

# STAR TREK *NIGHTFALL*

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

## TO STORM THE GATES OF HEAVEN

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



# ***STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL*** **TO STORM THE GATES OF HEAVEN**

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

The major powers of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants are thrown into disarray when a new Iconian leader abandons their previous subterfuge and strikes openly against frontier colonies and shipping. All of this still masks a hidden agenda though as the Iconian Lord Martial plans to bring them all to their knees in preparation for the return of the Iconians.

The only chance of stopping them lies aboard the Federation starship *USS Nightfall* as the crew discover the dreadful truth about one of their closest friends...

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2. Fleet of Ghosts
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# PROLOGUE

Stardate Unknown. Location Unknown.

“So you were summoned as well?” the Reman said to the young human girl who appeared as if from nowhere in the featureless room.

“Yes. Were you told what this is all about Shintar?” The Girl responded.

“No. Only that my presence was required by a member of the council itself.” Shintar said.

“As was I.” The Girl said before the only exit from the room slid open and a large humanoid form that was devoid of features entered, “You have been sent to collect us?” The Girl asked. Lacking the physical ability to speak the milky white figure instead sent a wireless transmission from itself to the implants contained within The Girl and Shintar telling them that they were to accompany it.

“Then lead the way. My time is valuable.” Shintar said.

Ordinarily when summoned before their leadership Iconians such as The Girl or Shintar would leave their host bodies and upload their consciousness to the computer system they had resided in for the last two hundred thousand years, before making their return to the Milky Way galaxy. However, on this occasion they were both led through the corridors of their home to a section that few visited and as the large doorway slid open to permit them access the figure that had escorted them here stepped aside and waited beside the open doorway.

“You know what this place is. Why bring us here?” Shintar said, looking at The Girl.

“To find that out I think we’re going to have to go inside.” she replied and she calmly walked through the doorway.

The chamber beyond was massive and the area that The Girl and Shintar entered was filled with row after row of transparent cylinders, each three metres tall and one and half metres wide. Some of these stood empty but others appeared filled with a fluid that was the same milky white colour as the figure that had escorted the pair here. The purpose of these cylinders was demonstrated in those places where the bodies of members of various species were being loaded into the open tops of the cylinders by machines under the direct control of other Iconian minds. Once immersed in the fluid, the liquid form of the synthetic flesh used to create fleshforms such as the one that had escorted The Girl and Shintar here, it would soak into the body and begin to modify it. These modifications would repair any physical damage that had been inflicted to the body and the most critical changes were the implantation in the brain of the storage vessel that would enable it to act as a host to an Iconian and also to be able to create the gateways that they used to travel between star systems and in the case of returning to their home, between dimensions.

“Ah you’re here.” a voice announced as The Girl and Shintar walked between the tanks.

“Lord Martial?” The Girl said, additional data wirelessly accompanying the voice identifying the owner of the voice. Before the Iconians had retreated into their subspace realm to escape the bombardment of their home world the Lord Martial had been their highest ranking military officer and in the aftermath of their retreat had become one of the members of their governing council.

“Yes. Please continue to the forming baths.” the Lord Martial told her and The Girl and Shintar continued to walk through the chamber.

Further on from the tanks used to create flesh hosts were the baths of raw synthetic flesh from which the plain fleshforms were constructed, woven using tools mounted on arms that moved around inside the fluid. The arms withdrew from one of the baths as The Girl and Shintar approached it and then a hand reached out to grab the side. It was immediately obvious that what had just been created in the bath was not an ordinary fleshform, apart from its colour the hand was a perfect replica of a human hand. Then as the figure inside the bath pulled itself out further it also became apparent that this Iconian form was also clad in clothing designed to resemble the style if not the colour of an obsolete pattern of Federation Starfleet uniform also made from the synthetic flesh.

“Now this brings back memories.” the Lord Martial said as he climbed out of the bath of liquid flesh and stood in front of The Girl and Shintar.

“I was not expecting you take a physical form Lord Martial.” Shintar said.

“I want to be able to watch the final destruction of the upstart empires that lay claim to what is ours by right.” the Lord Martial replied.

“You are taking control of our campaign?” The Girl asked.

“Your lack of progress demands my personal involvement.” the Lord Martial said, looking from her to Shintar,

“Your standing orders are simple, to destabilise the Alpha and Beta Quadrants ahead of our takeover. Yet here we are and despite the destruction of the Romulan home system their civil war is ending while you have both failed to make any serious inroads into bringing down the Federation. From now on you will both answer

to me directly.”

“What is your plan Lord Martial?” Shintar said.

“Infiltration and subversion has failed. From this point on we will use direct attacks to bring them to their knees. Then the way will be left open for us to rebuild our empire. What once was ours will be ours again.” the Lord Martial told him.

“Lord Martial a direct military strike has been attempted before.” The Girl pointed out and the Lord Martial glared at her.

“You call your effort a military strike?” The Lord Martial said, interrupting her again, “You scattered our forces and relied on a simple trick to disable the Federation's defences. Did it not occur to you to send our entire force against a single target? Destroy that and then move on to the next?”

“But Lord Martial we have only a limited number of ships and no means to make any more.” The Girl pointed out, “Individually the ships we would face are no match for our dreadnoughts but the civilisations that control the galaxy now exist in much larger numbers. Our losses would rapidly mount.”

“Only if they are able to concentrate enough of their ships where we plan to attack. Force them to spread their resources more thinly and attack while their ships are too far from home to be of use to them.” The Lord Martial said, “That is what the pair of you will now do. Find me isolated colonies and empires too weak to defend themselves, those shall be my first targets. I will smash them, leave their cities in ruins and their inhabitants helpless. That will force the galactic powers to send their ships to help the survivors, bleeding off their strength away from their home worlds and that is when we shall strike with our full force. One by one the capitals of the galaxy will be destroyed, leaving the rest to be easily conquered and I intend to watch their destruction myself.”

“Is that why you picked that form for your body Lord Martial? I've seen your face in Federation records.” The Girl said and the Lord Martial smiled.

“When I demand the Federation's surrender I will do using the face of one of their greatest heroes.” he answered.



Stardate 68004.5. Federation Colony Pharasas II. Located just over three light years from the Cardassian border.

The colony of Pharasas II had enjoyed a brief period of importance during the two years of the Dominion War and the Federation had used its strategic location as a major refuelling and servicing port. In the years following the war though, Starfleet had no longer viewed the planet as an important base of operations and resources had been transferred elsewhere. A few of the weapons that had been installed during the war had been turned over to the local planetary government but defence was not a high priority for the colonists and so when several unidentified vessels appeared in the system they were not immediately treated as hostile. "Sir I've got three contacts on my sensors." one of the orbital control staff reported, looking up from her console to the watch commander of the small orbiting platform that acted as a command and control centre for the system.

"Identification?" the commander asked as he walked over to the controller.

"Nothing yet. They just appeared, I think they were cloaked." the woman said and the watch commander frowned.

"Romulans are too busy cleaning up now that their civil war is ending to be interested in us and we're too far from the Klingon Empire for it to be one of their ships. Are they in visual range yet?"

"Yes sir, putting it on the main screen now." the controller said and both of them looked at the large view screen that dominated the small control room. This now showed a trio of massive cylindrical vessels heading towards the planet in a side by side formation.

"Good God, how big are those things?" he asked.

"Sensors indicate about three thousand metres sir." the controller said before her console indicated a change in the energy output of the unidentified vessels approaching, "It's hard to tell but I think they just raised their shields." she said and the watch commander's eyes widened.

"Red alert. Raise shields and activate all orbital defences. Someone get me the Prime Minister, he has to know what's going on up here. Then someone get me a direct line to Starfleet."

"I've got an energy spike, they're-" the controller began as alarms started to sound all over the orbiting platform but before she could finish her sentence what appeared to be a storm of lightning erupted from the front of one of the cylindrical ships. Rather than being focused on just a single target this lightning leapt out at every artificial satellite around Pharasas II that was within its field of view and in a matter of moments all the communication, navigation and defensive satellites were destroyed, including the command and control platform that was torn apart before being able to raise its shields.

With nothing but debris between them and the planet now the three cylindrical vessels settled into orbit themselves, taking up a position where the colony itself was visible and then all three released a wave of torpedoes in unison.

The barrage lasted just a few seconds but by the time it stopped tens of thousands of people on the planet below were dead and the colony was without power, running water or leadership. Their task complete, the three orbiting warships then simply vanished.

Stardate 68004.5 Transfer Station *M'Pek*. Located on the Klingon/Federation border.

The civilian freighter *SS Florence* dropped out of warp on final approach to the space station that orbited an unremarkable brown dwarf star. *M'Pek* had been constructed specifically to ease the movement of goods back and forth between the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets although during the brief Federation-Klingon war of 2372 to 2373 it had proved a useful base for raiding squadrons to attack Federation worlds and shipping. As was to be expected of a Klingon facility the *M'Pek* was armed but its weapons fit was not especially powerful, intended only to deter pirates from attacking during peacetime while during the war the presence of at least half a dozen warships at all times had been enough to protect it against Federation attack.

"Federation vessel you are to dock at port seven. Do not delay, there are other ships expected." the voice of the *M'Pek's* flight manager ordered in a typically gruff Klingon manner.

"Confirmed *M'Pek*, we are on approach now. Docking in-" the *Florence's* helmsman began to respond when all of a sudden a pair of massive cylindrical vessels appeared from nowhere and both unleashed storms of lightning from their darkened hulls. One of these storms struck the *Florence* and spread across its hull, finding weak point and exposed systems and triggering a rapid series of explosions before one of the freighter's warp nacelles exploded and the entire ship was consumed in a brief flare of heat and light.

Meanwhile the other intruder focused its fire on the *M'Pek* and the light from its hull tore through several other transport ships already docked with the station.

The Klingon crew of the *M'Pek* reacted quickly to this surprise attack and raised the station's shields while also powering their weapons. They had little time in which to fight back, however as both of the attacking ships fired volleys of torpedoes. The *M'Pek's* shields collapsed after just a few seconds of these before the rest of the torpedoes struck the main command and control sections of the station and destroyed it utterly. With the station crippled and the remaining crew and visitors isolated with no means of co-ordinating their damage control efforts the two Iconian warships ceased their attack and engaged their gateway generators, vanishing as suddenly as they had appeared.

Stardate 68004.6 Romulan Colony Voress. Located about twenty light years from the former location of Romulas.

Voress had long been colonised by the Romulans. It was an unpleasant world with an unbreathable atmosphere but rich in important minerals and so a workforce largely consisting of Remans had been brought in to mine these, living in a domed colony. When the Star Empire descended into civil war following the destruction of the Romulan home system the Reman workers had rebelled against their Romulan overseers. The revolt had been put down with heavy casualties and the surviving Romulans evacuated when the planet found itself on the front lines between two rival factions. Now that the civil war was over it was being resettled and dozens of transports now orbited the planet, while colonists and equipment were ferried down by shuttle and transporter.

No need for warship protection had been foreseen in this operation and so when a single Iconian vessel suddenly appeared the fleet of transports was helpless against it. The massive vessel targeted the transports with a swarm of torpedoes, each ship totally destroyed by a single hit while the colonists who had already made it to the planet below could only look on in horror with no means to defend the ships or even themselves.

Sirens sounded throughout the colony and Romulans ran for shelters they hoped were still functional, sealing themselves inside as the orbiting Iconian warship now turned its attention to the colony itself. Targeting this with its directed energy array, the lightning that erupted from the warship flowed across the surface of the colony dome until it shattered, sending debris down on top of the buildings and fleeing Romulans below and exposing them to the poisonous atmosphere outside. The Romulans already inside shelters immediately locked the doors to protect themselves against this, thus trapping more of their kin outside who hammered on the doors to be let in until they suffocated.

Leaving behind it several thousand Romulans now cowering in shelters with only limited life support and supplies the Iconian warship ceased its attack and disappeared again.

Stardate 68004.7 Cardassian Colony Yorva. Located along the Romulan Border.

In the close to fifteen years since the end of the Dominion War the Cardassian Union had been faced with the massive task of rebuilding their territory, including their own home world that had been brought to the brink of total destruction not by any invading Federation, Klingon or Romulan army but by their own Dominion allies. With so many resources needed to reconstruct the heart of their empire there had been little left for the outer colonies and Yorva was one such colony. Before the war it had been a military base intended to deter aggression from the Romulan Star Empire and when the Romulans entered the war on the side of the Federation-Klingon alliance they had launched a massive offensive to take the planet before it could be used as a base for Dominion counter attacks against them. In the immediate aftermath of the war the planet had been considered too remote to be a priority for rebuilding and later on the Romulan civil war meant that there was little threat even to the much weakened Cardassian Union for it to be worth diverting resources to it that were much needed elsewhere. Because of this the only reconstruction work carried out had been by the inhabitants of the colony themselves and although they had been able to re-establish basic services and become self sufficient in food supply the colony remained undefended.

Therefore, when a single Iconian warship appeared in orbit and rapidly destroyed the few satellites that the colonists had been able to launch the colonial administration could do nothing more than encourage the population to flee out into the countryside right as the bombardment began. However, this turned out to be largely counter productive as the bombardment targeted the outlying farms that supplied the colony's food instead of the only sizeable settlement and the death toll rose from civilians rushing into the target zone instead of away from it. The settlement's sole power plant was the only major planetary facility attacked before the Iconian warship suddenly withdrew, leaving it largely in darkness as rescuers attempted to save the injured out in the countryside

Stardate 68004.9. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol along the Romulan Neutral Zone.

"Over here cousin!" a voice called out as soon as Lieutenant Commander T'Lan, the *Nightfall's* chief science officer entered the officer's lounge and she looked across the room to see the Romulan liaison officer Sublieutenant Nayal waving at her from a table at which several other members of the *Nightfall's* senior staff sat.

"Can I get you anything commander?" the crewman behind the bar then asked.

"Hot chocolate please." T'Lan replied and the crewman nodded.

"I'll bring it across to your table." he said and T'Lan walked across the lounge to the table where the other senior officers were sat, picking an empty seat next to Lieutenant Commander William White, also known by his call sign 'Snowman', the leader of the *Nightfall's* attached fighter squadron. He and T'Lan were the only Starfleet officers sat at the table, as well as Nayal who held no official Federation rank there were three military officers present. Captain Shry commanded the company of Andorian Imperial Guard aboard the *Nightfall*, while Captain Gary Heart commanded the MACO company. The third military officer, a MACO lieutenant was Rebecca Edwards, an assault shuttle pilot and also the daughter of the *Nightfall's* captain.

"That was lucky Nayal." White commented as T'Lan sat beside him, "I was worried that T'Lan might not have noticed you."

"Sarcasm?" T'Lan asked.

"You think?" Heart responded, smiling.

"What, aren't you going to tell me not to call you 'cousin' cousin?" Nayal said and T'Lan looked at her.

"Given that my previous efforts have failed to change your behaviour it seems illogical to continue to try."

T'Lan replied, "Added to which it is not something that is likely to continue now that you will be returning to your home."

"You're leaving us Nayal?" Rebecca said and Nayal hesitated as the others around the table all turned towards her, "What about Bradley?"

The Bradley mentioned by Rebecca was Lieutenant Commander Hamilton, the *Nightfall's* chief helmsman and he and Nayal had shared a romantic relationship for some time.

"Hey look I was always clear with Bradley that our relationship is a casual one. So if I do decide to-" Nayal began.

"So you've not made up your mind yet?" Shry interrupted.

"No, no I haven't. Although I really don't see me getting citizenship and applying for a commission in Starfleet like Bradley suggested." Nayal said just as the crewman from behind the bar arrived to place T'Lan's drink on the table in front of her.

"Is that hot chocolate?" White asked when he saw the drink, "Should you be drinking that in your condition?" and he glanced at her swollen stomach.

"Although chocolate is an intoxicant to my species as alcohol is to yours there is no evidence that consuming small amounts while pregnant will harm a Vulcan child." T'Lan answered as she picked up the mug and took a sip.

"Your child is half human." Shry pointed out.

"And chocolate has no intoxicating effects on humans." T'Lan said.

"Okay but if your kid is born with fetal chocolate syndrome don't blame any of us." Heart added.

"There is no such condition." T'Lan replied.

"I didn't think you consumed chocolate anyway T'Lan." Rebecca added.

"Until recently I did not. However, possibly due the hybrid nature of my child I have found my emotional control harder to maintain at times. The chocolate has a calming effect." T'Lan said.

"Anything to avoid cracking a smile, eh cousin?" Nayal commented, smiling herself. However, before T'Lan could reply Heart suddenly turned his head so that he was no longer looking towards the main entrance to the lounge and covered his face with his hand.

"Oh no, don't look now but Mackey's just arrived. Everyone stay quiet and maybe he'll go away." he said and the officers all lowered their heads.

Mackey, the *Nightfall's* counsellor still noticed them, however and even though none of them socialised with him he still walked directly towards their table and stood at the end of it.

"Hi there." he said.

"Counsellor." Rebecca replied politely, taking a sip of her drink.

"Mackey." Shry added in a sterner tone.

"What brings you here lieutenant?" White asked.

"I was hoping you might be able to help me." Mackey answered, "I'm looking for Lieutenant Commander West. M'kay?"

"Over to you Gary." White said, looking at Heart, "She's your girlfriend."

"As Nayal said about Bradley, Jenna and I are purely casual." Heart replied.

"She refuses to stay the night." Shry commented and Heart sighed.

"Thanks for sharing that." he said. Then he looked at Mackey, "I don't know where she is right now. Have you tried her combadge? You know, those things all you Starfleet geniuses have pinned right there on your chests?" and he pointed at Mackey's combadge.

"Commander West tends not to respond when I try to get in touch with her that way." Mackey said.

"Ha!" T'Lan exclaimed suddenly, "Perhaps that is because you are such an ineffective counsellor that the crew avoids you wherever possible. The only reason Lieutenant Commander West continues to see you is because you have steadfastly refused to sign off on the report that confirms her mental fitness for duty. A form I doubt any other counsellor in Starfleet would sign for you."

The others at the table looked at one another, taken totally by surprise by T'Lan's outburst. Meanwhile Mackey appeared stunned by what she had just said and there was a noticeable pause before he spoke.

"I'll try somewhere else. M'kay." he said before turning around and hurrying away, at which point everyone at the table turned to stare at T'Lan while she continued to drink her hot chocolate.

"T'Lan, what the hell was that?" White asked.

"How much of that hot chocolate has she drunk?" Rebecca added.

"Not enough to explain that." White said.

"As I explained," T'Lan said, "my pregnancy is making controlling my emotions more difficult than usual."

"Seriously though," Heart said, "after all these years why are we only finding out now that if we just tell Mackey what a useless idiot he is that he'll go away? At the ship's launching ceremony I was stuck listening to him go on about the psychological problems my troops might face being deployed on a starship for forty-five minutes. Forty-five minutes of my life that I could have not wasted just by telling him what everyone who has known him for at least two minutes knows about him."

"Yellow alert. All crew to stations." a voice suddenly announced over the ship's intercom and an alarm began to sound.

"Your husband calls cousin." Nayal said as everyone around the table got up.

T'Lan and Nayal were the only ones from the group at the table to head for the *Nightfall's* bridge, the others making their way towards the lower decks where the cruiser's fighter crew and ground troops would be gathering. When the two women stepped from the turbolift into the bridge most of the ship's command staff were already present at their stations. Captain Edwards sat at the centre of the room with Commander Grace Carr, his first officer, sitting beside him. Commander Cole, T'Lan's husband and the ship's chief of security sat behind the captain and first officer at the tactical station while Hamilton sat at the helm, his hands firmly on the manual control system that enabled him to rapidly manoeuvre the ship. Only Lieutenant Commander West was absent from her station at operations as Nayal sat down beside Edwards and T'Lan took her place at the science station and donned a headset like the ones the other officers wore that gave her an additional heads up interface to the ship's command systems.

"What's happening?" Nayal asked. The bridge's main viewscreen showed that the ship was at warp but nothing more.

"We received multiple distress calls." Edwards replied, "From a Romulan convoy taking people back to Romulan space now that it's safe for them to return."

"My people? How many?" Nayal said as she quickly put on a headset as well and immediately called up a feed from the *Nightfall's* sensors.

"We were monitoring eight ships but all of them have stopped transmitting." Carr told her and Nayal frowned.

"Eight ships? That's too many for a simple engine malfunction." she said before the turbolift opened again and West came hurrying out, already wearing her headset.

"Sorry I took so long." she said as she made her way to her station to relieve the ensign currently sat there,

"Don't worry, I'm already caught up though." she added, tapping her headset.

"Good because we're almost there." Edwards said.

"ETA six minutes." Hamilton added and West nodded.

"I've got them on visual." she said before she frowned and added, "I think."

"Main screen. Maximum magnification." Edwards ordered and the image on the screen changed from a distorted star field to a cluster of transport ships of assorted classes but all of them dark and seemingly lifeless. In the space surrounding the ships though there were dozens of smaller objects, each of them marked by bright flashing lights.

"Escape pods." Carr said.

"Captain I am picking up more than a thousand individual life signs from those escape pods." T'Lan announced, "The vast majority are Romulan but there are also a number of other species among them."

"The crews of some of those transport ships perhaps." Carr suggested.

"Captain there are numerous erratic energy emissions coming from the ships themselves. These will likely disrupt any use of the transporters to beam survivors aboard." T'Lan said.



"Looks like we're doing this the old fashioned way then." Carr commented and Edwards nodded.  
"Commander West inform the hangar to launch our fighters. Tractoring all of those escape pods in using just our own tractor beams will take too long. I want shuttles and runabouts launched as well, anything that can bring those pods aboard. Commander Carr could you handle the arrangements in the hangar?" he said.  
"Yes captain." Carr replied and she looked at Cole, "Cole with me. West, Naya, you as well." she added and all four got up and left the bridge.

In the *Nightfall's* sickbay Doctor Henry King, the ship's chief medical officer was overseeing the preparation of medical kits for the staff he was sending to the hangar.

"Can I be of assistance?" a tall woman in a Starfleet science division said as she appeared from nowhere.  
"The more the merrier Emma." King told the woman, "But if you really want to help then you'll need your body." Emma had started out as the *Nightfall's* emergency medical hologram, her name being derived from the acronym EMH. However, although she had initially been limited to an existence as a hologram in sickbay or the holodecks, T'Lan and the ship's former Borg drone chief engineer Lieutenant Maximillian had created a physical body for her as part of their experimentation into the synthetic flesh used by the Iconians to help reanimate corpses deemed useful to them and also to produce complete bodies for themselves if there was the need. Having a physical form had allowed Emma to leave the areas of the ship she had previously been limited to, even leaving the ship altogether as long as she remained close enough to maintain a subspace link with the sickbay computer her program was stored in and this had allowed her to develop beyond her basic program and achieve self awareness. Choosing to remain aboard the *Nightfall*, she was now considered one of the ship's crew instead of just a piece of equipment.

"Of course commander." Emma replied as she looked around at the other staff preparing their equipment, "But you look like you could use some help here as well."

"Actually yes, go and check on Nikki. As luck would have it today is the first day of her medical rotation and she seems somewhat overwhelmed by it all." King said and Emma nodded.

"Right away." she said before she turned and walked across the room to where a young woman was taking medical tricorders from a shelf and checking each one before lining them up on a trolley. Unlike any of the other medical staff present Nikki Carr, the daughter of the *Nightfall's* first officer, wore no rank markings on her uniform. When a poor report written by Lieutenant Mackey was submitted she had failed to get into university so she had instead signed up for a Starfleet internship program and had spent the last two years working for each department aboard the ship in turn. Now she was beginning her final assignment with the medical department.

"Enjoying yourself Nikki?" Emma said to her and Nikki smiled back at her.

"Emma you're a sight for sore eyes. It's been hectic since I started. First King Henry gave me the introductory briefing from hell and I've been rushed off my feet since the yellow alert sounded." she responded, using one of the nickname's often applied to Doctor King.

"Well he sent me to give you a hand. Now hand me a tricorder and I'll check that it's working." Emma told her.

"Okay people the first escape pods are being brought in now." King announced suddenly from his office doorway, "Nikki, Emma, I want you two down in the hangar right away. Nikki take two kits with you, one for yourself and the other for Emma."

"See you down there Nikki." Emma said and she promptly vanished as she transferred herself to the physical body that waited in her quarters and Nikki sighed.

"So now I get to carry your kit for you as well as my own." she muttered as she picked up two of the nearby medical kits and slung one over each shoulder before exiting sick bay and heading for the *Nightfall's* hangar. The hangar of an Akira-class heavy cruiser was the largest internal space aboard the ship. Many vessels of the class were employed as carriers and their extensive hangar facilities suited this role. The main hangar bay extended from one end of the ship's main saucer section to the other and featured doors at both the front and rear. This allowed the flight controllers to operate a system where the ship's fighters and shuttles would launch through the main forward hangar door while using one of the two smaller aft doors when landing. This meant that auxiliary craft could take off while others were landing without risking a collision. Now this system meant that the turn around time for the craft involved in recovering the escape pods could be kept to a minimum by having them tractor the pods in through the aft doors before setting them down on the hangar deck without landing themselves and then flying straight out of the forward door to retrieve another of the pods.

When Nikki arrived in the hangar there were just two escape pods in it and she could see her mother standing by them along with a group consisting of Starfleet security guards, MACOs and Imperial Guard assisting the occupants from them. All of the occupants of these two pods appeared to be Romulan and none of them seemed to be injured so Nikki did not rush to try and help. Instead she looked around the

hangar she then noticed Rebecca among the others present waiting for more escape pods to be brought in. "Rebecca," she called out as she rushed towards her, "what are you doing here? I thought you'd be out there helping to bring in the Romulans."

"I fly assault shuttles Nikki. They don't have tractor beams so they wouldn't be any good at recovery work. Captain Heart's assigned me to help deal with the people aboard them instead. You know, finding out how many need medical treatment and making sure that the others get to the emergency quarters West is setting up in the cargo hold. Oh and if any of them cause trouble I've got this." Rebecca answered and she patting the MACO issue phaser holstered on her leg, "And you?"

"I'm supposed to help out with the medical treatment." Nikki said and she tapped one of the two medical kits she carried over her shoulders, "Or at least I will when Emma gets here. This is my first day on my medical rotation after all."

"Well here's your teacher now." Rebecca said, pointing across the hangar and Nikki looked around to see Emma hurrying towards her.

"Okay Nikki, here I am." Emma said as she reached out to take the medical kit offered to her, "Have I missed anything?"

"Not yet. Only a couple of the escape pods have been brought in and no-one's called for medical help yet." Nikki told her and she nodded.

"Good."

"Look, here comes another." Rebecca said, looking towards the rear of the hangar as the *USS Thames*, one of the two runabouts that the *Nightfall* carried approached one of the landing doors with a Romulan escape pod in tow.

The runabout slowed down as it flew into the hangar, coming to a halt in mid air before using its tractor beam to lower the escape pod to the flight deck. Then as soon as it was on the deck the tractor beam was released and the runabout accelerated again, speeding through the forward launch door to assist in the recovery of more escape pods. Nayal and a team of ground crew rushed towards the escape pod, reaching it just as the hatch was opened from the inside and a pair of Romulans staggered out, carrying a third between them.

"Medic! We need a medic over here!" Nayal called out as the injured Romulan was set down on the deck.

"Come on Nikki, we're needed." Emma said before she broke into a run towards the escape pod.

"Hey wait for me." Nikki shouted after her before she began to sprint across the flight deck as well.

Nikki could not match Emma's speed and the EMH was already crouched beside the injured Romulan when she arrived, breathing heavily.

"He's badly burned." Emma said as Nikki looked over her shoulder and flinched when she saw the extent of the Romulan's injuries. Then Emma looked at the other two Romulans to have been taken from the escape pod and asked, "How did this happen?"

"A plasma conduit blew out." one of the Romulans replied.

"When we were attacked." the other, a female, added. This woman possessed the ridged forehead that many of her species had, unlike Nayal who had the smooth forehead of a Vulcan instead.

"You're sure you were attacked?" Nayal asked and the second Romulan nodded.

"Yes, I was standing by a view port when we were first pulled out of warp. I saw the ship firing at us." she said.

Nayal turned and waved across the hangar, beckoning Carr and Cole towards her.

"Over here, quickly. You need to hear this." she called out and the two senior officers hurried towards her.

"What's happening?" Carr asked.

"Tell them about the ship." Nayal said to the other Romulan woman and Carr and Cole looked at the Romulan woman from the escape pod.

"The ship?" Cole said.

"We were attacked." the Romulan woman told him, "Our ships came out of warp suddenly. I was by a viewport at the time and I saw another ship firing at us."

"Do you know what sort of ship it was?" Cole asked.

"No, it was strange. The weapon fire didn't look like disruptors or phasers, it was more like lightning that attacked every ship in the convoy at the same time." the woman answered and Carr and Cole looked at one another, recognising the description of the weapon system of an Iconian warship.

"How big was the ship?" Carr said.

"I don't know. It was hard to make out, it just looked like a long tube but I couldn't see any details." the Romulan woman said.

"Sounds like an Iconian ship to me." Nayal said.

"But why attack a refugee convoy?" Carr added.

"Especially since they didn't destroy any of them." Cole pointed out.

"That's right." the uninjured male Romulan from the escape pod said, "We were left dead in space but the attack stopped as soon as that happened. They could have finished us off at any moment. Instead they let us

abandon ship and left us all adrift in escape pods.”

“So why attack?” Nikki said, glad of the excuse to look away from the burned Romulan Emma was treating with a dermal regenerator.

“If there was something or someone aboard one of those ships that the Iconians wanted then they could have just boarded it with those golems of theirs.” Cole said. The golems that he referred to were large humanoid forms constructed from the same synthetic flesh used to make Emma's body and known by the Iconians as fleshforms. However, instead of being given an accurate human appearance they were featureless and retained the milky white colouration of the material used to make them.

“All they achieved in their attack was to set several thousand people adrift.” Carr said and then her eyes widened.”

“What's wrong mom?” Nikki asked.

“The distress signals.” Carr replied.

“They wanted us here.” Cole added and Carr slapped her combadge to activate it.

“Carr to bridge, we may have just walked into a trap.” she said.



Edwards looked at the display mounted in the arm of his chair to check on the progress of the recovery operation. There were more than a hundred escape pods to be recovered and despite the impressive hangar capacity of the *Nightfall* the fighters and shuttles were still less than a third of the way through establishing locks on these with tractor beams, while only a handful had been delivered to the cruiser.

"Damn." he said softly, "If we raise shields then we can't launch or recover shuttles. T'Lan can you find a way to use our transporters through the interference?"

"No captain. There does not appear to be a regular pattern to the energy emissions that we can filter out." T'Lan replied.

"What about moving the escape pods beyond the effective range of the disruption?" Hamilton said from the helm station.

"An interesting idea. How would you propose we do that?" T'Lan said.

"Easy. Tractor beams. We can raise our shields and still use our tractor beams to exert a push on the escape pods. All we need to do is get them moving a few hundred metres per second or so and then let them go.

They'll keep drifting under their own momentum after that." Hamilton said.

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Hamilton is correct. If we can get all of the escape pods at least five kilometres away from the wrecked ships then we will be able to interpose the *Nightfall* between them and the disruptive energy sources we can then angle our deflector shields to block the emissions while lowering them on the side facing the escape pods to be able to beam their occupants aboard. If cargo transporters are used as well then I estimate that the survivors can be recovered in under eight minutes given optimum efficiency."

T'Lan said.

"Then that's what we do. Do you have a recommendation for exactly which way we send the pods commander?" Edwards said

"Yes captain. Three one six mark fourteen will get the pods clear in the minimum amount of time." T'Lan told him and he activated the *Nightfall's* communication system so that he could broadcast his orders to the swarm of smaller craft currently attempting to tow the drifting escape pods aboard the ship.

"This is Captain Edwards to all craft, we're changing strategy. These escape pods may be the bait in a trap. All craft are to raise shields and go to red alert. Interference from the wrecks still prevents us from beaming survivors aboard so I want all craft to instead use their tractor beams to give the escape pods a push at bearing Three one six mark fourteen and then let them go. We'll sort everything from there." Edwards broadcast before he looked at the junior officer who had replaced West at the operations station, "Ensign inform the hangar that they won't be receiving any more escape pods and send emergency teams to all transporter rooms and cargo holds instead. Tactical, raise shields and arm all weapons. I don't intend to be caught by surprise if this is a trap."

"Captain now that we know of Iconian involvement, perhaps we should consider taking action to disrupt their gateway technology." T'Lan suggested. The most infamous of all Iconian technologies were their gateways, portals that allowed instantaneous travel across vast interstellar distances. Once these had existed only as large fixed facilities similar to the transporter rooms aboard starships but at some point they had miniaturised the technology and now all of their agents included smaller versions of inside their bodies, enabling them to transport themselves from place to place in an instant while avoiding any intervening objects or force fields. However, by chance a faction of Remans had discovered that it was possible to prevent a gateway from forming within a particular area by flooding it with a very specific form of radiation. Unfortunately prolonged exposure to this radiation was itself harmful to most organic species and so gateways could only be jammed for a short period in areas that contained living beings.

"Agreed." Edwards replied and he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering, Max are you there?"

"Yes captain." the *Nightfall's* chief engineer responded.

"Max how soon can you set up a disruption field to block Iconian gateway travel?" Edwards asked.

"That depends on what sections of the ship you want it to cover captain." Max answered.

"The whole thing Max. The Iconians seem to have wanted us at this location and if they are planning to launch an attack then they could potentially try sending in a boarding party." Edwards explained.

"I can adjust our navigational deflector to emit the necessary field in four minutes captain. However, I should remind you that this is harmful to humanoid life forms after prolonged exposure."

"Yes I understand that Max. I want you to consult with Doctor King about the exposure levels. Let me know when he feels we are at fifty percent of the maximum suggested limit." Edwards said.

"Yes captain. I shall begin immediately. Engineering out." Max replied before the channel went dead.

With the *Nightfall* now preparing to come under attack the senior officers returned to the bridge where Cole took over at tactical. The *Nightfall* then joined the other craft involved in the rescue operation in locking onto

the drifting escape pods and hurling them through space to get them clear of the wrecked transport ships. One after another the escape pods were pushed away from the starships they had been launched from, many of them tumbling when the tractor beams towing them were released but all remained on the same heading, moving steadily away from the interference from the wrecked ships.

"Captain that's the last pod." West announced as one of the *Nightfall's* shuttles released the final escape pod.

"Excellent." Edwards said, "Helm take us in behind them and match course and speed. Mister Cole I want our deflector shields focused aft and lowered to the front. T'Lan alert the transporter rooms as soon as conditions are suitable to get locks on the occupants."

"Yes captain. I estimate seventy seconds until we are far enough from the wrecks to permit beaming." T'Lan replied.

"Any signs of Iconians?" Carr asked, looking at West.

"Nothing commander." she replied, shaking her head.

"Well if they're planning to attack they better do it soon." Naya commented.

"I'd rather avoid that all together sublieutenant." Edwards said before he looked at West, "Commander West I want to recover our shuttles and runabouts when we lower our forward shields. I know that means bringing them in through the forward hangar door instead of the rear ones but on this occasion we don't have much of a choice." he told her.

"Yes captain." West replied.

"What about our fighters?" Carr said, leaning closer to Edwards.

"They'll stay outside as escorts. As soon as the last of the survivors are aboard we'll head for Starbase Ten at warp eight. We can reel them in later but we may need the extra firepower if the Iconians are waiting for us to get everyone aboard before attacking." he said.

"Captain transporters will now function." T'Lan announced.

"Now Commander Cole." Edwards ordered and Cole nodded.

"Transferring power to aft shields. Lowering forward shields." he said.

"Shuttles on approach. Transporters energising now captain." West added.

In the *Nightfall's* transporter rooms and cargo holds groups of Romulans as well as a handful of members of various other species began to materialise. These survivors were immediately directed off the transporter pads as the operators established locks on the occupants of other escape pods.

The transporter was able to confirm that very few of the survivors beamed aboard were armed with advanced weapons and those few that were detected were drained of energy during materialisation before security officers or ground troops moved in to secure them. None of the survivors were hostile to the crew of the *Nightfall* and they handed over their weapons when asked to, all of them just happy to be rescued. Medical teams saw to the injured, with the most seriously hurt loaded onto stretchers to be moved to sick bay. Normally such casualties would have been beamed to sickbay with the transporters fully occupied recovering the occupants of the escape pods alternative means had to be used to move them. Meanwhile those who did not require such attention were escorted to the temporary quarters that had been set up in other areas of the ship's cargo holds.

"There are no further life signs captain." T'Lan said as soon as the last of the survivors had been beamed aboard.

"All shuttles aboard as well captain." West added.

"Hamilton?" Carr said.

"Course laid in for Starbase Ten. Ready to go to warp." Hamilton responded.

"Raise forward shields." Edwards ordered, "Commander Hamilton take us to warp."

"Engaging at warp eight now captain." Hamilton said, twisting his flight controls to engage the *Nightfall's* warp drive and the ship accelerated rapidly to faster than light speed. At the same time the twelve Peregrine-class fighters carried by the heavy cruiser that had been patrolling the space around it during the rescue operation now turned to follow, matching its speed as it sped away.

"Commander Carr you have the conn." Edwards said as soon as the *Nightfall* was safely at warp, "I'm going to check in with Starfleet."

Edwards then got up and walked across the bridge to his ready room where he sat behind his desk and activated the terminal, causing the emblem of Starfleet to appear before changing to show an admiral sat behind a desk of his own.

"Edwards, I'm glad you've called." the admiral said.

"I'm sorry it's bad news admiral." Edwards replied and the admiral sighed.

"I'm afraid that's all we're getting today captain. We're getting reports of massive Iconian attacks from all over. Federation, Cardassian, Romulan and Klingon worlds have been hit and that's just the attacks we can confirm, there are rumours that the Tholians have been attacked as well. There's no real pattern to any of it, they just appear in overwhelming strength, smash through any defences and conduct a bombardment before

pulling out. We've been scrambling ships to provide emergency relief for most of the day." he explained. "That's actually why I was calling admiral. The *Nightfall* has just picked up the survivors of a Romulan refugee convoy that was attacked by an Iconian vessel. The ships were pulled out of warp and attacked. Everything matches what you've just described, the ships were disabled and the occupants abandoned them but rather than finish them off while they were helpless the Iconian warship withdrew. We suspected that it was an ambush to draw us in but now I'm not so sure. It sounds like this is part of a larger scheme."

"We think that the Iconians are trying to destabilise the border regions. Word is spreading fast about the attacks and my office is being inundated with requests from colonial governments for starships to protect them." the admiral said.

"We're en route for Starbase Ten now with survivors from the attack aboard. We're about seventy two hours out at warp eight. Do you want me to divert? We can drop them off at-" Edwards began but the admiral shook his head.

"No, get the *Nightfall* to Starbase Ten as planned. I'll have intelligence standing by to debrief your passengers. Who knows, maybe one of them saw something that we've missed so far. I'll send you all the information that we have so far. I don't know if it will be of any use but it's worth you having so you can keep your crew up to date." he said.

"Very well admiral. I'll brief my crew on the situation and see you in three days. *Nightfall* out." Edwards replied before he ended the conversation, the Starfleet emblem appearing on the screen once more.

A white haired man sat alone in a private room aboard one of the many space stations that orbited Earth. The room featured a wall located on the outer hull of the station and this had been made entirely transparent so that the curvature of the Earth as well as many of the other orbital facilities and nearby starships were visible through it as the door opened and a younger man and woman entered.

"Impressive view you have there Admiral Schmidt." the woman said, using the older man's rank even though none of them wore any form of uniform that would identify them. All three of them worked for a top secret group within Starfleet dedicated to the defence of the Federation while not operating under the same strict rules as other parts of the organisation.

"Thank you Commander Brown." he replied, "Perhaps you and Commander Jones would like to sit down and enjoy it with me."

"Isn't that a security risk admiral?" Jones asked, "Any passing ship could see us." but Schmidt pointed to a device in the corner of the room.

"Unidirectional holographic projector. Even someone right outside that window won't see us. Instead they'll see a meeting being held by a group of accountants. While we still get to enjoy this fabulous view." he said and both Jones and Brown smiled as they sat down.

"So what demands the attention of our section today admiral?" Jones said.

"You've heard about the Iconian attacks in frontier sectors?" Schmidt replied and Brown nodded.

"It's not just the Federation that has been hit though is it? The Iconians seem to be shooting at anything that moves." she said.

"Minor targets only though. Frontier colonies, a few merchant ships carrying supplies, that's all. Nothing of great strategic importance." Jones added.

"Quite. The losses to each of the governments that have been attacked appear to be minimal in the long run. Several colonies may have been destroyed and their populations left homeless but there doesn't appear to have been any damage that can't be fixed within a year. However, while Starfleet and the Klingon Defence Forces have been rushing ships to the targets of the attacks to help survivors our own analysts have uncovered a more subtle pattern." Schmidt told them and he used his PADD to activate a wall mounted monitor.

"Starfleet deployments?" Brown said as she and Jones looked at the map of Federation territory now shown on the screen and Schmidt nodded.

"As you can see Starfleet has transferred more than three hundred starships from sectors surrounding Earth, Vulcan, Andoria, Denobula and Telar to border areas to reinforce them against further attack as well as help deal with the damage and casualties. The result of course is that the defences around our core systems have been left rather thin. Ordinarily this wouldn't be an issue since any invader would have to come through those border regions to attack the heart of the Federation and Starfleet could still muster a defence. However, if this fails we are dealing with an enemy with drive technology of a different form."

"Such as transwarp drive or Iconian gateway technology?" Brown commented.

"Indeed. These nuisance raids on our outer worlds may just be a distraction intended to sap our strength before a larger attack is launched on higher value targets. Possibly by the Iconians themselves or perhaps they have knowledge of an impending Borg incursion." Schmidt said.

"Are we going to put pressure on Starfleet to bring our ships back?" Jones said.

"No, we can't do that without the risk of isolating the outer colonies. We've had enough trouble already with

some of them complaining about being neglected while the core worlds get priority for resources. Right now the admiralty is seeing this as an opportunity to show that they value smaller colonies as well." Schmidt said. "So what are we supposed to do about the situation then?" Brown said. "For the time being nothing. Just keep doing what you have been, we have agents watching across the Alpha and Beta Quadrants for any signs of Iconian activity. I want you two to keep your ship at the ready to move as soon as we get a hit. It will be your job to capture the Iconian and bring them back here for interrogation. Right now all we've been able to do in this conflict is react to what the enemy has done. A prisoner will give us the chance to turn the tables on them for once." Schmidt explained. "And if we can't capture one of the enemy and they do launch a major offensive?" Brown said. "That depends on where they attack. If they attack Earth then there won't be much you can do other than sit back and watch. Of course if the opportunity arises to capture an Iconian then you should take it but other than that avoid getting involved. You're more likely to expose us to Starfleet or the MACOs if you attack. Our other agents will do the same, remain hidden but keep watch for Iconians that are vulnerable. As soon as any of them check in it will fall to you to carry out the rest of the mission."

Edwards waited until the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron had been recovered before gathering together all of his senior staff in the cruiser's briefing room and giving them a summary of the information that he had been sent about the Iconian attacks.

"In addition to the refugee convoy fifteen Federation colonies have been attacked stretching all the way from the Klingon border to the Cardassian one. At Gamma Hydra there was a Klingon cruiser in orbit at the time and the Iconians destroyed it as well as the colony. We know that the Klingons, Romulans and Cardassians have lost colonies as well and Klingon intelligence suggests that several Tholian worlds may have been attacked as well." Edwards explained.

"I don't suppose we've been able to get any confirmation of that from the Tholians themselves have we?" Carr asked and around the table many of those gathered smiled.

"No." Edwards said, "The Tholians have remained as tight lipped as ever about what's going on inside The Assembly."

"A pity." King commented, "If we all have a common enemy in the Iconians I'd have hoped that it would help us in our dealings with them."

"The Tholians are notoriously difficult to negotiate with doctor." T'Lan pointed out.

"Especially if you're late for the appointment." Heart added.

"So far no specific motivation has been determined for the Iconian attacks, but the fact that the Iconians are striking openly suggests that they aren't trying to trigger armed conflict between any of the major powers. In fact as Doctor King pointed out right now most of us are apparently talking to one another more than we have at any point since the end of the Dominion War." Edwards continued, "For now Starfleet is mobilising massive resources with almost the entirety of the Fourth and Seventh fleets being redeployed to the borders."

"That's going to leave the core worlds pretty short on ships." White said.

"The Second Fleet is still in place to protect them." Edwards replied.

"One fleet for the whole of the core worlds?" Cole commented.

"That's less than ten ships per system." Hamilton added and Shry snorted.

"I dare the Iconians to attack Andoria with one of their ships." he said, "Even without Starfleet the Imperial Guard is quite capable of defending our home." then he smiled and looked at T'Lan, "In fact I'd even say that the V'Shar could bring one down."

"Vulcan is well defended, as are the home worlds of most Federation member species Captain Shry.

However, the ability of the Iconians to move via their gateways would allow them to concentrate their forces where we are weakest. Attacking and withdrawing before a proper defence can be mounted." T'Lan said.

"What about that jamming technology?" Nayal asked, "Can that be scaled up to prevent the Iconians from appearing close to any of our planets?"

"And cook the inhabitants?" King replied, staring at her.

"Doctor King is correct." Max added from where he stood, his Borg implants making sitting down unnecessary, "The energy output needed to create a system wide field blocking Iconian gateway formation would necessitate energy emitters of such strength that at their centre a lethal level of radiation exposure would result in minutes."

"For now we're under orders to carry on as we were. We will take our passengers to Starbase Ten where they will be met by members of Starfleet Intelligence." Edwards said and Nayal frowned.

"They're being arrested?" she asked.

"No but Starfleet wants to know everything they saw. They'll be returned to Romulan space don't you worry." Edwards answered, "What I need to know now is our state of readiness if we hear of another Iconian attack, or worse still if we come under direct attack."

"We're in open space with nowhere to hide. If an Iconian ship jumps us then we're probably dead." Hamilton said, remembering how difficult it had been to escape a previous Iconian attack.

"It'll be a nightmare if we're boarded captain." Cole added, "We've got more than a thousand refugees aboard that an Iconian agent could easily hide among."

"A lot of those refugees are injured as well. In fact my department is so overrun that I've even had to pull Mackey in to help out with the basics. Thankfully he's managed to avoid killing anyone yet but it's only a matter of time if you ask me and if we get sent casualties from battle then things will get even worse. I've got say that I'm actually happy that T'Lan and Max created that body for Emma. She's said that since she doesn't need to sleep she'll stay on duty for as long as she has to." King said.

"Does anyone have anything good to say?" Carr asked.

"As soon as my fighters are rearmed then my squadron is good to go." White replied.

"All the ship's systems are functioning properly, aren't they Max?" West added and Max nodded once.

"They are. Our sensors will alert us to any gateway formation within a light year. Based on previous crew reaction speeds we should have enough time to raise our shields before an Iconian warship can open fire on us." he said.

"So the question is just how we live long enough after that to reach Starbase Ten." Carr said.

"Max if we go to maximum warp can we sustain it long enough to get there?" Edwards asked.

"Not without damage to the warp cores captain. We can run at warp nine point eight on three of our four cores but even keeping one off line at a time for maintenance the system will need closing down entirely for at least two days for repairs." Max replied.

"Starfleet won't like that right now." Carr commented and Edwards sighed.

"No but we need to get there as quickly as we can. Mister Hamilton I want our speed increasing to warp nine." Edwards said.

"That'll cut the length of our trip in half at least." Carr said.

"Yes, though it's still going to be too long for us to stay at red alert for the entire trip so I want a schedule drawing up that will keep the maximum number of fighter pilots, security officers and ground troops available at any time." Edwards ordered.

"That's a tall order captain. The crew have already been at red alert for six hours." Cole said.

"I know but I think we can stretch to another thirty six and then we'll be at Starbase Ten. The crew can stand down and relax then." Edwards said, "Now does anyone else have anything they'd like to add?"

"Yes I do." Carr said excitedly, raising her hand, "T'Lan, Jenna, Nayal, if we're all supposed to be winding down how about a girls night out? I'm sure Nikki will join us. Probably Rebecca and Emma as well."

"I am not sure if I should commander." T'Lan replied, stoking her stomach.

"Trust me T'Lan when that baby comes along you'll wish you'd gone out every night when you had the chance." Carr said.

"In that case I shall agree." T'Lan said.

"Well since no-one appears to have anything related to the running of this ship to say this meeting is ended. I want duty schedules arranged in three hours. Dismissed." Edwards said.

"Jenna." Lieutenant Mackey said from further along the corridor just as she reached her quarters and she winced. West had hoped to be able to relax for a while following the briefing and rescue operation but the arrival of Mackey made that unlikely.

"Yes counsellor?" she replied, looking along the corridor towards him.

"With all that's been going on today we missed our appointment." Mackey said.

"Yes, that slipped my mind." West lied. She had known full well while she had been assisting with the rescue operation that it meant she could not attend her scheduled meeting with the counsellor but had not cared. Some of the other crew members, Doctor King in particular, had suggested that she file a complaint against the counsellor for his refusal to sign off on her psychological fitness for duty but she had avoided doing so, concerned that this would result in having to speak with another counsellor to establish Mackey's mistake. If this happened then there was the possibility that they would discover something that she had so far been able to hide from him.

