just in case a stray shot hit one of the warp cores and triggered a breach that could destroy the entire ship. Instead the engineers grabbed hold of whatever tools came to hand and gathered together to fight the Breen hand to hand.

Fortunately for the *Nightfall*'s engineers the Breen also did not want to inadvertently destroy the ship while they were aboard it and so they slung their disruptor rifles as they came in through the doorway and instead drew long knives from their belts. However, they had not been warned about Max and as the first of them advanced through engineering the former Borg drone suddenly came charging towards him.

"Resistance is futile." Max said as he wrapped one of his hands around the Breen's hand holding his knife, gripping it tightly enough that there was a cracking sound as something inside the Breen's armour broke and the alien let out a burst of unintelligible sound. Immediately after this Max formed his other hand into a fist and brought it close to the Breen's neck, at which point a pair of narrow tubes extended from between his knuckles and sought out the join between the Breen's helmet and neck armour. The Breen immediately began to shudder and let out an electronic screeching sound as he dropped to his knees, clutching at his neck as Max withdrew the tubes and left the nanites he had injected into the Breen to course through the alien's body and attack it from within.

A burst of Breen speech alerted Max to another assailant rushing towards him and the former Borg drone dived aside as the Breen charged. The alien lunged at Max but he reacted quickly enough to deliver a kick to his stomach that, thanks to the enhanced strength provided by the Borg implants in his leg Max was able to throw the Breen back against the wall behind him after which he slumped to the floor.

Another Breen rushed to a nearby ladder and climbed up to the walkway above. One of the *Nightfall*'s engineers rushed to try and block the alien warrior from the walkway but the Breen reached out from the top of the ladder and grabbed the woman by her ankle, pulling her from the walkway and letting her fall to the level below. The Breen then climbed up onto the walkway but as soon as he did so there was the sound of projectile fire as a squad of MACOs burst into engineering from another entrance and began shooting immediately. The ammunition they were firing could not pierce the Breen's armour but the impact was sufficient to knock the alien off the ladder and he landed beside the engineer. Then as the Breen attempted to get back to his feet Max ran up behind him and wrapped his arm around the alien's neck before twisting

his head sharply and snapping it.

White fired his fighter's phasers at the destroyer already damaged by his squadron, approaching from the front to take advantage of the destroyer's lack of forward armament. His fire did little damage to the destroyer's shields but as White broke off the rest of his squadron followed him, attacking the destroyer one after another until its shields gave way and there was another explosion.

"Target's shields are collapsing." one of the fighter pilots broadcast.

"I see it Drummer." White responded, "Fire at will."

All of the fighters spun around and rushed back towards the already damaged destroyer firing their phasers. The destroyer attempted to turn away, bringing its remaining weapons to bear on the attack fighters and returned fire. A disruptor blast struck one of the fighters and White was relieved to see a pilot distress beacon appearing on his console, indicating that the pilot had been able to engage his escape transporter before his fighter was destroyed and was now awaiting rescue. A constant tone from his console told White that his sensors had locked onto the destroyer and he quickly launched another photon torpedo.

"Fox two." he said as the weapon sped towards the Breen vessel and he saw it hit towards the rear of the ship. The initial explosion of the warhead was then followed by a second larger one from inside the destroyer before a third massive blast tore apart the entire vessel, "Snowman to *Nightfall*, that's another one down." he signalled.

The door to one of the *Nightfall's* cargo holds slid open and Heart led a unit of his men inside the darkened room.

"I don't see anyone." he said into the communicator built into his headset, "Are you sure that this is where they went?"

"One hundred percent certain captain." Nikki responded from the security control station, "Internal sensors picked up the transporter signature in that hold and the door hasn't been opened."

"Okay so how about using the sensors to tell me where they're hiding? Or at least send someone down here with a tricorder?" Heart asked.

"Sensor can't carry out detailed scans of that hold captain. The mineral that Captain Edwards brought back is in there and it-"

"Yeah I know." Heart interrupted, "It refracts energy waves and disrupts sensors. Looks like we get to do this the old fashioned way then." and then he glanced at his men, "Split into pairs and remember that Breen are usually armoured. Use your phasers instead of your rifles but for goodness sake try not to hit anything volatile. I hate to think what the effect of a phaser blast hitting any of that mineral would be."

The MACOs then divided up into pairs with two of the armoured soldiers remaining by the door to prevent the Breen from escaping the hold while the rest of them headed in four separate directions to check between the rows of shelves either side of the hold. Heart himself headed towards the wall along the outer hull, intending to circle around the outside of the room but as he came near to the large external hold door he heard the distinctive sound of Breen speech and he held up his hand for the MACO behind him to stop.

"We've got hostiles by the outer door." he said softly into his communicator.

"Confirmed captain, I see four of them." another MACO responded, "I think they're trying to override the lockout on the hatch. But I don't get why they'd want to open the outer door."

"Probably to escape. With that mineral in here they may not be able to get a transporter lock. They'll have to go EVA and be beamed back to their ship from outside." Heart said, "Okay I want all units to move in and be ready to take them out together. Now move."

The MACOs began to close in around the Breen but the aliens had been alerted to their presence in the hold when they first entered and while two worked to try and open the outer door the other two stood watch. a sudden flash of disruptor fire lit up the hold briefly when one of the Breen spotted a MACO and opened fire. The alien's shot struck the armoured chest plate of the human soldier and although he collapsed when hit the energy absorbing plate blocked the worst of the shot and he survived.

"Open fire!" Heart yelled, no longer worried about whether or not all of his men were in position and he fired the phaser unit mounted beneath the barrel of his rifle at one of the Breen attempting to open the outer cargo hold doors. The beam hit the alien and he let out an electronic sounding squeal as he collapsed while the second Breen working with him reached for where he had left his weapon. Before he could pick it up however, another phaser beam hit him in the back and he too fell dead.

While this was happening the two Breen standing watch fired their disruptors in all directions, hoping that they would manage to hit something. However, all the bright pulses of energy achieved was to illuminate their own position and there was more phaser fire from between the shelves as the MACOs returned fire, shooting both Breen dead one after another.

"Heart to security." Heart transmitted, "Cargo hold three is secure. Now where do we need to go next?"

Hamilton brought the *Nightfall* around behind the only one of the Breen destroyers yet to have suffered damage. The destroyer's own helmsman attempted to veer off, not wanting to have the Starfleet heavy cruiser behind the smaller ship where it had fewest weapons. Ordinarily the Breen destroyer would have been able to out manoeuvre an Akira-class heavy cruiser but the controls system Hamilton used to steer the larger vessel enabled him to match every turn.

"I could take the shot myself." Hamilton said as he saw the destroyer move in and out of the centre of the targeting reticule in his headset.

"Why don't we have a lock yet?" Carr asked, looking over her shoulder at Cole.

"The Breen are attempting to jam our targeting system commander." he replied.

"Transfer phaser control to helm." Edwards ordered, "Keep trying to get a target lock for the torpedoes."

"Yes captain. Phaser control transferring to helm." Cole said and Hamilton smiled.

Rather than attempt to align the phaser emitters so that they pointed at the Breen destroyer, Hamilton instead set one of the main emitters to fire straight ahead of the *Nightfall* and continued to follow each manoeuvre that the enemy ship made before he depressed the trigger built into his manual flight controls and fired a continuous beam at it.

"You missed." West said as the beam passed by the Breen destroyer without hitting it.

"I'm not finished yet." Hamilton replied as he suddenly brought the nose of *Nightfall* up sharply while continuing to fire its forward phasers. This swept the beam across the space the Breen destroyer was flying through and its shields glowed brightly as they struggled to stop the beam from hitting the ship itself.

"Enemy shields reduced to fourteen percent." T'Lan reported.

"I've got a torpedo lock. Firing now." Cole added and a single quantum torpedo burst from one of the launchers located in the *Nightfall's* aft weapons pod.

The torpedo could make far tighter turns than the Breen destroyer and it slammed into the enemy ship's impulse drive where the resulting explosion blew apart the entire aft section of the ship and left what remained a burning wreck tumbling through space.

"Three down, one to go. Helm, bring us about, let's finish this." Edwards ordered.

"Uh-oh. We've got a problem." Nikki said as she looked at the internal sensor readouts on the security console in front of her, "We've got Breen heading this way."

The lieutenant sat beside Nikki drew his phaser and double checked its settings just as there was the sound of an explosion coming from the next room and the reinforced doors to the security section were blown open by the Breen in the corridor outside.

"Down." the lieutenant told Nikki before he rushed towards the door to help defend the security section.

"Security to bridge. We're under attack." Nikki said into her combadge as she ducked beneath her console.

Meanwhile the lieutenant fired his phaser at the Breen and hit the first of them to come through the doorway before a volley of disruptor blasts that came through in response blew him off his feet.

The Breen continued firing as they came through the doorway, spraying energy blasts all around the security section until they were satisfied that they had dealt with all resistance. Then the leader of the group waved his troops towards the door leading to the brig and leaving two of their number behind to cover their rear the rest headed for it, keeping their weapons trained ahead of themselves as they did so.

The lead Breen fired his disruptor at the controls to the door while a second took a stun grenade from his webbing. With the controls to the door destroyed two of the Breen were then able to physically drag the door open just far enough for their comrade to toss his grenade through into the next room where the sudden blast of energy incapacitated the three Starfleet security guards in there. The Breen then dragged the door open further and burst into the brig, checking to see if any of the guards were still active. However, all they found were the incapacitated guards on the floor and Adam standing in his cell, unaffected by the grenade thanks to both the construction of his body and the forcefield across the entrance to his cell.

"I take it you've come for me." Adam said as the Breen lined up in front of his cell, all pointing their disruptors towards him, "Very well if you'll just drop the forcefield we can end all this quickly."

Another Breen walked over to the control console, kicking the security guard lying on the floor behind it out of the way before accessing the controls to shut down the forcefield blocking Adam's cell.

The moment that the forcefield disengaged Adam suddenly leapt across the boundary of his cell and grabbed the muzzle of the nearest Breen's disruptor rifle, lifting it up towards the ceiling just as the alien warrior fired. Then he struck a blow to the Breen's throat and there was a 'crunch' as his neck was broken. Adam then leapt towards the next Breen, grabbing his weapon and pushing it aside just at the moment the trigger was pulled and the energy blast struck another Breen instead of the Iconian it was intended for.

