

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL ***THE SLAVER CRISIS***

SHUTDOWN

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Rendezvousing with Professor Denning while his research team are studying a planet with a primitive population the crew of the *USS Nightfall* discover that the world is at risk of disaster from an asteroid collision in the near future. However, when they attempt to prevent this they discover that the true threat to themselves is far greater...

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 68643.4 USS *Nightfall* NCC-82008-A on approach to planet Vendi IV, local name Ithsal.

The *USS Nightfall* came out of warp about thirty million kilometres from the fourth planet of the Vendi system in the remote Meltara Sector.

"Analysis Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan, the Akira-class cruiser's first officer said, glancing over her shoulder at the Betazoid woman sat at the bridge's science station.

"Planet is Class M with gravity slightly lower than that of Earth." Sodyne said as she looked at her console, "The natives have a pre-industrial level of technology and have settlements spread across four of the six continents." she added and Captain Robert Cole looked towards the helm station where the Bolian second officer sat.

"Commander Ghroc put us into a standard orbit. Commander Martin what is our tactical situation?" he said and the dark skinned man sat at the tactical station behind him double checked his console.

"No indications of any threats in the system captain." he responded.

"That is to be expected." T'Lan commented and Cole nodded, smiling at the Vulcan who was also his wife. "Lieutenant Nayal," he said to the Romulan woman at the operations console, "would you be so kind as to open a hailing frequency to Professor Denning?"

"Yes captain, opening a hailing frequency now." she said.

"Put him on the main screen when you have him." Cole added and moments later the *Nightfall's* main bridge view screen changed from a view of the planet from space to one of the inside of a covert research post on the surface with the face of a middle aged human male in the foreground.

"Professor Denning, sorry about the delay but we got somewhat held up." Cole said and Denning smiled.

"That's okay captain we're just glad it's you." he responded.

"You knew we were coming? I didn't realise that your sensors were active?" Cole said.

"You're forgetting about the Slaver stasis box captain. It started glowing as soon as you came within a light year." Denning reminded him. The Slavers had controlled a galaxy-spanning empire a billion years earlier that had collapsed in an uprising by one of their many slave species, now most traces of the empire were gone apart from a few ruins and artefacts. Key among these were stasis boxes, rare and incredibly valuable boxes inside which time stood completely still. These were therefore, able to preserve anything placed inside them perfectly for an indefinite amount of time and even living creatures could survive the billion years since the Slaver Empire had collapsed as long as they remained inside a closed stasis box. A curious property of the boxes was that they glowed when brought within a light year of another such box and this was the primary means, other than random chance, of finding them. With both Professor Denning's research team and the crew of the *Nightfall* possessing such a box it meant that either group could use them to detect the approach of the other, "We were taking bets on when you'd make contact."

"So who won?" Cole asked.

"Trellan." Denning answered. Trellan was a Romulan archaeologist who, like Nayal, had left Romulan space during the civil war that followed the destruction of their home world, "Now I owe him that half bottle of Canadian whisky I've been saving. Original, not replicated."

"Well you know what they say, never gamble what you can't afford to lose." Cole said.

"Captain we're entering orbit now." Ghroc then announced from the helm station.

"I will beam down as soon as I can assemble an away team." T'Lan said.

"Not this time I think T'Lan." Cole replied, "The research post is secure enough, I think I'll handle this one. You can have the conn and keep an eye on things up here." Cole said, "Sodyne you're with me. I'll take Doctor Hamill as well and a couple of our ground combat specialists. Commander Martin have them meet us in transporter room two in five minutes." he added as he got to his feet and began to walk towards the turbolift, "Sodyne with me."

"Yes captain." Sodyne responded as she followed him to the turbolift.

The two officers made their way to the transporter room, diverting only to equip themselves with phasers and a tricorder for Sodyne. It was not anticipated that they would need their weapons on the surface but Starfleet regulations called for all members of an away team to be armed. They were joined in the transporter room by Doctor Hamill, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer and also a pair of the ground combat specialists that the cruiser carried as part of a program to develop superior ground combat forces compared with those Starfleet had deployed during the Dominion War.

"All set doctor?" Cole asked as they stepped onto the transporter and she nodded.

"Yes captain." she said and Cole looked at the transporter operator.

"Do you have the co-ordinates chief?" he said.

"Yes captain. I've got the research station's beacon locked into the system." the man told him.
"Very good. Energise." Cole ordered and moments later he felt the sensation of the transporter activating and all he saw were lights until he materialised in another room similar to that of the transporter room aboard the *Nightfall*, only this time on the surface of the planet below.

"Welcome to Vendi Four Captain Cole." Professor Denning said, "Or Ithsal as the natives call it. Come with me and I'll show you the observation lounge. I believe you all know Jack Foster." he added and he pointed to the man stood by the research post's transporter control panel.

"Yes I remember him. How are you Mister Foster?" Cole asked, stepping down from the transporter pad.

"Bored." Foster responded, "Until something breaks around here there isn't anything for me to do. I'd go for a walk outside with the others but I'd be too tempted to tap some of the locals on the shoulder."

Cole smiled at the thought of this, knowing that the researchers wore isolation suits that made use of holographic technology to render themselves invisible whenever they left the research post.

Denning escorted the Starfleet away team to a room that had computer panels along the back wall and a large viewport all along the front one. Looking out of this viewport it was easy to see that the research post had been constructed on a hill that overlooked a native city and Cole, Sodyne and Hamill joined Denning in walking over to this and looking out of the viewport. Of course the reverse was not true, the research team operated under the Prime Directive and so their presence on the planet had to remain a secret. Therefore, the research outpost was well camouflaged and the viewport itself hidden behind a holographic projection known as a 'duck blind' screen, a term taken from human hunters for equipment that allowed them to catch their prey unawares.

The nearest edge of the settlement was easy to observe without magnification but for looking deeper into the city required the use of the magnifiers set up at intervals and when Cole peered through one of these he got a close up look at some of the natives. Like the vast majority of the sentient species in the milky way galaxy the natives were humanoid, differentiated from humans by the shape of their pale purple hairless heads. These were taller than a human's and in place of distinct ears projecting from either side they instead had a pair of ridged bulges that ran along them. Among these there were also a pair of figures wearing all enclosing suits that appeared to glow bright orange as they were observed from the outpost. The natives continued going about their business as if these two figures were not there though, unaware of their presence thanks to the holographic technology that concealed them.

"That's Hewitt and Doctor Terry." Denning said, "Terry wanted to run some scans of some of the natives suffering from an infection that's going around."

"Is it serious?" Hamill asked.

"Oh no. The vast majority of the victims recover after a few days but the doctor wanted more information about how it spreads so she took a tricorder out to run a few discrete scans." Denning explained.

"Is that a statue of a Slaver?" Sodyne said when she looked through another of the magnifiers at the city and she focused on a large statue outside one of the city's larger buildings.

The statue was of a tailed humanoid with a prominent snout and a single eye in the centre of its face, matching what was believed to be the appearance of the long extinct Slavers.

"How would they know what a Slaver looks like?" Cole said with a frown. Until this point only a single image of a Slaver had been discovered in a stasis box in the twenty-third century and since the last living example had died a billion years earlier this meant that their appearance ought to have been a mystery to the local natives.

"That's the big question." a voice said from behind the away team and they looked around to see a man entering the room who could easily have been mistaken for a Vulcan.

"Ah Trellan." Denning said.

"Come to collect your whisky?" Hamill commented with a smile.

"Offering to share it with me doctor?" Trellan responded.

"No thanks. The last time I drank with a Romulan my hangover lasted for a week." Hamill said and Sodyne winced.

"Ugh. Don't remind me." she said, "Still you are single now Sally."

"I'm sorry to hear that doctor." Trellan said.

"Thanks but I'm glad I ended it before I messed everything up. Jack figured that because he was on track to be a captain while I've probably reached the peak of my career it meant his position was more important than mine." Hamill said.

"Ah, I understand." Trellan said, "Getting back to the reason we're all here though, for the time being that statue is a total mystery. Obviously the natives can't have seen a living Slaver, almost all intelligent life in the galaxy was wiped out with the fall of their empire and anyway the ancestors of the natives wouldn't have been sentient a billion years ago even if they had been able to survive somehow. Plus although we came here because of the Slaver era ruins we haven't seen a single original image of a Slaver they could have used for reference. They made that themselves."

"And they don't have any of those stasis boxes. Ours didn't start to glow until you turned up." Foster added from where he had been stood leant against the wall as he listened to what was being said.

"Good. I hate those things. I'd smash the one aboard the *Nightfall* if I could." Hamill commented. She had been trapped inside a stasis box for a short period of time and this had left her with a strong dislike of the devices. Sodyne glared at Hamill when she said this, despite being close friends she had an opposing opinion to the doctor and took every opportunity to study information about the Slavers she could get.

"I suppose that if you had your people's telepathic skill you could just wander down there and read their minds Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." Trellan said, looking at Sodyne and she looked back at him for a moment with the stern expression still on her face. Unlike the vast majority of Betazoids Sodyne lacked any form of telepathic ability and as a rule she avoided other members of her own species whenever she could, even going as far as taking Earth citizenship when she joined Starfleet.

"We do know that the natives do seem to revere the Slavers as some kind of deity though." Denning said.

"Have you seen any other depictions of them?" Sodyne asked.

"Yes, plenty." Denning answered, nodding his head, "Most of the houses and official buildings contain them."

"But each image contains only a single figure. There are no groups shown in any of them, anywhere."

"What else have you found here?" Sodyne asked as she turned her attention back to the city and looking through the magnifiers she saw the two figures in isolation suits now walking across the open ground between the city and the research post.

"You mean original Slaver artefacts?" Denning asked.

"Yes." Sodyne answered simply.

"It looks like the natives found a number of Slaver devices while they were conducting mining operations. Our guess is that they were attracted to the metals used in Slaver outposts and while they were digging them out of the ground they came across things that obviously weren't natural." Trellan explained.

"Have you been to these mines?" Sodyne added.

"No, we think that they are probably located somewhere under one of the natives' temples. They'll have been in use at least a thousand years ago so they'd probably be played out by now anyway." Trellan replied.

"Captain I'd like to try and gain access to one of them." Sodyne said, looking at Cole.

"Well this is Professor Denning's operation lieutenant commander. We're only here to support him." Cole pointed out and he looked towards the professor.

"Oh I've no objection. Perhaps Foster could escort her. As long as he doesn't make use of the opportunity granted to him of being invisible to start playing pranks on the natives." Denning said and he grinned at Foster.

"Anything to get out of this place. Even if it does mean being stuck with one of you Starfleet types." Foster said.

"Great. When can we leave?" Sodyne asked.

"How about now. I'll show you where the isolation suits are kept." Foster replied.



The isolation suits kept at the outpost were loose enough to fit over the clothing that Sodyne and Foster wore so neither of them needed to spend time undressing first. All that was needed was for Sodyne to move her phaser and tricorder to the pouches provided on the outside of the suit that would keep them hidden as well. This meant that in just a few minutes they were able to step through the holographic barrier that concealed the entrance to the outpost into the outside world. The helmet visors of the all enclosing suits enabled Sodyne and Foster to not only see one another but also the barrier they had just stepped through and the similar one that covered the outpost's observation lounge viewport. Looking towards the native city they were also able to make out the two figures that were Professor Denning's assistant Erica Hewitt and the team's medical officer Susan Terry.

"Come on commander. Let's get a move on." Foster said.

"Lead the way Mister Foster." Sodyne responded and the pair began to walk towards the native city ahead of them.

When they were just under half way to the city they encountered Hewitt and Doctor Terry on their way back towards the outpost.

"Commander Sodyne? I didn't realise that the *Nightfall* had arrived yet." Hewitt said when she was close enough to realise who it was that was accompanying Foster.

"We arrived about an hour ago." Sodyne replied, "Mister Foster is showing me to the native temple."

"She wants to see if we can find one of the old mines underneath." Foster added.

"Good luck with that. We've not been able to find anything that would point towards where they are." Hewitt said.

"So is one of your medical staff about as well?" Terry asked and Sodyne glanced back towards the outpost before answering.

"Yes, Doctor Hamill beamed down with us." she said and Terry smiled.

"Good. I'd like her to take a look at some of the samples I've taken. I can always use a second opinion." she said.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to help." Sodyne said.

"Hey look I'd love to stand here all day and chat but if we want to be back at the outpost before it gets dark we're going to have to get a move on." Foster pointed out and Sodyne nodded.

"As you wish Mister Foster." she said and the two pairs of people each continued on their way.

Hewitt and Terry made it back to the outpost before Sodyne and Foster and as soon as they had removed their isolation suits they made their way to the observation lounge to report to Professor Denning.

"Ah Doctor did you manage to get the samples you wanted?" he asked.

"Right here professor." she answered, holding up a small sample case.

"Is that the disease infecting the natives?" Hamill said and Terry nodded.

"Yes. It's not that serious in most cases but there can be complications that lead to more serious issues." she said.

"Such as?" Hamill asked.

"Well it seems to mess up the infected person's sense of balance so there are the risks posed by injuries from falls. These tend to affect the old and the frail mainly as you'd expect. I suspect that it's water born so I've taken some samples from wells and rivers. All the water we use here comes from an isolated supply but I want to be sure that whatever this infection is we're protected against it." Terry explained.

The computers aboard the *Nightfall* could probably tell you that in less time than the equipment you have." Hamill pointed out and Terry smiled.

"I was hoping you'd say that." she said.

"Captain may I take some of the samples back to the ship?" Hamill said, turning to Cole.

"I don't see a problem as long as the usual precautions are followed doctor." Cole responded and Terry immediately opened her sample container to reveal the vials filled with water samples taken from the city.

"Here, I'll show you what I have." she said.

"Erica did you find anything else while you were out there?" Denning said to his assistant while the samples were being shared out.

"Nothing that we haven't seen before professor." she told him, "The natives certainly didn't give any indication that they'd noticed us either. Our presence is still a secret I think."

"Good. It would be nice to find where the natives got their knowledge of the Slavers from though." Denning said and then he looked at Cole and added, "Maybe your Lieutenant Commander Sodyne will be able to come up with something."

"Watch where you're standing." Foster warned Sodyne as they reached the edge of the city and he began to lead her through the streets.

"A bit of mud isn't going to give us away." she replied.

"No but that's not the point."

"Then what is?" Sodyne asked.

"These people haven't discovered the benefits of proper handling of sewage yet commander. Not everything at your feet is mud." Foster said and Sodyne suddenly stopped and looked down at her feet.

"You mean I could be standing in-" she began and Foster grinned.

"It happens." he interrupted, "Now come on. These suits have odour filters built into them but they don't last more than a couple of hours and then it's like rotten eggs vomited onto raw meat that's been left in the sun all day."

"Okay then, hurry up and show me to the temple." Sodyne said and she shoved Foster forwards.

"Careful there lieutenant commander, you don't want either of us to knock into anyone or anything that would give us away." he commented as he began to walk again.

The native temple was located at the edge of the square in which the large statue of a Slaver that was visible from the outpost had been constructed and from within the square Sodyne saw that an image of a Slaver had also been carved into the walls either side of the entrance to the temple.

"Do all the natives follow the same belief system?" Sodyne asked as they both walked towards the large open temple doorway.

"We've seen various temples around the city opening at different times so the Professor thinks that there are at least several different denominations of the same basic religion. Just like on Earth. Of course they could be completely different ones and until he manages to crack the locals' language we won't really know."

Foster told her as they entered the temple itself and Sodyne looked around the interior.

The room that they were stood in appeared to be some sort of antechamber, a small space with brightly painted walls that showed a number of different scenes varying from desert to arctic tundra, the common feature of each of them being a Slaver. Sometimes this creature was alone while in other images it was accompanied by a number of natives.

"I don't get it. These look like the natives actually met a Slaver but that's impossible." Sodyne said.

"Yeah, the professor thinks it has to do with natives just saying they saw one and the story getting spread around." Foster replied, "The good stuff is through there though." he added and he pointed towards the door leading to the next room. However, this was closed and this presented a problem to Sodyne and Foster. If there were any of the natives on the other side of the door then they would see it opening even if they could not see either of them.

"Keep watch." Sodyne said as she walked over to the door and while Foster watched for any other natives coming towards the temple she took out her tricorder and began to scan the temple. Being made of wood the doors did not block the subspace scanning field of the tricorder and Sodyne was able to get a rough idea of the size of the chamber on the other side as well as confirming that there was no-one in it, "Okay I'm not picking up any lifeforms. Help me with this door." she said as she returned her tricorder to its pouch on her isolation suit and then she and Foster gently pushed the doors open just wide enough to enable them to slip through into the next room when Sodyne came to a sudden halt as she looked around.

It was immediately clear that the belief system that this temple was dedicated to did not require large gatherings of worshippers and instead of rows of seats for the faithful to sit on the room looked more like an art gallery with numerous plinths on which various statues or bowls of burning oil had been placed while the walls were covered in more paintings like those in the antechamber.

"You might want to take a look over here." Foster told her and he walked across the room to one of the plinths.

"Why? What is-" Sodyne began as she turned towards him but she stopped speaking when she saw what was on the plinth and she rushed to his side, "Incredible." she said.

There on the plinth, resting on a cushion was a circuit board that the natives of Vendi IV were still at least a thousand years of technological development away from being able to replicate themselves. Initially Sodyne just stared at the circuit board but then she reached out to pick it up.

"Whoa!" Foster exclaimed, quickly grabbing her by the wrist, "Professor Denning says we aren't to touch anything. What if one of the priests comes in here and sees that thing floating in mid air? Do you want him rushing outside screaming about miracles to everyone in earshot?"

"Of course not. I just let my excitement get the better of me there." Sodyne responded as she instead took out her tricorder and began to scan the circuit board, "So do you know what it's for?" she added but Foster shrugged.