"Well I'm available now so this seems like as good a time as any for us to speak. M'kay." Mackey said.

West could think of anything she would rather do less after busy shift than talk to the *Nightfall's* counsellor but that was no different at any other time either, added to which she did not want him preventing her from leaving the ship with the other senior female officers when they reached Starbase Ten.

"Oh very well." she told him and he smiled.

"Excellent. M'kay. In that case follow me to my office, there is something new that I think will prove useful." he said, pointing for West to follow him down the corridor.

West and Mackey had to take a turbolift down to the level where the counsellor's office was located and West found having to be so close to him uncomfortable even though this lasted just a few seconds before the



doors opened again onto a corridor that his office was just a short distance from. West had spent many hours in the counsellor's office over the years and she did not wait for Mackey to point out a seat before she sat down.

"So what do you want to ask me today?" she asked as Mackey also sat down.

"I thought we'd go through your feelings about your promotion. M'kay." Mackey replied and West sighed.

"Again? I thought we went through that when I pinned this extra black pip to my collar." she replied, frowning as she pointed to the black pip beside the two gold ones that marked her out as a lieutenant commander.

"Yes but at the time you were still adjusting to your new rank and responsibility. As I mentioned there was something new that I wanted to try in this session. How familiar are you with hypnosis? M'kay." Mackey said and West glared at him.

"Hypnotherapy?" she said and he nodded.

"Yes it's an established technique that has been used for centuries to help people come to terms with difficult issues in their life. M'kay." he said.

"People have been telling me that about phasers too. Just one blast and one of my problems could be made to disappear." West said, miming the firing of a phaser with her fingers aimed at Mackey. The counsellor ignored this though and picked up a small light from the table beside his chair and shone it straight at West's face, causing her to flinch.

"Keep your eyes open and follow the light. M'kay." he told her, moving the light from side to side in a slow and steady pattern, "Good. Now relax and breath slowly, keeping your eyes focused on the light at all times. Listen carefully to the sound of my voice, I want you to ignore everything except my voice and the light. Nothing else matters. Repeat that."

"Nothing else matters." West said as she moved her eyes from side to side to keep watching the light at the same time as she resisted the urge to yawn.

"Good now as you continue to follow this light and relax you will feel yourself wanting to fall asleep. That is good, soon you won't be able to keep your eyes open and you'll fall asleep but you will still be able to hear my voice and answer my questions honestly. Do you understand me? M'kay."

"Yes, I understand." West said, her eyes starting to close and then she exhaled deeply as she fell asleep.

Mackey smiled when he saw this and leant closer to her, turning off the light and putting it back on the table. However, when he looked back at West her eyes suddenly opened wide and she grinned at him.

"Surprise!" she exclaimed as she reached out and grabbed Mackey by the throat with one hand.

"Jenna what are you doing? Let go of me. M'kay." Mackey croaked as he tried to pry her hand from his neck but West continued to smile as she stood up and pushed him back into his own chair.

"Oh Mackey you fool, here you are a qualified psychiatric professional and you can't even tell that I'm not Jenna West. I'm what she's been able to hide from you for three years, all that time and you never noticed me living inside her head, only coming out when she was asleep or unconscious." the Iconian intelligence inhabiting West said and then as Mackey reached for his combadge she ripped it from his uniform and dropped it to the floor before stamping it under her heel.

"Who are you?" Mackey gasped.

"I was the controller of the outpost on Lasner Two before the crew of this ship destroyed it. Fortunately for me I was able to survive thanks to Jenna. It seems that when she was held captive by my people they placed a suitable storage vessel for my consciousness in her brain and I was able to enter it before it was too late. Since then I've been helping my people as much as I can from in here. That was until recently of course. Did you know that she'd actually managed to find a way to contain me? Just think, one of you humans besting a mind that has existed for millennia. I'm free now though and I owe it all to you so I just thought I'd say 'thank you' before I kill you." The Controller said through West. Then she picked up a small ornament cast from a gold coloured metal from the nearby table with her free hand and began to smash it against the side of Mackey's head.

The Girl stood in front of a wall that was covered in display screens, each one scrolling through streams of data being received from Iconian agents across the galaxy, positioned within hundreds of species and alliances. Her focus was on the data coming from the Alpha and Beta Quadrants as the Iconian agents there reported on the effects of the Lord Martial's military campaign. All of a sudden a new data stream appeared, one from a source that The Girl had regarded as her most significant agent but that had not submitted a report for several months and she had regarded it as lost. Now though there was a new report that proved the agent was still in place aboard the *USS Nightfall*, the only Iconian to have successfully infiltrated Starfleet and The Girl called this stream up on her primary feed. Most of the data was technical, detailing the operational status of the *Nightfall* and its personnel but there were also sections that covered the ship's recent actions as well as its current plans. Among these was an explanation for the agent's prolonged absence. Surprisingly the human that The Controller inhabited had resorted to having herself restrained while she slept to prevent the Iconian from acting. It was pure chance that The Controller had been able to

gain control while still free to move but did not know whether this would be possible again. In fact there was a warning that The Controller had been forced to take drastic action to get her latest report to The Girl and it was inevitable that Starfleet would investigate. However, tagged onto the end of the report was a location where a face to face meeting would be possible, a place beyond the sensors now widely used by Starfleet to detect gateway formation and a time when The Controller's host would be present. "Oh Lieutenant Commander West," The Girl said to herself with a smile, "how I've looked forward to seeing you again."

### 3.

The presence of so many passengers aboard the *Nightfall* kept most of its regular security staff occupied ensuring that they remained in the sections that had been set aside for them and while they were busy with these duties the job of patrolling the rest of the ship fell to the two companies of ground troops it carried.

Although several teams of troops were kept on standby wearing their full armour and carrying assault rifles, the patrol duty was not considered to be especially high risk and so the pairs of troopers walking the *Nightfall's* corridors wore their regular combat fatigues and carried only phaser pistols.

A pair of soldiers from the MACO company were walking down the corridor where the counsellor's office was located when they noticed that there was a cold sensation outside the door.

"Do you feel that?" one said and he reached out to place a hand on the door, "Wow that's cold!" he exclaimed as he pulled his hand away again.

"It can't be a pressure leak, the alarms would have gone off. Life support must have malfunctioned." the other soldier said and he tapped the communicator fitted to his ear, "Bridge this is Corporal Welles, the heating control in the counsellor's office is broken. Can you give us access so we can take a look?"

"Confirmed Wells, releasing door seal now." the voice of an officer on the bridge responded and there was a 'clunk' from the door followed by a whining sound as it started to open but became stuck after just a few centimetres, the motors attempting to open the door before the control system determined that there was a significant obstruction and gave up. This was still enough for both MACOs to recoil away from the door though as icy cold air came from within the office, accompanied by a cloud of mist.

"That really is cold Stots." Welles said, "It must be frozen."

"I guess we warm it up a bit then." Stots responded and he drew his phaser. Welles drew his sidearm as well and both MACOs adjusted the settings of their weapons to fire a beam that would heat whatever it struck without causing significant molecular disruption. They then fired sustained beams of heat at the centre of the door and on the side facing them it began to glow. The energy from the two phasers was not enough to melt the door but it did melt the ice that had formed on the other side and was jamming the mechanism that allowed it to open. As soon as this happened the door shifted slightly, a movement that was detected by the opening mechanism and it engaged the motor again to fully open the door and reveal the inside of Mackey's office.

Every surface of the office was covered in ice crystals, giving the room a white appearance and the two MACOs looked around it from the doorway in amazement. Then Stots cast his gaze down at the floor where he saw a shape that was instantly recognisable despite the layer of ice that covered it and his eyes widened.

"Medical emergency!" he exclaimed as he activated his communicator, "I think Counsellor Mackey's dead." The two MACOs were still standing in the corridor outside Mackey's office when King came rushing towards them with a medical kit slung over his shoulder.

"What the hell happened?" he said, grinding to a halt when he saw the mist coming out of the counsellor's office.

"We don't know. We felt the cold through the door and thought maybe there was a life support malfunction. It took phasers to melt enough ice to get the door open and this is what we found." Stots replied.

King moved past the two MACOs and looked into the office.

"The body's over there." Welles said, pointing to where Mackey's body was lying on the floor.

King stepped through the door and the ice crystals in the carpet producing cracking sounds with each of the careful strides he took as he approached the body. Looking down at the corpse he saw the science division uniform that was recognisable even with the layer of frost covering it and ominously he saw the large dark red stain on the carpet that looked to have spread out from under the head.

"That's Mackey alright." he said, nodding, "But I don't think he froze to death in some accident. You better call Commander Cole and Captain Edwards, I think we're dealing with a murder here. Oh and call Lieutenant Maximillian as well to do something about this damned cold."

"You'll need this sir." Welles told Edwards when he reached the doorway, handing him a cold weather jacket.

"Thanks Corporal." Edwards replied as he took the jacket, putting it on as he entered the office to find both King and Cole crouched beside Mackey's corpse while Max stood at the far side of the room beside an open panel so that he could access the heating system directly, "Would someone mind explaining to me exactly what is happening here?" Edwards asked, "I was just told that someone had been murdered aboard my ship."

"Mackey." King responded, nodding.

"It looks like someone bludgeoned him to death captain." Cole added, "I think that statue down there was what was used as a weapon. Mind you its difficult to tell since whoever it was decided to deep freeze the

body.” then he looked at Max and added, “Any idea how long it will take to sort the heat in here out?”

“The temperature control system has been jammed so that it continually believes that the room is at fifty degrees centigrade commander.” Max replied, “While the cooling output has been rigged to only operate at maximum. I have removed the damaged parts and just need to replace them. That should only take a few minutes, however increasing the temperature will take more time.

“Establishing a time of death by autopsy is going to be impossible captain.” King said, “The body could have been frozen for hours or the MACOs could have missed the killer by just a few minutes.”

“I’m going to have to put out a request for anyone who saw Lieutenant Mackey before he died to come forwards with times and places. If we can establish when he was last seen alive then we’ll have something to work with in drawing up a list of suspects.” Cole added.

“Any ideas so far?” Edwards asked and King tapped at his PADD before handing it to the captain.

“Everyone aboard who didn’t like him.” he said and Edwards frowned when he saw it.

“Doctor this is just a crew manifest. Everyone’s on it.” he said.

“I removed Mackey. This wasn’t suicide.” King replied.

“That’s not exactly helpful doctor.” Cole said.

“Oh come on you know as well as I do that pretty much everyone aboard this ship hated him. He was a pompous fool with a vastly over inflated view of his ability and importance aboard this ship. He bragged about always having time to see people who wanted his help and advice without actually realising that the reason he had so much free time was because no-one from the Starfleet crew, the MACOs or Imperial Guard ever wanted to talk to him. His patients were limited to a few of the civilians who found being on a starship harder than they thought it would be and those poor unfortunate souls who were forced to spend time with him.” King said.

“Personally I think we’re better off starting by finding out where all our passengers have been.” Cole said, “I know that they are supposed to be limited to just a few areas of the ship but it’s still possible that one of them could have given my people the slip. Especially if Mackey was tricked into helping one of them.”

“If that’s the case then they could be anywhere on the ship. Commander Cole I want you to tell Captains Heart and Shry to have their men conduct a full scale search of the ship. I want every one of our passengers accounting for.” Edwards ordered.

“Yes captain. Mackey’s files might have information in them that could identify the killer as well.” Cole pointed out.

“Commander those files are confidential. That is also why the ship’s nanite hive does not monitor this room.” Max said.

“We’re dealing with a murder here so I’m going to authorise access to Mackey’s confidential crew files.” Edwards said and King snorted.

“Fat lot of use they’re likely to be. Remember that report he submitted for Nikki’s university application? Four years out of date and completely inaccurate.” King commented.

“Even so I want Max to check them. Not the detail logs of his counselling sessions just yet, just his crew appraisals. Check and see if he fought with anyone recently as well.” Edwards said.

“Ah.” Cole said and Edwards stared at him.

“What is it commander?”

“Well, err, it’s just that apparently T’Lan unloaded on him in the officer’s lounge. Told him exactly what she thought of him.” Cole said.

“What nearly all of us think of him by all accounts.” King added.

“Don’t worry commander, I’m not asking you to investigate your wife for murder. Just find out what happened here, then we’ll figure out who was responsible for it.” Edwards said.

When West’s eyes flickered open and she awoke she found herself handcuffed in the bathroom of her quarters. This was not at all unusual for her though, knowing that The Controller could only take control of her body while she was asleep West had taken to locking herself in her bathroom while she slept on an improvised bed on the floor. She also took the precaution of handcuffing herself to limit the ability of The Controller to do anything to override the very simple computer program that kept the bathroom door shut until she awoke the next morning or if there was an emergency. However, this was where the similarities ended. Instead of waking up in an improvised bed West found herself curled up naked in the shower, with her wrists cuffed around the vertical water pipe for the old fashioned water based shower she preferred over the sonic one. A second set of handcuffs had been used to bind her ankles and her mouth was filled by a large rubber gag that prevented her from calling out for help or making use of verbal computer commands. Looking across the room towards the wash basin West saw that her combadge was resting on the side of it along with a lipstick that The Controller had used to write on the mirror.

HOW DO YOU LIKE BEING HANDCUFFED BITCH?

West looked around again, The Controller had threatened her in the past if she did not co-operate but West

had called the Iconian's bluff and she did not think that the alien would now seek to expose them both to the crew. That meant that The Controller was likely to have left her with some way of freeing herself. It was as she looked around that she felt something hanging against the side of her head and she turned to look at the mirror again, using what little range of movement she had with her hands to pull back her hair to reveal her ear. Hanging from this on the end of an earring was a handcuff key and West leant her head towards her hands, stretching out her fingers to grab hold of it. However, she quickly discovered that the clasp of the earring was not something that she could release while she was still handcuffed and for a moment she wondered whether The Controller did plan on leaving her trapped to embarrass her. Apart from the message on the mirror it would appear to anyone who happened to find her here that she had done this to herself. This thought was dispelled though when West glanced back towards the mirror and the reflection she saw appeared to her to be without the gag and smiling at her.

"Come on now Jenna. You know what you have to do. No pain, no gain." The Controller told her and West realised that there was a way that she could get the key from her ear.

All she had to do was rip it free.

West gripped the key as tightly as her handcuffed hands would allow and closed her eyes as she mentally prepared herself for what she knew she had to do. Then all of a sudden she jerked her head back and her eyes opened wide as she screamed when the flesh of her ear was torn, the sound muffled by the gag. To her horror she felt that the earring was not yet free, despite the pain and the blood she could feel running down her neck.

"That's it Jenna, you're almost free now." The Controller said to her.

Repeating the action West let out another muffled scream. This time however, the key came free and West quickly unlocked one half of the handcuffs around her wrists. With her hands free she rolled across the floor to where she could reach for a towel to cover herself with although she also pressed one corner to the side of her head, pressing down to try and stem the bleeding. With her hands untied it was easy for West to release her ankles and remove the gag before hurriedly putting on a robe and fixing her combadge to it. West kept a basic dermal regenerator in a drawer that she passed over her wrists to remove the bruising caused by the handcuffs each day but she did not want to risk trying to heal the more serious injury to her ear herself and so with the towel still pressed to the side of her head she made her way to sickbay as quickly as she could.

Upon entering sickbay West saw that there were several of the medical staff on duty including Emma but all of them were treating the injuries of some of the Romulan refugees that had been brought aboard the *Nightfall*.

"Jenna what's wrong?" West heard Nikki say and she turned to see the intern standing in a doorway holding a tray of hyposprays.

"My ear." West replied, pulling the towel from her head and Nikki gasped when she saw the wound.

"Emma come here." she called out before asking, "How did that happen?"

"It's kind of stupid but I accidentally ripped out an earring." West replied, keeping the lie as close to the truth as she could.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." Emma then said as she walked over to West and Nikki.

"You don't have to keep saying that Emma." Nikki said, sighing.

"Sorry but it just seems natural." Emma replied before she saw the bleeding from West's ear, "Over here commander. Nikki get me a dermal regenerator."

While Nikki went for the dermal regenerator Emma led West to a nearby biobed and helped her sit on it before she began to spray her injured ear.

"Ouch, that stings." West said.

"Less than when you did this I bet." Emma replied, "How did you do it anyway?"

"An accident with an earring." West told her and Emma paused.

"Do you think I should get my ears pierced? I've thought about it but I can't make up my mind. I tried asking Doctor King about it but he was not helpful." she said.

"I bet." West commented as Nikki returned with a dermal regenerator and handed it to Emma.

"Thank you Nikki." Emma said, "Jenna please lean to your left while I repair your ear. I'm afraid that this will seal up the piercing as well so you'll need to get it redone."

"Maybe we could do it together." West commented and Emma smiled at her.

"Thank you, that is a very thoughtful invitation. I would be glad to join you." she said, "There. All done."

"Thanks." West said as she stood up again, "I'll let you both get back to real medicine now. It looks like you're in high demand."

"Yes we are." Emma replied.

"And to make things worse we don't have King Henry." Nikki added and West frowned.

"Why? Is he okay?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, he's not sick or anything but he's been called to help Commander Cole with his investigation."

Nikki answered.

"Can you believe that there's been a murder aboard the ship?" Emma added and West's jaw dropped.

"A murder?" she said.

"Someone killed Counsellor Mackey. Beat his skull in." Nikki said, miming the act of striking someone over the head.

West suddenly remembered her encounter with Mackey outside her quarters and going with him to his office. After that though she could not recall anything clearly and she began to fear the worst.

"That's dreadful." she said, "I better see if there's anything Cole needs from me."

"Okay we'll see you tomorrow." Nikki said and West frowned, "The girls night out? We reach Starbase Ten in less than a day now."

"Oh right, yes I'll see you both then." West responded, waving before she left sickbay and returning to her quarters.

As soon as she got there West sealed the door behind her and rushed to the mirror, glaring at the smiling face she saw looking back at her.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"What I had to. Now think carefully about what you do next because if you get this wrong then we'll both spend the rest of our life in a prison cell." The Controller answered.

"Enter." Edwards said from behind his desk and the door to his ready room opened to reveal Cole and Max. While they saw Carr standing behind Edwards' desk and stepping away from him.

"We're not interrupting anything are we captain?" Cole asked as the two department chiefs entered the room.

"No Commander Carr and I were just going over a few things. Please sit down." Edwards replied and while Cole took a seat and Max remained standing he added, "I take it that you're not here to tell me that you're ready to make an arrest." Edwards added.

"No captain, sorry." Cole replied, "In fact we're here with bad news." and Edwards sighed.

"More? That's all we seem to be getting right now." Carr said and Cole looked at Max.

"You found it, you tell him." he said.

"Captain I have uncovered evidence that seems to clear our passengers of murdering Lieutenant Mackey." Max said.

"Which means that it has to be a member of the crew." Edwards said.

"A specific member of the crew." Cole said, "The Iconian spy."

It had long been known to the *Nightfall's* senior staff that there was an Iconian agent aboard the ship but their identity had remained a mystery.

"So they are still aboard." Carr commented and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, I was hoping that we weren't going to hear about them again." he said, "So how do they tie into this?"

"When I was reviewing the *Nightfall's* computer system I discovered a recently added subroutine that accessed our lateral sensor array from the counsellor's office, creating a variation in our active sensor output that was used to carry a data packet. The code structure of the subroutine was clearly of Iconian design." Max explained.

"What was in this packet?" Edwards asked.

"Unfortunately it had already deleted itself from our systems." Max said.

"Unfortunately we're no closer to figuring out who his last patient was though." Cole added, "According to his schedule the last person he would have seen was Jenna West but she missed her appointment with him because of the rescue operation and he doesn't have any more appointments until the day after tomorrow when he was supposed to see Emma and one of the civilian engineers."

"So anyone could have gone to his office, murdered him and then used his computer to send that signal." Carr said.

"Pretty much, yes." Cole responded, "Right now we can't say whether the killer expected Mackey to be there and intended to kill him or if he disturbed them while they were making use of his computer terminal. You've got to admit it's a good way of hiding activity from us. The counsellor's files are restricted even to me."

"I take it that you're looking deeper into them Max?" Edwards said.

"Yes captain. The nanites are conducting a full data analysis of everything in Lieutenant Mackey's computer files, hunting for any signs of Iconian code among them." Max said.

"Good. What about Doctor King, has he been able to tell us anything else yet?" Edwards asked.

"Not yet captain. He's been examining the body but it was frozen solid when we found it and he doesn't want to apply any artificial heating just in case it destroys any evidence. Right now I think he's searching Mackey's office for evidence of who else has been there recently." Cole answered.

"But it's looking like the motivation for the murder was to cover up the identity of the Iconian spy?" Carr said.

"I think that's likely commander." Cole said, "Which from a personal point of view is a relief. It puts T'Lan in

the clear since I'm certain that it isn't her"

"Very well, thank you for bringing this information to me. I need to let Starfleet know. At least now when we reach Starbase Ten we won't need to keep all our passengers in custody. That would have been a logistical and legal nightmare." Edwards said.

"Agreed." Cole responded, smiling, "That's all we have to report for now though."

"Very well. Get back to your work and keep me up to date if you find anything new. This incident is not going to go down well with Starfleet." Edwards said as Cole began to get to his feet.

"Of course captain. We'll leave you and Commander Carr to get back to whatever we interrupted." he said.

"It was just paperwork." Carr commented.

"Of course commander. The galaxy runs on it." Cole said and then he and Max both turned to leave.

Exiting the ready room the two officers found Hamilton still sat in the captain's chair on the bridge.

"So has the captain accepted that T'Lan's off the hook?" he asked and he glanced at the science station where the Vulcan officer sat.

"Yes, he agrees that Mackey was killed to protect the Iconian spy." Cole said.

"And not because he was a complete prat." Hamilton added.

"Are you returning to our quarters now Robert?" T'Lan asked and Cole nodded.

"Yes, I need to grab something to eat before King gets back to me with the results of his scan of the murder scene." he said.

"Then since my shift is ending I shall join you." T'Lan told him and as she got up another officer in a blue science division uniform moved to take her place.

Cole and Max waited by the turbolift for T'Lan to join them before entering it.

"Deck five." Cole said and the turbolift began to move.

"I am relieved that you no longer suspect me of killing Lieutenant Mackey." T'Lan said and Cole frowned.

"I didn't suspect you in the first place." he said.

"Why not? I argued with him publicly and my emotional control has been questionable recently. I was a logical suspect." T'Lan said.

"Never to me." Cole replied before leaning over and kissing her forehead, "Of course I don't have any evidence of who the spy and killer is yet."

"I do have some interesting evidence of my own, however." Max said suddenly and T'Lan looked at him.

"You know the identity of the murderer?" she asked.

"No, I am as much in the dark as Lieutenant Commander Cole is regarding that. On the other hand I have just gained some interesting evidence about Captain Edwards and Commander Carr."

"Admiral what can we do for you?" Jones asked when Schmidt's face appeared on the main screen of the starship he and Brown were aboard. The bridge of their ship dispensed with central positions for the commanding and first officers, instead reducing the size necessary by only featuring the needed duty stations and having the commanding officers double as bridge staff.

"I've just had a report forwarded to me from the *USS Nightfall*. It seems that there has been a murder aboard the ship." Schmidt answered and Jones and Brown exchanged surprised looks.

"A murder aboard a Starfleet vessel?" Brown commented.

"Yes, the ship's counsellor has been killed." Schmidt said.

"Mackey? Admiral Dunn's former subordinate? Didn't we determine that he had been selected specifically to undermine the *Nightfall* project?" Brown asked.

"That was our section's assessment, yes. Now though he has been killed and the latest report from the *Nightfall* indicates that he was likely killed by the Iconian agent they've been hunting for." Schmidt said.

"The crew are investigating of course?" Jones said and Schmidt nodded.

"Of course and that presents us with an opportunity. Take your ship to Starbase Ten and monitor the status of the *Nightfall*. Even if Captain Edwards and his crew fail to identify the Iconian agent you may be able to. Your orders are to extract them and return them to Earth."

"The crew of the *Nightfall* will probably notice when they suddenly vanish admiral." Brown commented and Schmidt grinned.

"Of course they will but what can they do about it?" he said.

When Edwards, Cole and King materialised in one of Starbase Ten's transporter rooms they were met by a lieutenant in a red command division uniform.

"Admirals Trent and Saret are expecting you sirs." she said as they stepped off the transporter.

"Good. I'd like to get this over with as soon as possible." Edwards responded.

"This way please." the lieutenant said and she led the three officers from the *Nightfall* out of the transporter room and to a nearby office where surprisingly there were eight armed men standing outside, all of them eyeing one another nervously. Two of the men were Starfleet security officers from Starbase Ten while the

other six consisted of pair each of Klingon, Romulan and Cardassian soldiers.

"What's going on here?" King asked when he saw this.

"Maybe we should have brought a couple of your men as well." Edwards whispered to Cole.

"Never mind my men, a platoon of Heart's or Shry's troops would be better." he said.

"I'm sorry commander I'm not at liberty to discuss that but I can tell you that Admiral Trent and Admiral Saret already have other guests." the lieutenant replied to King before she pressed the intercom beside the office door, "Admiral the party from the *USS Nightfall* has arrived." she said into it and the door slid open. Behind the desk that dominated the far end of the room sat Admiral Trent, the same admiral that Edwards had earlier discussed the Iconian attacks with. Also present was a second Starfleet admiral, this one a Vulcan as well as a Klingon, Romulan and a Cardassian officer.

"Edwards, you and your men come in and close the door." Admiral Trent.

"Yes sir." Edwards replied.

"Good now take a seat and let me introduce everyone." Trent said, "First of all this is Admiral Saret of Starfleet Intelligence. Then we have General K'Rhan of the Klingon Defence Force, Admiral Daromen of the Romulan Space Navy and Legate Onac of the Cardassian High Command."

"Captain I have heard great things about you and your crew facing down a Borg cube." K'Rhan said, smiling at Edwards.

"You know Captain Kurvok then?" Edwards asked, remembering the Klingon officer that had assisted in the defence of a Federation colony against an attack by a Borg vessel. Kurvok had commanded a transport ship when they first met but following their actions against the Borg he had been rewarded with a warship command instead.

"The *Glorious Slayer* is a scout ship for one of my squadrons captain. Kurvok told me how you destroyed the cube together." K'Rhan said.

"And I have been told of your recent actions in rescuing more than a thousand of my people captain. I also saw the information you provided us with about the Reman forced breeding program. Rest assured we liberated thousands of women from that horror because of you. For that you have my thanks." the Romulan admiral added.

"Unfortunately I can't claim any prior knowledge of you captain." Legate Onac said, "But from the sounds of things you are a man to be reckoned with. Useful in these times."

"And what times would those be exactly legate?" King asked.

"Times when all our governments are under attack from a common foe." Admiral Daromen said.

"Then the Iconians have attacked more targets?" Edwards said.

"Iconian vessels strike at intervals of between two and seven hours." Admiral Saret said, "The exact interval appears to depend on the number of ships to be involved with a shorter interval indicating fewer ships. So far the largest number seen together was seven."

"They attacked a shipyard without warning." Legate Onac said, "Three vessels destroyed the entire Twelfth Order in a matter of minutes while the other four targeted the shipyard itself. All of the production facilities were destroyed and we estimate that it will be more than a year before they can be replaced. Thankfully the civilian workforce largely escaped harm. Casualties among them were less than five percent but only because the Seventh Order was able to arrive in time to evacuate them."

"That pattern has been repeated in every attack Captain Edwards." Admiral Saret added, "The Iconians are targeting infrastructure but leaving significant numbers of survivors at every location that then need to be evacuated or supported."

"They refuse to stand and fight in honourable combat." K'Rhan said with obvious contempt.

"We're hoping that we can come up with some strategy to defeat them." Admiral Trent replied, "We know that their ships aren't indestructible. They retreated when they faced opposition during their attempts to destroy our bases along the Romulan border."

"What we need is reliable intelligence on their strategy captain, other than generally destabilising the border regions of our territories." Admiral Daromen said.

"You want the spy aboard the *Nightfall*." Cole said.

"You realise that we don't know who it is yet?" King added.

"Yet being the operative word commander." Admiral Saret said, "But logic states that the killing of your ship's counsellor will inevitably lead to their exposure and capture."

"We just need you to do it quickly." Legate Onac commented.

"For yourselves as well as for everyone else in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants captain." Admiral Trent said and Edwards frowned.

"I'm sorry admiral, I don't follow." he said.

"Starfleet has decided to review the *Nightfall* project again. Admiral Dunn at Starfleet Command is saying that the presence of an enemy agent aboard your ship makes the entire project too risky." Admiral Trent said.

"You did narrowly avoid your own ship being used to attack Earth." Admiral Saret added.



"So now Starfleet's going to scrap the entire project?" Cole asked.

"If Admiral Dunn gets his way, yes." Admiral Trent replied.

"Dunn's always opposed the project." Edwards said.

"And his opinion is starting to sway others." Admiral Saret said, "The *Ek'Duv*, *Umbra* and *Pacific* have all been ordered to report here despite the current high demand for starships."

The *Ek'Duv* and *Umbra* were the other two modified Akira-class heavy cruisers of the *Nightfall* project that had been launched so far. The program had called for eighteen ships in the first wave but so far only three had been completed while senior Starfleet officers continued to argue over the idea of fitting weapons capable of massive planetary destruction to their ships and the formation of an improved ground combat force to be carried aboard them. On the other hand the *Pacific* was a Nebula-class ship that had been modified to carry a single mass accelerator in its configurable equipment module as a test bed for the technology. For every ship involved in the *Nightfall* project to be effectively stood down together suggested that support for it within Starfleet was draining away.

Edwards sighed.

"In other words unless we catch the spy soon and show that we have a role to play." he said.

"Your logic is sound captain." Admiral Saret replied and King snorted.

"I was supposed to be retired anyway. I only came back to Starfleet because of the manpower shortage. If Starfleet now thinks it has too many ships then I guess I can go back home to my wife." he said.

"Admiral I'm sure we'll have results for you soon." Cole added.

"You better had commander because we need your ship and the others of the *Nightfall* project out there dealing with the Iconians, not sat here in spacedock doing nothing." Admiral Trent told him.



Nayal crossed her quarters to answer the door when it chimed.

"What the hell are you doing here now?" she said when she saw Carr, T'Lan, West, Nikki, Rebecca and Emma standing in the corridor outside, all of them wearing dresses instead of their uniforms.

"The dinner?" Nikki commented and Nayal frowned.

"It's five in the morning." she said, "Dinner is at eight tonight."

"Local time." Carr pointed out, "The restaurant is ten hours behind us. We've docked at Starbase Ten and dinner is in an hour."

"And you are still wearing the onesie you sleep in." Rebecca added.

"Oh crap." Nayal said, "Okay let's go."

"Aren't you going to get dressed?" T'Lan asked.

"No time. I can go like this, I'm decent. In fact I'm showing less skin than you are cousin and if Rebecca's dress was any shorter it would be a vest." Nayal said and as she stepped out of her quarters she began to push the other women back, "Come on, let's go, go, go."

With Nayal continuing to push them along the corridor the women made their way to the transporter room.

"We need beaming over to the station chief." Carr told the crewman on duty as Nayal continued to push the women onto the transporter pads before taking her place beside them.

"Yes commander. Co-ordinates?" he responded.

"The commercial transporter station on deck seventeen, section six." Carr said and the crewman entered the co-ordinates into the transporter.

"Co-ordinates locked commander. Connection established." he said.

"Energise." Carr ordered and moments later the group of women dematerialised, reappearing in a similar transporter room on Starbase Ten.

"Okay come on, hurry, hurry." Nayal said.

"There is no need for you to keep pushing Nayal, we all intend to reach the same destination at the same time." T'Lan told her.

"That may be cousin, but even if you lot don't mind the draft but I'd like to get to the restaurant where at least I can get a warm meal. Is the air conditioning in here playing up or something?" Nayal said.

"What draft?" Rebecca asked.

"I don't feel anything." Nikki added.

"Obviously it's your dulled human senses. I bet T'Lan feels it though." Nayal replied.

"I do not. The life support system appears to be functioning properly." T'Lan said as Nayal ushered them out of the transporter room and into the wide commercial section of the orbiting starbase, all of them unaware that they were being watched from beside a small cluster of trees planted in one of the garden areas included in the commercial area to provide visitors with something other than bulkheads and hatchways to look at.

"You took your time Jenna." The Girl said to herself as she watched the party heading away from the transporter. She noticed that a number of passers by were turning their heads as the women from the *Nightfall* passed them and for a moment she wondered why until she saw Nayal, at which point she sighed and shook her head.

Unlike some of the more up market restaurants that were located on the outer edge of the space station so that customers could look out into space the one that the women from the *Nightfall* headed for was located towards the interior and to make up for the lack of a natural view each table was inside an alcove that featured a large display screen at the end that could be configured to show whatever scenic view the diners desired. Thus when the group entered the restaurant they noticed images of widely differing terrain from various worlds.

"At last." Nayal muttered, "Everywhere on this station is cold."

"The temperature is quite normal." Emma commented.

"For you maybe but I have circulation to worry about." Nayal responded.

"Carr." Carr said to the tripedal Edosian maitre d' when they entered and the man nodded.

"Of course. You are at table four. Your server will be with you shortly." he said, marking off the group's arrival on the console he stood beside just inside the entrance.

"Thanks." Carr replied and the women began to walk towards their table. However, when Nayal passed by him at the back of the group the maitre d' reached out one of his three arms and tapped her on the shoulder from behind.

"Excuse me madam but-" he began to say softly.

"Hey look if you're going to tell me that this outfit violates your dress code then I should point out that I am a Romulan citizen and this is a traditional costume on my home colony of-" Nayal interrupted but before she

could finish she was in turn interrupted by the maitre d'.

"Actually I was about inform you that the flap at the back is open and you are exposing yourself." he said and Nayal winced.

"Oh my God it is." West said, grinning as her eyes widened. Meanwhile Nayal hurried to close up the back of her onesie.

"Just move." she said, "Let's just forget this ever happened, okay?"

"Sure Nayal." Rebecca said, "We can put it all behind us." and Nayal frowned at her.

"Let's just take our seats." Nikki added.

"Now, now ladies, let's not make Nayal the butt of all our jokes tonight." Carr said.

"Ha, ha, all very funny." Nayal said as the women reached their table and sat down. Then she looked at T'Lan and added, "What about you cousin? Anything to add?"

"Humour is an illogical concept." T'Lan replied, "However, the jokes are clearly based on words that can instead describe the part of your anatomy that has been exposed to everyone we have passed on the way from your quarters to here." and Nayal sighed.

"I think she preferred the jokes to being reminded about that." Carr said.

"Okay everyone just shut up and order and if anyone dares order rump steak then I will show them why my people have a reputation for vengeance." Nayal said.

The meeting with the Starfleet admirals and leading military officers from the neighbouring powers broke up with no obvious solutions to the issue of the sudden Iconian military campaign other than promises from all those present that their governments would provide aide to their neighbours regardless of any past animosity between them.

"So are we heading back to the ship or shall we get a drink or something to eat first?" King asked.

"Drown our sorrows before breaking the news to everyone else that we could all be being reassigned soon you mean?" Cole said and King smiled.

"That's one way of putting it." he said.

"There's a good restaurant on deck seventeen but that's where the girls' night out is so I don't think we should crash that." Edwards commented.

"Captain Edwards, you are looking for somewhere to drink to your victory?" K'Rhan said as he exited the office behind them.

"Yes. Do you want to join us general?" Edwards asked.

"I must return to my ship and report to the High Council. But I know that some of my officers are at an establishment on deck twelve. The Green Dancer I believe it is called." K'Rhan told him and Edwards smiled.

"Would one of these officers be Captain Kurvok by any chance?" he said.

"It would. As I said, his ship is under my command and it was one of the vessels that escorted my own here. Now go, get there before the blood wine runs out." K'Rhan replied.

"Thank you general, we will." Edwards said and the three Starfleet officers began to walk away.

"So are we going to call the others?" Cole asked.

"Why not? Heck I bet even Max could do with an evening off now that we're effectively grounded." Edwards answered and he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to *Nightfall*." he transmitted.

"*Nightfall* here captain. Everything is under control." Hamilton responded.

"Glad to hear it commander. That means that you can stand down for a few hours and join us for a drink. Tell the other command staff as well. Max included." Edwards told him.

"Yes sir." Hamilton responded cheerfully, "Where shall we meet you?"

"A place called the Green Dancer on deck twelve. It comes with a recommendation from a Klingon." Edwards said.

"Understood captain, suitable precautions will be taken. *Nightfall* out."

"Are you not enjoying your meal?" T'Lan asked Nayal as the Romulan ate her main course.

"Of course I am. Why would you ask that?" Nayal answered.

"I have noticed that individuals happy with their meals tend to be more vocal about it. Of course eating for social purposes is not a Vulcan practice." T'Lan explained.

"If you must know I just don't trust any of these humans not to twist anything I say into another joke about my wardrobe malfunction cousin."

"Perhaps you could ask Commander Carr for her advice. She has also been observed in a compromising state of undress after all." T'Lan suggested and Carr frowned.

"Me?" she said.

"You were found handcuffed naked to the captain." West pointed out.

"Don't forget that crewman who found him unzipping your uniform in a turbolift." Nikki added.

"And both of those were your fault Nikki." Carr responded, "You changed the replicator settings in our

quarters so that you could pretend to be a Starfleet officer and buy alcohol under age. The next uniform I replicated was too small for me because of that.”

“Actually I was thinking about the incident yesterday in the captain's ready room.” T'Lan said and Carr stared at her, hesitating before she replied.

“The what?” she said.

“When Robert and Lieutenant Maximillian reported the current status of their investigation to you and Captain Edwards you were standing facing them with your back to the viewport behind the captain's desk. As you know Maximillian's Borg ocular implant is capable of detecting extremely fine details ordinarily missed by human, Vulcan or similar eyes and he was able to make out the reflection of your back in the surface of the viewport. You favour a single piece uniform sealed using a single zipper running down the back and this was shown to be open in your reflection.” T'Lan explained and with the exception of Rebecca the other women sat at the table all turned to look at Carr.

“And Max told you?” West asked.

“Correct.” T'Lan replied, “He informed Robert and myself in the turbolift immediately after.”

“Oh this is good.” Nayal said, smiling for the first time since the state of her onesie had been pointed out to her, “Now no-one cares about my wardrobe malfunction.”

“Rebecca does not appear shocked by this.” Emma commented and Nikki looked at Rebecca.

“That's because she knows already.” she said, “She got Captain Edwards to tell her because he's her father.” then she looked at Carr, “Well mom? Are you going to come clean at last?”

“It is illogical to continue with a deception given the existence of such evidence commander.” T'Lan added.

“Okay fine I admit it. David and I have been seeing one another ever since we ended up handcuffed to one another in that hotel room.” Carr responded, lifting her hands up in front of her.

“I guess having all your clothes stolen meant you saw plenty of one another then.” West commented and Nikki winced.

“I'm not sure I want to hear about what my mom did then.” she said.

“And I'd rather not go into details either. Now can this stay between us? Enough jokes are being made as it is even without people knowing for certain.” Carr asked.

“Wow this is the first secret I've been asked to keep.” Emma said, smiling, “I wonder if I can be trusted?”

“Vulcans do not gossip.” T'Lan commented.

“What do you call what you just did then?” Rebecca said.

“Making a suggestion to a colleague about where to obtain useful advice.” T'Lan answered.

“So what about the rest of you?” Carr said.

“Don't worry, I'll keep quiet.” West said.

“Me too mom.” Nikki added and then Carr turned to look at Nayal.

“Answer me one question. Is it serious?” the Romulan woman responded and Carr paused.

“Maybe, that's something we've never discussed.” she said and Nayal smiled again.

“Okay fine. I'll keep my mouth shut about it until Bradley suggests we should be a proper couple again because then I'm using you and the captain as an example of keeping things casual.” she said before she took a large bite of her meal and began to chew.

“Thank you all.” Carr said before she took another bite of her own meal.

“Now you just need to secure a similar promise from Cole and Max.” Emma pointed out.

The *Nightfall's* senior male officers met outside the Green Dancer, a bar that had a holographic image of an Orion woman dancing above the doorway and the new arrivals handed civilian jackets to Edwards, King and Cole to put over their uniforms so that they could avoid any complications when asking to be served alcohol while in uniform.

“This place just screams out tasteful doesn't it?” King said sarcastically.

“As long as they serve proper Andorian ale I'll be happy.” Shry said before they all heard a roar from inside.

“Yes, there are Klingons in there all right.” Edwards said, “Let's go and say 'hello' shall we?”

The group made their way inside the bar and found that in addition to the usual mix of Federation member species to be expected inside such an establishment there was also a group of four Klingons, one of whom turned to look at the group from the *Nightfall* when they entered and grinned.

“Captain Edwards!” Kurvok called out, spreading his arms in a welcoming gesture, “It is good to see you again. Join us.”

“We'd be glad to Captain Kurvok.” Edwards replied.

“And you.” Kurvok added, pointing at Hamilton.

“Me?” Hamilton said, surprised at being singled out.

“Yes you.” Kurvok said before he turned to the other Klingons, “This is the man who tamed a Romulan woman and made her his love slave.” he told them before looking back at Hamilton, “Come here and tell the tale of how you managed this.”

"I think love slave is going a bit far, don't you Bradley? It makes it sound like you drag her around on a leash." Cole said but Hamilton smiled.

"Let's not play down my achievement." he said as he approached the Klingons, "Gentlemen, have you ever been to a comic con?" he asked.

"Excuse me but is there a Lieutenant Commander Jenna West in your party?" the maitre d' asked when he walked up to the table.

"That's me." West said, raising a hand.

"There is a call for you from station security." the Edosian told her and she frowned.

"I wonder what they want?" she said as she got to her feet, "I'll be right back."

The maitre d' led West to his console where she saw that there was an active communication channel.

"Right here." he said, pointing to the console.

"Jenna West." she said into it.

"Commander West this is station security, we've just caught what we believe are two thieves in possession of parts from the *USS Nightfall*. We need you to come and verify the contents of the crates." a woman's voice said and West sighed.

"Can't this wait?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not commander." the woman said, "We need to determine the ownership of the parts as soon as possible."

"Fine, where do I need to meet you?" West asked.

"Deck nine, section fourteen."

"Right, I'm on my way." West said and the channel promptly went dead. Returning to the table West stood beside it, "Security say they need me. Someone may have been stealing from the *Nightfall*. I'll try to be back as soon as possible."

"Shouldn't that be a job for Commander Cole?" Nikki asked.

"Apparently they need someone to identify the parts they think are stolen. Just go on without me, no sense in anyone else having their evening disrupted." West answered and then she waved before leaving the restaurant.

Making her way to the nearest turbolift West summoned a car and told it to take her to deck nine, section fourteen. Even though the turbolift took less than a minute to make the journey it still seemed like a long time to West because of her frustration at being called away from the group meal. As soon as the doors slid open on deck seven she stepped forwards to leave the turbolift before she noticed The Girl standing outside in the otherwise empty corridor with a compact hand phaser pointed towards West.

"Hello Jenna." she said.

"Wait-" West began, holding out her hands but before she could say anything more The Girl fired the phaser and West collapsed.

The Girl then got into the turbolift and closed the doors just as West's eyes opened again.

"That stings." The Controller said, in control of West's body now that the phaser stun blast had rendered her unconscious.

"You'll get over it. Your information was correct. I was able to gate in without triggering the alarms." The Girl said and The Controller smiled.

"Their detection system works fine on a starship or any section of a space station or colony where electronic emissions can be controlled but in crowded commercial zones where you've got dozens of transmission sources interacting with one another a small gateway can be formed without being noticed. One or two agents, you wouldn't get an entire invasion force through though."

"An invasion force wouldn't worry about being detected. Now what can you tell me about Starfleet's plans to oppose The Lord Martial's attacks?" The Girl asked.

"The Lord Martial? You mean he's taken personal command of operations?" The Controller replied in surprise.

"Yes, he has a grand scheme to bring these young empires to their knees. Once he's drawn enough of their forces away from their core worlds that's where he'll strike. Destroying them while they are undefended. Not only that but to do it he's taken a fleshform body, one modelled after a hero of Starfleet can you believe? He looks like the captain of some centuries old ship called *Enterprise* that was important to the Federation." The Girl told her.

"Well other than the fact that Starfleet is rushing hundreds of ships to the Federation's border regions I've no information to give you. Although providing I can stay in control of this body long enough to get back to the *Nightfall* I should be able to rig up an automated relay program that will send any data regarding Starfleet deployment on to you without me needing to do anything more. Useful given that Jenna has been rather effective at stopping me from doing anything useful aboard the ship for months now. Hopefully she won't figure out what I've done."

"Hopefully?" The Girl commented.

"There seems to be something of a two way link between us. On the odd occasion she's been able to access my knowledge. I don't know how it works and thankfully she can't control it but I may need to stay dormant to stop her deleting the program."

"That sound dangerous." The Girl said, frowning, "You know enough about our operations to be a threat if that information falls into the hands of the Federation. The crew of the *Nightfall* have been able to recreate our gateway technology in the past."

"Even if they could reproduce it on a regular basis they wouldn't know how to access our realm without help and Starfleet are too soft to do anything to threaten my existence while I'm inhabiting their friend." The Controller replied.

"Very well but I want you to consider a means to leave the ship so that we can extract you." The Girl said and The Controller nodded.

"Okay, I'll make the preparations." she said.

"I wasn't aware that you drank anything lieutenant. Let alone Klingon blood wine." Kurvok said as he and the other Klingons watched Max down a goblet of blood wine.

"My body is still largely biological and can process organic compounds. Your blood wine is actually preferable to me over Federation or Romulan beverages. They contain few ingredients of use while I can digest the protein from blood wine." Max replied

"The question is though can you handle it?" Kurvok asked and Max smiled at him before putting the empty goblet down on the bar.

"Another." he said and the bartender who was still somewhat nervous about having a Borg in his establishment poured him another drink, "Let's find out shall we?" Max said to Kurvok as he raised the goblet and Kurvok and the other Klingons gave out a laugh.

"Now tell what victories you have had since our last encounter Captain Edwards." Kurvok said, "My fellow captains want to hear all about the ways we can beat the Iconians."

Edwards glanced at his fellow officers before turning back towards the Klingons.

"We haven't actually managed to beat any of their ships yet. The last time we faced any of them we only escaped thanks to some ingenuity from my helmsman and engineer." he told them.

"I improvise a slingshot manoeuvre around the local star and took us back in time far enough for us to make repairs." Hamilton added.

"So your talents go further than seducing Romulan women." one of the Klingon captains said and he slapped Hamilton on the back.

All of a sudden Max set his goblet down and pointed through a window of the bar that looked out into the large commercial area outside.

"Look captain!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Edwards asked as gathered officers all turned to look through the window as well.

"Over at the other side of the hallway, it's that Iconian girl." Max said.

"Yes, I see her." Shry said.

"Well let's get after her then." Heart added.

"Wait." Max said before they could start running, "Hand me your communicators." and as he took the combadge Cole offered him he presented his other hand to it and extended the nano-probe implantation tubes from between his knuckles, injecting the device with nanites of the same type that swarmed through the *Nightfall*.

"What does that do?" Cole asked as he then pinned his combadge back on his chest, this time on the jacket he wore over his uniform.

"The nanites will modify your combadge to emit a jamming signal of the type that disrupts Iconian gateway formation." Max said.

"Good idea Max. it's no good catching up to her if she can just gate out of here. What sort of range does it have?" Edwards said as he took back his own combadge.

"About ten metres, although I would suggest closing to within five if possible." Max told him.

With their combadges modified to emit jamming fields when activated the officers from the *Nightfall*, joined by the Klingons who were eager to assist in the capture of an Iconian agent all hurried from the bar and looked across the hallway. In the short time since Max had alerted the others to The Girl's location she had moved on and was no longer in sight.

"Split up into pairs." Edwards said, "Search every one of these businesses and exits. Captain Kurvok I suggest you stay with Max and Doctor King."

"You think we can't hunt?" one of the Klingons asked.

"He knows that we don't know what the child looks like." Kurvok told him, knowing both Edwards' reasoning and also how much his fellow Klingons would be angered by being left behind. The other Klingon snarled for

a moment, not totally satisfied with the answer but accepting it anyway.

The group then split up in their hunt for The Girl. Given the time on the station the number of businesses still open was lower than it could have been but this area was popular with bars and diners that were still open and many of these needed to be checked. Thankfully the number of potential hiding places for The Girl was limited by the apparent age of her host body meaning that she would not be admitted into many of them. However, it was not inside one of the other businesses that The Girl was located, instead it was in a corridor leading away from the main hallway to the loading section behind many of them.

"Got her." Hamilton said when he saw The Girl walking away from him and White.

"I wonder what she wants down here?" White said as they headed after her.

"I don't know but maybe the others can cut her off." Hamilton replied and he tapped his combadge, "This is Hamilton to all teams. White and I have eyes on the target in the corridor heading for section fifteen."

"Understood. Keep on her tail and I'll notify starbase security." Edwards responded

Unaware that she was being followed The Girl turned down another side passage, one that would take her towards the local power sub station where she knew that she could form a gateway without being detected by the starbase's internal sensors.

"Looks like she's heading for the local power station." Hamilton broadcast to the other group.

"Shry and I are right near there, we'll head her off." Heart responded.

Meanwhile The Girl continued towards the power substation, still unaware that she was walking into a trap until all of a sudden a door opened in front of her and both Heart and Shry appeared.

