



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

WILLFUL IGNORANCE

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Following the discovery of Slaver stasis boxes on Vega-468 the crew of the *Nightfall* are ordered to bring Professor Denning and his team to Vulcan to discuss their project. However, it soon becomes apparent that there are parties that see the project as a threat and are willing to go to extreme lengths to see it cancelled.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 68174.8. *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A en route to Vulcan.

Captain Robert Cole, commanding officer of the *USS Nightfall* looked up from his desk when a chime came from the door connecting his ready room to the bridge.

"Come in." he said and the door slid open to reveal the Vulcan woman who was not only the *Nightfall's* first officer but also Cole's wife, "Ah T'Lan." he said, smiling at her.

"Professor Denning and his team are here to see you captain." she replied, stepping aside so that four of the *Nightfall's* civilian guests could enter.

Professor Denning led an archaeological team that was investigating ruins left behind by the ancient Slaver civilisation that had died out abruptly around a billion years earlier along with most other sentient life in the galaxy. He was supported primarily by two other archaeologists, a human woman called Hewitt and a Romulan man called Trellan. Trellan was a more experienced archaeologist than Denning but the chaos brought about by the civil war in the former Romulan Star Empire had left him with limited career options, forcing him to seek employment wherever he could find it and that happened to be assisting Professor Denning. The fourth person present was another human woman, Doctor Terry, whose function it was to look both after the medical needs of the research team and also to evaluate the risk of biological contamination from anything they discovered.

"Do sit down." Cole told Denning and his team. There were only two chairs immediately in front of Cole's desk so while Denning and Terry sat down on these Hewitt and Trellan followed T'Lan to the couch across the room, "Is Mister Foster not joining us?"

Foster was the pilot who normally provided Denning's research team with transport and Cole knew that his small transport was currently docked inside the *Nightfall's* cavernous hangar bay.

"No. It seems Foster doesn't trust your ground crew not to tamper with his ship. He's staying aboard to look after it." Trellan commented.

"Mister Foster's concerns are not logical." T'Lan said.

"He just doesn't like Starfleet. That's all." Denning said.

"Plus I think he's sulking about the fact we're getting a lift from you instead of relying solely on him." Terry added.

"The *Nightfall* is faster than his ship. In fact we've already dropped out of warp and should have you on Vulcan in about half an hour in fact." Cole said.

"Point three-eight hours captain." T'Lan said.

"Thank you T'Lan." Cole responded, "There you go professor. Point-three eight hours. If my maths is correct that's a little over twenty minutes."

"Twenty two point eight minutes to be exact." T'Lan said.

"Captain I was wondering whether the Vulcan Science Academy had explained why they wanted us to appear. My expedition was authorised by the Federation Science Council, the Vulcans shouldn't be involved but now I've been told to drop everything and come rushing back here to the Core Worlds." Denning said and Cole sighed.

"I'm afraid not professor. All I can tell you is that my orders came straight from Starfleet Command. Bring you to Vulcan and be prepared to address a panel from the Vulcan Science Academy regarding the events on Vega four-six-eight."

"Trellan thinks they're after the stasis boxes." Hewitt said, looking at her Romulan colleague.

"Isn't it obvious?" Trellan said, holding out his hands, "We found three of them. The Ferengi stole one, we have one and the third is now being kept aboard the *Nightfall*."

"So that we can determine if we come within a light year of another such device." T'Lan said.

"Yes they glow when they come within that distance of another. Of course right now both ours and yours are glowing brightly because of one another so we could fly right past a third and never know about it. They're priceless and the Vulcan Science Academy would just love to take them apart to try and figure out how they work." Trellan said.

"No-one's been able to figure that out in hundreds of years of trying." Denning said.

"Every dismantled stasis box has ceased functioning." T'Lan pointed out, "Until further information can be discovered there is no logical reason to attempt it again." before her combadge sounded.

"Commander this is Naya." the voice of the *Nightfall's* Romulan operations manager said.

"Go ahead lieutenant." T'Lan told her.

"Commander we have a signal coming in from Vulcan for you. It's marked private." Naya said and T'Lan looked at Cole.

"Go. Take it in our quarters." he told her.

"Nayal please transfer the call to my quarters. I am on my way." T'Lan said, getting up to leave as Cole turned back to Denning.

"Now where was I? Oh yes, Starfleet Command ordered me to break off the *Nightfall's* survey mission and bring your team to Vulcan. As well as questioning you the Vulcan Science Academy also wants to hear testimony from me and my senior staff about what happened. I imagine that the first ever discovery of a Slaver telepathic amplifier is of great interest to them." he said.

"Yes but I've already submitted reports to the Federation Science Council. If the Vulcan Science Academy wanted to know what happened then they could have just applied to see those." Denning said.

"I imagine they have. I'd expect them to have also requested Starfleet to release the reports my crew submitted." Cole said.

"Can you tell me what was in those captain?" Denning asked.

"Pretty much what you'd expect. Once triggered the telepathic amplifier caused my Betazoid science officer Lieutenant Commander Sodyne to incapacitate everyone not immune to telepathic influence in the area, including aboard the *Nightfall* in orbit. Even though Sodyne never developed any of the telepathic abilities that are normal to her species."

"How is Sodyne captain?" Terry asked.

"According to Doctor Hamill she's fully recovered. I think the experience shook her of course but I haven't known her very long to be sure." Cole said.

"What more can I say professor?" Cole said, "I can't question lawful orders from Starfleet Command. If you want to know why the Vulcans have asked you come here then you're going to have to try asking the Federation Science Council."

"We did. They ignored us." Terry said.

"Then ask the Vulcans themselves when we get there. I have it on good authority that Vulcans don't lie." Cole told Denning.

"Nayal please put the call through to me now." T'Lan said when she returned to the quarters she shared with Cole and their daughter T'Sal.

"Putting it through now." Nayal said and the display in front of T'Lan activated to show an image of a male Vulcan.

"Seros." T'Lan said when she saw one of her brothers, "Why are you calling?"

"I understand that the *Nightfall* is on course for Vulcan. Is that correct?" Seros asked.

"It is." T'Lan answered.

"Are you intending to visit our father when you arrive?" Seros said.

"Yes. Robert and I will be taking T'Sal to see him." T'Lan replied.

"Have you spoken with father?"

"No, not yet. I sent a message ahead to express our interest in visiting him. I will call to confirm to when I know when we will be available. Why?" T'Lan said.

"Father is in a romantic relationship." Seros said simply and T'Lan hesitated, startled by this statement.

"He has not mentioned this to me. Who is the woman?" she said.

"Her name is Zho." Seros told her.

"Zho? That is not a typically Vulcan name." T'Lan commented.

"No, she is Romulan. One of the refugees from their empire. We are concerned that she may be having a negative effect on him." Seros said.

"We?"

"All of your brothers. Despite having lived on Vulcan for four years Zho has not embraced logic." Seros said.

"What is it that you want of me?" T'Lan asked.

"We want you to speak with both of them. Find out what it is that she wants. We have attempted to intervene but father refused to listen. Since then he has limited his contact with us. Logic suggests the possibility that Zho has encouraged this. As his only daughter you have always had a special place with him. Plus you are more familiar with aliens than any of us, especially Romulans, so perhaps you will have better success." Seros explained.

"I will do my best to address your concerns." T'Lan said, "Though I cannot guarantee that father will listen to me any more than he has to you."

"That is all we can ask T'Lan. Thank you. Live long and prosper." Seros responded, raising his hand into the shot in the traditional Vulcan salute.

"Peace and long life." T'Lan said, also saluting him before the channel was closed.

"Was it anything important T'Lan?" Cole asked when T'Lan returned to the *Nightfall's* bridge and took her seat beside him.

"A personal matter. I shall explain to you later." T'Lan replied.

"Well we're on final approach now." Cole said before glancing over his shoulder at the man at the tactical station behind him, "Martin?" he added.

"We've been scanned by the Vulcan defence network and cleared captain." Martin replied.

"Traffic control have given us a clear route to spacedock captain." Noyal added.

"Lieutenant Commander Ghroc are we still on schedule?" T'Lan asked the Bolian sat at the helm, his hands gripping the manual controls common to the ships of the *Nightfall* program.

"Yes commander. We should dock in about six minutes." he replied.

"Very good commander. Take us in." Cole said.

It was then that the turbolift opened again and Doctor Hamill. The *Nightfall's* chief medical officer stepped onto the bridge.

"Captain I understand we're about to dock." she said and Cole nodded.

"Yes, just a few minutes now doctor." he said.

"I was just wondering whether there was anything specific wanted for my report to the science academy." Hamill said.

"Have you included anything about your release from the stasis box the Ferengi imprisoned you in?" Noyal suggested, grinning.

"That wasn't funny." Hamill replied.

"Oh yes it was." Noyal said.

"You created a holodeck program to open the box to make me think it was more than a million years in the future and I was surrounded by aliens who told me humankind had been wiped out by a chin disease spread by playing dirty violins." Hamill said and Ghroc also grinned.

"That was my favourite part. It was brilliant." he said and Hamill glared at him.

"I do not believe that the Vulcan science Academy is interested in practical jokes." T'Lan said.

"We haven't heard anything from the Vulcan Science Academy doctor." Cole added then he looked at Sodyne to confirm this, "Have we commander?" he asked.

"No captain. They haven't tried to contact me directly." she answered.

"Then we can only wait and see what they want." Cole said, looking back towards Hamill.

"I would also like to remind everyone leaving the ship about deodorant." T'Lan added.

"Good point. It's bad enough that Vulcan is so hot without needing to worry about offending our hosts' olfactory senses. Everyone should make sure they do what they can to limit their body odour. Also be aware of the thin atmosphere. Avoid exerting yourselves too much and seek medical help if you feel short of breath." Cole said, "I think that covers everything. What about you T'Lan?"

"I agree." she said.

"Then commence docking procedures Mister Ghroc. We have an appointment and the Vulcan's appreciate promptness." Cole ordered.

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The house sat near the edge of a cliff that overlooked a desert valley. The building had stood for thousands of years, since before Surak brought his way of logical thought to the planet and had survived numerous wars. It was not the history of the building or the scenic view that it offered that brought the current group of individuals there, instead it was the privacy that it offered. The owner, who was among the four, was a Vulcan who prized being able to conduct his research without the constant interruptions of urban living and now it allowed him to meet with his associates without their meeting being observed.

Surtam's three guests had all arrived using private ground transport to avoid their journeys being logged by transporter stations or tracked by air traffic control and after greeting them at the front door Surtam led each of them to the grounds at the back where they could sit and look at the view while they spoke. All three of the others were human, two men and a woman. The woman was a fellow scientist while the men had a background in space travel, one a retired Starfleet officer and the other one of the few Maquis to have survived the Dominion's onslaught.

"The *Nightfall* was on final approach when the science academy contacted me." Surtam told the others gathered at the rear of his house.

"We should have intercepted it before it got here." the former Maquis member said.

"Kaye are you serious?" the woman responded, "Take down a starship?"

"There are ways. Starfleet never ignores a call for help. That can be used to draw them off course to somewhere where our forces can take them on." Kaye replied.

"With what?" Mitchell exclaimed, "Your thirty year old Bird of Prey, a salvaged Oberth-class and a pair of armed freighters? Hardly an armada is it?"

"Mitchell's right Kaye." the former Starfleet officer said, "We can't take down a starship, especially not a heavy cruiser like an Akira-class. The ship's we've been able to gather are nothing compared to the firepower the *Nightfall* can produce. We'd lose everything and have nothing to show for it."

"I think that Captain Copeland is trying to remind you that we cannot afford to take risks with our limited resources for the small chance of small term gain." Surtam said and Copeland smiled.

"Exactly. Denning's expedition is hardly the first time something like this has happened. Even if we can get him shut down there could be another time when we'll need those ships." he said.

"So what's the plan then?" Kaye asked, "Denning will be beaming down from that cruiser at any time."

"Initially we will give diplomacy another chance." Surtam said, "A representative of the Federation Science Council has been invited to attend our session. If we can make them see the logic of our position then they will recall Professor Denning and a new precedent will have been set."

"And if your logic doesn't prevail?" Kaye said.

"In that case we will be in your hands Kaye." Surtam told him.

"That's going to mean taking out those Starfleet officers as well. Are you okay with that?" Mitchell said, looking at Copeland.

"It's necessary." he replied, "Just think about how many more could die if we fail."

"Or what else might be unleashed at the same time." Kaye added.

"If we are going to escalate this to the next level though we'll need more details about the targets." Copeland pointed out.

"I can get accommodation data from the science academy." Surtam said.

"The *Nightfall's* crew may well stay aboard their ship." Copeland commented.

"Then we either need to find a way of luring them down to the surface or smuggling a team aboard their ship." Kaye said, "The surface will be an easier hit obviously. What about the science academy itself?"

"I do not want to risk collateral damage to the Vulcan Science Academy." Surtam responded.

"A knife to the neck won't damage your precious academy." Kaye said.

"We don't even know who the crew of the *Nightfall* are, beyond its captain of course. Copeland, can't your contacts help us out here?" Mitchell said.

"Of course they could. I could get copies of the personnel records of every member of the ship's crew. But this isn't like when there was a solid core of sympathisers for the Maquis within Starfleet that could be counted on to keep quiet. If the *Nightfall's* senior staff all turn up dead then the trail will lead directly to the four of us. Is that what you want?"

"Do not worry doctor. Each of the key members of the *USS Nightfall's* crew have been asked to present their version of events to the science academy as well." Surtam said, "From there we shall be able to track them and determine when they are most vulnerable. Now are there any other questions?"

"Just one thing." Kaye said, "I've done all this before. Taken action outside the law for something I knew was right and I've seen what happens if it all goes wrong. Once that first trigger gets pulled there's no going back

for any of us and everyone needs to be sure that they're willing to accept that. Anyone who wants to back out should do so now."

"Harriet could you give me a hand with this?" Lieutenant Commander Davis, the *Nightfall's* chief engineer called out as he struggled with the fastening of his white dress tunic and his wife came hurrying out of the bedroom."

"Ashley can't you ever do this yourself?" she asked as she took hold of his collar and fastened it for him, "Even five year olds tend to be able to dress themselves."

"It's not my fault they make these things so complicated. If Starfleet Command had warned me about them when they offered me a field commission I'd have told them where to stick it and stayed an enlisted man." Davis said.

"Then you're lucky you have me or you'd be looking scruffy at your court martial." his wife said before kissing him on the cheek, "How long will you be?"

"I don't know. The Vulcans haven't even explained properly what they want us for. That reminds me, I need to take some deodorant with me just in case."

"Don't the Vulcans have air conditioning?" Harriet asked.

"Of course they do but it's generally only set for non-Vulcans in areas meant for tourists. The rest of us get to sweat." Davis said.

"Well I may be beaming down to the surface myself. T'Lan asked me to drop T'Sal at her father's house if things run late and if I'm going down there anyway I may as well take in a few of the sights." Harriet said and Davis smiled.

"That does sound logical." he said, "Now I need to be going." and he kissed his wife goodbye before leaving their quarters and heading for the transporter room where the rest of the *Nightfall's* command staff and Professor Denning's team were all waiting to beam down. Like Davis the Starfleet officers also wore their white dress tunics in place of their grey and black service uniforms.

"Ah commander. Just in time." Cole said, "I was about to ask where you were."

"Sorry captain. It's been ten years since I got a commission but I'm still not used to this dress tunic." Davis said as they all moved onto the transporter.

"I know how you feel. One of the advantages to being married is that T'Lan can help me with mine." Cole replied before looking at the transporter operator and adding, "Energise."

Despite its name, the Vulcan Science Academy was a centre of learning for many disciplines rather than just sciences and its archives were widely regarded as being among the largest collections of knowledge on almost every subject to have ever existed in recorded galactic history. Since the founding of the United Federation of Planets opened up the planet Vulcan to non-Vulcans the academy had played host to researchers from more than a hundred worlds and as such it had been provided with a dedicated transporter room of its own. It was here that the command staff of the *Nightfall* along with Denning and his team materialised.

"Professor Marcus Denning. Captain Robert Cole. Welcome to Vulcan." the academy staff member who was in the room to meet them said, his hand held up in the Vulcan salute, "I am Turvol. I have been instructed to guide you to the audience chamber where the board of directors will meet with you."

"The entire board?" T'Lan asked.

"That is correct." Turvol answered.

"What does that mean?" Hamill said.

"It means that the most senior scientists on the planet are all gathering in one place to meet with us." Denning said.

"For our little expedition? It all sounds a little over the top." Hewitt added.

"The board of directors of the Vulcan Science Academy does not meet frivolously. They are all busy with their own research projects. Most of the day to day running of the academy is left to more junior officials." T'Lan said.

"That is correct. A meeting with the full board is to be considered a great honour." Turvol said.

"Isn't being honoured something of an emotional reaction?" Trellan commented and Nayal smiled.

"Don't get me started." she said.

Outside the transporter room the hallways of the Vulcan Science Academy were strangely quiet despite the number of people moving around in them.

"This place is like a morgue." Nayal said quietly and a pair of nearby Vulcans both turned their heads towards her.

"Vulcans are not given to idle chatter." T'Lan told her, "Academic discussions are often better held in private rather than in a hallway."

"Excuse me Turvol." Sodyne said, moving beside the Vulcan guide.

"You have a question lieutenant commander?" he asked.