"Who knows?" he said, "I know there are some power regulating components on there but I can't tell whether they're meant for just that board or if the whole thing is supposed to provide power for a larger mechanism."

"Are there any more like this?" Sodyne said when she had finished her scan.

"Not here that I know of." Foster answered, "Although some of the paintings on the walls seem to have images of advanced technology on them so the priests must have at least been told about other stuff."

"Well the materials this is made of match those we've seen in Slaver technology before. I'm certain that it was made by them. I'd love to get this back to the *Nightfall* to take a closer look." Sodyne commented as she then turned towards the nearest wall and began to study them.

"Yeah well I think that your Starfleet regulations might have something to say about that." Foster said, leaning against a supporting column as he watched Sodyne inspecting the painted walls and Sodyne snorted.

"Yes, there are times when they can be problematic but there are often ways to get around them." she said and Foster grinned.

"Wait, was that a criticism of Starfleet?" he said, "You know maybe you're not so bad after all. Leyla isn't it? Maybe we should get together when we get back to the outpost."

"Get together?" Sodyne said, turning to look at Foster and frowning at him.

"Yeah, have a drink and see what it leads to?" he said, "Would that be so bad?"

"If you are suggesting that the two of us should have sex then I should warn you that about a month ago a shared a bottle of Romulan ale with Nayal and Doctor Hamill after her break up and even then I didn't get drunk enough that I would agree to sleep with you. It can't happen Mister Foster."

"Why not? You got a boyfriend?" Foster asked when Sodyne turned her attention back to the painting.

"No." she said without taking her attention from the wall.

"Girlfriend?" Foster added and Sodyne just glared at him, "Okay so what do you have in your life that means you won't even give it a try?" he said.

"Standards." Sodyne replied as she turned back to the wall once again.

"Ouch." Foster said. Then after a moment's hesitation he added, "So you say that Doctor Hamill is single now?"

"Mister Foster I-" Sodyne began before there was the sound of a door opening and both she and Foster looked towards it as a pair of native priests entered the room.

Sodyne and Foster remained silent as the priests walked towards the end of the room where a single large image of a slaver dominated the wall. The priests chanted as they walked and Foster quickly activated the recording device built into his isolation suit to create a record of everything they said and did. As the priests walked past Foster he backed away to make sure that they did not bang into him while he was invisible to them and then followed them, making sure to keep the recorder focused on them at all times.

At the end of the room the two priests bowed in front of the painting of the Slaver and chanted some more before they turned and left the room in silence, at which point Foster turned off the recorder.

"Well I doubt that there was much new in there but maybe the professor can use that to help build us his language database." he said.

"Have you seen the natives do that before?" Sodyne asked.

"Sure. I don't know what the purpose of it is though. Then again I never really had much time for religion." Foster answered.

"Me either. At least not on Betazed. Especially weddings, they were the worst." Sodyne told him and he smiled.

"Weddings on Betazed are where everyone gets naked aren't they?" he said and Sodyne sighed.

"Unfortunately yes. Now can we get back to why we're really here instead of discussing your frustration with your inadequate sex life?" she said.

"Inadequate? Oh now that's just uncalled for lieutenant commander." Foster responded.

"Has the professor formulated any opinions on what these paintings are supposed to represent?" Sodyne said as she turned her attention back to the walls and began comparing the subject of each image.

"Oh he has general ideas about a few of them but until we can get the universal translator programmed so that we can understand what they're saying I doubt he'll come up with anything specific." Foster said and then he noticed that Sodyne was now staring specifically at the large painting that the priests had been praying to, "Hey Sodyne, is something up" he asked.

"What does that look like to you?" she replied and she pointed to the top corner of the painting where there was a silver circle that had a curved white protrusion coming out of it.

"Something moving in the sky perhaps? A shooting star?" Foster suggested and Sodyne nodded.

"Or maybe an asteroid or comet. The thing is that unless an object like that came very close to the planet the natives couldn't possibly detect it. They don't have the technology to grind lenses to make even the most basic of telescopes."

"But perhaps if we could identify that object then maybe we could figure out what was supposed to be happening in this picture." Foster commented and Sodyne smiled.

"Did you run a scan on the system when you arrived?" she said.

“No, Professor Denning just had us construct the outpost and then we landed my ship and shut it down. It’ll take a few hours to get the main sensors back online.” Foster told her.

“I think it would be a better idea to use the *Nightfall’s* sensors. I’m sure they’re better than the ones aboard your ship.” Sodyne said as she used her tricorder again to record every detail of the painting, “Come on, let’s get back to the outpost and show this to Captain Cole.” she added when she was finished.

3.

Sodyne linked her tricorder to the outpost computer when she and Foster returned and joined Cole and Denning's team. Hamill was no longer present though, the *Nightfall's* medical officer having returned to the orbiting heavy cruiser to run an analysis on the samples given to her by Terry.

"I noticed this in a painting that a pair of local priests were praying to." she said as she brought up a recorded image of the painting on one of the observation lounge's screens and she zoomed in on the silver circle.

"We've seen that symbol in a few places." Hewitt commented.

"I put it down to some belief in a form of astrology." Denning added.

"That may be so but given that Foster and I saw the priests praying to this specific image I think that this is supposed to be significant. Maybe if we knew exactly what it was then it would give us more of an insight into the local culture." Sodyne said.

"Commander there are likely to be thousands of objects in this system that this could represent." Cole pointed out.

"It could even be something that doesn't exist any more." Trellan added, "It could be something that hit this planet some time in the distant past or even just passed right through the system."

"Still it can't hurt to look." Cole said and then he tapped his combadge, "Cole to *Nightfall*." he said.

"*Nightfall* here." T'Lan's voice responded.

"T'Lan, Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has found a painting indicating that there could be some sort of celestial body in the system that is significant to the natives. I want the *Nightfall's* sensors used to build up a database of everything that it could be. Use our fighters to cover blind spots in the system if it will speed things up." Cole said.

"Yes captain. We will begin immediately. *Nightfall* out." T'Lan replied before the channel was closed.

On the *Nightfall's* bridge T'Lan looked from the captain's chair to the operations console where Nayal sat.

"Lieutenant Nayal engage our lateral sensors and commence scanning the system for all debris. Feed the results to my headset as they come in. Inform the hangar to launch our alert fighters and direct them to take up a position where they can look over the planetary horizon and expand our scanning field." she ordered she activated the small heads up display that was built into the headset that she like all of the *Nightfall's* command crew wore as an alternate means of interacting with the ship's systems.

"Yes commander. Beginning sensor scan now." Nayal replied and as she began to initiate a full sensor scan of the system T'Lan turned to the tactical station, "Lieutenant Commander Martin could you use our targeting system to expand our scanning capability?" she asked,

"You mean run a threat analysis commander?" he responded.

"Exactly. If we can spread the analysis between different systems then it will speed up the scanning process." T'Lan said.

"Commander what about deploying our runabouts?" Ghroc suggested, "They can stay on station indefinitely."

"An excellent suggestion Lieutenant Commander Ghroc. Please organise crews for them both. Instruct them to deploy around the star at the orbital distance of the fourth planet." T'Lan said and Ghroc nodded.

"Yes commander." he said, getting up from the helm station and as he headed for the turbolift a more junior officer took his place from one of the secondary stations at the rear of the bridge.

"Lieutenant Nayal it may also be useful to know whether the planet has suffered any major impacts in its history. Run a geological scan to determine whether there are any traces of such an event." T'Lan said.

"That'll take about ten minutes and I'll have to divert some of our scanning capability from the sweep of the system." Nayal pointed out.

"I am aware of the limitations of our sensors lieutenant. I did help design them after all." T'Lan reminded her,

"Please proceed."

"Yes commander." Nayal said before the intercom activated.

"Doctor Hamill to bridge." Hamill's voice said.

"Yes doctor?" T'Lan responded.

"Commander I've confirmed the presence of a pathogen in the samples provided to me on the surface. It looks to be some kind of bacteria." Hamill told her.

"And is it able to infect us doctor?" T'Lan asked.

"I haven't determined that yet. I've got the sickbay computer running simulations against the biologies of every species represented in the *Nightfall's* crew now but that's not why I'm calling. I want to try and find out how widespread this bacteria is. If I can determine what its environmental tolerance is then it may give me some more clues about how to destroy it." Hamill explained, "The problem is that I can't access the lateral sensors."

"No doctor, our sensors are currently occupied cataloguing astronomical objects on the captain's orders. It may be several hours before there is surplus capacity." T'Lan said.

"Okay I'll check again later. Sickbay out." Hamill said.

"Commander I think I may have something you ought to see here." Martin then said from behind T'Lan.

"How can you have identified the object that the natives have included in their religious beliefs already lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.

"That's not what I mean commander. It's just that I think you should take a look at this." Martin said and T'Lan used her headset to access the output from his console.

"An asteroid?" she said.

"Yes it looks like it's either in a wide irregular orbit or is a rogue object from outside the system. In either case our targeting system has tagged it as a threat." Martin told her.

"It is still more than three AUs away Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan pointed out, "At its rate of approach it would not come with range for several years yet."

"Yes commander but it's the planet that our computer has tagged as being under threat. If it sticks to its currently projected orbital pattern then its orbit will cross that of Vendi IV," Martin said, "and an impact from an object that big would trigger enough climatic change to destroy the local civilisation. Assuming that it isn't destroyed outright that is."

"Show me on the main screen Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan ordered and Martin brought up a tactical display on the bridge's main viewscreen. This showed a representation of the planet Vendi IV with the *USS Nightfall* in orbit around it at one side of the display and there was also another object shown at the far side of it. The orbital paths of the planet and this other object were both marked on the image and it was obvious that these intersected with one another.

"But we can intercept that thing, right?" Nayal asked, "As long as the natives never know we won't be breaking the Prime Directive."

"You are correct Lieutenant Nayal. The asteroid is alien to the planet's culture so it is not covered by the Prime Directive." T'Lan replied.

"I suppose that leaves the question of deflect or destroy." Martin said, "An asteroid like that would just shatter if we hit it with a quantum torpedo or a couple of rounds from our mass accelerators. Or we could carve a chunk off with our phasers to shift its course. The targeting system can't get a measure of its mass so I can't tell you whether using our tractor beams would be practical or not."

"That will be a matter for the captain to decide. Only he can authorise taking action against the asteroid." T'Lan replied.

"Then it's a good job we still have a few years in which he can make his mind up." Nayal commented.

"Yes it is. Lieutenant open a channel to the captain." T'Lan told her.

"Yes commander. Opening a channel now." Nayal responded.

"*Nightfall* to Captain Cole." T'Lan said.

"Go ahead T'Lan." Cole's voice replied.

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Martin has identified an asteroid that is on a collision course with Vendi IV. It will not strike it for a number of years yet but when it does it has the potential to wipe out the native civilisation." T'Lan told him.

"I take it that means it's still far enough away that we could do something about it without the natives noticing then?" Cole said.

"Yes captain." T'Lan answered simply.

"Okay then I'm on my way back up. I need to know exactly what we're dealing with here. Cole out." Cole said before he tapped his combadge to close the channel.

"Did you catch that?" Cole asked, looking at Professor Denning and the other man nodded.

"Yes, our sensors only have a range of a few million kilometres and we didn't run a general scan from the transport." he said.

"There didn't seem much of a point." Trellan added.

"I'm not blaming you." Cole said, "My priority now is to launch an intercept mission while we still have time. We'll have to return to the *Nightfall*."

"Captain." Sodyne said when she heard this and Cole turned towards her.

"Yes commander?" he asked.

"Captain I'd like to stay here on Vendi Four while you intercept the asteroid. It's obvious that this was a Slaver planet and I'd like to do as much study of it as I can." she told him and Cole nodded.

"Of course." he said.

"Captain I'd also like your permission to acquire a native artefact for study. There is an example of a Slaver circuit in the temple Foster and I visited." Sodyne added.

"Whoa, we can't just take native artefacts." Denning said.

"Agreed. Commander you know that would violate the Prime Directive." Cole said.

"Captain the natives don't need to know. I took detailed scans of the device with my tricorder, more than enough to create a virtual model that can be used as a replicator pattern." Sodyne said and Cole frowned. "You want to replace it with a fake?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Sodyne replied.

"It's a good idea if you ask me." Trellan said, "The natives don't even know what electrical power is so they aren't likely to try and power it up in the next thousand years or so."

"No, absolutely not." Cole said.

"I agree." Denning added, "As much as I'd like to get my hands on any Slaver technology we can't steal it from its legitimate owners."

"We'd only be borrowing it professor." Trellan said, "As soon as-

"I said 'no'." Cole interrupted, "Anyone who even attempts to remove native artefacts will be brought up on charges. Is that clear?" and he looked back and forth between Sodyne and Trellan.

"Crystal captain." Sodyne said, frowning and making no effort to hide her displeasure.

"And what about you Trellan?" Denning asked.

"Don't worry professor. I know my place on this team. I will do as you say and I won't remove the circuit from the temple." Trellan replied.

"Very well. I think we all know where we stand." Denning said, "Captain Cole, how long will it take you to carry out your intercept mission?"

"That depends on the exact nature of the asteroid professor. Once I find out the exact mass and composition then I'll know whether we're better off altering its orbit to keep it away from the planet or just destroying it outright." Cole told him, "I doubt it will be more than a day at the outside though. We'll travel there and back at warp and conduct a short ranged scan before we fire on it. We could be there and back in a couple of hours."

"Professor I think I should go with Captain Cole." Trellan said.

"What for Trellan?" Denning responded.

"We know that some sort of celestial body plays a part in the local belief system. What if the *Nightfall's* scans show that this asteroid could be it? It could be linked to the Slavers and if it is you'll need someone qualified to take a closer look after the asteroid has been deflected." Trellan said and Denning smiled.

"Sometimes Trellan I forget that you've been doing this several decades longer than I have." he said,

"Captain would you mind taking Trellan along with you?"

"I don't see any problem with that professor. I'm letting you keep my science officer after all so I may as well take one of yours with me." Cole replied.

T'Lan was waiting for Cole with one of the cruiser's junior officers when he beamed back aboard the *Nightfall* along with the two ground combat specialists and Trellan.

"Trellan you remember Commander T'Lan?" he said as they stepped from the transporter pad.

"Of course. It's good to see you again commander." Trellan said and he smiled at T'Lan who responded with the traditional Vulcan salute, "I take it that Lieutenant Nayal is aboard?" he added.

"She is. She has just finished her shift and returned to her quarters." T'Lan told him.

"Then do you think she'd object if I dropped by?" Trellan asked.

"You would have to ask her yourself." T'Lan said.

"Ensign show Trellan the way to Lieutenant Nayal's quarters." Cole ordered and the junior officer beside T'Lan nodded.

"Yes captain. This way please sir." he said to Trellan before escorting the Romulan out of the room.

"Where is Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" T'Lan asked as the transporter room door slid shut behind Trellan.

"She wanted to stay on the surface to study the natives. They obviously know more about the Slavers than a culture with their level of development ought to." Cole told her, "In fact I'd like you to join her T'Lan."

"You think she will require assistance?" T'Lan said.

"Perhaps, although I think that Professor Denning and Erica Hewitt can provide all the academic support she needs. I'm just a little concerned about her judgement. You know how keen she is to study anything to do with the Slavers and I'm worried that she'll take risks that she shouldn't." Cole explained.

"If that is your wish then I will certainly beam down. The presence of a second officer is advised by Starfleet procedures in any case." T'Lan said.

"Thanks. I knew I could count on you. Now is there anything I need to know about what's going on up here?" Cole added.

"Doctor Hamill has identified the pathogen as a water born bacteria and is still studying it for the risk of cross species contamination. At the same time we are continuing with your order to log all objects that could have influenced the native belief system." T'Lan told him.

"In that case I'll leave you to beam down." Cole said.

“Yes captain.” T’Lan replied and Cole began to walk towards the exit from the transporter room. However, he stopped just after passing by T’Lan and turned to face her again.

“Oh there is just one thing I should bring up while you’re still here.” he said, smiling at his Vulcan wife.

“Yes captain?” she asked and Cole suddenly embraced her and kissed her on her lips, holding the kiss for several seconds.

“There, I think that covers it for now.” he said when he pulled away.



Nayal held the tiny plastic figurine up close to the desk light as she applied paint to it. She paused when there was a chiming sound from the door to her quarters and she looked around.

"Come in." she said and the door slid open to reveal Trellan standing outside.

"Jolan tru." he said, using the Romulan greeting as he stepped through the doorway, "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, not at all Trellan. Jolan tru." Nayal replied as she put the figurine down and rinsed the excess paint from the brush, "I was just catching up on a bit of painting."

"Model soldiers?" Trellan asked, approaching Nayal and looking down at the figures on the desk in front of her. Each of them depicted an armed soldier in a variety of poses.

"Wargaming figures." Nayal corrected him, "It's a hobby I picked up from Bradley. He had a huge collection of them and I kind of got into them."

"Bradley? That was the helmsman you were involved with, yes?" Trellan said.

"That's him. He taught me a few of the techniques but I'm still a learner compared to how good he was."

Nayal replied, "So you're going to be looking over our shoulders while we blow up this asteroid then are you?"

"That's right. I figured that anything about that asteroid turns out to be significant in terms of Professor Denning's mission then one of us ought to be around to see it first hand. Especially if your captain decides to blow it up." Trellan said and Nayal stared at him for a moment. Then she held a hand up to one of her ears.

"What's that I hear Trellan? Is that a lie?" she said and Trellan smiled.

"Okay I admit it. I did have an ulterior motive for wanting to come aboard." he responded.

"I knew it." Nayal said, "So what are you really after?"