Pulling the Breen closer, Adam turned and dragged his opponent between him and the other Breen to use him as a shield as they opened fire with their disruptors.

Letting the dead Breen drop to the floor Adam kept hold of his disruptor rifle and quickly turned the weapon around to fire it at the first Breen to come in his field of fire before rolling across the floor to avoid the return

volley of disruptor blasts. He came to a stop in a kneeling position and fired his disruptor again, bringing down another Breen and leaving only two of them left standing in front of the cell and a third still behind the control console. Exchanging instructions with one another the closest aliens split up, one of them running towards a cell while the other headed for the control console in an attempt to find cover. Meanwhile the Breen already behind the console took aim at Adam and was about to fire when Adam shot him first, following this up with a second shot that killed the Breen rushing towards the console.

The disruptor fire and Breen shouts from within the brig then brought the two aliens who had waited outside to the door but before they could take any action against Adam they were hit by phaser blasts that came from behind them as Captain Shry and a squad of Imperial Guard arrived in response to Nikki's call for help. The last remaining Breen turned towards the doorway and fired his weapon when Captain Shry appeared, clipping one of his shoulders but failing to cause any injury thanks to the armoured pauldron that protected the Andorian. Before the Breen could try again Adam fired his disruptor once more and the Breen was hit in his side, letting out a strange whining sound as he collapsed while Andorians rushed into the brig. With the threat to him over Adam immediately threw away the Breen rifle he had been using and got back to his feet before calmly walking back into his cell, at which point he turned to face Captain Shry before speaking.

"You may reactivate the forcefield now." he said.

The final Breen destroyer made a ponderous turn towards the *Nightfall*, firing a pair of plasma torpedoes that were both shot down by the Starfleet cruiser's phasers before getting close enough to inflict any damage. In return another phaser blast rocked the Breen vessel as Shintar made his way from his quarters to the bridge where he found Gan rapidly issuing orders to his crew.

"Time to withdraw I think." Shintar said and Gan turned around to face him as he responded with a burst of Breen speech, "Yes, I know there are still a handful of Breen aboard the *Nightfall*. However, I have been monitoring their progress just like you have and I know that they have failed in their primary purpose. This one ship cannot stop the *Nightfall* reaching Earth and taking with it their precious cargo. However, we may yet succeed with our plan and there is no sense in delaying our departure."

One of the Breen crew then looked around and uttered a brief comment that made Shintar smile.

"Yes I am well aware of the damage this ship has suffered to its engines and that it cannot outrun the Starfleet vessel or its fighters." Shintar replied, "But I was not thinking about your escape at all." and then he took another step forwards, disappearing into thin air as he did so.

The Breen on the bridge all turned around in surprise, wondering what had happened to the Reman but as they then turned towards their captain for an explanation he too stepped forwards and vanished.

"Captain." T'Lan said suddenly, looking up from her console, "I have just detected two Iconian gateways aboard the Breen vessel. They formed one after another in rapid succession in the area of what I believe is the vessel's bridge."

"An Iconian agent leaving the ship before it is destroyed?" Carr suggested and Edwards nodded in agreement.

"If their captain was an Iconian then that would explain what they were doing here. They must have known about our prisoner." he said, "Lieutenant Commander West, try hailing the Breen ship again. Maybe now that the Iconians have abandoned them they'll be in more of a mood to talk."

"What shall I tell them captain?" West asked.

"Surrender?" Carr said.

"The Breen aren't know for giving up." Nayal pointed out.

"Maybe not, but we can at least try. We can't afford to hang around to deal with them but if they agree to eject their warp core then the *Citadel* and the *T'Pran* can pick them up when they can get here." Edwards said.

"Yes captain." West replied before activating the *Nightfall*'s communications again, "Attention Breen vessel. You are ordered to power down your weapons and surrender. Eject your warp core and a Starfleet vessel will transport your crew to the nearest starbase." she transmitted.

"They won't do it." Nayal commented.

"There is no logical reason for them to continue to fight." T'Lan responded before there was another flash of disruptor fire from the Breen destroyer.

"I think you have your answer captain. They'll fight to the finish." Nayal said.

"Orders captain?" Cole asked.

"Fire at will commander." Edwards told him and Cole promptly launched another pair of quantum torpedoes, both of them striking the destroyer and it vanished in a blast of flames.

"No further Breen vessels detected captain." T'Lan announced.

"What about the Breen boarding parties?" Carr asked.

"All known dealt with." Cole replied, checking the security status monitor on the console in front of him.
"Stand down from red alert." Edwards said, "I want security teams to make a full sweep of the ship to make sure that there are no more Breen or their Iconian masters hiding out anywhere. Is that pilot distress beacon still active?"
"Yes captain. The lieutenant appears to be healthy and in no immediate danger." West replied.
"Lower our shields and have him beamed back aboard. As soon as all our fighters are back onboard I want to get us back into warp. We still have an appointment to keep." Edwards said.
"Bridge to engineering." Carr said, tapping her combadge.
"Engineering here commander." Max's voice responded.
"Max can we go back into warp?" Carr asked.
"Yes commander. The Breen who attacked engineering were unable to damage any of the warp cores before being dealt with. I can give you warp eight all the way back to Earth just as before." Max answered.
"Very good Max. We will be going to warp soon. Carr out."
"What about the prisoner?" Edwards asked, looking around at Cole.
"The Breen did penetrate security," Cole answered, "and there were casualties reported." then when he saw the concerned look on Carr's face he added, "Nikki's fine though. Shry found her hiding under her console."
"I think I ought to go and check on her captain." Carr said.
"I'll join you. I want to check on the prisoner. Perhaps this attempt on his life will make him more eager to reveal information to us." Edwards said.
"Like how to get to create a stable gateway to Earth?" Hamilton asked.
"Maybe. Maybe." Edwards replied, "Lieutenant Commander Cole, the bridge is yours."
"Yes captain." Cole said.

When Shintar and Gan stepped from their gateways they found The Girl waiting for them.

"Come to beg forgiveness Shintar?" The Girl said.

"Why should I? The council knows-" Shintar began before The Girl interrupted him.

"The council doesn't want to see you Shintar. You promised them results and you've failed to deliver." she said. Then she looked at Gan and added, "Both of you."

Gan responded with a rapid burst of sound.

"Gan is right." Shintar said, "It is neither his fault nor mine that the boarding party got within sight of the primary objective before the *Nightfall's* ground troops intervened at the last minute. Everything else went to plan perfectly."

"You really think so Shintar? Because the council sent me here to tell you that they disagree." The Girl said.

"Then the council should consider the bigger picture. The *Nightfall* has a clear run to Earth. Our attack on the ship will have only served to reinforce their belief that they need to get there as quickly as possible."

"Precisely. If they can deliver what they carry to Starfleet Command then-" The Girl began but now it was Shintar that interrupted her.

"They will never reach Starfleet Command. It, the Federation council, MACO Headquarters. All of them will be destroyed and it will be the *USS Nightfall* that is responsible. Starfleet will then fire on the ship themselves to prevent any more damage to Earth and its facilities, destroying it along with the only thing the Federation has that can threaten us. In a month's time the galaxy will be ours for the taking. What once was ours."

"Shall be ours again." The Girl responded, "You had better be right about this Shintar because if you aren't then the council will want your head and I will gladly be the one to present it to them."



"Hello again captain." Adam said when Edwards and Carr entered the brig and stood in front of his cell, "From her uniform I take it that this is Commander Grace Carr, your first officer and some say your lover." Carr's eyes widened when she heard this.

"Oh no. No, not at all." she replied as she and Edwards exchanged glances and the nearby security guards suppressed laughter.

"Then perhaps there are still some things about you that are unknown to us." Adam said.

"We came to see how you were after the attack." Edwards said.

"Almost totally unharmed captain. Thank you for asking." Adam told him.

"Almost?" Carr commented.

"Yes, almost." Adam said and he lifted his arm to show the end of his sleeve, "As you can see I managed to catch my arm on something and tear my sleeve."

"I thought that stuff your body is made of was supposed to be tough." Edwards said with a smile on his face.

"Oh it is captain. However, the rigours of battle can prove too much to a great many things." Adam replied.

"We detected a pair of Iconian portals aboard one of the Breen vessels that attacked us." Edwards told him.

"Ah, so my fellow Iconians sought to prevent me from reaching Earth." Adam said.

"It seems that way. We are still a long way from Earth. At the best speed we can manage it will still take us more than twenty days to get there." Edwards said.

"More than enough time for them to try again." Carr added.

"You want me to give you the ability open a gateway to Earth?" Adam responded.

"It would be a gesture of trust." Edwards said, "On both sides. After all we would have to disable the dampening field keeping you from using a gateway to leave your cell if we are going to use one to reach Earth."

"Your point is well made captain. However, my hands are tied. Metaphorically at least. I have already explained to you that just as you are forbidden to provide advanced technology to primitive civilisations, I am under a similar restriction. Only after I have been able to confirm exactly how any support we give to you will be used will my people make a final decision on how much knowledge we will give you. I really do wish there was another way captain but those are the rules I must operate under."

"Very well. Though if you want to repair your jacket then we are capable of replicating the synthetic flesh used to make it. All you need to do is let us know how it needs configuring." Edwards said.

"Thank you for the offer captain. I shall consider it when we reach Earth. I want to look my best for the meeting with your superiors after all." Adam replied.

West sat in her quarters looking at the feed from the brig on her computer terminal. Every day since Adam had come aboard she had studied him covertly, trying to determine what it was that he was hiding. Something about this Iconian had said ran counter to what The Controller knew, or at least what The Controller believed but the problem was determining what that was. Adam had admitted that he was withholding technology from the crew of the *Nightfall* and West was considering the possibility that either he was either choosing to do this of his own accord rather than because of an Iconian equivalent of the Prime Directive or perhaps because he did not have this knowledge himself. If the latter was the case then it was possible that no matter what the outcome of the meeting with Starfleet Command and Federation officials on Earth there would be no assistance against the Iconians forthcoming.