"Sodyne. Leyla Sodyne. I'm the Nightfall's chief science officer." Sodyne told him.

"What may I help you with Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" Turvol said.

"I understand that you have one of the most extensive libraries in the Federation." Sodyne said.

"The library of the Vulcan Science Academy is the most extensive in known space lieutenant commander. Not just the Federation." Turvol told her.

"Of course. I was wondering if it would be possible to have access to it." Sodyne said.

"The library of the Vulcan Science Academy is closed to those are not members lieutenant commander. However, if there is a specific piece of information you wanted to check then you may request-" Turvol began.

"Actually I was hoping to review all of the information you hold on the Slavers, their empire and their technology." Sodyne interrupted and Trellan snorted.

"Good luck with that." he said.

"What Trellan is trying to say is that we made a similar request before our expedition set out commander." Denning added, "The academy was singularly unwilling to grant us access to any such material."

"Such general access is normally granted only to members of the academy." Turvol explained, "For anyone else to be granted it would require the permission of the board of directors themselves."

"Who we're about to meet, right? So I can just ask them?" Sodyne asked.

"That would not be normal but it is possible." Turvol answered and then he pointed towards a door ahead of them, "This is it. The board will meet with you in here." he said.

The room that the group was led to was a large internal chamber lined with large display screens that anyone in the room could use them to present information. A long oval table ran down the centre of the room with chairs positioned around it in two groups with enough for the visitors at the end closest to the doorway that they were shown in through while another group was positioned at the other end with a significant gap between the groups of chairs. Clearly these were intended for the board of directors who had yet to arrive.

"Please wait here. I will inform the board that you have arrived and are waiting for them." Turvol told the group before he turned around and left the room again.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, why do you want access to the science academy's records on the Slavers?" T'Lan asked as everyone was finding somewhere to sit.

"Because I'm the *Nightfall's* chief science officer and if we could expect to be dealing with Slaver technology on a regular basis then isn't it a good idea to know as much about them as possible?" Sodyne replied.

"Your reasoning is logical lieutenant commander. However, I would have liked to be consulted in advance. I may have been able to advise you." T'Lan said.

"I don't need my hand holding commander. I can do just fine on my own." Sodyne said before a door at the other end of the room opened and a line of Vulcans wearing traditional academic robes entered. In silence the Vulcans walked to the far end of the table and sat down before the man at the head of the table finally spoke.

"Professor Denning. Captain Cole. I am High Director Staris, thank you for attending this meeting. The Vulcan Science Academy wishes to review the events that took place on the moon Vega four-six-eight before we make our recommendations." he said.

"Excuse me but what recommendations can you make about my expedition or Starfleet operations?" Denning asked, "When I asked for your help before I set out you refused to have anything to do with it."

"You are not a member of the Vulcan Science Academy professor. Therefore, you are not eligible for our sponsorship. However, at the time we raised no specific objections with the Federation Science Council. That position is now up for debate though. Director Surtam has alerted us to your discovery of a telepathic amplifier as well as a number of hostile organisms contained inside a stasis box. Based on these discoveries he has advocated for us to change our existing position. You will of course be given the opportunity to argue against the logic of this recommendation." Staris said.

"So unless we satisfy you that we're worthy you'll tell the Federation Science Council to pull our grant, right?" Trellan said.

"That is an accurate summary." Staris replied.

"But why?" Hewitt asked.

"Your discoveries at Vega four-six-eight suggest that there is a level of risk we consider unacceptable." Surtam said.

"Risk? What risk?" Trellan asked.

"There are two primary risks." Surtam said, "Firstly the potentially destructive nature of Slaver technology. The telepathic amplifier was able to disable people on a planetary scale. Secondly the discovery of hostile organisms proved that life can be preserved inside stasis boxes. This opens up the possibility that some of the Slavers themselves could have survived in this way. What would happen if you were to revive one of them?"

"How dare you?" Denning exclaimed, "Trellan and I have decades of field experience between us. We don't need your permission to research anything."

“Professor your emotional outburst will not help you. Even you must admit that we as Vulcans have superior experience with technologies based on telepathic power.” Staris said.

“Ah the superior morality of telepaths.” Sodyne commented and Cole stared at her.

“Watch yourself lieutenant commander.” he said. Then he turned to Staris and added, “High director perhaps you could just explain what you need to know that you can't get from our reports?”

“We are interested in your intentions for the future Captain Cole.” Staris answered and he looked at Surtam, “Director Surtam will explain.” he added.

“We have compiled a list of questions that we require you to answer in full.” he said, “These will be used to make a final judgement about whether the Vulcan Science Academy thinks Professor Denning's expedition should be allowed to continue.”

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"We should have just left." Trellan said when the meeting concluded and the *Nightfall's* command crew and Denning's team were leaving the room, "You know they're going to go complaining to your science council that we shouldn't be allowed to continue, right?"

"Trellan you may have considered that meeting a waste of time but I believe that Professor Denning acquitted himself well." T'Lan said.

"Vulcan intuition T'Lan?" Cole commented.

"Logical deduction." T'Lan replied.

"Of course it was. So how does logic tell you that the directors won't try and shut down the professor's mission?" Nayal asked.

"I noticed that most of the questions being asked became shorter as the meeting went along. The directors required less information because they were satisfied with what had already been said." T'Lan explained.

"That Surtam didn't seem happy with anything that was said to him." Ghroc pointed out, "I was just knocked out but he seemed to think I was in a position to evaluate the technical capability of the amplifier."

"He also wanted all that information about the creatures in the stasis boxes." Terry added.

"Yes, Surtam did seem to be more hostile than the rest of the board." T'Lan agreed.

"He was also the one who brought this to the board's attention." Martin pointed out, "I've dealt with people like him in law enforcement before. They've already decided that someone is guilty before a court hearing has started. I think he was prejudiced against the professor from the start."

"Well we can only wait now. So what's everyone going to do in the meantime?" Nayal asked.

"The Romulan Quarter isn't far from here. I know a good bar." Trellan suggested.

"You've been there before?" Davis said.

"He was working there when I hired him." Denning said with a smile.

"You lot can go but T'Lan and I have a prior engagement with my father in law." Cole said, "I'll meet you all back at the ship. Shall we say at twenty-three hundred?"

"Twenty-three?" Trellan exclaimed, "Captain at this bar the party will have hardly started by then."

"Maybe so but I need my crew alert for their shifts tomorrow. I can't ask junior officers to fill in for superiors with hangovers." Cole replied just as a Vulcan in academy robes approached them.

"Who is Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" she asked.

"I am." Sodyne said, raising her hand.

"Please come with me lieutenant commander. Your request to access our library has been granted." the Vulcan woman said and Sodyne smiled.

"Aren't you coming to the bar with us then?" Hamill said.

"Sorry Sally, I need to do this. I might join you later though." Sodyne replied before she followed the Vulcan woman away.

"Her loss." Trellan said, "Come on, I bet I can get us our first round of drinks on the house."

"I'll give Foster a call. He won't want to miss this." Hewitt commented.

Most of the group then began to move off but Cole reached out and put his hand on Nayal's shoulder.

"A moment please Lieutenant." he said.

"Yes captain?" she replied.

"I seem to remember you and T'Lan taking Jenna West and Grace Carr to a bar that served Romulan drinks. I also remember the state they came back in." Cole said.

"Yes captain? What does-" Nayal began.

"Don't let anyone else come back in that state. Am I understood?" Cole interrupted and Nayal smiled at him.

"The board has ignored my warnings." Surtam said into his communicator, "They will not issue a protest to the Federation Science Council. Their decision will be announced tomorrow afternoon."

"I thought you were supposed to have this under control Surtam." Mitchell responded, "My contacts on the council won't act just on my say so. We needed the Vulcan Science Academy behind us."

"The board failed to see the logic of our position." Surtam said, "However, I have collected the information needed about Professor Denning's team and the senior officers of the *Nightfall*. If Kaye can act quickly then some of the them are vulnerable. I have personally acted to separate one of them from the others."

"Okay I'll let him know." Mitchell said and then she sighed, "I suppose there's no going back no is there?" she added.

Cole and T'Lan beamed back up to the *Nightfall* to collect T'Sal before beaming back down to the surface of Vulcan, close to the home of T'Lan's father Saron. This was located on the outskirts of the city of Vulcana

Regar several hundred kilometres from the capital ShiKahr but by transporter this distance meant nothing and the pair materialised at the end of the street. The buildings here were all residential and well spaced out. To maintain the privacy of their occupants each building was separated from those either side by stone walls and the main entrance to each was concealed around the back instead of in front.

"Just like I remember it." Cole commented as they walked towards Saron's house.

"We were here just after the birth of T'Sal. The area is unlikely to have changed much in just a few months Robert." T'Lan pointed out.

Approaching Saron's house Cole and T'Lan walked along the path that led into the grounds at the rear from where the sound of traditional Vulcan music could be heard playing at a moderate volume. As they walked around the house they saw a young woman wearing a bodysuit that left her arms and legs exposed standing in the grounds so that she faced them but with her eyes closed so that she could not see them. The music was coming from a compact speaker not far from the woman and as it played she slowly moved her limbs in time with it in what looked like very well rehearsed moves. The angle of her eyebrows and sharply pointed ears visible from beneath her hair confirmed her Vulcan heritage and Cole leant towards T'Lan.

"Looks like Zho has a daughter." he said softly.

"Excuse me." T'Lan said out loud, "We are here to see Saron."

The woman opened her eyes and looked at Cole and T'Lan, smiling.

"T'Lan," she said, "and you must be Robert. Saron told me to expect you." she added looking at Cole.

"That's right." Cole replied, "Pleased to meet you-"

"Zho." the woman said walking up to Cole and T'Lan then giving them the traditional Vulcan salute, "And this must be T'Sal. May I hold her?"

"You may." T'Lan replied and she handed her daughter to the Romulan woman.

"You are gorgeous." Zho said, looking at T'Sal, "Come on let's go inside. Saron will want to see you. I'd tried to get him to invite his sons around to visit as well but they've had a falling out so it'll just be the five of us. Maybe you can help me find a way to solve it." and she turned around and carried T'Sal inside the house.

"How old do you think she is?" Cole whispered to T'Lan, "If she was human I'd say about twenty or twenty five at most."

"That may be an accurate assessment." T'Lan replied, "We should go inside. Father will wonder why we are delaying." she added and she and Cole followed Zho into the house.

Inside they found Saron and Zho stood together looking at T'Sal while each of them held out two fingers from each hand, making contact in the Vulcan manner of expressing affection.

"Father." T'Lan said.

"T'Lan. It is agreeable to see you and Robert." Saron said, "Thank you for visiting and bringing T'Sal as well. Zho and I have prepared a meal. Please come and sit down."

When Surtam was informed that there was a visitor to see him he was not surprised, expecting Kaye to send someone to kill Sodyne as soon as possible. However, he had not expected the individual to be shown into his office to appear to be Vulcan. As a species Vulcans produced very few assassins, the profession being routed in the emotional need for revenge more than logic. However, this image was dispelled when the man smiled at Surtam, revealing him to be a Romulan instead. The Romulan wore the uniform of a police officer and had a phaser on open display. If the profession of assassin lacked logic then Surtam could still admire the logic of this disguise

"So who's the target professor?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne of Starfleet. She is in the building now." Surtam told the assassin and he handed him a PADD that held a profile of Sodyne taken from the science academy's security system.

"A Betazoid? I was told this was to be a close up job. I'm not a sniper." the assassin said.

"It is." Surtam told him.

"Against a Betazoid? No chance. She'll spot me coming." the assassin said, tossing the PADD back across Surtam's desk.

"If you took the time you read the profile I prepared for you then you would see that Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is unusual among her species in that she has never developed telepathic abilities. I learned this from her report into the issue that has brought us together." Surtam explained, scrolling to the section of the profile on the PADD that dealt with Sodyne's total lack of telepathic ability before passing it back to the assassin again and the Romulan man smiled.

"Then this should be straight forward." he said, "My uniform will let me get close without arousing suspicion and then I'll arrest her on some false charge."

"What charge? She beamed down directly from her ship and has not left the building since." Surtam pointed out.

"Theft is always a good one." the assassin answered, "I'll tell her that someone said they saw her remove an artefact of some sort from a shelf and she needs to come with me to sort it out. Then I'll take her somewhere quiet and deal with her where no-one will see us."

"And what if she refuses to go with you? What then?" Surtam asked.

"Then I have a phaser and handcuffs. Killing her on the premises will raise questions immediately. I doubt any of your staff would concern themselves about an off worlder being taken away in handcuffs though." the assassin replied as he got to his feet, "Now exactly where can I find this Lieutenant Commander Leyla Sodyne?"

Sodyne sat alone in one of the Vulcan Science Academy's archives. So much information was held by the academy that every so often another archive facility would need to be added. In addition to the various research papers concerning the Slavers and their empire the Vulcan Science Academy also contained a handful of artefacts from that time period and it was one of these that Sodyne now examined. The artefact in question was a small metal statue that according to its entry in the academy database had been discovered in a stasis box forty years earlier and depicted one of the Slavers themselves. What interested Sodyne about this statue was the writing on the base that was believed to be a description of an as yet undiscovered Slaver settlement somewhere within what was now Federation space.

As an energy saving measure the archive was only dimly lit under normal circumstances, with each work station having its own light but to study the statue Sodyne was instead wearing a set of illuminated magnifiers when she heard footsteps from behind her and she turned around to see who was there. The light from her headset shone in the man's eyes and he flinched.

"Sorry." she said, removing the headset and instead turning on the work station light to reveal the man who had just arrived to be a Vulcan police officer and she frowned, "What brings you here officer?" she asked.

"A report has been made of the theft of academy property. A rare artefact has been removed and you were seen close to its case when it was last seen." the disguised assassin said.

"Rubbish. You can clearly see I only have this one artefact. I'm not allowed any more than that at once." Sodyne told him.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne you are to come with me to be searched." the Romulan said calmly and Sodyne sighed.

"I'm a Betazoid." she said, "Nudity doesn't bother me and I don't think anyone else around here would care if they saw me with nothing on either so let's just get this over and done with so I can get back to work." then she spread her arms out and raised her hands, "Go on, unzip me." she said, briefly pointing to the zip that ran down the centre of her uniform.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I am arresting you on suspicion of theft." the Romulan said, stepping forwards and taking his handcuffs from his belt. However, the moment he locked one end of these around Sodyne's wrist she unexpectedly punched him in the face with her free hand. Then she rapidly tapped her combadge as she dived out of the Romulan's reach.

"Sodyne to *Nightfall*. I'm under attack, I need a security team down here immediately." she said.

"Copy that commander. Security team ETA thirty seconds." the security officer on watch aboard the orbiting *Nightfall* responded.

Having heard this the Romulan knew that he had little time to complete his mission. Sodyne had not identified her attacker to the *Nightfall* so if he was able to kill her before her reinforcements could arrive then he could claim to have been there in response to the attack. The most efficient way to complete his assignment was to use his phaser and the Romulan assassin drew the weapon and pointed it towards Sodyne. Her white Starfleet dress tunic made her easy to spot even in the dim light and the assassin quickly picked her out, however as he fired his phaser she rolled behind a display case and the beam hit it instead, shattering the cover and destroying the priceless artefact it contained.

Knowing that her white tunic was giving her position away Sodyne quickly unzipped it, removing the combadge and pinning it to her dark grey under shirt. Then she hurled the tunic towards the Romulan, spoiling his aim for his second shot while she dived between two rows of shelves that ran all the way from the floor to the ceiling.

The Romulan cursed under his breath as he knocked the thrown tunic aside and hunted for where Sodyne had gone. However, before he could find her he heard the distinctive sound of a transporter and there was a highly visible glow from behind him as the security team Sodyne had called for began to materialise. The Romulan rushed behind a set of shelves and peered around them to observe the newly arriving Starfleet team, wanting to assess the threat they posed. If there were just two security guards then he could possibly take them both out before they could even locate him. The assassin was concerned to see not two but six figures appearing through the haze of transporter signatures. Two of them wore standard Starfleet uniforms with the gold coloured collar of the services division while the other four wore obvious body armour and carried phaser rifles rather than hand phasers. The assassin was aware of Starfleet's ground combat division but had never encountered any of them before and he did not want his first encounter with a full fire team of them to be the end of his career so he remained out of sight.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne!" one of the security guards called out as the ground combat troops activated the flash lights mounted on top of their phaser rifles," *Nightfall* security team. Petty Officer Walsh."

"Here." Sodyne responded, stepping into view with her hands raised and she smiled when she saw the ground combat troops in addition to the two security guards, "Good, you've brought out the big guns." she said and she held out her hand, "Give me your sidearm." she told one of the soldiers.

"Yes ma'am." the man replied, passing her the hand phaser holstered on his leg and Sodyne adjusted the setting of this to one suitable to blast the handcuffs from her wrist.

"Okay our target is a man wearing the uniform of a police officer. He's not Vulcan though, he's Romulan." Sodyne the newly arrived troops.

"Are you sure commander?" Walsh asked.

"Of course. I shone a light in his face and he blinked. All Vulcans have an inner eyelid that would have protected them against that but not all Romulans do." Sodyne replied, "He was over there the last time I saw him."