"I'd like access to your replicator." Trellan told her, "Yours in particular. The ones we've got are limited to say the least and I ran out of kali-fal about a month ago."

Nayal smiled back at him and got up from her desk, walking over to the replicator at the far side of the room.

"Computer one bottle of kali-fal and two glasses." she said and a bottle of blue liquid along with a pair of drinking glasses. Then she brought them back to the desk where she started to pour each of them a drink, "This isn't perfect by any means but since the embargo ended Starfleet's managed to recreate something passable." she said, handing Trellan a glass, "Since we last met I've been able to acquire a small supply of original kali-fal that I've tucked away but that's for special occasions rather than visiting vagrants."

"I'll try not to take that too personally." Trellan said, taking a sip of the drink, "This isn't bad actually is it? Can I run off a few cases?"

"Be my guest." Nayal told him.

"There is one more thing Nayal, something you may be able to help me with." Trellan continued.

"Of course."

"There's a Slaver artefact in a native temple on the surface. Your science officer Sodyne and I both think that we could swap it for a replicated copy without the natives ever noticing but your Captain Cole says that that would violate the Prime Directive." Trellan said.

"Yes, that sounds like him. T'Lan would say the same. How those two produced a child that isn't a robot I've no idea. So you want me to try and talk him round?" Nayal asked and Trellan smiled at her again.

"Are you sure you don't have some Reman blood in you because I think you just read my mind." he said and Nayal frowned.

"Reman? Here I am supplying you with kali-fal and you're calling me one of those troglodytes." she said.

"Troglodytes?" Trellan said, also frowning.

"It's a human word for primitive cave dwellers." Nayal explained and Trellan's expression reverted to a smile.

"Troglodyte. I like that." he said, "So will you help me Nayal?"

"Trellan I'd be happy to, but once the captain has reached a decision he sticks by it. T'Lan might be able to talk him round but I doubt she'd listen. For some reason I think calling her 'cousin' for the last few years has annoyed her. Not that she'd show it of course." Nayal replied.

"Annoyed her? I can't image why." Trellan said and the two Romulans both laughed.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne what is our current situation?" T'Lan asked when she entered the observation lounge where Sodyne, Denning and Hewitt were all monitoring the native city through the magnifiers set up along the observation port.

"Commander T'Lan? What are you doing here?" Sodyne responded in surprise.

"Captain Cole and I both decided that a second officer should remain here with you as a precaution." T'Lan told her.

"I don't need my hand holding commander." Sodyne commented.

"As I said it is just a precaution." T'Lan replied.

"Sure. Come on I could use a break, I'll tell you where we're up to while I eat." Sodyne said and she led T'Lan from the observation lounge to a small dining area where she walked up to the replicator, "I'll have sweet and sour pork with noodles and coffee. Black no sugar." she told the device but it just buzzed.

"Your selection is not in this device's memory bank." it said and Sodyne sighed.

"I keep forgetting that our replicator is better than theirs." she said.

"On the previous *Nightfall* Captain Edwards kept a selection of isolinear chips encoded with his favoured meals. That way he could always add them to any replicator he used." T'Lan commented.

"That's a good idea." Sodyne said before she addressed the replicator again, "Tuna salad sandwich with coffee. Black no sugar and it better not be the coffee you can't make." she said and moments later her requested meal materialised and she carried to the nearest table when T'Lan sat opposite her.

"Okay so the locals definitely know about the Slavers even though there is no way they could have seen one." Sodyne said, "Now they seem to have turned the Slavers into some sort of cult and they've created numerous images and statues of them. They've also recovered a number of Slaver artefacts that they seem to treat as holy relics despite obviously having no idea how they work or what they even do."

"Such as the circuit you saw in the temple?" T'Lan said as Sodyne took a bite from her sandwich.

"Yes. I wanted to swap it for a fake but the captain said no."

"It would violate the Prime Directive." T'Lan pointed out.

"I was hoping there might be enough wiggle room to let us get away with it." Sodyne commented.

"Starfleet directives and regulations are not designed to have wiggle room as you put it lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Yes that's the impression I got from the captain."

"As long as you understand his decision is final. Now is there anything else I should be aware of?"

"Yes just one thing. Make sure you keep that wedding ring of yours on. Foster made a pass at me and I'm guessing he'd try his luck with you if he thought he had a shot." Sodyne warned T'Lan.

When Cole stepped from the turbolift onto the *Nightfall's* bridge he found Ghroc and the ship's chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Davis both standing behind Martin at the tactical station and he walked to join the three men.

"What do we have?" he asked.

"Not much at the moment I'm afraid captain." Ghroc replied, "I had our sensors remain focused on the cataloguing of all the astronomical objects in the system."

"We've got a lock though. Say the word and we can fire off a quantum torpedo right now and blow it to pieces." Martin added, "Although it's starting to look like that won't be a good idea."

"Why not?" Cole said.

"We may not have been able to run detailed scans of the asteroid but it does appear to have an extremely high metal content captain." Davis told him and Cole nodded.

"So if we just blow it up we could be left with a cloud of metal fragment heading for the planet." he said.

"Like a barrage of self forging fragment rounds." Martin said, "They'll melt as they enter the atmosphere and mould themselves into armour piercing darts on the way down before they solidify again. Nothing the natives can build will withstand even the shock wave of a near miss let alone a direct hit."

"So we either destroy it in such a fashion that the debris gets caught up in another gravity well or we attempt a deflection." Cole said.

"That would be my recommendation, yes captain." Davis said, "Of course I'd like to get better readings of its physical composition first."

"Commander Ghroc I take it that you already have an intercept course plotted?" Cole said, looking at the Bolian second officer.

"Yes captain. At warp two we can get within forty thousand kilometres in less than a quarter of an hour." Ghroc told him.

"Transporter range?" Cole commented and both Ghroc and Davis smiled.

"Just in case you decide it's worth taking a few samples. It's not like we're on a short timescale after all." Davis said.

"We can cut a few chunks free with our phasers and then beam them aboard." Martin suggested and Cole nodded.

"I've no problem with that." he said, "Of course I'd want them scanning beforehand. If this asteroid does have a high metal content then billions of years in space exposed to stellar emissions could have left it highly radioactive. If that's the case then I'm not having it brought aboard without Doctor Hamill giving it the all clear first. Is that understood?"

"Of course captain." Ghroc replied.

“Good. In that case let’s bring Lieutenant Nayal and our guest to the bridge and be on our way.” Cole said and Ghroc tapped his combadge.

“Lieutenant Nayal is Trellan with you?” he said.

“Yes commander.” Nayal replied.

“Good. Could you both report to the bridge as we’re about to get underway.” Ghroc told her.

“We’re on our way. Nayal out.”

“Lieutenant Commander Davis will you be remaining with us?” Cole added.

“I think so captain. I can monitor engineering from the bridge almost as easily as down there.” Davis said as he donned the headset he had been holding in his hand.

“Then you may as well take T’Lan’s position since both Ghroc and Martin have seats of their own.” Cole told him as he and Ghroc headed back to their regular positions on the bridge and Davis followed him to the centre of the room where he sat down beside Cole.

It was then that the turbolift door opened and Nayal and Trellan stepped out.

“Ah Mister Trellan you may as well take the extra seat beside me.” Cole said and the Romulan smiled as he walked over and sat down beside Cole.

“Do I get one of those headsets?” he asked when he noticed that he was the only one on the bridge who did not have one.

“No you won’t need one.” Cole replied and then he sniffed, “Romulan ale?” he said as he caught the scent of the drink on Trellan’s breath.

“He ran out several days ago so I let him use the replicator in my quarters captain.” Nayal said, “I was off duty after all.”

“Just as long as you aren’t too drunk to carry out your work lieutenant.” Cole said.

“Don’t worry captain. I can hold my kali-fal.” Nayal assured him and then Cole turned back towards Trellan.

“You can take a copy of the replicator pattern if you want. I doubt Starfleet would mind and it’ll save you the trouble of rationing your supply.” he said.

“Thank you captain. That’s much appreciated.” Trellan replied.

“Intercept course to asteroid laid in captain. Ready to engage at warp two on your command.” Ghroc announced from the helm station and Cole nodded, activating the communication system built into the arm of his chair.

“*Nightfall* to T’Lan. Do you read me?” he transmitted.

“Yes captain. I read you.” she responded.

“We’re about to break orbit. Do you need anything before we depart?” Cole asked.

“No thank you captain. Our position is secure. You are free to depart.” T’Lan answered.

“Very Good T’Lan. *Nightfall* out. Mister Ghroc, engage at warp two.” Cole ordered and Ghroc immediately activated the *Nightfall*’s warp drive, accelerating the ship to ten times the speed of light as it headed away from the planet and towards the distant asteroid that threatened it.

“The *Nightfall* has left orbit. The ship should reach the asteroid in under a quarter of an hour.” T’Lan told Denning and his team when she and Sodyne returned to the observation lounge.

“That’s good to hear.” Denning said and he looked at Hewitt, “Erica could you go and find Foster? I want someone more capable than one of the students to monitor the communication system just in case the *Nightfall* tries to contact us.”

“A logical move. Our combadges will be out of range until the *Nightfall* returns.” T’Lan responded.

“I’ll go and find him. He’s probably in his quarters drinking or looking at images he’ll try and hide when the door opens. After that I think I’ll turn in. It’s getting late.” Hewitt said and Denning nodded.

“Yes, we’ve lost the light.” he said.

“Don’t you watch the city at night?” Sodyne asked.

“We did at first but there seems to be little worth watching.” Terry told her and Sodyne looked at T’Lan.

“Commander I’d like to stay up and see what happens.” she said.

“Very well. I can manage for some time without sleep. I will remain here with you.” T’Lan told her.

“In that case I’ll see you ladies in the morning. At least two of my grad students are always up if you need anything.” Denning told T’Lan and Sodyne before he turned to leave.

“I think I’ll turn in for the night as well.” Terry added before she followed Denning from the observation lounge, leaving T’Lan and Sodyne alone.

“Commander when the *Nightfall* gets back I’d like to run a thorough scan of the planet for Slaver technology.” Sodyne said when she was sure they were alone.

“Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, if you are still thinking of removing artefacts from this world then-” T’Lan began.

“I’m not talking about anything the locals may have already found commander.” Sodyne interrupted.

“You are hoping to find facilities that remain as yet undiscovered?” T’Lan asked and Sodyne smiled.

“Exactly. We could remove whatever we wanted from one of them and it wouldn’t impact on the natives even

if they stumbled on it the next day. You know as well as I do that the sensors aboard the Nightfall are better than the ones aboard that crate that Foster pilots." she said.

"An accurate observation. Given the time that a planet wide geological scan would take I expect that Captain Cole would be willing to divert sensor time away from construction of the database of astronomical objects in the system." T'Lan replied and Sodyne smiled, "Did I say something to amuse you lieutenant commander?" T'Lan added.

"You always refer to the captain formally even though you're married. Don't you ever call him by his first name?" Sodyne asked.

"When not on duty, yes. However, it would be inappropriate to refer to him as 'Robert' during a professional conversation." T'Lan told her and the two women turned their focus back towards the alien city.

5.

When the *Nightfall* came out of warp the asteroid heading towards Vendi IV was directly ahead of the Starfleet vessel, travelling at several thousand kilometres per hour. This was a sedate pace in terms of space travel for Starfleet and Ghroc was easily able to match its course and speed using just the ship's thrusters. The asteroid itself had an ovoid shape and was about half as long in one dimension as the other.

"Target acquired captain." Martin said.

"Lieutenant Nayal run a scan of the asteroid. I want a full analysis of it before I decide how to proceed. Put it on the main screen when you have it along side the live footage." Cole ordered.

"Yes captain, scanning now. We'll need to make at least one orbit to make sure we get everything." Nayal responded as she trained the *Nightfall's* sensors on the asteroid and began to scan its composition.

"Firing thrusters now." Ghroc said in reaction to this, making use of the manual flight controls to steer the *Nightfall* around the asteroid.

The scan began on the surface of the asteroid, modelling the shape accurately in three dimensions. After this Nayal switched to a penetrating scan that took readings of the chemical make up of the asteroid and Martin studied these closely.

"Lieutenant are you running full spectrum scans or limiting the bandwidth?" he asked as he saw the results.

"They are full spectrum commander." Nayal replied, double checking her console to be certain she had not accidentally limited the functionality of the *Nightfall's* sensors.

"Is something wrong commander?" Cole asked.

"There's a gap in the frequency of the returned sensor energy." Martin said.

"What could be causing that?" Cole added.

"Well if we're running a full spectrum sensor scan as Lieutenant Nayal says then either the asteroid is totally transparent to the missing frequencies or it's absorbing all the energy in them." Martin said.

"Transparent? That's impossible isn't it?" Cole commented, frowning.

"Yes captain." Martin replied.

"Unless someone is running a bad cloaking device. Of course if they were then we'd be able to detect it using the rest of the scanning bandwidth." Nayal pointed out.

"So the asteroid is absorbing the energy then." Cole said.

"It certainly looks that way captain." Davis responded, "There's also something odd about the composition of the asteroid."

"What now?" Cole asked.

"Well the outer scans don't show anything like the metallic content we detected from Vendi Four's orbit. Oh there's some of the usual nickel and iron that you'd expect but not enough for the mass of this asteroid if it goes all the way down to the core. What I can tell you though is that this object originated right here in this system. The radioactive profile of the outer layers proves that." Martin said.

"How strong is the radiation?" Cole said.

"Oh typical for a nickel-iron asteroid. There's no real danger from it." Martin reassured him.

"Nayal keep pushing the scan deeper. I want to know everything about this rock." Cole said.

"Captain perhaps we could separate a small piece. Just enough to give us greater access to the interior." Martin suggested and Cole nodded.

"Very well commander. Lock phasers and cut a piece free. Then use a tractor beam to bring it aboard." Cole said.

"Don't go any deeper than about three metres." Davis added.

"Why not?" Cole said.

"Because it looks like the asteroid becomes solid metal at about that point, Captain, I don't think that this is a naturally occurring object." Martin explained.

"Then what is it Lieutenant Commander Martin?" Cole said.

"It looks like it could be some kind of artificial object that had enough mass to attract smaller naturally occurring objects to it as they passed by one another and these formed a shell around it over a billion years or so." Martin said.

"That puts it as being from the time of the Slaver Empire." Trellan said from the other side of Cole as a smile spread across the Romulan researcher's face, "Captain this could be the most significant find of Slaver technology ever. One of their ships maybe. No-one has ever discovered one of them before."

"Sodyne's going to be mad that she missed this if it is." Martin commented.

"The trick though is to get it free without damaging it further." Davis said.

"We cant risk using phasers." Trellan added.

"In that case we'll have to send an engineering team to the surface with charges. We should be able to shatter the outer covering and expose the object at its core in one go." Davis said.

"I want to know more about what's down there before I authorise anyone to beam down to the surface." Cole said, "Lieutenant Nayal how's that scan coming?"

"I'm having trouble getting to the core captain." Nayal replied, "In addition to something absorbing everything from a range of frequencies there seems to be a layer of ultra dense material that our sensors just can't penetrate."

"It could be neutronium." Davis suggested.

"We know that the Slavers knew of neutronium." Trellan added.

"Our phasers can't penetrate neutronium. Maybe we can just cut whatever is down there free." Ghroc said.

"That assumes the neutronium is solid. If something had already fractured it then we could hit a weak spot. Something had to have destroyed it a billion years ago after all." Martin pointed out.

"With any luck our scans will tell us about any weak points." Cole said, "Lieutenant, please continue scanning."

"Yes captain." Nayal responded and she continued to probe deeper into the asteroid. Then all of a sudden a few moments later she looked up from her console and added, "Captain I'm detecting a power source somewhere inside the asteroid."

"A power source? Still active after a billion years?" Davis said in surprise.

"Mister Trellan does any of this mean anything to you?" Cole said, looking at the Romulan sat beside him but Trellan shook his head.

"No. Nothing captain." he said.

"Captain the asteroid!" Ghroc exclaimed suddenly as through the heads up display built into his headset and everyone on the bridge turned their attention to either their own headsets or the image of the asteroid on the main viewscreen. The outer shell of rock was starting to splinter as long inactive systems slowly came back to life, firing thruster units and blasting the rock that obscured the machine's view of the universe away.

"What the hell is that?" Nayal said and she looked at Trellan.

"Don't ask me." he said, "Like I said no-one's ever found a Slaver ship before."

"But is it a slaver vessel?" Cole asked but Trellan shrugged.

"Maybe. The age is right but don't forget that the Slaver Empire was brought down by a revolt. If this thing is coming on line then that suggests it's heavily automated. Maybe that was a way to get around the Slavers' telepathic mind control abilities. No crew means no-one to brainwash." he said.

"I'm not taking any chances. Red alert." Cole said and alarms began to sound around the ship.

"Shields up captain. Phasers locked. Loading torpedo bays." Martin announced.

"Wait captain that's a priceless find." Trellan said, concerned that what stood to be the greatest discovery of his career was about to be blown to pieces before his very eyes, "Could I ask a favour?"

"Ask away." Cole said.

"Could a copy of this footage be downloaded to a PADD for me? I'd love to be able to study anything you find." Trellan said and Cole nodded.

"Nayal set up a transfer." he said.

"Thank you captain." Trellan commented.

"Helm back us away, one quarter impulse. Tactical stand by to fire but hold for now. Let's see what this thing does." Cole ordered, "Nayal what's the status of our fighters?"

"All crews aboard and ready to launch captain." Nayal responded.

"Tell them to scramble but don't head for the alien ship just yet. Have them circle around. I don't want to provoke it too much." Cole said and while Nayal was relaying his order to the *Nightfall's* hangar where a dozen Peregrine-class fighters waited Trellan smiled.

"A good call I think captain." he said.