"I suggest you stop right there." Shry said, holding up a hand for The Girl to stop while both he and Heart activated the jamming function of their communicators.

"The girl looked at the two men before looking back down the corridor behind her just as Hamilton and White came into view, blocking her escape that way. There was still a doorway that led into yet another part of the station but The Girl had no idea if anyone else would be waiting for her on the other side. Therefore, reasoning that her presence aboard the station had already been compromised she decided that she would use a gateway to escape anyway, not caring if it was detected.

However, when she took a single step forwards nothing more happened and she found herself still in the corridor facing the two military officers.

"What's the matter Miss Sanchez?" Heart asked, using the name of the dead girl that The Girl now inhabited,

"Is something wrong with your technology?" and Shry stepped forwards to grab her by her shoulder.

The Girl reacted to this with surprising speed and strength, grabbing hold of Shry's arm and twisting it sharply to produce a loud 'snap' and he cried out in pain. The Girl let go of him as he fell to the floor, clutching at his injured arm and leapt at Heart. The MACO dropped into a defensive stance and overcoming his general reluctance to strike someone who appeared to be so young struck The Girl in her face. The blow had little effect though, producing a 'crunch' sound as he broke her nose and white liquid began to drip from it but The Girl was not stopped by this as any ordinary humanoid would be. Instead she struck Heart in the abdomen with enough force to knock the breath from him and he too collapsed. The Girl was then poised to continue through the door that Heart and Shry had come through when she saw a trio of Klingons appear on the other side.

"There she is!" Kurvok yelled and all three broke into a run.

Turning around, The Girl saw that Hamilton and White were still some distance away and that left the other doorway as her only possible escape route. Rushing back past Heart and Shry, The Girl opened the door and stepped through only to see a pair of security officers appear ahead of her. With every way out now blocked The Girl broke into a run anyway, charging towards the security guards who both drew their phasers. She still had her own phaser but she did not draw this immediately, knowing that by appearing to be unarmed would probably cause the security guards to hesitate before firing at her.

"Stop right there!" one shouted as he took aim but The Girl ignored him and carried on running.

Edwards and Cole then appeared behind the two security guards just as one fired his phaser and the beam struck The Girl in the chest, however this had no more effect on her than Heart's punch did and she carried on running.

"No!" Edwards called out, "Stun won't affect her."

The two security guards were in the process of adjusting their weapons when all of a sudden The Girl lunged herself at them, knocking them both off their feet in less than a second and their phasers clattered to the floor.. The Girl quickly picked one of these up and both Edwards and Cole threw themselves to the floor. The Girl then turned back the other way just as the first of the Klingons was coming through the doorway after her and she fired the phaser. The beam hit the Klingon and he did not even have the chance to cry out as he was instantly vaporised. The high level phaser discharge was immediately detected by the starbase's internal sensors and an alarm began to sound. The Girl knew that this meant even more security guards would be on their way and there was the real danger that she would be killed. Seeing no clear escape routes she tried to create another gateway and this time, being far enough from the officers wearing modified

combades to be outside the range of their jamming, a gateway formed to carry her away from the starbase before more armed guards could arrive.

Kurvok roared when he saw The Girl vanish.

"Have you no honour?" he yelled at the spot where she had been stood.

"Damn it, I thought we finally had her." Cole said as he and Edwards came to a halt, watching the two starbase security guards picking themselves up.

"Captain this is King." King's voice said from Edwards' combadge.

"Go ahead doctor." Edwards responded.

"Captain, Shry is injured. I want to get him back to our sickbay to treat him." King said and even though the two officers could not see one another Edwards nodded.

"Very well doctor. Beam back to the ship. I'll join you there later but for now I think I need to speak to Admiral Trent again." he said.

"Oh and I bet he'll be just thrilled to see us." Cole commented.

"Everything sorted now?" Carr asked when The Controller, now impersonating West, returned to the restaurant.

"Actually it was a false alarm." The Controller said, "Would you believe that it was an old Maquis member who wanted me to help him steal supplies from the *Nightfall*?"

"What were they after?" Nikki asked.

"Engine parts and warp plasma mainly. Stuff to run a ship with." The Controller answered

"Have you reported this to starbase security?" T'Lan said.

"I didn't think it would be worth it. He was depending on me to be the source for his stolen goods and he told me that he's leaving soon anyway." The Controller replied, knowing that if anyone checked with station security they would find that no report had been filed.

"There is a degree of logic in your decision, although all threats to security ought to be recorded." T'Lan said.

"Well Jenna can still contact security after we've finished eating." Carr said.

"Quite, I've been looking forward to getting back to this meal." The Controller said as she sat down in West's seat, smiling at the thought of her crew mates being completely unaware that there was anything wrong.



Accompanied by Cole and Max, Edwards was able to locate Admiral Trent in the starbase operations centre where he was in the process of directing relief and security operations along the entire Romulan border. The arrival in the operations centre of a Borg drone prompted a few nervous looks from the command staff, few of them having ever encountered what had been regarded as the Federation's greatest enemy for more than two decades.

"An Iconian agent right here under our noses?" he said.

"Yes admiral, I'm afraid so." Edwards responded.

"And we didn't pick it up until it left. I thought our sensors were able to detect their gateways." the admiral said.

"They can admiral." Max said, "However, like any energy signature the formation of a gateway can be masked by surrounding it with other emission sources."

"Or she could have formed her gateway somewhere down on the surface and found a way to sneak aboard the station the old fashioned way. Hence nothing to detect when she arrived." Cole added.

"Admiral I would advise having your engineering staff run a security check on your computer network as well as advising the crews of all the starships currently docked here. The Iconians favour cyber warfare." Max said and Admiral Trent nodded.

"I'll see to it." he said, "Admiral Saret will want to track her movements as well. We need to know whether she met with anyone while she was here."

"I hate to say it but I think she could have been here to meet with one of my crew admiral." Edwards said.

"The spy?" Cole said and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, it's too much of a coincidence that this girl happens to turn up right when we arrive and just after the spy has suddenly become active again." he said.

"I'll speak to West." Cole said, "She should be able to give me a list of everyone who has left the ship."

"Are Commander Carr and the other ladies back?" Edwards asked when he, Cole and Max materialised on the transporter pads aboard the *Nightfall*.

"No sir." the transporter operator replied, "Do you want me to contact the commander?"

"No, that won't be necessary but when they return I want to speak to Commander Carr as soon as possible." Edwards said as he stepped off the pad. Then he looked at Cole and added, "Cole, Max, see if you can find any clues about who the Iconian agent might be and get back to me. I'll be in my ready room. If Starfleet command is going to cancel the *Nightfall* program then we need to be ready to argue our case."

"Don't worry captain, you can rely on me." Cole responded.

"Commander I have a report from the nanite hive." Max added, "It has completed its review of our computer network."

"Okay, let's go and take a look. After you Max." Cole told him and the former Borg drone nodded before exiting the transporter room.

He and Cole then made their way to the *Nightfall's* engineering section where teams of engineers were overhauling the cruiser's four warp cores. Max was capable of interfacing remotely with the ship's systems but Cole depended either on a console or heads up display, therefore Max brought up the results of the nanites' sweep of the *Nightfall's* computer network on the first monitor that they came to.

"Okay Max, what am I looking at?" Cole asked while he watched streams of numbers flowing across the screen.

"This is a representation of the trinary code used in the *Nightfall's* computers commander. Specifically the operating code from the terminal in Lieutenant Mackey's office." Max answered, "Our experience with Iconian code has shown that its presence appears in a data search as an anomalous value that then unpacks to carry out its function. You can see such a digit here." and he pointed to where the streams of '0's', '1's' and '2's' were suddenly interrupted by a single '3'.

"Okay so the nanites found Iconian code. We already suspected that it was the Iconian spy that killed Mackey."

"Yes commander. The nanites have also confirmed that this code is now inert, leaving us with no definite information regarding its function. However, it did leave this marker in the computer's active memory." Max said and Cole smiled.

"Isn't that all time stamped?" he asked.

"Yes commander. It is marked approximately one hour prior to the transmission via the lateral sensor array that I detected. It seems that the spy wanted to give themselves time to get away from the murder scene before their program was triggered. In addition to that the section of memory immediately preceding this

anomalous data element consists of an unbroken string of zero values. An impossible sequence in a correctly operating computer." Max answered and Cole nodded.

"Yes, I was taught about data scrubbing at the academy," he said, "You're telling me that the Iconian wiped the records from immediately before they uploaded their own code?"

"That's correct commander. The implication is that the Iconian spy went to the counsellor's office in the guise of a patient. Then after he had begun to speak with them they killed him and accessed his computer, wiping the previous records to conceal their identity." Max replied.

"But now we have a time frame in which we can focus our search. Thanks for this Max, let me call up the duty roster for this time period. Anyone on duty and in the presence of at least one other crew member can be crossed off our list of suspects." Cole said and he stepped forwards to take control of the display, moving the result of the data search into the background while he used his security chief's access code to bring up copies of the *Nightfall's* duty roster file for each department.

"We will need to consult with T'Lan and West about any of the civilian support staff who may have been working with their departments at the time." Max pointed out.

"Were there any here in engineering?" Cole asked.

"Yes commander. Barbara Leyton and Matthew Dorn were present in engineering throughout this time period. They have been co-operating with me in improving our engine efficiency so that we can extend the length of time we can remain at maximum warp. Given the extra stress we were placing on our warp drive at the time I thought it wise to have them study the effect it was having." Max told him.

"What is the exact time frame you require information for?" T'Lan's voice said from behind the two men and they looked around to see that the pregnant Vulcan had just entered engineering, still wearing the dress she had worn to dinner.

"T'Lan, I hope you didn't have to cut your dinner short for this." Cole said as she walked up to him and then he kissed her forehead.

"The dinner was over and upon our return to the ship the transporter technician informed us that you had come here to continue your investigation. I came to see if you required any assistance." T'Lan explained.

"Well you're just in time. Max has identified a rough time of death for Lieutenant Mackey from the code uploaded by the Iconian spy, as well as a period of time before that when they were likely speaking to the counsellor. Here you go, this is the time we're interested in." Cole said and T'Lan looked at the duty rosters he had called up.

"I can confirm that the science department was not making use of any of the civilian scientists aboard during those hours." T'Lan said, her memory good enough that she did not need to refer to any of her department logs.

"That just leaves West then." Cole said, "I also need to ask her for a list of crew members who have gone over to the starbase since we docked."

"Why is that Robert?" T'Lan asked.

"Haven't you heard? While you ladies were off having a fancy meal us men were drinking and giving chase to that Iconian girl." Cole said.

"You mean the Sanchez child?" T'Lan responded and Cole nodded.

"Max spotted her." Cole said.

"We tried to trap her using combadges modified to emit a jamming signal but she was still able to escape." Max said.

"Though not before killing a Klingon officer with a phaser she stole from a security guard that she flattened and breaking Shry's arm. Take it from me T'Lan, that kid is stronger than she looks. Maybe stronger even than you." Cole added.

"That is logical. Lieutenant Maximillian and I confirmed that the Iconian synthetic flesh has great potential for strength and endurance." T'Lan said, glancing at the former Borg drone.

"I'm going to go and talk to West." Cole said, "I need that list of everyone that crossed over to the station and the names of the civilians who were working with her department during these hours."

"I advise caution Robert." T'Lan said and Cole frowned.

"Why?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Commander West was called away during our meal under false pretences. She claimed not to be upset when she returned but her behaviour was more reminiscent of that from before her promotion." T'Lan said.

"Commander T'Lan to be fair you are not the best person at reading people's emotions." Max pointed out.

"No, but my hearing does permit me to notice the difference in someone's tone of voice more easily than most others do and Lieutenant Commander West spoke quite differently when she returned to before she left." T'Lan said.

"Why was she called away?" Cole said.

"The restaurant received a call that claimed to be from station security informing her of the theft of equipment

from the *Nightfall*. In fact it was from a former member of the Maquis who wanted her assistance in committing such thefts. She chose not to inform station security about this though since he claimed that he was due to leave Starbase Ten shortly." T'Lan answered.

"Now that's interesting." Cole said, "But it also opens up another possibility. What if that Sanchez girl didn't intend to meet with the spy aboard the starbase? What if the spy stayed right here on the *Nightfall* all along? She'd need a way to penetrate security and get aboard to meet them. That former Maquis member could be another Iconian."

"That possibility is diametrically opposite to our previous one." Max said.

"It at least has the benefit of making the suspects for each possibility mutually exclusive. The spy either remained aboard the *Nightfall* or travelled to the starbase, not both." T'Lan added.

"In either case I need a list of who's been over to the starbase and now I need to ask West about her old friend. If we move quickly enough then station security might still be able to catch him."

"And if he's already left?" Max asked.

"Then I'm sure that Captain Edwards will be willing to send Snowman and his squadron to bring him back." Cole replied, using the call sign that White was known by.

West woke up suddenly, finding herself in her quarters in the bed that she no longer used. Once again she found that The Controller had left her naked but she was relieved to find that this time she was at least no longer bound or gagged. She just had time to remember The Girl firing a phaser at her when a chiming sound from the door to her quarters made her realise what it was that had roused her back to consciousness now.

"Hang on." she called out as she looked around for something to wear. Putting on a uniform or the dress that had been tossed on the floor would take too long and so she instead rushed to a closet and pulled out a robe that she put on as she headed for the door, still tying the belt as she opened it, "Cole." she said when she saw him standing in the corridor outside.

"Jenna I'm sorry I didn't mean to disturb you." he said.

"What? Oh the robe. I was just about to take a shower." West told him.

"At half ten in the morning?" Cole commented and West suddenly remembered the current time difference between the *Nightfall* and Starbase Ten that had yet to be adjusted.

"Is that why you're here? To arrest me for using too much hot water?" she said and she smiled, hoping to deflect Cole from her mistake.

"No actually I wanted to ask you about the person you met when you were called away from your meal. Can I come in?" Cole said.

As was normal with the time during which The Controller was in control of West's body, she had no knowledge of what had transpired between being shot by The Girl's phaser and waking up in her bed but to refuse to answer Cole's questions would undoubtedly arouse suspicion.

"Sure." she said, stepping back to allow Cole to enter her quarters.

When he entered he walked over to the closest chair and sat down, waiting for West to join him.

"According to T'Lan you were called away from your meal." he began.

"Yes," West said, remembering this event at least, "the call claimed to be from station security. They said that they'd detained someone they suspected of stealing from the *Nightfall* and they wanted me to confirm whether the items had come from the ship."

"Only instead of station security you found an old friend from the Maquis waiting for you. An old friend that wanted your help to commit that theft in the first place." Cole said, "Is that correct?"

"So T'Lan told you that?" West responded and Cole nodded.

"Yes, she came to see Max and me in engineering as soon as you all returned to the ship." he said.

"Well Vulcans don't lie." West commented, hoping to glean more information about what The Controller had said and done before attempting to answer any of Cole's questions herself.

"You may not have heard yet but the Iconian girl was seen on the starbase." Cole said and West was suddenly concerned about whether or not she had been seen with The Girl and so she said nothing, instead letting Cole continue to speak himself, "We tried to trap her but she was able to get out of the range of our jamming and escape. Initially we thought that she was on the starbase to meet with the spy from the *Nightfall* but since I heard about your encounter with an ex-Maquis member who was trying to breach our security I can't discount the possibility that the spy remained on the ship and the Iconian girl wanted to get aboard to meet with them. If that's the case then your old friend could be an Iconian or at least working with them. Jenna, I need to know who they are."

West knew that she had been put on the spot. The Girl had obviously stunned her so that she could speak with The Controller and in turn she had used the excuse of meeting with another former member of the Maquis to avoid suspicion.

"Michael Dean." West said sighing as she gave the name of an old associate from the Maquis, "I should have

known it was too good to be true. I'd heard he was killed when the Dominion attacked his colony. He told me he'd just managed to get out ahead of the Jem'Hadar. Obviously that wasn't true though."

The name that West had just given Cole was genuine, as was the description of his death. Thankfully there was no way for Cole to check on that. The only information that Starfleet had about Maquis casualties came from those few who had escaped back into Federation territory.

"He may have escaped then but who knows what happened to him afterwards?" Cole replied as he typed the name West had just given him into the compact PADD he held, "Okay, I'll run that by Starfleet Intelligence. He may have been operating under an assumed name but we should be able to circulate an image at least. There are a couple of more things though.

"Anything." West said.

"Firstly I need you to provide me with a list of who has crossed over to the station since we docked just in case that girl was there to meet with the spy directly and also the names of all of the civilian specialists who have worked shifts for you during this time frame." Cole said and he showed West his PADD so that she could see the time period Max had identified as when Mackey's computer had been wiped.

"Okay I'll forward you my records." West told him, nodding.

"Thanks. That's all I needed for now so I'll leave you to your shower." Cole said and he got back to his feet. West also got up and followed him to the door from her quarters to see him out. Then as soon as the door slid shut she rushed to the nearest mirror and looked at her reflection.

"What have you done? Answer me damn you!" she snapped but the only thing that looked back at her was her own image.

"What's happening?" Jones asked when he entered the flight deck and sat down beside Brown.

"The admiral is calling." she told him and she pointed to the monitor in front of them.

"Admiral, is there news?" Jones said, looking at Schmidt's image on the screen.

"Yes, Starbase Ten reported an intrusion by a known Iconian agent. The young girl that was the daughter of the man they used to attack the colony on Brattan Six." Schmidt told them.

"Have they managed to apprehend her?" Brown said.

"No, sadly not. However, the information we received via Starfleet intelligence is that there may be another Iconian agent aboard the station. Michael Dean, a former member of the Maquis. I'm forwarding a file on him to you now. Find this man, detain him and check to see if he is an Iconian."

"Yes admiral. We won't let you down." Jones said.

"I know you won't. Contact me as soon as you have something." Schmidt said and then the screen went blank.

"That Girl has been at the centre of Iconian activity almost since they first came to our attention." Brown said and Jones nodded.

"Which means that she is likely to know everything about their campaign. Capture her and we can deal them a serious blow." he said.

Carr had also returned to her quarters when she returned to the *Nightfall* but she just changed into her uniform before making her way to *Edwards'* ready room.

"I heard there was excitement aboard the station." she said as he looked up.

"You could say that." he replied, "Max spotted that Iconian girl."

"So why didn't you call us?" Carr asked, "Maybe we could have helped you."

"By the time you could have reached us it would all have been over. Shry would still have a broken arm, the Klingon captain would still be dead and the Iconian would still have escaped. All calling you would have achieved would have been to spoil your breakfast. Or dinner or whatever it was given the time difference." Edwards told her, "There is something else that we need to discuss though. Admiral Trent told me that Admiral Dunn is making moves to cancel the *Nightfall* project. He's using the presence of the Iconian spy to push for scrapping it."

"Surely the admiralty can't be serious about that." Carr said and Edwards leant back in his chair.

"According to Admiral Trent they can be. Given that the *Pacific*, *Ek'Duv* and *Umbra* are all in dock as well I've sent messages to Captains Cameron, Sannel and Hurst."

"I can't believe I didn't check on where the *Pacific* was." Carr replied.

"You mean you'd have invited Charlie Frost to your girls night out?" Edwards said and Carr nodded.

"Mind you that would have meant information getting to the *Pacific* as well." she said and Edwards frowned.

"What information Grace? Did something happen at your meal?" he asked.

"David they know about us." Carr said and Edwards' expression changed to a smile.

"They gossip. That's all." he said.

"No, when Cole and Max came in here and I just about turned around in time to hide the fact that my uniform was open Max saw that it was from the reflection in that window over there." Carr said and she pointed to the

viewport behind Edwards' desk that looked out into the cavernous space dock inside Starbase Ten, "Max told Cole and T'Lan and then T'Lan announced it at dinner in an attempt to get Nayal over the fact that an Edosian maitre d' had to tell her that her butt was hanging out publicly."

"Damn it." Edwards said, wincing and then he sighed, "Well I suppose the cat's out of the bag now."

"The girls swore that they wouldn't say anything but word's bound to get out and if it does before Starfleet reviews us again you can bet that Dunn will use it against us." Carr said.

"Maybe that's what we should do Grace." Edwards said and Carr frowned.

"Huh?" she responded.

"We could leave Starfleet. Let's face it, if the *Nightfall* is scrapped then I doubt that I'd get another ship anyway. That puts me back in an administrative role and the last time I got landed with that it took me a decade to get the *Nightfall*. On the other hand we could move back to Earth. Rebecca will be going back with the other MACOs and Nikki's internship is up in a few months and she'll be able to get into university. Wouldn't you rather be nearer to her than aboard a ship more than a hundred light years away?"

"David this almost sounds like a proposal." Carr said.

"I suppose it is Grace. Even if we manage to save the *Nightfall* project I'd still like to be able to retire while I'm still able to enjoy it and I'd like you there with me."

"And what if the *Nightfall* is saved?" Carr asked.

"Then neither of us would need to worry about admirals with hidden agendas any more. I'll recommend a promotion for Commander Cole, he's shown that he's capable of commanding the ship on more than one occasion and he has plenty of choices for a first officer. Hamilton, West, even T'Lan if he wants the complication of what we've been through with our personal life." and Carr smiled, "Did I just say something funny Grace?"

"I don't know, did you just recommend that Bradley Hamilton be given a senior command role?" Carr said and Edwards smiled back at her.

"Yes I did. Do you think that the galaxy could handle that?" he said.

"Well if I can handle being the fourth Missus Edwards then I'm sure the galaxy can handle Commander Bradley Hamilton as executive officer." Carr responded.

As soon as Cole was gone from her quarters West hurried to her computer terminal and turned it on. Knowing that The Controller had had free reign to act while she had been stunned West also knew that the Iconian intelligence would not have hesitated to gain access to and manipulate the *Nightfall's* computer systems.

Working quickly West checked the log files of her own terminal. Although the Controller could have accessed the *Nightfall's* network from any terminal aboard the ship or even using West's command interface headset, those options did not offer the level of privacy that would be needed for tampering. Using a terminal outside her quarters meant risking being noticed, especially if The Controller had still been wearing the dress West had worn to the restaurant while a headset needed to link wirelessly with the network and it would be much more difficult to mask this connection.

Sure enough the log file indicated that the terminal had been powered up during the time that West had been unconscious and she smiled.

"Thought you could get that by me?" she said, certain that The Controller could hear her even if the Iconian was currently remaining silent and she activated a program she had written herself labelled 'BLOODHOUND', "Well let's see just how good you are at covering your tracks." she added as the program began to run.

West's Bloodhound program was designed to scour the *Nightfall's* computer network for connection records, starting with her own terminal so that she could see what sections of memory had been accessed or compromised. The program was crude and simply written, designed so that West could create small parts of it at a time before combining them all to create the final Bloodhound program in such a way that she hoped The Controller would not be able to keep track of what she had done.

Not surprisingly the Bloodhound program quickly found that the program West used to secure the bathroom door each night had been compromised, altering it so that the door would open automatically if anyone tried to manually pull it back.

"Nice try but you don't escape that easily." West said as she quickly removed that modification from the program and saved it.

There was one other connection that the Bloodhound program then flagged. West's terminal had been used to connect to the *Nightfall's* life support system and for a brief moment West was worried that The Controller could have been planning to sabotage life support to wipe out the crew. However, when she examined the memory that had been written to she found a far more mundane communication echoing program that was designed to repeat commands sent to it, forwarding them to a third location. This program could be accessed from anywhere on the ship but the third location was fixed. The purpose of this program was clear to West,

The Controller did not want to have communication between them and the system they were rewriting to be tracked back to them and this program would stop any such attempt, leading investigators back to the life support system instead. This program was simple enough to remove from the life support system but rather than just erase it entirely West downloaded a copy and moved it to a PADD on her desk. Picking this up she then disabled the device's wireless connectivity, isolating it from the computer network and making sure that the program could not be used to carry out its function. The problem remaining to her was that she could not tell from the compiled code exactly where it was designed to relay data to and from. In order to find out what The Controller wanted to access she was going to have to create a simulation of the Nightfall's network on her PADD and then observe which section of memory the program attempted to communicate with.

"Frankly Cole even knowing the exact time of death isn't going to change the information I can give you." King said while still running the bone-knitting laser over Shry's injured arm, "When the popsicle formerly known as Lieutenant Mackey thawed out I was able to determine that he died without a fight. There were no defensive wounds and no DNA present from anyone other than him. I'm not surprised about that last part, the idea of coming into physical contact with that idiot doesn't bear thinking about." he added before shutting off the laser and looking directly at Shry, "How's that captain?" he asked.

"Yes, that feels good." Shry replied, moving his arm around to test the range of motion he had, "Now if only there was a way that I could get over having it broken by a little girl in the first place."

"Good, now get out of my sickbay and make room for people who are still sick." King told him and Shry smiled.

"Ah, there's that bedside manner we all know and love." he said as he got up off the biobed, grabbed hold of his shirt and headed for the exit from sickbay as he was putting it on.

"Now where were we?" King said, turning back to Cole, "Oh yes, our late if not so lamented counsellor, Lieutenant Mackey. All I could tell from the injuries he sustained was that the angle of the blow came from above as well as the side. There was also bruising to his throat that suggested he was being choked at the same time. Not tight enough to kill him, but enough to limit his air flow and the amount of resistance he could put up. I think that he was sat down when he died, then he fell to the floor where he was found by the MACOs."

"Yes, I did get enough data from the fracture pattern of his skull to be able to model the side of the object used to kill him and as you suspected it was that tacky little statue he normally kept on that table beside where his patients sat." King told him.

"Which reinforces the theory that he was killed by someone he thought he was counselling." Cole said, "A pity that we couldn't lift any prints or DNA from it but it was obviously wiped clean."

"So what's next for your investigation then?" King asked.

"Wait for West to provide me with the list of civilians working for her department at the time Mackey was killed. Right now I'm eliminating people as suspects based on them being on duty in locations where other people could have seen them." Cole said. Then he smiled and added, "Which I'm sure you'll be glad to know eliminates more than eighty percent of your staff as suspects. They were either here in sickbay or treating our passengers at the time."

"Eighty percent hey?" King commented, "I guess that means I'm not working the other twenty percent hard enough then."

The Girl appeared in a chamber aboard one of the Iconian warships. Unlike the vessels operated by the space faring powers Iconian vessels had no bridge or control stations, these being simply unneeded. Instead each ship was operated by a number of Iconian consciousnesses that were downloaded into the ship's computer system from the main system in their home. The ships still maintained areas that could be made habitable though, enabling them to transport biological passengers in safety and relative comfort. The particular chamber that The Girl had just appeared inside was located at the very front of the cylindrically shaped warship and it featured a large viewport in the external wall that both the Lord Marshal and Shintar were looking through, observing the progress of the orbital bombardment of a Klingon colony world while the wreckage of a Klingon Defence Force cruiser continued to burn in space not far away.

"Lord Marshal." she said and both the Lord Marshal and Shintar looked around at her.

"Ah, you're here at last." the Lord Martial said, "Lord Shintar was just reporting on how he has been able to sabotage a Romulan subspace communications relay station. That will slow their response time down greatly."

"I met with the agent aboard the *USS Nightfall*." The Girl said, "She is going to set up a program to communicate Starfleet's deployment plans to us."

"We already know that they are moving fleets to border regions. Can your agent not provide us with any practical help? By destroying one of the Federation's starbases perhaps?" Shintar said and he snarled.

"Do I need to remind you that my agent can't simply gate off the *Nightfall* to escape like your agents can Shintar?" The Girl said, "The chaos of their civil war enabled us to plant hundreds of agents in the Romulan military, although I notice that there are far fewer of them now after months under your command." she added and Shintar snarled as she continued, "On the other hand we have been able to get only one of our number into Starfleet and we have no way of replacing them. Knowing how the Federation will deploy its forces is far more valuable than the temporary advantage of blowing up a starbase."

"Of course it is." The Lord Marshal said, "Until we know that our enemies' forces are properly committed we cannot risk striking at their central worlds and showing our hand. However, a pledge is not action. How soon will your agent provide us with the information she has promised?"

"Soon Lord Marshal. The agent's host has found ways to limit her activities. The window of opportunity for her is small." The Girl told him.

"Very well, I shall await the information eagerly. Now I recommend that you go and await your agent's message." The Lord Marshal said, turning back towards the viewport. Shintar then grinned at The Girl before he too turned around.

"What's happening?" Edwards said as he hurried from his ready room into the *Nightfall*'s bridge in response to Starbase Ten placing all the vessels docked there on alert.

"We've just got word of another Iconian attack." Carr said as she got up from the captain's chair and moved back to her own.

"Where?" Edwards asked.

"Outpost nine along the Neutral Zone." Carr told him.

"Space dock is clearing ships for immediate launch." West added.

"Good. Mister Hamilton as soon as we're clear-" Edwards began before West interrupted him.

"Err captain we don't have any launch orders." she said, "It looks like the *Pacific*, the *Umbra* and the *Ek'Duv* are all holding as well."

"All of the ships from the *Nightfall* program." Hamilton said, looking over his shoulder at Edwards.

"Looks like Admiral Trent is still under orders from Starfleet Command." Carr said.

"This review by Starfleet is not logical." T'Lan said from the science station.

"No it's not." Edwards said, "Starfleet needs ships out there now. West, get me Admiral Trent."

"Do you think you can get him to override orders from Starfleet Command?" Carr said.

"Probably not but I might still be able to get us out into space." Edwards replied.

"Admiral Trent on the line for you now captain." West said and the admiral's face appeared on the bridge's main viewscreen in place of the interior of the spacedock.

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

"Admiral our engineer has been overhauling our warp drive and he thinks that it needs a test run to put it through its paces. Since we're stood down at the moment it seems like a good time to me for us to do that." Edwards said and a smile began to appear on the admiral's face.

"A test run you say? At warp along the border perhaps?" he said.

"That's the idea admiral. We'll keep to the main transit routes between colonies and bases just in case we

need to put into port again.” Edwards explained.

“Very well captain, I’ll tell spacedock to clear you for launch but make sure that you don’t stray too far just in case we need to call you back into action.” Admiral Trent said and then his face vanished from the viewscreen.

“Captain I was not aware that Lieutenant Maximillian has requested that we undertake any such tests of our warp drive.” T’Lan said.

“Trust me T’Lan, he will have if we ask him.” Carr responded.

“Captain spacedock control is clearing us for launch.” Hamilton announced when his heads up display warned him that the docking clamps currently holding the *Nightfall* in place were about to be released.

“Stand by to engage thrusters and take us out of spacedock Mister Hamilton.” Carr ordered before she activated the ship’s intercom and announced, “All hands prepare to depart spacedock.”

“West, inform engineering that we will be going to warp speed and that I would like to know if we need to limit how hard we push the engines.” Edwards said.

“Yes captain.” West replied just as the ship was released from its moorings and Hamilton began to back it away from its berth in the spacedock, awaiting a slot for him to be able to take the ship out into space.

“T’Lan I want a list of areas that the Iconians have hit along the border. See if there are any gaps in the pattern that suggest they could be next.” Edwards said.

“Yes captain.” T’Lan said and then moments later she continued, “Captain there have been three recent raids by pairs of Iconian ships, possibly the same vessels, in a pattern heading towards the Deneva system.”

“Deneva is heavily populated and well defended.” Carr said.

“Yes and there are currently three Excelsior-class starships in the system.” Cole added from the tactical station behind her.

“A lot of shipping passes through Deneva, especially now that transports are running Romulans back to their space.” Edwards pointed out, “That’s a lot of soft targets that the Iconians could hit before any of our ships could respond.”

“Captain, engineering suggests that we go to warp six for one hour before ramping up to full power after that.” West said when she then received an answer from engineering.

“Excellent. Mister Hamilton take us to warp six as soon as we are in free space.” Edwards ordered.

“Aye captain, laying in a course for Deneva. Warp six when clear.” Hamilton confirmed.

Using only the heavy cruiser’s thrusters Hamilton backed the *Nightfall* out of Starbase 10’s spacedock before orientating the ship to point away from the star system’s orbital plane and engaging the impulse drive to take the ship clear of the gravitational interference of the planets orbiting the star where it could safely go to warp speed.

“Warp six now captain.” Hamilton said when the ship accelerated past the speed of light and Edwards nodded.

“Engineering confirms that all warp cores are functioning within acceptable parameters captain.” West added.

“Very good commander. I see your shift is almost over. Could you head down to the hangar and make sure that Lieutenant Commander White and his pilots are ready to scramble?” Edwards said and West nodded.

“Yes sir, I’m right on it.” she said, getting to her feet as a nearby officer moved from one of the secondary duty stations to take over her position and she made her way to the turbolift.

“Captain there is an anomaly in our main lateral sensors.” T’Lan said just after West had left the bridge.

“What sort of anomaly?” Carr asked.

“Part of the control system appears to be trying to overlay data from another system onto the subspace output wave.” T’Lan said and Edwards and Carr looked at one another, both frowning.

“From where?” Edwards said.

“Unknown at present captain.” T’Lan said, “However, it is clear that someone has attempted to use the sensors as a means of communication.”

“The spy.” Cole said, “T’Lan are you recording all of this?”

“Of course. My logs will include the full details of the abnormality.” T’Lan replied.

“Captain I need to speak to Max about this. This could point us towards the Iconian spy.” Cole said and Edwards nodded.

“Go.” he said and Cole got up and hurried from the bridge.

Cole travelled directly to the *Nightfall*’s engineering section where he found Max standing at the back of a group of engineers gathered around a wall mounted viewscreen that was monitoring the interaction between the ship’s four warp cores. With his direct link to the ship’s computer Max did not need to have a clear view of the screen to know what was going on with the warp engines.

“Commander.” Max said when he saw Cole enter engineering and head towards him.

“Max can you take a look at the lateral sensors? T’Lan’s picking up some odd readings and I think that our old friend could be back.” Cole said quietly, glancing at the gathered engineers to see if any of them had



taken their attention away from the *Nightfall's* engines.

"Of course, this way commander." Max responded and he led Cole to another nearby console where he could call up information without being observed. As soon as the two officers stood in front of the console Max remotely configured it to show the status of the *Nightfall's* primary lateral sensor arrays. This showed the power consumption, the output pattern and data being collected.

"I guess that's what T'Lan was seeing. She said that someone was overlaying data onto the emissions." Cole said, pointing to the output energy profile being displayed on the console. Ordinarily this would be a regular repeating pattern but the waveform being shown being emitted by the active sensor system was far more complicated.

"I agree, although the amount of data in question appears limited. Perhaps just an identification code." Max said.

"The spy trying to tell their superiors that they are here? Perhaps that girl was supposed to come aboard the ship to meet them after all. She missed the meeting and now the spy is trying to find out what happened." Cole suggested.

"I don't think so commander. I think that what we are seeing is a program attempting to deal with an error." Max said and Cole frowned.

"What sort of error?" he asked.

"One moment please commander, I must quarantine this function before examining it more closely." Max said as he began to go through the process of moving the computer code to an area of the *Nightfall's* computer where it would be unable to access any other systems.

"T'Lan to Cole." T'Lan's voice then said from Cole's combadge.

"Go ahead T'Lan." Cole responded.

"The interference pattern in the lateral sensors has ceased." she told him.

"Thanks T'Lan. Max has just quarantined the cause. He's investigating it now." Cole said.

"Understood. T'Lan out." T'Lan said and then the channel was shut off, prompting a smile from Cole.

"I love you too darling." he muttered before he turned to address Max again, "So what can you tell me about this program then?" he added.

"The code structure is Iconian. However, it does not appear to be a complete program, instead it depends on communication with a second program elsewhere in our network. For some reason though that program is not responding to the requests for communication that this one is issuing." Max said.

"And that's why it's interfering with our sensors?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. The signal being overlaid with our subspace emissions appears to be an attempt to communicate with an outside messaging system. The signal is the log in data. However, there is no message to be uploaded with this, presumably because that is what the program is attempting to acquire from the secondary source." Max explained and Cole smiled.

"Max this is great. The spy must be using this civilian communication account to pass information to their superiors. If you can identify it then we can take a look at the messages they've been sending and receiving all this time. Maybe even track the communication to other Iconian agents." he said.

"Your eagerness may be somewhat premature commander." Max replied, "Looking at the network communication traffic logs I can see that this program was continually attempting to connect to our life support system. Had it succeeded on the first attempt then I doubt that we would have noticed, however the repeated identical communication requests have established a pattern that can be more easily followed."

"So what was it looking for in the life support system?"

"Unknown. The program is attempting to communicate with a very specific memory address that is currently unused. Assuming that the program is not sending to the wrong address then that leaves only two possibilities. Either the program has triggered too soon and the spy has yet to upload the other part of the program or for some reason it has been deleted. A level two diagnostic of the computer should reveal whether this memory address has been accessed recently."

"Okay do it." Cole told him, nodding, "How long will it take?"

"Perhaps an hour. I shall begin immediately." Max said.

"Now that's interesting." Brown said as she studied the sensor readings on the console in front of her.

"What is?" Jones asked.

"Look, at the ships that just left Starbase Ten." she told him and as he looked at the same display she was watched she continued, "Most of them are heading this way but there's one heading over here instead. Towards Deneva. According to its transponder it's the *Nightfall*."

"The *Nightfall*? But admiral Dunn had all the ships confined to spacedock. Even the *Pacific* is being held back." Jones said.

"Well there are no alerts about an unauthorised launch so Edwards must have found a way to persuade Admiral Trent to ignore Starfleet Command's orders." Brown said and Jones smiled.

"Perhaps our section should consider approaching him." he said.

"I think we should go after the Nightfall instead of continuing towards Starbase Ten." Brown said, "The spy is aboard her and the crew must have a good reason for wanting to leave spacedock."

"You think that they're about to uncover the identity of the Iconian spy aboard their ship?" Jones said and Brown nodded, "In that case let's go. Adjusting course three five nine mark two. Accelerating to warp nine point two."

With time to spare while Max ran his diagnostic Cole returned to the tactical station on the bridge and he was still there when Max entered the bridge as well.

"Max, what are you doing up here?" Edwards asked when the Borg stepped from the turbolift.

"Captain I have completed the diagnostic that Commander Cole asked me to carry out and the results are very enlightening." Max replied.

"So why not just use the intercom to tell us?" Nayal asked.

"There is a security issue." Max answered and Edwards and Carr looked at one another nervously.

"My ready room." Edwards said, "Commander Carr, Cole, with me. T'Lan you have the conn." and the four officers all made their way into Edwards' ready room where everyone but Max sat down.

"Okay Max, so what have you found that's so sensitive that it can't be discussed in front of the rest of the command staff?" Carr said.

"Has Commander Cole informed you of my initial findings?" Max replied and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, he told us that you found an Iconian program running in the lateral sensor control system." he said.

"And that it was connected to our life support system as well." Carr added.

"Correct, which was the purpose of the diagnostic. I was searching for any signs of anyone accessing the affected areas of memory and I have found such indications. There was data uploaded into the life support system several hours ago. This was then deleted shortly afterwards, leaving the program running in the lateral sensor array unable to access it and creating the error that drew our attention to it." Max explained to the other three officers.

"Have you been able to identify who uploaded these programs Max?" Edwards said.

"I have captain. The program running in our lateral sensors was uploaded via the life support system. This suggests that the deleted program was a relay, intended to prevent the original source of the code being identified." Max answered.

"How would that work?" Cole asked.

"If the Iconian code in our sensors had been able to complete its run then it would have erased itself, leaving us with nothing to study and no way to track its source to a particular crew member even if we examined every single console, headset and PADD aboard. None of them would have uploaded anything to the sensor array." Max explained.

"And the relay code in the life support system?" Carr said.

"Was uploaded using a senior officer's access code and from their personal terminal." Max said and Edwards frowned, leaning forwards and resting his elbows on his desk.

"You mean that the person aboard this ship working for the Iconians is a member of my senior staff?" he said.

"Who is it?" Cole said, sighing.

"Lieutenant Commander West." Max said and the other three officers stared at him in surprise, none of them saying anything.

"Jenna West?" Carr said eventually.

"She's not one of those zombies though." Edwards commented, using the slang term that the Nightfall's crew had come up with to describe what the Iconians called flesh hosts, the reanimated corpses that they modified using their synthetic flesh and turned into hosts for their consciousnesses.

"That is unlikely captain. The Iconians cannot disguise the necrotic nature of their host bodies." Max said.

"So West is simply a traitor." Cole said.

"The trail couldn't have been faked at all?" Edwards added.

"The evidence is conclusive captain. Lieutenant Commander West both uploaded and then deleted the data from the life support system that the Iconian code in the sensor array was trying to access." Max replied.

"Computer where is Lieutenant Commander West?" Edwards said.

"Lieutenant Commander West is in her quarters." the voice of the computer responded and Edwards looked at Cole.

"Take her into custody." he ordered, "Max I want you to go through every system on this ship that she has had access to."

"She's our chief of operations. That's a lot to go through." Carr pointed out.

"I know but we need to know if there's anything else in our computer system that could suddenly bite us." Edwards replied.

"I'll go and get a security team." Cole said, getting to his feet before he exited the ready room.  
"And I will return to engineering." Max added before he too turned to leave.  
Outside the ready room both Cole and Max headed for the turbolift without speaking to the other bridge officers.  
"That doesn't look good." Naya commented as she watched this.  
"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Hamilton added.  
"Deck four." Cole told the turbolift.  
"Deck fifteen." Max added and the turbolift began to move.  
It took just a few seconds for the turbolift to reach deck four and Cole exited it as soon as the doors slid open, making his way to the nearby security section where a female officer sat behind the main console.  
"Commander. I wasn't expecting you." the duty officer said.  
"No, this is a surprise to me as well Ensign Richards. I want you and Jakande to draw phaser rifles and come with me." Cole said.  
"Where to commander?" Jakande asked as the crewman walked towards the armoury that adjoined the main security office.  
"We're going to make an arrest." Cole told them both.  
"And we need rifles for that?" Richards said. The standard Type II phaser that Starfleet security staff carried was considered adequate for most duties and the larger rifles were generally only issued in emergency situations where prolonged combat was expected and their superior range and ammunition capacity would be beneficial.  
"Max has identified the Iconian spy. We don't think that she's an actual Iconian host but she'll be armed and combat trained." Cole explained, "Keep your weapons set to stun for now, as far as we know she's still perfectly human and we want to take her alive."

When West had returned to her quarters at the end of her shift she had immediately prepared for bed, laying out the mattress and blankets on the floor of her bathroom and placing the handcuff key on her actual bed where it would be waiting for her the next day. She had not long locked herself in the bathroom when all of a sudden she heard a chiming sound from outside that she recognised as the intercom to the door to her quarters, telling her that there was someone wanting to enter. West had no way of communicating with anyone outside the bathroom though, she made sure to leave her combadge in the bedroom and her security program to keep The Controller trapped overnight while she slept shut down all communication and computer access inside the bathroom. All she could do was wait and hope that whoever was outside her quarters would decide that she was asleep and decide to leave. However, Cole and his security team were not going to just give up and when the intercom was ignored Cole decided to try an alternative means of getting West's attention.

"Maybe she's already asleep." he said to Richards and Jakande before he simply banged his fist on the door, "Jenna open up we need to talk." he called out but again there was no response and he tapped his combadge, "Computer where is Lieutenant Commander West?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Commander West is in her quarters." the computer responded as it had in Edwards' ready room when he had asked the question and Cole nodded and drew his phaser, prompting the two other security officers to raise their rifles, "Computer security override. Open the door to Lieutenant Commander West's quarters." he said and the door in front of them slid open.

Cole and his security team burst into West's quarters and looked around, instantly seeing that the room was empty. However, Jakande pointed to the bed where her combadge could be clearly seen.

"Looks like she didn't want to be tracked." he said and Cole walked over to the bed where he was about to pick up the combadge himself when he noticed the key beside. After all his years in security he was easily able to recognise a handcuff key when he saw one and he frowned.

"Now why would she need this?" he said softly before he turned around and saw that the bathroom door was closed, "Looks like she could be at home after all." he added, walking over to the door and knocking on it, "Jenna you need to come out of there now." he said.

Inside the bathroom West froze, her eyes widening in fear. She had no way of leaving the room and even if she could the only way out was now blocked by Cole.

"Jenna." Cole said again, "If you don't come out then we'll have to force the door."

"Can you come back in the morning? I'm not feeling well." West responded in desperation, unable to think up any other excuse and Cole sighed.

"Okay Jenna we'll do the hard way." Cole said and he tapped his combadge again, "Computer security override. Open the door to Lieutenant Commander West's bathroom."

"Unable to comply." the computer said and Cole and his security team looked at one another in confusion,

"Door controls locked out by program West six one eight."

"What's she playing at?" Cole said and he tapped his combadge again, "Cole to engineering. Max I need

your help.”

“Max here commander. What do you require?”

“Max do you have access to West’s computer files yet?” Cole asked.

“Yes commander, I was just configuring a scan to search for Iconian code.” Max answered.

“That’s great Max but right now I need you to look for a program listed as West six one eight. Jenna’s sealed herself in her bathroom and that is preventing us from opening the door. Also can you take all the systems in her bathroom offline? I don’t want her destroying evidence.” Cole said.

“Understood commander, searching for the program now. Please stand by. Max out.”

Cole stepped back from the bathroom door and raised his phaser. Having not yet searched West’s quarters he had no way of knowing whether she had the weapon issued to her in the bathroom with her.

“Get ready.” he told the other two security officers, both of whom brought their rifles up to their shoulders. All of a sudden the bathroom door slid open when Max disabled West’s security program and the lockout was released. With the door open Cole and the security team could see into the bathroom and they saw West standing at the back of the room in her nightclothes with her wrists handcuffed together in front of her.

“What the hell?” Cole said when he saw this.

"Where is she?" Edwards said when he and Carr entered the security section.

"Secure in the brig. We haven't questioned her yet." Cole replied, "I've got people taking her quarters apart right now looking for evidence."

"And you say she'd locked herself in the bathroom?" Carr asked and Cole nodded.

"And handcuffed. The key was on her bed where she couldn't get at it." he said.

"Any ideas why?" Edwards said and Cole hesitated.

"Not really captain. For all I know it was some sort of personal fetish. Heart might know more about that but I'd rather not just walk to him and start quizzing him on his and West's sex life." he said.

"Very well, let's see her." Edwards said and Cole led the *Nightfall's* captain and first officer into the brig where West, now wearing a set of plain overalls sat in one of the cells, her face streaked with tears.

"Captain-" she said, leaping to her feet when she saw Edwards and rushing towards the forcefield that kept her inside the cell.

"Lieutenant Commander West." Edwards interrupted, "You have been arrested on suspicion of espionage and treason. Depending on what other evidence we uncover further charges may yet be added. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Captain I'm sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen." West answered.

"You're not denying the accusation?" Carr said.

"No but you have to believe me that I couldn't stop her." West said.

"Her? The Iconian girl?" Edwards commented but West shook her head.

"No, it was the controller of the Iconian outpost on Lasner Two. Somehow when we destroyed the outpost she got inside my head." she said and Edwards and Carr looked at one another.

"I think you had better start at the beginning Jenna." Carr said and West sighed.

"At first I didn't notice anything really. I just kept feeling tired, as if I wasn't sleeping properly. Some people even mentioned to me that they'd seen me doing things, reading mainly, when I was certain I'd been asleep. It was her though, The Controller. When I fell asleep she was able to take over control of my body and move around but when I woke up again she couldn't do anything, my body was my own again. Later on she started talking to me though, trying to get me to help her." West said.

"And why didn't you tell anyone about this?" Cole asked.

"A good question." Edwards added.

"Because I was scared that you'd all think I was crazy. Thanks to that Iconian in my head I wasn't exactly anyone's favourite person aboard the ship at the time and if Mackey found out then he'd ship me off to a Federation funny farm."

"So you kept quiet and let this Controller carry on acting against us." Carr commented.

"Yes, I'm sorry but I did. But I looked for a way to keep her under control and that's when I hit on the idea of locking myself in the bathroom at night. Even if she could control my body while I slept she couldn't do any damage handcuffed in the bathroom. The program I wrote unlocked the door every morning so I could release myself and get ready for work."

"So this Iconian speaks to you?" Edwards said.

"Yes, it's like I'm hearing my own voice in my head but it's not me speaking. Sometimes I can look in a mirror and it's my face looking back at me but it's not really me."

"When we were on Iconia you seemed to know things about the place that no-one should have known." Carr said, "Was this Controller telling you what to do?"

"No. She doesn't help me unless it's to her own advantage but every now and again I seem to be able to access her knowledge just like she can access mine. She'll be watching us now." West said.

"And why do you think The Controller chose you as a host? What makes you so special Jenna? Edwards said.

"I think it was something that was done to me after I was captured by the Dominion before the war and put into stasis. The Iconians were experimenting on me when you rescued me." West said.

Edwards stepped away from the forcefield and beckoned for Carr and Cole to join him.

"So what do you think?" he said quietly.

"It's the most far fetched excuse I've ever heard in my career captain." Cole replied, "On the other hand I can't entirely rule it out."

"We need to have King examine her." Carr said.

"King's examined her on numerous occasions since she was pulled out of that tube." Cole pointed out.

"Maybe but now he might have a better understanding of what he's looking for. I think Max and T'Lan should take a look at her as well. They've studied the Iconian synthetic flesh and if West has any of that inside her

then they're the most qualified to study it." Edwards said.

King was sat in his office with Nikki, examining the report she had submitted regarding the status of some of the equipment in sick bay.

"Not bad." he told her, "I can see that you've been taught the right format in your previous assignments." and she nodded.