The leader of the ground troops make several gestures with his hand and the four men split into pairs and they began to advance in the direction indicated by Sodyne while she and the two security guards followed them. Seeing that the odds were heavily stacked against him the assassin began to withdraw, backing away from the advancing troops while keeping his phaser pointed in their direction. Reaching the exit from the archives he opened the door and hurried through just as one of the Starfleet soldiers spotted him.

"Contact!" he shouted as he fired only for the phaser beam to narrowly miss him.

"After him!" Sodyne yelled and she and the other Starfleet personnel broke into a run as they chased the Romulan out of the archives.

The sight of what appeared to be a uniformed police officer being chased through the hallways of the Vulcan Science Academy attracted considerable attention, enough to make both students and staff come to a sudden halt as they tried to determine what was going on while the Starfleet personnel yelled at them to get out of the way. The Romulan had two considerable advantages over his pursuers though, firstly neither humans nor Betazoids possessed the same strength and stamina that Vulcans or Romulans did and so the assassin could potentially move much faster than them over a long distance. However, this was of limited use inside the science academy when there was not enough room for him to maintain a sprint in a straight line. His second advantage was of far more significance though and it quickly became apparent that he would not be caught. The thin atmosphere of Vulcan rapidly began to take its toll on Sodyne and the men now under her command and all seven of them were soon short of breath. It was not much longer before one of the ground combat troops, weighed down by his weapons and armour stumbled and fell.

"Damn this air." Sodyne gasped as she too came to a halt, "Give it up. We'll never catch him." she ordered and the other ground troops and security guards also came to a halt, all of them struggling to breathe.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." a voice called out and when she looked up she saw High Director Staris staring at her, flanked by a pair of the academy staff, "Would you mind explaining what is going on?"

"Of course high director." Sodyne said, still struggling to catch her breath, "Just as soon as I get the energy back to talk properly." and then she promptly slumped to the floor.



Cole was surprised to find that the meal replicated for him included meat. As a rule Vulcans were vegetarian, although this was by choice rather than biological necessity and Saron and T'Lan's plates still consisted of just vegetables as was the bowl of food replicated especially for T'Sal. This led Cole to conclude that the addition of meat to the replicator's menu was a result of Zho's influence, Romulans still following an omnivorous diet. Another oddity that Cole put down to Zho's presence was that the meal was not eaten in silence as Vulcans generally did, with Saron questioning T'Lan about their life aboard the *Nightfall* as soon as they sat down.

Zho insisted on feeding T'Sal and she smiled as she raised a spoonful of food to the young child's mouth.

"So how did you and Saron meet Zho?" Cole asked.

"Oh it was a wonderful accident really." Zho answered, "I went to the museum to photograph some of the ancient Vulcan artefacts, those that dated back to before the time of Surak and the division of our people and Saron was there as well. He really helped me out."

"Helped you? With what?" T'Lan said.

"She wanted more information on the purposes of the artefacts." Saron said.

"Don't you have guides or computer interfaces?" Cole said.

"Of course but they're so sterile and they just list a specific set of details. They don't tell you whether there are any better examples in other museums. Saron knew all of that though." Zho explained.

"So you started by touring museums. Are you a historian as well Zho?" Cole said.

"Oh no I'm a photographer. I like to capture the beauty of the galaxy." Zho told him.

"And your parents?" T'Lan said.

"My father was a senator before the civil war. He represented a minor colony and when the fighting started he sent my mother and I along with enough money to pay our way and as many other civilians as would fit aboard his personal ship to the Federation for safety while he joined the military. After he died my mother got a visa to move to Vulcan so she could try to embrace our Vulcan heritage by studying for the Kolinahr. I didn't fancy shedding all my emotions so I opted to study my heritage by photographing for everyone to see." Zho explained.

"I was able to provide Zho with the locations of the best objects on public display for her project." Saron added.

"That wasn't all. Thanks to your father's influence I was able to see objects normally not on display. Plus he knew every cave and tunnel in the Forge and I really wanted to go out there for a special project." Zho said, "Saron organised transport and advised me on what I could do without causing offence."

"The Forge is not off limits to visitors of any species or belief." T'Lan commented, "The only restriction is the ability of the individual to tolerate the conditions."

"I know but I didn't want to upset anyone by taking all my clothes off to lie down on a two thousand year old monument to have my photograph taken on it." Zho said and Cole spluttered when he heard this at the same time he was chewing a mouthful of food. Then he looked at Saron.

"So you photographed her?" he said.

"I am not the photographer Robert." Saron replied, "Zho set up the camera equipment and set it off using a timer. My purpose was to act as a guide and cultural adviser."

"At first I had to persuade him it was okay for him to just be in the same cave while I wasn't wearing anything. He was going to wait outside in the heat or on the other side of the hill just to spare me embarrassment." Zho commented, "But what good would that do me if there turned out to be a Sehlat nearby?"

"I was also Zho's protector. I know the signs of various predators close by and I had my phaser with me." Saron said.

"That's when we got together as well. We were only supposed to be there a week but it was so beautiful I wanted to stay longer. The problem was that Saron could sense his Pon Farr coming on and needed to get back to the city. So I suggested that I simply solve the problem for him. We had enough supplies for another week after all." Zho continued.

"It was a logical solution." Saron added.

"Indeed it was." T'Lan agreed.

"Logical?" Cole commented.

"In Vulcan society it is accepted for individuals to mate purely for the sake of satisfying Pon Farr even when they are not in a relationship." T'Lan told him.

"Just to make it more interesting I set up the camera to record it. It was my first time so I thought it would be nice to have a proper record." Zho said and Cole spluttered again.

"Is something wrong with your food Robert? An alternative can be replicated." Saron said.

"No the food is fine thanks. I just swallowed it a bit too fast, that's all. Zho I hope you don't mind me asking but how old are you?" he said.

"I'll be twenty in forty-six days." Zho answered.

"We are planning to mark the occasion with a trip to Betazed." Saron added and Zho smiled.

"I think it would be so romantic to get married by the Janaran Falls." she said and both Cole and T'Lan looked at Saron. However, before either could question the older Vulcan about this Cole noticed a bright red dot appear on Saron's chest.

"Down!" Cole yelled, pushing Saron to the floor moments before the first plasma bolt came in through the window.

The eight masked figures had ridden in an enclosed transport vehicle painted to resemble a common type of courier's vehicle. This had pulled up outside Saron's house so that the assault team could disembark while the driver remained inside but lying down to remain hidden. Meanwhile the assault team advanced using the transport to conceal themselves from detection by any of the street's other residents, four of them positioning themselves against the walls separating Saron's property from that of his neighbours while the other four crept down the pathway leading to the entrance at the rear. Finding this locked they signalled their comrades to the front of the house to provide a diversion at which point they opened fire with their plasma rifles, spraying the room in which their targets sat with energy blasts. This gave the group at the rear of the house the opportunity to shoot the locking mechanism from the door and force their way inside.

"Somebody has just entered the house." Saron said when he heard the back door opening.

"Do you still have that phaser just in case any sehlat's wander out of the desert?" Cole asked.

"Yes. It is secured in my study." Saron responded.

"Good. Then let's see if we can get to it. We'll all go together, remember to stay low." Cole said. Then he looked at Saron and added, "Lead the way."

Keeping below the level of the window the occupants of the house moved towards the doorway, Zho clutching T'Sal in her arms. Once at the door Cole got to his feet and peered out into the hallway, then when he saw that there was no-one around he waved the others onward. Fortunately Saron's study was further towards the rear of the house than the dining room and so this meant that the attackers to the front no longer had a line of sight and Cole and the others were able to stand up as they entered. As he entered the room Cole noticed that Saron still kept it decorated with images of his family, including his late wife. However, the collection of images had changed since Cole was last at the house and he averted his gaze when he saw that the images of Saron's four sons had all been replaced by images of Zho, including a number that appeared to have been taken during their two week long trip to The Forge.

"T'Lan keep watch." he said and T'Lan nodded as she positioned herself just inside the doorway from where she could see down the hall while Saron hurried over to the locked cabinet he stored his phaser in.

Saron's phaser looked like an older pattern Starfleet issue weapon but it was marked as a civilian model, meaning that its settings were limited to lower output levels and that its internal components were less tolerant of continued use. Perfectly adequate for defending against a small number of wild animals but not intended for use on a modern battlefield.

"Thank you." Cole said as he took the weapon from Saron, "Now I suggest you use that communicator to call the police."

All of a sudden T'Lan waved everyone back and Cole took aim at the doorway. Moments later the muzzle of a plasma rifle appeared around the door frame and Cole prepared to fire. Before a target fully presented itself though T'Lan reached out and grabbed hold of the rifle barrel, dragging the startled owner through the doorway after it. She reached down for the masked man's shoulder, intending to incapacitate him with a nerve pinch but she found that he was wearing an armoured plate across his shoulders that would prevent her from applying the necessary pressure at the correct point so instead she ripped the plasma rifle from his grasp and used it to deliver a blow to the base of his skull that rendered him unconscious. Then she looked at Cole and nodded.

"The communicator has been disabled." Saron said as he attempted to use it to summon the police and Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to-" he began but the device just produced a loud squealing sound before he quickly shut it off again.

"What's the matter? Can't you contact your ship?" a voice called out from the hallway and then a rapid stream of plasma bolts came flying in through the doorway.

Cole then rushed to the doorway, standing on the opposite side to his wife and they looked at one another.

"On three?" T'Lan asked and Cole nodded.

"On three. One. Two. Three." he said and then both of them leaned through the doorway to return fire, T'Lan firing a short suppressing burst of plasma bolts from her rifle while Cole fired a single beam that hit the gunman standing further along the hallway. Even though the output power of the weapon was restricted it was still enough to kill and the gunman collapsed, his rifle falling from his grasp and clattering to the floor, "Saron take this. Stay here and protect T'Sal and Zho." he said. Then he and T'Lan darted out of the study,

hurrying down the hallway to where the dead gunman was lying on the floor and Cole picked up the dropped plasma rifle and checked it, "It looks functional." he said before there was a soft creaking sound and he and T'Lan spun around to see another masked gunman.

T'Lan already had her plasma rifle to her shoulder and she fired but the man was able to retreat out of sight before being hit. Cole then ducked under the level of T'Lan's rifle and advanced along the opposite side of the hallway as his wife covered him. He paused before moving around the corner though while T'Lan moved to catch up with him. It was then that the man reappeared, pointing his plasma rifle towards T'Lan but before he could fire Cole shot him dead with two blasts in rapid succession aimed at his chest.

"Three down." Cole muttered before T'Lan suddenly pushed him aside.

"Get down!" she called out as the first of a burst of plasma blasts struck the wall behind where Cole had been standing. T'Lan returned fire and one of her shots hit the man in his thigh, causing him to scream as he collapsed but he kept hold of his weapon and fired again. This time he aimed at T'Lan and she was forced to retreat out of sight but this gave Cole an opportunity and he fired a rapid four shot burst of plasma blasts from his weapon at the man. All four shots struck their target and the man jerked under the impacts before slumping sideways.

"T'Lan do you hear anyone else?" Cole asked quietly, knowing that Vulcan hearing was superior to a human's. However, before T'Lan could answer the sound of firing from outside suddenly ceased, "Are they giving up?" Cole added.

"Perhaps we have killed everyone they sent into the house and they do not wish to send in anyone else." T'Lan suggested before she heard another faint sound that rapidly grew in volume so that Cole could hear it as well, "Or perhaps they have another motive." she said.

"Cops!" the driver of the transport called out to the four men firing at the house. Although they had been able to cut off the land line communications of Saron and his immediate neighbours and jammed local wireless signals this had not prevented a neighbour from further up the street alerting the police when they heard the sounds of shooting and now police units were converging on the area. The first of these was an ordinary patrol that consisted of two Vulcans in a fast moving vehicle. More used to handling petty crime that pitched gun battles the two officers nevertheless halted their vehicle in front of the transport just as the gunmen were running towards it and leapt out with phasers in their hands.

"Drop your weapons and surrender. You are under arrest." one called out using an amplification system built into their vehicle to make his voice louder.

None of the gunmen followed the instruction though, instead they opened fire. Fortunately the vehicle that had brought the two Vulcan police officers here was of reinforced construction and the Vulcans were able to shelter behind its doors as plasma bolts struck it repeatedly.

The sound of the transport's engines grew as the driver powered up the vehicle while the surviving gunmen dived in the back as quickly as they could and the transport turned on the spot to face in the opposite direction before racing away as fast as possible. Rather than get back into their own vehicle and give chase though the two Vulcan police officers ran towards Saron's house to investigate what had happened and as they reached the front of the property they saw Cole and T'Lan running down the path towards them, both still holding plasma rifles.

"Drop your weapons!" one of the police officers ordered as both pointed their phasers at the pair despite the Starfleet uniforms they wore.

"I am Commander T'Lan." T'Lan responded as both she and Cole threw their plasma rifles to the ground and raised their hands, "This is the home of my father and there are four dead men inside."

5.

Jack Foster, the owner of the private transport vessel chartered to carry Professor Denning's team on their expedition gulped back the pale blue liquid in the shot glass in one go before gasping as he slammed it down upturned onto the table in front of him beside two other upside down and empty glasses.

"There!" he exclaimed, "Three in a row. Now let's see you Starfleet types match that." and he stared at Ghroc, Martin, Davis and Hamill.

"Go on. I did it." Nayal said.

"Yes but you're Romulan. Kali-fal is your drink." Ghroc said. Then he looked at where Terry was leant over Hewitt who was slumped across the table, "Look what it did to her and that was just one shot." he added.

"I like my liver." Hamill said, looking at the glass of Romulan ale she also held.

"It's an excellent vintage." Trellan said.

"And you did agree to his challenge." Denning said, sipping at a glass of Vulcan port as he watched.

"On three then?" Davis suggested.

"Foster really doesn't look well." Hamill said, noticing Foster starting to sway.

"Jack can you hear me?" Terry asked.

"I can't feel anything beneath my-" he began before suddenly falling forwards and knocking the upturned glasses from the table.

"Unless you drink my team still wins." Denning said.

"Here we go then. On three all together." Martin said.

"Goodbye liver." Hamill commented before all of a sudden Ghroc's combadge activated, "Oh thank God." she added.

"Ghroc." Ghroc said as he responded.

"Commander I think we have a situation that requires everyone to return." the junior officer left in command of the *Nightfall* while all the ship's senior officers were on the surface said.

"If someone's broken something in engineering then I'm going to make them regret it." Davis commented.

"What's wrong lieutenant?" Ghroc asked.

"We've had a security alert from Lieutenant Commander Sodyne sir. She was attacked at the science academy and requested reinforcements. Now we've been contacted by the police in Vulcana Regar. There's been an incident at the home of T'Lan's father. Shots have been fired."

"Okay beam us back up." Ghroc said as most of the Starfleet officers present quickly put their drinks down on the table, "Sorry but we have to leave. We'll pick this up another time." he told Denning as his team but Davis suddenly lifted his glass to his mouth and downed the contents in one go.

"Yes, it is a good vintage." he said as he put the now empty glass down, "Shall we go?"

"*Nightfall* five to beam up." Ghroc said and moments later they were all surrounded by glowing lights as the *Nightfall*'s transporter locked onto them and beamed them out.

Ghroc, Martin and Nayal changed back into duty uniforms and armed themselves before beaming down to the street outside Saron's home. They materialised within the area that had been cordoned off by the police, who now included several heavily armed tactical officers in addition to ordinary patrol men. Although Vulcans were not noted for being nosey the presence of these officers as well as the preceding events were highly unusual and curiosity had got the better of a number of Saron's neighbours had gathered beyond the perimeter to see what was happening. Rather than simply send them all away though the police officers were questioning them about what they had seen or heard during the attack. Meanwhile Cole and T'Lan stood talking to a Vulcan wearing the robes of a police detective while Saron and Zho stood at the end of the path leading around his house, Zho still holding T'Sal and now wearing a robe over her bodysuit. Seeing this the newly arrived trio of Starfleet officers headed towards their captain, police officers moving out of their way when they saw the Starfleet uniforms.

"Captain what happened here?" Ghroc asked.

"As I was just telling Inspector Setrol here we had not long sat down to dinner when someone decided to shoot up the house without warning. With these." Cole replied and he picked up a plasma rifle that had been wrapped in plastic and tagged as evidence, "It's been modified to fire bursts."

"Is that legal on Vulcan?" Martin said.

"A permit for any weapon can be obtained on Vulcan." Setrol responded, "As long as the applicant can provide a logical reason for possessing it."

"Logical reason. Of course." Nayal commented.

"I take it that that's your father in law over there." Ghroc said, looking towards Saron and Zho, "What about the kid with him holding your daughter? Is she T'Lan's sister?"

"She looks scared." Martin said, "It must have been bad for a Vulcan to look scared."

"She's not Vulcan," Nayal said, "and T'Lan doesn't have a sister. Four brothers. All older than her."

"You are correct lieutenant. That is Zho and she is a Romulan like yourself." T'Lan said and Cole sighed.

"In forty-six days time she'll be my mother in law." he said, "They plan to get married on her twentieth birthday. On Betazed."

"So she's nineteen." Martin said, "And T'Lan's father?"

"My father is one hundred and seventy-six years old." T'Lan told him.

"That's one hell of an age difference." Ghroc commented.

The Starfleet officers' attention was then caught by another transporter signature as three more people were beamed in from somewhere.

"Expecting reinforcements?" Cole asked but Ghroc shook his head.

