

STAR TREK

NIGHTFALL

THE SLOVER CRISIS

SOMETHINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



CONTAMINATION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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

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

The promise of artefacts made by the ancient Slaver Empire is bringing scavengers to the Meltara Sector, all eager to discover something that will make them rich. The potential for vast rewards makes many of these blind to the risks though and when a group of these independent scavengers falls victim to a predatory species not seen in the galaxy for a billion years the crew of the *USS Nightfall* must prevent it spreading to settled areas of the galaxy.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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The vessel that dropped out of warp as it approached the moon Vega-468 was far from state of the art. It was a transport ship that had once served in the Federation mercantile fleet but had long since passed into private hands. Now it had spent several months travelling from the Federation Core to the Meltara Sector, way beyond the borders of the Federation. The crew of the transport came from a mix of species, all humanoid but only about a quarter of them actually human while the others were members of both Federation and non-Federation species.

"Doesn't look like much Captain Coster." one of the flight crew told the human at the helm station and in response the captain smiled.

"Trust me Gravis this trip could make us all rich." he said.

"How?" the navigator sat beside the captain asked, "I'm not seeing any signs of cities, dead or not. I wouldn't even say that there was much in the way of life signs, just a few scattered ones."

"Yeah well the guy I spoke to on Vulcan said that he was transporting a science team that stopped off here. He said they found an old Slaver colony." the captain said.

"Slavers?" another of the crew commented. All of the crew had heard about the ancient species that had ruled a vast empire a billion years earlier and they knew how valuable artefacts from that civilisation could be worth, "If there was a Federation science team here then they would have picked the planet clean of everything."

"Not according to the man I spoke to. He said that the team cleared out fast after there was some sort of accident or something. He was pretty vague about that, but he did say that they finished their research here before they were done and moved on to another site." the captain explained.

"So you're thinking that they could have missed something?" the first crewman asked and Coster nodded.

"Exactly. Now someone run a scan of the surface and tell me where that science team landed. We'll start there." he said.

The old transport ship had no transporter capability and rather than using a shuttlecraft that would only be able to transport a limited number of men and equipment Coster opted to land the vessel itself. When a geological scan picked up signs of an artificial tunnel network the location of it was chosen as the landing site. There was also a large crater covering part of this network, suggesting that a significant portion had been collapsed, although there were no indications of what may have created this crater. This turned out to be a good choice as when the transport descended the main view screen showed several indentations in the ground where another vessel had landed previously.

"Looks like we found the right spot captain." Gravis commented.

"I don't see any signs of a dig site though." the navigator added.

"That's because the whole thing is underground Horst, look at that." Coster told him and he pointed to a cliff that was shown on the main screen as well. At the base of this, very close to the indentations left behind where the science team's ship had landed there was an opening that only became visible as the transport descended further.

"I'm picking up a large cavern and metallic readings." Gravis said.

"From the research team maybe?" another of the crew said, "Federation science teams sometimes leave equipment behind for any follow up research."

"Maybe it's something we can add to our salvage. It might bring in some more money." another crewman suggested.

"Once we get in there we'll take a look but I don't want to waste time with scrap when we could be digging up Slaver artefacts." Coster said before he added, "Lowering landing gear."

With the transport's landing gear lowered Coster landed the transport beside the spot where the science team's vessel had landed and he powered down the engines.

"What now captain?" Gravis asked.

"Now we go and check out that cave." Coster answered, "I want two men to stay aboard the ship just in case but everyone else should grab a phaser, a communicator and a palm beacon. We'll take all the tricorders as well, I don't want to miss anything."

When the crew disembarked from the transport in a group more than a dozen strong they made their way towards the cavern opening in a casual fashion. Although they were heavily armed they were not trained in small unit tactics and they had little reason to fear being attacked. Therefore, apart from the odd glance around them they focused solely on what lay ahead of them.

"Getting anything doc?" Coster asked the ship's medical officer. Despite his position the doctor also carried a

phaser slung over his shoulder but his familiarity with tricorder operations made him the natural choice to be the one scanning the crew's surroundings.

"I'm not picking up any airborne toxins or excessive levels of radiation so whatever drove the science team out doesn't appear to be related to either of those. I am picking up a faint life reading though and there is organic material just up ahead." the doctor said and he pointed into the cavern.

Coster had clipped his palm beacon to his phaser and he turned the powerful light on, directing it into the cavern where the doctor was pointing and the beam illuminated a skeleton. Immediately the rest of the team brought up their phasers and looked around for what could have been responsible for the skeleton getting there.

"Anyone see anything?" Coster said.

"It's just an animal." the doctor commented as he got closer, "Look, you can see the quadrupedal form of the body. It was probably just sick or injured and came into the cavern for shelter before it died. Then I guess all the local scavengers picked it clean."

"Captain, look over there." one of the crew called out as he shone his own palm beacon deeper into the cavern. At the limit of the beam's reach there were a number of prefabricated structures of the type often used by research or survey teams to give them a base of operations outside a starship. More of the team also shone their palm beacons towards the structures and this revealed more of the area around them. In addition to the structures themselves there were several flood lights as well as portable fusion generators that looked to be in working order even if they were not currently supplying any power to the cavern.

"Let's see if any of these generators are working." Coster said, "It'll help speed things up if we can get some lights on around here."

While the bulk of the transport's crew was working on restarting the reactors in the cavern the two men left behind sat on the ramp that led up into the ship.