Both of these possibilities opened up another potential lie that he could be telling. As of yet there was no proof of who Adam really was beyond being an Iconian. He claimed that he was an ambassador for a different faction of the species to the one currently threatening all known space but it was possible that he held no such position. The attack and boarding action by the Breen did suggest that the Iconians that the *Nightfall* had been fighting against for several years now did not want him to reach Earth but the question remained why this might be. Obviously if there was some sort of conflict between different Iconian factions then that would be one answer, but it also occurred to West that perhaps Adam came from the same faction as those who had tried to kill him and that there might not be more than one. This would mean that he was some sort of renegade and that he might be hoping to gain sanctuary in the Federation. Allowing himself to be placed inside the dampening field that block gate travel would certainly offer him some protection, preventing any Iconian assassins from simply appearing in his cell to kill him.

Sadly as West considered all these options The Controller remained silent and so she decided that she would try to get answers from Adam himself and she got up out of her chair. She had made it most of the way to the door leading from her quarters when the intercom sounded.

"Jenna it's me." Heart's voice said.

"Gary. What are you doing here so early?" West said as she opened the door to him.
"Early? Only by five minutes." Heart replied, "It's time for our just two friends having a nice meal together that is absolutely not a date."
"Of course it is. I completely lost track of time." West said as she looked at the clock on her wall and saw that it was much later than she had thought.
"If you're busy then we can reschedule." Heart said, "I'm sure the other not a couple Bradley Hamilton and Nayal won't mind us not being there. They're bound to be able enjoy some of those benefits their friendship has without us."
"No I'm coming." West told Heart, stepping out of her quarters to join him in the corridor. Linking arms, the pair began to walk towards the officers' lounge located at the front of the *Nightfall's* primary hull, right above the hangar bay launch doors. "So these benefits that Bradley and Nayal have." West said, smiling, "Do you see us having them as well?" and Heart shrugged.
"Benefits? I already get the best possible healthcare and retirement plan with the MACOs so what else is there?" he said before West punched his arm, "Hey! It's behaviour like that that won't get you invited into the role-playing campaign Bradley runs." Heart added and West frowned.
"What makes you think I want to join Bradley's geek game?" she asked.
"Well after your infamous costume from that convention I thought maybe you'd enjoy-"
"Okay rule number one for our relationship." West said, "You never, ever mention the fact that I dressed up as a comic book character that unknown to me is famous for-" and then she noticed Heart smiling, "What's so amusing?" she asked.
"You just admitted we're in a relationship." he said and West winced.
"Just don't go changing any social media profiles just yet." she said.

"Ah, here you are. Take a seat." Nayal said when West and Heart arrived in the officers lounge and joined them at their table.
"We almost didn't make it. I completely lost track of time." West replied.
"Well you're here now." Nayal said and she held up a bottle of blue liquid, "Kali-fal?"
"No thank you." West said, remembering the dreadful hangover she had suffered from after the only other time she had drunk Romulan ale, "I think I'll get a bottle of wine instead."
"A pity, I had hoped you'd entertain us with more of your singing." Nayal said as she poured herself another glass of the drink, "Though we would need Commander Carr here to perform a duet with you. What about you Gary?"
"I wouldn't mind a small taste." Heart responded while West made her way to the bar and he held up an empty glass so that Nayal could pour some of the potent beverage into it, "Best to use it up before we reach Earth anyway. I doubt customs would be too happy if they found out you had some aboard."
"That's nothing compared to the stockpile the captain has." Hamilton commented, sipping at his own drink, "In addition to those cases he admits to there's the stash Max is hiding for him in engineering."
"Ah yes, Nayal's gift to him from her old superior. Right Nayal?" Heart said.
"What? Oh yes of course." the Romulan woman responded and then she looked at West as she returned to the table with a bottle of wine and a glass, "So Jenna what was more important than dinner with me and Bradley?" Nayal added.
"I was taking a look at our prisoner. The video feed of his cell I mean, I've not seen him in person." West answered and Nayal smiled.
"So do you still agree with me that he's hiding something?" Nayal asked.
"Yes I do and seeing as how we're now barely a day away from Earth we need to figure out what it is pretty quickly." West said, "Something about his story just doesn't add up."
"So you don't think that he's really an ambassador for a more friendly group of Iconians?" Hamilton said.
"I don't know. I can't tell you whether he's lying about who he is or why he's here but I don't think that he's here to offer us technology that can help us defeat the Iconians." West explained.
"Plus he looks creepy." Nayal added, "I mean just look at him. Every bit of him is the same colour. Even his clothes. It's like he's trying to look like some sort of ghost or something."
"Everything's made of that synthetic flesh." Heart pointed out and West's eyes widened.
"That's it!" she exclaimed, leaping up out of her chair, "I'm sorry I have to go." and then she kissed Heart on his cheek and ran from the lounge.
"Well that was unexpected." Heart said.
"What? That she just ran off or that she kissed you?" Nayal asked.
"Both. In hindsight the kiss was preferable though." Heart answered.

After leaving the lounge West hurried towards the nearest turbolift, tapping her combadge as she went.
"West to Max. Where are you?" she said but there was no immediate response and so she tapped it again,

"West to engineering. Do you know where Lieutenant Maximillian is?"

"Lieutenant commander, this is Lieutenant Saunders. Lieutenant Maximillian is currently off duty. I think he's regenerating."

"Okay thanks." West replied and just as she reached the turbolift she tapped her combadge a third time, "West to T'Lan."

"This is T'Lan. How may I help you?"

"I need to ask you a few questions about the Iconian synthetic flesh. Are you available?" West asked.

"I am off duty but you may come to my quarters." T'Lan told her.

"Okay thanks. I'm on my way."

Leaping into the turbolift as soon as the door opened West went to the quarters that T'Lan shared with Cole, holding her finger down on the intercom button by the door until it opened to reveal Cole.

"You know it works when you press it just once." he said.

"Sorry, but I needed to make sure that you heard it." West replied as she dashed past Cole.

"Yes, do come in." he said, sighing.

T'Lan was sat on the couch wearing traditional Vulcan clothing in place of her uniform and she looked at West.

"I assume that you consider your questions to be important." she said and West nodded.

"I need to ask about the way the Iconians can adapt their synthetic flesh to different purposes." she said.

"This might be easier if I had my PADD." T'Lan said.

"I'll get it." Cole said, "You take a seat." and while he headed for the bedroom West sat down beside T'Lan.

When Cole returned with T'Lan's PADD he sat down beside her as he handed her the device. Turning on the PADD she immediately called up the files relating to the research she and Max had carried out on samples of the Iconian synthetic flesh that had ultimately led to the creation of a physical body for the ship's EMH.

"What is it that you would like to know?" she asked.

"Cells made of the synthetic flesh can be made to perform any purpose that an ordinary living cell can, right?" West said.

"That is correct. In effect the nucleus of each cell is a highly compact computer." T'Lan answered and she brought up an image of two synthetic cells magnified many thousands of times. The two cells were not identical, although the outer layers were made of the same materials the nucleus of one cell was quite clearly more primitive than the other. This was one of the first cells that T'Lan and Max had been able to construct before moving onto making a complete body for the EMH while the more advanced example was an original Iconian cell.

"And the way that computer is programmed determines what the cell is for?" West said.

"Correct again lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"West, where exactly are you going with this?" Cole asked.

"I think that the prisoner, this Adam isn't contained in his cell." West answered.

"He was still there the last time I checked and he's being watched around the clock." Cole said.

"Robert is correct. He has not left his cell." T'Lan added.

"Except when the Breen turned off the forcefield keeping him inside." West pointed out.

"But he never left the brig itself and Shry put him right back in his cell when the Breen were dealt with." Cole replied.

"Not quite." West said, a smile appearing on her face.

"I do not follow your meaning." T'Lan said.

"Have you seen the feed from when the captain and Commander Carr visited Adam after we got back into warp?" West asked.

"Yes, they talked for a few minutes and then left, but he was behind the forcefield the whole time and it hasn't been shut off since. The dampening field hasn't stopped running since Max first set it up either. Even when the cell forcefield was turned off it stayed active so he couldn't form a gateway to escape." Cole responded.

"Not all of him." West said and both Cole and T'Lan looked at her, confused.

"He was not injured." T'Lan said.

"No, but his jacket got torn. A piece ripped off." West said.

"And his jacket is made from the same synthetic flesh as his body is." Cole added as he realised where West was leading to.

"T'Lan could a clump of the synthetic flesh change its purpose?" West asked.

"That is feasible, yes." T'Lan answered.

"Which means that there could be a clump of that stuff about this big on the loose." West said and she held up one hand with her thumb and forefinger just over a centimetre apart.

"That doesn't seem like much to me." Cole said, "T'Lan, how much damage could that much of the synthetic flesh do?"

"That depends on how it reconfigures itself." T'Lan replied, "If it aims to physically attack any of the crew or

one of the ship's systems then very little. However, at our first encounter with an Iconian agent disguised as a Romulan refugee he was witnessed trying to interface himself with the computer system in engineering. We do not know exactly how powerful the computer at the core the Iconian cells is but there is every possibility that the number that are unaccounted for would be able to disrupt several of our systems." "And with our nanite hive out of action our network is especially vulnerable right now." West added. "West we need to go." Cole said, jumping back to his feet, "T'Lan can you try using the internal sensors to locate whatever happened to that missing piece of his jacket." and T'Lan nodded. "Of course." she replied. "What about us?" West asked. "We're going to go and see the captain. I get the feeling that he'll want to confront this Adam and see what he has to say for himself." Cole answered.

7.

Adam was still sat in his cell when Edwards entered the brig with Cole and West, all three of them armed. "Another visit captain? To what do I owe the pleasure this time?" he asked.

"What happened to that section of your jacket that got torn when the Breen boarded the ship?" Edwards asked in reply and Adam shrugged.

"I'm afraid I lost track of what was happening during the struggle captain. I can only assume that it got caught on something. Perhaps one of the Breen themselves. I know that I am being monitored around the clock so perhaps if you check-"

"I've been over the surveillance tapes and Doctor King examined the bodies of all the Breen." West interrupted, "No trace of Iconian synthetic flesh has been found."

"Then I'm afraid I cannot help you." Adam said, "What is your concern captain?"