"I ordered everyone to stay put." he said as a trio of Vulcans in formal robes materialised.

"The V'Shar." T'Lan said, instantly recognising the uniform of Vulcan's planetary security service and she looked at Setrol, "Inspector were you informed that they would be coming?"

"No commander. This incident must have been classified as a terrorist attack." the Vulcan detective replied.

"You think?" Cole commented.

"I would not have said so if I did not captain Cole." Setrol said.

"I believe that my husband was being sarcastic. Please forgive him his human qualities inspector." T'Lan said before the three newly arrived V'Shar agents walked up to them.

"I am Sub-commander T'Rel." the leader of the three introduced herself, "You must be Captain Cole and Commander T'Lan of the Starfleet vessel *USS Nightfall*, currently berthed in orbit around Vulcan."

"I am." Cole said.

"I am Inspector Setrol. Vulcan Regar Police Department." Setrol added.

"So sub-commander do you have any ideas about what happened here?" Cole asked.

"Our investigation into the two attacks has only just begun captain." T'Rel responded and Cole frowned.

"Two attacks?" he said.

"Ah, someone impersonating a police officer attacked Sodyne in the science academy's archives." Ghroc told him. Then when Cole's eyes widened he quickly added, "Don't worry though she came out of it just fine. A little out of breath maybe but she's unhurt."

"The Vulcan Science Academy's board of directors has issued a complaint about the deployment of Starfleet ground combat specialists with my office, however." T'Rel said and Cole looked at Martin.

"Sodyne called for backup and the lieutenant on duty sent down a fire team of ground troops that were on standby as well as a security team." Martin explained.

"It was a logical decision." T'Rel said, "The Vulcan government will not be issuing a protest to Starfleet about the use of military force without prior consultation."

"I'll have words with my crew anyway. It shouldn't have happened." Cole said, "What about Sodyne's attacker?"

"A Romulan disguised as a member of the ShiKahr police department." T'Rel said.

"Then you have him in custody?" T'Lan asked.

"Regrettably no commander. He was able to escape the building." T'Rel answered.

"Sodyne and the security team tried to chase after him but the thin atmosphere got to them. Don't worry, they're all fine now. Doctor Hamill just gave them all tri-ox shots." Martin added.

"Commander T'Lan could you describe the attack that happened here?" T'Rel asked.

"Of course sub-commander." T'Lan replied and she pointed towards the house where the window of the dining room had been shot out by the plasma blasts, "We came under fire while sat down to dinner. My husband was fortunate enough to notice the targeting beam of one of the gunmen while talking to my father."

"Talking at the meal table?" one of the other V'Shar officers commented as he took notes on a PADD.

"Humans frequently use meals as an opportunity to interact socially." T'Lan told him.

"You should try it." Nayal commented.

"Lieutenant Nayal is Romulan." T'Lan added.

"I see." the V'Shar officer said, noting this down as well while T'Lan continued.

"In addition to the gunmen outside another group entered the house and attempted to engage us directly. When we attempted to summon assistance we discovered that all our communications had been cut off." she said.

"The local land line was cut. This disabled communications for six local residences." Setrol commented, "The alarm was raised from the residents further away but still close enough to hear the weapons fire."

"My combadge was jammed as well." Cole added, "So they came prepared to deal with Starfleet officers. I think that makes it obvious that it was T'Lan and I were the targets rather than her father or his, err his-"

"We will determine the facts of this case captain. Commander T'Lan please continue." T'Rel interrupted.

"In the meantime however, I was able to disarm one of them and by using his own weapon as well as my father's personal phaser my husband and I were able to overpower all those assailants in the house." T'Lan

said, "It was at that point that the first police unit arrived and the attackers outside the house withdrew." "Local witnesses as well as the officers on the scene have described a commercial transport vehicle." Setrol said.

"I understand that one of them was taken alive." T'Rel said.

"That is correct." Setrol said, "An unconscious Tellarite male. He suffered minor injuries but is in no danger. A genetic sample has been taken and sent to be analysed to provide positive identification but the results have yet to come back. In the meantime he is being held over there." and he pointed towards one of the police transports."

"He is the individual that I that took a weapon from." T'Lan added.

"Inspector Setrol I want the prisoner transferred to V'Shar custody. Given the seriousness of the attacks we are taking over the investigation." T'Rel told Setrol.

"Of course sub-commander." the police inspector replied.

"Captain Cole, will your vessel be remaining in orbit for long?" T'Rel asked, turning back towards Cole and he nodded.

"Our business here on Vulcan isn't finished yet. I can tell Starfleet that we've been detained if necessary." he said.

"Captain if the attack was connected with our visit then Professor Denning's team could be in danger as well." Martin pointed out.

"Yes, if we hadn't been in such a public place we could have been targeted as well." Ghroc added.

"Who is Professor Denning?" T'Rel asked.

"An archaeologist. We provided him with transport to meet with the Vulcan Science Academy's board of directors." T'Lan told her.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin, could you have a security team sent to take the professor and his team back to the *Nightfall*? If they are potential targets then they'll be safer aboard the ship. No ground strike teams this time though." Cole ordered and Martin nodded.

"Right away captain." he said.

"Perhaps my father and Zho should also be brought aboard the *Nightfall*." T'Lan suggested, "They may not have been specifically targeted by our attackers but they could still be in danger for having been present during the attack."

"Of course. Nayal please see to providing them with quarters." Cole said and Nayal grinned at him.

"It would be my pleasure captain." she said and she turned to head for where Saron and Zho stood.

"Lieutenant Nayal," T'Lan called out after her, "please take them to sickbay so that Doctor Hamill can ensure that they are not injured."

"Of course commander." Nayal said before continuing towards Saron and Zho.

"What was that about? Your father and Zho aren't hurt." Cole pointed out.

"Perhaps not, but having Doctor Hamill examine them both will limit the amount of time that Nayal can spend alone with either of them." T'Lan replied.

"Mister Kaye, your operative failed." Surtam said when Kaye answered his communicator.

"I know, he's already contacted me." Kaye replied.

"His failure puts us in a difficult situation. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne was granted access to our archive by my authorisation, given your assurances it seemed the most logical way of separating her from the others while simultaneously diverting suspicion away from myself as well. However, now that she has survived she has been able to take with her the information she gathered from the archive. If she shares that with Professor Denning then that could lead him to further Slaver remains. The risk factor has now increased. I have already been contacted by the police to ask why I met with him. I have deflected any suspicion they may have had for now but they may come back." Surtam said.

"That is something we can deal with down the line Surtam. For now though we've got bigger problems. I sent out two other teams to deal with Denning's team as well as the *Nightfall*'s command staff and they all failed." Kaye said.

"How?" Surtam asked.

"Most of them headed for a public bar in the Romulan Quarter. There were too many witnesses to deal with them inside and when they left they were beamed out. Presumably back to the *Nightfall*." Kaye said.

"You said 'most'. What about the others?"

"As you told us they would, Captain Cole and T'Lan went to Vulcana Regar to visit her father. I sent an eight man team, the best I could get on short notice, but they screwed up. Most of the entry group were killed and the covering team had to pull out when the police showed up faster than expected. The worst part is that one of the entry group may have been taken alive. The support team did a sweep past a few minutes later and they saw someone being brought out of the house by the police." Kaye told him.

"This is most serious Mister Kaye. It could expose our entire operation. I think we should meet with the others as soon as possible." Surtam said.

“Okay but we shouldn’t meet at your place again so soon. We need to avoid a pattern.” Kaye said.

“Very well, what do you suggest?” Surtam said.

“I’ll let you know when I have something. Until then don’t try contacting anyone else.” Kay told him and then the communicator’s screen went blank.



"Well you both look fine to me." Hamill said, returning the probe to her medical tricorder and closing it after she completed scanning Zho, "Have you had quarters arranged?"

"I understand that Lieutenant Nayal was taking care of that." Saron replied.

"I'll check." Hamill said and she tapped her combadge, "Hamill to Nayal."

"Yes doctor? Are your patients healthy or do you need to break out the violin while you devise a treatment?" Nayal replied.

"Despite the shock they must have had the pair of them are just fine. Have you arranged quarters for them yet?" Hamill asked.

"Of course. They're sleeping together, yes?" Nayal said and Hamill looked at Saron and Zho.

"Why wouldn't we?" Zho said and she held out two fingers towards Saron who returned the gesture, touching her fingers with his own.

"Yes Nayal, they're sleeping together." Hamill said.

"In that case they're on deck four, section two. I'll be at sickbay in a couple of minutes to escort them there." Nayal told her.

"Very well. Hamill out." Hamill said before she tapped her combadge again, "Nayal will be with you soon." she told Saron and Zho.

"What was that Nayal said about a violin? That's a musical instrument isn't it?" Zho said and Hamill smiled.

"Yes, I play in my spare time. Plus it helps me think so I sometimes play when I'm trying to figure out a problem." she said.

"Musical tones can improve thought processes in many humanoid species." Saron said, "It is a logical act."

"Why thank you Saron. It's nice to know that someone supports what I do." Hamill replied, smiling at the Vulcan.

"Saron plays the ka'athyra." Zho added, "Whenever I hear it coming from his study I can just picture him thinking about something important."

"I do not play purely as an aide to concentration." Saron said.

"Perhaps you two should perform a duet while we're here." Zho suggested.

"I'd like that." Hamill replied, "What about T'Lan? Does she play an instrument?"

"No." Saron said, "Uniquely among my children T'Lan did not take to learning to play an instrument. Her musical talent tends towards singing instead." Saron said.

"Singing?" Hamill exclaimed just as the door to sickbay opened and Nayal entered.

"Who sings?" she asked.

"Our first officer apparently." Hamill answered.

"No. I've known her five years and never heard so much as a single note. Not even when she fell into that vat of narcotics and got completely wasted." Nayal said.

"Perhaps she did not tell you because you spent so much time attempting to disrupt her emotional discipline instead of accepting her for who she is." Saron said.

"He's got you there Nayal." Hamill commented, "Now perhaps you could show our guests to their quarters?"

"Sure, come with me. Everything there is ready for you. The replicators will provide you with whatever you need." Nayal said, "I've also brought you these." and she held out a pair of Starfleet combadges.

"So we can talk to anyone with one of these, right?" Zho asked as she and Saron each took one of the combadges and stuck them to their robes.

"Not quite. You're not crew so these won't access the *Nightfall's* main communications network. However, you will be able to contact Captain Cole, T'Lan, myself, Doctor Hamill or Lieutenant Commander Martin. Basically everyone who can sort out any problems you may have." Nayal explained.

"That is logical." Saron said, "Perhaps the poor impression you made on our first meeting was not entirely deserved."

"Captain may I come in?" Martin asked when the door to Cole's ready room opened.

"Of course commander. Take a seat." Cole replied as Martin entered with a plasma rifle in a plastic evidence bag.

"What's our situation?" Cole said.

"Vulcan spacedock security have placed guards on all the access points to the ship and I've got security and ground combat specialists patrolling all decks to make sure no-one tries tripping any hatches. Don't worry captain, no-one is getting aboard this ship without us knowing about it." Martin told him and Cole smiled, "What's so funny captain?"

"I've just spent five years of my life dealing with aliens who could just appear practically anywhere they

wanted." Cole said and then he looked at the plasma rifle, "I take it that's one of the weapons used to try and kill me and T'Lan?" he added.

"Yes, the Vulcans let me have one to examine. As you can see it's of Earth origin." Martins said.

"Yes and obsolete. MACOs were carrying those two hundred years ago." Cole said.

"This isn't that old. Nearer twenty than two hundred according to its serial number." Martins said.

"It still has its serial number? No-one tried to remove it?" Cole commented, surprised at this from his own experience dealing with armed crime as a Starfleet security officer.

"No and I've checked it against the manufacturer's records. This gun was made as a collector's piece for people who are interested in older pattern energy weapons and was part of a batch of more than a thousand of them sold to a frontier colony." Martin told him.

"Let me guess, it fell into the hands of the Maquis." Cole said, leaning back in his chair.

"Probably, yes. The colony in question was one surrendered to the Cardassians under the treaty. The Maquis were grabbing every weapon they could get hold of and they probably acquired this one at that time. Then someone modified it for sustained pulse operation, increasing the recharge rate from about ten rounds per minute to about ten rounds per second maximum. Of course we lose track of it then but obviously either it was one of the limited number of Maquis weapons to not be seized by the Cardassians and the Dominion or else it's one that got sold onto the galactic black market after the fall of Cardassia when stockpiles of stuff like this were being looted by the survivors. According to the Vulcans the serial numbers on the other weapons also come from the same batch."

"So we may be dealing with a surviving Maquis cell that never got pulled in or people with good access to the black market. Very good if they can smuggle weapons onto Vulcan." Cole said.

"It seems so captain." Martin replied.

"Well I've been communicating with Starfleet. Since the attacks were directed against us they've agreed to exercise joint jurisdiction with the Vulcans. That means we'll be able to take part in the investigation as well." Cole said.

"So have the Vulcans responded to this yet captain?"

"Yes actually. Logically of course. Whether or not this has upset the V'Shar their official response is that they welcome the pooling of investigative resources and they have agreed that we should be present when the Tellarite prisoner is questioned." Cole said.

"Sounds good. When?" Martin asked.

"Whenever we're ready."

"We'? So you're coming as well?" Martin commented and Cole nodded.

"Yes. You'll have the lead of course but as captain I'm exercising my right to oversee the investigation. I wanted to be certain that Sodyne was okay and my father in law and Zho were settled in first though." he told him.

"Ah yes, your father in law and the Romulan. The age gap of more than a hundred and fifty years." Martins said, "Do you think she's using him? Is she after his property?"

"Actually she's a senator's daughter and since her mother is going full Vulcan and studying for the Kolinahr then she has exclusive access to her family's remaining fortune. She's probably wealthier than Saron is. I think she actually loves him and he loves her. I just don't want to have to watch any of their home movies."

"So she made a video?" Martin said and Cole nodded, "Young, rich and sexually adventurous. You know what this means captain?"

"No, what?"

"That your father in law is going to be a very happy man for the hundred years or so he has left to him. Even if he won't ever show it." Martin said and he and Cole smiled at one another.

"Hold on! I'm coming!" Zho called out, running from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her when the intercom of the door to the quarters assigned to her and Saron sounded. Then when she opened it she saw Sodyne standing in the corridor outside.

"Hi. Zho right? I'm Leyla Sodyne, the *Nightfall's* science officer. I hope I'm not disturbing you. Is Saron in?" Sodyne asked.

"Oh yes, we were just showering." Zho answered.

"Oh look I'm sorry. I'll come back later when you're-" Sodyne began

"No it's okay, we were done. Saron's just drying off. He'll be out in a minute. Did you know that if you just adjust the tuning of a sonic shower slightly then the sound waves will amplify your-" Zho said as she walked over to a couch and sat down.

"Yes I know that." Sodyne interrupted, "But where did you find out about that?"

"Oh Nayal gave me a PADD to read. It has this list on it." Zho said, looking around, "I have it somewhere."

"That's alright. Nayal gave me a copy of T'Lan's list of fantasies as well."

"T'Lan wrote it?" Zho exclaimed, "Wow. Look can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"They aren't about that list are they because-"

"Oh no. You're a Betazoid, right? I can tell by your eyes." Zho said.

"Yes, I'm from Betazed originally. Why?"

"Because Saron and I are going there to get married. What's it like? Do you have any advice on places we should see?" Zho asked but Sodyne sighed.

"Look Zho I'm sorry but I'm really not the person to ask about this. I hated Betazed growing up there. If you ask me it's full of busybody telepaths who spend all their time poking around in one another's heads studying their most private and intimate thoughts. Weddings weren't my thing there either. Contrary to what I recently told an assassin wanting to kill me I'm not okay with being naked in public. When I joined Starfleet I went to the academy on Earth and took Earth citizenship as soon as I qualified." she said.

"I'm sorry I-" Zho said, worried that she had offended Sodyne.

"That's okay. You weren't to know." Sodyne interrupted again before she heard the sound of someone approaching from the direction of the bathroom and looking around she saw Saron walking up to her in a robe.

"Lieutenant commander." he said, seeing the rank markings on Sodyne's uniform and he raised his hand in the Vulcan salute.

"This is Leyla Sodyne. The *Nightfall's* science officer." Zho said.

"How may we help you Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" Saron asked as he sat down beside Zho as she slid right up next to him.

"Saron. My I have a word with you? You may be able to answer some questions I have." she asked.

"Go ahead lieutenant commander. I will answer to the best of my ability. Does this concern the attempt on our lives?" Saron responded.

"No not that and you can call me Leyla by the way. My questions are academic ones, I understand that you have studied ancient civilisations." Sodyne said.

"That is correct Leyla." Saron replied.

"Good because I'd like to know everything you can tell me about the Slaver Empire as well as the Slavers themselves. I've downloaded everything the Vulcan Science Academy has in its data archives but I would like to know what personal knowledge you may have that isn't included in there." Sodyne said.

"Unfortunately I know nothing more than what little I have also read in the archives Leyla." Saron said, "The destruction caused at the end of the war that destroyed the Slaver Empire left few witnesses and study of what they have left behind is now a highly specialised field that relies on the investigation of what few artefacts have survived the last billion years and fragments of records from the few survivors of the period handed down through perhaps scores of other, later civilisations each of which distorted them slightly in their own way. I have spent most of my career studying the Iconians and other contemporary species. Their Empire was destroyed a mere two hundred thousand years ago and yet until recently they too remained largely a mystery to us."