"T'Lan was very particular about how I submitted reports. Bradley, err, Lieutenant Commander Hamilton not so much." she replied before King's combadge activated.

"Edwards to King I need you to report to me in the brig immediately to examine a subject." Edwards' voice said and King frowned.

"I hope that I'm not expected to deliver my opinion on whether or not any of our security officers or ground troops have been using excessive force captain." he responded.

"No doctor. West has been arrested and I want you to examine her for signs of Iconian technology." Edwards said and Nikki's jaw dropped when she heard this.

"West's been arrested?" she said.

"I'm on my way captain. King out." King said before tapping his combadge to deactivate it.

"What's going on? Why has West been arrested?" Nikki asked as King was getting to his feet.

"In case you missed it, the captain didn't say and I didn't ask. If it means that much to you then you can come with me. Grab that medical kit over there and come with me." he told her and Nikki leapt up from her chair and picked up the medical kit he had pointed at.

When King and Nikki arrived in the brig they found that Max and T'Lan had already arrived and were stood in front of the cell that contained West. Max was watching her closely while T'Lan was focused on the tricorder she held.

"Mom what's going on?" Nikki said. as soon as she saw Carr standing further back from the cell with Edwards and Cole.

"Honey, Jenna West is the Iconian spy." Carr said and Nikki shook her head.

"She can't be." she replied.

"I'm afraid it's true." Cole added.

"So what exactly am I looking for?" King asked.

"Any signs of Iconian technology inside West's body." Edwards answered, "Something that was put there before we rescued her from that laboratory but that might not have shown up in any earlier medical checks."

"So far I have been unable to detect anything doctor. However, the forcefield between me and Lieutenant Commander West may be shielding anything of interest." T'Lan said.

"I agree." Max added, "We need to lower the shield and enter the cell."

"I'm not sure that's advisable." Cole said.

"I'm not going to attack anyone." West said from inside the cell, "I'm wide awake and The Controller can only control me when I'm asleep."

"Commander with the forcefield in place we cannot detect any presence of Iconian technology." T'Lan said and Cole stepped closer to his wife.

"Look T'Lan I'm just worried about you and the baby, okay?" he said, "I can't send you in there with a phaser just in case she makes a grab for it."

"Your concern is logical and most reassuring." she replied, "However, I do have a duty to perform."

"Commander Cole I doubt that I am in any physical danger from Commander West." Max said.

"Nikki and I will need to get closer to properly examine her as well." King added.

"Okay, we'll drop the shield." Cole said, nodding.

"Wait, Nikki's going in there?" Carr said.

"I'll be fine mom." Nikki replied.

"West move to the back of the cell and stand leaning with your hands pressed against the wall." Cole ordered as he made his way to the controls for the cell forcefield. In response to this West turned and walked to the back of the cell, leaning forwards and supporting herself against the rear wall with her arms. Only then did Cole lower the forcefield and allow King, T'Lan, Max and Nikki to enter.

"Please remain still." Max told West as he stood behind her, looking carefully at the back of her head and using his Borg implants to scan her in the same way King and T'Lan used their tricorders.

"Sure. Resistance is futile, right?" West replied, glancing over her shoulder at him.

"And face forwards." Max told her.

"I am still detecting no signs of the Iconian synthetic flesh in her body." T'Lan announced as she ran her tricorder up and up West's back, "Perhaps it is shielded somehow."

"Perhaps it would help if you didn't think of this as a science project instead of a medical examination." King said, studying his own medical tricorder, "If I turn this thing up to its most sensitive setting I'm getting some interesting readings. Ordinarily I'd dismiss them as noise but this time I'm not so sure. West, you say that this

Iconian can control your body while you're asleep?"

"Yes, that's right." West replied, avoiding the instinct to nod.

"Which means that it must be able to obtain sensory data. If not then it would forever be tripping over things and that means that wherever the Iconian is hiding it must have a tap into the parts of your brain that interpret those senses." King said.

"Jenna be careful. This only ends with your death. Let me help you and we can escape this cell, I promise you." a voice in West's head said suddenly as The Controller finally broke her silence and she smiled.

"So there you are." West commented.

"Who are you addressing?" T'Lan asked.

"The Controller." West said, "She just spoke to me. I think King Henry has her worried."

"Bow down before the king." King added, smiling. Then he looked at Nikki and said, "Nikki you need a bone-knitting laser."

"I am detecting no broken bones doctor." T'Lan said.

"I know but I need to prompt a strong sensory input so I can trace the parts of West's brain that are taking in that data." King said.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this doctor." West said.

"Don't worry this will be over quickly. Nikki do you have that laser?" King said and Nikki held up the device.

"Right here Doctor King." she said.

"Good. Then turn it on and move it across one of West's buttocks." King told her and West suddenly turned her head.

"Hey wait a moment-" she began before she felt a sudden stinging sensation and gave out a yelp, "Hey that hurt!" she exclaimed.

"Very good Nikki, although I only needed a couple of centimetres." King said.

"I smell burning." West said, "What's going on?"

"The laser has sliced through your clothing." T'Lan told her.

"You how Nayal turned up at the restaurant?" Carr added from outside the cell and West winced.

"Oh you are kidding me." she said.

"Perhaps some fresh clothing is in order." Edwards said to Cole.

"Well the good news is that that jolt of pain just lit up part of West's brain that it shouldn't have." King said,

"There was a definite passing of information from the neocortex to the hippocampus. I think that what we're looking for is there."

"So you can take it out of me now?" West asked.

"You'll die if they try to get rid of me." The Controller warned her.

"Hold on a minute, I'm not one hundred percent certain that this is what we're looking for. That Iconian might be squatting in several places." King said.

"Well she seems pretty worried to me. Burn my butt again if you need more data but I want that thing gone." West said.

"Captain before we rush into removing the Iconian intelligence from Lieutenant Commander West we should consider the advantages of being able to communicate with it." T'Lan said.

"T'Lan is right captain." Cole added.

"Yeah stick up for you wife. This is my body and I want control of it back." West said.

"In time for your court martial?" King commented.

"Doctor can you remove the Iconian in such a way that it is not destroyed?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not even sure we can take it out at all. If it is where I think it is then that means getting past some very sensitive parts of West's brain." King answered.

"Perhaps I might be of assistance doctor." Max said.

"How?" Carr said.

"I suggest that I inject a number of nanites into Lieutenant Commander West. These could then conduct a physical search of the areas of her brain highlighted by Doctor King for the presence of Iconian technology. Once located they could perhaps act to isolate or disable it." Max said and King smiled.

"I'm impressed. Captain isn't it about time you promoted our chief engineer to lieutenant commander at least? Admiral maybe?" he said.

"I have never sought promotion doctor." Max replied.

"You deserve it all the same." King told him.

"We'll need West's consent if we're going to be-" Carr began.

"Do it. If it means getting rid of this Iconian I'll agree to almost anything." West interrupted and without any further instruction Max extended his arm towards the back of her neck, clenching his hand into a fist and extending the nano-probe injectors from between his knuckles. This made contact with West at the base of her spine and she gasped as he injected her with the same type of nanites that swarmed through the Nightfall itself.

"Injection procedure complete." Max said, "The ship's nanite hive will now examine Lieutenant Commander West's brain from within and pass their findings to us."

"In that case I think we can leave Jenna in peace for now." Edwards said.

"Wait one moment." King said as he turned and reached for the medical kit that Nikki held and she opened it up for him. King removed a hypospray and a vial of liquid that he loaded into the device, "This is a stimulant." he said, "If the Iconian can only take control of West when she's asleep then keeping her awake ought to keep it suppressed." and he injected the drug into West's neck.

"How long will it last?" Edwards asked.

"That dose ought to be good for ten to twelve hours. Hopefully that will be long enough to find a more permanent way of dealing with the Iconian. Long term use of stimulants is not something I'd recommend for anyone." King answered.

"Very well. Keep me informed. I need to update Starfleet with what we know." Edwards said.

"Now this is interesting." Brown said, looking at her console.

"What is?" Jones asked.

"We've just picked up a transmission from the *Nightfall* to Starfleet Command. They've found and arrested the Iconian spy." Brown told him.

"They have him in custody? That's great, who is it?"

"He is a she. It's Lieutenant Commander Jenna West, the former Maquis member who right up until she was arrested was the ship's chief operations officer."

"And is she an Iconian?" Jones said.

"Not quite. According to this she claims to be possessed by one though. The crew are currently looking for a way to remove it from her."

"Then we need to hurry up and intercept them before they can manage that. Increasing speed to warp nine point seven." Jones said as he pushed their ship's engines to their maximum.

King was sat at his desk again, reviewing the streams of data being provided by the nanites now moving through West's brain when Emma entered his office.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Captain Heart's here to see you Doctor King." she said and King frowned.

"Can't you deal with? A bunch of Starfleet egg heads did give you a massive medical knowledge database after all. Put it to some use." he replied.

"This isn't something that's covered in them. It's related to Lieutenant Commander West." Emma said.

"Fine. Show him in." King said and upon hearing this Heart appeared behind Emma.

"Thanks for seeing me doctor." he said as he entered the room.

"So captain what's the problem that's so obscure our former EMH doesn't know the answer?" King said, leaning back in his chair.

"I assume you know that Jenna West and I were—"

"Sleeping together? Yes, neither of you ever tried to hide it like another couple I could mention." King interrupted.

"Well it's all over the ship that she's the Iconian spy and that there is Iconian tech inside her head. Is there any danger that it could have affected me?" Heart said.

"You mean is being an Iconian agent sexually transmitted?" King said.

"Kind of, yes." Heart responded, "She has a contraceptive implant so—"

"I understand." King said and he stood up, "Unfortunately I don't know nearly enough to give you a definitive answer. However, I can run a quick scan. Max can always inject you with nanites as well if you want. They seem to be quite effective at gathering data on these implants."

King picked up a medical tricorder and began to scan Heart, moving the detachable probe around his head in particular, searching for the same signs of abnormal nerve activity.

"So what's the news doc?" Heart asked when King returned the probe to the mounting on top of the tricorder.

"I don't see anything out of the ordinary and unless you've been hearing voices in your head telling you to commit treason then I think you're in the clear, but as I said Max can make sure with the nanites." King told him as he returned to his chair.

"So you know what the Iconians put in her head then?" Heart said and King nodded.

"Take a look." he said, turning the display mounted on his desk so that Heart could see it as well. In addition to the stream of chemical and electrical information that the nanites inside West were gathering by monitoring the operation of the implant as well as taking microscopic samples of the material it was made from there was a false colour image that showed the irregular lumpen shape of the Iconian implant tucked inside the structure of her brain, "This is about three millimetres long and is connected to her hippocampus. Those fine lines coming from it extend through the rest of the brain, connecting to the areas that deal with the



physical control of the body, enabling the Iconian to take control of it.”

“But only when she's sleeping?” Heart commented.

“According to Wet, yes.” King answered.

“I guess that was why she never stayed over.” Heart said, “She was hiding it from me.”

“Have you been to see her?” King said and Heart hesitated.

“No, I haven't. I'm still not sure how I feel about what's happened.”

“Maybe talking to her would help you figure it out.” King said and Heart smiled.

“I think I will. Thanks doc.” he said and he got up and left King's office, whereupon King turned his monitor back towards himself and smiled.

“One question and I managed to do more counselling than that idiot Mackey did in seven years.” he said to himself.

After leaving sickbay Heart headed for the security section and walked right in to find Richards once again acting as duty officer.

“Captain Heart, what can I do for you?” she asked as he walked up to her console.

“Can I see Jenna?” Heart responded and Richards glanced down at her console where a window showed a feed from the security camera covering West's cell. In this she could be seen sat on the bed with her knees brought up to her chest and her arms pulling her legs in.

“Sure thing captain. I've not been given any orders about keeping her in isolation. The forcefield will have to remain active though and you'll be recorded.” Richards told him.

“Thanks, that's fine.” Heart said and Richards pointed towards the door to the brig.

“Go right in then sir.” she told him.

Heart walked over to the door and it slid open. However, as soon as he stepped through into the brig and saw the cell where West was being held he ground to a halt and quickly activated his communicator.

“Heart to bridge. Security alert. West's not in her cell.” he said, staring in disbelief at the empty cell with its forcefield still active.



The transport took West by surprise. The forcefields surrounding Starfleet cells were supposed to block a transporter lock but somehow she still felt the characteristic tingling sensation as someone began to beam her out of hers. When she materialised she knew immediately that she was no longer aboard the *Nightfall* but the transporter room which she was now in still appeared to be of Federation design and construction. Before she could properly take in her surroundings though a group of four black clad and masked figures rushed towards her. Two of them grabbed hold of her by her arms and forced her to her knees before a third slid a hood over her head, pulling a draw string around her neck to stop her from shaking it loose. "Who are you?" West said from under the hood, "What are you doing with me?" but the four figures remained silent and she instead felt the other two grab hold of her legs before she was lifted off the floor and carried along by her mysterious new captors.

West tried to struggle but with all four of her limbs held tightly she could not get free before she felt herself being pushed down onto a table of some sort. At this point her arms were spread out beside her and her wrists and ankles were secured in place. Only then was the hood pulled from her head and she found herself looking at a pair of familiar faces in the form of Jones and Brown. She had met each of them briefly when they had been aboard the *Nightfall* posing as officers from Starfleet Intelligence and a medical officer. Now though they wore nondescript black clothing similar to that worn by the figures who had brought West here and restrained her, except that they both had their faces exposed.

"You. How did you get me out of my cell? The forcefields block transporter locks." West said and Brown smiled.

"I told you she'd remember us." she said to Jones.

"Yes you did." he replied before he turned to West and added, "Don't concern yourself with how you got her. Just accept that our section has ways of bypassing all of the usual Starfleet security procedures."

"Your section? Who are you and why have you kidnapped me?" West asked as she tugged at her restraints. As she did this she looked towards one of her outstretched arms and saw that just beyond the end of the section of the table to which the limb was strapped was a trolley on which lay a number of what looked like medical instruments. However, these were not modern devices such as tricorders, bone knitting lasers or dermal regenerators. Instead they were a mix of blades and clamps that looked as if they had come out of a holodeck recreation of an operating theatre from the twentieth or twenty-first century.

"Calm down Jenna, we aren't going to hurt you." Brown said.

"No." Jones added, "We just want to talk to that Iconian you say is inside your head. We need information and we think that it can answer our questions."

"Well tough. Torture me all you want but I can't make it say anything." West said.

"Ah but that's not what you told your captain now is it?" Jones said as he looked at a PADD that he held,

"You told him that sometimes you can sense what the Iconian that you refer to as The Controller is thinking.

I'm guessing that since it is plugged into your senses then causing you discomfort will also do the same to it."

"Plus we can always act to bring this Controller out. That's what this is for." Brown said and she pulled an intravenous drip on a stand to where West could see it.

"What's that?" West asked.

"Just a simple sedative. If we keep you unconscious then according to your statement we can talk directly to The Controller. Isn't that true? Of course we need to wait for your system to purge itself of the stimulant Doctor King gave you first but after that I think we and your Iconian can have a nice little chat." Brown answered.

"How the hell did a prisoner just disappear from a cell on my starship?" Edwards said as he looked into the empty cell where West had been held earlier. Cole and Heart stood either of him, also looking into the now vacant cell.

"I'm sorry captain I can't explain what happened. I know that it's a security issue though and I accept full responsibility." Cole responded.

"I'm not looking to assign blame commander. I just want to know what happened and how it happened without anyone noticing." Edwards said.

"The video feed was showing her in the cell when I arrived captain." Heart said.

"It still is. Max says that the footage is being fed from our holodeck computer. Someone created a holo-program of West in the cell that was then rendered as a two dimensional image and fed to the console instead of the holodeck itself." Cole explained.

"Was it Jenna that created it?" Heart asked.

"Max is still looking into that now." Cole said.

"And what about West? Can anyone explain how she seems to have just vanished? We're in deep space with no other ships within at least half a light year so she can't have beamed off the ship. Even if a cloaked ship had managed to get close enough we would have detected the transporter signature." Edwards said. "Being beamed off the ship wouldn't explain how she got out of the cell to begin with. The forcefields surrounding it prevent all beaming." Cole pointed out.

"Then she must still be aboard somewhere." Edwards said.

"Shry's co-ordinating the search right now. We've got every MACO, Imperial Guardsman and security office aboard combing the ship. They'll find her sir, don't worry." Heart said.

"They better had captain because there's going to be hell to pay if they don't." Edwards said and he held up his thumb and forefinger close together, "Starfleet is already this close to scrapping this project and Admiral Dunn is bound to use an incident like this against us."

"Max to Captain Edwards." Max's voice suddenly said from Edwards combadge.

"Edwards here Max. Have you found out who tampered with the security feed from West's cell?" Edwards responded.

"That's what I was calling about captain. I think you should meet me in engineering. I've found something interesting that you need to see." Max said and Edwards sighed.

"I'm on my way Max." he said before turning off his combadge. Then he looked at Cole and Heart, "Commander Cole keep investigating here to see if you can figure out how West escaped. Heart join Shry. If West is aboard then maybe you can use your relationship to help flush her out of hiding." he told the two men before he turned around and strode out of the brig.

Making his way down to engineering Edwards found Max standing in front of a display that showed an image of three Starfleet officers who he recognised immediately although none of them were officers aboard the *Nightfall*. Captain Cameron was the commanding officer of the Nebula class *USS Pacific*, the vessel that had formed the test bed for a number of the systems later installed on the *Nightfall* and was still equipped with a single magnetic accelerator cannon in her upper hull module. The Caitian Commander S'Kora served as Cameron's first officer while the only woman among the three, Lieutenant Commander Frost was the *Pacific's* chief engineer.

"Captain Cameron. I didn't realise that Max was calling in outside help." Edwards said.

"More like passing on a warning Captain Edwards." Cameron responded, "What your engineer has found has got people here going mad."

"What's going on Max?" Edwards asked.

"Captain I ran a diagnostic of every computer required to construct the fake video feed and found nothing. It was as if the false feed simply appeared out of nowhere. However, I was able to make use of the ship's nanite hive to delve deeper into our network and uncovered something more disturbing." Max said.

"Right now Max I doubt that anything could be more disturbing than things are." Edwards said.

"Wait until you hear what he has to say captain. This undermines the trust we place in our ships entirely." Frost commented and Edwards frowned.

"What does she mean Max?" he asked.

"Captain with the help of the nanites I was able to trace the origin of the false security feed. It came from our own computer's operating system." Max said and Edwards frowned.

"The operating system?" he said.

"Yes captain. It appears that there are a number of hidden subroutines within the operating that permit remote access to our entire network." Max said.

"Remote access? So from a mobile device like a PADD or outside the ship?" Edwards said.

"Either captain. Although there are no records of exactly how many of these subroutines have been used recently, if any have at all, it is my belief that a vessel was able to approach ours close enough to permit them to disable the transport scrambling forcefields around West's cell to beam her off this ship and onto their own, using the false security field to cover up what happened." Max said, "Of course when I found these subroutines I contacted Lieutenant Commander Frost. She was a part of the development of the *Nightfall* project and I wanted to see if they also existed in the *Pacific's* computer system."

"Which they do." Frost added.

"They are also in the *Umbra* and the *Ek'Duv*." S'Kora said.

"Every one of the ships involved in the *Nightfall* project is affected?" Edward said in astonishment.

"No captain. It appears that every Starfleet ship in the fleet is." Max told him, "The same subroutines can also be found in our runabouts and fighters."

"I contacted the captains of some other starships as well." Cameron said, "They checked their computer networks and the same subroutines are embedded in their operating systems as well."

"But how?" Edwards said, "Max don't you check every update that we get sent? How did someone manage to hack all of our ships without anyone noticing?"

"I do not believe that they did captain. These subroutines are not the result of hacking, they have existed as

part of the operating system since it was first installed on our computers. It was put there by Starfleet Command." Max said.

"Starfleet Command?" Edwards repeated.

"Yes captain, there is no other explanation. These subroutines exist in every version of operating system that we have been able to examine and there is no evidence that they were put there in updates." Max said.

"There's an old transport ship docked here at Starbase Ten that was disposed of as surplus from the fleet more than thirty years ago." Cameron added, "We had their captain check their computer as well and the same subroutines were found in that. This isn't anything new. For all we know every starship since the founding of Starfleet has included them."

"So what you're telling me is that Starfleet itself abducted a member of my crew from my ship without us knowing?" Edwards said.

"Yes captain. That is the only logical conclusion. Another vessel was able to approach us unseen because our computers were ordered to ignore the information being collected by our sensors. The crew of that ship were then able to deactivate a section of the shielding around our brig and acquire a lock on Lieutenant Commander West inside her cell before beaming her off the *Nightfall*. Captain I do not believe that Lieutenant Commander West is still aboard."

Edwards nodded.

"Max I want you to work with T'Lan. Find a way to disable these subroutines and find Jenna West. I want her back." he ordered.

As the starship carrying Jones and Brown sped back to Earth they received another transmission and Admiral Schmidt appeared on their viewscreen.

"Admiral." Jones said with a smile on his face, "I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that we have Lieutenant Commander West aboard. She has been identified as-

"I know all this commander." Schmidt interrupted, "I've seen Captain Edwards' report. I've also seen the latest communication between the *USS Nightfall* and Starbase Ten, however and it seems that we have a major problem."

"But everything went well admiral." Brown said.

"Perhaps, but our section has never had to beam anyone off a ship like the *Nightfall* before and it has shown up some flaws in our systems. Their Borg engineer wasn't willing to accept that someone could vanish and with the help of the ship's nanite hive, two features not commonly found on Starfleet ships, he was able to look deep enough into the operating system to find where all our overrides are located. To make matters worse he also contacted the other *Nightfall* program ships at Starbase Ten. In turn they contacted the other ships docked their, including a surplus transport ship and all of them were able to locate the same subroutines. Our entire section is in danger of being exposed."

"We've had to face exposure before admiral. At the end of the Dominion War the command staff of Deep Space Nine were able to uncover our operation." Brown pointed out.

"Perhaps but they had no physical evidence. All that remains little more than a footnote in online conspiracy posts. The crew of the *Nightfall* and the ships at Starbase Ten have the operating system code to prove their case. I've got people working on a way to prevent our being exposed but so far all they can offer is to make it look like the code is part of a spy scandal." Schmidt told them.

"If the code is removed then our section loses its access to Starfleet ships and bases. That's going to set us back two hundred years." Jones said.

"Yes I'm very well aware of that commander and that's why I'm about to take a drastic step. I'm going to contact the *Nightfall* directly. There is someone there that might be able to help us out and stop all this from becoming public knowledge." Schmidt said.

"You always said that you couldn't contact the *Nightfall*. That someone there could recognise you." Brown commented and Schmidt nodded.

"That's right. I'm hoping to call in a favour from an old friend." he replied.

"We have a call for you from Earth doctor." the officer who had taken over from West at operations told King over the intercom while he was sat in his quarters.

"Put it through to me here," he said, nodding and on the display mounted on his desk an image of Admiral Schmidt appeared.

"Hello Henry." he said.

"Martin." King responded, smiling, "Long time no see. The last I heard you'd retired from Starfleet to join that think tank. How's that working out?"

"Better than your so-called retirement." Schmidt answered.

"Yes, you would think that almost fifteen years after the end of the war Starfleet would have sorted out its manpower crisis and I could go home to my wife again."

"So why not have her live aboard the *Nightfall* with you?" Schmidt asked.

"She's happier being closer to our children and their own families. Frankly I can't say I blame her." King said.

"Thinking of leaving you post Henry?" Schmidt said and King sighed.

"Maybe. Thanks to some unauthorised tinkering by the *Nightfall's* science officer and chief engineer my presence would probably not be missed." he said.

"Ah, the EMH with a body made of Iconian synthetic flesh." Schmidt said and King frowned.

"How do you know about that Martin?" he said.

"Look Henry my own retirement was no more genuine than yours." Schmidt told him.

"You still work for Starfleet? Doing what exactly?" King said.

"That's the point Henry, what I do is classified. In fact so classified that even most of the admiralty don't have clearance to know. The President in fact. My section is given considerable latitude to deal with the challenges facing the Federation. There are potential threats out there that we have dealt with before they could trouble people like you."

"You're making it sound like you're some sort of black ops group. I thought we'd abandoned the idea of those before Starfleet was even formed." King said.

"No, when the United Earth government created Starfleet they knew that not every crisis would be solved by diplomatic means or even regular gunboat diplomacy. That's what my section is for. Pre-emptive crisis management and right now we're trying to prevent the Iconians from destroying the heart of the Federation." Schmidt said.

"You kidnapped West." King said.

"We removed her from the *Nightfall* so that she could be questioned by specialists. Or rather that the Iconian intelligence inside her could be."

"And by any chance would these specialists specialise in the use of electrocutions, pulling teeth or drowning people?" King said angrily.

"We're not barbarians Henry."

"No, you just make people disappear without any accountability to the Federation Martin." King snapped back at him.

"Look Henry, I'm calling you as a courtesy. Lieutenant Commander West is in our custody now. Tell Edwards to accept that. Don't try and find her and forget about spreading what you know any further." Schmidt said.

"Oh don't you worry Martin. I'll tell Captain Edwards everything." King said before he reached out and ended the conversation. Then he reached for the intercom instead, "King to bridge." he said.

"Bridge here doctor." the operations officer replied.

"I want a copy of that last call to me keeping. The captain needs to see it, both sides of it." King told the man.

"Err, I'm sorry doctor but there appears to have been a fault in the communication system. For some reason the conversation hasn't been stored in the log. It self deleted as soon as each packet was sent." the operations officer said and King frowned.

"That's okay lieutenant. It wasn't your fault. I'll speak to the captain in person." he said.

King then shut off the intercom and exited sickbay, making his way to the nearest turbolift and taking it to the bridge.

"Is Edwards in there?" he asked Carr when he stepped into the bridge and saw her in the captain's chair.

"Yes doctor the captain-" Carr began.

"Good, that's all I needed to know." King interrupted as he walked to the door of Edwards' ready room and pressed the intercom.

"Come in." Edwards said from inside and the door slid open, "Ah doctor, have a seat. Is there any more word on how you intend to remove the Iconian from West when we find her?"

"No, that's not why I'm here captain." King said as he sat down, "Although it does concern Jenna West. I know what happened to her."

"How?" Edwards asked, frowning.

"Because it was an old friend of mine by the name of Martin Schmidt who took her. Or at least people under his command did. He just called me and told me everything. He says that he now works for some secret black ops unit within Starfleet that even the President doesn't know about. He says that his section has West so that they can question her. He denied that they'd torture her but frankly I'm not so sure about that. The inference was that she could be harmed if we try to get her back. Also if we try to go public with any of this."

"He used the word 'section'?" Edwards said and King hesitated.

"Yes. Why, what's significant about that?" he asked.

"Just a hunch." Edwards said as he called up a file on his computer and began to search it, "Just after the war a new member of staff was transferred to the Academy. An enlisted man who told a tale about a secret group inside Starfleet that were able to break any rule or law they wanted. He said that it was called Section Thirty-one. A name taken from the original Starfleet charter. Here, see for yourself." he said and he turned his monitor so that King could read the text shown on it.

"Article fourteen, section thirty- section thirty one." King said and his eyes widened, "Allowing for the use of extreme measures during time of extraordinary threat. How the hell does that end up creating our very own version of the Tal'Shiar or the Obsidian Order?"

"It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions doctor. I'm sure that the United Earth government thought they were doing the right thing when they wrote this."

"Well hell is where they can go with it." King said angrily, "I hope you're not going to give into their threats."

"Of course not but there is still the problem of how we are going to locate West to begin with Doctor King. Unless your old friend gave us any hints about where he has taken her we still don't have anything to go on."

West tilted her head, one of the few movements left to her while she was strapped down to the table in her cell and she saw Jones and Brown enter the room.

"Is she ready yet?" Jones asked.

"Give me a chance to scan her." Brown replied as she opened a medical tricorder.

"I've been scanned by those hundreds of times." West said, "Whatever the Iconians put inside my head doesn't show up."

"It's not the implant I'm scanning for." Brown told her, "I'm running a blood test. I need to know whether the stimulant Doctor King injected into you is still present in a significant quantity in your bloodstream."

"And is it?" Jones asked.

"Hold on, I'm still checking." Brown told her again, "There, the stimulant level has dropped to where counteracting it with a sedative will not cause any complications. We can set up the IV now."

"IV?" West said, "No, you can't! If you give me a sedative I'll fall asleep and that's when she takes over."

"That's exactly the point lieutenant commander." Jones said and he placed a finger to the side of West's head, "You see the Iconian is trapped in here and we need to let it out enough to talk to us. When you fall asleep, she wakes up."

"Basically he's saying goodnight Jenna." Brown added as she pulled the IV stand closer to the table West was strapped to and began to fit a collar around her arm that would take the line itself, "Sweet dreams now." she added and then she turned on the sedative flow.

West was about to try protesting again but the sedative was strong and fast acting, rapidly overcoming what remained of the stimulant in her system to render her unconscious while Jones and Brown looked on.

"So what's supposed to happen now?" Jones said, frowning as West remained motionless on the table in front of them.

"Don't ask me." Brown answered, "This is the first time I've done anything like this." and she leant closer to West just as her eyes opened wide and she grinned at the two officers.

"Hello there." The Controller said as Brown leapt back in surprise.

"Ah the mysterious Iconian agent aboard the *USS Nightfall*." Jones said.

"A ship that I am no longer aboard." The Controller replied, "So where am I?"

"On the way to Earth." Brown told her.

"Where we have people waiting to question you." Jones added.

"They may ask but I won't answer." The Controller said.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. They can be very persuasive." Jones said and The Controller turned her head to look at the tray of ancient medical instruments.

"With items such as these no doubt." she said.

"I thought we'd get a head start, but trust me there is far worse waiting for you on Earth if you refuse to cooperate." Brown said.

"It won't make any difference." The Controller said calmly, "The pain and injury of torture will harm only Jenna West, not me. I can cut myself off from her nervous system at any time. In case you hadn't noticed you just pumped her full of a sedative and yet here I am wide awake."

"I'm sure we can find a way to persuade you to give us the information we're looking for." Brown said, smiling at The Controller.

"Such as?" The Controller asked.

"Such as how many of those warships you have and what their weaknesses are." Jones commented.

"I don't think so." The Controller said, "All I have to do to avoid your questions is-" and at that point she released her control over West and her body went limp as she returned to an unconscious state.

"Well that didn't go so well did it?" Jones said, looking at Brown.

"Oh I don't know, for a first attempt I think it was pretty productive. The sensors built into this room are far more sensitive than my tricorder and West's alien hitch hiker interacted with us quite readily. I want to see what was going on inside her brain at the time." she responded.

Jones and Brown then left the room, leaving behind the unconscious West and the inactive Controller. As they exited the cell they remained completely unaware of the other passengers they had picked up when they beamed West off the *Nightfall*, however. Inside West's brain, following the path of every link put in by the

Iconians but mainly clustered around the main implant itself there remained the thousands of nanites that Max had injected into her. While aboard the *Nightfall* these had been able to link to the main hive that was distributed around the ship but now they could not detect the hive around them. In the absence of this they instead sought out other sources of data, hoping to discover where they were now that they were off the *Nightfall* and in doing so they detected the ship's own computer network.

Meanwhile Jones and Brown made their way back towards the bridge of their ship.

"So what do you think?" Jones asked as they walked.

"About what?" Brown responded.

"About the weather. What do you think? About that Iconian. Can you get anything out of it?" Jones said.

"I expect so. It claims to be able to ignore any pain or discomfort that we apply to its host but I suspect that isn't the entire truth." Brown said.

"And what's that? The truth."

"Ah now you're asking me to guess." Brown said.

"Your best guess then. What is The Controller afraid of?" Jones asked.

"My guess is oblivion. I won't call it death since I would hardly call being a few lines of code inside a cybernetic brain implant being alive. If it lives through West then it isn't going to want her being damaged too badly even if the short term pain means nothing."

"And what about the host?"

"What about her? Remember, Jenna West is under general anaesthetic. She can't feel anything and if the information we have is correct then she doesn't retain the experience of the Iconian's actions. That means that as long I limit the degree of damage I cause to her body to something that I can put right afterwards then she won't even realise that anything happened. I can hardly be accused of torturing someone who was anaesthetised at the time now can I?" Brown said and Jones smiled.

"Very clever." he said, "I was wondering why you'd had all those antique blades replicated."

"Those are mainly for show." Brown replied, "I'm thinking that electrical shock will be a much more effective means of persuasion. In fact I'm thinking that that could also be a means by which we could incapacitate an Iconian temporarily."

"You mean like the old fashioned tasers?" Jones said and Brown smiled back at him.

"Exactly. A few hundred thousand volts ought to paralyse the host's motor system nicely. It may even work on those things made entirely from their synthetic flesh." she explained.

"I'll speak to our engineer and see what he can come up with. It would be nice to have something to present to Admiral Schmidt by the time we reach Earth."

"As well as the results of a successful interrogation you mean?" Brown said.

"Well of course, that would be even better." Jones responded just as they reached the entrance to the bridge and it slid open.

"Anything to report?" Brown asked the officers who vacated the main flight stations to allow her and Jones to sit down.

"There are some odd readings coming from the main communication array." one of the officers said.

"Is someone sending a signal off the ship? We're supposed to be running silent." Jones pointed out.

"No sir, all the terminals are secured. No-one has access to the array." the officer said.

"And yet still the array is emitting a signal that could be used to track us if someone knew what to look for. When did this start?" Jones said.

"About five minutes ago." the officer told him.

"Not long after we woke the Iconian." Brown commented and Jones called up the sensor feed from the cell where West was being held, "No, I'm not picking up anything coming from her though."

"Then there must be a system fault. Engineering will have to deal with it." Jones said.

"More Iconian attacks?" Carr asked as she sat down in Edwards' ready room and he sighed.

"Yes. Two against Federation targets, a colony and a research station. Then we have four reported against the Klingons, seven against the Romulans, one against the Ferengi and five against the Cardassians. Long range scans of Tholian territory confirm that one of their outposts has been attacked as well. The *USS Rogue* picked up an attack on a Tholian border world and offered to render assistance."

"Let me guess, the Tholians declined." Carr said and Edwards smiled.

"They said that they needed no help that Starfleet could offer." he said and Carr sighed.

"So nothing new there." she said, "What about us?"

"Starfleet Command hasn't rescinded its order for the ships of the *Nightfall* project to be held in spacedock so officially we're still on a test run to Deneva." Edwards told her before the intercom activated.

"Captain it's Max. I have news. May I speak to you in person?"

"In person?" Edwards commented.

"Yes captain. I am attempting to determine the extent to which our operating system has been compromised

but I cannot guarantee the security of any system yet, including the intercom." Max said and Edwards and Carr looked at one another.

"Very well Max. Report to myself and Commander Carr in my ready room immediately." Edwards said.

"Yes captain. I am already on my way. Max out." Max responded before the channel went dead.

"This sounds important." Carr said and Edwards nodded.

"Yes though I suspect that it's not going to be good news. If Max doesn't trust the systems he maintains then things are definitely not as they should be." he said before there was a chiming sound from the door leading to the bridge, "Come in." Edwards added and the door slid open to let Max enter the room.

"Captain. Commander. I hope this is not an awkward moment." he said and Edwards and Carr exchanged looks again, both thinking back to how their relationship had been exposed by a reflection the former Borg drone had seen in this very room.

"No, it sounded as if it was important." Edwards said.

"It is captain. It concerns Lieutenant Commander West."

"What about her?" Carr asked.

"I have been able to locate her." Max said.

"How?" Edwards said in amazement.

"When the nanites I injected into her were cut off from contact with the rest of the *Nightfall's* hive they took steps to determine their location. A number of them left her body and determined that they were aboard a different vessel. Then by entering its computer network they were able to access that ship's main computer and then send us a signal using its own subspace antenna."

"And they've given you their position?" Edwards said.

"Their position at that time, yes. But also their destination." Max told him.

"Which is?" Carr asked.

"Earth. The vessel is travelling at warp six and attempting to run silent. There is more data but have yet to decode it." Max said.

"How long will that take?" Edwards said.

"I cannot say exactly captain but from the size of the datafile I estimate fifteen to twenty minutes." Max said.

"Very well. In that case I'm going to call a senior staff meeting in half an hour. Present your findings to them then." Edwards ordered.

West's eyes suddenly opened wide and she let out a scream as her body shook violently. The overalls she had been wearing when she had been brought aboard had been cut from her, leaving her in just her underwear so that most of her flesh was exposed to permit electrodes to be stuck to various parts of her body.

"So who was that?" Jones asked Brown when the electricity stopped flowing.

"The Iconian." she answered as she studied the readings on her medical tricorder, the probe held beside West's head to be best placed to monitor her brain activity.

"Ah so you can't shut yourself off if we apply enough juice." Jones said, leaning in closer to West's face.

"Where am I? Why are you doing this to me?" she replied.

"Sorry but you're not fooling us into thinking that you're Jenna West." Jones told The Controller, "My associate is monitoring her brain activity very carefully and thanks to the sedative that is letting you control her body she didn't feel a thing."

"Should I hit her again?" the third black clad officer in the room asked from beside the newly installed console that controlled the supply of the power to the electrodes.

"Yes. Same strength, same location. Twenty seconds." Jones ordered and the officer turned the flow of electricity on again.

West, under the The Controller's control screamed again and convulsed while Jones and Brown watched.

"Brain waves steady, the sedative is still being administered at the same rate." Brown said, continuing to watch the readings on her tricorder.

"Good." Jones replied just as the electricity was turned off again and The Controller gasped.

"I'll tell you nothing." she croaked.

"You will." Brown replied, clipping the probe back into her tricorder and then closing it, "I think we can leave her now." she said and Jones nodded.

"Fine, let's see how she feels in a few hours. Gag her." he said.

"What are-" The Controller managed to say just before a rubber ball was forced into her mouth and strapped in place.

"Don't worry my dear," Brown said as she secured the gag, "this is just so you won't accidentally bite of Jenna's tongue. We won't be here to listen to anything you have to say anyway so we won't miss anything." At the same time Jones walked over to the control console and when Brown nodded at him to indicate that the gag was in place he pressed another button on the console. This started a program designed to send a



continuing series of powerful electrical shocks through West's body, changing the strength and location regularly so that every part of her would be exposed to them at some point and The Controller began to scream again, this time her cries muffled by the ball in her mouth.  
“Program running. We'll give her four hours I think.” Jones said.  
“Good.” Brown replied, “That gives us plenty of time to get something to eat. I don't know about you but I have a craving for barbecue.”

The *Nightfall's* senior staff gathered together in the ship's briefing room to hear Max's report. Edwards had yet to appoint a new chief of operations and so West's department was not represented at the meeting as Max stood beside the wall mounted monitor and began to speak.

"For those of you who do not already know, I have received a subspace transmission from the nanites that I injected into Lieutenant Commander West to find a way of removing or deactivating the Iconian implant inside her. When they found themselves cut off from the rest of the hive they sought out and found a way of establishing contact with us, specifically the communication array of the vessel she is being held aboard." he said and then he activated the monitor remotely to show an image of a common type of Federation commercial starship, "This is the general type of ship that she is being held aboard. However, the example used by her kidnappers has been modified to a certain degree. For example when the nanites confirmed their course and speed they discovered that it was moving at warp seven."

"That kind of ship can't break warp six normally." Hamilton commented, "Even then they can only exceed warp four for a few hours."

"Warp seven won't draw too much attention though." White added, "They won't be producing a massive warp signature moving that fast on a ship that size."

"It seems that detection is not an issue for the crew in any case. They can simply order our computers to ignore them." T'Lan pointed out.

"Foreign ships might still pick them up." White replied.

"What are the vessel's tactical capabilities?" Cole asked.

"Unknown commander." Max answered, "The amount of information that the nanites were able to send was limited to avoid discovery."

"So the people who took West don't know about the nanites then?" Edwards said.

"I do not think so captain. They are likely to have noticed that their subspace communication array was being used to emit a signal but the nanites used an encoding method that is unique to them. I doubt that the ship's crew will have been able to decrypt it already, if they even recognised it as a coherent message." Max explained.

"So surprise will be on our side." Shry said.

"If we can find them. They don't show up on our sensors." Carr said.

"Commander the nanites aboard the vessel may be able to guide us towards it if we can get close enough." T'Lan said.

"Yes, that was my thought as well." Edwards added, "We'll follow the trail that the nanites have already given us and then use them as a homing beacon once we get closer."

"That might not be enough for us to get aboard captain." Cole said, "Without full sensor readings we won't be able to get a transporter lock to beam a boarding party over there."

"Then we'll use our assault shuttles." Shry said, "Hard dock and blast our way in."

"Do we know how big the crew of that ship is?" Carr asked.

"A crew manifest was not among the data supplied by the nanites." Max replied.

"Normal compliment of that class is eight to ten." Hamilton said, "Mind you, there's enough spare room in the cargo hold for a couple of hundred people if they wanted."

"That means we're going to have to deploy pretty much our entire ground combat and security force to guarantee our people aren't overrun." Carr said.

"What then?" Heart said, "What are our aims exactly?"

"To get West back of course." King said.

"But can you help her after that doctor?" Heart said, "Are we bringing her back just to put her in another cage?"

"Bring in a couple of priests. One old, one young." Hamilton muttered.

"The initial readings from the nanites inside Lieutenant Commander West were promising Captain Heart."

Max said, "Although removal of the implant in a single piece appears impossible due to its location, it should be possible to isolate it and then have the nanites dismantle it."

"That will make further study of the device impossible." T'Lan said.

"So what? We get Jenna back. I call that a win." Heart said.

"Captain Heart you are obviously emotionally involved with this issue." T'Lan said and Heart frowned.

"So?" he asked.

"So it has caused you to overlook the larger issue. The Iconian intelligence that inhabits the implant may have valuable intelligence that will save many lives instead of just one." T'Lan said.

"Don't quote that needs of the many bull to me." Heart snapped.

"Captain Heart." Edwards said sternly, "T'Lan's point was fair. However, I agree that if we are able to recover Jenna West then our main concern should be freeing her from the influence of the Iconian. What concerns me more is the legal situation we find ourselves in."

"You mean the fact that we're plotting to attack a Federation ship?" Carr said.

"Treason in effect." Noyal added.

"If we do this then we can probably kiss our careers goodbye and the Nightfall project will undoubtedly be cancelled." Edwards said.

"Captain I don't have a problem with any of that." Heart said.

"It could be argued that the removal of Lieutenant Commander West from this ship was an illegal act captain." T'Lan said, "In that circumstance you as her commanding officer are perfectly entitled to seek her return."

"Ha! I like it." King said, smiling.

"Like what doctor? Did I miss something?" Noyal said.

"The people that kidnapped West from us are from a section that flaunts the rules under an obscure section in Starfleet regulations covering extreme circumstances. Isn't that kind of what we'll be doing?" King said.

"It could be argued that way, yes." T'Lan said.

"Then we'd all better make sure to get Vulcan lawyers at our court martials." Shry said.

"Participation in this mission has to be voluntary. I'll announce my intention to launch a rescue of West to the crew and let them decide if they want to go along with it." Edwards said.

"And what about those who don't? Will you lock them in the brig?" Noyal asked.

"No. They can take our shuttles and continue to Deneva. The civilians as well. I'm not asking them to come along with us." Edwards responded.

"Captain there is still one issue that has been overlooked." T'Lan said.

"What's that T'Lan?" White said.

"That the crew of this vessel will undoubtedly see us coming. As soon as they do we can expect them to make use of the numerous back doors they have into our computer system to disrupt our approach if not disable the *Nightfall* entirely."

"Can they do that?" Hamilton said.

"I do not know the extent of the capabilities of the subroutines I have found." Max said.

"Then we'll just need to make certain that they don't see us until the last minute." Edwards said.

"In open space?" Cole commented, "How do you hide a five hundred metre starship when there's nothing to hide behind?"

"let me worry about that." Edwards told him, "For now we need to find out who wants to get off the ship. Once we can be sure that no-one aboard the ship will be telling anyone else what we're doing we can start to finalise our planning."

The Controller was still convulsing when Brown entered her cell and it was clear that, if not for her gag, then her screams would have been audible from the corridor outside. Brown went straight to the control console and shut off the supply of power to the electrodes covering West's body.

"There, now we can talk." she said, "Or at least I can. So are you ready to answer a few questions yet?" she asked, walking towards the table that West was strapped to and taking out her tricorder. Meanwhile The Controller turned her head away, avoiding looking at Brown as she began to scan her, "Ah good, no physical damage at all and Jenna's brainwaves indicate that she is still sound asleep. Now what about those questions?" but The Controller did not respond and Brown sighed, "Oh well, perhaps another hour or so will change your mind." she said before returning to the console and restarting the program delivering the electric shocks to The Controller.

Brown remained in the cell just long enough to witness The Controller convulsing and trying to cry out in pain before exiting the cell once more, at which point she tapped the communicator mounted on her wrist to activate it.

"Jones it's me." she said.

"So how is our guest?" he responded.

"Doing her best to act like she doesn't care but I'm not buying it for a moment. We may have a problem with West though. So far the sedative is keeping her under but the system is drawing in more of it than I'd planned for."

"Because of the electrocution?" Jones asked.

"Probably. The Iconian may be trying to rouse her so that she'll be suppressed." Brown said.

"I take that would shield the Iconian from the pain." Jones said.

"Perhaps. In any case torturing a Starfleet officer is far different from torturing some alien hell bent on destroying everything we've sworn to protect. If Lieutenant Commander West wakes up I'm terminating the power." Brown said.

"Yes, I agree. West isn't the one we want answers from."

"What about our other issue? Has engineering isolated that problem with the communication antenna yet?"

"No. Our chief engineer has confirmed that no-one actually accessed the subspace communication system but so far he can't find a technical fault that would result in the antenna behaving like it has. For the time being he's putting it down a power distribution fault, possibly caused by a stellar phenomenon we passed by introducing electrical noise that the antenna picked up and radiated." Jones told her.

"So he doesn't know. Great. Here we are heading for Earth with potentially the most valuable prisoner in history aboard and our ship is suffering from random power surges." Brown said.

"I wouldn't worry about it." Jones reassured her, "The prisoner is only of interest to the Iconians and they don't know she's aboard."

"What about the crew of the *Nightfall*?" Brown pointed out.

"What about them? Even if Admiral Schmidt hasn't been able to warn them off they've got no way of tracking us." Jones replied.

The basic design of Starfleet Ambassador-class starships was two generations out of date but, like the even older Excelsior-class vessels their space frames had proven to be sound and a program of updates over several decades had kept them competitive with more modern designs from the Federation and its rivals in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

This counted for nothing though when the *USS Grand Duchess* found itself facing a single Iconian warship while escorting a convoy of nine transport ships close to Nausicaan territory. The crew of the *Grand Duchess* detected the formation of the Iconian gateway large enough to permit the transit of the three kilometre long warship in time for the captain to order that the cruiser's shields be raised and weapons powered. However, just moments later the Iconian ship fired a volley of torpedoes, each of which flew along a different course so that one struck each of the nine civilian transport ships. Two of these were immediately consumed by the powerful torpedo explosions while the other seven were reduced to burning wrecks. The fact that each ship obviously had survivors aboard meant that the *Grand Duchess* could not withdraw since that would mean abandoning them and so the Starfleet crew stood their ground as the Iconian ship turned towards the cruiser. The *Grand Duchess* moved towards the Iconian warship and opened fire with a barrage of both phasers and photon torpedoes but the massive ship responded by unleashing a lightning storm that brought down every last one of the torpedoes before they could find their target while the Starfleet vessel's phasers were unable to penetrate the Iconian shields before a second blast of lightning was released by the warship that swept across the shields of the *Grand Duchess*. The effect of this was dramatic, the cruiser's shields withstood the storm for a few seconds before being overwhelmed and the lightning surged through the widening holes in the cruiser's shields to attack the hull directly, ripping off hull plates wherever it struck. When the lightning reached one of the *Grand Duchess*'s warp nacelles there was a blinding flash of light as it exploded, leaving the ship dead in space. Only then did the attack cease and the Iconian ship simply vanished into empty space as it opened a gateway to take it away and leaving the survivors to evacuate their stricken vessels.

Several of the *Nightfall*'s shuttles had been brought up from their storage hangars to the main launch bay where those members of the ship's company that were not staying with the ship to take part in the mission to rescue West were embarking on them. All of the civilian staff had been ordered off the ship, along with a number of the crew who Doctor King had declared medically unfit at that time. The rest were the small number, barely more than a dozen of the Starfleet crew who had refused to take part in the unsanctioned mission while support for remaining aboard among the MACOs and Imperial Guard had been unanimous and only the injured among them were being evacuated.

"They should all be off the ship in under a quarter of an hour captain." White said as he and Edwards watched the loading from the launch bay control booth that over looked the entire bay.

"Good. Then how long to prep half your squadron for action?" Edwards asked in reply.

"All the ships were overhauled after our last sortie captain. Normally we'd keep a flight ready for immediate launch but with us being stood down we've not done that. They just need fuelling and their ordnance loading though. Say two hours for six ships. But are you sure you want only half the squadron?" White said.

"Yes half. I doubt we're going to be involved in a major ship to ship engagement but I still want some fighter cover. Half your squadron should be ample while still leaving me with you and some of your pilots for another assignment." Edwards said and White frowned.

"What assignment is this captain?" he asked.