"There are problems with your story." Edwards answered, "Mainly that you've not given us any proof of who you are or your purpose in being here. All we have to go on is your word and frankly I'm suspicious that we're only hearing about a faction of Iconians that wants to help us now after more than four years during which we've known we were under attack, let alone the amount of time this infiltration must have been going on before that."

Adam got to his feet and walked right up to the forcefield blocking the entrance to his cell, prompting the security guards on duty to raise their phaser rifles and take aim at him.

"Stand down. The forcefield is still intact." Cole said.

"Yes indeed it is." Adam responded with a smile and he looked up at one of the emitters along the top of the entrance to his cell.

All of a sudden the forcefield emitters of the cell flared and instead of being a flat plane across the entrance the forcefield turning into a bubble that bulged outwards and rapidly expanded, striking all of the Starfleet crew in the room with enough force to send them flying backwards away from the cell and delivering a massive electrical shock that stunned them in the process. This overloaded the forcefield emitters and the bubble vanished as they exploded. With alarms already sounding Adam was then free to step from the cell and walk across the brig to where one of the security guards lay unconscious. The guard had managed to keep hold of his phaser rifle long enough for it to land beside him and Adam bent down to pick it up, then detaching the holstered hand phaser from the guard's waist and fixing it to his own. Adam paused as he stood up and looked around, verifying that all of the Starfleet crew in the room were unconscious.

"They are stunned," he said out loud, "and the security monitors have been disabled."

West's eyes opened.

"Thank you, I can't tell you what a relief this is." The Controller said as she got to her feet.

"I was told that you might be aboard but given how long it has been since you last reported in there was some doubt as to whether you were still alive."

The Controller frowned.

"My host is willing to go to extreme lengths to prevent me from being able to access any of the *Nightfall's* systems." she said, "I haven't been able to get to a computer terminal for some time. Now what do you need me to do?"

"Just stay out of my way. I have control over most of the *Nightfall's* systems myself now and I don't need any help in destroying the centre of the Federation's resistance to us." Adam told her.

"So have you found what you're looking for?" Carr asked, looking from the captain's chair to the science station where T'Lan had taken over, still dressed in her Vulcan robes instead of changing back into her Starfleet uniform first.

"I think so Commander Carr." T'Lan replied, "The chemical make up of the Iconian synthetic flesh is easy to identify and using the *Nightfall's* lateral sensor arrays I have been able to set up a filter to pick out all traces of it. There are two strong concentrations aboard, those of Emma and the prisoner but there are also a further forty-two traces that are significantly smaller scattered around the ship. All of them are-"

All of a sudden the screens all around the bridge, including the main viewscreen and the small heads up displays in the headsets worn by the command crew flickered.

"What's happening?" Carr asked as she looked around.

"Commander our speed just increased to warp nine point eight." the lieutenant at the helm station announced.

"That will have us at Earth in approximately four hours commander." T'Lan added.

"Yes and probably burn out our warp drive the way we've been pushing it. Take us out of warp until we can figure out what happened." Carr ordered.

"I can't commander, the helm is not responding." the helmsman replied.

"Commander I'm getting a security alert from the brig." the tactical officer on duty announced.

"The captain is down there." Carr said, "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know commander." the tactical officer said as he studied his console, "All of the monitors are down."

"Helm and security? That can't be good. What is working on this ship?" Carr said, looking around the bridge again.

"We've lost communications." the operations officer said.

"Weapons and shields are reporting ready but I can't control either." the tactical officer added.

"Sensors are still functional but I cannot adjust any of their settings. They are being controlled from another location. Commander we have lost control of the ship." T'Lan said.

"I can see that T'Lan. But how?" Carr asked.

"The fragments of Iconian synthetic flesh material I detected before losing control of the sensors were all located within the *Nightfall's* electronic systems. Half were located within the computer core itself while the rest were distributed throughout other locations, including one here on the bridge."

"Here? Where?" Carr said as she turned on the spot, half expecting to see a mass of milky white flesh hanging from a wall somewhere that she really should have noticed it.

"Over here commander." T'Lan said and she got up from her seat and walked across the bridge to the operations console when she crouched down to open up an access panel on the back of it to expose the isolinear circuitry within it.

Carr crouched down beside and looked inside to where T'Lan pointed at what looked like a small milky-white worm that was about five centimetres long and just a couple of millimetres wide that was wrapped around an isolinear chip.

"Well get it out of there." Carr said and T'Lan reached in to remove the isolinear chip from its mounting before holding it up.

"May I borrow your phaser commander?" the Vulcan asked, having left her own weapon in her quarters with her uniform.

"Be my guest." Carr replied and she handed her sidearm to T'Lan who then adjusted the setting, "Heavy stun? T'Lan I thought that doesn't affect anything made of synthetic flesh."

"Normally no. However, I cannot use a higher setting without risking damage to the isolinear chip itself." T'Lan replied and she held up the isolinear chip with the Iconian worm creature wrapped around it before pressing the muzzle of Carr's phaser against the worm about half way along its length. T'Lan then fired the phaser, keeping her finger on the trigger to sustain the beam.

Anything more than a stun setting would have burned through the isolinear chip in a matter of moments, but at this low level the only affect was a slow but steady heating of the electronic component and this heat was then transferred into the worm itself. The simple programming of the worm did not allow for any defensive or evasive action and so it remained in place as it heated up and it produced smoke before going limp and dropping to the floor where it writhed around, its processing core attempting to locate the circuitry it was supposed to be connected to.

"Okay finish it off T'Lan." Carr said.

"That would be illogical captain. In its current state we can study this device further. I recommend that you get something to keep it in." T'Lan responded as she turned back to the open panel in the ops console and replaced the isolinear circuit.

"Internal communications are now back on line commander." the officer sat at the console said.

"What about subspace?" Carr asked.

"Still off line commander." the ops officer told her.

"Okay then, it looks like we're on our own." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to Captain Edwards. Do you read me?"

"Commander Carr, we can only assume that whatever has happened in the security section is preventing Captain Edwards and the others from responding." T'Lan said when there was no reply and Carr nodded and she tapped her combadge again.

"All crew this is Commander Carr. Red alert. The ship's major systems have been compromised and the prisoner may be responsible. Contact has been lost with the security section. I want it checked out immediately. Engineering, do whatever you can to get us out of warp without blowing up the ship. All other crew report to battle stations immediately but be on the lookout for system malfunctions. Carr out." tapping her combadge once more to turn it off, Carr looked at T'Lan, "Okay so how long will it take you to find and remove the rest of these worm things?" she asked.

"I cannot say for certain commander. Though I have a rough idea of where they are located, the one in the operations console was the only one I was able to precisely locate before losing control of the sensors. The rest will need to be located individually using tricorders."

"Looks like they've realised that something's wrong." The Controller said, looking up at the ceiling as Carr made her announcement, "Didn't you think to disable the internal communications?"

"Of course I did." Adam replied, "They must have discovered and removed the infiltration form I used to do it."

"Well now the crew are bound to be hunting you. Are you sure you don't want my help?" The Controller asked and he stared at her for a few moments.

"Actually I think I might be able to use you after all." he told her and as he made his way to the control console he added, "Turn around and place your hands behind your back."

"What for?"

"You have just become my hostage." Adam said, taking a set of handcuffs from beneath the console.

The expanding forcefield had stunned everyone in the entire security section and as Adam led The Controller, her hands now bound behind her back and her mouth taped shut towards the exit they had to step over several unconscious security officers. When the door slid open Adam shoved The Controller out first and as soon as she was in the corridor outside she looked both ways and saw a pair of security guards hurrying towards her and she let out a muffled grunt to alert Adam to their presence. The guards paused when they saw The Controller, taking her to be West and they raised their weapons as Adam stepped into view behind her. Unwilling to fire while West was in the way the two guards hesitated before one reached for his combadge to report the situation. However, before he could do this Adam opened fire with his stolen phaser rifle and shot both guards in rapid succession.

"Let's move." he told The Controller, "We only need to keep ahead of them for four hours. Then all of this will be over and we can both go home."



Edwards' eyes snapped open to find Doctor King crouching next to him with the hypospray he had just used to bring the captain back to consciousness in his hand while behind him a pair of security guards watched over him.

"Doctor? What's happening?" he asked, sitting up and looking around.

"What happened is the prisoner has been lying to us from the start." King answered, "According to T'Lan there are little bits of him all over the ship that have allowed him to take control of all our major systems. Thankfully he's left life support alone or we'd all be choking by now."

"Where is he? And where's West?" Edwards said when he realised that West was missing.

"Easy now captain, you've had a nasty bump." King replied as he moved on to Cole, injecting him with a stimulant as well and the Nightfall's second officer let out a gasp as he awoke as well.

"What happened?" he said, rubbing his head as he sat up and finding blood on his hand after he did so.

"As I was just explaining to the captain the prisoner escaped and has taken control of the ship." King told him.

"But how?" Cole said.

"It must be that missing piece from his jacket." Edwards said and King nodded.

"That's what T'Lan says. It looks like after it was detached, most likely on purpose, it split up into segments that each fixed themselves to a different part of the ship and the prisoner now has control of those systems. Thankfully T'Lan was able to get internal communications back by frying the thing that was controlling them but everything else is still out."

"Casualties?" Edwards asked.

"A couple of security guards who tried to stop the prisoner when he left the security section. It looks like he's using West as a hostage. The guards couldn't fire for fear of hitting her." King explained.

"We better get to the bridge." Edwards said to Cole, "We need to stop this Adam from doing whatever it is he came here to do."

"Best hurry up with that captain. You don't have long." King said.

"What do you mean?" Cole said, frowning.

"When the prisoner got control of the ship he increased our speed to maximum. It looks like he wants to get to Earth very quickly and he's not bothered about burning out our warp drive to do it." King replied.

Hearing this, Edwards and Cole rushed from the security section and made their way to the bridge as quickly as possible. By this time Hamilton and Nayal had also arrived there to join in the attempts to regain control of the ship from Adam but so far without any luck.

"Captain, thank God you're okay." Carr said when Edwards and Cole stepped from the turbolift and Edwards nodded.

"What's our status commander?" he asked.

"We're at maximum warp heading for Earth with no helm control or external communications." Carr told him.

"Has anyone checked the communications aboard any of the shuttles and fighters we're loaded with?" Edwards asked.