"Oh." Sodyne said, disappointed.

"Perhaps you could suggest someone that Leyla could ask." Zho suggested.

"There is one person who may be able to provide you with information about the Slavers." Saron said, "One of the board of directors has studied them in considerable detail. However, as far as I know he gave up teaching the subject some time ago and does not generally discuss the subject."

"That's weird." Sodyne commented.

"What is?" Zho asked.

"Academics don't generally keep quiet about their specialities. They like to show off their knowledge. Even Vulcans." Sodyne told her.

"The lieutenant commander is correct, but Surtam has remained most reticent about his studies for a number of decades now." Saron added.

"Surtam? Director Surtam?" Sodyne said, her eyes widening.

"That is correct. As I said, he is on the board of directors of the Vulcan Science Academy. A position he would not hold if he did not possess great knowledge." Saron replied, "Do you know of him?"

"Yes I know of him. He's the one who wants to shut down Professor Denning's expedition." Sodyne said.

7.

Surtam was not used to visiting any of the areas of Vulcan where non-Vulcans tended to congregate and so he felt the need to conceal his appearance as he travelled to the establishment close to the main starport of ShiKahr that was among a cluster of businesses operated by other Federation species, in this case humans. Opting for a plain hooded robe that would cover his clothing and face Surtam arranged to be beamed from his home to the outskirts of the area before proceeding on foot, turning off the communicator he had had to carry with him to use the public transporter so that it could not be used to track him any further than his beam down point. He soon saw that he was not the only Vulcan to be visiting the area though with a number of other natives present in the area either on business or, in the case of a number of largely younger Vulcans, out of a sense of curiosity as to how other species behaved among themselves. Surtam noticed that because he was the only one hiding his face he was ironically attracting more attention than anyone else and he lowered his hood.

The establishment Kaye had told Surtam and the others to travel to was a cafe serving a variety of different human foods and Surtam could smell the meat products from a considerable distance away. This made him feel mildly nauseous but he continued inside and approached the member of staff who appeared to be most senior.

"I am here to see Mister Kaye," he said.

"Of course, this way." the staff member replied and he led Surtam from the main dining area to a small hallway where he pointed up a set of stairs, "It's the room right at the top." he said and without speaking Surtam walked past him and climbed the stairs, entering the room without first making the occupants aware of his presence.

Inside all three of his co-conspirators sat around a plain table with drinks in front of them and Mitchell smiled when she saw him.

"Ah Surtam, I was starting to wonder whether you'd be lowering yourself to slumming it here with the rest of us humans." she said.

"This was the place Kaye recommended." Surtam replied as he sat down in the vacant chair and looked at the drink that had already been placed there.

"It's just water. We didn't think you'd join us with alcohol." Copeland told him.

"You are correct." Surtam replied and he took a sip of the water, "Now shall we get down to the issue that brought us here?"

"Ah yes, the total failure of Kaye's people." Mitchell said.

"The intelligence was good, so what went wrong?" Copeland asked.

"We're having to move too quickly." Kaye said, "Sure we have thousands of supporters across the Federation and more beyond but we're not an army. I've got a pool of fewer than five hundred people to call upon for direct action. Barely twenty here on Vulcan right now."

"I thought you were the expert in these matters." Surtam said.

"Do you think the Maquis just sprang up out of nowhere? It took months before we were in a position to attack the Cardassians openly and that was with elements of Starfleet funnelling us weapons and equipment. We've none of that now." Kaye responded.

"So what went wrong?" Mitchell asked.

"The man we sent after the Betazoid was too subtle. Trying to get her out of the building to deal with quietly was a mistake. He should have just killed her there and then."

"The archive sensors would have detected the use of an energy weapon and the alarm would have been raised." Surtam pointed out.

"A Romulan against a Betazoid? One on one that's no contest. Our man is one of the few we have with proper covert operations experience. He was Tal Shiar back in the day but he obviously got overconfident." Kaye said.

"Murdering political dissidents was probably easier than taking out Starfleet officers." Copeland commented.

"Nevertheless he could have just strangled her and then left. Instead he made it too complicated." Kaye said.

"So complicated didn't work but neither did the brute force applied against Captain Cole and his wife."

Mitchell commented.

"That's because none of that team were trained soldiers. We've got perhaps a dozen of them in our organisation and none of them are here on Vulcan right now. I thought maybe they'd be able to just overwhelm Cole and T'Lan but obviously I was wrong."

"Cole has considerable combat experience." Copeland said, "Remember that from what we do know about him he served on the previous *Nightfall* as chief of security alongside MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard. He must have picked up a thing or two from them."

"From what the ones who did get away have said the group that went inside split up to search the whole house individually instead of sticking in pairs to cover one another." Kaye added.

"Which brings us to the most critical issue at hand." Surtam said, "One of the assault team was arrested by the police. He may even have been handed over to the V'Shar by now. How much damage can he do to us?"

"Minimal." Kaye said, "Our people may not be experienced but our structure is sound. The team that I sent after Cole and T'Lan was a single cell. They don't even know the identities of the support unit that drove by before and after to check out the area."

"But they know you and you know all of us." Copeland reminded him.

"He's met me, true, but outside of a handful of our better agents no-one knows my real name and I've been very careful to limit how I communicate with each cell. Our Romulan friend is already well hidden and he'll be off planet in two days. The rest of the team will be gone in under a week. Nothing can lead back to me I assure you." Kaye said.

"So where do we go from here?" Mitchell asked.

"Nowhere." Copeland replied, "If we aren't ready to be taking action then we shouldn't be rushing into it prematurely."

"Your position is logical." Surtam agreed, "We will only risk losing further resources if we act too soon."

"What about Professor Denning?" Mitchell said, "He's going to head back out and continue digging up Slaver artefacts. The longer he is able to continue the more dangerous the situation will become."

"It'll be easier to deal with him outside Federation space. He's got one starship for protection and the *Nightfall* can't be on hand one hundred percent of the time." Kaye pointed out, "If we can locate them then we can attack them while they're undefended. Better yet if we could find out ahead of time where his team is going to be we can hit the sites from space, destroy any machinery and shoot any stasis boxes into the local star. I doubt a Slaver could survive being revived under those conditions."

"I like the sound of that." Copeland said, "Minimal risk and no loss of life."

"We'll still need a small armed force mind you. Especially if our teams happen to run into Denning's people." Kaye said.

"Or any other future teams." Mitchell added, "If we could have got the Vulcan Science Academy to advocate for a ban on all research into the Slavers then we wouldn't need to worry about who else may come along later. We may even have been able to use Starfleet to deal with any Slaver ruins that were discovered."

"It's unlikely Starfleet would easily accept being used to destroy Slaver ruins, even if the Federation did ban all research into them." Copeland commented.

"What about you Surtam? What do you think about this?" Mitchell said, turning to look at the Vulcan academic.

"Again this plan is logical. Preventing further research would be preferable but in the absence of that option we must be prepared to prevent any expeditions that do go ahead from making any discoveries that could be dangerous." Surtam replied.

"Until then we should all be looking to keep a low profile. The Vulcan authorities will be hunting for someone and from what I know about them they don't give up easily." Kaye said.

"It would not be logical for law enforcement agencies to allow culprits to escape." Surtam commented.

"Copeland and I were supposed to be returning to Earth in two days." Mitchell said.

"If the Vulcan Science Academy had agreed with our position then we'd have been taking our case to Starfleet and the Federation Science Council." Copeland added.

"Then you should probably leave as planned. If you change your plans now it may look suspicious if anyone looks." Kaye said, "Surtam and I can handle things here."

"What if the authorities do establish a link to either of you?" Mitchell said.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one." Surtam replied, "All four of us know too much to allow ourselves to be arrested."

"Are you suggesting we commit suicide?" Mitchell said in surprise.

"It is the logical answer." Surtam replied.

"Well forgive me but I think that taking my own life going too far." Mitchell said.

"No-one can force you do it." Copeland reassured her, "But if any of us are captured we need to make sure that the rest of us can get away."

"I can sort out fake identity documents but each of us will need to arrange for a safe house. Find someone you trust that you can stay with who isn't associated with our group at all." Kaye said.

"We'll need weapons as well. Ones that aren't registered." Copeland added and Kaye nodded.

"We've plenty of those. Disruptors, phasers, pulse guns, even stunners if you're worried about using lethal force." he said and he looked at Mitchell as he mentioned the last of these weapons, "I'll get you each a portable transport inhibitor as well. One tactic that Starfleet uses is to beam people aboard their ships so they can disarm any weapons they have during transport."

"Will the operation of these inhibitors not call attention to us?" Surtam asked and Kaye shook his head.

"No. They're clever little devices that only react when they pick up a transporter lock. Other than that they're

no more detectable than a communicator.” he said.

“How soon can you get them to us?” Mitchell said.

“I can get you all the transport inhibitors today but you and Copeland will have to wait for the weapons until you're back on Earth. You'd never get them through customs here or there.” Kaye told her.

“That'll have to do.” Copeland replied, “Other than that I suppose we can call this meeting to a close.”

“Captain Cole. Lieutenant Commander Martin.” the V'Shar agent that met the two Starfleet officers when they materialised in a transporter room at V'Shar headquarters said, “Sub-commander T'Rel is waiting for you in the investigation suite. Please follow me.”

“Of course.” Cole replied, stepping off the transporter pad ahead of Martin.

The Vulcan agent then led them from the room and through the corridors of the headquarters building. The interior of this was distinctively Vulcan but it still had the features that both Starfleet officers recognised as common to most law enforcement agencies, with screens showing updates on ongoing manhunts and notices regarding procedures to be followed.

The room that they were led to was occupied by more than a dozen Vulcans, all of them in V'Shar uniform. Most sat at computer terminals while others studied wall mounted or free standing view screens. In addition to the computer screens mounted on the walls one of them was decorated with portraits of the leaders of the V'Shar stretching back to the twenty-second century. The V'Shar was much older than this but just prior to that time period the agency had been corrupted by what had been known then as the Vulcan Central Command, an agency responsible for rights abuses across the planet and the V'Shar had been heavily reformed after this. Combined with the long lifespan of Vulcans this meant that there were only a handful of portraits on the wall, most of the Vulcans pictured having served in their post for several decades.

“Ah captain.” T'Rel said when Cole and Martin were led into the room, “I did not expect you to come personally.”

“Someone took a shot at me and my wife. More than a hundred shots actually.” Cole began.

“Two thousand four hundred and seventy-eight according to our calculations.” T'Rel said.

“Quite. That means I'm rather interested to make sure that this case is closed to my satisfaction. So since I have a background in security I've decided to accompany Lieutenant Commander Martin. However, he will be the lead Starfleet investigator in this matter.” Cole continued.

“Of course.” T'Rel replied, “Lieutenant Commander Martin, have you had the opportunity to review the case file?”

“As of thirty minutes ago sub-commander, yes. If you've added anything more since then then no I haven't seen it.” Martin answered.

“Unfortunately we have added nothing new since then. The vehicle used by Captain Cole's attackers remains unaccounted for, as does the individual who impersonated a police officer in order to attack Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. Our only lead remains the prisoner.” T'Rel said.

“Have you identified him yet?” Cole asked.

“Not yet. He had no identification with him when arrested and biometric data collected since then has only confirmed that he does not have a legitimate visa to be present on Vulcan.” T'Rel answered, “We have forwarded the data to Federation law enforcement for an identification from them.”

“Sub-commander.” one of the other Vulcan agents in the room then called out, “We have an identification on the suspect.”

T'Rel and the two Starfleet officers immediately walked over to where the agent sat and looked over his shoulder at the report on the screen in front of him.

“Trakar.” Martin said, “Independent surveyor.”

“No criminal record. Where did this come from?” Cole asked.

“From the Federation shipping registry. Trakar is the registered owner of a warp capable vessel on Tellar.” the Vulcan sat at the terminal replied.

“I suppose this explains why he and his friends were so easy to deal with. If the rest of them are the same as him then none of them are exactly combat trained.” Cole commented.

“At least know we have something to use against him.” Martin said and he looked at T'Rel, “Can we go and question him now?”

“Yes lieutenant commander. I have already had him moved to an interrogation suite. Perhaps you should wait outside Captain Cole. You are emotionally involved in this case after all.” T'Rel said and Cole smiled. “I'll try and contain my anger.” he said.

Cole waited outside the interrogation suite Trakar had been placed in, watching what was happening inside on a viewscreen along with another Vulcan agent as Martin and T'Rel entered the room.

“Mister Trakar.” Martin said out loud and the Tellarite looked up at him in surprise. “What, did you really think that by refusing to speak we wouldn't find out who you were? Or maybe you thought your buddies would come and break you out.”

"That would be an illogical belief. This building is one of the most secure on Vulcan." T'Rel added.

"Hear that? The only way out of this cell is if we let you out." Martin said, "So why don't you do yourself a favour and tell us who you were working with?"

The Tellarite looked directly ahead and muttered a phrase in his own language.

"Did you hear that?" Martin said as his universal translator converted what Trakar had said into English and he looked at T'Rel.

"Indeed. Although for us to engage in such an act would be unprofessional. Also physically dangerous to a human." she responded.

"Look you're charged with four counts of attempted murder as well as the lesser charges relating to that plasma rifle and just being on Vulcan illegally. Right now it's not a question of how long you spend behind bars, its the nature of the prison the Vulcans stick you in." Martin said, leaning across the table Trakar sat behind but once again the Tellarite responded with an obscene remark in his own language.

"You do not seem to be persuading him to co-operate." T'Rel said.

Cole continued to watch the interview as both Martin and T'Rel questioned the Tellarite prisoner without him responding with anything other than obscenities. Hearing footsteps from behind him he turned around to see another V'Shar agent approached with a PADD. Cole remembered this man as one of the agents from the room where T'Rel was running her investigation.

"Are you looking for T'rel?" Cole asked.

"Yes, I have further information regarding the identities of the other attackers." the agent answered.

"May I see?" Cole said and the agent handed him the PADD.

"The results are back from the queries regarding the three who you and Commander T'Lan killed during the attack. The identity of the prisoner was given higher priority but now we have this data as well. It was logical to present it to the sub-commander as soon as possible." the Vulcan explained and Cole nodded in agreement.

"Yes. I see we have a mixed bag here. Two humans, our Tellarite in there and a Bajoran. Two here legally the other two without visas but no other serious criminal activity on record from any of them." he said as he read the information from the PADD, "Any luck with tracking the Romulan would-be assassin?"

"No captain. We are relying purely on facial recognition taken from the science academy's security system for that line of inquiry

"I require the sub-commander's authorisation to engage in a public data sweep for facial recognition purposes." the agent replied.

"I can pass on your request when the interview is completed." the Vulcan already sat monitoring the interview said.

"No I think we should tell her now." Cole said.

"The interview is incomplete." the Vulcan replied.

"You've been watching it the same as I have. Have you heard that Tellarite say anything other than crude insults? Trust me, logical persuasion about the impossibility of getting out of this without spending the rest of his life in prison aren't going to get results. We need more information to put to him then maybe he'll cave and agree to fill in the blanks." Cole said and then before either of the Vulcan agents could respond he opened the door to the interview room, "Sub-commander there's information here about this prisoner's accomplices that you need to see." he told T'Rel. Then he looked at Trakar and smiled, "Hi there. In case you haven't noticed I'm still alive and well. That's a nasty bruise you've got there thanks to my wife by the way." he said to the Tellarite before backing out through the open doorway again before Martin and T'Rrel followed, "Looks like your search on the dead men has come back with results." Cole added, handing the PADD to T'Rel.

"We've got IDs on them all?" Martin asked and Cole nodded.

"Yes. Plus some other data about immigration status. No other significant criminal record for any of them though." Cole told him.

"We will need to run a facial recognition sweep." T'Rel said as she studied the information on the PADD, "Begin with areas around where the two with legal resident visas lived and worked. Look for them meeting the others and note the locations these meetings took place as well as anyone else present."

"Yes sub-commander." the recently arrived Vulcan responded, nodding before he turned and left.

A man dressed as a courier brought the package to Surtam's home although he knew that not only was he not a genuine courier but also that he was not really Vulcan from the way he smiled when Surtam opened the door to him. It was possible that he was Romulan but Surtam suspected that he was instead a disguised human.

The package was devoid of any markings, including delivery or return address information. When opened Surtam found a basic statue inside, protected by layers of foam to prevent it from breaking accidentally. Now that he had received it though, Surtam removed the statue from its protective packaging and smashed it against a table, shattering it at the point of impact. This revealed the statue to be hollow, filled with more

foam that held the true contents of the package inside.

The first item that Surtam removed was a phaser, an obsolete Starfleet design. This was then followed by a power cell for the weapon that he promptly loaded into it. Releasing the safety lock revealed that the phaser had the full range of settings available to it, suggesting that it had been stolen from Starfleet rather than having being produced for the civilian market. The next item that he dug out of the hollow statue looked at first glance like a communicator but Surtam knew that this would be the transport inhibitor that would make sure that he could not just be beamed into a cell. Surtam was then about to dispose of the statue when he noticed that the weight was still too heavy for it to be nothing more than an empty shell so he upturned it, holding out his hand to catch whatever else it was that Kaye had sent him.