"Whoever took West needs to be held to account for what they've done. The fact that they have the power to interfere with our ships suggests to me that this is something that they're used to doing but we need proof." Edwards said.

"You mean expose them and we can show that our actions were justified?" White said and Edwards nodded.

"That's right. A few computer subroutines buried in our operating system won't be enough, we need to

connect them to illegal operations and I think that their ship can do that. I want your pilots to be prepared to take control of the target ship as soon as it has been secured. The *Nightfall* will then escort it to the nearest Federation port." he said.

"Sure captain. Though you still haven't explained how we're going to catch this mystery ship without them seeing us coming." White replied.

"Actually I'm just about to check on that myself." Edwards said and then he tapped his combadge, "Max, Nayal. Meet me in engineering." he added.

Leaving the control booth, Edwards headed straight for engineering where Max was already present.

"Captain, Sublieutenant Nayal is on her way." Max said.

"Good." Edwards replied right before another of the entrances to engineering slid open and Nayal stepped in, pausing to look around. As a Romulan citizen her access to certain parts of the ship was limited and she was only supposed to be in engineering with an escort.

"Permission to enter a restricted area captain?" she said when she noticed Edwards and Max.

"Granted." Edwards said and Nayal smiled as she walked over to the two men.

"So what do you need me for captain?" Nayal asked.

"The crate that Commander Kelak had you deliver to me. I think it's time we put it to use." Edwards answered and then he looked at Max, "Is it ready?"

"It has been ready for three years captain. Although of course it remains untested." Max responded.

"Good, in that case let's take a look at it." Edwards said.

"Of course. Please follow me." Max said and he led Edwards and Nayal to a closed door.

When the *Nightfall* had undertaken its maiden voyage it had encountered a convoy of Romulan refugee ships, a mix of civilian and military vessels. Nayal had been one of the officers aboard that convoy, serving under the command of a Romulan commander called Kelak. His flagship had been destroyed with him aboard but not before he had sent Nayal to the *Nightfall* with a sealed crate to be presented to Captain Edwards. This had promptly been sealed away behind the door they now approached in a room that only Max was able to enter afterwards. The rumour on the ship was that the crate had been full of Romulan ale, however no-one had been able to confirm this.

A number of the engineering staff paused to look at the door as Max unlocked it but before it opened he turned around to look back at them.

"You have duties. Continue with them." he ordered, waiting for them to get back to work before he opened the door and allowed Edwards and Nayal to enter the room with him.

The small compartment had originally been intended just as a storage room but now there were extra power conduits fixed to the walls, all leading to a spot in the centre of the room where a mounting for a piece of heavy equipment was located. The equipment itself was not present though, instead this remained inside the crate with Romulan markings on it that rested on a table at the side of the room.

"This all looks good." Nayal said, studying the equipment mounting and power conduits obviously meant to supply what was to be fitted there while Max went over to the crate and opened it to reveal the Romulan cloaking device that it contained.

"My studies of this device suggest that is easily capable of concealing an Akira-class heavy cruiser like the *Nightfall* from detection with more than ninety-eight percent effectiveness captain." Max said.

"My people have a standard of ninety-nine percent effectiveness." Nayal said, looking over her shoulder at Max, "Didn't the Borg ever assimilate cloaking technology?"

"Of course. Numerous species have created technologies to try and conceal their ships from the Borg. However, none proved effective enough to prevent their assimilation in the long run and all were useless on vessels as large as Borg cubes so the Collective did not pursue that line of development. Even if they had I do not have access to the sum total of the Collective's knowledge. There are numerous gaps." Max explained.

"Can you help Max interface this cloaking device with our systems Nayal?" Edwards asked.

"Probably captain. Although I was trained to operate a cloaking device, not install or maintain one. It's a pity we dropped all those refugees off at Starbase Ten. Maybe one of them would have been able to help you." Nayal said.

"Captain I must remind you that so far we have done nothing illegal. However, if this device is installed aboard the *Nightfall* and activated then we will be in violation of the Treaty of Algeron." Max pointed out.

"Max I am merely taking an extraordinary measure in a time of extreme threat." Edwards replied, quoting the part of the Starfleet Charter that was the basis for the existence of the group they were now going to pursue, "Now how long will it take to get this thing plugged in and working well enough to conceal us while moving at warp nine?"

"Approximately ten minutes to install and a further forty-five to interface it with our control systems captain.

This model of cloaking device was designed for use on a D'deridex-class warbird, a much larger vessel than an Akira-class heavy cruiser so the power output at warp nine should not be an issue. The exact time for

interfacing it fully with our systems may vary depending on how much assistance Sublieutenant Noyal is able to offer me though captain. I should remind you however, captain that we will be unable to raise shields or fire our weapons while we are cloaked. Even our mass accelerators will be unable to operate." Max told him and he nodded.

"Very good. It's a shame about our weapons but I want to capture the ship West is being held on anyway, not destroy it. Noyal I take it that feeding this thing through to ops would make sense?" Edwards added.

"Ops or tactical, yes." Noyal responded.

"Good. In that case patch control of the cloak through to ops. I still have a tactical officer Noyal, but you can fill in at ops when you're done here. Is that acceptable?" Edwards said.

"Yes captain." she answered.

"Then I will see you on the bridge in a little under an hour sublieutenant. Now I need to go and tell the crew what my plan is." Edwards said and then he turned around and left the room.

After leaving Max and Noyal to install the cloaking device Edwards made his way directly to the bridge and as he entered Carr got out of his chair and moved to the one beside it.

"Everything sorted in engineering then?" she asked and Edwards nodded.

"Sort of. I left Max and Noyal finishing things off." he said.

"Captain, Noyal is not an engineer. What help could she offer?" T'Lan said but Edwards ignore her question, instead just sitting down in his seat.

"How many more people are left to get off the ship?" he asked.

"The last shuttle was cleared to launch just before you got here. The ship is now secure." Carr told him and he activated the intercom so that he could address the *Nightfall's* entire crew at once.

"Now hear this, this is the captain." he announced, "All of you left aboard the ship have volunteered to take part in the rescue of Lieutenant Commander Jenna West and I would like to start by thanking you all for your sacrifice. Our mission is unsanctioned by Starfleet and the consequences are at this point unknown. Now that those not taking part have left the ship though it is time for me to explain to you my plan of action. How we will recover our lost crew member and what I hope to gain afterwards.

"To begin with I need to inform you that when Sublieutenant Noyal came aboard this ship she brought with her a Romulan cloaking device that has been in storage since that time. Acting on my orders our chief engineer has created an interface that will allow this device to be operated aboard the *Nightfall*, hopefully rendering us invisible to the sensors of our target. It is my intention for this ship to operate under cover of the cloaking device while we move to intercept the target vessel. It is possible that the target itself will not show up on our sensors but the presence aboard it of some of the nanites from our onboard hive means that we will be able to detect its presence. This will most likely not be enough for us gain a reliable transporter lock so our boarding parties will use our assault shuttles and runabouts to make their way across to the target using visual navigation before forcing their way aboard. The boarding parties will then have two objectives, firstly to secure the safe return to this ship of Lieutenant Commander West. Secondly they will secure control of the ship itself so that we can use it to prove the existence of the shadow organisation that routinely operates outside Starfleet regulations and Federation law. I will discuss individual elements of this plan with department heads later on. Thank you, Edwards out." and then he turned off the intercom.

"You've had a cloaking device all this time?" Carr said, staring at Edwards.

"And you never mentioned it when we could have used it?" Cole added.

"Using such a device violates the Treaty of Algeron." T'Lan commented.

"The Romulan Star Empire collapsed and there were times when that could have come in useful. Escaping from a squadron of Iconian warships for example." Cole replied.

"Hey, I had that under control." Hamilton said, frowning.

"Yes by hurling us into a time warp." Carr said.

"The Federation pledged to stick by the terms of the Treaty of Algeron as far as possible. The captain's actions have been legally correct." T'Lan said.

"And what about now?" Carr asked.

"We are already operating outside Starfleet authority. One more violation is only logical if it increases our chances of success." T'Lan said and Edwards smiled.

"Thank you commander." he said before he looked at T'Lan and added, "Which is just another reason why I love you of course."

"I am only stating the facts captain. If I thought your reasoning was illogical then I would say so." T'Lan replied and Cole grinned.

"Trust me, she does." he said.

"Now that I've explained my plan I think that it's time we got underway. Mister Hamilton do you have the data provided by Lieutenant Maximillian regarding our target's course and speed?" Edwards said.

"Yes captain. Intercept course based on our maintaining a speed of warp eight until contact can be established laid in. Ready to engage on your word." Hamilton said.

"How long until intercept at that speed?" Carr asked.  
"Eleven hours assuming that they keep to warp seven." Hamilton said.  
"Mister Hamilton, engage at warp eight." Edwards ordered and Hamilton smiled.  
"I feel the need, the need for warp speed." he said as he gripped the *Nightfall's* flight controls and accelerated the ship to warp speed.

"I think we're making progress." Brown said when she entered the transport's bridge and took her seat beside Jones after checking on The Controller again.  
"The Iconian's willing to talk?" Jones asked.  
"Not yet but it wasn't able to remain as calm and collected as previously during the break from the power flowing. The real problem remains the side effects of the constant sedative flow into West's body." Brown explained before a bleeping sound from the console in front of them told them of an incoming signal from their superior.  
"The admiral knows we're supposed to be running silent." Jones said, looking at his console and seeing the source of the transmission displayed there.  
"Then it must be important." Brown said and she activated the communication system, "Yes admiral?" she asked when Schmidt's face appeared on the view screen.  
"Brown, Jones, I know you're running silent but this is something you need to know. Traffic control at Deneva just picked up several shuttles from the *Nightfall* heading towards them." Schmidt told them.  
"Has something happened to the *Nightfall*?" Jones said.  
"No, according to the reports of those aboard the shuttles the ship is still perfectly operational. However, it seems that Captain Edwards has taken it upon himself to ignore my advice and is intent on coming after you. He asked his crew to volunteer to go with him and put all those who either wouldn't or couldn't off his ship." Schmidt said.  
"But how does he pose to find us?" Jones said.  
"Even if he can then we can shut the *Nightfall* down as soon as we see her." Brown added.  
"Maybe so but I doubt that Captain Edwards would have gone to the trouble of doing what he has if he didn't have a plan for finding you so be careful. The *Nightfall* can outrun you and out-gun you, make sure that your crew are prepared for any eventuality. In the mean time I'm going to do what I can at this end to force Edwards to take the *Nightfall* back to spacedock." Schmidt said before he abruptly ended his transmission.  
"So what do you think?" Brown asked, looking at Jones.  
"I think we should do what the admiral told us to. It can't hurt to issue phasers after all."

Captain Cameron had just replicated himself a mug of coffee when the door to his quarters chimed.  
"Come in." he said and the door opened to reveal S'Kora.  
"Sorry to disturb you captain but I thought you'd want to see this in private." the Caitian first officer said, holding out a PADD towards Cameron, "Orders via Admiral Trent's office."  
"About time. Let me see." Cameron said as he reached out to take the device. However, as soon as he saw what was written on it he lowered his mug and looked straight at S'Kora, "Is this a joke?" he asked.  
"No joke captain. I checked with the *Ek'Duv* and the *Umbra*. They have received identical orders to these." S'Kora answered.  
"What, locate the *USS Nightfall* and order Captain Edwards to return her to port? If they want the *Nightfall* back here then why not just send a subspace message?"  
"The rumour is that Edwards has gone rogue. He threw those of his crew off the *Nightfall* on shuttles while they've gone to try and find Lieutenant Commander West. I'm guessing that this is related to those subroutines in our operating system."  
"You mean that he's gone rogue to prevent anyone from tampering with his ship?" Cameron said and S'Kora nodded.  
"Yes captain. What are your orders?" he asked and Cameron held up the PADD.  
"We have our orders right here commander. We're going after Edwards and the *Nightfall*. But when we catch up with them I'm going to find out what he's doing before I make any decision about coming back to spacedock with him." Cameron said.

"Captain the cloaking device is installed and ready to test." Nayal said when she entered the bridge and Edwards smiled and nodded.  
"Good. Sublieutenant Nayal please take over at operations and let's give it a test. Commander Cole launch a class eight probe ahead of us." Edwards ordered.  
"Yes captain, launching probe now." Cole responded as he launched a warp capable probe one of the *Nightfall's* torpedo launchers.  
"Receiving probe telemetry now captain." T'Lan added when the probe came on line and began to feed its

sensor data back to the ship.

"Are we visible on it?" Carr asked.

"Yes commander." T'Lan said, "The probe is feeding back our location relative to it on both active and passive sensors."

"On screen." Carr said and an image of the *Nightfall* itself viewed from in front appeared on the main screen at the front of the bridge.

"Sublieutenant Noyal are you ready to engage the cloaking device?" Edwards said.

"One moment captain, I'm just configuring this console. There, got it. Ready to cloak now captain." Noyal replied.

"Noyal please engage the cloaking device." Edwards told her.

As soon as Noyal pressed the button she had set up on the console to activate the cloaking device the image of the *Nightfall* on the main view screen began to blur before it vanished entirely.

"Cloaking device operating at full power captain." Noyal announced, smiling at her achievement.

"T'Lan are we just shrouded from visual detection or are we shielded from all of the probe's sensors?" Edwards asked.

"I am receiving no telemetry of any kind relating to the *Nightfall* captain. It is logical to conclude that Lieutenant Maximillian and Sublieutenant Noyal have correctly interfaced the cloaking device with our systems." T'Lan said.

"Thank you cousin, that means a lot to me." Noyal responded.

"I was simply stating a fact. Unlike your assertion that we are related." T'Lan told her.

"Commander Hamilton, what effect has the cloaking device had on our navigation?" Edwards said.

"None captain. Unless the field is disrupting our fix on the star field and inertial sensors we're still heading in the same direction and holding at warp eight. ETA to target four hours."

"Take us to warp nine point six." Edwards said and then he activated the *Nightfall's* intercom, "All hands this is the captain. We are now running with our cloaking device operating. No personnel are to activate any equipment that will produce an energy output capable of penetrating the hull until further notice. Boarding parties and fighter pilots are to prepare and assemble in the main launch bay. Sickbay prepare to receive casualties. Edwards out."

"Lieutenant Page take over at helm. Evans take tactical." Carr said, "Hamilton, Cole with me." and the two junior officers moved to relieve Cole and Hamilton so that they could join the boarding parties with Carr.

The *Nightfall's* launch bay was a hive of activity as almost the entire ship's complement of ground troops and security officers assembled there. In place of their ordinary uniforms that clearly identified them as coming from the *Nightfall* by the patch on their sleeves every member of the boarding party whether they were Starfleet, MACO or Imperial Guard wore plain black combat fatigues. The ground troops still wore their armoured vests and helmets, however and also carried their distinctive projectile assault rifles with their phaser units mounted beneath them.

At the very front of the launch bay, just inside the forward launch door sat the six Peregrine-class attack fighters that would be taking part in the assault and when Carr arrived with Cole and Hamilton, White was giving the six pilots their final briefing.

"Your mission is simple." he told them, "You'll be launched while the *Nightfall* is still cloaked so you should have total surprise when you suddenly appear right on top of the target. But you'll probably still only have a few seconds at most to identify its subspace antenna before the enemy can do whatever they can to interfere with your ships using those back doors they have. When you've found it, hit with phasers. Take out the antenna and maybe we can take out their ability to use them. Follow that up with strikes to their sensors and that's when you're to get clear. The *Nightfall* will de-cloak and lock onto the ship with her tractor beam. If they haven't already dropped out of warp by then they'll have to after that. That's when our boarding parties will make their move and you're just to fly cover for them. It's unlikely that the enemy will have any fighter cover themselves but we can't rule it out entirely."

"What about you Snowman?" one of the pilots asked.

"Yeah, why aren't you on this op?" another added and White smiled.

"Captain Edwards has seen fit to send me in with the troops. That ship is going to need a prize crew putting aboard it and those of us missing out on the fun with you guys will be part of that." he replied.

"Don't worry Snowman." Hamilton said as he, Carr and Cole walked up to White and he put an arm around White's shoulder, "I'll be there to teach you how to fly something bigger than those toy ships you're used to." White snorted.

"We'll see who's giving the flying lessons." he said.

"Just tell me that you think your pilots can clear the way for us." Carr said, "If we can't disable that ship's ability to give orders to ours then this mission will be over before any of us even step foot aboard it."

"Don't worry commander. The enemy won't see this coming." White reassured her before Nikki called out



from behind Carr.

"Mom you all need one of these." she said and when she looked around she saw her daughter approaching pushing along a cart loaded with equipment cases, the top one of which was open to show that it was filled with hyposprays.

"What are they?" Cole asked when Nikki handed him one of the devices.

"Hyposprays." Hamilton said and he and Nikki smiled.

"Just explain what they're for Nikki." Carr said.

"Doctor King wants every member of the boarding party to carry one." Nikki explained as she handed out more hyposprays, "Each one is loaded with a powerful stimulant. He says that the drug he gave to West will have worn off by now and this will make sure that it's her we bring back and not the Iconian inside her."

"So we just shoot her up with this then do we?" Hamilton asked, holding his hypospray close to his neck.

"Careful." Nikki told him, "Doctor King also said for everyone to be sure not to inject themselves with it or they won't be able to blink for a week."

"I'll be careful." Cole said, slipping his hypospray into a pocket on his jacket just as Heart and Shry came towards them.

"All ground forces ready for deployment commander." Shry reported.

"That includes your security officers." Heart added.

"Good." Cole responded, "Have they been given their targets?"

Heart nodded.

"Yes, your people will secure key parts of the ship, the bridge, engineering, life support and the computer core while MACOs and Imperial Guard round up the crew. Whoever finds Jenna first will free her." he said.

Carr then tapped her combadge.

"Carr to bridge. Captain Edwards our forces are ready to board their ships." she said.

"Excellent timing commander." Edwards responded, "Max has just told me that he's picked up the subspace communications of the nanites he injected into West. We're still too far for meaningful communication with them but we're getting close. Our revised ETA is eighty-four minutes."

"Understood captain. We'll be ready." Carr said before tapping her combadge again and looking at the officers around her, "Okay you heard the captain. Get everyone to their ships, we're on the clock now."

The modified cargo ship being used to transport West to Earth was clearly visible on the bridge's main view screen while data scrolled down the feed of Edwards' headset.

"We don't seem to be having any difficulty in detecting them now." he commented.

"No captain." T'Lan replied from the seat where Carr usually sat. With Carr leading the assault forces T'Lan was filling in as first officer while one of her subordinates now sat at the science station, "Logic suggests that they must actively instruct the computer of a vessel to erase all sensor returns without presenting them to the crew first."

"I'm not picking up any active weapons or defensive shielding." Nayal added.

"So they don't know we're here then. Just as we hoped. Excellent work Sublieutenant Nayal." Edwards said.

"I believe that Lieutenant Maximillian was largely responsible for interfacing the cloaking device supplied by Commander Kelak provided you with." T'Lan commented.

"Can't stand to be in my debt cousin?" Nayal said.

"Sublieutenant it is doubly inappropriate for you to refer to me as your cousin now. In addition to being factually incorrect, I am also currently acting as the *Nightfall's* executive officer and you should address me by my rank." T'Lan said.

"Of course Lieutenant Commander T'Lan." Nayal said, bowing her head.

"That is better." T'Lan commented.

"Nayal what's the status of our cloaking device?" Edwards asked.

"Functioning well given that it's fitted to a vessel it wasn't designed for. We should remain invisible to their sensors as long as our power distribution system remains stable. Any imbalance in our warp cores is likely to show up like a fireworks display though." Nayal answered.

"Sublieutenant, would engaging the forcefield used to maintain the atmosphere in our launch bay cause a power surge that would show up through the cloaking device?" T'Lan said and Nayal hesitated.

"It might." she said after a few moments' thought, "The two fields could interact with one another and that would disrupt the cloak."

"Edwards to Carr." Edwards said into the intercom.

"Carr here captain." Carr's voice responded.

"Commander we can't use the forcefield to maintain atmospheric pressure inside the hangar while we're cloaked. As soon as the pilots and assault groups are aboard their ships we'll decompress it instead. Make sure everyone knows we need all ground crew either clear or in suits." Edwards warned her.

"Understood captain. I'll pass the word to prep for decompression. Carr out." Carr replied.

"What do you make of this?" Brown asked and Jones turned to look at the readings on her console.

"A localised subspace field?" he suggested.

"Yes I can see that but where's it coming from? According to these readings it's all around us but the only emission field like that that we should be seeing is our own warp field." Brown pointed out.

"We've been pushing the warp drive pretty hard. Maybe the core needs looking at." Jones said and then he activated the intercom, "Engineering this is the bridge. We're seeing an odd variation in our warp field up here. Do you know what's causing it?"

"Negative sir. The warp drive is singing like a bird. The source must be somewhere else." the engineer replied.

"There is nowhere else." Jones told him.

"Maybe there is." Brown said, her eyes widening as a thought struck her, "The *Nightfall's* engineer is a Borg and his body is filled with nanites from their hive. They are small enough to enter a human body or electronic system without notice communicate with one via subspace fields."

"Check the prisoner. That could be how Captain Edwards intends to track us." Jones said.

"Range to target five hundred thousand kilometres captain." the lieutenant at the *Nightfall's* helm announced as the heavy cruiser closed in on the transport.

"Drop to impulse. Launch all fighters." Edwards ordered.

"Bridge to hangar. Scramble. Scramble. Scramble." Nayal said into the intercom as the *Nightfall* suddenly decelerated to below light speed so that it could launch its fighter squadron.

Normally when the *Nightfall* was about to launch any of its fighters a forcefield would be erected across the hangar's forward launch door so that an atmosphere could be maintained inside. However, with the hangar already in a vacuum the door could be opened without this, exposing the hangar to space. As soon as this happened the six fighters accelerated along the deck in pairs side by side so that they emerged two at a time

before splitting apart and then accelerating to warp speed as quickly as they could to catch the transport that was now speeding away from them.

"Last fighter away captain. Now moving at warp eight. Intercept in less than sixty seconds." Noyal reported when the six tiny attack craft had accelerated to warp speed.

"Engage at warp eight." Edwards ordered and the *Nightfall* re-entered warp before it could be left too far behind.

"What the hell?" Jones exclaimed when he suddenly saw the six Peregrine-class attack fighters appear on the sensor display and he quickly activated the intercom, "Brown get back here, I've got six fighters closing on our position from the rear. They just came out of nowhere."

"Fighters don't appear from nowhere." Brown said.

"Well these did. Forget the prisoner for now, we've got bigger problems." Jones told her. Then he looked at the other crew in the bridge with him, "Those pilots must be targeting us visually. Let's see what we can do to-" but before he could finish his sentence the transport was rocked by the impact of phaser fire from the lead attack fighter.

"The pilot missed the antenna captain. The enemy vessel can still attack them via their computers. The *Nightfall* as well." T'Lan said when she saw that the phaser strike had narrowly missed the transport's subspace antenna.

"Don't be so pessimistic cousin. There are still five more fighters in the group." Noyal said right before the second of the *Nightfall's* fighters opened fire and also narrowly missed the transport's subspace antenna. This was followed by a third blast of phaser fire, only this time from the transport itself when the crew acted to protect themselves. The beam hit the next fighter as its pilot was beginning his run on the ship but fortunately the energy beam failed to penetrate the fighter's shields and only succeeded in forcing the pilot to break off from his run. He was followed by the fourth fighter and the pilot fired several rapid phaser blasts towards the transport's subspace antenna, this time shearing it off even without the ability to gain a sensor lock on the vessel.

"Captain I'm getting a sensor reading on the ship now." the officer at the science station said.

"Without its subspace antenna the vessel is no longer able to tell our computer to ignore it captain." T'Lan said.

"So they can't attack our other systems either now?" Edwards asked.

"That is the logical conclusion captain." T'Lan replied and Edwards smiled.

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear. Noyal disengage the cloak." he ordered, "I want our shields up and a tractor beam locked onto that ship as soon as possible."

Brown had just entered the bridge of the transport when the subspace antenna was blown off.

"What's going on?" she exclaimed as she sat down beside Jones.

"We just lost the antenna. We can't access their computers to shut them down." Jones told her.

"How did they get close enough to fire on us?" Brown said.

"I don't know. They must be from the *Nightfall* but I can't see the ship anywhere." Jones answered before all of a sudden the star field behind the transport began to blur as the *Nightfall's* cloaking device was deactivated and the heavy cruiser revealed its presence.

"What the hell?" Brown said in disbelief, "Where did Edwards get a cloaking device?" but before Jones could respond the ship shook violently as it was seized by a tractor beam from the *Nightfall*.

"Tractor beam locked on captain." the officer at the *Nightfall's* tactical station announced when the transport was captured and Edwards nodded.

"Helm reduce power as quickly as you can without losing the target or ripping it in half. Keep going and let me know when we hit half impulse." he ordered.

"Beginning deceleration now captain." the helmsman replied while T'Lan activated the intercom.

"Commander Carr we have locked onto the target. The *Nightfall* is now decelerating." she said.

"Copy that T'Lan. Starting power up sequence now." Carr responded from the cockpit of one of the *Nightfall's* two runabouts, each of which was now filled to capacity with security officers and ground troops.

As the *Nightfall's* helmsman reduced the power to the warp drive the ship slowed down and the transport ship was forced to decelerate as well, its warp drive unable to break free of the larger vessel's tractor beam without suffering catastrophic structural damage. However the transport had already demonstrated that it was not defenceless and it now fired its phasers at the *Nightfall*, attempting to target the source of the tractor beam.

"We're hit captain, Shields holding at ninety percent." the tactical officer announced.

"Captain repeated hits at that location will disrupt our tractor beam even without penetrating our shields."

T'Lan pointed out as she studied the phaser beam's effects with her headset.

"Tactical, try to take out their weapons. I don't want them firing on our shuttles." Edwards said.

"Yes captain. Locking phasers." the tactical officer replied and moments later there was a flash of red as one of the *Nightfall's* forward phaser banks fired at the transport and there was a small explosion.

"Enemy weapon destroyed captain."

"And let's hope they don't have any more." Edwards said, "If they fire again don't wait for an order from me. Lock onto the source and destroy it."

"They've taken out our phasers and our shields aren't responding while that tractor beam is locked onto us." Brown said, frantically checking her console for some good news but finding only bad.

"They must intend to board us." Jones said, "I'm setting up a jamming field to stop them beaming aboard or just taking West back."

"They have shuttles you know." Brown said.

"I know. But we can see those coming and deploy to box in their boarding parties." Jones said and then he reached out his hand to the helm controls, "Let's get this over with." he added before shutting down the transport's warp drive.

"Captain the enemy vessel just dropped out of warp." the *Nightfall's* helmsman said as the ship lurched under the sudden drag applied by the transport, "We're at half impulse now."

"Launch all assault craft." Edwards ordered and in the hangar the assortment of runabouts and other shuttlecraft began to rise up off the deck.

"Here we go." Carr said as she engaged the runabout's thrusters, taking off and accelerating out into space with the second Danube-class craft following right behind it.

"Taking off now, weapons hot." Rebecca added from the cockpit of the assault shuttle she was piloting as she took off as well. The four assault shuttles used by the *Nightfall's* ground forces were outwardly similar to Starfleet aero-shuttles but in place of the warp nacelles embedded in their wings the assault shuttles carried enhanced weapon pods for providing air support to the platoon of infantry each was designed to carry. Because the four shuttles could only transport half of the *Nightfall's* complement of ground troops the two heavy lift shuttles often used by them were also being used in an assault role. Ordinarily these carried only two squads of troops inside a pair of wheeled armoured personnel carriers, but with no need for the armoured vehicles there was enough space inside to fit another platoon each, leaving the final few to be carried aboard the Starfleet runabouts and shuttles.

As soon as the various shuttles and runabouts emerged from the *Nightfall's* hangar they saw the transport caught in the heavy cruiser's tractor beam directly ahead of them, helpless now that its weapons had been destroyed.

"Target in sight, I'm heading for the forward section now." Carr broadcast.

"I'm coming up right behind you commander." White added from his own shuttle right before the smaller craft that carried just himself and three Andorian troops sped past the runabout, also making its way towards the forward section of the transport.

"Careful White. They can see us coming and there are only four of you in there." Carr warned him but White just smiled.

"Sorry commander, didn't quite catch that. Going for hard seal now. Arming breaching charge." he responded as he landed his shuttle against the hull of the transport so that the docking hatch in the floor made contact. There was a 'clump' sound inside the shuttle as the connection was made and a shaped charge fitted to the base of the shuttle blasted a hole into the transport.

"Move." the senior Imperial Guard trooper said as he and the other two Andorians got out of their seats, pulling the masks all of the boarding party were equipped with over their faces as they hurried to the hatch, "Stay behind us sir." he then told White as he pulled a stun grenade from his webbing while the other two soldiers pointed their rifles down at the hatch.

White opened the hatch from the flight console and as soon as he did the grenade was hurled through into the transport before the hatch was closed again. The sound of another explosion followed seconds later and White then opened the hatch again so that the Andorians could leap down into the transport. The shuttle was clamped to the side of the transport and this meant that their artificial gravity fields were acting at right angles. This created a small zone of conflict around the hole but since the boarding party passed through this so rapidly it had little effect on most of them. Only White was disorientated as he came through the hole after the Andorians and one of the soldiers steadied him before he could fall.

"Not used to forced boardings commander?" the Andorian asked and White shook his head.

"I do my fighting from a cockpit normally." he answered as he looked around and saw a pair of crewmen from the transport, both either unconscious or dead. They had been armed with phaser rifles of the same model

issued to Starfleet security officers and White could not help but notice that the one he could see the setting of was at a lethal setting, "Let's get moving before any more of these guys can show up." he said.

While Carr and White headed for the transport's forward section Hamilton flew the second runabout beneath the transport to where he saw a large door set into the ventral hull.

"That will be the main cargo bay." he told the security officer sat beside him, "Let's see if we can get that door open." he added before he fired the runabout's phasers directly ahead of the craft. The phaser blast struck the centre of the ventral cargo bay door and it exploded outwards as the pressure of the air within caused the damaged door to shatter. The rush of air and tumbling storage containers from inside the cargo hold lasted only a few moments though, ceasing when the ship's computer detected the sudden loss of pressure and engaged the forcefield that would normally cover the doorway during cargo transfer operations to stem the loss. This forcefield was not designed to resist anything more than basic air pressure though and with the transport unable to manoeuvre out of the way Hamilton was able to simply pilot his runabout through the hole into the hold to use it as a hangar. The cargo hold of an unmodified transport of this class was massive, designed to allow the ship to move a vast amount of material as efficiently as possible and with the modifications made to this ship, the cargo space had been reduced by more than three-quarters. However, even with this much reduced volume available there was still sufficient room inside the hold to house several craft the size of a runabout.

"Go! Go! Go!" a MACO yelled from just inside the hatch at the rear of the runabout's cockpit as he opened it so that the occupants could disembark and before he leapt down to the hold floor. He landed just as the hold's internal door slid open to reveal a four man defence team all armed with phaser rifles and one of them fired at the MACO. The beam struck the MACO's body armour but the rifle was set to such a high setting that it still burned right through it before disintegrating the soldier wearing it.

In response to this the next man to the hatch, one of the *Nightfall's* security officers now wearing the same featureless black fatigues as the MACOs fired his own phaser rifle back at the defending crewmen and the man who had just killed the MACO was blasted off his feet.

"We can't get out that side." Hamilton said as more phaser blasts struck the side of the runabout and the occupants backed away from the hatch as some of the fire came through it, "Seal it up and try the other." The security officer reached out to close the hatch but there was a sudden flash of light as one of the incoming phaser blasts struck one of the hatch motors and destroyed it.

"It's jammed!" the security officer exclaimed when the hatch then failed to close.

"Then we're pinned down." Hamilton said, knowing that moving to the hatch on the opposite side of the cockpit would expose them to fire through the already open one.

The solution to this problem came just seconds later though as the assault shuttle piloted by Rebecca suddenly rose up through the forcefield in the floor and she slowly turned it towards the crewmen before firing the shuttle's phasers. The powerful beams blasted the cargo containers that the crewmen were using for cover apart before incinerating the men themselves. Rebecca then flew the shuttle clear of the opening beneath it and set the craft down on the floor of the cargo hold.

"We're down." she said into the intercom and the large hatch at the rear of the craft opened to allow the platoon it carried to rapidly disembark.

No longer coming under fire from the crewmen, the troops aboard Hamilton's runabout also began to disembark from their craft just as a third shuttle was entering the hold, this one smaller than the first two.

"Hamilton," Heart called out as he emerged from the assault shuttle, "where are you heading?"

"If this ship still has the same basic configuration as the standard version then engineering is about twenty metres aft of here." Hamilton told him, "The auxiliary control is close to there so that will be my target. White and his people can take the bridge."

"I'm going to try and find where they're holding Jenna." Heart responded.

"We're being boarded in multiple sections." Brown said as her console detailed every hull breach, "we don't have enough people to respond to them all."

"Then we'll have to concentrate on protecting the key parts of the ship that will be their targets. Then we'll form the rest of our people into hunting groups to pick off Edwards' forces. I'm going to lead one of them, I'll see if I can make it to one of their ships to access their subspace communications."

"Do you think you can shut down their ships?" Brown asked as they both got out of their seats.

"No but I can use it to send for help. Edwards has overstepped his authority in attacking us. Admiral Schmidt will bring the entire Fourth Fleet down on the *Nightfall* for this. All we need to do is stop them taking control long enough for the reinforcements to arrive. I suggest that you make sure that the prisoner is kept secure. She's bound to be a priority target for them."

The heavy lift shuttle carrying Shry and large number of Imperial Guard troops attached itself to the

transport's dorsal hull close to where the vessel's subspace antenna had been located.

"With any luck this will put us close to their main computer core." he told his troops, "Take that and maybe we can start denying them access to key systems. The jamming field that prevents beaming for example." After breaching the transport's hull the Andorians dropped stun grenades through the hole to ensure that the immediate area was clear of defending forces before they boarded the ship themselves. There were no signs of defending troops when they first boarded the ship and Shry began to give deployment orders to his men, sending squads in various different directions to search as large an area as possible before he led the last group towards a nearby doorway himself.

This door had been sealed remotely to prevent any of the forces from the *Nightfall* from moving easily through the ship and Shry had to wait while one of his men physically overrode the lockout, shorting out the trigger line for the motor that opened the door so that it slid aside. As soon as this happened though Shry's men came under fire from the other side where a pair of crewmen were lying in wait.

"Take cover!" Shry ordered as one of his men was hit, saved only by his armour and dragged clear by his comrades.

The corridor was then filled with the roar of projectile fire as the Andorians returned fire, using their weapons to force the defending crewmen to take cover while Shry led a fire team forwards for a better position before firing the phasers mounted beneath their rifles.

One of the defending crewmen was hit in his leg and he fell sideways, landing in the open and still clutching his phaser rifle. The injured crewman fired his weapon in desperation but the beam went up into the ceiling harmlessly before Shry shot him again, this time hitting him in the chest and killing him instantly. Unwilling to face the Imperial Guard alone the surviving crewman tried to fall back but a rapid burst of fire from an assault rifle cut him down as he ran.

"Forward." Shry ordered, waving his men on as they advanced, "The were protecting something."

Sure enough the entrance to the main computer core was not much further along the corridor, protected by a heavily armoured door and Shry turned to the Andorian who had opened the previous door blocking their path.

"Get that open." he ordered.

"Yes captain." the Andorian replied, slinging his rifle over his shoulder as he rushed forwards and ripped open the wall panel beside the door.

Carr used her phaser to shoot one of the defending crewmen as he leant around a corner but as he fell something fell from his hand and rolled along the corridor towards her and her team.

"Grenade!" Cole yelled, pulling Carr back around a junction just moments before there was a brilliant flash of light and a loud booming sound as the stun grenade went off. The fact that it was a stun grenade rather than an explosive or photon type indicated that the defenders were not yet so desperate that they were willing to risk the collateral damage to their vessel of using powerful explosives but it did demonstrate that they were well armed.

"Thanks." Carr said, "Think they've got many more of those?"

"Depends on how much warning they had we were coming. If none then maybe but if they had a lot then in their place I would have spent every moment until we arrived replicating more."

"I can take them." one of Cole's security officers exclaimed suddenly before he burst out of cover and charged down the corridor towards the enemy position.

"No!" Cole yelled, "It could be-" but before he could finish his sentence there was an explosion as the security officer hit a trip wire and another explosive was triggered. Unlike the stun grenade this was designed to inflict lethal wounds at close range, firing a canister filled with hard plastic pellets at the man. These were tough enough to penetrate flesh and some bone but would not go through a bulkhead.

In anticipation of there being several injured Starfleet officers lying in the corridor two more of the defending crew appeared at the end of the corridor to finish them off with their phaser rifles but the dead man was the only person to have been caught in the blast and they were now caught out in the open as Carr and Cole opened fire from their end of the corridor, their phasers bringing both men down.

"Having trouble?" a voice said from behind their team and they turned, pointing their phasers the other way but relaxing when they saw White heading for them with the members of his boarding party.

"I thought you were heading for the bridge." Cole said.

"I was but the layout of this ship isn't standard. We breached the hull on the wrong side of a wall that wasn't where it ought to be. We're looking for another way around." White explained.

"There's a lot of that going on." Carr said and then she tapped her combadge, "Has anyone made it to their target yet?" she broadcast to the other boarding parties.

"Negative commander." Heart responded, "My team found what looked like a brig but it was empty. Wherever Jenna is being held she's not there."

"We've not made it to engineering or auxiliary control yet either." Hamilton added.

"My team is right outside the computer core." Shry reported, "When we get through the door we ought to be able to pull up some schematics of this ship."

"Good, we'll wait to hear from you." Carr said before tapping her combadge a second time to shut it off.

Carr had just finished speaking when all of a sudden another group of crewmen appeared and fired on Shry's team. One of them fired his phaser on a high setting and even though the beam struck an Andorian's armoured vest he was briefly turned into a bright red light before he disintegrated entirely.

"Contact!" Shry yelled.

Shry's men were quick to return fire, shooting dead the crewman who had just disintegrated their comrade before he could fire a second shot.

"Keep working, get that door open." Shry ordered the Andorian attempting to override the door seal. Then, keeping low to avoid the phaser fire from the far end of the corridor he went over to one of his men, "Can you put a photon grenade down there? Level four ought to do, we don't need to demolish the entire corridor."

"Yes captain." the other Andorian said as he took what looked like an oversized bullet from a pocket on his webbing. Unlike the other Andorians this Imperial Guard soldier had a grenade launcher mounted under the barrel of his assault rifle instead of the phaser units the other troops were armed with. The photon grenade he had just taken from his webbing had an adjustable yield and the Andorian set it to the yield that Shry had specified before loading it into the launcher. Bracing the weapon in his shoulder the Andorian then fired the grenade down the corridor, "Fire in the hole!"

The grenade flew down the corridor towards the crewmen before exploding among them. The energy blast blew all of them off their feet but killed only those two who had been closest to the epicentre of the blast while the others were incapacitated temporarily and the phaser fire from the crewmen ceased.

"Where are we with that door?" Shry asked.

"Just about got it." the Andorian attempting to open the door answered before there was a hissing sound and the heavy door slid open.

"Inside quickly." Shry ordered and his team retreated through the doorway before the crewmen at the other end of the corridor could recover.

As soon as the Andorians passed through the doorway Shry was forced to duck as another phaser beam shot down from an overhead walkway. This hit another Andorian in the leg and he stumbled and rolled, demonstrating that the weapon was set only to a 'stun' level, probably to avoid collateral damage to the computer equipment that filled the room. On the other hand when Shry raised his rifle and took aim at the technician he fired a single projectile from his assault rifle that hit the crewman and he toppled from the walkway.

"Seal that door." Shry ordered, "Then spread out and make sure that we've got this place to ourselves. I don't want anyone springing out of nowhere and taking another shot at me while I'm looking for an access terminal."

Hamilton and his mixed team of security officers and MACOs came under fire from one of the patrols of crewmen sent to hunt down the boarding parties that were steadily gaining control over more and more of the transport when they were approaching the estimated location of the main engineering section.

"Looks like they're dug in like a Ceti eel commander." one of the security officers said as numerous phaser beams came down the corridor, preventing them from advancing any further.

"Then we need another way around." Hamilton said.

"According to the provisional deck plan we have there is no other way around." a MACO sergeant pointed out but Hamilton just smiled.

"Deck plans aren't everything sergeant." he said and he pointed to a small hatch set into the base of a nearby bulkhead, "The MACOs won't fit through that with their armour so I'll just take the Starfleet personnel with me into the jefferies tubes to make our way around them." Hamilton added and the MACO sergeant nodded.

"We'll keep them busy at this end sir. With any luck the first thing they'll know about being surrounded is when you shoot them in the back."

"I never did like fighting fair." Hamilton commented as one of the security officers forced open the entrance to the jefferies tube and then he got down on his hands and knees to crawl inside.

Even unencumbered by the bulky body armour worn by the MACOs it was difficult for the Starfleet team led by Hamilton to make their way along the narrow jefferies tube, particularly while trying to avoid getting their phaser rifles caught along the way. Before they reached the hatchway that would lead out to the transport's engineering section though they were interrupted by a broadcast from Captain Shry in the ship's computer core.

"We're into the system." he announced, "We're shutting down the transporter jamming field and opening all internal doors now."

Moments later all of the internal doors that had been slowing down the progress of the boarding parties slid open, turning the ship into a single if complex internal space and this allowed Hamilton to hear a disturbingly familiar if muffled sound. It was the sound of screaming.

"West." he said to himself as he looked down a jefferies tube that led off to the side.

"Shall we head after her commander?" the security officer immediately behind him asked.

"No." Hamilton replied, you all carry on to engineering, "I'm going after her myself." and then he started to crawl along the side passageway while the *Nightfall's* security officers carried on towards their original destination.

The sound of screaming led Hamilton down a ladder to the level below where he found an open access leading into a corridor. Even though the sound was getting louder it remained muffled and Hamilton paused just inside the jefferies tube as he listened, trying to pinpoint the source. After a short delay he exited the jefferies tube cautiously and looked around, finding himself alone in a corridor. From his current location it seemed to Hamilton that the muffled screaming was coming from an open doorway about ten metres away from him, though where this led to was not clear from where he stood so he advanced slowly towards it with his phaser rifle held ready to fire. He paused when he reached the doorway and pressed himself up against the wall right beside. Then he attempted to peer through the doorway but there was a phaser shot from the other side that forced him to duck back again. This presented Hamilton with a problem, if as it seemed likely West was being held in the room on the other side of the doorway then he had to try and rescue her. However, there was obviously at least one armed crew member guarding her and he did not know whether they were using West as a human shield. This left Hamilton with only one option open to him and he began to adjust the setting of his phaser rifle, changing not only the power output to a 'stun' setting but also altering the projection angle so that instead of firing a concentrated beam at a specific target it would blanket a wider area with nadiion particles. He knew that using his weapon in this way would also incapacitate West and enable The Controller to take control of her body but with the hypospray in his pocket Hamilton was ready to rouse her again.

Rather than risk exposing himself to enemy fire Hamilton just held his rifle through the doorway and pulled the trigger, sweeping the weapon around the room as he discharged it. Hamilton heard the sound of a single body hitting the floor but the muffled screaming continued uninterrupted, suggesting to him that West had already been unconscious and that he was listening to The Controller screaming and he was thankful that this meant West would probably have no memory of him shooting her.

Charging through the doorway Hamilton gasped when he saw the control console with the cluster of cables leading to the table to which West had been strapped, the intravenous drug feed still attached to her. From the way that West's body was convulsing it was obvious to Hamilton that the console was delivering a succession of electrical shocks to her and so he rushed up to it and quickly studied the control interface. However, it was not immediately obvious to him how to safely shut down the flow of electricity and so instead he stepped back and adjust his phaser rifle again, back to its original lethal and narrow beam setting before firing it at the console. The console exploded as soon as the beam hit it and the muffled screaming from The Controller was replaced by gasping as she tried to catch her breath despite the gag that was still in place. Slinging his rifle Hamilton pulled down the front of his mask to expose his entire face and tapped his combadge as he rushed towards the table.

"I've located West." he said, taking the stimulant hypospray from his webbing, "She's being held in a room on level six, section eight aft." and then he tapped the combadge again to shut it off, "Okay West, time to wake up." he said as he looked down at West who, still under the influence of The Controller shook her head when he ripped out the sedative line, pressed the hypospray to her neck and injected her with the stimulant.

The effect of this was not immediate, the two drugs in West's system now fighting for dominance while Hamilton set to work untying her. He began by removing the gag from her mouth and tossing it aside before undoing both of the restraints around her wrists. Then he turned around to release her ankles and free her completely.

It was at this moment that West began to regain consciousness, The Controller being forced back into her subconscious. She could feel someone working on the restraints around her ankles and she looked down her legs, blinking as she saw the black clad figure standing by her legs. Remembering how the people who had abducted her dressed, West immediately feared that this was one of them. However, with her arms free she was no longer helpless and she reached out to the tray of ancient surgical instruments that was still beside her, grabbing hold of a scalpel. Before the black clad figure could turn around to see what she was doing West sat up and reached out to plunge the scalpel down into the figure's neck. Only when he collapsed to the floor, clutching at the wound to his neck did Hamilton turn so that West could see his face and her jaw dropped and her eyes widened.

"No!" she screamed as she realised what she had done.

Rolling off the table West landed beside Hamilton and she pressed her hand over his where he was trying to stem the flow of blood from his neck.



"Jenna what happened?" she heard Heart say and she looked up to see him standing in the doorway staring in horror at the scene in front of him.

"I stabbed him. I didn't mean to but I didn't know it was him." West told him.

With his troops remaining by the doorway Heart rushed to examine the extent of Hamilton's wound. It was immediately obvious to Heart that the wound was deep and that Hamilton needed more treatment than he could manage with a field dressing kit.

"Heart to *Nightfall*," he said, activating his communicator, "I have a medical emergency. Hamilton needs beaming directly to sickbay."

"Heart this is King, we're bringing back a number of casualties now that Shry has shutting off the jamming. What are Hamilton's injuries?" King responded.

"Severe lacerations to his neck. If we don't get him to sickbay in two minutes he's going to bleed out." Heart said. Then he looked at West and added, "Jenna says she stabbed him."

"Captain Heart we have a transporter lock. Beaming him out now." T'Lan's voice added and Heart pulled West back from Hamilton just as he was beamed back to the *Nightfall*.

"Captain Heart can you confirm that you have West?" Carr asked using her combadge.

"Affirmative commander. My team are taking her back to our ship now." Heart replied.

"Make sure she's secured." Cole added, "We have no way of knowing whether we're dealing with West or the Iconian."



It was obvious to Jones that his crew were losing control of their ship. The combined security and ground forces from the *Nightfall* outnumbered them greatly and they were far better trained and equipped for such an operation than his own crew were. This presented Jones with a serious dilemma, there was information contained in the transport's computer core that could compromise many of his organisation's personnel and operations and he knew that he had an absolute duty to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. The problem was that the only way to accomplish this now would easily cost him and what was left of his crew their lives.

"Jones to bridge." he said into his communicator.

"Yes commander?" the voice of one of the officers he had left on the bridge responded.

"Lieutenant I need you to arm the self destruct system." Jones told the other officer. On ordinary Starfleet vessels authority to activate the self destruct system was reserved only for senior officers, however the section that Jones worked for was more concerned with preventing its secrets from falling into the hands of outsiders, even from other parts of Starfleet and so any crewman could scuttle the ship if it was deemed necessary as Jones deemed it now.

"Yes commander. Do you want the standard one minute silent countdown?" the other officer asked, his loyalty to their section being strong enough that he did not question the order at all. Jones was about agree to this suggestion when a thought occurred to him, the fact that his crew had lost control of the computer core and that troops from the *Nightfall* had been able to shut down the transporter jamming field could be used against the attacking force if done correctly. A count down of one minute left too little time for engineering specialists from the *Nightfall* to be sent over to disarm the self destruct but it did allow time for the boarding parties to be beamed off the transport if they knew that they were in danger.

"No silent countdown." he told the bridge officer, "I want everyone aboard to know that they have sixty seconds to get off the ship. If I'm right then Captain Edwards will beam all his people back to the *Nightfall* and disengage their tractor beam so that they can get clear before our warp core breaches. I need you to be ready to raise our shields and engage at warp eight as soon as they do."

"Yes commander." the bridge officer said and then Jones shut off his communicator.

With all of the transport's interior doors now opened the defending crewmen had resorted to other means to try and slow down the boarding parties from the *Nightfall*, constructing barriers out of equipment and containers or removing bulkhead plates that could turn into improvised strong points. However, Carr and White's teams were still well on their way to the bridge when they heard an automated voice over the ship's public address system.

"Attention all hands, the self destruct system has been armed. T-minus sixty seconds until warp core breach. All personnel should abandon ship immediately." the computer announced.

"Do you think they're serious?" White said when he heard this.

"One way to find out." Carr replied and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*, the computer over here just announced that the self destruct has been activated. Can you confirm?" she transmitted.

"Affirmative commander." T'Lan responded, "Our sensors indicate that the transport's warp core is building up to a catastrophic breach."

"Can we shut it down in under a minute?" Carr asked.

"That is unlikely commander." T'Lan said.

"Carr we're going to beam you out of there." Edwards added, "All shuttles are to disengage immediately and get clear. As soon as we have you all back we'll disengage the tractor beam."