As the ancient alien vessel continued to break free of its rocky prison the *Nightfall's* fighters raced from the forward launch door at the very front of its saucer section and the heavy cruiser's shields were raised again as soon as the last of them was clear. These tiny but well armed craft spread out into a 'V' formation and promptly turned aside so that they were heading past the alien vessel instead of directly towards it. Like the *Nightfall* itself they raised their shields and armed their weapons but held their fire while everyone waited to see what would happen next.

Like the asteroid that it had appeared to be, the ancient spacecraft had an oval shaped hull that appeared symmetrical along each axis. The smoothness of the surface was broken only by the occasional engine exhaust port or sensor and weapon arrays.

"Eight hundred metres long." Cole said as he read the longest dimension of the alien vessel from his headset's display.

"A D'deridex-class warbird is longer." Trellan pointed out.

"Yes but they don't have neutronium hulls." Martin responded from behind him.

"Captain we're being scanned." Nayal announced.

"Can you tell if she's powering weapons?" Cole asked.

"Sorry captain, no. Although I can tell you that the energy levels inside that thing are building. Whatever its fuels source is it's lasted a billion years." Noyal answered.

"I'm not picking up any shields." Martin commented.

"With a neutronium hull who needs shields?" Davis pointed out, "Mind you it makes you wonder what sort of weaponry was used in that war if neutronium hulls weren't enough to protect them."

"Direct matter to energy conversion." Trellan said.

"What?" Cole said.

"The Slavers and their enemies used weapons that could achieve total conversion of matter to energy even in something as compact as one of your hand phasers." Trellan explained.

"Commander Davis do you think our shields would stop something like that?" Cole said, turning to his chief engineer.

"Possibly for a few hits. Without a weapon to study I couldn't tell you how it would react to striking a forcefield rather than solid matter." Davis replied.

"Energy spike!" Noyal snapped as the energy readings from the ovoid vessel suddenly more than tripled in strength.

"Evasive action!" Cole ordered and Ghroc threw the *Nightfall* into a sudden turn that was just in time to avoid the bolt of energy that erupted from the alien craft and sped towards the Starfleet cruiser. Then the image of the enemy ship on the main viewscreen showed it turning towards the *Nightfall* ominously.

"Now captain?" Martin asked and Cole nodded.

"Now Mister Martin, open fire. Noyal tell our fighters to engage the enemy." he said.

"Captain can you at least try to disable rather than destroy that ship" Trellan said but he was too late to stop Martin from unleashing the *Nightfall's* firepower.

"Firing phasers and quantum torpedoes captain. Full spread." Martin said as he fired the heavy cruiser's ship to ship weapons. The twin mass accelerator cannons that ran the length of the *Nightfall's* secondary hulls were not regarded as effective against manoeuvrable or shielded targets and so Martin did not use these. However, he did fire all of the ship's phasers at the same time as launching dozens of quantum torpedoes at the enemy ship, hoping that by using such a massive barrage he would be able to find a weak spot in its protection.

The bright red phaser beams hit the alien ship first but these appeared to be ineffective against the neutronium hull and when the quantum torpedoes struck soon after the ship was still undamaged. However, with thirty torpedoes, two from each of the *Nightfall's* launchers, it was almost inevitable that they would find a weak point if one existed and when one of the torpedoes hit a thruster unit it triggered a secondary explosion that tore a hole several metres across in the otherwise impenetrable hull.

At the same time as the *Nightfall* was engaging the enemy vessel its squadron of Peregrine-class fighters split into pairs and all raced towards it as well, adding the firepower of their own phasers and photon torpedoes to those of the *Nightfall*. Like the *Nightfall's* weapons though, these were largely ineffective against the ovoid ship, scorching the hull in places but failing to hit anything that they could cause damage to. The alien ship was distracted by the oncoming fighters though and instead of firing at the *Nightfall* again it turned its fire on the smaller but closer fighters.

Instead of a single large energy blast, the alien ship unleashed a barrage of smaller pulses of energy from multiple weapon arrays. When one of these hit a Starfleet fighter it was destroyed totally, not even giving the unfortunate pilot the chance to eject and three of the squadron were rapidly destroyed in this manner while the remainder broke off and took evasive action.

"Martin give our fighters what cover you can. See if you can target that damaged section with our phasers." Cole ordered.

"Yes captain." Martin replied and he fired the *Nightfall's* phasers again, this time using only the arrays that had the hole created by the exploding thruster unit in their field of fire.

With both the *Nightfall* and the alien ship in motion targeting the hole was not easy and most of the bright red energy beams were instead simply absorbed by the heavily armoured hull. One of the beams found its target though and there was another detonation from somewhere inside the enemy ship. This did not widen the hole but the alien vessel did respond by rotating to take the damaged section out of the *Nightfall's* line of fire before unleashing another powerful energy blast at the heavy cruiser. This blast hit the *Nightfall* head on and the entire vessel shook violently.

Had the command crew not been strapped into their seats they would have been thrown from them. The blast itself did not physically damage the *Nightfall* but the moment that it impacted on the cruiser's shields it triggered a massive disruption of its power systems. This caused the forcefields covering the hangar doors to flicker and there was a rush of escaping air from the front and rear of the saucer section, carrying with it unsecured equipment from the hangar before the forcefields were stabilised again and the decompression ended. Thankfully the hangar was deserted at that point and none of the *Nightfall's* crew were blown out into space as well.

"Damage report." Cole called out as the lights and displays on the bridge flickered.

"Shields collapsed entirely as soon as we were hit captain." Martin reported, "They're back up now but they're down to sixty percent. It looks like some of the hardware blew out from a massive reverse flow of power."

"I read our warp cores as stable thank God." Davis added, using the panel built into his chair to check on engineering. Their emergency power supply remained stable but it looks like the mains are fluctuating. Captain I think I'd better get down there and help sort it out."

"Go." Cole responded, nodding and Davis released his safety harness before getting up and heading for the turbolift, "Mister Martin, what about weapons?"

"We've lost phaser power. The system just blanked when we were hit. We've still got torpedoes though." Martin told him.

"Helm is sluggish captain." Ghroc added, "It's probably the power issue."

"I'm getting erratic readings from the nanite hive as well captain. I think the surge fried a whole bunch of them." Nayal said as her console informed her of the feed coming from the millions of microscopic machines that swarmed through the ship's systems, not only acting as an alternate means of controlling the vessel but also protecting it against assimilation by the Borg should they ever manage to get aboard.

"Hopefully Lieutenant Commander Davis will be able to solve that problem soon." Cole replied before the intercom activated.

"Sickbay to bridge." Hamill's voice said.

"Go ahead doctor." Cole replied.

"Captain I'm getting casualty reports from all over the ship. What's going on?" Hamill asked.

"We're under fire doctor." Cole answered.

"Well fortunately the local emergency backup for sickbay kicked in as it was supposed to or I'd already know whether that bacteria from Vendi Four can infect humans." Hamill said.

"Can you shut your experiment down doctor?"

"Yes, I'm working on that as fast as I can. The problem is I'm about to be inundated with patients down here. From the sounds of things very few of the cases are serious but it's the sheer quantity I'm concerned about. I've called in all my staff but I'd like to be able to bring in the field medics from our ground forces as well."

Hamill explained and Cole glanced over his shoulder at Martin.

"I'll let them know immediately. They'll be with you soon doctor." Martin told Hamill.

"Thank you. Sick bay out." Hamill responded before she closed the channel.

Seeing that the *Nightfall* had been hit and temporarily lost control, the squadron of fighters turned around again and began a second run on the alien ship, this time coming at it from multiple directions at once. This limited the firepower they could bring to bear on it from any one direction but it kept the ship's attention split and also made it impossible to keep its damaged section hidden from the Starfleet vessels. For the most part though the fighter pilots focused more on evading the pulses of energy fired towards them as they sped towards the alien ship than in targeting specific locations and only one more of them was hit before they sped past without inflicting any more damage. Their attack run did provide the *Nightfall* with all the opportunity it needed to regain some semblance of control though and although it moved more slowly than normal the heavy cruiser turned back towards the alien ship.

"Fire torpedoes." Cole ordered and another salvo was launched from the *Nightfall*. This was smaller than the first salvo by half but it was fired just as the alien ship was turning to try and track the fighters that were now speeding away from it again and this gave Martin a heat source to lock onto for another thruster unit. The targeting of the quantum torpedoes was not accurate enough to guarantee that all of them would strike the same point, Especially not when the alien ship was manoeuvring itself and the first three rounds all impacted against the neutronium hull, pitting and scorching it but failing to penetrate it. The fourth round did score a direct hit on the thruster though and the resulting explosion created a larger hole that half of the remaining torpedoes were able to enter and the resulting explosion tore a large gash along the side of the alien craft.

This proved that the alien ship was not indestructible but before the *Nightfall* or its fighters could attempt to capitalise on the damage the alien ship fired on the *Nightfall* again. With its manoeuvrability hampered by the lingering effects of the first shot the Starfleet ship was an easy target and the energy blast struck its dorsal shields. Once again this caused a massive disruption of power and thanks to the already weakened status of the *Nightfall's* shields this one was far worse than the previous one. The *Nightfall* shook violently again as lights all across the ship went out. Turbolifts suddenly came to a halt in their shafts, trapping people between levels and all of the *Nightfall's* drive systems and weapons abruptly shut down as the main auxiliary power grids failed to leave the ship tumbling through space with only emergency batteries to maintain life support and the magnetic containment of its warp cores and anti-matter storage cells.

"Can somebody tell me what the hell is going on?" Cole asked, looking around the darkened bridge that was lit only by emergency lights now that not only the main lighting but also every console and headset had failed.

"Everything's dead captain." Nayal said, jabbing at her blank console to try and coax it back into life and so Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to Davis, come in please." he said.

"Davis here captain." the engineer responded, using his own combadge as well now that the consoles in engineering where he had only just arrived had also gone blank.

"Engineer Davis I need you to take control of the ship from engineering. We've suffered a total systems failure on the bridge." Cole told him.

"I'm afraid that it's the same here captain. We lost the main and auxiliary energisers and our warp cores have all gone into shutdown mode. Right now I can't even replicate a cup of coffee, let alone control the ship. It looks like the nanites have gone as well. There may be a few left here and there but it'll take time for their numbers to recover enough to help us fix the ship." Davis responded.

"Understood. Do what you can to restore flight controls. The longer we're adrift the more chance that ship has to finish us off. Cole out." Cole said before he hit his combadge to turn it off. Then immediately after doing this he tapped it again, "Bridge to sickbay. Doctor Hamill are you there?"

"Yes I'm here captain but I'm going to need more help. Everything's stopped working down here. We're having to break out emergency field treatment kits to get anything done and the EMH just shut down right in the middle of performing surgery." Hamill told him.

"I understand doctor. I'll try to get anyone with any medical training to you but I don't want you starting any procedures that would prevent you evacuating your patients." Cole replied.

"Evacuate?" Hamill said in surprise while the other bridge officers all looked towards Cole when he said this.

"Yes doctor, evacuate. Right now we're dead in space and running off batteries. If we don't get at least our primary systems back on line soon then our only hope will be to abandon ship. Cole out." Cole said before shutting off his combadge again.

"Did you mean that about abandoning ship captain?" Nayal asked.

"Unless anyone can come up with a better alternative then yes, I meant it." Cole responded.

"Okay. I was just remembering Captain Edwards, that's all. Every ship-" NayaI began.
"Every ship he served on was lost in action. Don't worry about that curse with me though NayaI. I've served on ships other than the two *Nightfalls*." Cole interrupted.
"I don't mean to interrupt these touching anecdotes about former comrades but has anyone noticed that we're still here?" Trellan said, "Shouldn't that alien ship have blown us to pieces by now? A Romulan commander wouldn't wait while a helpless enemy had the chance to make repairs."
"That's a very good point captain." Martin added, "What is it waiting for?"

With the *Nightfall* clearly disabled the ovoid alien ship instead turned its attention to the remaining Peregrine-class fighters that were still firing on it. The tiny attack craft were keeping their distance though, making brief attacks intended to try and keep the alien vessel occupied while the crew of the *Nightfall* could effect repairs to the cruiser. This tactic seemed to be effective and the alien ship paid no more attention to the *Nightfall* while it instead attempted to shoot down the fighters. The alien ship did not continue to act in this way though and after a time of failing to bring down even one more of the Starfleet attack craft something within it determined that it needed to change its behaviour.

Rather than turning back towards the crippled *Nightfall* though, the alien ship instead changed its heading back to one similar to the course it had been following while still drifting through space in the shell of rock that had encased it for tens of millions of years and then it began to accelerate, heading once again towards Vendi IV.

"*Rhine* to Commander T'Lan, do you read me?" the voice of one of the officers assigned to crew the runabout *USS Rhine* said from T'Lan's combadge.

"T'Lan here lieutenant. Why have you changed your location" she responded, knowing that the two runabouts deployed to chart the locations of the objects within the Vendi system should have been too far from the planet's surface to be able to contact her directly using her combadge.

"Commander we picked up weapons fire coming from the *Nightfall's* location, too much for a simple asteroid intercept mission so we shifted the focus of our scans towards it. The asteroid must have been some kind of dormant alien ship or weapon system that activated when the *Nightfall* got too close." the officer on the *Rhine* explained.

"The *Nightfall* is engaged in battle with this vessel?" T'Lan said as she and Sodyne exchanged looks.

"Not any more commander. The *Nightfall's* gone dark and it looks like the alien ship is on its way to you now. We're still reading active subspace fields from eight of the *Nightfall's* fighters and there's still us and the *Seine*, but if the *Nightfall*-"

"If the *Nightfall* and a full squadron of fighters couldn't stop the alien ship then it is most illogical to expect you to be able to." T'Lan interrupted, "What is the alien ship's ETA lieutenant?"

"Ah now there there is some good news commander. The alien ship looks like it's operating under impulse power only and pretty low power at that. I'd say you've got at least thirty-six hours before it arrives."

"Thank you lieutenant. Please try to contact the *Nightfall's* surviving fighters and request that they send all the information they have regarding this vessel. Under no circumstances are you or they to attempt to engage it until we have a clear idea of how to defeat it though. Is that understood?" T'Lan told the officer aboard the runabout.

"Yes commander. I'll get right on it. *Rhine* out."

"I'm sure Captain Cole-" Sodyne began when the channel was closed.

"Robert is a capable officer. He will be fine." T'Lan interrupted, "Now we must alert Professor Denning." she added before she turned around to leave the observation lounge.

"Wait, hold on." Sodyne called out, rushing after the Vulcan woman, "So what's your plan?" she asked when she caught up with T'Lan.

"At this moment it is too early to have a plan Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. We know little about the capability and nothing about the motivation of this craft. The only hard information about it we have is that its speed appears to be limited to one tenth of the speed of light at present. That means that our runabouts and Mister Foster's transport can easily outrun it at warp speed."

"So you're thinking of retreating?" Sodyne asked.

"If necessary, yes." T'Lan answered as they reached the door to Denning's quarters and T'Lan knocked on it.

"Hold on." Denning's voice said from the other side of the door and a few moments later he opened it in his pyjamas and looked at the two women standing outside, "Well I know you're not here for what most men hope two beautiful women will turn up at his bedroom door in the middle of the night for. What do you want?" he asked.

"Professor I think you should come to the command centre. There has been a serious incident involving the asteroid the *Nightfall* went to intercept." T'Lan told him.

"Hey can you two tell me what those runabouts of yours are up to? Both of them have left their assigned positions and relocated to an orbit that puts them above us. Plus one of them is- Foster said as T'Lan and Sodyne entered the outpost's command centre. Apart from him there were also a pair of Denning's students present to monitor the instruments. Then he noticed Denning following them in a robe, "Professor, what's going on?" he added.

"I'm hoping that Commander T'Lan will tell us."

"Has the *Rhine* downloaded any data files in the last few minutes Mister Foster?" T'Lan asked.

"Yes, that's what I was saying. Your runabout just sent us a pretty big data packet marked for your attention." Foster told her.

"Let me see." T'Lan said and she looked at the contents of the data packet sent to her by the *USS Rhine* as shown on the communications console. As she had expected this contained a number of image files and she opened one of these, causing a picture of the alien ship that had fought the *Nightfall* to appear on a screen.

"What is that?" Denning said as he stared at the image.

"That alien vessel is what the asteroid that was heading for this planet really is." T'Lan told him.

"And now that it's either disabled or destroyed the *Nightfall* it's on its way back here again, only faster than when it was just drifting." Sodyne added.

"That thing took out a heavy cruiser and now it's coming here for us?" Foster exclaimed.

"How long do we have?" Denning asked.

"Approximately thirty-six hours professor. It seems that this vessel can only move at a low impulse speed." T'Lan answered.

"Okay thirty-six hours is good." Foster said, nodding his head, "We won't be able to dismantle this place in that amount of time but we'll easily be able to get everyone aboard the ship and get out of here at warp speed in less than a third of that time."

"Yes I agree." Denning said, "I'll go and wake everyone else. We need to get started. Jack perhaps you could prepare your ship for lift off."

Only a few of the lights in the *Nightfall's* briefing room still worked when Cole gathered what senior officers he still had aboard to assess their current situation. In addition to the Starfleet officers he also included Trellan, hoping that the Romulan researcher's expertise in the Slavers would offer some insight.

"Thank you all for coming. I understand that everyone has a lot to do right now but I wanted to make sure that we all knew where we stand." Cole began, "Lieutenant Commander Davis, perhaps you can start by telling us what the general status of the *Nightfall* is?"

"Yes captain. We've managed to restore a limited amount of power to vital systems by tapping into the impulse engines on our shuttlecraft. Right now they're the best source of power we have. Our own engines are still dead and we're adrift." Davis said.