"Commander White is down in the hangar now." Carr told him, "So far it looks like the maintenance systems have been used to lock every auxiliary craft in our hangar into a repeating level one diagnostic cycle

"It looks like we're going in hot as well." Cole commented, "Our weapons and shields are both powered."

"There are no signs of either being activated yet though." Carr added.

"Okay, what about how the prisoner was able to gain control of my ship?" Edwards said.

"Hand me that jar." Carr said, turning to one of the other bridge crew and the ensign passed her a small glass jar that contained the Iconian worm form. The synthetic flesh creation was moving around in the base of it in an erratic manner, damaged by T'Lan's use of the phaser but still intact enough to be attempting to find a way out so that it could return to the internal communication control circuit and disable it again, "T'Lan said she found forty-two of these spread around the ship before we lost control of our sensors. She's off hunting for the others now with a tricorder."

"She didn't go alone did she?" Cole asked, concerned for the safety of his pregnant wife, "Adam's on the loose and he's not afraid about shooting people or taking hostages."

"Don't worry. Nikki, Shry and an entire squad of Imperial Guard went with her." Carr reassured him, "Meanwhile Heart is organising his men to hunt down Adam."

"Assuming he's still aboard." Nayal said from her seat beside the captain's.

"Nayal has a theory that he could have left the ship." Carr said.

"Well he is outside his cell and that means he can make a gateway to wherever he wants whenever he wants to." Nayal pointed out.

"If he was going to do that then he'd have no need to take a hostage. He could have just left the ship as soon as he stepped outside of his cell. In fact he could have left when the Breen attacked." Edwards said.

"T'Lan is this one of the worms?" Nikki asked when her tricorder picked up traces of Iconian synthetic flesh and she held the device out towards the Vulcan woman to show the readings she had picked up.

"I believe you are correct." T'Lan replied, "One of the Iconian devices has implanted itself in the fusion reactor control system.

"That sounds bad." Nikki said, "Could it blow up the ship?"

"That is unlikely. There are too many physical safety features built into the system for that to be done from a single location and if the Iconian device was placed to complete the self destruct sequence then I would be able to detect the other changes already made."

"Well that's one thing at least. So what do we do now?"

"Now we find the thing, remove it and destroy it." Shry said from behind T'Lan and Nikki, "Right?" he added when they looked around at him.

"Correct." T'Lan agreed and she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to engineering." she said.

"This is Max. How may I help you commander?" Max responded.

"We have located another of the Iconian devices attached to one of the impulse drive fusion reactors. We require an engineering team to remove it." T'Lan explained.

"I shall send one as soon as possible commander. However, we have located five of the devices here in engineering within the warp cores and main diagnostic system and are working to try and remove them." Max said.

The Controller was not happy about the way events had unfolded since Adam had made his escape from the *Nightfall's* brig. When he had agreed to accept her help she had assumed that meant she would be advising him on the layout of the Starfleet vessel and the tactics that the crew could be expected to use against him. What she had not expected was to become a shield against attack who thanks to the tape over her mouth would not be able to warn him of any mistakes he was making or advise alternative strategies if the crew did something unexpected.

Adam was familiar with the layout of the *Nightfall* in any case, having studied the deck plan that The Controller had supplied early on during her infiltration of the ship at great length and using this knowledge he made his way into the port side secondary hull and from there towards the very rear of the ship close to the weapons pod where he quickly located an empty enlisted man's cabin for them to hide in. Even in the privacy of the cabin he did not release The Controller though, instead shoving her onto the bottom bunk while he sat down at a nearby table and placed his phaser rifle on it.

"Do not disturb me." he said when The Controller attempted to speak and attract his attention, hoping to be untied, "The infiltration forms I have used to take control of this ship are not fully autonomous. They will require their instructions updating if my mission is to succeed."

With The Controller now just staring at him, Adam closed his eyes and enabled his wireless connection to all of the infiltration forms spread around the *Nightfall*. As expected the device that had been connected to the ship's internal communication system had been removed but it still reported back as being operational, if somewhat damaged and unable to determine its precise location. In addition to this the five devices in engineering were also all reporting that the crew of the *Nightfall* were attempting to remove them from the systems they were embedded in. If this could be achieved then the crew would be able to bring the *Nightfall* out of warp before it reached Earth's solar system and Adam's plan would fail. Fortunately he had planned for this eventuality and he linked to one of the five devices, uploading a new command into its processor.

A sudden blast of vapour from a pipe running along one side of one of the *Nightfall's* four warp cores struck an engineer working to remove the infiltrator form embedded deep inside the core and the man screamed briefly as his flesh was eaten away, turned to liquid before he could get clear.

"Coolant leak!" another engineer yelled and an alarm began to sound.

"Evacuate main engineering." Max ordered as he looked around at where the coolant pipes led. With four cores to be kept operating the distribution network for the plasma coolant was widely spread throughout engineering and multiple ruptures could cause massive casualties very rapidly and the manual control to the environmental purge system was located too close to the source of the coolant leak for anyone to be able to reach it safely, "Everyone out now."

The engineering staff, currently including a number of science officers seconded to the engineering department made their way quickly to the nearest exit from engineering. This included Max, whose biological components were just as vulnerable to the liquefying effects of the plasma coolant as the human crew members were. Once outside engineering and satisfied that none of his engineers remained in the danger area Max closed the door behind him just as the cloud of coolant came towards it. Then he activated his

combadge.

"Max to bridge." he said, "There has been a coolant leak in engineering and we have been forced to evacuate. I believe the leak was triggered deliberately by one of the Iconian devices to prevent us from removing them."

"Do you have any casualties Max?" Edwards responded.

"Petty Officer Rand is dead but everyone else was able to escape unharmed. I recommend that my engineers be used to join the search for where the other devices are located while we attempt to find a way to get back into engineering." Max answered, "I also have an idea about how we may be able to disrupt these devices that I would like to discuss in person."

"In person?" Edwards commented.

"Yes captain. We cannot be certain that our communications are not being monitored and I do not want to risk revealing what I have learned." Max told him.

"Okay then Max. Have your engineers spread out and try to find the other devices while you join us here." Edwards replied.

"I will be with you shortly captain. Max out." Max said before shutting off his combadge.

When Max made it to the bridge he found the command crew still working to try and determine how much of the ship they still had control over and Max made his way towards the engineering console along the rear wall.

"Transfer all engineering functions to this station." he told the computer.

"Unable to comply. Warp and impulse control circuits do not respond." the computer announced.

"We've been getting that a lot." Edwards said as he and Carr joined Max by the console.

"Those things seem to have dug themselves in deep." Carr added.

"Perhaps, but I may have discovered a vulnerability." Max replied as he used his nanite injecting tubes to connect directly with the engineering console and upload data to it, "This is a scan of one of the devices attached to one of our warp cores." Max said as a false colour image of one of the infiltration forms appeared on the screen shown coiled around part of a circuit, "It was optimised to detect energy levels in the hope that I could isolate a power source and disrupt it. However, what I found was significantly more interesting. Watch."

Max then ran the scan data as a video and part way through there was a sudden fluctuation in the image colour as an energy wave passed through the field of the scan that was followed by what appeared to be a release of similar energy from within the Iconian device.

"What was that?" Carr asked.

"Communication." Edwards said.

"Correct captain." Max replied, "I believe that all of these devices are controlled via a wireless broadcast link. That was likely how the prisoner was able to make his escape at the very moment you confronted him."

"So can we jam it?" Carr suggested.

"Perhaps commander. However, without knowing the exact manner in which these devices have been programmed to react to a loss of communication it may be better to leave their control frequency open but monitored while we attempt to locate not only the other devices but the prisoner and Lieutenant Commander West." Max said.

"Radio direction finding?" Edwards said.

"Yes captain. We know the frequency that this broadcast was made on and none of the equipment we have aboard makes use of it. Even without internal sensors we can still make use of tricorders to track down any sources of such an energy frequency." Max explained.

"Pass the word to all search teams. In addition to scanning for Iconian synthetic flesh they are to scan for any energy patterns that match what you've found here." Edwards ordered.

"What about engineering?" Carr asked, "We know that there are five more of those devices in there."

"Space suits should enable us to get an engineer in there to trigger the manual purge system." Edwards said.

"If I might captain," Max said, "we do not know how the Iconian devices will react when someone enters main engineering. It is also possible that the prisoner will now have positioned himself close by to prevent anyone from clearing the coolant and any damage to a protective suit would leave the wearer exposed to it."

"Are you suggesting we just ignore engineering Max? We need to get control of our warp drive back." Edwards said.

"Indeed we do captain. However, there is one member of our crew that will be unaffected by the coolant's liquefying effects on organic matter and will not require any sort of protective clothing." Max responded.

3.

Emma, formerly the *Nightfall's* emergency medical hologram entered engineering through a doorway on an upper level and stood on the walkway that overlooked the massive room. Emma's mind still resided inside the computer located in sickbay but she was able to leave there and exist in places where there were no holo-emitters, including leaving the ship entirely thanks to her body that was made almost entirely of a replicated version of the Iconian synthetic flesh. The fact that the infiltration forms had used plasma coolant to clear out the crew from engineering exposed their immunity to its liquefying properties and that meant that Emma would also be able to pass through the cloud that now covered the whole of the lower level of engineering to about waist height without being damaged. Even if it did turn out that there was some difference in the replicated synthetic flesh used in her construction to the original Iconian version and she suffered damage, or worse yet her entire body was destroyed, then another could be created to house her mind that would remain intact in sick bay.

"I'm in." she said, tapping her combadge, "I don't see any signs of movement so I don't think that Adam is here. Unless he's hiding under the coolant cloud of course." she added.

"Can you see the purge control?" Edwards asked and Emma looked at the lever she needed to pull to clear the room of the plasma coolant.

"Yes captain. The level of the coolant has not reached it yet, though I think that it is rising. If it is not vented soon then the entire room is likely to become flooded with it." she responded.

"Then perhaps now would be a good time to activate the purge valve Emma." Edwards ordered.

"And keep monitoring for any signals to or from the worms." Carr added.

"Yes commander." Emma said, taking a tricorder from her waist and unfolding it.