"Copy that *Nightfall*. We're ready to beam out." Carr said.

"So much for taking the ship." Cole said before the entire team was suddenly beamed off the transport.

Hamilton materialised in sickbay on a vacant biobed with blood still pumping from his neck and the scalpel still in place.

"This man needs immediate surgery." King said as he hurried over to him, waving for a nurse to join him.

"What happened?" Nikki asked, following King.

"Never mind that now. Get out of my way while I get to work. Go and see if Emma needs any help." King told her and she nodded, backing away slowly as the nurse began to help King sterilise his hands for surgery.

"The last of our boarding parties are aboard now captain." Nayal reported, "There are still three shuttles aboard the transport but none of our people are left over there to bring them back."

"That'll have to do." Edwards said, "Time for us to pull back."

"Disengage tractor beam and raise shields. Full reverse impulse." T'Lan added and as soon as the tractor beam was shut off the *Nightfall* began to pull back from the transport in anticipation of its imminent destruction.

The shuttles that had evacuated the transport were also retreating away from the transport, setting courses that would get them as far away as possible rather than heading back to the *Nightfall*, producing an expanding cloud of small craft.

"Captain the enemy vessel's warp signature is changing." Noyal announced.

"How?" Edwards asked.

"That does fit with a build up to a warp core breach sublieutenant." T'Lan commented.

"No, the power level is decreasing. I think that they're bleeding off plasma from the core." Noyal replied.

"Captain the enemy ship just raised its shields." the officer at tactical said.

"Lock phasers. Take out their warp drive now." Edwards ordered, realising that he had been deceived but before the *Nightfall's* weapons could be fired there was a sudden flash of light as the transport entered warp.

"Too late captain, they're gone." the tactical officer said.

"Moving away at warp eight captain." Noyal added.

"Pursuit course laid in captain, ready to pursue." the helmsman said but Edwards sighed and shook his head.

"No, let them go." he said, "We still have people out there in shuttles that we'll leave behind if we go to warp now. We've got West back and that was our primary objective."

The door to the turbolift then opened and Carr exited it.

"Has the transport self destructed yet?" she asked.

"It would seem that the crew of the enemy vessel were able to deactivate the self destruct as soon as you were evacuated commander." T'Lan responded.

"They pulled a fast one on us." Edwards said.

"Bridge this is sickbay." King's voice said over the intercom.

"Yes doctor, what is it?" Edwards asked as Carr took her seat, T'Lan returning to the science station.

"I just thought you ought to know that Bradley Hamilton died a few minutes ago." King said, "He'd already lost too much blood by the time he got to sickbay and there was nothing that I could do."

"Thank you doctor. I'm sure you did your best." Edwards said before he looked towards Noyal who was just staring back at him in disbelief, "Sublieutenant if you need to leave-" Edwards began before Noyal just leapt up from her seat and ran to the turbolift.

"What about West?" Edwards then asked Carr.

"Cole and Heart have taken her back to the brig. There's some confusion about exactly how she came to stab Hamilton so Cole is making sure that she won't be a danger to anyone as well as taking steps to make sure that no-one else will be beaming her out of her cell." Carr answered and Edwards nodded.

"In that case I think I better head down there and speak to her myself. Find out if getting her back was worth the price we paid. You have the conn commander. Get our shuttles back aboard as quickly as possible then find somewhere for us to hide. I have a feeling that if we stay here too long then we'll be getting company."

"Jones? Brown? Why are you calling me from a shuttle?" Schmidt asked when an image of his two subordinates sat in the cockpit of a Starfleet shuttlecraft appeared on his desk monitor.

"The *Nightfall* attacked us admiral." Jones replied, "They took out our subspace antenna so we're having to use one of the shuttles they left behind when they withdrew."

"The *Nightfall* attacked you? How did they manage that exactly? Your ship is equipped not only to evade detection by Starfleet vessels but also to be able to disable any of their systems that you need to." Schmidt said.

"Captain Edwards has been able to acquire a cloaking device." Brown told him, "It let the *Nightfall* get close enough to launch her fighters and take out our antenna before we could respond. Then they caught us in a tractor beam and sent over what was probably their entire compliment of security officer and ground troops. I'm afraid that they took back Lieutenant Commander West."

"We only prevented them from taking the entire ship by using the self destruct system to get them to pull out long enough for us to get to warp and cancel the countdown." Jones added.

"And how did they find you in the first place?" Schmidt said and Jones looked at Brown.

"There were nanites inside West from the *Nightfall's* hive." she said, "Some of them must have got out of her and given our course and speed to the *Nightfall*. Then when they got close enough to us they were able to re-establish their link to the rest of the hive. Or at least that's my theory. Without West I can't say for sure."

"So let me get this straight, you have lost the only Iconian anyone has been able to capture and now the people who have her also have a ship that can evade pursuit by rendering itself invisible to our sensors. Am I correct?" Schmidt said.

"We don't need to invent any excuses for Starfleet to hunt them down now admiral. That cloaking device puts

Edwards and his crew in violation of the Treaty of Algeron. We can form a tachyon detection grid and-" Jones began.

"Starfleet can't spare the ships to form a tachyon detection grid!" Schmidt snapped, "You two just get back here while I see what I can do to clean up your mess."

Edwards entered the brig to find West back in her cell. Upon her return to the Nightfall she had been given a fresh set of overalls to wear but in addition to this she had been restrained in a straitjacket to ensure that there would not be a repeat of her attack on Hamilton. Now she sat on the bed in her cell with tears running down her face. No longer trusting the security monitors, Cole had stationed a pair of armed security guards immediately outside it while he and Heart watched a pair of MACOs as they set up a portable transport inhibitor. Emma was also present in the brig but instead of monitoring the security precautions being put in place she was monitoring West herself as best as she could through the force field across the front of her cell.

"Captain!" West called out, dashing to the front of her cell just within the forcefield when she saw Edwards, "Is Bradley okay?" but Edwards ignored her.

"Are you sure that will prevent anyone from beaming her out again?" he asked instead, looking at the transport inhibitor.

"Yes captain." Heart answered, "Max checked the operating system and found several odd sections of code in the operating system just like with all of our ships so we pulled the wireless access port. So given that it has its own internal power supply the only way to shut it off now is to walk up to it and flip the switch."

"Which won't be possible while my men are guarding it." Cole added, "No-one will be inserting fake feeds into the surveillance system now."

"I'm leaving my men here as well captain." Heart said, "Four guards will make it much harder to stage a jailbreak the old fashioned way."

"Good." Edwards said before he turned towards Emma, "What about her?" he said.

"The nanites Max implanted in her are still functional captain." Emma replied, "There numbers are somewhat diminished though after West's kidnappers spent several hours electrocuting her. Some of them destroyed by the power surges but there are still enough to keep constructing a model of the implant."

"Can it be removed yet?" Heart said and Emma shrugged.

"My database doesn't have a lot of information regarding Iconian implants." she said, "It may be appropriate to think of it as a sort of tumour, but in that case I'd be recommending chemical rather than surgical treatment. The difficulty is that scans appear to be showing a number of connections to blood vessels, although quite why is beyond me at this point. Doctor King is still confident that with Max's help he can at least disable the implant though."

"And if he can't?" Cole said and Emma looked back towards West in her cell.

"Then she'll probably spend the rest of her life in a cell like this one." she said and West stared at her in disbelief.

"Captain if it's alright now that the inhibitor is in place I'd like to go and check on my men in sickbay. Some were badly injured during the mission." Heart said and Edwards nodded.

"Of course captain. Dismissed." he said.

"Wait Gary." West called out as he turned to leave but he paid no attention to her as he exited the brig.

"Commander I'd like to discuss our options now with you and Commander Carr." Edwards said.

"Of course captain. I think everything is in hand here." Cole responded and the two men turned to leave.

"Captain please." West said, "Tell me how Bradley is." and Edwards halted and looked back over his shoulder at her.

"Lieutenant Commander Hamilton died shortly after being beamed back aboard." he told her before continuing out of the brig with Cole.

"Captain is that true about Hamilton?" Cole asked as soon as the door to the brig slid shut behind them.

"I'm afraid so. Doctor King said that he had just lost too much blood." Edwards said.

"That doesn't leave West in a very good place. She says that it was her and not the Iconian that attacked him. She said she didn't know it was him of course but-"

"But she still killed him while his back was turned." Edwards interrupted, "When this is all over I doubt that she'll be able to remain serving in Starfleet. Mind you, the rest of us could be joining her in the stockade yet. Without that transport as evidence all we have is West's testimony."

"And the hidden subroutines in the operating system of every ship in Starfleet." Cole pointed out and Edwards sighed.

"Yes and I'm sure that right now the black ops section that put them there is moving to cover their tracks." he said.

"You asked to see me Lord Martial?" The Girl asked after appearing in the observation chamber aboard her

superior's personal flagship. Through the viewport a stream of torpedoes could be seen bombarding the surface of an already desolate planet, targeted to scatter the population into the wilderness where they would only be able to survive a short time without help.

"Yes. Has there been any further word from your source aboard the *USS Nightfall*?" The Lord Martial asked without looking around at The Girl.

"No. She hasn't made contact since I met with her at the starbase." The Girl told him.

"Ah yes, where you yourself were almost captured." The Lord Martial said and then he suddenly turned to look at The Girl, "We are ready." he said, "Our assessment is that none of the major powers in the Alpha or Beta Quadrants can defend their primary systems from our fleets long enough to recall the forces we have drawn away from them."

"Then we are moving to the next stage of our plan?" The Girl said.

"Of my plan, yes." The Lord Martial answered, "We will start with the new Romulan capital. Their empire is already weakened by the loss of their home system and years of civil war. Today we will deliver the final blow and end their existence as an interstellar power. After that though I want to bring down the Federation. Earth and Mars will be our first targets, followed by Vulcan, then Andoria and then Tellar. But before we strike I want confirmation of their defence status. Shintar is bringing me details of Romulan defences as we speak, yet I have nothing from you or your source. Why not?"

"I apologise Lord Martial. My agent promised me-" The Girl began.

"Enough!" The Lord Martial snapped, "If you cannot provide me with accurate intelligence then why should I continue to allow you to counsel me at all? Your efforts to infiltrate Starfleet and the higher echelons of the Federation have failed."

"But Lord Martial-" The Girl protested but The Lord Martial ignored her, interrupting her again.

"My decision is made. You will return to our home realm to oversee the assembly of our invasion forces. I warn you, fail me again and only oblivion will await you." he said angrily.

"I'm not interrupting anything am I Lord Martial?" Shintar asked when he appeared in the observation room from nowhere.

"No Shintar, we are finished here. I take it you have the information I requested?" The Lord Martial responded and Shintar grinned and tapped the side of his head.

"I uploaded it directly from my agents Lord Martial. Shall I share it with you?" he said and The Lord Martial looked at The Girl.

"Well? What are you waiting for? Were my orders not clear?" he said and The Girl turned around, scowling when he could no longer see her face before she took a single step and vanished into thin air.

"There are no signs of the transport within sensor range." Carr said when she, Edwards and Cole gathered in the captain's ready room to discuss their present situation.

"That's not surprising. Max hasn't made any headway with digging that code out of our operating system." Edwards replied.

"So what next? Do we head back to Starbase Ten and hope that our testimony and the existence of these subroutines in our computers is enough to make Starfleet overlook the fact that we used a cloaking device?" Cole asked.

"I gave the order to use the cloaking device." Edwards said, "I'll take the responsibility for it. Starfleet can have my commission anyway."

Cole frowned.

"Captain are you seriously-"

"We're both leaving Starfleet when this is over Robert." Carr interrupted. Then she looked at Edwards and smiled, "We're getting married."

Cole's jaw dropped when he heard this.

"Why so shocked? Max told you what he saw." Edwards said.

"Yes but I didn't think that you were in a serious relationship." Cole replied.

"Being caught was what convinced us to stop hiding." Carr told him.

"And for what it's worth we'll both be recommending you for the position of captain, whether here on the *Nightfall* or whatever other ship is available if this project is cancelled by Starfleet." Edwards said.

"I'm grateful." Cole said, "Although I have a feeling that after what we've done I'll be lucky if they offer me a commission aboard a garbage scow."

"Cole has raised a valid point about where we go from here though. The communications that we've monitored suggest that Starfleet is sending ships out to hunt for us." Carr said and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, conveniently including the *Pacific*, *Umbra* and *Ek'Duv*." he said, "My guess is that Doctor King's old friend has enough pull to override Admiral Dunn's order standing them down."

"So what are your orders captain?" Cole asked.

"For now we wait We'll use the cloaking device to try and keep out of sight while Doctor King and Max see

whether they can remove the Iconian implant from West or at the very least isolate it. Then we'll see whether we have anything we can present to Starfleet that will help us fight the Iconians." Edwards said.

"Planning to offer them a deal? Forgive us and we'll let you have what we know?" Carr said.

"Not really. Just thinking that it will make the situation look better if we can show that the crew of this ship achieved something while Admiral Dunn wanted us confined to Starbase Ten." Edwards told her.

"In the mean time all we have to show for our actions is a woman sitting a cell who can't tell us a damned thing it seems." Cole pointed out.

When Nikki saw that the door to the *Nightfall's* mortuary was open she walked across sickbay to investigate and peering inside she saw Nayal sitting beside the body of Hamilton.

"Nayal are you okay?" Nikki asked.

"Bradley's dead Nikki, so no I'm not okay." Nayal replied and she glanced at Nikki, letting her see that she had been crying.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since Doctor King told us that Bradley was dead. I can't bring myself to leave. I just keep thinking about what I could have had."

"I thought you were planning on going back to a Romulan world now that the civil war is over." Nikki said.

"That's what I told everyone because I needed to believe that I was going to do it but I don't think I could have left him." Nayal said and Nikki frowned.

"Bradley? But you always said your relationship was just a casual one." she said, remembering how often Nayal denied being in a serious relationship with Hamilton.

"I did but that never stopped Bradley asking for more. He wanted us to build a life together but I was too scared. I knew eventually the civil war would end but Romulans wouldn't accept me if I was married to a human and I'm hardly Starfleet material am I? Now that he's gone though I realise that I would have been willing to live without ever seeing another Romulan again if he was there with me. He and I first got together before Cole and T'Lan and look at them. If I'd just been able to show Bradley how I felt about him then maybe we could have been married by now. Maybe we'd have a baby and there would still be a part of him left with us."

"It's not your fault Nayal. It was West that killed him." Nikki said and Nayal nodded.

"I know. It wasn't even that Iconian that's inside her. It was West herself, she admits it." she said. Then she stood up to lean over Hamilton's body and kiss him on the forehead, "Sweet dreams my love." she said before closing the drawer that the body had been placed in to preserve it then she calmly walked past Nikki, wiping away the final tears from her face.

"Where are you going?" Nikki asked and Nayal paused.

"I'm still a Romulan Nikki." she replied, "I want two things. Firstly to know that Bradley did not die for nothing."

"And what's the other?" Nikki said.

"Revenge." Nayal told her.

"Surely you know that your friends can't remove me Jenna." the voice of The Controller said to West while she lay on the bed in her cell, "And that means you're going to spend the rest of your life like this. Caged and alone. Listen to me and maybe I can find you a way out of this."

West snorted.

"Who do you think you are? Harry Houdini?" she said before she heard the sound of the door to the brig opening and she sat up when she saw Nayal entering with a covered tray.

"It's lunch time." Nayal told the guards, "I've been told to feed the prisoner."

"Are you sure about going in there with her ma'am?" one of the MACOs asked.

"I'm a Romulan corporal. I'll be in no danger. Now lower the forcefield." Nayal answered and the soldier nodded before turning off the forcefield to allow Nayal to enter the cell with her tray.

"Nayal I'm so sorry about Bradley." West said, "Believe me I wouldn't."

"Shut up!" Nayal snapped as she approached West and set the tray down on the bed beside her, "You don't get to say his name."

"I don't suppose you're going to let me out of this thing so I can feed myself are you?" West asked, flexing her arms to demonstrate her inability to use them in any meaningful way and a smile spread across Nayal's face.

"Don't trust her." The Controller warned West.

"Oh Jenna I'm just here to serve you a Klingon dish. One they say is best served cold." Nayal said and as she suddenly pulled back the cover of the tray to reveal that there was nothing but a large kitchen knife beneath it she called out, "Computer activate program Nayal one."

"Confirmed." the computer responded and all of a sudden the forcefield across the front of the cell activated again to separate Nayal and West from the four armed guards outside.

Immediately three of the four the guards raised their weapons while the MACO still standing beside the forcefield control console reached out to try and shut it down again. However, the barrier remained in place and allowed Nayal to grab the helpless West by her throat and with just hand lift her from the bed and slam her against the nearest wall.

"Now talk to me!" Nayal shouted into West's ear as she held the kitchen knife to her throat, "Tell me how we stop the Iconians."

"I don't know." West croaked, struggling to breathe with Nayal's hand around her throat, "I swear it."

"Lhusra!" Nayal snapped, cursing in her own language, "You've already said that sometimes you can read the thoughts of that creature inside you. Isn't having a knife against your throat enough to convince it to tell me what I need to know?"

"Put the knife down and lower the forcefield." one of the security officers outside the cell ordered but Nayal ignored him.

"Security to bridge,." the other security officer said, tapping his combadge, "we have a hostage situation in the brig. Sublieutenant Nayal is threatening the prisoner with a knife and has blocked our access to the cell."

"I'm on my way. Do whatever you have to do to get inside." Edwards responded.

"Sublieutenant, let the prisoner go and open the cell." a MACO shouted, his rifle trained on Nayal even though he knew that it would not penetrate the forcefield.

"Not until she tells me what I want to know." Nayal replied without taking her eyes off West.

"I told you I don't know anything." West protested.

"And I don't believe you. Do I need to slit your throat the way you slit Bradley's to convince you how serious I am?" Nayal said as the door to the brig slid open and Heart rushed in with a fire team of MACOs.

"Get that cell open." he ordered and one of his men rushed to the console while he and the others joined the guards pointing their weapons at Nayal through the forcefield, "Let her go Nayal. This won't bring Bradley back." he said.

"Oh look who's here to save his girlfriend. Can you forget about Bradley so easily just for the sake of sex with this traitor?" Nayal hissed, still glaring angrily at West, "She talks or she dies."

"What's going on?" Edwards asked when he then entered the brig with Cole.

"Captain the sublieutenant claimed to be here to feed the prisoner. Then when she entered the cell she produced a knife, remotely activated the forcefield and took the prisoner hostage." one of the security guards told him.

"Then open the cell." Cole said.

"We can't commander. She's used a computer subroutine to lock us out." the security guard replied.

"Nayal open the cell." Edwards said but Nayal just grinned.

"I'm not one of your Starfleet minions captain. She killed Bradley and now she'll pay for that one way or another." she said and she pressed the knife blade a little closer to West's throat, just hard enough to break the skin and draw blood, "If I press hard enough I'm fairly sure I could hack that pretty head right off her shoulders."

"Nayal listen to me," Edwards said, "King and Max think they can remove the Iconian. There's no need to hurt West."

"Oh but there is captain. She admitted that it was her that killed Bradley, not the Iconian she's been hiding from us all these years." Nayal said, "She always disliked him. She mocked him and belittled him constantly. Now she's gone even further and killed him and if I don't get answers to my questions then I'm going to return the favour."

"Captain please help me." West said.

"Shut up! If you aren't going to tell me what I want to know then don't bother speaking at all. They can't get in here fast enough to save your worthless life anyway." Nayal told her.

"Edwards to engineering. Max can you do anything about the brig forcefield? We need them taking down immediately." Edwards said, tapping his combadge.

"Not right away captain. Lieutenant Nayal has created a series of interlinked subroutines. As soon as one is disabled the others recompile the code to replace it." Max's voice answered.

"What about just pulling the power?" Heart said, looking at the MACO crouched beside the control console but the soldier shook his head.

"Sorry captain, the power doesn't run through this. This is just a control circuit." he said.

"We need to get through that forcefield." Cole commented.

"Tell me what I want to know and I'll let them in." Nayal said softly, staring into West's eyes and she gently slid the knife across her throat so that she could feel the metal without it cutting into her.

As West felt the coldness of the blade a panicked thought suddenly popped into her mind and she cried out.

"Iconia!" West exclaimed loudly.

"Yes that's where the Iconians came from originally." Nayal said, "I already knew that but they're long gone from there."

"No they aren't." West said, "Their home was a space station in orbit around the planet when they were attacked. They just transported it into a subspace realm using their gateway technology but they're still in the same physical location. Now only the old fixed gateways on the surface can transport you anywhere other than their subspace realm. They have a different targeting system to the ones the mobile versions require." "So if we open a gateway at Iconia we can reach the Iconian base of operations?" Edwards said and West nodded as much as Naya's grip on her would allow.

"And do it quickly." she added.

"Why?" Cole asked.

"The Iconian attacks on the border regions are a diversion. They have a new military leader who is planning to attack the core worlds of the Federation and the other governments."

"Earth?" Heart said and West struggled to nod again.

"I think we've heard enough." Edwards said.

"Me too." Heart agreed and as he lowered his rifle he walked over to the soldier crouched beside the forcefield control panel and simply reached out and turned it off.

"I told you it would work." Naya said, releasing her grip on West's throat and pulling the knife away from her.

"It was a trick?" West said, "You could have walked into the cell at any time?"

"My program just turned on the forcefield. You don't really think that I could keep Max out of the system do you?" Naya replied, turning her back on West and walking out of the cell, coming a stop in front of Edwards and handing him the knife, "I don't need this any more captain." she added.

"You told us that stress caused you to sense what the Iconian was thinking. We just needed a way to trigger that." Edwards told West.

"But what if I hadn't been able to tell you anything?" West asked.

"Then I would have avenged Bradley's death." Naya answered as the forcefield across the cell was turned back on and everyone but the four guards supposed to be on duty turned to leave.

"Did Naya's little scheme work then captain?" Carr asked when Edwards and Cole returned to the bridge, moving back to her own seat so that Edwards could sit down.

"Like a charm." Edwards answered, "Helm lay in a course for Iconia."

"Captain might I remind you that Iconia lies within the Romulan Neutral Zone?" T'Lan said, "Even with our cloaking device we cannot cross the border without being detected by the tachyon detection grid."

"That's why I want you to find a way to shut down a section without it being noticed by Starfleet that they're blind when we cross the border." Edwards told her.

"Of course captain. That should be straight forward enough." T'Lan said.

"Are you going to tell us why we're heading for Iconia?" Carr said.

"Because that's where the Iconians are." Cole responded before Edwards could answer.

"The planet was deserted when we last went there." Carr pointed out.

"You mean when we were tricked into going there?" Edwards said, "Remember we only visited the planet itself. According to whatever it is that's living inside West the Iconians retreated into a subspace realm of some sort when their planet came under attack and they've been existing there ever since."

"She also said that all these attacks are just the Iconians' way of drawing our strength away from Earth and the other Federation core systems before they attack them directly." Cole added.

"A potentially devastating strategy." T'Lan said, "It will take several days for our forces to return to the core systems while the Iconians can move from one target to another instantly."

"Which is why we need to do something about it now." Edwards said, "Helm are we ready yet?"

"Yes captain. Course laid in." the helmsman replied and Edwards nodded.

"Good. In that case engage at warp eight. Bring us out of warp just before we get to the border though so that T'Lan can get us past without being seen. After that take us to warp nine directly to Iconia." he ordered.

"What about when we get there captain?" Cole asked.

"We'll move in cloaked and try to locate the Iconian realm in subspace. I'll make a decision on what we do after that when I have more information but I want us at red alert when we enter the system just in case the Iconians are waiting for us." Edwards said.



T'Lan was easily able to deactivate a small section of the tachyon detection grid that Starfleet had deployed to monitor the border with the Romulan Neutral Zone for cloaked vessels. Given the limitations imposed on Starfleet by the Treaty of Algeron it had not been anticipated that any such intrusions would be coming from the Federation side of the border and it was then just a trip of a few hours at warp nine to the legendary Iconia system, the original home to that ancient civilisation.

Just as Edwards had ordered the *USS Nightfall* was at red alert as the heavy cruiser entered the Iconia system, all of its crew at their stations ready to enter battle if that was what was called for. Unusually for such an alert status though the *Nightfall's* shields were not raised, nor were its weapons powered. The operation of the cloaking device, now being carefully monitored by Nyal at the operations station once again precluded either of these systems from being activated. Stealth was the ship's only defence at this point, a fact that proved its worth when the *Nightfall's* crew found that they were not alone.

"Is that what I think it is?" Carr said as the *Nightfall's* bridge crew looked at the image of the massive cylindrical vessel on the main viewscreen.

"The vessel is an Iconian warship." T'Lan responded, "Presumably stationed here to act as a sentry vessel.

"Makes sense." Cole said, "With the Iconians attacking openly it may only be a matter of time before someone orders a force sent here to see if there's anything worth bombing in revenge.

"Are there any signs that it's seen us?" Carr said.

"If it had do you think we'd still be here?" Nyal commented, "No, the cloak is keeping us invisible to their sensors."

"How close can we get?" Edwards asked.

"Probably to within a few hundred metres before they start to notice our exhaust trail." Nyal said.

"Thinking of getting a closer look?" Carr said and Edwards nodded.

"If we would take some close up passive scans without being seen then maybe we could find a weakness that we can exploit." he said.

"A logical suggestion captain." T'Lan said

"I'm glad you approve lieutenant commander. Helm take us in closer. One quarter impulse power. Then thrusters only from five kilometres." Edwards ordered and at the same time Carr activated the ship's intercom to address the crew.

"All hands we have entered the Iconian system and found one of their warships here. We are moving in closer to conduct surveillance. Silent running is essential. Activate no equipment that may radiate energy externally without authorisation from the bridge or engineering." she announced.

The cloaked *Nightfall* moved slowly towards the Iconian warship that orbited the planet Iconia itself. The Iconian warship had no obvious external features that would give any visual clues about the internal structure and layout. However, as the *Nightfall* drew closer the energy emissions from inside the three kilometre long cylinder began to provide a far more interesting picture.

"Fascinating." T'Lan said as she closely watched the feed from the *Nightfall's* passive sensors.

"Are you in a mood to share commander?" Edwards asked.

"Of course captain. The feed is available on your headset now." T'Lan replied and the other bridge crew all brought up the sensor readings on their headsets. This showed the concentration of energy inside the ship where its main power plant was located and the spider web pattern of the distribution network that carried this power to all of the warship's other systems.

"There are a lot of high energy feeds to the hull." Cole commented, "For that lightning weapon of theirs perhaps?"

"That seems logical." T'Lan said.

"What's that haze near the rear of the ship?" Carr asked, noticing a blurred area where it looked as if the feed image was out of focus.

"I believe that is where the ship's gateway generator is located. If you recall commander the mineral that is used to create gateways has refractive properties that disrupts active scans. In this case we are seeing the refraction of the energy surrounding the gateway core." T'Lan explained.

"I don't see anything that looks like an obvious target that would allow us to destroy the ship with just one or two shots." Edwards said.

"No captain. However, I would suggest that if the gateway system was struck by a strong enough phaser blast then it would trigger a secondary energy release that would cause catastrophic damage, crippling if not destroying the ship. Similar to destroying the warp core of one of our own vessels." T'Lan said.

"How many times are we likely to have to hit the ship to get to the gateway system though?" Carr asked.

"If the materials used to construct the vessel have similar energy absorption rates compared to their tensile

strength then between three and five quantum torpedo strikes should expose the gateway system sufficiently for it to be targeted.” T'Lan said.

“What about their own shields though? How do we get through them first?” Cole asked.

“Not to mention that their lightning weapon has proven rather effective at intercepting torpedoes.” Edwards added.

“Yes captain, in order for us to inflict the required damage we will need to divert the Iconians' attention away from us.” T'Lan said.

“Easy. Use your fighters.” Nayal said, “Then de-cloak right behind the ship and hit it with everything you have.”

“There is a greater than ninety percent chance that such a strategy would result in the destruction of our entire squadron without the Iconians being diverted away from us long enough to permit us to penetrate their shields captain.” T'Lan said.

“Then we need more ships.” Edwards said.

“We're fugitives captain. I don't think that anyone's going to be coming rushing to our aide.” Cole said.

“Maybe, maybe not. We certainly can't risk contacting any Starfleet vessels directly. I wouldn't be surprised if the subroutines hidden in their operating systems alerted Schmidt and his cronies to our plan, but there is another option. I want a channel to the *Glorious Slayer*, I need to talk to Captain Kurvok.”

After Edwards, Cole, Nayal and Heart exited the brig the remaining guards ignored West, leaving her to slump to the floor of her cell until the door opened again to reveal Doctor King and Max.

“Open the cell.” King told the guards and West struggled into a sitting position, watching as the two officers entered the cell and advanced on her.

“I have good news for you.” King said as Max reached down to lift West to her feet, “Lieutenant Maximillian and I think we have found a way to remove the Iconian implant from your head.”

“How?” West asked but before either King or Max spoke the Borg engineer extended his nano probe injection tubes from his fist and they connected to West's neck.

“We have mapped the way in which the Iconian technology is interfaced with your brain.” Max explained, “This has allowed me to encode the nanites I am injecting into your body to seek out all of the connection points and sever them simultaneously.”

“That last point is important.” King added, “The implant is linked to a number of sensitive parts of your brain that we think the Iconian could conceivably cause damage to if the overall interface is disrupted.”

“So what stops The Controller from doing that right now?” West asked.

“We don't think that the damage would be caused deliberately. It would be the result of signals meant to be matched with signals from other connections.” King told her, “Cutting every connection at once means that there won't be any stray messages that could trigger your body to try and do things it's not designed for.” West snorted.

“Unless you're planning on untying me doc I don't think my body is going to be doing much of anything whether the Iconian tells it to or not.” she replied.

“Sorry, not yet.” King said, “I'm sorry to say that this procedure is not without risk. There could be-”

“Could be what?” West asked.

“Damage.” Max answered and West sighed.

“More?” she said.

“Most likely bleeding if the implants go deeper than we think. But that could cause neurological issues. Of course we'll need your consent before the nanites are activated.” King told her.

“They're lying to you Jenna.” The Controller's voice said inside West's head, “They're going to keep you in a cage for the rest of your life. Tell them that you refuse and I will find a way to free you.”

“Where do I sign?” West said, flexing her arms bound arms and smirking at her defiance of the Iconian intelligence inside her.

“Do it lieutenant.” King said looking at Max.

“Nanites engaged doctor.” Max responded.

“So now what?” West asked.

“Now you wait. You'll know when the implant has been destroyed.” King told her and she frowned.

“How?” she said.

“Because you'll vomit up the bits, probably along with some blood.” King replied. Then he looked at Max and added, “Okay let's get out of here.”

“Wait, are you just leaving me?” West said as King and Max headed back out of the cell.

“The nanites will keep me up to date with their progress. We will return when they are done.” Max responded without turning around.

“Keep an eye on her anyway.” King told the guards, “This procedure is experimental after all so we can't predict exactly what will happen.”

"Yes doctor." the guard replied.

"I have have Captain Kurvok for you now captain." Nayal announced.

"Captain Edwards, I take you know that Starfleet is hunting you?" the Klingon captain said when his face appeared on the main view screen.

"Yes, we're aware of that captain." Edwards replied.

"Then it's a good job I'm not in Starfleet. Now what can I do for you my friend?" Kurvok said.

"We've managed to locate the headquarters of the Iconians but we can't assault it alone." Edwards told him.

"Ah, you require the *Glorious Slayer*." Kurvok said, grinning.

"Probably more than just one bird of prey I'm afraid." Edwards said, "We're in the Iconia system, the place that the Iconian headquarters is accessible from and there's one of their warships here. We've been able to run some close up passive scans that might show a vulnerability but it's still more than just one ship can hope to handle. We're going to need as many other ships as possible to back us up. First to take out the Iconian warship and then to attack their headquarters. We need to hurry as well. Our information is that the Iconians attacks we're seeing at the moment are just a distraction to lure our forces away from our core worlds before they attack them."

"The Iconians have no honour!" Kurvok snapped, "When I inform the Klingon High Command of this I guarantee they will send as many ships as they can spare."

"Thank you captain the real reason I contacted you was to ask you to contact other Starfleet vessels. Specifically the other ships of the *Nightfall* program. I trust their captains to do the right thing." Edwards said and Kurvok frowned.

"But why not contact them directly if you trust them so much my friend?" Kurvok asked.

"There is a problem with that. I'm afraid that the reason we're being hunted is because there is a secret section within Starfleet intelligence that operates outside our usual regulations. They abducted one of my crew and I took the *Nightfall* to rescue them. The reason this section is able to operate is because of a set of computer subroutines hidden inside the operating system of every Federation vessel." Edwards explained.

"Ah and you think that if you try to contact any of your other ships then these will inform these petaQ of what you are doing." Kurvok said and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, we don't know exactly how far their ability to monitor our communications goes but logging which ships are talking to one another ought to be within the realms of possibility." he said.

"But listening to the content of every call would be a much greater task." Kurvok replied, "Very well my friend. As well as alerting my own people I will also contact your friends in Starfleet."

"Thank you. Have them meet us in the Nelvana system in two days. It's only a few light years away so we should be able to use it a staging area." Edward told him.

"Agreed. I will see you there with every ship I can gather. This is the *Glorious Slayer* out." Kurvok replied before the view screen switched back to a view of the planet Iconia.

"Should I lay in a course for the Nelvana system now captain?" the *Nightfall*'s helmsman asked but Edwards shook his head.

"No there's still more we can do here. If we destroy that warship the Iconians will be able to bring in another in moments. We need to be able to attack their stronghold before they get that chance and for that I want to know what we'll be facing. Commander Carr you have the conn. T'Lan with me, we're going to go and talk to Max."

Edwards and T'Lan headed straight to engineering where they found Max in the compartment that housed the cloaking device keeping them hidden from the Iconian sensors.

"Captain how may I help you?" the Borg engineer asked.

"Max we need you and T'Lan to equip a probe to create a gateway. How long will that take?" Edwards said.

"Applying the refractive mineral to the probe will be relatively straight forwards captain. However, if you recall when we created a gateway system for the *Nightfall* we needed to match our shield output to a matching frequency in order to generate a stable energy field around the ship." Max said.

"A class five probe could be modified with a deflector shield generator replacing its warp drive." T'Lan suggested.

"There is also the question of how you would like the probe to be guided captain." Max said.

"Well if West is right then guidance shouldn't be much of an issue. Creating a gateway in this system should drag the probe into the Iconians' subspace realm." Edwards said.

"I would also recommend upgrading the probes subspace transmitter captain. We cannot be certain how deep into subspace the Iconians are located." Max pointed out.

"Okay so how long for all of that and how much of the mineral we have aboard will it take?" Edwards asked.

"The calculations I have performed since you first asked the question indicate that this will require six hundred and ninety grams of the mineral captain." Max answered before he looked at T'Lan and added, "With T'Lan's help I estimate that the necessary modifications can be achieved in a little under five hours."

"I estimate roughly four point eight six." T'Lan added.

"Estimate?" Edwards commented, smiling.

"I am sorry captain. It is impossible to give you a precise time." T'Lan said, failing to understand Edwards' joke.

"Just let me know when you're finished. I'll be on the bridge." Edwards replied before he turned to leave.

"Captain, Nyal has an idea for how we might be able to get some extra ships." Carr said as soon as Edwards exited the turbolift and stepped back into the bridge.

"Where?" he asked.

"Where else? The Romulans." Carr said.

"There are probably cloaked patrol ships along the Romulan side of the Neutral Zone captain." Nyal added.

"Patrol ships that may well notice when any of our ships that Kurvok can convince to join us cross into the zone." Cole added.

"The trick is going to be communicating with them. The more signals we emit the more likely it becomes that that Iconian warship out there will realise that we're here. We got away with talking to Kurvok because we could use a tight beam but broadcasting across the entire Romulan border is another thing altogether." Nyal said.

"Perhaps we should have asked Kurvok to communicate with the Romulans as well." Cole suggested.

"My people would never listen to a Klingon. We'll have enough trouble convincing them to listen to you." Nyal replied.

"What about using a probe as a relay?" Edwards asked, "When we launch the probe to investigate the Iconian subspace realm we can launch a second one at the same time. We'll use Iconia itself to shield the launch from detection. We'll preload a message onto the probe and have it broadcast towards the Romulan side of the zone."

"Won't the Iconians still spot that and destroy the probe captain?" Cole pointed out.

"As long as it gets the message out first then what does it matter? I'll bet that they'll realise we're around anyway when the other probe suddenly appears in their home." Edwards replied.

"Captain we're receiving a transmission from the commander of a Klingon vessel, the *Glorious Slayer*."

S'Kora told Cameron over the intercom while the *Pacific's* captain was in his quarters.

"Has he said what he wants?" Cameron asked.

"He claims to have a message from Captain Edwards aboard the *Nightfall* sir." S'Kora told him and Cameron sat up straight.

"Put him through." he said.

"Yes captain." S'Kora replied and then the face of Kurvok appeared on the monitor in front of Cameron.

"Captain Cameron." the Klingon said, "I am Kurvok."

"Hello captain, I understand you have a message for me from Captain Edwards." Cameron replied.

"Yes I do. Our mutual friend is gathering a fleet in the Nelvana system to attack the home base of the Iconians." Kurvok told him.

"Why isn't he telling me this himself?" Cameron asked.

"Edwards told me that there are force at work within your own Federation that could be monitoring your communications using subroutines they have hidden inside your computers." Kurvok answered and Cameron nodded.

"Yes, my engineer has been unable to dig those out." Cameron said.

"Edwards wants the fleet we are gathering to meet in the Nelvana system in two days. Will you join us?"

Kurvok continued and Cameron hesitated before replying.

"The Pacific will be there, but what do you by 'we'?" he said.

"While Edwards gave me a list of Starfleet vessels to contact I also told him that I would gather what Klingon ships I could. He also wants you to spread word of his fleet but there is a more important message you must pass on to your superiors." Kurvok explain and Cameron frowned.

"What is it?" he said.

"The attacks the Iconians are carrying out are a distraction intended to draw our forces away from our home worlds before they come under attack. Tell Starfleet to make sure that Earth and the other core worlds of the Federation are secure." Kurvok said.

"Okay I'll do it. Who else in Starfleet have you spoken to about this?"

"You are the first. Edwards told me to ask all of the captains of the ships in the *Nightfall* program."

"Okay I'll leave you to contact the *Umbra* and *Ek'Duv* while I get in touch with some of the other ships in the area. We may have been ordered to hunt the *Nightfall* but there's not much enthusiasm in the fleet to do that since Edwards revealed how someone in the Federation has been spying on us all this time." Cameron said and Kurvok grinned, bearing his teeth.

"Excellent. Captain Edwards was right to trust you. Qapla!" Kurvok said before he ended his transmission, at which point Cameron tapped his combadge.

"Commander S'Kora I want a list of every Starfleet vessel within ten light years of the Nelvana system and get me a line to Starbase Ten, I have an urgent message to pass along." he said.

"Probes loaded and ready to launch captain." T'Lan reported from the *Nightfall's* science station and Edwards looked at Carr.

"Here goes." he said, "Helm thrusters only, take us below the horizon and out of that Iconian ship's line of sight."

"Aye captain, firing thrusters now," the helmsman replied and slowly the *Nightfall* began to change its orbit around Iconia to put the planet in between it and the massive Iconian warship.

"Captain we are now out of the Iconians' line of sight. If their sensors have the same limitations as ours then we will be invisible to them even without our cloaking device." T'Lan reported.

"Do we need to drop the cloak to launch the probes Nayal?" Carr asked.

"No commander. The only risk of detection comes if the Iconians are able to see them when they leave the area covered by our cloaking field." Nayal answered.

"Mister Cole launch the probes." Edwards ordered and Cole nodded.

"Launching now captain." he said as he engaged the probes loaded into two of the *Nightfall's* torpedo launchers, sending them both shooting out into space.

"Probes launched successfully captain. Receiving telemetry from both." T'Lan said.

"How long until the gateway activates?" Carr said.

"Any moment now commander." T'Lan responded before adding, "Gateway detected, the probe is entering subspace."

At the same time as the class five probe modified with the Iconian gateway technology started to form a gateway the second probe, a faster and longer ranged class eight probe engaged its warp drive to accelerate upwards out of the system's orbital plane. Initially the Iconian warship turned in the direction of the class eight probe as soon as it became visible, however moments later the class five probe suddenly reappeared having exited the Iconian subspace realm as rapidly as it entered and the Iconian vessel unleashed a blast of lightning across space to destroy it. After this it fired a single torpedo that accelerated to warp speed itself, heading out of the system after the class eight probe. The then the warship began to move, heading around the planet to hunt for the vessel that had launched the two probes.

"T'Lan what happened?" Edwards said, "Why did the probe fail to reach the Iconian subspace realm?"

"I do not believe it did captain. I have the full telemetry here. This confirms that the probe was drawn into the Iconian realm and then exited it." T'Lan replied.

"But why T'Lan?" Carr asked.

"Captain we may have a bigger problem." Nayal said as the Iconian warship came around the planet.

"I'm picking up sensor sweeps, they're looking for us captain." Cole said and Edwards nodded.

"Okay let's get out of here. Helm head for the Nelvana system at maximum warp. Engage." he ordered and before the Iconian ship could detect the cloaked cruiser it sped out of the system.

"So what happened to our probe?" Carr said, frowning, "Why didn't it stay in the Iconian realm?"

"T'Lan?" Edwards added, looking towards the Vulcan science officer.

"Captain the probe telemetry does offer an explanation." T'Lan replied.

"So how about letting the rest of us in on that then T'Lan?" Carr said when T'Lan stopped speaking at that point.

"Yes commander. The probe indicates that the subspace realm inhabited by the Iconians is a finite sphere just over seven thousand kilometres across. The probe was drawn into this as expected and then passed across at an oblique angle until it struck the interior of the sphere at another location. The probe then passed through this and was returned to our universe." T'Lan explained.

"So any object that tries to get outside the sphere will just exit subspace?" Cole asked.

"I believe that is correct, yes." T'Lan answered.

"What about the Iconians themselves?" Edwards said.

"Please see the main viewscreen captain." T'Lan told him before she brought up an image taken from the probe telemetry.

"I don't like the look of that." Carr said, looking at the image of the ominous looking space station. The station had a flat, irregular shaped core while multiple spires extended seemingly at random from both the upper and lower surfaces.

"I don't see any berths for ships." Cole commented, "At least not ones big enough for their warships."

"No, the probe has detected what could be multiple entry points but nothing more than two hundred metres in diameter. Less than half what is required for any of the vessels we have witnessed the Iconians using." T'Lan agreed, "The probe telemetry does indicate the presence of an internal space large enough to house a

maximum of seventy-two of the Iconian warship class we have encountered so far. Logic suggests that the Iconians use their gateways to travel directly between this hangar and the galaxy when entering or exiting their realm.”

“Any sign of defences?” Edwards said.

“No captain. However, it would be illogical to assume that the station we see here is unarmed. It is more likely that given that the Iconians have been isolated in this region of subspace for more than a quarter of a million years they have simply not kept their defences in a state of active readiness. Our probe was not expected and it exited the realm before it could be fired upon. However, now that they are aware that we can access their realm it is logical to assume that from now on they will be better prepared.” T'Lan said.

“So in other words we've shot ourselves in the foot.” Cole said and T'Lan looked at him.

“A self inflicted phaser wound even to an extremity is ill advised.” she said and Cole smiled.

“I meant that if we hadn't sent in that probe then maybe we could have taken the Iconians by surprise and destroyed that space station before they could bring their defences on line. Now they'll be ready for us.” he said.

“I see.” T'Lan responded, “In that case you may have a valid point. However, to have taken the *Nightfall* in without any advance surveillance would have itself been illogical.”

“T'Lan I want you to study every detail of the probe telemetry. Find me any weaknesses in that structure that we can exploit. Be prepared to brief the senior staff as well as captains from any of the other ships that join us.” Edwards ordered and T'Lan nodded.

“Yes captain.” she replied.

“I sent you back to our realm for a reason. What do you want?” the Lord Martial asked when The Girl appeared on his ship.

“Starfleet has found us.” she said, “They managed to get a probe into our subspace pocket. It passed right through and returned to Iconia before it was destroyed by our sentry ship but there was also a second probe that seemed to be carrying some sort of signal.”

“How was this allowed to happen? I stationed one of our ships above our ancient home to prevent exactly this from happening.” the Lord Martial hissed.

“I don't know. The sentry ship didn't detect any alien vessels in the system which would suggest a cloaked vessel but the two probes were definitely of Federation origin and we know that Starfleet is banned from using cloaking devices. I've ordered our own defences brought on line as a precaution but I thought you ought to know just in case you-”

“Just in case I what?” the Lord Martial interrupted, “Wanted to pull our forces back when we are on the verge of victory? No we will press on with our attacks. After all we have seen no indication that any of our enemies are capable of sending a fleet to attack our home. I will destroy their worlds one by one and when they are on their knees then what once was ours-”

“Shall be ours again.” The Girl said.

"Let me see it." the Romulan admiral said as she sat down in the bridge of her flagship.

"We received this broadcast just now admiral. It appears to have been pre-recorded before sending." one of her command staff responded as he brought up the message on the main viewscreen and an image of Edwards appeared with Nayaal sat beside him.

"Greetings." Edwards said, "My name is Captain David Edwards of the Federation starship *USS Nightfall* and beside me is Sublieutenant Nayaal, formerly of the Romulan Star Navy. We bring you a warning of grave danger to both our peoples. The attacks by Iconian forces on our frontier colonies and outposts are just a distraction intended to divert our forces from our core worlds. The Iconians intend to attack these when they are at their most vulnerable. I implore the Romulan Star Navy to ensure that the new Romulan capital remains fully protected. In the mean time I can confirm that the crew of my vessel have been able to determine not only the location of the Iconian central command from which these attacks are being sent but also created a means to reach it. I am gathering all the ships I can, whether Federation, Klingon, Romulan or anyone else who receives this message in the Nelvana system."

"This message is also a request for aide." Nayaal added, "This may be our only chance to stop the Iconians and the more ships we have the better our chance will be. I ask that the captains of any ships close enough to reach the Nelvana system in two days joins us but above all else warn the Senate, they must prepare for the Iconians to attack our new home world at any day now."

"That's where the message ends admiral." the bridge officer said, "It repeats several time before suddenly ceasing part way through. My guess is that the source was destroyed."

"Then this Captain Edwards is already dead?" the admiral asked him.

"No admiral. The origin coding of the message indicates that it was sent from a Starfleet probe. Perhaps to enable this *USS Nightfall* to escape detection."

"It's a trick." another of the Romulan officers said suddenly, "If our capital is in such danger then why drag our ships into the Neutral Zone with the Federation?"

"I think not." the admiral said, leaning back in her chair, "I've faced some of Starfleet's finest officers as well as fighting alongside a number of them in the war with the Dominion and they have no interest in the destruction of our people. In fact they will take great risks just for the idea that we could live alongside one another in peace and harmony. Communications officer, forward that message to the Praetor's office then order the other ships in the squadron to set a course for the Nelvana system at maximum warp. Tactical be ready with the cloaking device. If this does turn out to be some sort of trick, Starfleet or otherwise then I want us to have the upper hand."

"Entering the Nelvana system now captain." the *Nightfall's* helmsman reported.

"Drop to half impulse." Carr ordered.

"Find the nearest planetary body and put us in standard orbit." Edwards added.

"There's a frozen gas planet at one four six mark twenty-two." Nayaal announced.

"That sounds ideal." Carr said.

"Laying in a course now. ETA to orbit four point five hours." the helmsman said.

"Are there any signs of other ships in the system?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not picking up any transponders or warp fields." Nayaal said.

"Confirmed captain." T'Lan added, "Unless there are any cloaked vessels present we are alone."

"What about our cloaking device? Should we activate it just in case?" Nayaal asked.

"No." Edwards replied, shaking his head, "I want the modifications made to allow us to form a gateway immediately. Other than that take us to yellow alert. Hail any ship that comes within half a light year to find out what their intentions are."

"Yes captain I'll-" Nayaal began before there was a alarm from her console, "I'm reading vessels de-cloaking ahead of us. Four of them." Nayaal she announced.

"On screen." Edwards ordered and the image of a squadron of Romulan warbirds appeared on the main viewscreen.

"Reading two Valdore-class warbirds and two destroyer escorts." Nayaal said before she looked up from the operations console, "Their commander is hailing us." she said.

"Well put them through." Edwards said and the image on the main viewscreen changed again to show the Romulan admiral aboard her flagship.

"Greetings Captain Edwards." she said, smiling over the communication link.

"Hello admiral, you have me at something of a disadvantage. I'm afraid I don't know your name." Edwards replied.

"My name is irrelevant captain. What is important is why your ship has penetrated the Neutral Zone." the Romulan admiral said.

"Admiral I can assure you that we mean no-" Carr began.

"I know why you are here." the admiral interrupted, "We received your broadcast. I'm sure you'll be glad to know that we have relayed your warning to the senate and come to assist you in your mission. Although I have to admit that I am disappointed to see that there is no-one else here. I can understand that Klingons may promise more than they would ever deliver but what about your own mighty Starfleet? Where are their starships?"

"Hopefully on their way." Edwards replied, "But in the meantime perhaps you'd like to beam aboard my ship and we can provide you with the information we have about the Iconian home."

"Very well. I'll see you soon captain." the Romulan admiral said before the communication link was ended.