"We're not going to crash into anything are we?" Hamill asked nervously.

"Don't worry doctor, our fighters are running escort for us. They'll make sure anything in our path is taken care of." Martin reassured her, "Apart from the pair we've got following that ship at a discrete distance."

"In the meantime my people are concentrating on trying to restore impulse power." Davis continued, "That will give us power to keep the ship running without worrying about overloading the shuttles' engines. We were just lucky that we were able to get the hangar doors closed with the forcefields being down. The main computer core is a mess as well. A lot of the isolar chips burned out and I've got a team tracking down which ones need replacing. Not that we're going to be able to replace them all until we get the replicators back on line. The amount of damage we suffered is making repairs more difficult, some systems just can't be fixed no matter how trivial the damage to them is because another system that they're dependent on is also damaged and that needs fixing first. I've also checked up on the nanite hive. If we could use them then we'd be in much better shape. They could run all the system to system interfaces through the hive. Hell, we could fly the entire ship just by telling them where we wanted to go. The problem is though that, as we feared, most of them were wiped out when that second energy surge hit us. Inevitably some were in more shielded sections of the ship and they're working to replenish their numbers but it's going to be days before they're back up to strength."

"Okay so we can't count on the nanites for help in controlling the ship. Now who's next?" Cole said.

"Well my report's simple enough." Ghroc said, "Helm is dead until we get power. We can probably use our thrusters but it would be a waste of time given that we can't see where we're steering to."

"Weapons are similar." Martin added, "There's nowhere near enough power to operate the phasers and the torpedo charging system is offline so we can't get anti-matter into them. That just leaves us with the mass accelerators and I'm not confident that we could get them to fire a round fast enough to do any damage even if we knew what we were aiming at."

"Nayal, what about operations?" Cole asked.

"Nothing works captain. We're lucky we've got life support. Most of my people are working with Davis' engineering teams to try and get us up and running again. I'm sure you all noticed that we can't even get

from one deck to another without climbing through the Jefferies tubes, turbolifts aren't working at all and the artificial gravity now varies across the ship. Some sections are reporting less than half a gee while others are up almost to two gees. Without central control all of them need recalibrating by hand." Nayal answered, "I've got a couple of officers down in the hangar as well. With our subspace antenna out of action the shuttles are the only means we have of maintaining communications outside of combat range. Thanks to that we know that Professor Denning's team is planning to evacuate the research post. Commander T'Lan and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are still studying the data our fighters were able to send them. The *Rhine* and the *Seine* are standing by to take them out if they decide to evacuate as well."

"What about casualties?" Cole said, turning towards Doctor Hamill.

"A mix of impact injuries and burns captain." she replied, "Frankly we've been lucky that we've only lost a handful of people but there are patients that are going to need treatment I can't give them right now while we're on standby to abandon ship at any moment."

"They'll have priority on the runabouts if we do need to evacuate." Cole said.

"Those runabouts aren't going to be big enough for everyone captain." Martin pointed out, "Even with standing room only they'll take less than a fifth of the crew and they won't get us back to Federation space like that."

"I doubt Jack Foster's transport will be of much help either." Trellan added.

"Then it seems our fates could be in the hands of T'Lan and Sodyne." Cole said.

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"You two are really going to stay and try to fight that thing?" Hewitt asked as she entered the command centre and found T'Lan and Sodyne both sitting at consoles reviewing the data that the *Nightfall's* fighters had sent them.

"There is no logic in prematurely abandoning this planet. Particularly not when the survival of an entire species may depend on our remaining here if the vessel's intent towards them is as hostile as it was towards the *Nightfall*." T'Lan replied without looking up.

"I thought the Prime Directive forbade you interfering." Hewitt commented.

"Only in a species' natural development. Facing potential destruction from an alien spacecraft is not natural." T'Lan pointed out.

"Hey Hewitt, you read the Slaver language don't you?" Sodyne added.

"Yes, a little. Trellan's the nearest thing we have to an expert though." Hewitt told her.

"Yes, yes. Professor Denning recruited him because of it. But can you tell me what this says?" Sodyne said, beckoning Hewitt towards her. Then when the researcher walked over to where Sodyne sat the Betazoid pointed to a close up image of the alien ship. This showed only part of the hull and there were obvious markings on it, "I magnified a section of one of the images our fighters were able to get to us when I spotted this. I've been studying your team's research and I can tell that these are Slaver letters but I don't know enough yet to be able to translate their meaning." she said.

"Well that second line is pure nonsense to me. I don't think it's anything other than a random mix of letters and numbers." Hewitt said.

"A registration code perhaps." T'Lan suggested.

"That's possible I suppose." Hewitt said.

"Right so the second line doesn't say anything. Now what about the top one?" Sodyne asked.

"I'm not sure exactly. I think it's something about a guardian or a protector." Hewitt said and Sodyne smiled.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed.

"You have a theory Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" T'Lan asked and Sodyne smiled.

"You bet I've got a theory. In fact I've got a theory that could not only stop that thing from attacking us but might just let us take it intact." she said.

"You believe that the ship's intention towards this planet is hostile then?" T'Lan said.

"I'm pretty sure of it commander, yes." Sodyne said, "I think that that ship is some kind of automated defence monitor. Used by the Slavers to defend their presence here. We can't be certain whether the Slavers were driven off this world or if they remained here right up until the end of their war but they left that ship behind but I'm guessing that they were here until end otherwise that monitor would have been destroyed. I'm guessing that after the war it just drifted after it ran out of power and attracted the material that then covered it. The data shows that some of the sensor energy aimed at it was absorbed and I think that was used to jump start it again. That's why its power output grew during the battle. Now it's returning to its home base and when it gets here it's going to find the planet occupied by beings that aren't Slavers."

"It'll think that they're an invading army." Hewitt said.

"A logical conclusion." T'Lan replied.

"All the more reason for us to be away from here by the time it arrives then." Hewitt added.

"Didn't you listen to what I just said?" Sodyne responded, "It's an automated defence monitor. That means it must have had a command and control system, a system that was probably right here on this planet. If we can find it then maybe we can just shut it down."

"The chances that that specific facility has survived all this time is remote." T'Lan said.

"But not impossible." Sodyne said, "Maybe we don't even need the specific facility. All we need is something that can communicate with that ship."

"Err, we also need to be able to figure out how to operate their systems." Hewitt pointed out, "Remember what happened when you tried working that telepathic amplifier?"

"Your point is logical Miss Hewitt. We may need assistance from the *Nightfall*." T'Lan said.

"A ship that's crippled and has everyone struggling to fix it." Sodyne reminded her.

"I am aware of the situation Lieutenant Commander Sodyne but I will nevertheless discuss this with the captain." T'Lan replied.

"Captain we've got a call coming in from Vendi Four. It's T'Lan for you." Nayal told Cole via his combadge while he was discussing repairs to the bridge with Ghroc and a pair of engineers. Instead of being at her station on the bridge Nayal was in the hangar, monitoring communications from the shuttle assigned to the task.

"Okay give me a moment." Cole responded and then he turned to Ghroc, "Can you take care of things here commander?"

"Of course captain." the tall Bolian responded and Cole then made his way into his ready room and sat behind his desk. Just like the rest of the ship his supposedly private office was only dimly lit and the power shortages meant that the door was now stuck open to avoid having to use even the miniscule amount of power required to open and close it.

"Okay Nayal, put her through." Cole said.

"Connecting you now captain." Nayal responded.

"Robert?" T'Lan's voice then said and Cole smiled.

"T'Lan it's good to hear your voice. Are you okay?" he asked.

"Your question is illogical. I am in no danger. On the other hand you are aboard a badly damaged starship that has recently been in combat. It is I that should be enquiring about your health." T'Lan answered and Cole laughed, "I'm sorry Robert, I didn't realise that I was saying something amusing." T'Lan added.

"No it's just that you have such a wonderful way of explaining why your way of looking at something is the right one. T'Sal is fine as well by the way." Cole said, thinking that his wife would want to know that their baby daughter was safe, "Harriet Davis said she was upset during the battle but calmed down pretty quickly afterwards."

"I am relieved to hear it Robert. However, I did not call simply to ensure that my family was safe."

"I didn't think so. So why are you calling? Is it about an evacuation?" Cole said.

"No. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has a theory that seems logical given the information we currently hold about the spacecraft that attacked the *Nightfall*." T'Lan replied, "She has deduced that it is an automated system defence monitor constructed by the Slavers and believes that it was reactivated by the *Nightfall*'s scans. If this is correct then there may still be a command centre of some sort here on Vendi Four. If we can locate it in the time remaining to us then we may be able to deactivate it. If we cannot then it logic suggests that the Slaver vessel will interpret the presence of the natives on Vendi Four as an invasion and attack. An attack that they would have no defence against."

"Okay that all sounds plausible. What do you need?" Cole asked.

"That is the difficult issue Robert." T'Lan said, "Hopefully the sensors aboard the *Rhine* and the *Seine* will be sufficient to locate a facility we can use to gain control of the Slaver ship but after that we are going to need engineers to get it working."

"And right now engineers are just what I need the most up here to repair the damage to the *Nightfall*." Cole said.

"Precisely." T'Lan replied and Cole sighed.

"Look T'Lan, have the runabouts conduct their search and see if you can locate a Slaver command centre. If you can then I'll see how many people we can spare to help you out. At maximum warp it should only take a few minutes for either runabout to reach us, beam the engineers over and then return to you. If that enemy ship is limited to impulse power then a runabout should be able to get around it easily." he said, "Is there anything else you want?"

"Yes Robert. However, it is not logical to ask you to bring T'Sal here now so that I can see the pair of you are safe so I will instead trust in your ability and look forward to seeing you soon. Hopefully you will greet me in the same way you saw me off before I beamed down." T'Lan said and Cole smiled.

"You can count on it." he said before there was a sudden cheer from the bridge, "I've got to go T'Lan. I love you." he added and as he got to his feet he tapped his combadge again.

Rushing back out of his ready room Cole saw Ghroc sat at the helm station and wearing his headset while the engineers he had been talking to earlier stood behind him with PADDs and smiling.

"What's happened?" Cole asked.

"Captain we have helm control again." Ghroc told him, "After a fashion anyway."

Cole frowned as he walked across the bridge and he noticed that Ghroc's console was still blank.

"What do you mean?" Cole asked.

"It's the manual controls captain." one of the engineers said.

"They can be linked directly to the engines, bypassing the automated flight control interface." the other engineer added.

"The same goes with my headset. It can take in sensor data directly. Most of our sensors are off line but we still have the external cameras." Ghroc said and Cole smiled.

"Now if only we had impulse and warp drive." he said.

"The captain has agreed to your plan." T'Lan told Sodyne when she returned to the observation lounge. Rather than being stood by one of the magnifiers studying the native city the Betazoid science officer was instead at the other side of the room at one of the consoles.

"He didn't really have much choice though did he? So is he sending the engineers?" she replied without taking her eyes off the console.

"No. We are to locate a suitable facility using just the resources of the *Rhine* and the *Seine* as well as whatever this outpost can offer." T'Lan said and Sodyne turned towards her.

"But we can't hope to take control of that ship without help." she said.

"The *Nightfall's* engineers are needed aboard the ship to help repair it." T'Lan said, "If we are able to locate a facility that can be used to take control of the Slaver vessel then our runabouts will be able to bring us an engineering team in a matter of minutes."

"I'd still feel better with them here with us while we search." Sodyne commented.

"Maybe so but resources are limited lieutenant commander. What progress have you made so far?" T'Lan asked and she looked at the display Sodyne had been studying.

"It looks like Professor Denning's team have been focusing on what the natives have already recovered and put on display rather than trying to find anything new themselves." Sodyne responded.

"A logical move. Professor Denning's team may not be xeno anthropologists but the native population have had centuries to locate anything left behind by the Slavers." T'Lan said.

"Yes well that leaves us with images of a lot of individual pieces of a larger whole but with no idea how any of them fit and work together." Sodyne said.

"Nevertheless we now have clearance to use the sensors aboard the *Rhine* and the *Seine* to search the planet for more Slaver technology. What they need is a starting point." T'Lan responded, "Unless you have anything else to suggest I am going to order them to begin with a metallurgical analysis of the planet's crust. This will tell us if there are any alloys present that should not be."

"You realise that a command centre is likely to be shielded against detection, right commander? If the Slavers are half as smart as we give them credit for they'll have made sure none of their electronics or advanced materials will show up on an orbital scan. Remember on Vega Four-six-eight the professor's team had to scan from within the complex to plot the layout." Sodyne pointed out.

"I would welcome an alternative strategy Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan said.

"We should run full spectrum scans, not just basic metallurgy. Even non-metallic shielding will be dense and that will show up on a more extensive scan." Sodyne suggested.

"Such scans will also take longer. I estimate that a full sweep of the planet would take more than sixty hours to complete with just two runabouts." T'Lan replied.

"For a full sweep, yes. But think about this logically for a moment Commander T'Lan." Sodyne said.

"I think no other way." T'Lan commented.

"Yes well there's a categorised list of bizarre sexual fantasies doing the rounds on the *Nightfall* that says otherwise commander." Sodyne said, smirking at the Vulcan.

"Please just continue with your suggestion Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and I will overlook your insubordinate attitude this once." T'Lan said.

"The natives regard the Slavers or at least one Slaver as a god or gods, correct?" Sodyne asked.

"That is correct." T'Lan answered.

"And anything made by them is revered as holy. All of the entries in Professor Denning's database are in public temples." Sodyne continued.

"Again that is correct." T'Lan repeated.

"And temples are holy ground. Now if your Vulcan ancestors in their wild and illogical days had come across something that they considered of such spiritual importance that it needed to be worshipped then where would they build the temple to house it?" Sodyne asked.

"Where it was discovered." T'Lan replied and Sodyne smiled as T'Lan tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to *Rhine*." she said.

"Rhine here commander." the lieutenant aboard the orbiting runabout responded.

"Lieutenant I want you to co-ordinate with the *Seine* to run full spectrum scans in a radius of five hundred metres around each native temple beginning with those in the largest cities. You will be able to identify these by the presence of advanced alloys and electronic components." T'Lan told him.

"Yes commander." the lieutenant responded.

"Inform me as soon as you have any information. T'Lan out." T'Lan said and then she tapped her combadge again before turning back to Sodyne, "If we are to follow up on any leads provided by our runabouts we will need to enter the native temples. For that we will need isolation suits so we should make sure that Professor Denning's team do not remove them all first."

B.

"We've got four warp cores in this room. Can anyone tell me why not one of them is working?" Davis called out in frustration when the latest attempt to restart the *Nightfall's* main power grid failed.

"I think the problem's in the synchronising system commander." one of his engineers responded as he studied a PADD that he was using in place of a console to interface with the starship's power system.

"Ensign you may just have a point there." Davis responded, grabbing a tool kit and rushing over to the nearest of the *Nightfall's* four warp cores. Crouching down he pulled open an inspection panel that covered the power output lines from the core and proceeded to disconnect them, "Okay try it again. All four cores. Start up in three, two, one." he ordered and the ensign pressed the screen of his PADD again.

Just as on the previous attempts to restart the warp cores there was a dull 'clunk' followed by a brief humming sound. However, whereas on the earlier attempts all four cores had gone into auto shutdown this time the isolated core remained active.

"Let there be light!" Davis exclaimed as he leapt back to his feet, "See, it's the grid itself that's stopping the cores from starting up again. Without full synchronisation or automatic isolation we can't balance the power output or keep the cores separate from one another. They're all coming on at slightly different times and this is causing a reverse power flow that's crashing the system. Now I want those other three cores all manually disconnected from the grid and then plug this one back in on its own."

"Commander do you want us to start up the others once they're isolated?" another engineer asked but Davis shook his head.

"No." he said, "One core is enough to give us enough power for weapons, shields and limited warp drive. Plus without synchronisation any attempt to plug a second core into the system could just take down this one. At best we'd have some spares we'd have to plug in manually after unplugging this one. Right now I want everyone to get working on other systems we need now that we've got the power to run them." he then explained before he tapped his combadge, "Lieutenant Commander Davis to Captain Cole." he said.

"Yes commander?" Cole asked.

"Captain we've got one of the warp cores back on line. My men are just getting it connected back into the system now. That should give us all the power we need for the rest of the repairs, not to mention keeping us alive." Davis told him.

"Excellent news. Well done commander. How soon can you have the rest up and running?" Cole asked.

"Ah, there's a problem there captain." Davis said and he heard Cole sigh.

"I thought there might be. Every bit of good news I'm getting right now is coming with a 'but'. Go on then, tell me what the problem is now." he said.

"Running multiple power sources requires them to be carefully balanced captain and that sort of synchronisation can only be achieved with a computer. Right now our computer control of the main power grid is still fried. That's why I'm reassigning my engineering teams to other projects. Right now I can give you power for phasers but the phaser banks themselves don't work because the coolant systems are jammed and the regulators have all melted. Plus although I can give you warp drive at up to about warp four I can't give you impulse power." Davis explained to Cole.

"And trying to manoeuvre at sublight speeds using only warp drive is a nightmare." Cole commented.

"Exactly captain. Our manual controls may make it easier but without impulse power we're pretty much limited to travelling in straight lines. That's about all we can do with our torpedoes as well without a targeting system. We're a paper tiger captain. We can look fierce but right now we'd have to fold if we came under fire." Davis said.

"Agreed. Thank you for the update though commander, you've done excellent work. Please continue. Cole out." Cole said before he closed the channel.

"What's our situation Jack?" Denning asked as he entered the bridge of Foster's transport ship along with Hewitt and Terry.

"Almost set professor." Foster replied, smiling as he looked around at the researchers. We can take off at any time. The warp core is still cold but I can have that online by the time we break orbit and then we're out of here."

"You mean you're out of here." Denning replied.