What fell out into Surtam's hand startled him. Quite what Kaye had been thinking in sending him what he now held Surtam could not imagine. However, should such an item be needed it would certainly be welcome and so he tucked it into his robes before clearing away the pieces of the destroyed statue.

B.

“Lieutenant Commander Davis, I have Captain Cole calling from the surface for you and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne.” Nayal said as she connected to both of the other senior officers. Davis was on duty in engineering while Sodyne had practically shut herself away in her quarters to study the information she had downloaded from the Vulcan Science Academy’s archives about the ancient Slavers.

“I’m here lieutenant.” Davis responded.

“I’m listening as well.” Sodyne added.

“Captain you’re on now.” Nayal said.

“Thank you.” Cole said, his voice now being heard by both Sodyne and Davis, “The Vulcans have been able to identify all four members of the team that attacked me and T’Lan at her father’s house.”

“What about the Romulan?” Sodyne asked.

“So far he’s avoided being identified. Other than security footage there’s nothing to identify him.” Cole answered, “On the other hand there was plenty of biometric information about the attackers at the house that could be used to identify them from Federation databases. Now the Vulcans are running facial recognition on them, comparing them to footage from public cameras to see if they can identify any other conspirators from it but that’s going to take time. I’d like the pair of you to help out if you can.”

“That should be fine captain.” Davis said, “My staff can handle routine maintenance while we’re in spacedock.”

“I suppose I can make the time as well. I was trying to get through the information I got from the Vulcan Science Academy but I can always catch up while we’re heading back out.” Sodyne added.

“Excellent. I’m on my way back up to the *Nightfall* shortly. I’ll have the V’Shar give you access to the Vulcan camera system so you can check on any matches it comes up with.” Cole told them.

“Understood captain. I’ll liaise with Sodyne to split the work.” Davis replied.

“Can you meet me in my quarters?” Sodyne asked and even though the channel was audio only Davis instinctively nodded.

“I’ll be there in five minutes.” he told her.

By the time Davis reached Sodyne’s quarters the V’Shar had already provided the *Nightfall* with access to the search they were running from Vulcan’s public camera system. The fact that the attackers were all from off world meant that there were more security cameras to cover their movements than would have been the case for native Vulcans. As with most things the Vulcans determined the density and placement of public security cameras on the basis of logical need and since the nature of the crimes they were most effective against were motivated by emotional responses rather than logic this meant that they were far more likely to be committed by aliens. Therefore, more cameras were placed in areas with a large alien population. This of course meant that there was a lot of data to be searched through, enough to challenge even an automated facial recognition system but this volume of data could be drastically reduced by focusing on the cameras closest to the registered addresses of the two suspects who were on Vulcan legally and so had their residences and places of employment on file.

“It looks like the V’Shar are only giving us the results from one of the two suspects. A Bajoran.” Sodyne told Davis as he sat down opposite her at her desk and she handed him a PADD.

“They’re probably following up on the other one themselves.” Davis suggested, flipping through the data on the PADD. Then he paused and smiled at Sodyne.

“Something funny?” she asked when she saw this.

“Did you mean to leave this file open?” he asked and held up the PADD to show the document he had found open when he reached the end of the data relevant to the investigation, “Modifying a sonic shower to provide-”

“Sorry about that.” Sodyne interrupted as she snatched the PADD back off him and closed the file, “Nayal gave me a copy of Commander T’Lan’s fantasy list. I was just reading up on the one she and T’Lan’s father tried again. Apparently it’s really good. Even I can only read so much about the Slavers without taking a break every now and again.”

“Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me Leyla. Nayal gave Harriet a copy as well. Thankfully she spoke to Sally Hamill before suggesting we try any of what’s in it. She’d been considering one that shouldn’t be attempted except in zero gravity unless you’re willing to bet your spine on modern medicine’s ability to heal a broken one.” Davis replied. Then when Sodyne handed the PADD back to him he added, “So where do you want to start?”

“I was thinking of cross referencing his residence and place of work. He’ll have travelled between them regularly so we should be able to build up a pattern of how long it takes to go from one to the other. Then we

can see if he made any detours or other trips.” Sodyne said.

“Sounds good to me.” Davis agreed, nodding, “Do we have the profiles of the other suspects?”

“Yes, the V'Shar sent them as well so we can run them against the results for the Bajoran.” Sodyne said.

“Okay so how about you set up the filter and I'll start checking out the exceptions?” Davis suggested.

“Sounds good to me.”

“May I come in T'Lan?” Saron asked when T'Lan opened the door of her quarters to him.

“Of course father. Robert and T'Sal are both sleeping.” she replied.

“Understandable. T'Sal is an infant and humans are prone to fatigue. I can return later if necessary.” Saron said.

“No, now is a convenient time to talk. What do you wish to discuss?” T'Lan said as they both sat down.

“Lieutenant Commander Sodyne came to the quarters assigned to myself and Zho. She enquired about any information I may have about the Slavers.” Saron told her.

“Yes, she has shown herself to be eager to acquire as much information about them as possible. Her experience on Vega four-six-eight was somewhat traumatic. Did you tell her that your expertise is in the Iconians?” T'Lan asked.

“I did. I recommended that she approach Director Surtam at the Vulcan Science Institute instead.” Saron responded.

“Director Surtam believes that Professor Denning's expedition should be shut down and all further research into the Slavers be banned.” T'Lan said.

“Yes, that is what Lieutenant Commander Sodyne informed me. That is what I wanted to warn you about. Surtam is not a man to be easily swayed from a position. Even if he is unsuccessful now he will continue to try and persuade others about the logic of his position.” Saron told her, “He will be watching for any mistakes that are made either by Professor Denning's team or the crew of the *Nightfall* if your vessel continues to be deployed in support of his expedition.”

“I am confident that the crew will act in accordance with proper procedure. Professor Denning has also shown himself to be aware of those procedures. He did not rush to open the stasis boxes on Vega four-six-eight.” T'Lan replied.

“Of course. In that case I am sure you will be fine. Now there is another matter I have promised to raise with you.” Saron said.

“From Zho? Why did she not accompany you if she wished to ask something of me?” T'Lan asked.

“She is unsure of the correct way to make her request. It is most likely something that Robert will have to approve. I recommended that I approach you first.”

“That is logical.” T'Lan commented.

“Yes. Plus this has given her the opportunity to further study the list you compiled following your marriage to Robert. She is eager to try many of them.” Saron told her.

“That was intended to be private father. Also Robert has explained to me that-”

“You do not need to justify your relationship to your husband to me.” Saron interrupted.

“I understand. What is her request?” T'Lan asked.

“She wishes to photograph herself in key areas of the ship. Places that may be restricted such as the bridge and engineering. She wishes to create a collection that can compare our modern achievements with the works of our ancestors.” Saron said.

“I take it she intends to be naked for these images?” T'Lan said.

“That is her intention.” Saron told her.

“Then I do not believe Robert will be able to grant his permission. Starfleet will not permit material that could be sexually explicit to be produced aboard its ships.” T'Lan told Saron.

“That is understandable.” he responded.

“I hope Zho will not be upset by this father.”

“She will be disappointed but she will understand. I will inform her when I return to our quarters.” Saron said.

“What attracts you to Zho father?” T'Lan said suddenly and Saron sighed.

“When she was alive your mother looked at the universe with a sense of wonder. She would study the very atoms that made it up in her quest to understand how every part of it worked. That is a quality that you share T'Lan. As a Starfleet science officer you have flourished in a way that you did not achieve as a teacher. Zho shares that quality as well but she seeks to capture the universe in art, sharing it with everyone else.” he explained.

“By removing her clothing?” T'Lan asked.

“I do not pretend to understand her art.” Saron answered, “I know only that she makes my life better by being in it. Your brothers do not understand this. It is my hope that you do.”

3.

The barely three hours sleep that Cole was able to get before being awoken was more than some of his senior staff had managed during the past twenty-four hours and so when they gathered in the briefing room along with Sub-commander T'Rel who had beamed up from the surface to hear the report from Sodyne and Davis following their analysis of the Vulcan facial recognition data many of them had mugs of strong smelling coffee in front of them.

"This is the suspect the V'Shar assigned us to trace the movements of." Davis said, standing beside a large wall mounted monitor that showed an image of a Bajoran man walking along a street that had obviously been taken from a public security camera, "Stet Capros was an agricultural specialist on Vulcan to act as an agent for the purchase of chemical fertilisers and rapid growing crop seeds to be sent back to Bajor and its colonies. In his spare time though it seems that he adopted the role of urban terrorist."

"Do we know why this man tried to kill the captain and T'Lan?" Hamill asked.

"No motive has yet been determined for either the attempt on the lives of Captain Cole and Commander T'Lan or that of Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. However, it is too much of a co-incidence for them to be considered anything other than two parts of the same conspiracy." T'Rel said.

"What about the rest of us? Are we on some hit list as well?" Noyal asked.

"It would be logical to assume so." T'Rel replied.

"We probably escaped because we were a public place at the time." Ghroc commented.

"So there could have been another team out there waiting for us. In addition to the men who escaped from T'Lan's father's house." Martin added.

"Probably. Although without even a visual description of them we haven't been able to search for them. We did manage to catch him with some others that we know though." Sodyne replied.

"Davis, please continue." Cole said and Davis nodded.

"Stet's daily routine obviously took him between his home and a nearby Vulcan agricultural supplier on a regular basis." he said, "However, he was also a regular visitor to this establishment." and then he changed the image on the display screen to one that showed Stet entering the same eatery where Kaye had called the meeting of his co-conspirators.

"I take it you have evidence that suggests this is more than just a business he likes to frequent because of the food?" T'Lan said and Sodyne sighed.

"We did our job properly commander." she said as Davis called up another set of images, each of them showing other people caught entering the business on a nearby camera.

"These are the other members of the group that were identified from the attack on the house." he said, switching between different images that clearly identified the two humans as well as the Tellarite now in custody all entering and leaving the business. When they were shown entering they were invariably alone but they often left together, indicating that they used the building as a meeting place

"Now show them the other picture." Sodyne added with a smile.

"Yes, we also found another familiar face on the footage." Davis said and he changed the screen again. This time it showed a lone individual with characteristic pointed ears entering.

"That's the Romulan who attacked me." Sodyne said.

"So we have a location that all of our suspects frequented." Cole said, "That seems like a good place to start."

"It could just be somewhere they used to meet up rather than a safe house." Noyal commented.

"This certainly is not enough evidence to justify obtaining an order to search the establishment." T'Rel added.

"At least its covered by a camera." Hamill said.

"A camera isn't enough. We need to be able to conduct close range scans of specific individuals to check them for concealed weapons and the like." Martin said, "A tricorder should be fine."

"So we plant someone close by with one. Across the street say." Noyal suggested.

"Given the largely non-Vulcan population of this area it would be illogical for either an officer of the local police or V'Shar to take on this role." T'Rel pointed out, "A member of your crew Captain Cole would seem most logical."

"Anyone standing around on a street with a tricorder is going to attract attention." Sodyne commented.

"Unless they look like they have a valid reason to be in there." Martin pointed out, "Davis can you zoom that image out and show the whole street."

"Yes of course." Davis replied, adjusting the image on the screen to show both sides of the street, "There I knew it. Look at the man on the corner."

"Is he playing a saxophone?" Cole asked.

"That's what it looks like to me." Davis replied.

"Individuals may apply for a street performance permit in the city." T'Rel said, "They are issued by the local council."

"Then we need to get the council to issue us with a permit so we can put someone on that corner with a concealed tricorder. One we can activate by remote control." Martin said.

"So who aboard plays the saxophone?" Nayal said.

"Actually I was thinking more about the violin." Martin replied and everyone in the room other than T'Rel turned towards Hamill.

"Me?" she exclaimed.

"Your medical officer?" T'Rel asked.

"She plays the violin." Cole answered.

"Yes but captain given the extreme heat of Vulcan haven't the people down there suffered enough already?" Ghroc commented and Hamill glared at him.

As a member of the Vulcan Science Academy's board of directors Surtam was sent a copy of the statement that had been prepared for release concerning the academy's position on carrying out research into the Slavers ahead of its release to the interested parties. In this case Professor Denning and Captain Cole. After they had had the chance offer any feedback a revised version would be issued publicly to the Federation Science Council and the media. The issuing of this had been delayed due to the failed attempt to kill Sodyne in the archives but its release would still take place within the next day.

None of the wording came as a surprise to Surtam. The vote had been taken with an overall majority of the directors, including High Director Staris voting to continue their support for such endeavours. However, it was then that an idea occurred to Surtam. Any member of the board could object to the statement and call for it to be voted on. This would inevitably delay the issuing of the statement until this vote had been called.

Potentially the board could vote to reject it entirely and reverse their decision. The idea of academics as senior as the board of directors of the Vulcan Science Academy abruptly changing their minds was unthinkable. However, if any of their positions suddenly became vacant the vote would be delayed until replacements could be appointed and if Surtam could find a way to manipulate those appointments then the board's previous decision could be reversed.

Activating his communicator he entered the details for Kaye and waited for him to answer.

"Hello?" Kaye said simply.

"An opportunity has presented itself. It is complicated but could bring us the results we require." Surtam told him.

"We agreed that our cells would remain inactive. If we're going to change that then we should get Copeland and Mitchell back." Kaye replied.

"I am not proposing an armed assault. However, it may be something that your Romulan associate is suited to. It will require a considerable degree of complex planning." Surtam told him, "Is he still available?"

"Reaching him may be difficult. He's moved to a safe house without any means of direct communication. I can send out a call for him to come here though. What's your idea?" Kaye answered.

"We still have time before the board of directors releases its decision regarding research into the Slavers. If we could arrange for some of the directors to be eliminated then the release would have to be delayed while replacements were appointed to fill their positions. Replacements that we could influence the selection of to ensure that they are more amenable to our position." Surtam explained.

"Interesting. Ambitious too but that sounds like the sort of thing the Romulan would be capable of. I'll send out the call." Kaye responded.

"Shall I meet you as well?" Surtam asked.

"No. I don't want anyone here recognising you. I'll send him to you." Kaye said, "I'll call ahead as soon as I've met with him. Just make sure you're in. he's impatient to get off world and won't be around much longer."

"Very well. I shall await your call." Surtam said before abruptly shutting off the communicator.

T'Lan, Ghroc, Davis and T'Rel were gathered around Martin at the *Nightfall's* tactical station when the turbolift door opened and Hamill stepped out onto the bridge. In place of her usual Starfleet duty uniform she instead wore a brightly coloured dress and headscarf while carrying her violin and bow in her hands.

"Well I feel ridiculous." she said.

"You look it as well." Ghroc added.

"At least I still sound good." Hamill said, lifting the violin to her shoulder and beginning to play. This caused Ghroc to wince.

"How do you all put up with that?" he asked.

"Sounds fine to me." Martin replied.

"Fine? I sound great." Hamill protested.

"Lieutenant Commander Hamill, perhaps we should brief you." T'Lan said.

"Of course commander." Hamill responded as she joined the others at the tactical station.

"This is the tricorder rigged for remote operation." Davis told her, handing her an ordinary looking tricorder.

"Will it fit beneath your outfit?" T'Rel asked.

"I think so. Fortunately gypsy violinists went in for loose clothing." Hamill said, taking the tricorder and looking at it, "So I don't need to do anything then?" she added.

"No. We can activate it even when closed and adjust the scanning angle to cope with any facing." Davis explained, "The only thing to bear in mind is that the scanning may need to be done up close to comply with Vulcan privacy laws that limit general scans in public. Very close in fact."

"How close exactly?" Hamill said.

"Possibly under three metres." Martin responded.

"You will require an earpiece for us to communicate with you covertly." T'Lan said.

"Here, I've already prepared one for you." Davis added, handing Hamill a small box that when she looked inside she saw it contained a compact earpiece that would fit entirely within her right ear, "It will interface with your combadge so just keep that hidden somewhere about you and we'll be able to stay in constant touch."

"We can also beam you right out if there's any trouble." Martin commented.

"Like a mob complaining about the noise." Ghroc said and Hamill suddenly raised her bow, pointing it at the Bolian.

"Okay that's it. I'm putting a gypsy curse on you. From now on you'll have nothing but bad luck." she said and T'Rel looked at T'Lan.

"Commander T'Lan is this behaviour typical of your crew?" she asked.

"I have not served with them long enough to determine a pattern sub-commander. However, I shall make a note to monitor them more closely." T'Lan said, lifting the PADD she held and starting to type.

"What about a phaser?" Hamill said, "If there's going to be trouble then shouldn't I be able to defend myself?"

"A phaser would just risk calling attention to yourself. Beaming you out is the best bet." Martin said.

"And if someone jams the transport?" Hamill asked.

"There are several empty rooms that overlook the area." T'Rel added, "Perhaps a support team could be placed inside one of them?"

"If there's space in this building it would offer a commanding view of the entire street." Ghroc said, pointing at a map shown on Martin's display. However, as he did so there was a quiet 'crack' accompanied by a spark from the console to Ghroc's outstretched finger and he winced as he pulled it away, shaking his hand.

"What happened there?" Martin asked, looking at that part of his console but there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary about it.

"Looks fine to me." Davis said.

"Ghroc's point is sound. A security team should be assigned to protect Lieutenant Commander Hamill." T'Lan said and Martin nodded.