"Commander Carr could you go and meet the admiral? Bring her directly to my ready room." Edwards said, getting up from his seat, "Mister Cole the conn is yours." he added.

When the Romulan admiral was shown into Edwards' ready room he was stood in front of his desk pouring out two glasses of Romulan ale.

"Care for a drink admiral?" he asked.

"To be honest captain I've never been very impressed by your people's efforts when it comes to replicating kali-fal." the admiral replied and Edwards smiled, passing her a glass as she sat down.

"Try it." he said and as he walked around his desk to his own seat she took a sip from the glass then frowned and looked at the liquid.

"How-" she began.

"I have a supply. Genuine, not replicated." Edwards interrupted, "A gift from the same officer that supplied us with one of your cloaking devices."

"You have a cloaking device captain?" the admiral asked and Edwards nodded.

"Yes, it's meant for use aboard one of your D'deridex-class warbirds so it's more than adequate to render an Akira-class cruiser like the *Nightfall* undetectable. Although the modifications I'm more interested in discussing with you are those necessary to enable your ships to form Iconian gateways." Edwards said and the Romulan admiral stared at him across his desk.

"You are able to do that?" she said.

"Yes, we've done it before. In fact it's key to the success of our mission. The Iconians are located inside a pocket within subspace that is ordinarily inaccessible." Edwards explained.

"But by using their own transit technology against them you hope to be able to overcome that." the Romulan admiral said and Edwards smiled.

"Yes, in fact once again we've already-" he began before he was interrupted by the intercom.

"Captain we've got company. Eleven ships closing at warp nine point four. Five Klingon and six Starfleet." Carr told him.

"The rest of your fleet captain?" the Romulan admiral asked.

"I hope so admiral. The alternative is that they've come here to arrest me." Edwards answered.

The Romulan admiral threw back the rest of her drink before she and Edwards left his ready room to see the approaching small fleet of Federation and Klingon ships shown on the main viewscreen. The Klingon force consisted of a single Vor'cha-class battlecruiser accompanied by four smaller B'rel-class birds or prey. Alongside them were the half dozen Starfleet vessels that had been gathered to join the attack on the Iconians. Three of these were the other vessels of the *Nightfall* project, the two other Akira-class cruisers as well as the Nebula-class *Pacific*. Joining these ships were a pair of Excelsior-class cruisers and an Intrepid-class exploration ship.

"Sixteen ships Captain Edwards, will that be enough for you?" the Romulan admiral asked.

"We will also have three squadrons of attack fighters admiral." T'Lan pointed out.

"It'll have to be enough." Edwards said before adding, "Commander Carr please have the captains of all those vessels shown to the briefing room and have Max meet us there. T'Lan you're with me, I'll need you to present your findings and explain what we're up against."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

West still sat alone in her cell with the voice of The Controller inside her.

"Jenna this isn't going to work. Call that cyborg bastard back here now to get these nanites out of you before they damage your brain." the Iconian told her but West just grinned.

"Worried?" she said, ignoring the looks on the face of the guards outside her cell as they listened to her apparently talking to herself.

"You're going to die Jenna and when you die, I die with you." The Controller said.

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

"Look you fool right now there are millions of microscopic machines poking about in your brain and – and –



and-”

“Something wrong there?” West said.

“It’s starting Jenna. You don’t – don’t have long before – Jenna!” The Controller snapped and then the Iconian stopped talking.

“Hello?” Jenna said, “Still there? I said are you still-” but before she could finish repeating the question she suddenly felt her nose filling with fluid and moments later she felt it flowing from her nostrils. Looking down she saw blood dripping onto the floor. Then she tasted blood in her mouth and coughed up another mouthful of dark red fluid, spraying it down her front and also over the floor.

The Klingon and Romulan starship captains eyed one another cautiously across the table in the *Nightfall’s* briefing room while the Starfleet captains occupied the seats in between them. Edwards already knew Captain Cameron, Sannel and Hurst but this was the first time he was meeting Captain Lee and the Bajoran Pem of the Excelsior-class cruisers *Dawnstone* and *Mount Seleya* or Captain Sackoff of the Intrepid-class *Matilda* while among the non-Starfleet captains he knew only Kurvok.

“I’d like to start by thanking you all for trusting me enough to come here.” Edwards told the gathered captains, “Now you all already know why we’re here so I’m going to hand this over to my chief science officer Lieutenant Commander T’Lan who will brief you all on exactly what it is we’re facing. Over to you T’Lan.”

“Thank you captain.” T’Lan replied and she got to her feet and walked over to the wall mounted display screen.

“I take it that this will not be a long mission Captain Edwards. I would hate for you to have to leave early so that your science officer can give birth.” one of the Klingons said, bearing his teeth in amusement at T’Lan’s advanced pregnancy. T’Lan ignored this though and brought up an image of an Iconian warship on the screen beside her.

“This is the sentry vessel we observed in the Iconia system.” she said, “This represents the first time we have been able to take detailed scans of such a vessel and the results have been quite informative.” then the image changed to overlay the results of the *Nightfall’s* passive scans of the Iconian ship, showing the power distribution throughout the vessel’s structure, “As you can see there is a region towards the rear of the ship that is made up of a highly refractive material that defies precise scans. This material is the key requirement to the formation of Iconian gateways. It produces a scattering effect when subject to any energy input and this offers a means to destroy the ship. Our attack will require our force to be split into two groups. The first will approach the Iconian vessel cloaked and take up a position to its stern before the second moves in head on and opens fire from extreme range. This will prompt the Iconian ship to focus its defences forwards while it acts to protect itself and at that point the first wave of ships will deactivate their cloaking devices and launch a concentrated barrage from behind the Iconian vessel. Once the target’s shields and hull are penetrated the core of the Iconian gateway system will be exposed and spread the energy of our weapons throughout the interior of the ship. If our earlier experience with the refractive material this is constructed of remains true in this case then the energy should be sufficient to destroy the target.”

“And if it isn’t?” Sackoff asked.

“That would depend on how much damage we are able to inflict on the Iconian ship.” T’Lan answered, “There is still a chance that we would inflict sufficient damage to prevent it from returning fire with sufficient strength before our combined force can destroy it.”

“Although this offensive could end up being over before we even get to the final target.” Edwards added.

“What prevents that Iconian ship from using one of their gateways to counter attack our fleet instead of reducing its defences?” Hurst said.

“Our information suggests that the Iconians cannot form a gateway within the Iconia system itself without being drawn into the subspace pocket they inhabit. Their warship will have to either make two jumps in rapid succession, firstly into subspace and then to the location of your fleet or first move out of the system under impulse power before forming a gateway.” T’Lan explained.

“Ah yes, the subspace realm that the Iconians have been hiding in for millennia.” the Romulan admiral said, “You told us that the Iconians are hiding somewhere in subspace. How exactly are we supposed to reach them?”

“Max.” Edwards said, looking to the corner of the briefing room where his engineer had been waiting and as Max stepped forwards Edwards introduced him, “For those of you unfamiliar with him, Max is my chief engineer and between him and T’Lan, they have a way to get us into the Iconian subspace realm.”

The presence of Max in the room had not gone unnoticed by the other starship captains in the room and they focused on him intently as he stepped towards the monitor T’Lan had used to present her information. Rather than use the control panel beside the monitor that T’Lan had made use of though he accessed the screen remotely and used it to show a diagram of the *Nightfall* that had several components highlighted.

“Those are not standard components to our vessels.” the Vulcan Captain Sannel of the *Ek’Duv* said.

“Correct captain.” Max responded, “What you see here is an overview of the modifications that I have made

to the *Nightfall* in order to enable it to duplicate the Iconian gateway technology. This required a quantity of the refractive mineral that was obtained on a covert operation by a team led by Captain Edwards. Similar modifications have also been made to the *Nightfall's* squadron of Peregrine-class attack fighters. For the rest of your ships it will be necessary to replicate these modifications so that they may also form a gateway to access the Iconian subspace realm."

"So after this we'll be able to form these gateways and go wherever we want instantly?" the Romulan admiral asked.

"No, that is not the case. Our understanding of the Iconian gateway technology is incomplete." Max answered, "At present when we form a gateway the refractive material itself is consumed during the transit. It may be that even the Iconians themselves must periodically replace the material in their own ships and gateway facilities but it could also be that they overcame this problem entirely."

"I take it that you won't sharing any of the surplus of this material with us." one of the Romulan captains said. "Typical Romulan." Kurvok commented, snorting, "Only interested in what they have to gain." and the Romulans present all glared at him.

"How about you have your new government ask the Federation council for a share after all this is over?" Cameron said and the Romulan admiral smiled.

"Yes, a matter for the diplomats to discuss." she said.

"How long will it take to carry out these modifications?" Kurvok asked.

"I can provide exact details to the engineering teams of the *Umbra* and *Ek'Duv* to be able to carry out the work on their ships including their attached fighter squadrons themselves. I estimate that this should take less than twelve hours given their manpower. I have sufficient knowledge of the other Starfleet vessels present that altering these details are unlikely to add more than four hours to the total work time, however I will need to review the warp and deflector shield systems of the Klingon and Romulan vessels to assess how to interface the gateway technology with those ships."

"Why do you need to study our deflector shields?" the Romulan admiral said.

"Creating a gateway requires a ship's deflector shields to produce an energy field of a frequency that matches the output of the refractive material." T'Lan said.

"Will we be defenceless when we enter the Iconian realm?" a Klingon asked.

"No, but it would be logical to immediately alter the frequency of your deflector shields before the Iconians can take advantage of probably knowing what frequency they will have been set to in order to enter their realm." T'Lan said.

"And can you tell us what we will be facing when we get there? How many more of those ships will be waiting for us?" Kurvok asked.

"T'Lan back to you." Edwards said and T'Lan made her way back to the monitor so that she could display the telemetry from the probe launched into the Iconian realm.

"The subspace pocket measures just under seven thousand kilometres across and this was the only object present when we despatched a probe into it." she said as footage of the Iconian space station appeared on the screen, "The probe was not fired upon during its brief transit through the subspace pocket but a detailed analysis of the scans taken by the probe suggest a power distribution system running to specific points on the station's hull that may indicate weapon emplacements or deflector shield generators that are likely to be active when our ships arrive now that the Iconians are aware that we have the capability to reach them. Although there do appear to be numerous hangar access points these are not large enough to permit any warships of the type we have observed so far to exit the station. However, there may be fighter defences and it is also possible that the Iconians will attempt to board our ships using shuttles."

"We're going to have to hit them hard with everything we have." Edwards said, "We can provide a list of the suspected weapon and shield generator positions and our ships should endeavour to target these first but I'm also proposing that we send troops aboard the station to try and sabotage it from within. The *Nightfall*, *Umbra* and *Ek'Duv* carry six full companies of ground troops alone and I know that all Klingon ships can form boarding parties. If nothing else then maybe they can divert the Iconians' attention away from our ships attacking from the outside."

"You say you sent a probe. Were you able to recover it?" Cameron asked, "Knowing that this isn't a one way trip would be nice."

"The probe travelled across the full length of the subspace pocket and breached the other side. At that point it immediately returned to real space without needing to form another gateway." T'Lan told him.

"Every minute we delay gives the Iconians more time to launch their main attacks against our core worlds." Edwards said, "Are you in or out?"

"The Federation and the Klingon Empire are allies. I have been ordered to assist you and I trust your engineer. He may inspect our ships." Kurvok said and then he looked towards the Romulan admiral.

"Your engineer may board my ships." she said, "But he will be accompanied by a security detail at all times."

"That should not be an issue captain." Max said and Edwards smiled.

"Good. Then in that case I suggest we begin preparations immediately." he said.

Cole sat down on the side of his bed and sighed.

"It feels like it's been a week since we last slept." he told T'Lan while she sat down beside him.

"We woke up here fourteen hours ago." she replied, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"What's wrong T'Lan?" Cole asked and she lifted her head and looked at him.

"Why do you think that something is wrong?" she responded and he smiled at her.

"You think I can't see when something is troubling my wife? T'Lan you may be a Vulcan but you still have emotional tells that I can spot." Cole said and then T'Lan lent forwards and kissed him.

"I love you Robert." she said, "Something has been on my mind since the briefing with the other starships captains. It is something that one of the Klingons said."

Cole frowned.

"Is there a problem with one of them?" he said.

"No. However, he did remind me of how soon our child will be born and it has made me reconsider whether I should be joining the attack on the Iconian headquarters. If something were to happen-

"T'Lan I think you should stay behind." Cole interrupted, "To keep our baby safe." and then he kissed her.

"Thank you Robert. I will speak with Captain Edwards tomorrow." she said and Cole smiled at her again.

"No, we'll talk to him together." he told her.

The refractive properties of the mineral that was vital to Iconian gateway technology meant that it could not be moved using a transporter and so the only way to move it from the *Nightfall* to the other ships of the fleet was to physically load it aboard shuttlecraft. Fortunately the design of the *Nightfall's* hangar bay made this a much easier proposition than it would have been on many other Starfleet vessels and even the Romulan and Klingon pilots were easily able to grasp the idea of bringing their craft into the hangar through the *Nightfall's* aft doors and then leaving through the forward one.

The four Birds of Prey lacked hangars for shuttles of their own and so to speed up the process of supplying them with enough of the mineral it was taken to them by some of the *Nightfall's* own shuttles before their engineers set to work adapting the crude gateway technology to their own vessels.

"I calculate that the modifications should be complete in a further eight hours captain." Max told Edwards upon his return from the final Romulan ship to be inspected, reporting to him and Carr in the captain's ready room. Engineering teams from the Klingon and Romulan vessels had been able to begin the process of modifying their vessels before Max had even begun his inspections by installing extra power conduits and tuning their shield generators to the frequency required.

"We have enough of the mineral then?" Carr asked.

"In fact we have far more than was required commander." Max answered, "We have distributed around fifty percent of the total amount we have in storage to the other vessels in our fleet. This leaves us with a considerable reserve of the mineral."

"That I'm sure the diplomats will spend years arguing over." Edwards commented before there was a chiming sound from the door, "Come in." he said and the door opened to reveal Cole and T'Lan.

"Captain we have something we need to discuss with you." Cole said as they entered the ready room and the door slid shut behind them.

"Of course. Sit down." Edwards told them, "Max was just filling us in on the progress being made in modifying the other ships."

"We should be ready to go in about eight hours." Carr added.

"That is what we wished to discuss with you captain." T'Lan said, "I will not be accompanying you on this offensive. Commander Cole and I have discussed the matter and come to the logical conclusion that-

"It's too dangerous for T'Lan to go in her condition." Cole interrupted. Then he glanced at T'Lan and added, "Sorry but you were taking your time."

"Your apology is accepted." she responded and Edwards nodded.

"I understand fully." he said, "In fact I think you could be in a position to help us out with something."

"Of course captain." T'Lan said.

"We've used up about half of the refractive mineral we had in storage to modify the ships we've been able to gather. I'd like the rest loading on a runabout and returning to Starfleet just in case we fail here. Together with all of Max's notes and your expertise perhaps they'll be able to use it to launch another attack with a superior fleet." Edwards explained.

"Of course captain." T'Lan replied.

"Captain if we're despatching a runabout to Starfleet then I'd like Nikki to be aboard it as well." Carr said, "It didn't worry me so much when we were taking down that transport because there was never any real danger to the *Nightfall* itself but now that we're proposing going toe to toe with the Iconians things are more serious."

"Of course." Edwards replied.

"Commander I have noticed that Nikki can be rather headstrong and eagerly accepted remaining aboard for our attack on the transport. What if she does not wish to leave the *Nightfall* at all?" T'Lan asked.

"I don't intend to give her a choice. We can stun her if we have to." Carr said.

As soon as all of the refractive material needed to modify the other ships, including the fighter squadrons carried aboard the *Umbra* and *Ek'Duv* the crew of the *Nightfall* began to prepare their own fighter squadron for launch. This time the entire squadron would be deployed and these filled most of the ship's hangar deck. However, there remained enough space at one side for one of the *Nightfall's* two runabouts to be loaded with what remained of the mineral and it was to here that Nikki headed when she was told to report to the hangar. "Mom what's going on?" she asked when she found Carr standing outside the runabout with Cole and T'Lan, "We're really busy in sickbay. King wants us ready for casualties and-

"Nikki you're not coming with us to Iconia." Carr said and Nikki frowned.

"What do you mean? Of course I'm coming with you." she said, "Wait have been called down here so that you can just load me onto a shuttle and dump me?"

"We will both be aboard the runabout Nikki." T'Lan said.

"Yeah I get that you have a good reason for skipping this but I-

"You're just an intern Nikki." Carr said.

"An intern on my final assignment. Starfleet cadets can be given combat roles after a year and I've served twice that." Nikki said, "And what about Rebecca? I bet that Captain Edwards isn't throwing her off the ship."

"Rebecca Edwards is a commissioned officer in Earth's MACO organisation Nikki." T'Lan reminded her.

"So what? I've been taught how to protect myself by a MACO too. Captain Heart taught me to shoot. Just give me a phaser and I'll be fine." Nikki said.

"No chance." Cole said when he heard this, "Regulations prohibit the arming of interns."

"Regulations? Nothing we're doing here is by the book." Nikki protested.

"Okay in that case I'm ordering you to get on this runabout to take care of T'Lan." Carr said sternly, folding her arms.

"And if we are suddenly going by the book again and I disobey that order then Commander Cole will have to arrest me and toss me in the brig with that witch Jenna and I'll still be harm's way." Nikki responded and Carr sighed.

"T'Lan would you do the honours?" she said.

"Of course commander." T'Lan replied and she reached out to grasp Nikki by the base of her neck, applying pressure in just the right spot to instantly render her unconscious. Then as Nikki collapsed Cole stepped forwards to catch her before she landed on the metal deck plates.

"You know she's going to be in a foul mood when she wakes up." he said and Carr snorted.

"Not that it would make much difference." she commented.

"What means am I to use to calm her down when she awakens commander?" T'Lan asked.

"Whatever it takes. Knock her out again if you have to." Carr answered.

"Repeated use of a nerve pinch can lead to complications commander." T'Lan pointed out.

"I'm sure that there's a reel of duct tape in the runabout's emergency kit." Cole suggested, "Even if there isn't you could always replicate some and just tape her to a chair." and Carr smiled, "What?" Cole said.

"You have no idea how many times over recent years I've been tempted to do that." Carr replied.

"Bridge to Commander Carr." Nayal's voice said from Carr's combadge and she tapped it before responding.

"Go ahead Nayal." she said.

"Commander we're all set to go. The captain would like to know whether everything is ready down there." Nayal said.

"Affirmative Nayal. You can assure the captain that the final package has been loaded aboard the *Thames* and the runabout will be ready to depart in five minutes. I'm on my way to the bridge now." Carr said before tapping her combadge again to turn it off.

Carr and Cole returned to the bridge together and as they took their seats the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron was in the process of launching. These were then joining with the squadrons from the other Akira-class vessels to form one large attack wing.

"Snowman to fleet command, all attack fighters are in formation." White reported.

"Thank you Snowman. Is T'Lan clear yet?" Carr said.

"Yes commander, the Thames has just left our hangar." Nayal said.

"What is the status of our fleet?" Edwards asked.

"All ships reporting ready captain." Nayal answered, "Gateway modifications have passed diagnostic checks."

"Send to the fleet all vessels of task force one are to engage cloaking devices and lay in a course for Iconia. Warp nine. Task force two is to lay in the same course at warp eight. We will rendezvous in orbit around Iconia when the initial target has been engaged." Edwards said.

One by one the Klingon and Romulan ships, as well as the *USS Nightfall* vanished as their cloaking devices were activated and they sped off at warp speed. They were joined by the other Starfleet vessels, those who lacked cloaking devices that followed behind them at a slower speed determined by the fastest speed that could be achieved by the wing of attack fighters that made up the bulk of the Federation force.

T'Lan watched the successive flashes of light that signified the fleet going to warp from the cockpit of the runabout *Thames*. When the last of the starships had disappeared T'Lan began to input a course into the runabout's navigation system and it was then that she heard Nikki groan from the seat beside her.

Opening her eyes, Nikki immediately realised where she was and what had happened.

"T'Lan!" she snapped, her head spinning to look at the Vulcan, "How could you do that?"

"I was merely taking the logical course of action needed to get you off the *Nightfall* and into this runabout." T'Lan responded.

"Well get me back aboard the *Nightfall*. Now."

"That is not possible. The *Nightfall*, along with the other cloaked ships of the task force is now travelling at warp nine. The second wave of ships is moving more slowly but still at warp eight. Given that our maximum speed is warp five we cannot possibly catch up with them before they reach the Iconia system." T'Lan explained and Nikki's face fell, "I estimate that the Iconian warship orbiting Iconia will already have been destroyed and the fleet will have entered the Iconian subspace realm by the time we arrive." T'Lan added and Nikki frowned.

"What?" she said, "Aren't you taking us back to Starbase ten or the nearest Federation colony or something?"

"If that is necessary, yes. However, there is no need for us to abandon the *Nightfall* just yet. Logic dictates that we have the maximum information possible when we communicate with Starfleet and that includes knowing the outcome of the battle. This can best be determined by following the fleet to the Iconia system. If the enemy sentry vessel is still present then we will know that the attack has failed and can report that to Starfleet. On the other hand if it has been destroyed then we can wait for confirmation of the outcome. Additionally we can be on hand to recover any survivors forced to abandon ship that move beyond the perimeter of the subspace bubble." T'Lan told Nikki and she smiled.

"I knew you couldn't just turn your back on everyone." she said.

"My decisions are motivated by logic, not sentiment. However, I must insist that you do not interfere in any way. If you do then I have been granted permission to physically restrain you." T'Lan added and she lifted a reel of tape onto the console between them.



"There she is." Cole said when the Iconian ship orbiting Iconia first came into view.

"What's her status?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not picking up any deflector shields or powered weapons at this time." Cole answered.

"You can bet that they'll bring those on line as soon as the second wave arrives." Carr commented.

"Helm, take us to the rendezvous point." Edwards ordered.

"Think that the other cloaked ships are actually here?" Carr said, glancing in his direction, "I wouldn't put it past that Romulan admiral to have run off with the means to make their own gateways." then she looked at Nayal and added, "No offence meant Nayal."

"Don't worry commander, the thought did cross my mind as well." the Romulan responded.

"I'm sure they'll be here. After all if they just ran and we still won where would that leave them?" Edwards said.

"What about the second wave?" Carr asked.

"Still about four hours out." Nayal said.

"Then I guess we just sit here and wait. Anyone got a deck of cards?" Cole said.

"What is the status of our defences?" The Girl said from within one of the compartments aboard the Iconian space station.

"Weapon status is ninety-four percent operational. Deflector shields coverage of one hundred percent is possible. Power for defences has not been authorised by the council." a voice responded and The Girl scowled.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Need for defensive action has not been confirmed to their satisfaction." the voice told her.

"Then I obviously need to explain it to them in person." The Girl said and she closed her eyes and promptly transferred her consciousness into the space station's computer where the bulk of the Iconian civilisation now resided. From here she could address their ruling council directly.

"Why have you come before us?" one of the council demanded.

"We face the possibility of attack and yet you still refuse to authorise the activation of our defences. Why?" The Girl replied.

"There is no risk. A dreadnought guards Iconia." the council member answered.

"Would this be the same dreadnought that failed to prevent a Starfleet probe from reaching us?" The Girl said, "Supposing that had been a starship or a torpedo of some kind. Where would we be then? Apart from scattered across our ancestral home system as little more than subatomic particles of course."

"You will show us the proper respect."

"Respect? What respect have you shown me? For years I undermined the upstart empires and how did you respond? First you gave that fool Shintar authority over me and then the Lord Martial himself decided to take the glory. Well he ordered me to protect this facility and that's what I intend to do. It's bad enough that none of you bothered to keep our weapons maintained for all these centuries but I've still managed to get most of them on line again. Or least they will be on line when you accept that even the slightest risk means that we need to be prepared and that means authorising the power to operate them."

"Very well. The power will be released." the council member said after a brief pause and The Girl exited the virtual realm, returning to her body where she opened her eyes.

"Defence status?" she said.

"Weapon systems powered. Deflector shields now raising." the previous voice told her and she smiled.

"Dropping out of warp now captain." the *Pacific's* helmsman reported as the Nebula-class starship dropped to sublight speed along with the rest of the second wave of ships in the hastily assembled fleet.

"This is Snowman to the fleet, I have eyes on the enemy vessel." White broadcast from his fighter when he detected the Iconian warship.

"Red alert." Cameron ordered.

"Raise shields, load all torpedo bays." S'Kora added.

"Weapons ready captain." the ship's tactical officer responded.

"What about the rest of our ships?" Cameron asked.

"All starships and all fighters reporting ready sir." S'Kora told him.

"Fire torpedoes." Cameron ordered and from each Starfleet starship and attack fighter a single torpedo shot from a launcher and sped towards the Iconian ship, forty-two altogether.

The Iconian warship had already detected the approaching Federation fleet and was turning to face them

when the torpedo volley was launched. This prompted an immediate response from the Iconian vessel and a storm of lightning erupted into space ahead of the vessel that detonated all of the torpedoes before they could reach their intended target. Just in case any of the explosives managed to evade this fire the Iconian consciousness controlling the warship focused the strength of its shields forwards, unaware of the danger waiting to its stern.

"Captain the enemy vessel has focused its shields forward." Cole said and Edwards grinned.

"Send to squadron, now." he said.

All of a sudden the entire combined force of Klingon and Romulan vessels along with the *USS Nightfall* deactivated their cloaking devices in rapid succession. None of the vessels had their shields raised at this point but with the Iconian focused on targeting the other Starfleet vessels they were in no danger for the few seconds it took to raise them. As soon as their cloaking devices were deactivated the collection of starships opened fire, targeting the rear of the Iconian warship. A barrage of phasers, disruptors and various types of torpedo slammed into the Iconian vessel and produced multiple flashes of light as they impacted against its shields. With the Iconian shields focused ahead of the vessel the shields to the rear had been weakened and they soon collapsed. The barrage of fire did not end there though and the ships continued firing at the now unshielded warship. This blasted multiple holes in the warship's hull until the refractive gateway core was exposed.

"There it is!" Edwards exclaimed, "Cole focus all fire on that location."

"Phasers locked captain, firing now." Cole replied as he fired the *Nightfall's* forward phasers at the exposed core.

As soon as the energy from these beams struck the refractive material that it was made of it ceased to be focused in a single direction and spread out, its destructive power amplified by the material itself and the Iconian ship was rocked by explosions from inside.

"Get us clear." Carr ordered and the *Nightfall's* helmsman steered the ship away from the stricken Iconian warship.

Seeing that the Iconian vessel was doomed the Klingon and Romulan vessels that had also been part of the ambush veered off as well although the Klingon captains continued to fire their disruptors defiantly and strafed the burning warship before speeding away just in time to escape the massive blast as its power core breached and the vessel was ripped apart from the inside.

"Did we lose anyone?" Carr asked.

"Negative commander, all ships are reporting operational. Looks like the plan worked perfectly." Noyal responded.

"Then let's not hang around. The Iconians might already know that they've lost their sentry ship and I doubt it will take long for more of them to arrive." Edwards said.

"Err captain," Noyal said, looking up from the operations console, "The Iconian fleet might be a little preoccupied right now."

"What do you mean Noyal?" Carr said.

"I've just picked up an emergency broadcast from Starfleet on all channels. The Iconians are assaulting the Martian defence perimeter." Noyal announced.

Although their gateway technology gave them the ability to bypass the Martian defence perimeter, the Iconians did not want to be facing the defences of Earth itself at the same time as the starships and automated defence pods that this would leave to their rear, the Lord Martial seeking to avoid the same fate that he did not yet know had befallen the sentry ship in the Iconia system. Instead the large Iconian task force, consisting of twenty-two dreadnoughts appeared in the solar system just beyond the orbit of Mars. This was close enough to trigger the proximity alarms and every defensive facility in the system went to red alert.

The first response from the Martian defence perimeter came in the form of a wave of automated defence pods. Programmed to seek out intruders these unmanned flying bombs flew towards the Iconian ships with the intention of crashing into them before releasing the large antimatter containers they held as warheads. Just a few decades earlier the idea of an attack on Earth had seemed so far fetched that there had been only a handful of these defence pods in service but these had proven so inadequate when during a Borg attack that their number had been massively increased, even more so following the Breen attack during the final year of the Dominion War and now almost a hundred of them were already speeding towards the Iconian invaders. The Lord Martial watched these craft approach from the observation chamber aboard his flagship and smiled.

"Do they really think these toys can stop us?" he said before adding, "Destroy them."

The Iconians used their lightning weapons to fire at the rapidly closing defence pods. Although their purpose was identical to photon and quantum torpedoes the defence pods were designed to be used from much greater ranges and to prevent them from simply being shot down they were equipped with deflector shields

of their own. This enabled the pods to withstand the energy of the Iconian weapons for a brief time but the lightning eventually collapsed their shields and one by one they exploded in brilliant flashes of light. The Iconians did not come out of the attack totally unscathed though, the amount of antimatter held inside each defence pod was many times the amount inside a standard Starfleet photon or quantum torpedo and some of them got close enough to the Iconian ships prior to being shot down that the resulting blast still managed to affect their targets and in one case an Iconian vessel's shields were brought down and the ship itself damaged.

"Advance." The Lord Martial ordered, "Maintain watch for approaching defence forces and fire as soon as they come within range. Do not fire on Earth itself until I give the word. I want the chance to communicate with them first so they can see who has destroyed them."

"This is Captain Edwards to all ships, engage gateway systems now." Edwards broadcast to his fleet and then the *Nightfall* began to shudder as the energy field needed to create an Iconian style gateway formed around the ship.

The fields formed around the smaller ships of the fleet faster, an outcome that had not been predicted in any of the simulations and the wing of attack fighters vanished almost in unison as they entered subspace and were immediately dragged into the enclosed pocket that the Iconians inhabited.

"Look at the size of it!" one of the fighter pilots exclaimed when she saw the Iconian space station in person, a vast structure that spanned for hundreds of kilometres.

"Cut the chatter. Adjust shields to secondary rotation frequencies. Break and attack." White ordered and the three dozen tiny attack craft all turned towards the space station and unleashed a volley of photon torpedoes.

"Combat alert. Combat alert. We are under attack." a voice announced throughout the interior of the Iconian space station and The Girl halted as she walked down a hallway.

"Well what are we doing about it?" she asked.

"Shields raised. Defensive batteries locking on. Awaiting clearance to fire." the voice responded.

"What? Just shoot them. I'm on my way to the command centre now." The Girl ordered.

What looked like bolts of lightning lashed out from locations all across the surface of the space station, striking the shields of the Federation attack fighters. One of the craft from the *Umbr*a was hit repeatedly and White heard a scream over the communication channel as the fighter exploded, killing its pilot instantly.

"Evasive action. Try to target those guns or we'll be wiped out before anyone else gets to us." he told the other pilots and the fighters broke formation, splitting apart and manoeuvring randomly to try and confuse the Iconian targeting system.

Fortunately for the fighter pilots reinforcements were not long in arriving and the four Klingon B'Rel-class birds of prey soon appeared in the subspace pocket and immediately charged headlong towards the Iconian space station.

"Full speed!" Kurvok ordered his bridge crew, "Tactical fire all weapons. We'll teach these Iconians what it means to face true warriors head on."

"Snowman to *Glorious Slayer*, glad you could join us. I think that thing is more than we can take with just fighters." White transmitted.

"Let's see how much damage we can do before the Romulans join us, eh?" Kurvok responded as the four Klingon ships fired their weapons at a tower mounting one of the station's defensive batteries and the top section exploded.

The two Romulan destroyers were the next ships to arrive, followed just seconds later by the *Matilda*.

Already operational, the Iconian defences reacted quickly to the arrival of these ships and several batteries targeted one of the Romulan destroyers before its crew had the opportunity to adjust their shield frequency.

Predicting that the attacking ships would have had to use their shields to form stable gateways the Iconians were prepared for the shield frequencies this meant the newly arrived ships would be using and the rapid succession of lightning blasts as soon as the destroyer arrived passed through its shields unimpeded. The mid-sized warship was rocked by explosions wherever the lightning struck its hull before it was consumed entirely by one massive blast as the artificial singularity that served as its power core breached.

Despite this loss the other warships to have arrived had managed to change their shield frequencies by this point and were in the process of bombarding the Iconian space station when the larger vessels of the fleet arrived.

"Status?" Edwards said as soon as the *Nightfall* appeared inside the subspace bubble.

"It looks like one of the Romulan destroyers has been destroyed captain." Nayal replied.

"They must have been hit before they retuned their shields." Carr said.

"Commander Cole I take that we won't be vulnerable like that?" Edwards asked.



"No sir, I had the secondary frequency ready as soon as we came through." Cole replied, "Target captain?"

"Tactical officer's choice for now commander." Edwards told him and he smiled.

"Firing quantum torpedoes captain." he said.

The Akira-class of heavy cruiser was primarily a torpedo cruiser, mounting fifteen launchers capable of firing both photon torpedoes and the more advanced quantum torpedoes that the *Nightfall* was armed with. With each launcher able to hold ten torpedoes at a time this meant that the *Nightfall* was able fire more than a hundred quantum torpedoes in a very short space of time and these struck the Iconian station over a relatively narrow area.

"Captain their shields are down in that section." Nayal announced.

"Hangar scramble all assault craft. Transporter room energise now." Carr ordered and moments later the four assault shuttles carried by the *Nightfall* shot out of the hangar, heading directly towards the damaged section of the Iconian space station. These were joined by craft from the other two Akira-class vessels as they all despatched boarding parties to take the fight to the Iconians face to face.

"Incoming craft. Multiple lifeforms detected aboard each." the voice of one of the Iconians controlling the defence of the station announced to The Girl while she stood watching the progress of the battle on a multitude of screens all around her.

"They intend to board us." she said, "Deploy fleshforms and constructs to counter them." then a smile spread across her face and she added, "And prepare our own shuttles. I think we should return the favour and I have the perfect target in mind." and then she focused on a screen showing an image of the *Nightfall* as it fired its phasers at the space station.

A pair of powerful torpedoes struck the *Pacific's* upper equipment module and the entire ship shook violently.

"Captain I hope you didn't plan on using any of the weapons in the upper module because they aren't there any more." the voice of the *Pacific's* chief engineer said as she reported on the damage to the bridge.

"Is there anything you can do to bring any of it back on line Commander Frost?" Cameron asked.

"Sorry captain, the entire module is a write off. The best bet is to dry dock, just scrap the module entirely and fit a new one in its place."

"Understood commander. Just do what you can to keep us in this fight. Tactical lay down cover fire for those assault shuttles. Maybe we can draw some fire away from them." Cameron ordered and the *Pacific* turned sharply to follow the small force of assault shuttles towards the Iconian space station, looming over them like some form of protective parent. This was partially successful and most of the fire that came in that direction from the space station headed for the Nebula-class starship rather than the smaller and more fragile shuttles. The *Pacific* was rocked by repeated lightning strikes but its shields held long enough for all but one of the assault shuttles to reach the space station and either enter exposed shuttle hangars or clamp themselves to the hull where they found hatches. The last shuttle was struck by one of the lightning bolts and flames filled the interior as it tumbled onwards before crashing into the space station and exploding.

Those assault shuttles that clamped themselves to hatches used shaped charges to blow open the outer doors before technical specialists among the boarding parties overrode the locks of the internal doors. Not knowing the exact environmental conditions inside the space station each member of the boarding parties wore a space suit for protection that had been enhanced with added on armour plates. These plates offered reasonable protection from both physical and energy attacks but they did not make the soldiers invulnerable and the first MACO through the inner door of one air lock screamed momentarily before he vanished as a high yield energy blast from an Iconian controlled machine disintegrated him. From behind where he had stood more MACOs returned fire at the machine, first using their assault rifles but the bullets from these just bounced off harmlessly and so they switched to their phasers. Initially the machine withstood these beams as well but as the MACOs continued with their concentrated fire its casing eventually gave way and there was a shower of sparks as it fell forwards and came crashing down to the floor.

"Captain Heart I'm disengaging." Rebecca signalled when the MACO platoon she had been carrying was fully off loaded into an Iconian hangar.

"Understood. See if you can put your weapons to good use." Heart responded as his men exchanged fire with a small unit of Iconian combat robots and fleshforms that had rushed into the hangar to try and keep them contained.

As the assault shuttle lifted off the deck Rebecca first turned it to face the Iconian defenders coming into the hangar through a large doorway and she fired the weapons that her craft was armed with at them. Twin powerful phaser beams blasted through the Iconians, melting both metal and synthetic flesh indiscriminately. Although many of the Iconian intelligences directing the defenders survived this by uploading themselves back to the space station's computer their physical bodies were totally destroyed and the way opened for Heart and his men to advance deeper into the structure.

Rebecca then used the shuttle's thrusters to back out of the hangar where she switched to her impulse drive.

Keeping close to the space station's hull she proceeded to fire at its surface, doing her best to target any feature that looked as if it could be a part of a vital system. However, her effort to keep out of the line of fire was unsuccessful and all of a sudden her shuttle rocked as it was hit by a bolt of lightning. The sound of alarms suddenly filled the cockpit and Rebecca found the shuttle spinning out of control.

"Mayday! Mayday!" she broadcast, "All control systems have failed. Activating ejection system."

Pulling on a lever located between her legs, Rebecca triggered a set of explosive bolts that blasted the assault shuttle's cockpit free of the craft's fuselage. The cockpit module itself continued to tumble, its own stabilisation system also damaged. The module then struck the space station's shields and bounced off, spinning towards the edge of the subspace pocket where it passed across the limit and disappeared.

"Rebecca." Edwards said from the bridge of the *Nightfall* when he saw this.

"David I'm sure-" Carr began.

"That's okay Grace. She'll be back in the Iconia system by now." Edwards interrupted. Then he asked, "Tactical, what's our status?"

"Shields down to ten percent captain. Weapons still operational but our quantum torpedo supply is down to less than a hundred." Cole reported.

"Keep firing. Don't hold back our torpedoes because you're afraid of running out." Edwards ordered before there was a bright flash of light on the main viewscreen.

"Captain one of the Klingon ships has been destroyed." Nayal reported.

"Report!" Kurvok yelled when one of the four birds of prey exploded.

"The *Fury of K'Nor* is gone." one of his officers responded, "We are undamaged."

"They were killed by a turret cluster at bearing three four seven." a second officer added.

"Helm take us towards that cluster. Tactical, fire all weapons." Kurvok ordered and the *Glorious Slayer* turned towards the cluster of towers that were each tipped with a lightning projector, arranged around a torpedo launcher. The *Glorious Slayer's* disruptors could not penetrate the Iconian shields themselves until the tactical officer also launched a torpedo that exploded against the shields and briefly opened a hole that was enough for the bird of prey's gunner to fire a volley of disruptor blasts through that struck one of the towers with enough firepower to sever it. However, as the tower exploded the central torpedo launcher fired a rapid burst of torpedoes back towards the *Glorious Slayer*.

"Evasive action!" Kurvok yelled but the torpedoes themselves also turned, tracking the compact warship and one after another four of them hit the Klingon vessel.

Explosions rocked the ship and several consoles on the bridge burst into flames, one blast hurling a crewman back from it and alarms sounded.

"We've lost weapons." the gunner exclaimed.

"Engineering reports the warp core is losing containment." another officer added and Kurvok snarled.

"Helm turn us back towards those towers and take us to full impulse. I want ramming speed – we'll show the Iconians that today is a good day to die!" he barked.

The *Glorious Slayer* turned towards the Iconian weapon emplacements, accelerating towards them as the turrets continued to fire. The lightning struck the bird of prey's shields and collapsed sections of them when the vessel was just a few kilometres from the Iconian space station. There were more explosions from the Klingon ship and one of its wings was torn free before the *Glorious Slayer* finally struck the Iconian shield and the magnetic field surrounding its warp core gave way, causing the anti-matter it contained to spill out uncontrolled and mix with the matter surrounding the core. The resulting explosion vaporised the *Glorious Slayer* in an instant but it also blasted through the Iconian shields in this section and destroyed the weapon cluster on the other side.

"That was the *Glorious Slayer* captain." Nayal said when the second bird of prey exploded.

"Kurvok managed to open another hole in their shields in that section captain." Cole added and Edwards nodded.

"Target that area and fire all phasers. Let's see if there's anything critical in it." he said.

Shry's Imperial Guard company had beamed aboard the Iconian space station while Heart's MACOs were boarding using assault shuttles. This had allowed them a few minutes of uninterrupted action during which time they laid as many spatial charges as they could to demolish machinery they could only guess at the function of before the first of the Iconian defenders arrived to try and stop them.

A hatchway slid open and a pair of vaguely humanoid Iconian fighting machines strode through, firing rapid pulses of energy from weapons mounted on their arms and behind these marched a group of fleshforms. These mounted no weapons but the Andorians knew that they were strong enough to kill in close combat without the need for any.

A shaped charge grenade fired from a launcher hit one of the fighting machines and blew a hole right through its torso. The machine fell forwards and broke in half, leaving the top half flailing before it was able to aim its weapons back towards the Andorians. However, before it was able to open fire again a phaser beam struck the machine's head and destroyed it.

The second machine continued firing though, breaking into a run as the fleshforms also charged at the Imperial Guard while they fired their own weapons. Their assault rifles had only limited effect against the Iconians' robotic fighting machines and even less against the fleshforms that lacked any internal organs that the projectiles could damage so they instead made extensive use of the phasers mounted beneath these and one after another of the fleshforms was destroyed. However, there were enough of the Iconians that the limited number of Andorians who could engage them without stepping out into the open could not bring them all down until the fleshforms ran past a junction and all of a sudden a barrage of phaser and disruptor fire came from down it.

"Shry, Imperial Guard!" Shry called out when the firing ceased and the Andorians advanced cautiously down the corridor.

"Saron, V'shar." a calm voice responded and as Shry reached the junction he looked around the corner to see a group of Vulcan soldiers accompanied by a smaller unit of Klingon troops.

"Have you heard from any of the MACO units?" Shry asked.

"Most are fighting their way in from the hangars but the transported units are pinned down and taking heavy casualties. We are trying to reach them. Krann and his men are all that remains of his platoon." the Vulcan company commander responded.

"We destroyed as many of the Iconians as they killed of us." the Klingon beside him added and Shry nodded.

"We've been blowing up everything we could find. This was the first opposition we faced. Perhaps we should work together from now on." he said.

"That is logical." Saron responded, "Follow us, we have the location of the MACOs identified." and then he started to walk past the Andorians.

The *Matilda* fired what was left of its photon torpedoes towards a large dome structure that protruded from the space station before breaking off under fire from several Iconian turrets. However, this was merely a diversion while the *Umbra* manoeuvred into position behind the exploration vessel. The torpedo volley had opened a hole in the space station's shields that the *Umbra*'s helmsman took full advantage of, lining the cruiser up on the hole before firing a burst of projectiles from the mass accelerator cannons it was armed with. Intended for use against Borg cubes, the projectile weapons were not considered effective in general ship to ship combat. The duranium projectiles moved too slowly to strike a vessel capable of high speed manoeuvres and could not penetrate conventional deflector shields. However, against an unshielded section of a static space station they were devastatingly effective and the entire dome structure exploded, spraying out wreckage that flew to the edge of the subspace pocket and vanished as it was hurled back into real space in the Iconia system.

"Roll and weave boys. Roll and weave." White broadcast from his fighter as he found himself having to evade the debris from this explosion. As the other attack fighters followed his example though they came under fire from another cluster of Iconian weapons and White heard several pilots cry out as their craft were hit.

"Can anyone see where that fire is coming from?" the voice of a Vulcan pilot asked.

"Bearing two nine seven low." White responded, "I'm going in, form up on my-" but before he could finish his sentence his fighter was also hit by a blast of lightning that tore through his shields, "I'm hit. Quarterback take control of the squadron. Ejecting now." he signalled but as he was reaching for the ejection handle his fighter was hit again and it exploded in a short lived ball of flame.

"We've lost Snowman." Nayal said, looking up suddenly from the operations console.

"Did he manage to eject?" Carr asked and Nayal looked back down to check her instruments. The expression on her face told Carr the answer before she had the chance to shake her head. The *Nightfall* then shuddered as it came under fire again, pressing the bridge crew against their harnesses. "Ventral shields down to one percent captain." Cole reported.

"Bridge to engineering," Edwards said into the intercom, "can you do anything about our shields?"

"Not right away captain. The emitters themselves are damaged." Max responded, "I recommend that you-" but before he could finish there was another torpedo impact and as the *Nightfall* shuddered again the helm station exploded, the helmsman slumping forwards.

"Grace take over." Edwards ordered and undoing her harness as rapidly as she could, Carr got up and hurried to the science station that was vacant now that T'Lan was no longer aboard. Sitting down here it took just moments for Carr to reconfigure the console to give her helm control, although it offered her only the computer controlled automatic interface that was standard to Starfleet vessels this was adequate for her to stabilise the *Nightfall's* course.

"As I was saying captain," Max continued, "I recommend keeping our ventral hull away from the enemy." "Noted." Edwards replied.

With Federation and Klingon troops advancing in several areas of the station it took some time for The Girl to gather a reasonably sized force to retaliate in kind. However, as soon as enough fleshforms and fighting machines had been assembled in a hangar she watched them embark on a number of shuttles before joining them.

"I want the *Nightfall*." she said as the hatch was closing, knowing that the Iconian intelligence directing the craft was listening. Then she checked the object she held in her hand. It had been many thousands of years since the Iconian that possessed this body had wielded a weapon in combat but the skill was not one that had been forgotten in the mean time and now The Girl meant to put that long unused skill into practice.

"Confirmed. Sensors indicate the target vessel's ventral shields are weak enough for penetration." the voice of the controlling intelligence responded as the shuttle's thrusters fired. Then it and the rest of the swarm of small craft sped out of the hangar towards the ships of the attacking fleet.

"Lord Martial." a voice that The Lord Martial recognised as belonging to another member of the Iconian ruling council said as he watched another Starfleet vessel explode ahead of his own, "What is your progress?"

"Starfleet fights hard. They still had a fleet of more than a hundred starships in place to defend Earth. Though more than twenty have been destroyed. I could have wiped them out by now but not without incurring losses to our own forces. Their nearest reinforcements are still days away though so I can afford a little caution."

The Lord Martial responded.

"Not any longer. The troops aboard your vessels are needed here. The sanctum is attacked. A combined fleet of Starfleet, Klingon and Romulan ships has entered our realm. The ships we can deal with but enemy troops have boarded us. They may threaten us. Return immediately."

"Immediately? But Earth itself is almost within my grasp."

"What good is Earth without Iconia? Return now. That is the order of the council."

The Lord Martial snarled, knowing that the chance of a swift victory was fast disappearing. His only hope was that the troops carried aboard his ships would be able to deal with the boarding parties fast enough that he could return to Earth before it could be reinforced.

"Send to all ships." he announced, "Fall back. Set a course for Iconia. We are returning home."

"Target those ships with phasers." Edwards ordered as the shuttles swarmed out of the space station just as the second Romulan destroyer exploded and split into groups, each group making directly for one of the attacking fleet's remaining starships.

"Aye captain. Firing phasers." Cole responded and one by one he began to pick off the shuttles heading towards the *Nightfall*. However, there were too many of them for him to be able to destroy them all before several suddenly dove beneath the ship and then pulled up to fly through the severely weakened ventral shields. Each of the shuttles then clamped to the hull and alerts appeared on Cole's console, "Captain we're being boarded!" he exclaimed.

"Intruder alert. All security teams to respond immediately. Activate containment fields." Edwards ordered. Standard practice when a Starfleet vessel was boarded was to release an anesthesia gas into compromised areas through the life support system but Edwards already knew that this would be ineffective against the Iconians and so the only way to deal with them was in person.

"Captain the *Dawnstone*!" Nayal exclaimed suddenly and everyone looked at the main viewscreen where the Excelsior-class cruiser was shown to be burning badly, limping away from the Iconian space station and towards the perimeter of the subspace pocket.

"Can they make it?" Edwards asked, realising that the crew were attempting to get back to the relative safety

of the Iconia system but before Nayal could answer the stricken starship was hit by a torpedo that blasted through its secondary hull and triggered a massive explosion that destroyed the ship entirely.

With most of them armed before the start of the battle it did not take long for the crew of the *Nightfall* to come to the defence of their vessel when the Iconians boarded it. Initially this defence came only from crewmen armed with hand phasers but security teams had been stationed around the vessel and they soon brought the added firepower of their phaser rifles into the fight. As the Iconians advanced though casualties among the crew began to mount and in sickbay King soon found himself overwhelmed with injuries varying from burns suffered when the *Nightfall* had come under fire from the space station and now from energy weapon blasts and physical injuries inflicted by fleshforms.

"Doctor there are more." Emma said as the door to sickbay opened and blue uniformed science and medical crewmen helped other in the red and yellow of the command and service division through the doorway.

"Examine them quickly." King ordered as he continued to operate on the injured security guard lying on the biobed in front of him, "Establish treatment priority and get started."

"Of course I'll-" Emma began but then she stumbled, steadying herself on another biobed.

"Emma are you okay?" King asked when he saw this.

"The subspace link to my body was just disrupted." she replied, "I would recommend that I return to my holographic form but the power to the emitters appears to be fluctuating as well."

"King to engineering, can't you keep Emma running?" King said, tapping his combadge.