"What do you mean professor?" Hewitt said in surprise as she and Terry also looked at him.

"I mean that I'm not going with you. Commander T'Lan and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are staying to try and stop that ship before it wipes out the native population and I think I ought to help. I do know more about the Slaver presence on this planet than them after all." Denning told the members of his team and Foster groaned.

"Look professor I get that those two women are making it look like they'll still be here when that ship shows up and starts dropping bombs on anything that moves but mark my words Starfleet will run as soon as it becomes obvious that they can't stop it." he said.

"You can't really think that." Terry said.

"Want to bet?" Foster replied, "Starfleet did nothing while the Dominion swarmed across the DMZ and those were Federation citizens dying. Do you really think they care about primitive aliens? Their precious prime Directive bans them from walking into that city and giving the natives a cure for that bug you've been studying doctor. Take my advice, leave them behind. Let's just take off and go."

"Unbelievable." Hewitt said, folding her arms as she stared at Foster, "You're just looking to save your own skin."

"Hey look this could benefit you as well. Those natives are going to get wiped out no matter what we do so while I'm finishing up here you can be making use of that transporter the Science Council let you have for your secret base and beaming all those Slaver artefacts out of the temples they're sat in. Starfleet won't notice and you'll get to study them at your leisure." Foster said.

"Professor you-" Hewitt began but Denning raised his hand for quiet.

"No, Mister Foster has said his piece and I respect his position. That doesn't change the fact that I'll be staying though. On the other hand I encourage the pair of you to leave with him. Join up with Trellan and continue the project." he said.

"Professor Denning I'm not going to abandon you." Hewitt said.

"Me either." Terry added, "Supposing that ship can attack from further out than Starfleet are guessing? You're going to need a doctor just in case." then she and Hewitt both looked at Foster.

"What?" he said.

"So you're really just going to run?" Terry asked.

"Yes I am and you would too if you were thinking clearly. I've seen what happens when ships like that Slaver monitor start firing on planets. I saw an entire town wiped out in seconds by a strafing run by a single Jem'Hadar attack ship and I'm in no hurry to see that again." Foster said.

"You have to go anyway." Denning added and Hewitt frowned.

"Why?" she said.

"Because he is the only one of us that can fly this ship." Denning pointed out, "If Jack stays then everyone of the students has to stay as well and I can't ask that of them."

"Hey look," Foster said, "this ship may not be a Starfleet runabout with state of the art sensors but I can still help scan for Slaver facilities from orbit until that ship gets here. I'll wait until it's within about a million kilometres before I go to warp. That should give me more than enough margin of safety to get clear safely."

"Thank you, that would be appreciated." Denning said, "Take off as soon as it's clear that there aren't any of the natives around to see you and head for orbit. I'm sure that Commander T'Lan will have the runabouts provide you with a scanning pattern. Now I think that the rest of us ought to go and tell Commander T'Lan of our decision."

"Well at least they haven't loaded these yet." Sodyne said as she and T'Lan entered the room where the isolation suits were stored, hung on hook along a wall, "Oh and we should try to find extra filters."

"The atmosphere is breathable lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and Sodyne smiled.

"Yes but those cities also stink according to Foster. Fortunately I didn't have to experience it but apparently if you don't have good filters on your suit the smell can be really bad and since Vulcans-" she began.

"We have a more sensitive sense of smell, yes. Thank you for your recommendation lieutenant commander." T'Lan interrupted and she began to search the row of cupboards at the far end of the room for additional odour filters when Denning entered the room with Hewitt and Terry.

"Professor, are you here to take these suits?" Sodyne asked, "Because T'Lan and I are going to-"

"Don't worry Commander Sodyne." Denning said, "We aren't here to take the suits. We're here to tell you that we're staying to help."

"Professor the chances of success are slim." T'Lan told him.

"Maybe, but aren't they better if you have more help?" Hewitt commented.

"That is a logical statement. Your knowledge of both the Slavers and the native population will increase our chances of success." T'Lan responded.

"Okay, so what do you need from us?" Denning said, "Bear in mind that Jack Foster will be taking his ship into orbit where it can help your runabouts scan the planet if you want to let them know."

"I will do so professor. Now perhaps you can take us through your records. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has formed a theory that we will find a Slaver command post within or close to one of their temples." T'Lan replied.

"Doctor?" Davis called out as he stuck his head through the open doorway to sickbay. He could tell from the sound of violin music that Hamill was somewhere inside but with only a handful of emergency lights currently

functioning he could not tell exactly where she was. Obviously Hamill did not hear him calling out to her though because the music continued without any reply and so Davis walked into sickbay to look for her. After taking a few steps it became obvious to him that Hamill was in her office and so he headed towards it. Like the main treatment area of sickbay the chief medical officer's office was in near darkness but Davis could see the outline of Hamill herself as she stood in it playing her violin. Then as he got closer he noticed a set of headphones in her ears that had obviously prevented her from hearing him when he called out to her. "Doctor," he said, placing his hand on Hamill's shoulder and she immediately let out a scream, startled by his sudden appearance and Davis leapt back in surprise as she spun around. "Davis, what are you doing?" she exclaimed and as she pulled the headphones from her ears Davis heard the sound of music coming from them that she had obviously been playing along to. "I've come to assess the damage to sickbay," he replied defensively, "What about you? Why are you just playing the violin in the dark all alone?" "Because I sent all my patients away," Hamill told him, "Most were minor injuries that were quickly stabilised so there was no need to keep them here and the more serious cases I didn't want to keep here without any equipment to monitor them." "So where are they?" Davis asked. "In the hangar where our ground troops' assault shuttles are. Those things are equipped for evacuating casualties so they've got a basic diagnostic and treatment system in them. Someone had to stay here to mind sickbay and since the field medics know the shuttles better than I do I told them to monitor the patients. I'll go and see to them if I'm called to," Hamill explained. "Okay then. So does anything still work in here?" "Anything that wasn't linked to the network when we were hit by that energy blast or whatever it was. All the main hardware just shut down and instruments linked wirelessly to it or being charged at the time all locked up. Thankfully we had emergency field kits that were isolated from everything that blew up." Hamill told him, "Anyway shouldn't you be trying to fix the warp drive?" "Oh so you haven't heard then. We've got one of the warp cores working again and that means we can concentrate on getting everything else working. Given that we may well end up having to engage that Slaver ship again we could suffer more casualties and the captain's pretty keen to have sickbay up and running if we do. So since it's a priority I thought I'd come and take a look myself. I've got an entire team looking at the impulse drive after all." Davis said before they heard another voice call out from the entrance to sickbay. "Hello? Is anyone in here?" Trellan's voice said. "In here Trellan. Are you hurt?" Hamill replied as she went to the doorway linking her office to the rest of sickbay and she saw the Romulan archaeologist standing in the entrance to sickbay with a PADD in his hand. "Oh no, I'm fine thanks. But I've found myself at a bit of a loose end for the past few hours and so I thought I'd just go through what data we managed to collect about that ship before all your ship's sensors were scrambled." Trellan replied and he held up the PADD he was holding. "Do you think you've found some sort of weakness?" Davis asked as he appeared beside Hamill. "Ah Lieutenant Commander Davis, it was you I was looking for. I was told you were in here. To answer your question though, no I'm afraid I'm still as much in the dark as we all appear to be." Trellan answered. "So what do you need?" Davis said. "As I said I was feeling like something of a – a, what's that word? Dunsel?" Trellan said and Davis smiled. "Very good. Yes, dunsel," he said. "I heard Jack Foster use it to describe some students." Trellan told him. "What's a dunsel?" Hamill asked, confused. "A part that has no purpose. Engineering midshipman slang." Davis explained to her. "Anyway since I've been through these sensor readings now I'd like to get them sent back home as quickly as possible. One of the conditions of me agreeing to join Professor Denning's expedition was that I'd be able to keep copies of all the new information we found. I've been sending regular status updates back home where my family is looking after them until I get back and can the data to convince a university to hire me. Of course with the *Nightfall's* subspace antenna down I can't send it. Do you have any idea when it will be fixed and I can get a private connection?" "I'm sorry, I've assigned that job to Lieutenant Becker and his team. You'll have to check with them. They're probably at the antenna now. I should warn you though, even when it's fixed the captain may not want it being used for personal purposes right away." Davis said and Trellan smiled. "Oh well, as long as I can get this sent eventually," he replied.

3.

The two fighters from the *Nightfall* assigned to monitor the Slaver defence monitor remained more than a light second away and coasted through space to limit any energy emissions that would give them away. This included their sensors and they monitored the robotic vessel with passive sensors only. With the monitor limited to impulse power and making only occasional use of its own subspace sensors this meant that there was a delay imposed by the speed of light before the pilots of the two fighters would see what the Slaver vessel was doing. Therefore, when an opening appeared in the hull and a needle shaped object was extended they did not see it until its own impulse drive had already ignited and it sped away, heading towards Vendi IV.

"We've got a fast mover Lockpick." one of the pilots transmitted, addressing his wingman by his call sign.

"Copy that Havoc." the wingman responded, also using the other pilot's call sign, "Looks like it's accelerating to high impulse. At this rate it'll reach Vendi IV in about three minutes."

"Havoc to *Nightfall*." Havoc signalled, using his fighter's subspace transmitter to contact the *Nightfall* via its shuttle, "I think we've got a missile heading for Vendi IV. We're going after it." then he switched back to talking to his wingman, "Okay Lockpick time to move, I'm engaging at warp three for intercept."

"Copy that Havoc. I'm right with you." the second pilot responded and then the two fighters engaged their warp drives, racing past the massive Slaver defence monitor before even its automated systems could react to their presence. The fighters then had to decelerate again, dropping out of warp behind the missile and matching its speed while aligning themselves immediately behind it in preparation of shooting it down.

However, before the fighters could launch their attack the forward section of the missile suddenly burst open and a swarm of smaller weapons emerged, each one engaging its own impulse drive before spreading out and adopting slightly different courses as they headed towards Vendi IV.

"Break and attack." Havoc told his wingman, turning hard to avoid crashing into the main body of the missile that began to tumble through space now that it had released its payload. The pilot knew that between them the two fighters would have difficulty in shooting down all the missiles before they reached the planet but there was another option open to him and he opted to signal the two runabouts orbiting Vendi IV, "Havoc to *Rhine* and *Seine*. You've got incoming missiles. We can't stop them all."

"Copy that Havoc. We're raising shields and will move to intercept." an officer from the *Rhine* responded as the two runabouts orbiting the planet interrupted their scans and turned to face the oncoming missiles.

At the same time as the Danube-class runabouts were preparing to act as the planet's last line of defence the two Peregrine-class fighters were moving in behind the missiles to engage them and each one rapidly claimed a kill, their phaser blasts triggering massive explosions that, had they occurred on the surface of a planet would have had the destructive power to wipe out an entire city. The missiles were programmed to evade attack though and they continued to disperse, forcing the two Starfleet attack fighters to prioritise some over others as they steered to follow their targets. The missiles were constantly manoeuvring as well and it took several attempts by the pilot known as Lockpick to bring down the next one. He was only able to manage this by getting so close to the missile that he was within the blast radius when it exploded and his fighter's shields flared as they absorbed the energy. Lockpick lost vital seconds because of this though and by the time he recovered from the distraction the other missiles were even further away.

The fighter pilots did not give up though, continuing to try and shoot down as many of the missiles as they could before they reached the planet. However, it was becoming ever clearer that they would not be able to shoot down even half of the missiles before they reached Vendi IV and so the crews of the runabouts began plotting the best positions they could take up to try and head them off. Initially this was based off the assumption that the missiles would strike at the largest cities first but as they came closer a more disturbing pattern for the Starfleet crews emerged.

"*Rhine* this *Seine*, are you seeing what I'm seeing? It looks like the missiles are forming themselves into two groups." one of the runabout pilots signalled to the other.

"Affirmative *Seine*. If one of those groups holds steady it will fly right past us. We won't need to move to engage. Looking at the other I'd say it was heading for -" an officer aboard the *Rhine* responded before suddenly stopping as he realised exactly where the second group of missiles was heading towards.

They were heading for the *Seine*.

"*Rhine* to T'Lan." the officer transmitted, "We're under fire. I say again we are under fire. We have multiple missiles closing on us and the *Seine*. We're going to have to withdraw. With any luck we'll be able to avoid them by taking cover behind the planet's moon but I doubt we'll be able to show ourselves for long without exposing ourselves to further fire. We should still be able to nip in fast enough to beam you out though if you need it."

"Understood Rhine. You are to withdraw and seek cover. We will continue with our operations down here without you. T'Lan out." T'Lan responded and as soon as the channel was shut off the two runabouts fired their thrusters to take them into higher orbits before switching to impulse power and accelerating away from the planet.

The missiles fired by the slaver monitor promptly changed their own courses to compensate for the manoeuvring of the runabouts, confirming the assumption that they were not targeted against the planet but the tiny Starfleet ships in orbit around it.

The change in the missiles' flight pattern gave the fighter pilots still chasing them more of a chance to catch up and Havoc fired his phasers again, shooting down another of the missiles and destroying a second that had been just under a thousand kilometres away from it in the resulting blast when the warhead self destructed.

"Havoc to runabouts, I'm sending you my sensor readings. Match your position to keep out of the missiles' line of sight while Lockpick and I follow them." Havoc transmitted.

"Copy that Havoc, we're receiving your transmission." the *Rhine's* pilot responded.

The subspace link from the fighters relayed provided the two runabouts with the exact positions of the clusters of missiles heading towards them and they were able to remain on the far side of the moon from them. At the same time the two Peregrine-class fighters continued to fire on the missiles and there were more explosions as they were destroyed. Without any visible targets the missiles could only continue on their existing courses, hoping to reacquire the runabouts. This constant flight path made them much easier targets and the fighter pilots increased their rate of fire as they, the missiles and the runabouts all circled Vendi IV's moon in pursuit of one another. This continued until the last of the missiles had been shot down, at which point both the fighters and the runabouts positioned themselves in the shadow of the moon as viewed from the steadily approaching Slaver vessel so that they could not be targeted for more missile strikes.

"Wait, so now we don't have your runabouts scanning the planet from orbit?" Terry asked when she and the other members of Professor Denning's research team who had remained behind overheard T'Lan's conversation with the officer aboard the *Rhine*.

"That is correct." T'Lan responded, "When Mister Foster takes off he will also have to leave orbit and take cover behind the moon or it is likely that his ship will be fired upon."

"But why?" Hewitt asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Sodyne replied.

"No." Hewitt said and Sodyne sighed.

"That defence monitor is tens of millions of kilometres away from us still. Given the level of technological development on this planet it may not even be aware of the natives yet. On the other hand it could tell that the runabouts weren't other Slaver ships so it acted to try and destroy them. Of course once it gets into orbit and scans the planet up close it's going to see that the natives aren't Slavers either." she explained.

"But now we've no way of searching for a Slaver base of operations." Hewitt commented.

"Incorrect Miss Hewitt." T'Lan said, "Searching without the runabouts sensors to assist us will be slower but it can still be done." then she looked at Denning and added, "Professor Denning, what is the operational surface to surface range of this outpost's transporter system?"

"I get it." Denning said, smiling and nodding at the same time, "Six hundred and fifty kilometres. There are more than thirty major settlements with populations in excess of ten thousand people in range."

"You mean we're going to have to beam into each settlement and search them ourselves?" Terry said in surprise, "That could take days."

"Which is why we cannot afford any further delays." T'Lan told her, "We will split into two teams of two. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne will accompany me while Miss Hewitt will go with Professor Denning."

"What about me?" Terry said.

"You will be needed here to operate the transporter for us." T'Lan told her, "You will beam us directly into native temples where we will conduct covert scans with tricorders. We should allow no more than thirty minutes for each search before we return here and move onto another site."

"What if the natives notice us beaming in?" Hewitt asked.

"Doctor Terry will have to use the transporter's targeting sensors to determine whether there are any lifeforms present prior to beaming us in. If there are then that site will be skipped until we can deploy to it unnoticed. When beaming out we should locate a private spot where our departure will not be noticed." T'Lan answered.

"Okay everyone we all know what we're doing now." Denning said as he stood up and walked towards the nearby rack of isolation suits, "Erica, let's you and I suit up."

While the four who were to be searching the native temples were putting on the isolation suits that would enable them to move among the native population unseen Terry headed for the outpost's transporter room and began to access the results of the surveys that the team had carried out on the planet. Given that their mission in the sector was to study what had been left behind by the ancient Slaver civilisation rather than to

study the natives of Vendi IV, Professor Denning's team had logged the location of every Slaver artefact and every representation of them and this of course included the temples where the vast majority were on display.

"Have you got the co-ordinates doctor?" Denning asked when the others arrived in the transporter room, now wearing isolation suits but carrying the helmets under their arms.

"Yes professor. Where should I start?" Terry replied.

"Since Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has already visited the temple in the nearby city we will begin with that one." T'Lan told her, "I think it is logical that we should then work outwards."

"Sounds good to me." Denning said and T'Lan and Sodyne looked at one another.

"Ready when you are commander." Sodyne said and the two women both put on their helmets and took their places on the transporter pad.

"Scans confirm the target area is clear of natives Commander T'Lan." Terry said

"Energise." T'Lan told her and the doctor activated the transporter.

T'Lan and Sodyne materialised directly in the main chamber of the temple Sodyne and Foster had visited previously and as Terry had told them it was deserted.

"Interesting." T'Lan said as she looked around at the decoration of the chamber.

"Have you seen something commander?" Sodyne asked.

"Nothing specific Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan answered, "However, I would judge this to be an excellent example of why the Prime Directive is required. It is clear that only from discovering a few remnants of the Slaver presence on this world the current native civilisation has been radically altered."