The tricorder was a medical variant, optimised for scanning organic tissue, but it was still capable of detecting both the synthetic flesh used to make the infiltrator forms and also the energy patterns associated with their communication. This close to the infiltrator forms Emma was able to pick up all five that had been found in engineering, four of them in the *Nightfall's* warp cores while the fifth was located in the plasma coolant regulation system. None of the infiltrator forms were sending or receiving any commands and so Emma made her way along the walkway to the nearest ladder and descended to the level below where the cloud of plasma coolant billowed around her.

"I have reached the lower level." she reported, "I am suffering no ill effects from the plasma coolant and am about to make my way to the purge valve control."

"Understood Emma." Edwards responded as she began to wade through the cloud towards the lever.

If any of the infiltrator forms were aware of her presence in engineering then they gave no indication of it, all five apparently limiting themselves to direct control of the systems they had attached themselves to and still not communicating with one another or Adam. Walking up to the lever Emma reached out and took hold of it in one hand while keeping hold of her tricorder in the other before pulling the lever firmly.

As soon as the lever slammed into its active position there was the sound of mechanical pumps running and the level of gaseous coolant around Emma began to lower as it was sucked through the vents located all around the room at floor level.

"Venting system operational." she said as she looked around, half expecting Adam to suddenly appear from beneath the coolant but even when the floor came into view Emma saw that she was just as alone as she had been when she walked in, "Venting complete and there's no sign of the prisoner." she added and the doors to engineering opened to allow Max and a team of his engineers to enter.

"Quickly." he told his men, "We need to bring the ship out of warp."

All of a sudden the *Nightfall* shook slightly and the hum of power flowing from the four warp cores changed in pitch and volume.

"What just happened?" Emma asked, "Did I break something?"

"No." Max replied, "We just came out of warp."

"What the hell?" Edwards exclaimed as the image being fed through his headset showed him that the *Nightfall* had come out of warp close to Saturn.

"We're moving at full impulse." Hamilton announced, pulling at the control sticks built into his chair, "Still no helm control."

"Captain we may have a problem here." Cole added.

"Really? You think so? We don't have any control over the ship. I'd call that a problem." Noyal said.

"We also don't have any control over our defences and our shields just went up and we're running targeting sweeps." Cole said.

"What?" Edwards said as he and Carr hurried to stand behind Cole and look at his console. Sure enough the

Nightfall's shields were now raised and all of the ship's weapons had been armed.
"We're targeting Earth." Carr said, "San Francisco. Paris."
"Starfleet Command and the Federation Council." Edwards said.
"But surely one ship can't do that much damage." NayaI said, "Won't your defences stop us?"
"We're in a Starfleet ship and we're expected." Carr pointed out.
"But aren't both those locations protected by shields?" NayaI asked.
"Yes they are." Cole said, "But shields won't do anything to stop the seismic damage that our mass accelerators would cause if they hit close by, say a hundred metres outside the shield."
"The first hits will easily take out the shields and then the next ones will smash Starfleet Command and the council assembly building to pieces." Carr said.
"Cole I want you to take teams to the ammunition feeds of both mass accelerators and disconnect the ammunition feed. Even at full impulse we're still a few hours from Earth and anything we fire from this far out will be intercepted before it gets close to Earth." Edwards ordered and Cole nodded before he got out of his chair and headed for the turbolift. Then Edwards tapped his combadge, "Edwards to T'Lan. Do you read me?"
"T'Lan here captain. My team is still located near the fusion reactors. There is an engineering team on site but the level of power being drawn from the reactors for our impulse engines is making it impossible for them to reach the Iconian device. They have sent for-"
"That doesn't matter right now T'Lan." Edwards interrupted, "Do you think that you can manually fire a quantum torpedo?"
"Of course captain. The procedure is relatively straight forwards providing I have access to the torpedo itself." T'Lan answered.
"Good. Then I want you to head for the closest torpedo launcher and prepare a torpedo for manual launch on my command." Edwards told her.
"Yes captain. We are on our way." T'Lan replied before shutting off the channel.
"Launching a torpedo?" Carr asked and Edwards nodded.
"If we reach the Mars defence perimeter without regaining control of the ship then we'll fire a torpedo." he replied.
"But what will that achieve?" NayaI asked.
"It'll make the defence perimeter target us." Hamilton told her.
"Then when we don't respond to any communication they'll open fire." Carr added.
"Hopefully they'll shoot us down before we get close enough to Earth to fire the mass accelerators." Edwards said.
"Hopefully? You don't sound too convinced captain." NayaI said.
"Because even from Mars orbit our mass accelerators can still fire rounds that will strike Earth with pinpoint accuracy in a matter of minutes. Our defences will probably pick up the projectiles and shoot them down but there are no guarantees and it only takes one to slip through to level a city." Carr said.
"I see why so many of your people don't want ships like this being made." NayaI said and then she shrugged, "Of course most of my own would jump at the chance to have them."

"We are coming up on the planet the humans call Jupiter." Adam said, his eyes closed as he maintained his link with the infiltration forms scattered around the ship, "So far Starfleet has accepted the automated clearance messages being exchanged between this ship and their sentry beacons. Of course I'm sure that will change by the time we get within the orbit of Mars."

The Controller grunted and Adam opened his eyes to look at her.

"Don't worry. I'm sure that when Starfleet does eventually respond and shoots down this ship there will be enough time for us to get to an escape pod. Of course I won't be in it by the time it is recovered so you may want to come up with a story to explain how you managed to get away from me and eject. Or at least our host might want to. Otherwise they may not look to kindly on-" Adam said before he suddenly stopped speaking for a moment as a signal from another of the infiltration forms reached him, "Well it seems that Captain Edwards and his crew are smarter than I gave them credit for." he said, "They appear to know that I intend to use their ship's mass accelerators to attack Earth and are attempting to put the weapons out of commission before I can. I will have to do something about that."

The theory of the *Nightfall's* three hundred metre long mass accelerator weapons was primitive and they were almost useless against rapidly moving or shielded targets such as other starships. However, the purpose of them was to defend against the Borg who relied on their ability to adapt to attacks on their ships and regenerate rather than block it entirely and so they did not use conventional deflector shields meaning that they were as vulnerable to physical projectiles as their drones were. The problem was that the technology could also be used to inflict horrific damage to inhabited planets if used to bombard them as

Adam now intended to do and so there were many in the Federation and Starfleet that would rather the handful of ships like the *Nightfall* did not exist at all.

The duranium alloy rounds fired by the *Nightfall's* mass accelerator were fed from individual drum magazines mounted above the weapons' chambers towards the rear of the cruiser's two secondary hulls and were in plain sight when Cole and a trio of other security guards armed with phaser rifles entered the compartment that housed the loading mechanism of one of the weapons. Cole himself had his rifle slung and was holding his hand phaser so that he had a hand free to operate a tricorder as he scanned for signs of the infiltration forms.

"There are two up there in the firing mechanism." Cole said softly when he picked up the distinctive signs of Iconian synthetic flesh.

"Do you think we can remove them commander?" one of the guards asked as all three pointed their phaser rifles towards the mechanism.

"I don't know but we can certainly disconnect the ammunition feed. Give me a hand with this." Cole replied and as he put away his phaser and tricorder the security guard slung his rifle over his shoulder.

The two men then walked over to where the mass accelerator's ammunition was fed into the weapon via a track from the overhead drum and took hold of the end. The track was held in place by several clasps that were released by simply pulling back on them to disconnect it from the mass accelerator and Cole and the security guard pulled it back to expose the weapon's firing chamber.

"There's already a round in there." the security guard said.

"Yes, I see it." Cole replied. Fortunately the weapon was also fitted with a manual ejection system to clear a jammed round from the chamber and Cole reached for the lever that operated it. However, as he did so there was the sound of a hatch opening followed by the rush of escaping air, "Out!" Cole yelled as the air in the compartment began to rush into the mass accelerator's open chamber, passing over the projectile and into the barrel that was open to space now that the hatches at each end had been opened.

Cole himself paused just long enough to eject the projectile from the mass accelerator's chamber before rushing to the exit from the compartment that the other security guards were already hurrying through, Fortunately for all of the crewmen the two infiltrator forms located inside the mass accelerator were placed so that while they had control of the weapon they had no control over any of the other systems in the room and so could not prevent the men from leaving as the atmosphere inside was vented into space.

"Cole to bridge." Cole said, activating his combadge as the door slid shut behind him and the rush of air from the corridor was cut off.

"Go ahead commander." Edwards responded.

"Captain we've cut of the ammunition feed from the starboard side mass accelerator but there's a problem. Our Iconian friend must have picked up on what we were doing because he's vented the air inside into space by opening the barrel." Cole explained.

"That explains our readings here commander." Edwards said, "We picked up on the loss of pressure from your section. How long will it take you to suit up to take care of the other weapon? I'd send Max but he's busy in engineering trying to get us control of the warp drive."

"Say twenty minutes." Cole said.

"Then hurry up commander. That take us awfully close to the Mars defence perimeter and if we can't get control of the ship back by then I'm going to have to do something drastic." Edwards told him.

"We're on our way. Cole out." Cole replied and as he shut off his combadge he looked at his men, "I don't like the sound of that." he said.

T'Lan chose one of the torpedo bays located in the *Nightfall's* primary hull to ready one of the weapons for a manual launch. With the *Nightfall's* torpedoes and phasers not part of Adam's plan to bombard Earth there were none of the infiltrator forms within the launcher, instead the system as a whole was being controlled from elsewhere on the ship. All Adam was interested in was preventing the crew from doing anything that could get in the way of his plan such as using other weapons to shoot down the projectiles he planned to launch.

"What is this supposed to do?" Nikki asked when she saw T'Lan and Shry slide the quantum torpedo out of its launcher.

"Since we will not be able to guide this torpedo after launch, logic suggests that the captain intends to launch it as a signal to the Mars defence perimeter that all is not well aboard the ship." T'Lan replied.

"And what will they do when they detect it?" Nikki added.

"They will likely try to establish face to face contact with Captain Edwards." T'Lan answered.

"And when they can't?" Nikki said nervously.

"If they're anything like the defences around Andoria then they'll fire everything they've got at the ship and blow it out of the sky." Shry told her.

"But we're all still aboard." Nikki said.

"We will likely have time to get to escape pods before the ship is destroyed." T'Lan said, "Casualties will be minimal."