"I'll assign a four man team." he said, "Hand phasers ought to be enough but I'll issue a pair of phaser rifles as well just in case. If you're in trouble then my people can provide support until the *Nightfall* can beam you out."

"I will also contribute a pair of agents." T'Rel added, "If an opportunity arises they will be needed to execute an arrest of any suspects."

"We will monitor the situation from here. Sub-commander T'Rel do you wish to join us or would you rather observe from V'Shar headquarters?" T'Lan said.

"V'Shar headquarters is the logical choice. It may be necessary to liaise with local law enforcement and that capability already exists there." T'Rel replied.

"Logical." T'Lan said, "Lieutenant Commander Ghroc we will need to establish a relay through the spacedock communication system. Kindly contact them and arrange this."

"Shouldn't I handle that?" Nayal asked from the operations station, "I'm the operations officer after all."

"Spacedock may require a command level officer to confirm the link. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc is the logical choice." T'Lan said.

"I'll handle it now." Ghroc said, walking from the tactical station to the helm at the front of the bridge. With the *Nightfall* in spacedock there was no need to keep the helm manned and the station sat vacant as Ghroc approached it and sat down. At which point the console unexpectedly went blank, "What the hell?" he said.

"Is there a problem commander?" T'Lan asked.

"My console just failed." Ghroc replied.

"Failed?" Davis said.

"Yes failed. It's just gone blank." Ghroc told him.

"Let me see." Davis said hurrying to the helm station where he saw that the console was indeed totally blank. However, when he crouched down to investigate further it suddenly restarted, "That's weird. It must have just been a power surge. Put it down to bad luck." he added and then he and Ghroc both looked over their shoulders at where Hamill stood.

To avoid being seen with any other Starfleet or Vulcan law enforcement personnel Hamill beamed down from the *Nightfall* alone, materialising at a public transporter station close to where she was to position herself. Few people seemed to notice her as she walked through the streets until she reached a corner opposite the eatery that she was to monitor. Putting her violin case down on the ground she opened it up and first took out the permit she had been issued to play her violin here and hung it around her neck before taking out the violin itself and lifting it to her chin.

"I'm in position." she whispered, "Any requests?"

"I would say don't play but-" Ghroc began before he was cut off by the sound of static in Hamill's ear and she flinched for a moment.

"Ghroc says 'but you're under orders so he supposes you'll have to play.'" Sodyne added, her voice perfectly clear, "However, it seems something's just gone wrong with his combadge. Talk about bad luck."

"It's not my fault, okay? It's just a coincidence. I'm going to start now." Hamill replied and she began to play.

"What's our status?" Cole asked as he walked out of his ready room to find T'Lan standing behind Martin while they both monitored the data feed from Hamill's hidden tricorder while the footage from the local security camera played beside it. This gave them a view of who was entering and leaving the eatery so that they could choose who to direct tricorder scans towards.

"Doctor Hamill is on the surface." T'Lan replied.

"And proving popular it seems. We've had quite a few people from various races stop to listen to her playing." Martin added.

"Perhaps Commander T'Lan could beam down and join her on vocals." Sodyne commented with a slight smile.

"Have we gained any useful information though?" Cole asked.

"Not yet, no." Martin answered, "You know how these things are though." he added and Cole nodded. Both men had experience of surveillance operations and knew that they often consisted of long periods of boredom followed by sudden bursts of activity.

"We should consider that Hamill cannot remain where she is indefinitely." T'Lan pointed out, "The environment is harsh for humans." and Cole nodded.

"Okay let's give her a break." he said.

"Going into the target building would seem logical." T'Lan suggested, "She would be able to be away from her position for the minimum amount of time."

"It takes her out of our line of sight and we'll have to kill the tricorder while she's on private property." Martin said, "Bringing her back here would be safer."

"Captain look there." T'Lan said suddenly, pointing towards the console where the feed from the security camera was shown.

"Is that the Romulan?" Martin asked and Cole looked towards Sodyne.

"Commander." he said and she reached up to the headset she like the other senior staff wore. This included a small heads up display screen that she used to duplicate the security camera feed. Then she nodded.

"That's him captain." she said, "That's the man who tried to kill me."

"Alert the security detail. If Hamill's been made then we may need them." Cole ordered.

"Lieutenant Nayal please confirm that we have a transporter lock on the doctor." T'Lan added.

"Doctor Hamill the Romulan who attacked Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is approaching you from the left. Be ready to move." Cole said into the communication link to the surface.

"I see him." Hamill said softly, "Do you want me to follow him?"

"No, keep your distance. The security team has him in their sights but don't let him get within arms' reach." Cole told her.

"Scanning him now." Martin said as he interfaced his console with the tricorder Hamill had hidden beneath her dress.

"Ooh that tingles." Hamill said.

"He's carrying." Martin said, "Looks like a Vulcan police issue detective phaser."

"That's two Vulcan police issue phasers he's got." Sodyne commented, "He had a patrol weapon when he tried to kill me yesterday."

"Both those weapons should have been disabled when they were found to be missing from the police armoury." T'Lan pointed out.

"So either he has a way to get them from the armoury without anyone noticing or he was able to override the shutdown command." Martin said.

"If he can hack the shutdown command could he remotely shut down other police weapons? Maybe even ours?" Sodyne asked.

"That's a scary thought." Cole said.

"Very scary." Martin agreed.

"Also highly illogical. It is more likely that he has replaced elements of the control circuitry with commercially available parts." T'Lan said.

"Well what are we going to do about him now?" Sodyne said.

"Look he's crossing the street." Martin said, watching the feed from the camera.

"Yes and heading inside the cafe." Cole added.

"We could do with seeing who he's meeting." Martin commented.

"I'm going after him." Hamill said quietly as she suddenly ceased playing her violin and put it back into its case.

"Doctor there is significant risk in leaving the sight of the security team." T'Lan warned her.

"That's okay commander. I'll be careful." Hamill responded, crossing the street after the Romulan and she followed him into the eatery.

Hamill watched the Romulan walk right through the main dining area and through an unmarked door at the back. When this closed behind him she stopped, wondering what she should do next.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked and she turned to see a man behind the counter looking at her, "If you're looking for a job then I'm afraid the boss isn't interested in music."

"Is your boss Bolian by any chance?" Hamill asked, walking over to the counter and the man behind it frowned.

"No. Why?" he said.

"Just wondering. Anyway I'm just here to get a quick meal. How's the chicken soup?" Hamill asked.

"Replicated." the man behind the bar told her.

"It'll do. Oh and a bottle of water as well please. It's hot out there."

"Welcome to Vulcan. Where the air conditioner was probably invented before the wheel." the man said, smiling at Hamill and she smiled back.

All of this was of course overheard aboard the *Nightfall* and T'Lan looked at Cole.

"That statement was not accurate. No civilisation could invent air conditioning without having invented the wheel. Was that intended to be a joke?" she said.

"Probably. Just not a very good one. It may have been an attempt to impress Doctor Hamill. Men will do strange things to get on the good side of a pretty woman." Cole replied.

"You think I'm pretty? Why thank you captain." Hamill said softly, "You're not bad yourself, although I should remind you that we're both attached."

"Just eat your soup and let us know when that Romulan reappears." Cole replied.

"We're going to need a way to track him when he leaves captain. We can't just let Doctor Hamill try and tail him. She's not trained." Martin said.

"Don't worry I've got an idea. As long as he doesn't go anywhere too remote we'll be able to monitor his location." Cole said, "Sub-commander T'Rel do we need any special permission to plant a tracking device on this guy?"

"No Captain Cole. As long as it is planted on public property it will be acceptable to our legal system." she responded from V'Shar headquarters, "But what makes you so certain that he will not detect the tracker?"

"Because we've got very small trackers. Too small for anyone to see with the naked eye." Cole told her before looking at T'Lan, "T'Lan could you liaise with Commander Davis on this?" he added.

"So what is it now? My shuttle is arranged. I'm heading back to the Neutral Zone." the Romulan said as he sat down opposite Kaye.

"Surtam has come up with an idea that you may be able to take care of." Kaye told him, "How do you fancy killing a bunch of Vulcans?"

"I'm listening." the Romulan said.

"Surtam hasn't given me the exact details but his idea is to get rid of a number of the directors of the Vulcan Science Academy." Kaye told him.

"Not including himself I expect. So is he trying to get the top job for himself?" the Romulan asked and Kaye shrugged.

"He hasn't said. I doubt he'd admit it if that was his plan. All he's told me is that he wants to replace some of the directors with others that we can count on to support us." he answered.

"Okay so where is he?"

"At home. I didn't want to risk having you both here. Here's his address. How soon can you get there?" Kaye said, handing the Romulan a PADD with Surtam's address on it. The Romulan read this and then deleted it before handing back to Kaye.

"Tell him I'll be there in three hours." he said, "If he's not home I'm leaving."

"I'll let him know to expect you." Kaye responded and the Romulan got up to leave.

"He's on the move." Hamill said when she noticed the Romulan reappear from the back room while she consumed her soup at a nearby table.

"Okay Hamill we're sending you a package." Cole replied, "Look at the floor under your table."

Hamill looked down and as she did so she saw a brief glowing light as a small object was beamed at her feet.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching down and picking up a small bottle of pale fluid that had a spray nozzle fitted to the top.

"Nanites." Cole answered, "From our hive. Just spray a few squirts of the fluid onto his clothing and the nanites will make their way into his system from there."

"What if he notices?" Hamill said as she picked up the bottle and began to follow the Romulan out of the eatery, her violin case in her other hand and the bottle of water tucked under her arm.

"The fluid is just water. Give yourself a quick spray as well. We can recover the nanites from you later." Cole said.

"Okay here goes." Hamill said, stepping out into the heat of the Vulcan day once more.

The Romulan did not suspect that he was being followed just yet and Hamill dashed to catch up with him with the compact spray bottle in her hand.

"Any part of him will do. You don't have to hold the bottle out." she heard Cole say through her earpiece and she quickly delivered two rapid squirts to the Romulan's back.

All of a sudden he stopped and turned around, looking straight at Hamill.

"Do you want something?" he said, glaring at her. In the heat of the Vulcan sun the fluid that Hamill had squirted him with had evaporated before he could notice it but the Romulan still knew that someone had suddenly come rushing up behind him.

"Tell your future?" Hamill responded quickly, lifting the spray bottle to her face and squirting herself as if trying to cool herself off but the Romulan just said something harsh sounding in his own language before turning away from her again and continuing to walk down the street.

"Wow, that was uncalled for." Nayal commented when she heard what he said.

"I got him. Two good squirts to his back. Will that be enough?" Hamill asked.

"Just one squirt would have hit him with a thousand nanites. Two will be fine." Martin said.

"Okay so now what? Back to playing the violin?" Hamill said.

"No I think we can bring you back up here now. Let's see where our Romulan leads us." Cole said.

"Okay I'm heading for the extraction point." Hamill replied.

"Captain Cole." T'Rel said from her command centre, "Will you provide us with the feed from your tracking device?"

"Certainly sub-commander. Lieutenant Nayal please set up a link with V'Shar headquarters so they can track the target in real time." Cole ordered.

"Yes captain. I'm on it right now." Nayal replied.

Ghroc was waiting in the transporter room when Hamill returned from the surface, standing with a PAD in his hand.

"Commander Ghroc, what re you dong here?" Hamill said when she materialised and he held up the PADD.

"There's not much call for a helmsman in spacedock so I've been sent to clear the nanites out of you." he said.

"With a PADD that's turned off?" Hamill asked and Ghroc frowned.

"What?" he said, looking at the blank screen, "This was on a moment ago. What have you done to me with that curse?"

"Oh come on. There's no such things as curses Ghroc." Hamill said.

"Then how do you explain this?" Ghroc asked and he passed her the PADD.

"Maybe the battery's flat." Hamill suggested as she reached out to take hold of the device but the moment she touched it the screen suddenly came back to life, "There must be an explanation for that." she said before she suddenly dashed past Ghroc and out of the transporter room.

Ghroc sighed and then approached the doors himself but he had to come to a complete halt suddenly as they unexpectedly failed to open automatically as they should have done and he took a step back before they finally opened. Then he leapt forwards through the open doorway, only narrowly missing being caught between the doors as they closed again.

ii.

"Looks like he's leaving the city." Martin said as the nanites that had now embedded themselves in the Romulan's body used the local communications network to relay their position to the *Nightfall*. Being armed the Romulan obviously could not risk using a public transporter station so he instead had to take a taxi out of the capital to a more remote part of Vulcan.

"What's out there?" Cole asked, looking at T'Lan.

"Private residences. It is an area popular with senior members of Vulcan society." she replied.

"He's coming to a stop. Orbital surveillance shows just one house nearby." Martin said.

"Sub-commander T'Rel, can you tell us who lives there?"

"Checking now captain." T'Rel replied from V'Shar headquarters. Then moments later she replied, "Captain Cole that is the home of Director Surtam. Of the Vulcan Science Academy"

"Is he going to kill the director?" Sodyne asked from the science station.

"Logically if he wanted to kill the director then he could have done so when they met at the science academy." T'Rel said.

"Wait, they met?" Cole said, "Why wasn't I informed of this?"

"Because it was considered irrelevant to the investigation. When questioned Director Surtam informed the police that the Romulan had approached him looking for Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, nothing more. Since he was disguised as a police officer at the time the director had no logical reason not to answer his question." T'Rel said.

"Well if this Romulan isn't about to kill Surtam then he must be working with him." Cole said.

"Should we send in a tactical team to grab them both captain?" Martin asked.

Cole was about to agree when all of a sudden an idea hit him.

"Sub-commander T'Rel is the presence of this Romulan in Director Surtam's home enough to have it bugged?" he said.

"It is." T'Rel confirmed.

"Good. Then can you remotely access Surtam's home communications system without him knowing?" Cole added.

"Yes captain we can. I will see to it immediately and feed the information directly to you." T'Rel replied.

"Come inside." Surtam told the Romulan when he opened his front door.

The Romulan entered Surtam's house without a word and sat down in a nearby chair.

"So I hear you have a task for me director. Eliminating the competition so to speak." he said when Surtam had also taken a seat.

"Nothing so self interested." Surtam replied, "However, the board of directors has proven to be an obstacle with their refusal to support a ban on Slaver research."

"Ah so we take out the opposition and the vote goes our way." the Romulan replied.

"Exactly. The drawback of course is that we need to replace four directors with individuals more aligned with our way of thinking. If it appears that they were killed because of how they voted then not only will the academy likely appoint others who agreed with them but suspicion will fall on those of us who voted logically. Myself in particular given that it was me that called the vote to begin with." Surtam said.

"Do you have a list of names for me?" the Romulan asked and Surtam handed him a PADD with a list of names on the screen.

"That is a complete list of those who voted to continue the research. Removing any four will do though it would of course be beneficial to eliminate High Director Staris." he told the Romulan.

"Sure thing. Why not grab a promotion while you're at it? I take it that if your boss did happen to die suddenly then you'd be in with a shot of replacing him?" the Romulan said.

"I would. Especially if those newly appointed to the board of directors agreed with our position on the Slavers instead of that of my potential rivals."

"Four separate fatal accidents is going to look suspicious. What we need is one accident that gets all four." the Romulan said.

"It would have to be tonight." Surtam said, "The report is now scheduled to be released tomorrow afternoon. What do you suggest?"

"A fire." the Romulan said, "Fires are good for hiding a lot of evidence. I'll force my way into the high director's home and incapacitate him with a phaser. Then I'll make it look like he's inviting about half the people on this list around to his home urgently. As each arrive I'll stun them as well before setting the fire. An autopsy will show that they all burned to death in a fire started by a faulty domestic appliance in the high director's home. I'll send an invitation to you as well to throw off the authorities. You just won't turn up until

after I call you a second time to tell you the fire is set. With any luck you'll arrive while the fire department are dealing with the blaze. What better alibi than a dozen firefighters?"

"That snake! All this was about stopping anyone else doing any research into the Slavers." Sodyne exclaimed.

"T'Rel is that enough?" Cole asked.

"Enough for us to plan a response, yes. Although apprehending the Romulan in the act of attempting to assassinate the directors of the Vulcan Science Academy would make for a stronger case." T'Rel replied.

"Isn't that conversation enough?" Sodyne asked, "I can identify the Romulan in court for you."

"He may be a part of another cell." Cole pointed out, "If there are others with him then they'll be at the high director's house when he makes his move."

"Agreed captain." T'Rel said, "I propose three simultaneous operations. A tactical team should be deployed to the home of High Director Staris to await the arrival of the Romulan and any accomplices he has. At the same moment that team acts a second team should raid the home of Director Surtam while a third should carry out a raid on the business identified as a meeting place for this group."

"That all sounds reasonable to me." Martin said and Cole nodded in agreement.

"Me too." he said.

"Captain I'd like to volunteer to join the team that takes Director Surtam into custody." Sodyne said and Cole and Martin looked at one another before Cole turned to Sodyne.

"Why is that commander?" he asked.

"The director may have important information concerning the Slavers on his personal computer. I would like to try and retrieve that before it can be wiped." Sodyne told him.

"The director may have more information about the Slavers that brought him to the conclusion that research into them should be halted." T'Lan said.

"Very well. Sub-commander T'Rel would you agree to a Starfleet team dealing with the director?" Cole asked.

"Of course captain. Since the involvement of a Romulan may point towards support for these criminals from beyond the Federation it is logical for you to also take him into custody. I have no doubt that Starfleet Intelligence will want to question him." T'Rel said.