"Then perhaps we should seriously think about removing anything we find that the locals may not know about." Sodyne suggested as she took out her tricorder and began to scan the room, "I'm not reading any energy signatures." she said.

"That is not surprising. I suspect that whatever remains of Slaver technology will have been inactive for a long time. Our first order of business once we have located a command centre will be to have an engineering team set up an alternative power supply." T'Lan responded as she too opened up her tricorder.

The sound of an opening door attracted the attention of the two Starfleet officers and despite being invisible thanks to their isolation suits they took cover so that their tricorders would not be seen. They then watched as a single native priest entered the room and walked towards the large image depicting the Slaver and the supposed shooting star, chanting as he went. Then he knelt down in front of the image and continued to chant.

"What do we do now commander?" Sodyne said.

"We cannot act on anything we find with the priest present." T'Lan told her, "Do you know how long his activity will take?"

"No idea. Hours maybe. Do we abort?" Sodyne said and T'Lan considered the possibility. Then something struck her about the image that the priest was praying to.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is that the image that caused you to suspect an astronomical body of some kind was important to the native religion?" she said and Sodyne nodded.

"That's the one. Why?"

"Because logic suggests that the prominence given to it suggests that it is related to something found by the natives on this site. Such as a Slaver command centre that revealed the existence of the automated defence monitor." T'Lan said, "The priest may be paying his respects to more than just a painting. The entrance to that command centre may be on the other side of it."

"That's very good commander but how do we check to find out with him knelt there?" Sodyne replied.

"If we cannot get the priest to move we will have to incapacitate him." T'Lan said as she closed her tricorder and returned it to one of her isolation suit's pouches.

Knowing that the isolation suit she wore kept her invisible to the native priest, T'Lan then walked steadily up behind him and paused to make sure he had not realised that he was not alone. Next T'Lan took the risk of removing one of the gloves from her isolation suit and had the native not been looking away from her he would have seen her hand apparently floating in mid air. However, he remained focused ahead of him at the image of the Slaver and the shooting star and T'Lan was able to reach down and grasp him at the base of the neck. The native let out a momentary gasp and his eyes widened before his body went limp as a result of the nerve pinch. T'Lan lowered him to the floor and then beckoned Sodyne towards her.

"Quickly, we need to examine this wall." she said as she put her glove back on to make sure that she would not be seen and the Betazoid hurried towards her.

Using their tricorders the two Starfleet officers began to scan the structure of the wall. This showed it to be about twenty centimetres thick and made of the same stone as the rest of the temple structure along with several iron components. None of this was unusual but then T'Lan noticed a pattern to the metal contained within the wall.

"There appears to be some kind of mechanism contained within this wall." she said.

"Yes I think I see it." Sodyne responded, "Is that a counterweight system?"

"It appears so. That would mean that this is not a true wall, it is a doorway of some kind." T'Lan said as she moved along the wall and adjusting her tricorder to look for the discontinuity that would indicate the edge of a door.

"So the counterweight will balance out the mass of the door so it can be opened easily." Sodyne added.

"That is a logical assumption lieutenant commander. Although whether the door is simply pushed open or if the mechanism will open it automatically when triggered." T'Lan said.

"Which means there has to be a switch of some kind around here." Sodyne said and then she turned her attention to a torch mounted in a bracket on the wall nearby, "A-ha." she said and she reached out to pull on

the torch, "It's stuck." she said as it refused to move and she pulled harder."

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne-" T'Lan began before there was a snapping sound and the torch came free of the wall in Sodyne's hand along with part of the bracket.

"Oops." Sodyne said and T'Lan tapped her combadge.

"T'Lan to Doctor Terry." she signalled.

"Terry here. Do you need beaming out?" Terry responded.

"No doctor. However, could you please beam some all rapid setting purpose adhesive to us. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has a repair to make before the natives can discover the damage she has done to their temple." T'Lan told her.

"Did you have to say it like that? Now I sound like an idiot." Sodyne complained.

"You're kidding." Terry said.

"I am a Vulcan and Vulcans do not 'kid' Doctor Terry." T'Lan replied.

"Okay I'm sending it over now." Terry said and after a short delay while she fetched the adhesive from a nearby tool kit and placed it on the transporter the tube materialised in the temple.

"I'll get to work." Sodyne said.

"Yes and I shall continue to search for a means to open the door." T'Lan said, turning her attention back towards the hidden door. There was no mechanism to open the door that T'Lan could find using her tricorder so instead she opted to take a more basic approach and she simply placed a hand against a part of the wall and pushed it before moving her hand along and pressing again. She repeated this several times until all of a sudden she felt the wall shift under the pressure of her hand, "I think I have found it." she said.

"And I've got this fixed." Sodyne added, replacing the torch into the now fixed bracket. Then she turned towards T'Lan and the Vulcan pressed harder on the wall.

Thanks to the counterweight that the natives had set up the hidden doorway required almost no pressure to open and as T'Lan pushed further it swung inwards to reveal a small chamber that was dominated by a large irregular hole in the earth floor. Mounted at the side of this was a ladder that extended down into the darkness below.

"Does that look like a primitive mine shaft to you as well commander?" Sodyne said and T'Lan nodded.

"Yes lieutenant commander, it does." she said and she reached into another of the pouches on her isolation suit to produce a chemical light stick. Activating this she then tossed it into the hole and watched as it fell. The light cast from the chemical stick was still visible from the top of the shaft when it hit the bottom but it was too deep to see the actual stick itself. However, this still satisfied T'Lan, "I shall descend first. Follow behind me and close the door behind you."

"What if there's something down there?" Sodyne asked, "A living Slaver for example?"

"Hand me your phaser." T'Lan told Sodyne and the Betazoid reached for her weapon.

"What do you need two for?" she said.

"I do not. However, as a Vulcan I suspect that my telepathic skill will make me more resistant to the mind control ability of a Slaver. Your unfortunate lack of such ability will leave you vulnerable." T'Lan explained and Sodyne frowned.

"You telepaths do like to remind people of your superiority, don't you?" she commented.

"Superiority has nothing to do with it Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. It is a simple fact. Now come on, I will lead the way." T'Lan responded, tucking Sodyne's phaser into a spare pouch and then starting to climb down the ladder.

"Captain we have tactical." Martin announced.

"Our sensors are back online?" Cole asked.

"Sorry captain, no. However, some of our communications are and I've been able to patch into our fighters' data feeds. We can use them to track other ships." Martin told him.

"Can we use it to target weapons?" Ghroc said.

"Torpedoes, yes. As long as our fighters are close enough we can get a lock using their sensors and after firing their own internal guidance system will kick in. Phasers and the mass accelerators are another matter though. This setup isn't going to be precise enough for us to fire them with any degree of accuracy." Martin explained.

"I suppose that will have to do then. Okay commander, let's see what's going on." Cole ordered and Martin brought up a tactical diagram on the main forward viewscreen for the other bridge officers to see. This diagram showed the *Nightfall* and several attack fighters at one side of the diagram while at the other was Vendi IV, its moon and also the fighters and runabouts lurking behind it. Meanwhile between the *Nightfall* and the planet was the automated Slaver defence monitor.

"It's picking up speed." Ghroc commented and Cole nodded.

"I take it that it's still on schedule to arrive at Vendi IV?" he said.

"It looks that way, yes captain." Martin replied.

"Okay I think it's time we made use of what warp capability we have." Cole said as he reached for his combadge, "Cole to Davis."

"Yes captain?" Davis asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis I want to take the *Nightfall* to warp. Are we ready for that?" Cole said.

"Yes captain. Our speed will be limited of course but we'll hold together." Davis told him.

"Very good, thank you commander. Cole out." Cole said before shutting off his combadge and turning towards Ghroc, "Mister Ghroc I want a course that will take us behind that moon. Synchronise with our fighter escort to make sure they stay with us."

"That's going to be pretty tricky." Ghroc said, "We'll have to make use of the moon's gravitational pull to get us around the other side. I can get us close to the moon but we'll still be in the Slaver ship's line of fire. If we had impulse drive then manoeuvring us around it would be easy. Without it I'll have to use thrusters to put us into a stable orbit and then push us over the horizon."

"As long as you don't crash us right into it I'll be happy commander. Engage when ready." Cole told him.

"I'll do my best captain." Ghroc said as he turned the *Nightfall* towards Vendi IV and its moon. Ordinarily he would have been able to use the *Nightfall's* computing power to easily place the starship into orbit around the planet's moon but without that he had to align the ship manually before engaging its warp drive. With only one of its four warp cores operating the *Nightfall* was limited to a relatively low velocity but having only to travel across a single solar system instead of between different ones meant that the journey still took little more than two minutes, "Secured from warp captain." Ghroc announced as the *Nightfall* decelerated to sublight speed in close proximity to Vendi IV's moon, "Firing thrusters."

Ghroc then proceeded to use the *Nightfall's* manual flight controls to steer the ship into an orbit around the moon, locking it into the gravitational pull. Then he fired the thrusters again to push the *Nightfall* forwards as rapidly as possible and with the moon's gravity continuously pulling the ship towards it the heavy cruiser was hurled around the rear of the moon and out of the Slaver defence monitor's line of sight before it could react.

"I can see the bottom of the shaft now." T'Lan said as she looked down and saw the chemical light stick lying on the ground at the bottom of the ladder.

"How much further do you think?" Sodyne asked from above the Vulcan.

"I would say about twenty metres." T'Lan answered and she continued to descend steadily to the bottom of the ladder.

As she got closer she noticed a sudden change in the texture of the walls of the shaft right at the bottom. Whereas the shaft walls where she was now and right the way up to the top had been crudely cut into the ground and had an irregular finish, there was a smooth surface at the bottom. Furthermore it became clear when T'Lan was just a few metres from the bottom of the ladder that instead of stone, the floor and walls there were made of some kind of metal.

"It looks like the native dug right into a Slaver facility." she told Sodyne without stopping.

T'Lan could also see that the shaft seemed to end in a passageway that led off in two opposite directions and when she stepped from the ladder she drew a phaser, turning back and forth to cover both of them until Sodyne caught up with her.

"Is that light?" Sodyne said when she thought she saw a glow coming from one direction.

"It appears so lieutenant commander. Logic suggests that a light source is worthy of investigation." T'Lan replied and she started to advance down the passageway.

"This certainly looks like it was built by the Slavers." Sodyne said as they walked along the passageway and she studied the walls, "This is near enough an exact duplicate of the facility on Vega Four-six-eight. If there's a telepathic amplifier."

"Only the command centre for the defence monitor is of concern to us right now lieutenant commander."

T'Lan interrupted.

"As you say commander. But it can't hurt to examine this place a little more closely later on can it?" Sodyne said.

Following the passage, it became obvious to T'Lan and Sodyne that the light was coming from a chamber that it led to and the constant, white brightness indicated that it was from a technological source rather than more of the torches used by the natives to light their buildings. They would not only have flickered but also given off a more yellow light than what the two Starfleet officers were seeing. The passageway led to a door that had the appearance of having been forced open just far enough to permit one of the natives to pass through the gap between the two halves. The two women stopped when they reached this gap and both peered through into the chamber beyond.

What they saw confirmed to them that they had found what they were looking for.

On the other side of the doorway there was a room filled with computer equipment that was still active somehow despite the Slavers who had built it dying at least a billion years earlier. More significantly though there were numerous display screens. Most of these had writing in the language of the Slavers shown on them but there was also one large screen visible from outside the doorway that showed a brief repeating

video clip that alternated between showing a single Slaver and a defence monitor of the kind that had badly damaged the *Nightfall* flying through space.

"I guess now we know where the natives got their inspiration for all the artwork." Sodyne commented.

"That is a logical deduction." T'Lan responded and she handed the phaser she was holding to the Betazoid, "Since we can be confident that there are no longer any Slavers I this facility it is logical to return your weapon." she said as Sodyne took the phaser and put it in a pouch on her isolation suit while T'Lan stepped through the gap between the doors into the control room on the other side.

"I can't believe that this place is still operational after all this time." Sodyne said when she followed T'Lan into the control room and looked around, "Can you imagine the power reserves that it would take to run even something like this for a billion years?"

"It requires little imagination Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. However, if you are hoping to discover a new form of energy supply then I suspect that the answer may be rather disappointing." T'Lan replied and she shut off the holo-emitter built into her isolation suit that rendered her invisible before removing her helmet, "Yes, it is as I suspected." she said.

"What is?" Sodyne asked, suddenly appearing in front of T'Lan when she too shut down her isolation suit's camouflage ability.

"How would you describe the temperature in here lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked in reply.

"I don't know. Pretty warm I'd say." Sodyne answered.

"As would I. I suspect that this is a by-product of the power source." T'Lan said, "Although they may have included other forms of power generation for more energy intensive purposes I suspect that the general operation of this facility was was powered by geothermal energy."

"Of course. The molten core of the planet would give the Slavers energy reserves that would last indefinitely. Still, I'm impressed that the pumping and turbine setup they'd need has lasted a billion years without wearing out. I'd like to get a good look at that." Sodyne responded.

"That may be possible later lieutenant commander but for now I think it is time we brought in Professor Denning and his team to assist us in understanding the functionality of this place." T'Lan added and she reached inside her suit to activate her combadge, "Commander T'Lan to Doctor Terry." she transmitted.

"Terry here. Go ahead commander." Terry responded.

"Doctor, Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and I have discovered what looks to be a Slaver command centre concealed beneath the native temple. It still has power and its instruments are active. We require Professor Denning and Miss Hewitt's assistance in understanding it. You may inform them that it is secure. There are no natives present and we have deactivated our isolation suits." T'Lan told her.

"Understood commander, I'll contact them immediately. Oh it may interest you to know that the *Nightfall* has managed to make it into a lunar orbit. It's hiding behind the moon along with your fighters and runabouts and Jack Foster's transport right now." Terry said.

Thank you Doctor Terry. Please inform the *Nightfall* of our status. We may require an engineering team soon. T'Lan out." T'Lan said and then she shut off her combadge and turned back towards Sodyne, "Lieutenant Commander I suggest we begin by looking for anything that looks like a command interface." she added.

"Status reports from the monitor?" Sodyne asked and T'Lan nodded.

"Precisely. Anything we can use to take control of or deactivate the vessel." the Vulcan said and the two women began to search the room, inspecting each console in turn. The difficulty was that Sodyne had only a limited ability to read the Slaver language and T'Lan had none so they were largely reliant on graphical displays as they tried to determine the function of each of the consoles.

Fortunately they did not have to wait long before two clusters of glowing lights appeared in the command centre as Denning and Hewitt materialised. Like the two Starfleet officers the two researchers were still wearing the isolation suits that granted them invisibility but they had deactivated the holo-emitters that provided this protection.

"Professor, you're here. We need your help translating all of this." Sodyne said while Denning and Hewitt were still taking in their surroundings.

"Incredible. How were you able to reactivate all this?" Denning said instead of responding directly to Sodyne. "Reactivation was not necessary Professor Denning." T'Lan told him, "This facility is most likely sustained by a geothermal power plant."

"Turning the planet into a billion year battery." Hewitt commented.

"A crude analogy but accurate." T'Lan replied.

"That image." Denning said, looking at the repeating video of the Slaver and the warship.

"If the natives found this place then I guess we know how they knew what the Slavers looked like." Hewitt said.

"They did." Sodyne told the researchers, "That big painting that tipped us off to the existence of the asteroid that turned out to be the defence monitor was concealing a hidden door. We found an old mine shaft behind it that led down to the passageway outside that door. Following it brought us here."

"Okay then, let's see what you've found." Denning responded and he walked over to Sodyne's side and looked at the console she was studying. At the same time Hewitt headed for T'Lan.

"We've been trying to find something that looks like a command interface for the defence monitor." Sodyne told Denning.

"Well I don't think this is it." Denning said, producing a PADD from a pouch on his isolation suit that contained the partial language database his team had created, "Ah yes, here we are. This text here is referring to air. I suspect that this is some kind of environmental control console. What about over there Erica?"

"I don't know professor. I think this is something we've not seen before." Hewitt replied as she consulted her own PADD and compared its contents with what was marked on the console.

"Then we must keep searching until we find the correct console." T'Lan said.

"Nayal to Captain Cole." Nayal's voice said from Cole's combadge while he, Ghroc and Martin were studying the current tactical situation and Cole tapped it.

"Go ahead Nayal." he said.

"Captain we've just received a signal from the surface. Doctor Terry reports that T'Lan and Sodyne were able to locate a Slaver command centre of some kind. They're down there now with Professor Denning and his assistant." Nayal told him.

"Are they asking for Trellan to go down there and help out?" Cole asked.

"No captain, they haven't requested any support from us yet." Nayal answered.

"Very well. Let Commander Davis know that he needs to put an engineering team on standby just in case T'Lan calls for them and keep me informed of any further communication from the surface. Cole out." Cole responded before tapping his combadge again.

"I hope they come up with something quickly." Ghroc commented, "Because that Slaver ship is almost here and we're in no shape to go toe to toe with her again."

"Our phasers are fully charged again but we're still limited to visual targeting captain. Frankly if it's not right in front of us I wouldn't rely on us being able to hit anything." Martin added and Cole nodded.

"At least we are making progress gentlemen. For now though it looks like this is in T'Lan and Sodyne's hands." he said.

"This console has a schematic image of the defence monitor on it." T'Lan announced when she found a console that had a large display in the centre that was showing a diagram of a vessel the same shape as the defence monitor. This diagram was marked in several places by flashing red patches.

"What do you suppose that means?" Hewitt asked as she joined T'Lan at the console.

"I suspect that this image is a damage report of some kind. The highlighted sections must be where the ship was damaged in battle with the *Nightfall*." T'Lan said.

"Is there a command link?" Sodyne said as she and Denning also made their way towards the console.