"Minimal?" Nikki commented.

"Unfortunately there is no way for Emma to abandon ship. Despite now being self aware her program is still stored purely within the computer in sick bay." T'Lan said.

"Wait, so Emma will be killed?" Nikki said.

"Perhaps. The computer may remain intact even after the *Nightfall* is destroyed." T'Lan said, "Now please stand back while I prepare this torpedo for manual launch."

Nikki stepped back while T'Lan opened up the weapon to expose its guidance and launching circuitry. She then opened up her tricorder to link with the torpedo remotely as she began to reprogram it.

Had the *Nightfall's* nanite hive still been intact the infiltration forms would have been unable to interface themselves into the starship's systems, the microscopic machines being able to destroy any such physical threats to the ship and the Breen's use of their energy dampening weapons had been intended to remove this impediment to their plan. However, the nanites flowing through the cruiser's systems were not the only ones aboard the ship. In addition there were also a number of the machines contained within Max in place of the nanoprobes that were the first stage of Borg assimilation and these had survived the Breen attack.

These provided Max with the means to remove the infiltration forms from the *Nightfall's* warp drive as soon as the circuits they had attached themselves to were exposed. Max went from one to the next, reaching inside the circuitry to deliver a number of nanites that immediately made their way to the infiltration forms and clustered around them. Then when all five of the infiltration forms in engineering had been exposed and surrounded by the nanites Max sent the command for them to attack.

The nanites bored into the surfaces of the Iconian machines, penetrating the tough outer layer before burrowing their way to the processors at their heart and there were sparks from inside the open access panels as they were destroyed almost in unison.

"Report." Max said out loud as the nanites reported to him that the infiltration forms had been destroyed.

"We have full control of the warp drive." an engineer told him from a nearby control panel, "No signs of damage to the control system but the cores themselves will need overhauling. They've been pushed way past their limit for too long."

"Interesting." Max said.

"What? That the warp drive is breaking down?" the other engineer asked.

"No. The nanites recorded some interesting information when they disabled the Iconian machine." Max said and he activated his combadge, "Max to bridge." he transmitted.

"Tell me you have some good news Max." Carr's voice responded.

"Yes commander. On two counts." Max said, "Firstly the Iconian machines in engineering have all been destroyed."

"That's great news Max. Do we have control of the warp drive again?" Carr asked.

"Technically yes. Though without navigation control we cannot make use of it. In addition the warp drive has been overtaxed from prolonged operation at maximum warp and we need to over haul it. For now I recommend that main power be deactivated and only auxiliary be used." Max told her.

"Okay and what's the second thing you wanted to say?" Carr said.

"When my nanites were attacking the Iconian machines one of them made a last minute transmission and received a response from the escaped prisoner. The signal was enough for the nanites to get a bearing on where he is."

"Max that's brilliant." Carr said, "Where is he?"

"He is currently located towards the rear of the port side secondary hull commander. Where is Lieutenant Commander T'Lan currently located?" Max asked.

"In the primary hull. Deck thirteen forward torpedo bay." Carr told him.

"Excellent. Commander I want the captain's permission to set up a dampening field to prevent the prisoner from activating a gateway to relocate." Max said.

"Max this is Captain Edwards, you have my permission to establish the dampening field throughout the secondary hulls and weapons pod. I'm going to have troops move in and surround him. Can you join the teams hunting for the other devices? If your nanites are able to monitor their communications then maybe they can narrow down where the prisoner is."

"Yes captain. I am on my way."

Cole and his security team stood outside the compartment where the mechanism for the *Nightfall's* second mass accelerator was located. All four of the team now wore space suits so that they would be protected from the vacuum of space if Adam decided to decompress this one as well.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole, what is your situation?" Edwards asked from the bridge just as Cole and his team were about to enter the compartment.

"We're at the mass accelerator now captain. We should have it disabled in a couple of minutes." Cole responded.

"Good. Max thinks he's located the prisoner in the port side secondary hull towards the rear. He's going to set up a dampening field to stop him from forming a gateway to escape. I'm ordering all our security and ground troops to close in and keep him contained before we move in. We don't know what the status of West is so we have to treat this as a hostage situation." Edwards told him.

"Understood captain. I'll join them as soon as possible."

"We need to move." Adam said, suddenly getting to his feet and picking up his phaser rifle from the table and The Controller grunted as she was pulled off the bunk she had been sat on, "The crew have activated a dampening field to prevent me from leaving through a gateway and despite my best efforts the second mass accelerator has just been disabled. I will have to reactivate one and fire it myself. I will need your service as a hostage again."

Adam then pushed The Controller out into the corridor ahead of him again so that she could verify that it was empty before he emerged. Then he pushed The Controller along ahead of him as he turned towards the mass accelerator on this side of the ship.

The sound of a doorway sliding open behind Adam made him spin around, dragging The Controller so that she remained in front of him as a science officer and a pair of security guards came through the doorway. Adam was already prepared to fire and he shot one of the security guards before he had the chance to realise that he was there. The science officer threw herself to the floor while the other security guard turned around and took aim but with West in his line of fire he hesitated long enough for Adam to shoot him as well. Meanwhile the science officer had grabbed hold of the first security guard's phaser rifle and fired it at Adam. However, her attempt to avoid hitting West with a weapon she knew was configured to a lethal setting meant that her shot went wide and missed Adam entirely before he shot her as well.

"Hurry up." Adam told The Controller as he started to drag her down the corridor towards the mass accelerator again, "Thanks to my disruption of their internal sensors I doubt the crew will have detected the phaser fire but someone might have heard that and those crewmen will undoubtedly be missed soon."

After Cole had disabled the mass accelerator on the port side a pair of security guards had been stationed outside it to ensure that the weapon could not be reactivated without anyone knowing about it. As he had done before Adam used The Controller as a shield when he stepped into view of the two security guards, resting his rifle on her shoulder. As soon as they saw him both of the security guards dropped into a kneeling position and took aim, attempting to draw a line of sight that would get around West. This time though one of the guards reached for his combadge.

"This is crewman Raynor. The prisoner is outside the port side accelerator and still has Lieutenant Commander West as a hostage." he transmitted before Adam shot him.

"Get back!" Adam shouted at the other guard, "Get back or you and her both die."

"Let her go." the security guard responded and then Adam fired again, shooting him dead as well.

Grabbing The Controller by her arm, Adam dragged her along with him as he ran to the door leading to the mass accelerator. It took just a moment for him to send the command to the infiltrator forms within the

weapon's mechanism for the barrel to be sealed again, closing off the opening into space. The compartment itself remained in a vacuum and the door would not open when Adam pressed the controls. Instead he was forced to smash the front of the control panel to expose the circuitry. Then he rolled up one of his sleeves and using his fingernails scratched into the synthetic flesh of his body and pulled out a strand of the material, the end of which he pressed to the circuit board to provide him with a direct link that enabled him to override the safety system on the door and open it. This triggered a short lived breeze as air from the corridor flowed into the compartment until the pressure was equalised and Adam smiled.

"Inside and stand watch while I work." he told The Controller as he picked up his phaser rifle again and darted inside the room.

The Controller followed begrudgingly and remained standing by the door while it remained open, the mechanism that would have closed it automatically having been disabled when Adam forced the door open. While she was standing watch The Controller made his way to the mass accelerator itself and using his superior strength lifted the ammunition feed track back into place before locking it down. Almost immediately after he did this there was the sound of a round being fed into the weapon's chamber by the infiltration form controlling that mechanism.

All of a sudden The Controller let out a muffled cry from by the doorway and Adam turned to see that she had stepped back from it. Grabbing hold of his phaser rifle he rushed to her side and briefly peered out into the corridor where he saw a pair of MACOs rushing towards him with their rifles held at the ready. With West nowhere in sight the two soldiers both opened fire and the corridor was filled with the sound of assault rifles being used while set to fully automatic. A round clipped the side of Adam's head as he retreated back into the mass accelerator compartment and tore away part of his head. Had he been human the wound would have been fatal but the synthetic tissue destroyed or exposed had no other purpose to Adam than to make him appear more humanoid and he just snarled.

"Target is hit." Adam heard a MACO saying into his communicator, "Believed still active. We're going in." and then there was the sound of something solid hitting the floor of the corridor before sliding along it. Looking down at the floor just outside the doorway Adam saw a smoke grenade roll into view before there was a 'pop' as it burst open and the corridor began to fill with thick grey smoke.

"Get back from the door." Adam told The Controller and she stepped further away from it, backing up as far as the mass accelerator on the other side of the compartment while Adam lay down on the floor to play dead, placing his rifle on the floor close by.

The MACOs came through the doorway together and immediately saw Adam lying face down in front of them and one kicked the phaser rifle away.

"Commander are you okay?" one of the soldiers asked when he saw The Controller standing bound and gagged beside the mass accelerator and she nodded. The soldier then walked towards her, intending to try and release her and at the same time the other MACO rolled Adam over only to find that he had been holding a hand phaser beneath him. Adam fired the phaser and shot the MACO standing over him at point blank range, the beam burning right through the armoured soldier's torso before hitting the ceiling. Hearing the sound of the energy weapon firing the other MACO turned around and took aim but in doing so he took his eyes off The Controller and she delivered a sharp kick to the back of one of his knees, bringing him to the floor with a cry of both pain and surprise as he realised who had just attacked him. Before he could either recover from this or try to warn anyone about the true nature of Adam's hostage he too was hit by a phaser beam. Adam fired again and the MACO slumped forwards in a lifeless heap.

Adam picked up one of the MACO rifles and studied it briefly, taking note of the odd combination of modern directed energy weapon with the centuries old technology of the assault rifle it was mounted beneath.

Deciding that the limitations of a firearm outweighed any benefit in circumstances such as this Adam tossed the weapon aside again and picked up the phaser rifle before returning to the doorway and peering back out into the corridor. The environmental monitoring system in the corridor had detected the cloud of smoke from the grenade that the MACOs had used to cover their advance and acted to draw it into the ventilation system as rapidly as possible. This meant that the cloud was already well on its way to being cleared and Adam could see that the corridor was empty.

"Stand watch again." he told The Controller, "I need to connect with my infiltration forms again." and he retreated back into the compartment again and sat on the floor.

ii.