"Apologies doctor but we are experiencing widespread system failures. Thankfully we are not being targeted as heavily now that we have been boarded but it will still take time to re-establish some systems." Max replied.

"Hurry Max." King said before tapping his combadge again, "Emma just do your best." he added and she nodded.

"That was the last of our torpedoes admiral." the tactical officer aboard the Romulan flagship said.

"What about our disruptors?" the admiral responded.

"Still functional but if we divert them to the primary target then I won't be able to keep those shuttles away from us." the tactical officer told her.

"Then keep targeting the shuttles. Communications, see if you can get any of those Federation fighters to cover us. Maybe then we can-"

"Admiral the *Ventari*!" the flagship's first officer exclaimed, pointing to the main view screen on which the other Valdore-class cruiser could be seen spinning out of control towards them.

"Take evasive action!" the admiral ordered.

"Too late. Brace for impact!" the first officer snapped moments before the other cruiser slammed into the Romulan flagship.

"Damage report." the admiral called out.

"Shields down to five percent and failing. Weapons gone, main power offline. Fires on all decks and breaches on decks seven through thirteen. We're venting atmosphere. Admiral we're dead in space." the first officer replied and the admiral frowned.

"All hands abandon ship." she ordered, "All hands abandon ship."

Escape pods ejected from the Romulan flagship, all flying towards the edge of the subspace pocket where they would be able to return to real space. However, despite still being engaged with several other vessels the Iconians were not in the mood to let the Romulan crew escape and bolts of lightning sought out the helpless escape pods as they fled and by the time the first of them passed through the perimeter of the pocket more than half had already been destroyed.

It took a spatial charge to blow open the door blocking the path of Heart's MACO company and when the explosion had died down he waved his troops forwards.

"Let's see what needed a door like that to protect." he told them and the soldiers charged through the doorway into the massive chamber beyond. In there they found the rows of fluid filled cylinders in which corpses were prepared for use as flesh hosts for Iconian minds. Heart realised what these were immediately and he smiled as he brought his rifle to his shoulder before firing a sustained burst at several nearby cylinders. Although toughened to resist breakage the material of the cylinders could not stand up to the bullets and they shattered, spilling out their liquid contents as well as the bodies floating inside them onto the floor.

The chamber was then filled with the roar of automatic fire as the MACOs finally put the assault rifles that had been largely ineffective against their Iconian opposition to use by smashing all of the cylinders they could. As he progressed deeper into the chamber Heart came across the vats used by the Iconians to craft their synthetic flesh into their fleshform bodies. These looked more resilient than the transparent cylinders

and so he switched to his phaser, firing the beam directly into the fluid inside the nearest vat. The continuous beam boiled away a significant amount of fluid before the energy disrupted the vat itself and it exploded, causing Heart to flinch as his armoured spacesuit was hit by shrapnel. Unharmful by this he stood up straight again to attack another vat but as he did so he saw that the MACOs were no longer alone in the chamber as newly created fleshforms started to rise up out of many of the vats.

"Incoming." Heart called out as he fired at the first of the fleshforms to emerge and the figure tumbled out of its vat with a large section blown from its shoulder before it had even had the chance to take a single step. As more of the fleshforms emerged more of the MACOs opened fire but their lines of fire were blocked by the machinery of the chamber and for every Iconian shot down while still attempting to climb out of their vats at least two others were able to emerge safely and these charged towards the human soldiers.

"Fall back to the door." Heart ordered, seeing that trying to hold off the fleshforms within the birthing chamber was a futile effort. On the other hand the doorway offered a more defensible position. Adjusting his phaser to fire brief pulses of energy instead of continuous beams, Heart fired several rapid bursts as he retreated but as he backed towards the doorway he heard a voice call out to him.

"Captain to your right!" one of the MACOs shouted and Heart turned just in time to see a fleshform looming over him, having used a large column as cover.

Heart turned attempting to aim his rifle at the advancing fleshform but the figure lashed out and knocked his weapon from his hands. Then before Heart could draw his sidearm the fleshform grabbed hold of his spacesuit and lifted him up off his feet, tossing him into the nearby column. Heart's armour protected him from the worst of the impact but he was still stunned by it even before the fleshform let go of him and dropped him to the floor. Before Heart could recover his senses the fleshform struck again, kicking him in the chest repeatedly hard enough that after the third strike Heart's armoured chest plate cracked. Without the protection of his armour the next blow broke Heart's ribs and he coughed up a mouthful of blood onto the inside of his helmet visor. The fleshform then struck at Heart's head, stomping on his helmet in the same manner as it had attacked his chest previously. The helmet visor was not as tough as his chest plate and even in his already disorientated state Heart saw it crack and heard the hiss of escaping air.

It was then that a phaser blast disintegrated the fleshform, destroying it faster than the Iconian intelligence it housed could upload itself back into the space station's computer. A pair of MACOs then rushed up to Heart while he was lying on the floor, every breath he took causing him more pain and continuing to cough up blood.

"Captain are you okay? Can you hear me?" one of the MACOs asked, kneeling down beside Heart and taking out a field medical kit while other troops continued to try and hold back the advancing fleshforms.

"We need to get him out of here." the other MACO said.

"If we pick him up now his own ribcage will probably tear his lungs apart. I need to refuse them. Help me detach this armour." the first MACO said but before they could release even the first clasp Heart's eyes widened.

"Jenna." he gasped before his body went limp.

West knew that the *Nightfall* was in combat and it angered her that at this critical time she could not stand with her crew mates. The guards had been withdrawn from outside her cell but the forcefield was still being monitored from the security station outside the brig. Even if there had been guards present West doubted that they would have been willing to talk to her enough to keep her up to date with the progress of the battle and so the first indication of how it was progressing she got was when she heard the sound of phaser fire from outside the brig and she looked towards the door, listening to the sounds of fighting before there was a sudden eerie silence.

She wanted to call out to try and find out what was happening but she opted to remain silent, not wanting to attract the wrong type of attention to herself. However, this proved fruitless when the door to the main security section slid open to reveal a pair of fleshforms. These stepped into the brig and then apart from one another so that The Girl could pass between them, smiling at West.

"Why Jenna it is such a relief to see you safe and well." she said, "Or are you?" she added as she walked up to the controls to the forcefield across the entrance to West's cell and shut it off so that she could enter it while behind her the two fleshforms followed, "My, my, what have they done to you? What is all this blood and why are you trussed up like this?"

"Your Iconian friend is gone." West replied, "Doctor King and Max found a way to get it out of my head."

"So sad." The Girl said, "Did you know that the being your friends murdered was travelling the stars with me while your ancestors were still trying to figure out how to make fire?"

West then looked down at the object The Girl held in her hand. She did not recognise it but she could tell that it was some sort of weapon.

"Just get it over with okay? You'll never have a better chance." she said and The Girl smiled.

"Do you really think that little of me? That I'd just calmly shoot someone who has been so helpful to us over

the years while she is helpless? No, you can go Jenna.” she responded.

“What do you mean 'go'?”

“I mean leave. Find your way to an escape pod and eject. Leave the fighting behind. Or maybe even find one of your friends, if you have any left and see if they'll untie you. Right now they need all the help they can get. I promise that I will not harm you in any way.” The Girl told her and she stepped aside to clear the way for West to get past her.

Nervously West took a few steps, expecting The Girl to suddenly block her path or shoot her but neither happened and she was able to exit the cell. Then she moved as quickly as she could out of the brig and entered the main security section where she saw several more flesh forms standing over the bodies of a number of the *Nightfall's* security officers. These turned as she moved past them, painfully aware of how helpless she was while still bound and their actions seemed strange to West given the fleshforms lack of facial features. West picked up her pace as she neared the doorway leading out of the security section and into the corridor outside and had only one fleshform ahead of her standing right by the doorway. She breathed a sigh of relief as she finally made it to the door but then before she could step out into the corridor the final fleshform sudden reached out one arm and grabbed her by the throat and lifted her off the floor so that she hung in the air with her legs flailing helplessly.

“Of course some of my subordinates may not be as forgiving about your killing of one of us as I am.” The Girl said from the doorway that led to the brig and then the fleshform that was holding West off the floor reached out with its other arm to grasp her head before twisting it sharply and breaking her neck and then dropping her corpse at its feet.

“Let's go.” The Girl ordered, “She was irrelevant. I want Edwards.”

“Captain our warp core is losing containment. We've got eight and a half minutes before we're looking at a breach.” Frost reported from the engineering section of the *Pacific*.

“Can the core be ejected?” S'Kora asked.

“Negative commander. The core's emergency containment system is shot. If we disconnect from the main power grid it will breach immediately. We couldn't get clear in time.” Frost answered.

“Put all power you can into the containment system and then evacuate.” Cameron ordered, “I want all personnel to move to the saucer section. Commander S'Kora prepare to separate the saucer from the secondary hull. Operations ask if the *Ek'Duv* can give us covering fire.”

Warnings began to sound throughout the *Pacific* as the crew rushed to evacuate, making their way by any means available to the starship's saucer section.

“Captain we've got three minutes left.” Frost announced as she entered the bridge and made her way to a vacant control station at the back where she called up engineering functions and Cameron nodded.

“What's the status of the evacuation?” he asked.

“Still twenty five unaccounted for.” S'Kora told him, “They could be dead or-”

“Or they could be right around the corner when we lock them out.” Cameron interrupted.

“Captain we have two and a half minutes. If we leave it much longer the saucer section's shields won't be able to hold.” Frost said.

“Seal all hatches. Commence separation.” Cameron ordered.

The latches holding the *Pacific's* saucer section to the secondary hull were all suddenly released and a brief firing of thrusters on both sections started them moving away from one another.

“Stand by on impulse drive.” S'Kora said, knowing that the saucer section needed to put much more distance between it and the secondary hull before the warp core lost containment. However, before the saucer section's impulse engines could fire the secondary hull was hit once again by an Iconian torpedo. This punched through the failing shields and struck the secondary hull close enough to the engineering section that it destroyed the warp core's already damaged containment system and there was a massive explosion that ripped the secondary hull apart. The blast struck the detached saucer section with much greater force than its shields were able to withstand and the rear section was torn open, venting air and debris into space.

“We've lost impulse power captain.” Frost exclaimed.

“The helm's not responding at all, we're out of control.” the helmsman added.

“Shields?” Cameron asked.

“Off line.” the tactical officer replied.

“There's no power. Just emergency batteries.” Frost added as the saucer section tumbled through space.

The Iconians understood that the saucer section was no longer a threat to them though and they turned their fire away from it and towards the nearby *Ek'Duv* instead. This meant that the *Pacific's* saucer section was able to continue tumbling through the space of the subspace pocket until it passed through the perimeter and was hurled back into the Iconia system.

The sounds of firing and explosions from ahead informed Shry and the mixture of other ground troops with

him that they were close to the position where a number of MACOs were pinned down. The size of Shry's force had been reduced by several ambushes but between them the Andorians, Vulcans and Klingons could still muster just under two hundred men. However, as they got closer to the fighting they saw that they were still vastly outnumbered.

The MACOs who had beamed aboard the space station from the *Umbra* had fallen back to a position around a massive column that was surrounded by a network of walkways and from these they were firing across the gap between them and another set of walkways that ran around the outer edge of the enormous chamber that had the column at its heart. Shry and the other soldiers had entered this chamber about two thirds of the way up and they could see that they were about fifty metres above where the fighting appeared to be.

"This is Captain Shry of the Imperial Guard, what is your status?" Shry signalled.

"Lieutenant Foster, MACOs. We're down to about fifty men captain, including wounded. Captain Reynolds is dead and we've got Iconians all around us." the reply came back but Shry noticed an odd distortion in the channel even though there were no intervening objects between him and the MACOs.

"What's causing that?" he said, looking around at Saron and the Vulcan quickly produced a tricorder.

"I am picking up an odd energy feedback pattern from the direction of the column. It appears to be increasing in magnitude." he said.

"Quick! Turn that tricorder off." Shry snapped.

"You have a theory Captain Shry?" Saron asked as he closed the tricorder.

"I'm thinking that that column might be full of the mineral that the Iconians use for their gateways." Shry replied.

"A logical supposition. Observe that the Iconian forces appear to be using a lower energy setting on their weapons than we have witnessed previously. This perhaps explains how the MACOs have been able to hold out so long." Saron said.

"Their armour can stop these blasts." Shry commented and then he smiled and activated his suit's communication system, "Shry to *Nightfall*. Can you read me *Nightfall*?"

"Just about Captain Shry." Nayal's voice responded.

"*Nightfall* we've come across a structure that could contain a large amount of that mineral that helped you blow up the Iconian warship. Was thinking that blowing it up might have serious implications for them but I doubt our spatial charges will put much of a dent in it. Can you hit it with a torpedo or phaser blast from outside?" Shry said and then there was a brief pause before Edwards responded.

"Shry we're going to run that past Max. We've got your location. We're out of torpedoes but still have phaser capability. Suggest you fall back just in case." he said.

"Understood *Nightfall*. We're here to reinforce MACOs from the *Umbra*. Will advise when clear. Shry out."

Shry said before looking at Saron again, "Did you get that?" he asked.

"Of course. We should proceed downwards and establish a position that the MACOs can reach with the minimum of Iconian interference."

"Agreed. Let's move out." Shry said, nodding and the soldiers began to make their way to the levels where the fighting was continuing.

Numerous blasts from the Iconian lightning weapons struck the *Ek'Duv*, creating a hole in the heavy cruiser's lateral shields that enabled the lightning to surge through and hit the port side warp nacelle which promptly exploded. Operating at impulse power anyway, the loss of one of its nacelles did not reduce the vessel's manoeuvrability while the warp cores were still able to provide power to the ship's phasers. However, the loss of the nacelle destabilised the shields in that section and so Captain Sannet ordered the ship's heading changed to present a different facing to the Iconians.

"Bring us about and line up our magnetic accelerators. Tactical fire all phasers at maximum strength. Follow up with magnetic accelerators as soon as you have breached their shields." he ordered and as the ship turned directly towards the Iconian space station the tactical officer began firing its phasers as his chosen target area came into their arc.

The Iconians continued to fire on the *Ek'Duv* though and the lightning was joined by a trio of torpedoes. Reacting quickly to this the *Ek'Duv*'s tactical officer shot down one of these with a well targeted phaser blast but did not have enough time to intercept either of the other two before they hit the ship's forward shields one after another in rapid succession. This created an opening that the lightning was able to get through and hit the upper part of the primary hull, ripping off hull plating and exposing several decks to space.

"Forward phaser arrays off line captain." the tactical officer reported.

"Evasive action." Sannet said, seeing that the lightning was spreading across the primary hull and getting closer to the bridge itself. The helmsman obeyed immediately and turned the *Ek'Duv* sharply but the lightning had widened the hole in the shield and the ship could not move out of the way fast enough before it reached the bridge at the very top of the saucer section and ripped it open as well, killing the ship's command staff instantly.



In the *Ek'Duv's* engineering section the engineers knew instantly that their vessel was no longer controlled and several of them rushed towards the nearby control interfaces to try and reconfigure them to reproduce the function of bridge stations. However, even as they were running as fast as they could to try and re-establish control the Iconian weapons continued to fire and inflict more damage on the ship. As the damage mounted the *Ek'Duv* lurched violently before all artificial gravity and inertial dampening failed and the crew were hurled against the walls as the ship tumbled. Unable to regain any control, the Vulcans could do nothing before another torpedo slammed into the engineering section and triggered a massive explosion that ripped the entire ship apart.

"I believe that Captain Shry's idea is valid captain." Max said, "However, without torpedoes we may have difficulty penetrating the Iconian shields and then inflicting enough damage to the space station's hull to expose the gateway core without help from the other vessels."

"Then we need to work fast Max, we're rapidly running out of ships." Edwards replied.

"I will attempt to determine the most efficient means of reaching the core as quickly as possible captain." Max said before the sound of firing attracted his attention, "Captain I believe that the Iconians are outside engineering." he added.

Like the other engineers, Max was already armed and he drew the phaser from his holster just as the door to engineering was blasted open and an Iconian fighting machine strode in with its weapon arms raised. Max and the other engineers were prepared for this though and four of them fired their phasers together, bringing the machine crashing to the floor in a smoking heap. A pair of fleshforms followed the fighting machine but these were both brought down by a barrage of phaser fire from the *Nightfall's* engineers before they could get close enough to strike at anyone. Max then stepped into the corridor outside where the body of a security guard was lying on the floor with a phaser rifle beside him. Bending down Max picked up the powerful weapon and tossed it to a nearby engineer.

"Keep this entrance secure. I have work to do." he ordered.

The *Nightfall* was not the only vessel to have been boarded. One Iconian shuttle was able to locate a breach in the shields of the Klingon Vor'cha-class battle cruiser and slip through. However, the limited number of fleshforms and single fighting machine that it carried were no match for the hundreds of Klingon warriors aboard the ship who all rushed to its defence when they were boarded. On the other hand the *Matilda* did not fare so well. Seven Iconian shuttles were able to dock with the exploration ship and its small crew were unable to contain them before a pair of fighting machines reached the engineering section and wiped out the crew there.

To the rest of the *Matilda's* crew it suddenly appeared as if the Iconians in other parts of the ship had dropped dead as their synthetic flesh and mechanical bodies collapsed. However, the reason for this was simply that the Iconian consciousnesses inside them were returning to their space station as the two fighting machines in engineering marched up to the warp core itself. The Iconians controlling these machines then engaged their self destruct systems before they too abandoned their bodies for the safety of the space station.

A security team arrived at the entrance to engineering moments later and they were just in time to see both fighting machines explode simultaneously, the damage destroying the containment system of the *Matilda's* warp core and destroying the entire ship in a blinding flash of light.

Of the original task force that Edwards and his allies had assembled now only seven starships and eight of the three dozen fighters remained while although the Iconian space station had been badly damaged in several sections it still maintained its overall structural integrity.

"There was no need to recall me. This puny force offers no significant threat to us." The Lord Martial said as he entered the command centre just in time to see a torpedo explosion obscure one of the Klingon birds of prey and when it cleared the vessel was gone.

"The intruders have already caused damage to several sections. They even breached the gateway core for a time." the voice of another of the ruling council responded and one of the command centre's screens changed to show a recording of the fighting around the gateway core as the MACOs withdrew, covered by their Andorian, Vulcan and Klingon allies.

"They were driven out weren't they?" The Lord Martial said.

"With losses, yes. Another group penetrated the flesh shaping section and damaged it. Our ability to produce new bodies has been severely reduced. Deploy your troops Lord Martial and secure this facility."

"I already have. Now stop bothering me and watch how to fight a war." The Lord Martial replied.

The Klingons were advancing ahead of the various Federation soldiers and so they were the first in the firing line when a unit of fighting machines unleashed a barrage of lightning bolts from a walkway above the

hallway that they had just entered. A Vulcan soldier responded with a grenade that exploded against the underside of the walkway and caused it to collapse but the fall was insufficient to incapacitate the fighting machines and they fired again as they got back to their feet.

"Back!" Shry called out, realising that the corridor the soldiers were in offered no protection but even as they began to fall back to a more defensible location Saron was hit by a blast of energy that burned right through the Vulcan.

A group of fleshforms then appeared to cut the retreating soldiers off but they were too far away to attack them and a volley of phaser fire burned through them all, enabling the soldiers to continue retreating. The fighting machines from the walkway continued to follow them though, picking off any soldier that stopped to try and give covering fire to the others and the retreat rapidly turned into a rout.

At every junction the Federation troops came under further attack as the army brought back to the space station surrounded them, preventing them from reaching any critical areas of the structure and inflicting any more damage. A scream from behind him caused Shry to turn around and he saw a MACO that had been knocked to the floor being attacked by several fleshforms, the milky white figures beating him while his rifle lay just out of reach. Shry was about to fire his phaser at the flesh forms when he saw the helpless MACO instead reach to his chest where he had a number of spatial charges in his load carrying vest and there was a pulsing light.

"Fire in the hole!" Shry yelled as he realised what the MACO had done and the other soldiers retreated further, getting just far enough away before the charge exploded and destroyed the fleshforms that were advancing once more now that they had killed the MACO.

The soldiers continued to run, firing rapidly at any Iconian targets that appeared but their number continued to be whittled down as more and more of them fell victim to the ambushes at every turning. Shry could not help but notice that there was always an escape route left open for the fleeing troops though and he knew that they were being driven towards something although he did not know what just yet. Then when he had barely more than a squad of men left out his initial force of hundreds he saw what the Iconians had been driving them towards.

"They are in position. Air lock sequence prepared. Awaiting final order to purge section one-one-three-eight." the Iconian voice said and The Lord Martial smiled. After killing the vast majority of the invading soldiers by far more conventional means it seemed almost wasteful not to finish the final few off in the same way but he preferred the idea of leaving them to a lingering death rather than killing them quickly..

"Purge section one-one-three-eight." he ordered.

The large air lock that stood at the end of the corridor Shry and his handful of remaining men had been driven into opened suddenly, a klaxon sounding in warning and there was a strong rush of air that picked up the soldiers and hurled them towards the opening into space. Unable to grab onto anything in time to prevent it, all of the soldiers tumbled out of the air lock into space. From here Shry could see the wreckage of several of the ships of the fleet as well as those still fighting. However, he could see no way by which he or his men could be rescued now. Their rate of travel was too slow for them to reach the perimeter of the subspace pocket and return to the Iconia system, assuming they could even survive such a transition with nothing but their armoured spacesuits to protect them while none of the ships inside could recover them without at least lowering their shields to permit transport.

Shry tried to think of some meaningful words he could give to the other soldiers now drifting with him when all of a sudden he felt a tingling sensation and he saw a red glow forming around himself and all of the other soldiers and he laughed as he realised what was happening before all of them vanished completely.

"Welcome to the *Bat'leth of K'Las*." a Klingon told the mix of human, Andorian and Vulcan troops that had just been beamed aboard the bird of prey. Shry could hear shouts in Klingon and the sound of banging as the crew desperately attempted to carry out repairs to their damaged vessel.

"It looks like I owe you my life." he said as he got to his feet.

"We are not safe yet Andorian." the Klingon replied, "The *Bat'leth of K'Las* has taken serious damage. Our weapons and shields are both offline and we have only limited manoeuvring power. Fortunately our cloaking device is still operational and when we were last hit our captain ordered it engaged. Now we are trying to make repairs and beaming aboard strays like you while we remain hidden."

The *Nightfall* shuddered again as it was struck by more lightning on its saucer section and this time another alarm began to sound.

"Warning, bridge life support compromised. All personnel should evacuate immediately." the computer's voice announced.

"I think that's our cue to leave." Edwards said and as he got to his feet he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to engineering. Bridge life support has failed. We're on our way down to you now."

"Understood captain. I will have consoles prepared for you by the time you arrive." Max told him.

"Thanks Max. Our headsets are still working so we'll be able to deal with emergencies en route." Edwards responded as he and the other bridge crew rushed into a turbolift.

The turbolift should have taken the bridge crew all of the way down to the level that the *Nightfall's* engineering section was located on but instead it came to a sudden halt just part way there.

"Engineering." Carr said but there was just a buzzing sound.

"It must be jammed." Cole said, "Doors open." and the doors slid open.

First out of the turbolift was a junior officer who had been manning a secondary control station at the back of the bridge when it was evacuated and he was suddenly hit by an energy blast from an Iconian fighting machine that hurled him backwards.

Edwards lent around the door frame and fired his phaser at the lone machine, hitting it centrally and causing a small explosion as it collapsed.

"Looks like we'll have to take the long way around." he told the others in the turbolift before they exited it, all with their phaser drawn and they headed towards the nearest shaft that would connect them to the deck that main engineering was on.

The Girl came to a sudden halt just after stepping over the body of another member of the *Nightfall's* crew who had tried to stop her force as it headed towards the ship's bridge.

"They aren't there." she said as she received the update from the fighting machine that had ambushed the bridge crew outside the turbolift. Although the machine had been destroyed the Iconian controlling it had been able to alert the other boarding parties via the communication network that they shared that the command staff had left the bridge. The Girl could not picture the command staff abandoning the bridge unless it was no longer possible for them to control the *Nightfall* from that location and if that was the case then the engineering section was the most likely place that they would head for instead, "But I know where they're going. We need to get to engineering." and she turned around and started to head in the opposite direction.

A torpedo hit the *Umbra* from the side, penetrated the ship's shields and then blasted through the Akira-class cruiser's starboard side secondary hull, severing it entirely. This destroyed one of the ship's mass accelerators but more significantly it meant that the connection between the primary hull and the rear of the ship including the warp nacelles and main weapons pod was no longer stable. The *Umbra* had been performing an impulse turn as part of its evasive manoeuvring to try and avoid the torpedo when the impact occurred and the helmsman could not disengage this in time to prevent the extreme force being produced by the impulse drive at full power from creating such a strong twist in the port side secondary hull that it too snapped, splitting the vessel in two.

"Helm get us out of here. Full impulse!" Captain Hurst yelled as what remained of his vessel lurched violently. The *Umbra's* main saucer section still housed enough of the ship's systems that it could operate at impulse power and maintain shields but it was obvious that the ship could play no further role in the battle in this state. Now the only option left was escape.

"Full impulse aye captain." the helmsman replied, steering the saucer section towards the closest point of the subspace pocket's perimeter so that it could return to the Iconia system while Hurst used his headset to call

up a real time image of the severed secondary hull section and much to his relief he could see numerous escape pods jettisoning from it and also heading for the perimeter.

Unfortunately the *Umbra's* primary hull was not equipped to be able to protect itself from the rear without the weapons and shield projectors mounted on the secondary hull. This meant that not only did it have no weapons to cover its rear arc but also that the aft shielding was not as strong as that on other facings. Thus when another torpedo was fired from the space station the crew of the *Umbra* had no phasers with which to try and shoot it down and its shields were unable to absorb the energy of the explosion when the torpedo hit. The explosion destroyed the entire rear quarter of the saucer section, including the impulse drives and engineering section and leaving what remained without power other than the emergency reserve batteries located at key points.

"Abandon ship. All hands abandon ship." Hurst ordered, knowing that one more torpedo would finish them off entirely.

Although he believed that the battle would be won easily The Lord Martial still paid close attention to every detail. The council had ordered his return and he intended to demonstrate to them his mastery of combat tactics. The biggest problem he faced was that the Iconians had been unprepared for this fight. After transporting their space station to a subspace pocket many thousands of years earlier the thought of it coming under attack again had not occurred to them and the defences that had been damaged in the original siege of Iconia had not been repaired. More importantly although new stocks of torpedoes had been manufactured these had mainly been loaded aboard the small fleet of dreadnoughts that had survived the war instead of being loaded into the space station's launchers and now their supply of ammunition was starting to run low.

"How long will it take to transfer munitions from the fleet to our defensive launchers?" he said.

"Calculating." a voice responded and then after a brief pause it added, "Fourteen minutes for the first batch of fifty torpedoes. Then an average of an additional eight minutes per extra fifty for the first two thousand. This assumes taking all munitions from a single dreadnought."

The Lord Martial looked at the remaining stock of torpedoes loaded in the space station's launchers. This indicated that there were sixty four left, a number which could be fired in a matter of seconds. Reloading with weapons taken from one of the dreadnoughts would obviously enhance the station's defences but The Lord Martial doubted whether the fighting would last long enough for any additional torpedoes to be able to be brought into play. Plus it would then be necessary to reload them aboard the dreadnought afterwards for the main offensive and The Lord Martial did not want to delay that any longer than it already had been.

"Do you want to commence munition transfer my lord?" the voice asked when The Lord Martial failed to respond.

"No. Continue with existing munitions but limit fire rate of torpedo launchers to six per minute until there is only one hostile vessel remaining. Then fire all available torpedoes at once." he ordered.

The last combat capable Klingon bird of prey acted in support of the larger Vor'cha-class battlecruiser, flying close behind it and targeting sections of the space station where weapon fire originated from after the larger vessel had used its primary prow mounted disruptor to weaken the shields protecting it. This continued until a pair of torpedoes were fired from the space station to force the battlecruiser to break off before its main disruptor could weaken the shields protecting a cluster of weapon towers. The first torpedo hit the cruiser's shields before it suddenly broke off to avoid the second. This left the bird of prey exposed as it turned to follow the cruiser and the Iconian towers targeted it with more lightning. The bird of prey was enveloped by the energy from these weapons until its shields gave way entirely and the ship exploded, its hull fragmenting under the onslaught that affected every part of it at once.

In retaliation for this the Vor'cha-class battlecruiser performed a tight turn and fired its main disruptor at the weapon towers again and this time was able to punch a hole in the deflector shield protecting them. To take advantage of this the cruiser then fired all of its weapons as rapidly as possible, concentrating on the hole in the shield so that its shots struck a narrow area of the hull and one of the towers came crashing down in flames. However, while focusing entirely on attack the Klingons overlooked their own defence and another pair of torpedoes struck the ship, the first knocking down its shields before the second crippled its impulse engines. Travelling too fast to be able to turn aside on thruster alone the Klingon cruiser ploughed into the Iconian space station, ripping hull plating from both vessels as it dragged along the surface before finally coming to a halt. This was followed by a brilliant flash of light as a massive explosion destroyed the cruiser as well as opening a large area of the station to space when its warp core lost containment because of the damage suffered.

"Whoa." Nayal said, coming to a brief halt when the sensor feed being passed to her headset showed her the destruction of the Klingon battlecruiser.

"Nayal what happened?" Cole asked.

"The Klingons are gone." she replied, "That cruiser of theirs just crashed right into the station and blew a massive chunk out of it."

"Enough to take it out of commission?" Carr asked hopefully but Nayal shrugged.

"I don't think so. It's still firing." she said.

"Come on, we're almost at engineering. Maybe Max can fill us in." Edwards said, beckoning the others to follow him.

The engineering section was only a few metres ahead and as the bridge staff rounded the final corner they found themselves confronted by a pair of engineers standing guard with phaser rifles taken from dead security guards.

"What happened here?" Cole asked.

"A small Iconian party took our security detail sir." one of the engineers told him, "Lieutenant Maximillian ordered us to take over sentry duty but we haven't seen any more of them yet."

Cole nodded.

"Call out as soon as you see anything." he said as the command officers then entered engineering to find Max beside the central console while other engineers stood by consoles that had been configured to replicate those normally found on the bridge.

"Is everything ready here Max?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain. You have full control of the ship from here." Max responded as the newly arrived officers all rushed to consoles and took control.

"And do you have any ideas on how to hit that gateway core?" Carr added.

"Unfortunately there is only one solution that has presented itself commander. I have evaluated the damage that was inflicted on the Iconian space station. This suggests that the detonation of our warp cores directly against the hull adjacent to the gateway core will be enough to penetrate to the core itself." Max explained and Edwards frowned.

"Won't our weapons be enough?" he said.

"Unfortunately not captain. The core is too deeply buried for our phasers or mass accelerators to penetrate that far within a reasonable amount of time. Even with quantum torpedoes it would require a significant number. On the other hand the energy of four warp core breaches will be enough to trigger the desired chain reaction."

"Four? Can't we just eject one or two?" Nayal asked.

"No, my calculations confirm that all four must be triggered simultaneously." Max said.

"Simultaneously?" Edwards commented, "Max is that possible if we're ejecting them?"

"Given enough time it may be possible captain but I don't believe that we have that time. The only solution is to land the *Nightfall* itself on the space station and then detonate the warp cores." Max said.

"Max this ship isn't designed to land on anything. You mean crash." Edwards pointed out.

"Unfortunately yes captain." Max replied.

"Look at it this way captain, your record of losing ships will remain intact." Nayal said, referencing the fact that every starship that Edwards had served on previously to the *USS Nightfall* had been lost in combat.

"Not an encouraging thought Nayal." Edwards said.

"I will of course remain behind to operate the ship while you and the rest of the crew evacuate captain." Max said and Carr frowned.

"Max you shouldn't-" she began

"Commander I am capable of directly interfacing with and operating every system aboard this vessel alone. For anyone else it would require two people. One to operate the helm and the other our phasers to create a break in the Iconian shields. Do not worry, once I have positioned the *Nightfall* I will set a timed destruct sequence and abandon ship as well. I will not be-" Max interrupted before he too was cut off by the sound of phaser fire from outside engineering.

"Contact!" one of the engineers now on guard yelled as he fired at the first fleshform to come into view.

Before he could fire a second shot though a bolt of lightning from the weapon carried by The Girl struck him and he screamed as he fell backwards.

Flanked by a pair of fighting machines The Girl advanced towards the entrance to engineering, the trio cutting down engineers as they appeared with phasers in their hands.

"Take cover!" Cole shouted as he drew his own weapon when The Girl appeared in the doorway, abandoning control of the *Nightfall's* weapons to defend engineering. It was The Girl that fired first though and although her shot narrowly missed Cole it struck the console he was standing beside and it exploded, showering him with fragments.

The other officers and engineers exchanged fire with the Iconians, both sides being cautious to avoid firing their weapons towards any of the warp cores in the knowledge that it would trigger a breach. Max charged towards the doorway, firing his phaser at a fighting machine that burst into flames as a blast from the Borg's

weapon penetrated its armoured housing. From behind the fighting machine a pair of fleshforms charged at Max, one knocking the phaser from his hand before the other struck him hard enough that he was lifted off the floor and hurled backwards into a large wall mounted console that shattered and exploded when his cyborg body struck it. Falling forwards Max then rolled across the floor with small flashes coming from his implants as they overloaded and burned out before he came to a stop against the central console and lay still.

Ducking behind the central console both Edwards and Carr fired their phasers in short bursts, satisfied with keeping the Iconians back as long as it meant other crew members could get into better firing positions. Nayal on the other hand fired more continuous beams, first turning her weapon on the two fleshforms that had attacked Max before taking aim at The Girl. She was able to dive out of Nayal's line of fire in time though before shooting another two engineers in rapid succession.

A fleshform that had managed to climb up to engineering's upper level lunged at the only remaining member of the engineering staff but the man was able to bring his phaser to bear in time and burned a large hole through the centre of the figure's chest. This was enough to disable the fleshform but did not halt its dive and what remained of it collided with the unfortunate engineer who was pushed over the safety rail and both he and the remains of the fleshform plummeted to the floor below.

The Iconian had not fared much better than the crew of the *Nightfall* though and now The Girl had only two fleshforms left under her command and she did not think that this was enough for her to be able to win a stand up fight against the crew in engineering despite their losses. However, The Girl saw that Nayal was just a few metres away and she hurled herself at the Romulan woman, leaping over Max's body.

Had The Girl been truly human then her strength would have been no match for Nayal's but the synthetic flesh used to augment her body gave her superior strength instead and she easily batted the phaser from Nayal's hand before lifting her to her feet so that she could use her as a shield against Edwards and Carr. "Drop your weapons!" The Girl yelled as the two surviving fleshforms advanced slowly behind her. The two Starfleet officers ceased fire when they saw Nayal taken hostage but neither of them gave up their phasers and so The Girl pressed the muzzle of her claw shaped weapon to Nayal's throat, "I'm warning you Captain Edwards. This Romulan bitch will die." she said.

"Just shoot her." Nayal croaked but after Edwards and Carr looked at one another they both placed their weapons on top of the console that they had been using for cover before raising their hands and getting to their feet.

"Very good captain." The Girl said, "It's good that you can accept defeat so readily, Now personally I'd like to keep you all alive long enough that you can witness the downfall of your precious United Federation of Planets and its allies but I doubt that the Lord Martial will agree to that so instead I'm just going to keep you all alive long enough to ask what made you think that you had any chance of defeating us, did you think that because your probe was able to come and go without being instantly destroyed that there would be no resistance a second time?"

Before either Edwards or Carr could respond to this though The Girl felt a sudden shooting pain from her ankle, a sensation that she was not used to and she looked down to see that Max was still alive and that he had just injected her with the nanites he carried inside his body.

"Resistance is futile." he told her as she lost control of her body and she creamed as she began to convulse. Nayal reacted quickly and snatched The Girl's weapon away from her and turned it on the nearby fleshforms. She had no experience with the Iconian weapon but since she had witnessed how The Girl had held it she was easily able to determine its function. Firing two bolts of lightning in rapid succession Nayal shot both fleshforms and the effect of the weapon on them was dramatic, the synthetic flesh that their bodies were made of instantly reverting to a liquid state as they appeared to burst and the areas around where they had stood, including Nayal herself were sprayed with the milky fluid.

"This is gross." Nayal said as she lowered the Iconian weapon. Then she looked at The Girl as she continued to convulse on the floor, "Oh well I suppose I ought to finish this." she added.

"No." Edwards said as he and Carr rounded the console, "We'll take her back to Earth so she can answer for what she's done." then they both crouched beside Max and lifted him into a sitting position.

"You had us worried there for a while Max." Carr said and he looked at her and smiled.

"I am sorry commander." he said slowly. Then he looked at Edwards and added, "I must apologise to you as well captain. I will no longer be able to operate the *Nightfall*."

"Your network connection?" Edwards asked and Max nodded.

"Destroyed. The nanites inside me may be able to repair it given time but that is something I do not have. My cerebral implants are failing. I estimate that brain death will occur in forty seconds." he said.

"Max there has to be something we can do. You saved my life, let me save yours." Nayal said and she looked around, "What tool do we have to use?"

"There is nothing that can be done to save me. However, I do have one request captain." Max responded.

"Name it." Edwards said.

"After escaping the Collective I never discovered who my people are. If you ever find out then please tell them what happened to me. Tell them I died trying to-" Max began before he suddenly fell silent as he died. Just then a groan attracted the attention of Edwards, Carr and Noyal to where Cole was lying and they all looked towards him.

"He's alive." Noyal said.

"Quick, get a medical kit." Edwards told her and she rushed to a nearby emergency station where there was a medical kit that she took to Edwards and Carr as they went to check on Cole.

"I think he's coming round. Pass me that kit.," Carr said, taking the medical kit from Noyal and opening it. A lot of the equipment that the kit contained was too specialised for Carr to make use of but she was able to load a stimulant and pain killer mix into a hypospray and administer it to Cole. This had the effect of immediately bringing him back to consciousness and he gasped as his eyes opened wide.

"Take it easy." Edwards told him.

"What happened?" Cole asked.

"Max is dead." Noyal answered.

"So now what?" Cole said and Edwards looked at Carr and she nodded at him.

"Now Grace and I fly the *Nightfall* while everyone else abandons ship." Edwards said.

"But you'll need us captain." Cole replied.

"No we'll be fine. Noyal do you think that you can help Commander Cole to an escape pod while carrying her as well?" Edwards said, looking at The Girl who was still convulsing, her skin looking unusually pale with dark lines where major blood vessels were being used by the nanites Max had injected her with to move around her body and keep her incapacitated.

"I can do it captain." Noyal replied, nodding.

"Good. Then get going." Edwards ordered and he tapped his combadge, "This is the captain. All hands abandon ship. I repeat all hands abandon ship."

In sickbay the medical staff rushed to transfer critically injured patients to stretchers so that they could be carried to escape pods while the walking wounded would have to make their own way.

"Emma what are you doing?" King asked when he saw her checking a phaser rifle that had been brought into sickbay along with one of the casualties and left on King's desk.

"There may still be Iconian forces active on board the ship. I'll stay back and protect you doctor." she replied.

"What about you?" King said.

"I cannot leave doctor. This body is just a means for me to interact with the physical world. I exist only in there." Emma reminded him and she pointed to the computer mounted on the wall of sickbay that housed her program.

"Right then." King said and he turned around and strode up to the computer before removing an inspection cover.

"Doctor what are you doing?" Emma asked him, following him from the office and standing behind him.

"Taking you with us." he said, "Your program is in that drive unit, right?" and he pointed to a computer drive visible behind the panel.

"Yes but if you remove it then my link to my body will be broken and I won't be able to-" Emma protested but King was not listening to her. Instead he reached into the innards of the computer and simply pulled the drive out of its mounting. In an instant the subspace connection between Emma's consciousness inside the computer and her synthetic flesh body was broken and she collapsed in a heap. Then as King turned around again he looked at the other occupants of sick bay.

"Well what are you waiting for? Get everyone out of here." he called out before picking up the phaser rifle that Emma had dropped.

"Evacuation complete captain." Carr said as she watched the ejecting of escape pods on the main console in engineering that she and Edwards had configured to give them control over all the systems that they needed for the *USS Nightfall's* final flight.

"And the *Dawnstone* and *Mount Seleya* are pulling back. Locking phasers on target. Do you have the course laid in?"

"Ready as soon as the word is given." Carr replied.

"Good. Computer this is Captain David Edwards. Destruct sequence authorisation one, four delta six echo." Edwards said.

"Sequence accepted. Awaiting second sequence." the computer responded.

"Computer this is Commander Grace Carr. Destruct sequence two, hotel nine tango seven."

"Sequence accepted. Awaiting final sequence and countdown instructions."

"Computer this is Captain David Edwards with final destruct sequence for ten minute silent countdown on my order. One alpha one baker one charlie. Confirm."

"Sequence confirmed." the computer replied before there was a brief buzzing sound, "Unable to set timed countdown due to damage to secondary command systems."

Upon hearing this Edwards and Carr looked at one another.

"Can self destruct still be initiated?" Carr asked.

"Affirmative. Self destruct is possible by direct command for immediate effect." the computer answered.

"You know what this means Grace?" Edward said and she smiled.

"Awaiting your order captain." she said.

"The word is given." Edwards told her.

The *Nightfall* turned directly towards the location of the space station's gateway core and accelerated towards it, Edwards firing the ship's phasers to punch a hole in its shields. Lightning leapt from the space station's defences but the *Nightfall*'s own shields held even when a torpedo struck them as well. Had the Iconians guessed what Edwards and Carr were planning then they would have concentrated all their remaining torpedoes on the Akira-class cruiser but as far as they could tell the remaining crew of the damaged vessel were making a desperate strafing and would pull up at the last moment.

It was only when the *Nightfall* struck the weakened Iconian shields and flew through them, protected by its own shields that the Iconians realised that there was something more to this attack run but by that time it was too late for them to do anything about it and the cruiser crashed into the space station.

The impact threw both Edwards and Carr to the floor and they supported one another as they got back to their feet.

"What's our position?" Edwards asked.

"Right on target." Carr answered and he nodded.

"I love you Grace." he said.

"I love you too David. Looks like we get to spend the rest of our lives together after all. Till death do us part." she replied and then he leant in to kiss her.

"Computer," he said just before their lips met, "activate destruct sequence."

The simultaneous detonation of all four of the *Nightfall*'s warp cores was enough to instantly vaporise the cruiser and also ripped open the Iconian space station and destroyed its gateway core. To the Iconians themselves with their ability to process data as fast as a computer this chain of events was not quite instantaneous though. First their sensors detected the failure of the magnetic containment fields surrounding the warp cores and The Lord Martial gasped as he came to the inevitable conclusion about what was going to happen next. Then they sensed the massive release of energy as the anti-matter of the warp cores escaped before the explosion blew open their space station and finally for one brief moment they observed the expanding energy wave from the explosion reach their gateway core where the refractive mineral that it was made of spread this throughout the space station and it too was vaporised from the inside, the subspace pocket that it had remained hidden inside for two thousand centuries collapsing.

"I am picking up multiple distress signals." T'Lan said as the *Thames* entered the Iconia system.

"T'Lan look at this." Nikki said, looking at the runabout's sensors. These showed not only the wreckage of the Iconian dreadnought that had been positioned to protect the system but also every piece of wreckage and escape pod that had crossed the perimeter of the subspace pocket and forced back into real space.

"I am seeing transponders from several of the fleet's vessels." T'Lan said.

"Is that the saucer section from the *Pacific*?" Nikki asked.

"It appears so. There is also a Klingon bird of prey present." T'Lan responded.

"I'm picking up two operational Starfleet warp signatures." Nikki added.

"Yes, it is the *Dawnstone* and *Mount Seleya*. They have just exited the subspace pocket. They appear to be damaged." T'Lan said before another new group of signals appeared, "Escape pods. From the *Nightfall*." she added and Nikki's eyes widened.

"The *Nightfall*?" she said as T'Lan reached for the runabout's communications.

"This is the *USS Thames* to any crew from the *USS Nightfall*. Please confirm your status." she broadcast.

"T'Lan it's me." Nayal's voice responded, "You better come and pick us up quick. Robert's hurt. I think he'll make it but he just passed out again."

"Nayal it's Nikki. What about my mom. Where is she?" Nikki signalled.

"Nikki I'm so sorry." Nayal had just enough time to say before there was a massive flash of light as the energy released from the destruction of the Iconian space station lit up the entire Iconia system.



## EPILOGUE

Stardate Classified, Location Classified.

“Ah here we are. Your new home.” Admiral Schmidt said to The Girl as the trolley that she was secured to was pushed into a featureless room. After being handed over to Starfleet Security to be interrogated, Schmidt had had her transferred to his custody instead. Now that the Iconians were nothing more than a few scattered individuals he did not consider them a serious threat to the existence of the Federation but he wanted to make sure that his section had The Girl available should this change. The Girl could do nothing but glare back at him, a muzzle covering her face below her nose, “I understand that your ability to form gateways was destroyed by the nanites you were injected with but there's always the chance that some other member of your species could try to break in here to rescue you so you'll be glad to know that we set up a permanent interdiction field around the room to stop that. Of course that means that you won't be getting any other visitors either, what with the energy of that field being dangerous to humanoids but everything needed to supply the energy that will sustain you indefinitely has been built into this trolley you're lying on. It is indefinitely as well isn't it? This body has already died so it can't die again and I suppose that makes you immortal. Perhaps you could use some of that time to reflect on what brought you here.” Schmidt and the two agents who had brought The Girl to her cell then all turned and left, the door sliding shut behind them. The Girl was so completely secured that she could not even lift her head when there was the sound of the door being welded shut from the outside, trapping her inside forever. Then when this stopped the lighting panels in the ceiling were suddenly shut off and she was plunged into total darkness.

Stardate 68110.23. Starfleet Command. Earth.

The Starfleet admiral sat in the centre of a row of five such senior officer held a PADD in his hand and looked at the audience in the large room before he began to read.

“It is the finding of this investigation that the actions of Captain David Edwards and the officers and men of the *USS Nightfall*, registry N X eight-two-zero-zero-eight, were justified. It is our finding that the presence of subroutines in the operating systems of multiple Starfleet vessels were the result of an attempt by Starfleet Admiral Dunn to undermine the *Nightfall* project and that this resulted in the chain of command breaking down and the events in the Iconia system. The rulings of this board are, therefore as follows; firstly no charges will be brought against any member of the crew of the *USS Nightfall* or any other Starfleet vessel that took part in the attack on the Iconia system for their actions, including the use of a cloaking device in violation of the Treaty of Algeron. Secondly a task force shall be established to determine the full extent of the unauthorised modifications carried out to Starfleet operating systems by agents of Admiral Dunn. Thirdly despite the destruction of all of the ships involved in it, the *Nightfall* program will proceed with the construction of a new batch of vessels within the authorisation limits laid down by the Federation Council on Starfleet procurement. I now declare these proceedings closed.”

“Congratulations on your promotion Captain Cole.” Cole heard a voice say and both he and T'Lan turned to see Schmidt standing in a nearby alcove. Both Cole and T'Lan now wore the red of the command division, with Cole wearing the rank pips of a captain and T'Lan those of a full commander, “I take it that this beautiful child is your daughter.” Schmidt added, looking at the infant T'Lan was holding.

“You. I take it you came here to remind me us that your section has managed to remain hidden?” Cole replied and Schmidt smiled.

“Be grateful that it did Captain Cole. That is why you still have a commission and a ship.” he said.

“Because you were able to frame Admiral Dunn. I hear he's having trouble with his legal team for his trial.” Cole said.

“The evidence is overwhelming.” Schmidt replied.

“Evidence that you planted.” T'Lan commented.

“Indeed. Though I wouldn't try making too many allegations like that in public commander. It could damage your career if you were thought of as a conspiracy theorist.” Schmidt told her.

“Now you listen here, “Cole hissed, stepping towards Schmidt, “if you ever threaten my family or crew again I'll-”

“Don't worry captain.” Schmidt interrupted, “I can promise that you won't be hearing from myself, Commander Jones or Commander Brown again. Our identities have been compromised where you are concerned and we can do without the further risk of exposure. On the other hand you may be contacted by others within my section from time to time if we need anything from you. Now I shall bid you goodbye. I

believe that you both have somewhere to be.” he said and then he turned around and calmly walked off down the corridor.

“He is correct Robert. We should be going.” T'Lan said as Cole stared at Schmidt while he was walking away and Cole nodded before he and T'Lan continued on their way, heading for a landing pad outside where they found Nayal, now wearing a Starfleet uniform as well and she saluted.

“Lieutenant.” Cole said, returning her salute, “Ready for your first day as operations chief?”

“Step aboard my ride and I'll take us right there.” Nayal replied and Cole and T'Lan boarded the shuttle. As T'Lan walked past her Nayal smiled and simply added, “Cousin.”

Nayal piloted the shuttle up out of the Earth's atmosphere, heading towards a ship that orbited the planet and Cole smiled as soon as he saw the Akira-class vessel.

“There she is T'Lan. Freshly delivered from the Beta Antares shipyards. Nayal circle us around if you don't mind.” he said and Nayal nodded.

“Aye captain.” Nayal said, steering the shuttle around the cruiser.

“I do not see the point in this Robert.” T'Lan commented.

“Indulge me T'Lan.” Cole replied as the lettering on the front of the ship's primary hull came into view and he smiled.

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“We're home.” he added.