"What do you think professor? Is that the Slaver wording for 'remote control'?" Hewitt said, pointing to a text label on the console.

"I think so, yes." Denning responded, nodding at the same time.

"So do any of these controls say anything about a shutdown?" Sodyne asked.

"I don't know. I have to admit that I don't know much about controlling a starship but there don't seem to be very many controls here at all." Denning said.

"Perhaps the console uses a layered format professor." T'Lan suggested, "The touch interface is reminiscent of our own LCARS operating system."

"So all we need to do is find the right menu?" Hewitt said.

"If the system is structured in the same way as our own then yes." T'Lan said.

"That triangle at the top of the screen, could that be a return function?" Sodyne said and she pointed to a triangular symbol in the top corner of the console's display area. There were two Slaver letters inside the triangle itself and Denning double checked them against his database.

"That label isn't a word that we know of." he said, "However, the individual letters are the first and last ones used in the Slaver word that means to return to a place of origin."

"Such as a top level menu?" Sodyne said, "That sounds pretty good to me." and she reached out and jabbed the triangle.

However, instead of returning the console to a higher level menu the console just produced an abrupt tone and a message appeared across it.

"What does that say professor?" T'Lan asked.

"Something along the lines of 'forbidden'." Denning answered and Sodyne sighed.

"It's a security lockout." she said.

"A logical assumption. A defence system may only be accessible by an authorised user." T'Lan said.

"Yes and the authorised users of this console all died a billion years ago." Hewitt pointed out.

"Can your engineers bypass this commander?" Denning said.

"Possibly, although that is likely to take a much greater amount of time than we have available professor." T'Lan told him.

"So what if we can figure out how to override the control signal with one of our own?" Sodyne said.

"That sounds like a valid approach Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan responded, "The damage report diagram suggests that this console is in live contact with the defence monitor. If we can determine how the subspace commands are encoded then we may be able to either block or modify them."

T'Lan then took out her tricorder again and began to scan the surrounding area.

"What are you looking for commander?" Denning asked.

"Subspace emissions from this facility. That is the only way by which the Slavers could have retained real time control of their defence monitor throughout the system." T'Lan answered.

Sodyne immediately took out her own tricorder and also began to scan for subspace emissions. It did not take long for the two officers to find what they were looking for in the form of clearly artificial subspace energy pulses.

"I've got a high frequency data stream." Sodyne said.

"Yes," T'Lan responded, "I am detecting it too. Are you detecting two distinct amplitudes in a two hundred to two hundred and ten gigahertz band?"

"That's it. Bi-directional communications?" Sodyne said and T'Lan nodded.

"That seems logical." she answered.

"What do you mean?" Hewitt asked.

"The signals are on the same frequency so they're probably connected." Sodyne told her, "The different amplitudes come from us picking up both the strong outgoing signal and also the incoming one that has had more chance to attenuate over the distance it travelled."

"But those signals won't be directly into or out of this console so what good are they?" Denning said.
"They will help us to locate the subspace antenna Professor Denning and from there we can hopefully track the line of communication to the central computer core." T'Lan told him.
"Should we have Captain Cole send us that engineering team now?" Sodyne said and T'Lan nodded.
"Yes. By the time they can transfer down here we will hopefully have located the core." she said as she started to walk across the room, heading for another doorway that looked as if it had been pried open just enough for one of Vendi IV's natives to get through.

"Well everything looks intact now." Davis said as he replaced the cover over the sickbay computer system and Hamill smiled.

"Computer activate emergency medical hologram." she said and what appeared to be a tall woman in a Starfleet science division uniform but lacking any rank insignia appeared in front of her and Davis.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." the emergency medical hologram, or EMH, said.

"There isn't one." Hamill said and the hologram frowned.

"Then why was I activated?" the EMH asked.

"To test the repairs Lieutenant Commander Davis has made." Hamill told her.

"I'm programmed to be a doctor, not a guinea pig." the EMH complained and Hamill sighed.

"Computer deactivate EMH." she said and the woman promptly vanished.

"Cole to Davis." Cole's voice said from Davis' combadge.

"Yes captain?" Davis asked.

"Commander we've just received a request from the surface for your team to head down. T'Lan and Sodyne have found the Slaver command centre and want you to help bringing it under our control." Cole said.

"Very good captain. I was just finishing in sickbay." Davis replied.

"Then gather your team and beam over to the Seine. You'll be taken by the runabout into a low planetary orbit and beamed down directly to Commander T'Lan's location. Cole out."

When Davis and three of his engineering staff materialised in the Slaver control room they found themselves alone and Davis reached for his phaser.

"Commander T'Lan? Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" he called out.

"This way." Sodyne's voice called out through a nearby doorway and Davis holstered his phaser again before beckoning for the other engineers to follow him.

"Come on, let's go see what they've got for us." he said.

As the engineers squeezed their way through the partially open door they found themselves in a short corridor that had more doorways that were only partially open in it and Sodyne was leaning through one of these.

"Over here." she said before disappearing back through the doorway and when the engineers followed her they entered a room that was lined with more screens and consoles of the type that filled the control room they had materialised in but as well as this there was a large column in the centre of the room that had more consoles around it where T'Lan stood.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis I believe that this is the Slavers' main computer core." she said, looking at Davis.

"Let me see." Davis replied, walking over to her side and he looked at the console she was studying. This had text in the Slaver language scrolling down it in two columns that it flipped back and forth between,

"Something's obviously running." he commented.

"Indeed lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Do you know what any of this means?" Davis asked.

"It looks like a flight log in real time." Denning said from behind him, "Speed, heading, power output. All accompanied by numbers that don't really mean much without us knowing what their units are."

"Logic suggests that the Slaver defence monitor is sending its status to its command centre." T'Lan added.

"Yes and then the command centre is sending out a whole load more data." Sodyne said.

"How much data exactly?" Davis asked.

"You can see the two streams here Lieutenant Commander Davis." T'Lan said, pointing to the display, "It seems that the column to the left is the status reporting from the monitor while the one on the right shows the data being sent to it from here."

"That's a lot of data. Even just for telling the ship what to do." Davis said.

"Is that significant?" Hewitt asked.

"It could be. What I'd really like to do is be able to stop those commands and see how the ship reacts." Davis said.

"Lieutenant commander your curiosity is admirable but our pressing concern is to find a way to take control of the Slaver vessel before it can launch an attack on this planet." T'Lan said.

"And bypass any security lockouts like the ones on the actual console interface in the command centre itself." Sodyne said.

Even without a direct line of sight to any of the Starfleet vessels the control system aboard the Slaver defence monitor knew that they were hiding behind the only moon orbiting the system's fourth planet so as it came closer it manoeuvred away from the moon while signalling to the planet below and requesting further orders. All that came back though were automated responses from the planetary defence system and no specific status reports. Without any specific instructions to carry out the defence monitor resorted to its default system orders instead and began to scan the surface of the planet, searching for signs of its creators.

"T'Lan can you hear me?" Cole's voice said from T'Lan's combadge and T'Lan tapped the device on her chest.

"Yes captain." she said, "However, your signal is distorted."

"I'm not surprised given how many steps it has to go through to get from the *Nightfall* to you. Look T'Lan that Slaver ship is in orbit now and I'm told that it looks like it's scanning the planet. It's only a matter of time before it starts shooting." Cole told her.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis, can you tell me how long it will be before you can give us control of the ship?" T'Lan asked, looking at Davis.

"Sorry commander. All I've been able to do so far is confirm that the signal this place is sending repeats at regular intervals and each transmission is the same as the last." he said.

"Like a keep alive signal?" Sodyne suggested.

"It could be that, yes." Davis said.

"A what?" Denning asked.

"A keep alive signal is a means to keep an automated weapon system active only as long as it is needed professor." T'Lan told him, "Should the signal be terminated then the weapon will shut down."

"So kill the signal and stop the weapon?" Hewitt said.

"That is correct." T'Lan said, "Lieutenant Commander Davis how much damage to this facility do you think it would take to prevent that keep alive signal being transmitted?"

"I don't know. Destroying the core may be enough but the signal could be stored in the antenna array and this is just the system report we're looking at." Davis said.

"Then we need to destroy the geothermal power plant that supplies this facility with energy. It is the only way to stop the transmission." T'Lan said.

"Hold on a minute if you do that then the blast of high pressure steam coming from the return pipes could take out this entire facility." Sodyne said.

"Commander T'Lan this is an incredible discovery. You can't just destroy it." Denning exclaimed when he heard this.

"Professor it seems that the only other choice would be for the defence monitor to bombard this planet and wipe out the native population." T'Lan said and then she tapped her combadge, "Commander T'Lan to Doctor Terry." she said.

"Terry here. Go ahead commander."

"Doctor Do you have a transporter lock on us?" T'Lan asked.

"Affirmative commander. I have a lock on everyone inside that facility." Terry replied.

"Good. Then would like you to beam out everyone except myself. I will contact you shortly for you beam me out as well." T'Lan said.

"Commander you can't do this. We need to be able to study this place." Sodyne protested.

"I have made my decision lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Then I want to speak to Captain Cole." Sodyne said sternly.

"I wouldn't Leyla." Davis commented.

"You may speak to him if you wish but he will recognise that my decision is the logical one. He will not sacrifice the native population just to preserve this." T'Lan added and Sodyne sighed.

"Okay have it your way. I just can't believe what you're sacrificing." she said.

"Doctor Terry, energise." T'Lan said and the others in the room were suddenly surrounded by a glowing light as they were beamed away.

T'Lan then drew her phaser and made her way out of the computer core, heading back towards the control room. Here she walked over to the door leading out into the passageway that she and Sodyne had followed from the shaft and he pointed her phaser through the gap in the doorway.

Pointing the phaser up towards the ceiling T'Lan fired a sustained beam from the weapon until it was enough to bring it down, blocking the passageway with rubble entirely. She hoped that this would prevent any super heated steam that escaped from the geothermal power plant making it back up to the native city above while appearing to the natives that the passageway had suffered nothing more sinister than a natural collapse.

Then she took out her tricorder and began to scan for heat signatures, knowing that the hottest one would have to be the power plant.

The heat signature led T'Lan to a turbolift shaft that had been forced open just like so many of the other doorways in the underground facility and from below she could hear the sound of machinery running. There was no car inside it but there was an emergency ladder set into a wall within easy reach of the doorway and T'Lan used this to descend to the bottom of the shaft two levels below. Here she found another doorway that was partially opened and she looked through the gap she saw the pumping machinery and turbines of a geothermal power plant.

"T'Lan to Doctor Terry." she said, tapping her combadge.

"T'Lan it's Davis." Davis' voice responded from the outpost instead of Terry's, "I thought it better that I take over the transporter."

"A logical move lieutenant commander. Can you get a lock on me?" T'Lan asked.

"Just about. Can you keep your combadge active though? An active signal is easier to track." Davis said.

"Understood lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "Please beam me out on my command."

"Yes commander. I'll be waiting." Davis said.

Leaving her combadge active so that its signal would enable Davis to keep a good lock on her T'Lan then adjusted her phaser. She did not fire the weapon into the power plant though, instead she disabled the phaser's safety features and set in motion an overload. The phaser immediately began to emit a shrill whining sound and T'Lan threw it into the power plant.

"Now Mister Davis. Energise." she said and moments later she felt the sensation of a transporter field forming around her before she materialised back at the outpost in the transporter room where Davis waited with Sodyne and Denning, "It's done." she told them.

The phaser exploded just under a minute later and all of its stored energy was released in one go. This was enough to shatter all of the machinery inside the room and with this destroyed there was nothing left to contain the high pressure steam inside the pumping system. The combination of the explosion and the steam then blew the turbolift door wide open and the steam made its way up the shaft, spreading out onto each floor as it went and blasting the shaft doors free in the process. On the level that held the control room and computer core the steam blasted its way into both chambers and smashed it all. Only when it reached the rubble barrier was the force of the steam brought to a halt, preventing it from reaching the native temple above.

The destruction of the Slaver command centre was matched by a sudden change in the behaviour of the defence monitor in space. While it had been manoeuvring under power as it sought to find some sign of its creators on the world below all of its engines suddenly shut down and its scans ceased as it began to drift. "Captain the *Seine* is reporting that the enemy vessel looks to have powered down." Nayal told Cole via his combadge.

"Can you put me through to T'Lan lieutenant?" he replied.

"Yes captain. Connecting you now." Nayal said.

"T'Lan the Slaver ship has shut down. I take it we have your team to thank for that?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. The Slaver command centre has been destroyed. This will have terminated the keep alive signal to the defence monitor." T'Lan said and Cole smiled.

"Mister Ghroc take us in closer. Mister Martin I want our fighters to stay close and make sure the research post has a feed from their sensors." he ordered.

"Firing thrusters captain." Ghroc announced as he adjusted the *Nightfall's* orbit so that the cruiser moved over the lunar horizon to where the crew could see the Slaver defence monitor directly using visual sensors.

"T'Lan are you seeing this feed?" Cole asked.

"I am. The ship appears to be-" T'Lan began before there was a brief flash from one of the defence monitor's thruster units.

"Captain did you see that?" Ghroc said.

"Yes I saw it." Cole replied.

"The fighters are registering renewed subspace activity captain." Martin added.

"Opinions T'Lan?" Cole said.

"There may be another command centre on the planet that is taking over from this one." T'Lan suggested.

"And there could be who knows how many more." Cole said, "Okay Ghroc take us around that thing. Align us with that hole we blew in it earlier."

"Yes captain. Bringing thrusters to full power." Ghroc responded.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin sound red alert and bring all weapons on line." Cole added.

"Captain we can't target anything-" Martin began.

"Anything that isn't dead ahead of us, I know." Cole interrupted, "That's why we're going to sit right in front of that hole and you're going to fire everything we've got into it."

Had the *Nightfall's* impulse drive been active then it would have taken just a few seconds to move the heavy cruiser into a firing position beside the hole in the defence monitor's armour but with only thrusters it took almost a minute to get the ship into position. However, as Ghroc aligned the *Nightfall* with the hole in the Slaver vessel's armour Martin was prepared.

"Firing weapons captain." he said as he pressed down on the weapon controls.

In unison all of the *Nightfall's* forward firing weapons, including the two massive mass accelerators built into the secondary hulls opened fire and a mix of phaser blasts, solid duranium projectiles and anti-matter charged quantum torpedoes slammed into the Slaver defence monitor while it was still powering up. Some hit the thick neutronium armour plated hull and did little more than scorch the surface but even without a fully operational targeting system the majority of the shots still went into the hole and tore apart the monitor's internal systems. This continued until all of a sudden the automated ship was rocked by multiple internal explosions.

"Pull us back!" Cole snapped as he realised what was about to happen.

"Engaging warp drive." Ghroc said, knowing that thrusters alone would not be enough to get the *Nightfall* to a safe distance.

Even with the *Nightfall's* currently limited warp capability it was enough to suddenly propel the Starfleet vessel a million kilometres away from the monitor before it exploded in a fireball that lit up space and caused even natives on the surface to look up towards the sky. By the time the explosion subsided though all that was left of the ancient and powerful warship was tiny fragments of metal spinning through space.

"Target destroyed captain." Martin said, a smile spreading across his face and Cole sighed.

"Hopefully we didn't scare the natives too much in the process." he said, "Now would someone get my chief engineer back on board? I want my ship putting back together."

The ship that entered orbit around Vendi IV after the *Nightfall* had left the system had an insectoid appearance, divided into three sections structurally with its warp nacelles mounted close in to the bulging aft section. The vessel was a transport but it was still armed. These weapons would be useless against a Starfleet heavy cruiser such as the *USS Nightfall* but for the time being they meant that it could dominate Vendi IV if it had to. Aboard the ship its Ferengi crew scanned the planet below, focusing on the city close to the Federation outpost.

"Report." DaiMon Krom, the ship's commanding officer said.

"It is as your agent informed you leader." the female Ferengi at the science console said, "The Federation scientists are not scanning for approaching ships. We remain undetected for the time being at least. Remember that the humans have a Slaver stasis box and will know that someone with another of the devices is close by. For now they may think that it is the Starfleet vessel but that will not last long."

"And what about our prize Neeradel?" Drurk, the Ferengi first officer asked.

"Sensors put it right where we were told it was." Neeradel answered.

"Then we should beam it aboard and leave before the humans notice us and summon the Starfleet vessel back again." Drurk said but Krom snarled.

"Use your lobes Drurk. There could be more than just a few pieces of Slaver technology down there.

Consider what valuables the natives could have of their own." he said, "Drurk take two crewmen down to the surface and take everything that looks valuable."

"Yes leader." Drurk replied and he turned around and walked out of the transport's bridge.

Drurk's beam down was timed to coincide with the local night and the interior of the temple glowed yellow as the trio of Ferengi materialised inside the main chamber. All three of them were armed with a variety of disruptors just in case they encountered any resistance but when the beam down was completed they found themselves alone.

"Split up and search the room." Drurk ordered, "Take anything that looks like it will bring in latinum."

The other Ferengi just nodded and began to move around the room, taking any of the artefacts on show that looked like they might be worth something to a collector. Meanwhile Drurk himself quickly located the Slaver circuit board and he bared his teeth as he smiled at the thought of how valuable this was. Removing the circuit from its plinth he activated his communicator, "Drurk to Latinum Lobes." he said.

"What is it Drurk? Have you found the prize?" Krom's voice demanded.

"Yes leader. Exactly as it was described." Drurk told him.

"Good. Stand by to beam back up. We have what our agent told us about and we need to leave before the humans get suspicious." Krom said,

"Of course leader. Ready to beam up." Drurk said, standing up straight with his arms by his side moments before he and the other Ferengi were enveloped in the yellow glow of a transporter once more as they left the temple as quickly as they had arrived, taking with them whatever they could.