"That sounds reasonable sub-commander. That leaves the cafe for the V'Shar then." Cole responded.

"We will act on your signal captain." T'Rel replied.

The Romulan had committed the plans of High Director Staris' home to memory, as well as all of the other information Surtam had provided him with. The high director lived with his wife, all of their children having already grown to adulthood and left the family home. He still needed to be sure that he would only be having to deal with two older Vulcans though, the presence of even one or two more would run the risk of at least one being able to make enough noise to raise the alarm and so as the sun was going down he stood at the edge of the property and took out a tricorder that he used to scan the house. This quickly picked up just two life forms inside, both apparently Vulcan and one of each sex.

Taking one last look around the Romulan checked that no-one was watching as he then began to move cautiously along the path that led around the house to the main entrance at the rear. He came to a halt when he noticed a motion activated security light and looked around him again, then when he saw that no-one was able to see him he took out his phaser. The weapon was only set to stun but that was enough for what the Romulan wanted and he took aim at the security light's motion sensor. He fired a brief blast from the phaser that struck the sensor's lens directly and this was enough to overwhelm the circuitry and there was a soft 'crack' as the lens itself cracked.

With nothing more to reveal his position, the Romulan crept further along the path watching for any indication that his use of the phaser had attracted the attention of anyone close by, especially the pair inside the house. However, it appeared to the Romulan that he was the only person around. Walking around the back of the house the Romulan saw another security system in place, this time a small camera mounted beside the door that was intended to permit anyone inside the house to see who was outside before answering it. The Romulan was prepared for this though and he took a PADD from his pocket that was equipped with an integral camera. Standing beside the wall mounted security camera he took a picture that would show exactly what the camera currently saw. This was of no use to the Romulan on its own though, if he used the door intercom to alert the house's occupants to his presence they would need to see someone outside that they would open the door to. Therefore, the Romulan needed to add a stock image of such a person to the photograph he had just taken. The PADD included an animation of a Vulcan police officer that he pasted into the photograph before holding up the device's screen to the security camera. This would have the effect of showing a police officer standing outside the door who appeared to move against the static background of the house grounds. Then he pressed the intercom and waited.

"Hello?" a woman's voice said through the intercom.

"Police department. I need to speak with High Director Staris of the Vulcan Science Academy." the Romulan

said.

"One moment. He's coming." the woman replied and the Romulan raised his phaser, pointing it at the door while continuing to hold his PADD with its false image in front of the door security camera. A few seconds later the door began to open and the Romulan prepared to fire. However, rather than High Director Staris and his wife, the Romulan found himself looking straight at Nayal and a Vulcan ground combat specialist from the *Nightfall*. Both Starfleet crew members were wearing body armour and pointing their own phasers back at the Romulan, the Vulcan ground combat specialist had a phaser rifle while Nayal had just a hand phaser.

"Well hello there." Nayal said and she smiled at the Romulan assassin.

The Romulan immediately fired his phaser, aiming at the Vulcan but the beam struck the armoured vest he wore. Had the phaser been set to a high level it may have been able to burn through the vest at such a close range but the Romulan had already set his weapon to stun in preparation of incapacitating his intended victims and the low intensity beam was incapable of penetrating the armour. Realising his mistake the Romulan lunged at Nayal and pushed her in the direction of the Vulcan ground combat specialist. As she fell into the Vulcan's line of fire the Romulan assassin turned and started to run, heading back towards the front of the house. While Nayal and the Vulcan had been waiting inside the house in place of Staris and his wife though, more Starfleet troops had been positioned in several other nearby houses and when the Romulan had gone behind Staris' house they had emerged from their hiding places to form a perimeter and cut off his escape.

"Get down on your knees!" the officer in command of the ground troops called out as they all aimed their weapons at the Romulan and he also heard the sound of Nayal and the Vulcan soldier from inside the house running down the path behind him.

Even without the armour worn by the ground troops, the Romulan knew that he could not take them all on at once. All it would take was for one of them to fire a phaser and the fight would end there and then. The Romulan did not fear being killed but he did not want to be taken alive and this meant that he had no choice but to play along with them. Tossing his phaser aside the Romulan raised his hands and then got down on his knees. Two of the ground combat specialists then began to advance on the Romulan, keeping their rifles trained on him and he moved his tongue to the side of his mouth in readiness. Applying pressure to the false tooth the Romulan pushed it out of position and as the two soldier closed in he bit down on it.

From behind the Romulan, Nayal heard a 'crunch' followed by a hissing sound.

"Get back!" Nayal yelled recognising the sound of a Tal Shiar suicide tooth being crushed. These were implanted in some Tal Shiar agents in place of an ordinary tooth as a means for them to avoid capture at the cost of their own life. Once crushed the chemical it released reacted with the agent's own body to form a powerful acid and a final defiant act the Romulan spat some of this acid towards the nearest Starfleet soldier. The soldier leapt back as the liquid struck his armoured vest and his partner hurried to help him remove this before the highly corrosive liquid could burn through it. Meanwhile the Romulan could not help but cry out briefly as the acid burned his own flesh but he was quickly rendered incapable of this as his throat was burned and he collapsed in a heap as the acid spread throughout his body and rapidly turned it into a pool of sludge.

"Is everyone okay?" Nayal asked and she looked at the two ground combat specialist who had moved in to try and arrest the Romulan assassin.

"Yes lieutenant. This vest is a write off though." the soldier struck by the acid replied and he looked down at where his body armour was dissolving on the ground. Meanwhile Nayal tapped her combadge to contact the *Nightfall*.

"Nayal to *Nightfall*." she said, "The target is dead. He was alone and from the looks of it he was Tal Shiar at some point."

As soon as the Romulan assassin had been observed walking towards High Director Staris' house the two raids on Surtam's house and the eatery were launched simultaneously, the intention being that none of the targets at any location would be able to warn anyone at any of the others that something had gone wrong. At Director Surtam's house Martin and Sodyne had beamed down with an eight-strong security team, all armed with hand phasers and they deployed behind a low wall in front of the property. Because of the remote location of the property the main entrance was located at the front of the building in full view of the Starfleet team.

"He's alone." Sodyne said, scanning the house with her tricorder from behind the wall while the security team waited.

"Okay this should be easy enough." Martin replied.

"Wait, I'm picking up a couple of odd energy signatures." Sodyne told him.

"What kind of energy signatures?" he asked.

"There's an odd pulse every now and again as if something in there is reacting to my scans. Normally I'd say it was some remotely operated piece of domestic equipment that happens to be picking up the scan frequency but there's also another signature that looks like some kind of compact containment field. Isn't Director Surtam's speciality in history?"

"That's what I heard." Martin said.

"Then I don't see why he'd need any sort of containment field. If he was an engineer or physicist then he might have a home workshop but a social scientist like him wouldn't." Sodyne said.

"Could it be a weapon?" Martin suggested.

"Possibly. Improvised explosives aren't exactly stable. A containment field would avoid any nasty accidents. I'm definitely picking up a concentrated energy source inside the house that looks like the power cell for a weapon as well." Sodyne responded.

"Okay everyone take care. I don't want to lose anyone." Martin said before he tapped his combadge, "Martin to *Nightfall* we're moving in." he signalled.

The security team vaulted over the wall and rushed toward the house, keeping as low as they could while pointing their phasers towards it just in case Surtam was expecting them. Arresting an armed suspect at home was regarded as one of the most dangerous places to attempt this and so the security team was being extra cautious. The team positioned themselves either side of the front door while Sodyne conducted another scan.

"He's close by the weapon and the other energy sources. To the left." she said and Martin nodded.

"Remember what I said. Take care everyone." he said before he banged on the door with his fist, "Starfleet security! We have a warrant!" he and Sodyne then ducked away from the door as one of the security guards fired his phaser at it. The weapon was set to burn through material rapidly and the security guard shot the door off its hinges. With one sharp kick Martin kicked the door down now that it was not secured in place and he dived through the doorway.

The other security guards followed Martin through the doorway, spreading out in the hallway to cover all of the exits before Sodyne followed them with her tricorder in her hands.

"Over there." she said, pointing towards a doorway towards the rear of the hall they now stood in and a pair of security guards rushed towards it.

"Stay where you are!" one of them called out when they saw Surtam standing at the back of the room just inside the large glass doors that opened out to the rear grounds that overlooked the desert. Surtam was standing with his back to the security guards with his hands tucked inside his robes and he slowly turned around to face them.

"Come no closer." he said just as Martin entered the room.

"Hands where we can see them." the security guard called out.

"Certainly." Surtam responded and slowly he withdrew his hands from within his robes. As he did so a small ring of metal fell to the floor and Martin's eyes widened as Surtam produced a photon grenade, its safety lever held in place only by his hand. In his other hand he held what appeared to be a communicator and Martin tapped his combadge quickly.

"*Nightfall* the suspect has a grenade. Can you get a transporter lock?" he said but before the *Nightfall* could responded Surtam looked at him.

"The answer to that question will be 'no' lieutenant commander." he said and he raised the hand that appeared to be holding a communicator, "This device will prevent it." then he began to back away from the Starfleet security team, stepping out through the open doorway.

"Stay where you are!" Martin called out.

Surtam continued to back away from the security team while they maintained their distance rather than rushing him or firing at him for fear of him releasing the grenade while they waited for a response from the *Nightfall*.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin we are unable to get a transporter lock. Director Surtam appears to be using some kind of jamming device." T'Lan told him from the *Nightfall*.

"It's that communicator." Sodyne said from behind Martin, "As soon as the *Nightfall* tried to get a lock it suddenly energised. That's the pulse I was picking up on my scans. It thought my tricorder was trying to establish a transporter lock on him."

"*Nightfall* are there any ships heading this way?" Martin asked.

"Negative Lieutenant Commander Martin. The Vulcan sensor net shows no contacts nearby." T'Lan told him. "So where does this guy think he's going? He'll run out of land real soon." Sodyne said as Surtam continued to back away towards the cliff edge at the end of his property.

"Come on director." Martin called out, "Suicide is hardly logical is it?"

"On the contrary lieutenant commander, it is entirely logical." Surtam replied, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one. Your pursuit of the knowledge possessed by the Slavers is dangerous, it risks the resurgence of another Slaver Empire that will kill billions. If I am taken alive then eventually you will find a way to get the names those others that believe as I do and that cannot be allowed to happen." and then he opened the hand in which he held the photon grenade, allowing the lever to fly off. "Fire in the hole!" Martin yelled and the security turned and ran while Surtam remained where he stood, still holding the photon grenade in his hand.

The grenade detonated several seconds later, just as the Starfleet security team was exiting through the front door of Surtam's house. The blast tore apart the edge of the cliff, triggering a landslide that saw all of the ground behind the house break up and tumble down into the desert valley below. The damage done to the ground did not stop there though and as the Starfleet team looked around they heard a creaking sound coming from the house.

"Keep going, it's going to collapse!" Sodyne snapped and the security team broke into a run once again as the house now right at the edge of the cliff collapsed in on itself, disappearing into a cloud of dust before it too fell into the valley below.

Two units of V'Shar commandos beamed into position in front of and behind the eatery where Kaye had called his meetings and they immediately broke down the doors to storm inside from both directions at the same time, cutting off the escape of anyone inside at the time. Scans of the building immediately before the raid produced no results thanks to a low level disruption field set up to mask lifeforms and so the raid was carried out on the basis that significant armed opposition was possible. However, the commandos found no one inside the building as they swept through it, checking each room in turn until they reached a small office on the top floor that held what was obviously an explosive device laid out a desk and connected to the door mechanism so that its timer would begin to count down the moment that it opened.

"Emergency beam out. Explosive device about to detonate." the first Vulcan to see the counter said into his communicator and with just two seconds to spare both assaults teams were beamed away.

Meanwhile on a nearby street corner Kaye watched as the building erupted into flames and smiled before he turned around and calmly walked away.

"Sally can I come in?" Sodyne called out from outside Hamill's quarters.

"If you must." Hamill responded and the door slid open.

"Sally?" Sodyne said as she stepped inside and looked around to see no signs of the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer.

"I'm in here." Hamill replied from in the bedroom and Sodyne walked over to the doorway and looked inside to see a bulge in Hamill's bed where she was hiding under the covers.

"Sally what are you doing?" Sodyne asked and Hamill suddenly poked her head out.

"Making sure I don't put the evil eye on anyone else." she said.

"You are not going to put the evil eye on anyone." Sodyne said and she held up a PADD, "Ghroc asked me to come and shut down the nanites in your system. Apparently he didn't get the chance."

"No because I cursed him." Hamill said and Sodyne sighed as she walked over to her friend and held out the PADD before pressing on the screen.

"There." she said, "Now the nanites will all leave your system harmlessly. Now get out of bed, the captain wants to see you."

"What about?" Hamill said and Sodyne shrugged.

"He didn't say. He tried getting you on the intercom but apparently you turned it off. He's waiting for you in his ready room now." she told her.

Hamill groaned as she got out of bed, revealing herself to be fully dressed in her duty uniform and only needing to put her boots on before accompanying Sodyne to the bridge. Stepping out of the turbolift they

saw Ghroc sat at the helm station while Martin, Nayal and Davis stood close by, all trying to work out while the console had gone blank again as soon as he sat down. Avoiding eye contact with them Hamill hurried to the door to Cole's ready room and knocked on it.

"Captain it's me." she said and the door slid open.

"Doctor please come in and sit down." Cole said, looking at her and he watched as she walked towards him and sat down opposite him, "Doctor Hamill as I am sure you are aware Starfleet is a scientific organisation, not one that puts its faith in myth and superstition so please understand that I would normally never expect to have to ask this question of any other officer or enlisted man." he said. Then he hesitated before he added, "Did you or did you not put a gypsy curse on Lieutenant Commander Ghroc?"

"Err, maybe. I don't know." Hamill answered nervously.

"Doctor this ship needs its chief helmsman and second officer to be able to operate every system at maximum efficiency. Would you kindly go and remove this curse?" Cole said.

"Captain I really don't know-"

"Now doctor." Cole interrupted and he pointed towards the door that led to the bridge.

"Yes captain." Hamill said and she got up and rushed back out of his ready room.

"I don't get it." Davis was saying just as the door closed behind Hamill, "Every diagnostic I run says that this console is fully functional. It should be working."

"Well it obviously isn't." Martin added.

"You told on me?" Hamill said, looking at Ghroc, "You told the captain I supposedly put some gypsy curse on you?"

"He wanted to know what was going on. What else could we say?" Nayal responded and Hamill sighed as she shook her head.

"Fine. Whatever. Lieutenant Commander Antur Ghroc I do hereby release you from my curse. Now and for all time." Hamill said, holding out her hand towards him and clicking her fingers, at which point the console suddenly came to life.

"What just happened there?" Davis asked.

"It was a coincidence. It has to be." Sodyne said from the science station while Hamill just ran back into the turbolift and left the bridge.

"Okay so I think we're all agreed that none of us can ever annoy Sally Hamill again. Right?" Nayal said.

Cole smiled when he heard the sound of singing as he returned to his quarters and he walked in to the room where T'Lan was cradling T'Sal in her arms, singing her a traditional Vulcan lullaby about the dangers of children not feeding their pet sehlat's on time. Walking over to his wife Cole waited for her to put their daughter to bed before wrapping his arms around her.

"Is our task here complete?" she asked and he nodded.

"Yes, all done. Starfleet intelligence is going to alert law enforcement agencies across the Federation to be on the lookout for anyone who may have been working with Surtam. The V'Shar thinks he was telling the truth about a wider conspiracy." he told her.

"It is logical. He was not the sort of person who would have developed the contacts necessary to obtain the weapons used in the attacks himself. Someone else had to be supplying him." T'Lan replied, "I suppose it will now be safe for my father and Zho to return home."

"About that." Cole said, "I spoke with Starfleet and they expect Professor Denning and his team to make their own way back to the Meltara Sector aboard Foster's ship. That means that at maximum warp we can get there ahead of them even if they have a considerable head start on us. Forty or so days say. So I was thinking that perhaps we could give your father and Zho a lift to Betazed for their wedding. It is on our way after all. Plus it would mean that we could actually attend. If you wanted to that is."

"It is a logical solution Robert. Thank you." T'Lan replied, brushing her fingers against Cole's and he smiled.

"There is just one thing I need to know." he said

"Of course. You may ask me anything."

"How did you do it? Hamill, Ghroc and the gypsy curse?" Cole asked.

"The nanite hive. I instructed them to disrupt any system or piece of equipment Ghroc attempted to make use of. It enabled me to limit the disruption caused to a nuisance value instead of dangerous and was totally undetectable." T'Lan answered.

"You were certain that Davis and Sodyne wouldn't realise what was going on?" Cole said.

"Both officers are competent at their roles but they lack the practical experience that you and I have aboard ships of the Nightfall project. Nayal also has more experience but her access to the previous vessels systems was limited and I considered the chance that she would determine the source of the problem to be slight at best." T'Lan explained.

"That's was brilliant." Cole said, kissing her.

"Thank you. Now I have a favour to ask of you." she said.

"Name it." Cole replied.

"I wish to try on the outfit I will wear to my father's wedding and I want your help getting into it." T'Lan told him and he frowned.

"But everyone's naked at a wedding on Betazed T'Lan." he said.

"I know that Robert." T'Lan whispered as she kissed him back.