"Captain internal sensors just came back on line." Carr announced as she looked at the display built into her chair.

"Excellent. Do we have locations on all of the worms now?" Edwards responded.

"Yes captain. It looks like there are just under thirty of them left to be cleared." Carr answered and Edwards nodded.

"Make sure that the locations are passed along to the search teams. I want full control of my ship back. Now what about the prisoner?" Edwards said.

"Still holed up with the mass accelerator probably." Carr replied.

"What about transporters? Can't we just beam him out of there now we can get a lock?" Nayal suggested.

"Transporter functions are still disabled by the worms." Carr told her.

"Bridge to Captain Heart. What's your status?" Edwards said, activating his intercom.

"I've got squads of men cutting off all access to the mass accelerator captain," Heart responded, "and I'm preparing an assault team to move in and deal with the prisoner. Do you have any specific orders regarding him?"

Edwards paused.

"Recapture him if you can but don't hesitate to take a shot if you have one. The safety of Lieutenant Commander West must take priority over-" he began.

"Don't worry captain. I'm not about to let her get hurt on my watch. Heart out." Heart interrupted before shutting off his communicator.

In the corridor where Heart and a mixed group of MACOs, Imperial Guard and Starfleet security officers were preparing for their assault on the mass accelerator compartment a door slid open and Shry entered with another pair of Andorians, each of them carrying a bulky duranium shield on one arm.

"Think these will do?" Shry asked as Heart studied the shields.

"I think so. Hopefully they'll only have to take a couple of hits before we can take out the prisoner anyway." he replied.

"Good, that's what I thought as well. I've sent more to Cole's team that will be moving in from behind" Shry said as the door opened again and Doctor King stepped into the corridor.

"Well I'm here like you asked." he said.

"Good. Hopefully we'll manage to pull this off casualty free but if anyone does get hurt I want you on hand to treat them." Heart said before he activated his communicator, "Heart to Cole." he transmitted.

"Cole here."

"Commander we're all set to move in. What about your people?" Heart asked.

"We just received the shields and we're ready as well." Cole told him.

"Good. In that case let's not delay any further. We're going in." Heart said.

Max peered into the impulse drive control system, his Borg implants revealing the exact location of the infiltration form that was connected to one of the fusion reactors. There did not appear to be anything about this machine that was any different to any of the others he and his engineers had already dealt with but as he reached inside the machinery an idea occurred to him.

"Max to bridge." he said as he activated his combadge.

"Go ahead Max." Edwards replied.

"Captain I am about to deactivate the device overriding our control of the impulse drive." Max said.

"Very good. How long will it take?" Edwards asked.

"Probably less than a minute, just like the other captain. However, it occurs to me that even without navigational control we can still make use of the impulse drive to prevent the prisoner from firing our mass accelerators at Earth." Max answered.

"How?" Edwards said.

"If I remain connected to the impulse drive then I can control it directly. The mass accelerators are in fixed forward mountings so all I will require is someone to tell me how to steer the ship. I suggest someone takes up a position in the officer's lounge with a set of binoculars. They can direct me away from Earth. Even if the prisoner attempts to use our manoeuvring thrusters to change our facing again the impulse engines are far more powerful and he will not be able to overcome them with nothing but thrusters." Max said.

"Do it." Edwards told him, "T'Lan's probably most qualified to direct you so I'll send her to the lounge now that we won't be needing her to fire the torpedo."

Adam's eyes opened wide when the infiltration forms attached to the *Nightfall's* sensors told him that the ship had just made an impulse turn of a few degrees, just enough that any rounds fired from the ship's mass accelerators would pass harmlessly by Earth instead of striking it. An attempt to bring the ship back onto the desired facing met with failure when the impulse engines fired again and the ship turned towards empty space once more. Adam had watched while the reports coming in from his infiltration forms decreased as the crew of the *Nightfall* found and destroyed more and more of them but he had hoped that he would be able to launch his attack before they regained enough control of their ship to prevent it. As far as Adam could tell the ship's external sensors and navigational controls were still under his control but obviously the Starfleet crew had been able to find a way around this and now there was only one option left open to him.

He had to leave.

With his mission an obvious failure Adam decided that the time had come to return home to the subspace realm where the Iconians now resided. However, with the dampening field in place to prevent him from creating a gateway there directly he needed to get off the *Nightfall* first. His own infiltrator forms had disabled all of the ship's shuttles and other auxiliary craft so taking one of them was out of the question, even if he could make it all the way to the hangar. On the other hand there were numerous escape pods located all around the *Nightfall* so that the crew would be able to evacuate the ship quickly if there was an emergency. The escape pods had only minimal propulsion and no weapons or shields but all that Adam needed was a way of getting far enough away from the *Nightfall* that he would be outside the reach of the dampening field that he would be able to form a gateway.

"We're leaving." he said suddenly, grabbing hold of The Controller and pushing her through the doorway into the corridor.

As soon as she was in the corridor The Corridor looked both ways down and froze when she saw the troops advancing from both directions behind the large rectangular shields that had been deployed side by side to create barriers across almost the entire width of the corridor. Stepping out of the compartment behind The Controller, Adam also saw these troops and he immediately hooked an arm around The Controller's neck to pull her close to him and he held her right in front of him, making sure that it was not possible to get a clear line of fire at him from either direction. he then fired his phaser rifle one handed at one of the rows of shields but the beam was unable to penetrate it rapidly and so he ceased fire.

"Stay back!" he called out, "Stay back or she dies."

From both sides the troops ceased their advance, the shields being placed against the deck as the soldiers behind aimed their rifles over the tops of them.

"There's no way out." Cole shouted back at him, "Surrender now and I can guarantee that you'll be well treated."

"Get back." Adam shouted, "I know you won't take a shot at me while I have Jenna here as a hostage and I'll know the moment you regain control of your transporters and try to beam her to safety. Trust me, try anything and she dies."

Looking through the optical sight of his rifle Heart was confident that he or any of his troops, as well as the Imperial Guard present could put a shot into the side of Adam's head and finish him off before he could react but just one small and unintentional movement from him or Adam could put West in the line of fire instead and so he held his fire until an idea occurred to him and he activated his communicator, setting it to broadcast to all of the troops in the corridor.

"Stand by to fire." he broadcast.

"Belay that order." Cole responded, "West is still in the way."

"Trust me commander, she'll be clear. Watch for me to make my move and then open fire." Heart said and Cole sighed.

"Very well captain. You can-" he began before Heart switched the phaser emitter mounted under the barrel of his assault rifle to stun and fired it, not at Adam but at West.

The phaser beam hit The Controller in her chest. With West already being unconscious and The Controller immune to the effects of any incapacitating attack the beam did not affect her. However, she remained resolute in maintaining her cover as Jenna West and so The Controller feigned being knocked out by the beam and allowed West's body to go limp. Adam was unprepared for this and his grip was not enough to keep her standing up in front of him. Instead West's body dropped to the floor at his feet and all of a sudden there was a barrage of phaser fire from both directions that struck him repeatedly.

Adam convulsed under the barrage of fire before he too collapsed and his inanimate body landed on top of The Controller.

"Cole to bridge." Cole said as he tapped his combadge, "The Iconian is down. I say again the Iconian is down. There shouldn't be anything to stop us taking control of the ship back now."

"Doctor let's move!" Heart snapped and the troops in front of them opened a gap between their shields that allowed the two men to race down the corridor to where The Controller was pretending to be unconscious and King took a hypospray loaded with a stimulant from his medical kit.

"This should do the trick." he said as he injected the drug into West's neck and she was immediately brought back to consciousness.

Having gone directly from confronting Adam in the brig about the missing material from his jacket to waking up bound and gagged on the floor of a corridor from her point of view left West confused and it was only when she saw the remains of Adam's corpse that she realised that he must have been using the Iconian personality in her mind to impersonate her and act as a hostage. West let out a cry as Heart ripped the tape from over her mouth and he smiled at her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, "I hated to have to stun you but it was the only way I could think of to get you clear of the prisoner."

"I think so. One hell of a headache though." she replied, a vague recollection of being hit by a phaser beam coming to her.

"We should get you to sick bay and check you out though." King said, "Then we'll try and come up with an excuse as to why that idiot Mackey doesn't need to offer you more counselling to get over being used as a hostage." and West groaned.

"Can't someone just shoot me again instead?" she said.

Sat in an apartment that overlooked Starfleet Command and the Golden Gate Bridge, Admiral Schmidt reviewed the official report of what had happened aboard the *USS Nightfall* on a PADD while Jones and Brown watched and drank coffee.

"Unfortunate." he said, sighing as he lowered the PADD and then also took a sip of coffee, "The technology of these Iconian worms looks interesting, mind you but I think that next time more drastic measures will be necessary."

"Such as?" Jones asked, lowering his mug.

"Our mistake was having the *Nightfall* transport the prisoner back to Earth. Had we gone to Starbase twelve ourselves to collect and examine him then none of this would have happened." Schmidt replied, holding up the PADD again.

"But you said yourself that both Jones and I are known to the crew of the *Nightfall*. You've also mentioned that one of the crew knows who you are. Would you trust this to someone else?" Brown asked.

"No. I want to keep this between just us as much as possible. However, we may need to bring in some additional support. What we should have done was removed the Iconian from the *Nightfall* and placed him in a more secure confinement facility aboard one of our own ships. Then we could have examined him directly."

"I think the chief of Starfleet Intelligence would object to that." Jones commented.

"Let her object all she wants. We will share any relevant data with her and she can pass the information on to the rest of Starfleet if she so wishes." Schmidt said.

"As long our section isn't named." Brown commented.

"Of course." Schmidt replied.

"So how do you intend to obtain another Iconian?" Jones asked, "I don't think anyone has had any success in luring them in deliberately yet."

"No, unfortunately we will probably have to wait for another to be discovered. Though if they are becoming so bold or perhaps desperate that they try attacking Earth itself then I do not think it will take long before another makes itself known to us one way or another and now that we can both detect and trap them we will not let another slip through our fingers." Schmidt answered.

"We'll need a ship preparing." Brown said and Schmidt nodded.

"Do it." he said, "Make sure that it is equipped to our precise specifications. I don't want anything to go wrong a second time."