"There's nothing here you know?" one of them told the other, "Anything valuable was taken by the science team."

"Then you should be glad that we get to sit here and relax while the others break their backs for nothing." the other pointed out and the first shrugged his shoulders. Then the second got to his feet and looked around, "I'm going to replicate a beer. Do you want one?"

"The captain won't like us drinking on watch." the first said.

"The captain doesn't need to know. They'll be running around those caves for hours before they come back here and we've been told that this planet is uninhabited anyway. The worst that can happen is that we'll have to blast the odd local animal." the second told him.

"I skip the beer just in case." the first responded and the second sighed.

"Suit yourself." he said before he turned around and was about to walk back up the ramp into the transport when he suddenly froze, "Over there!" he hissed, quickly unslinging his phaser and pointing it beneath the ship.

"What's wrong?" the first crewman said as he too readied his weapon and searched for a target.

"I saw something moving by the landing gear." the second said softly.

"Well I don't see anything there now." the first responded.

"It was definitely there. Cover me while I check it out." the second said and he jumped down off the ramp and began to advance slowly towards the landing gear.

"Wait, I'm coming with you. If there is something out here then we should stick together." the first said suddenly and he jumped down from the ramp and ran after his crew mate.

Together the two men walked up to the landing gear, watching closely for any signs of movement but they were able to walk right up to it without seeing anything.

"Nothing's here after all." the first said and he lowered his phaser.

"I know I saw something." the second replied and then he looked down at the ground and saw marks that indicated that something had crawled or dragged itself right up to the landing gear, "See, look at this. There was something here." then he looked at the landing gear itself more closely and he noticed that in places there was a shiny residue.

"If it left that there then that means that it's-" the first said as he followed the trail of watery slime up the landing gear and into the gear well above their heads.

It was difficult to make anything out in the darkness of the landing gear well and the first crewman unclipped his palm beacon from his belt. Pointing this up into the gear well he saw the light reflect of some kind of pulsing mass before all of a sudden a translucent tentacle lashed out towards him and struck him in his throat. The crewman dropped both his palm beacon and phaser as he staggered back and clutched at his neck where he had been struck. The tentacle had been barbed and several of these had broken the skin, not deep enough to rip away significant amounts of flesh but blood had been drawn and the man tried to stem the bleeding with his hands.

For a moment the second crewman just stared in horror at his comrade before he quickly raised his phaser and fired it into the landing gear well. Without the palm beacon to illuminate the gear well the crewman could not see the creature when he first fired but the phaser beam illuminated it and allowed him to adjust his aim. The creature did not remain still though, instead it moved around the landing gear and lashed out towards him. One of the phaser blasts cut through one of the creature's tentacles and it let out a strange whistling sound before leaping away from the landing gear and landing on the ground close by. Now that the creature was out in the open the crewman was able to see it more clearly. Consisting of numerous tentacles surrounding a bulbous body it appeared to be made from a translucent jelly with no significant organs visible inside it. The creature began to move rapidly towards the crewman again, using its tentacles to pull itself rapidly across the ground despite having lost one of its tentacles. The crewman had a clear shot now though and he fired his phaser at the advancing creature. The beam struck the bulbous mass at the centre of the creature and burned right through it. The heat of the beam also spread throughout the rest of the creature's body, enabled by the high moisture content and the sudden heating effect caused it to burst and spray fluid in a wide area.

With the creature dead the crewman then rushed to his comrade's side and found that he still had blood seeping out from behind his hands that remained at his own throat. Quickly he took out his communicator and activated the device.

"This is Toros to Doctor Kal, we've got a man down. Something attacked Ollafson." he said into it.

In the cavern the rest of the crew were getting ready to start up the fusion reactors. They had made sure that any potentially heavy loads had been disconnected so that the reactors would not be over stressed at start up and were getting into position to bring the first of them online when Toros' message came through.

"Go and see what's wrong." Coster told his ship's doctor and the man turned around and rushed from the cavern. Coster then turned back towards the man who was his engineer, "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Whenever you give the word captain." the engineer replied and Coster nodded.

"Try it." he ordered and the engineer reached to a large lever mounted inside the control box of one of the fusion generators, grabbed hold of it and pulled it firmly.

Instead of the surge of power that ought to have activated all of the lights in the cavern though, all that came from the generator was a whistling sound from inside that was accompanied by a rapid pounding sound as something struck the inside of the casing repeatedly. The engineer threw the lever again, returning it to the inactive position and he turned to Coster.

"Is there something alive in there?" Gravis commented.

"Check it out." Coster ordered and the engineer walked over to the generator to inspect the casing.

"If that sound was made by something alive then it must have been pretty big." he said, "Too big to have got in through any of these holes." and he looked closely at the ventilation slots cut into the side of the casing to prevent the control circuitry from overheating. These were all several centimetres long but less than one wide. Large enough for creatures such as insects and many arachnids to enter but too small for even all but the tiniest of rodents.

"The something must be loose inside. Find out what it is and get it fixed." Coster said and the engineer began to undo the side panel of the reactor. As he removed the final fastener though the panel was struck again from the inside with enough force that it flew clear and the engineer leapt back out of the way. He did not leap far enough, however and as the tentacled creature emerged from inside the reactor casing it leapt after him and knocked him over as it hit his chest.

The engineer screamed as the creature lashed at him with its tentacles and for a moment the rest of the crew just looked on in horror before Coster came to his senses and fired his phaser. The beam hit the creature and it let out another whistle as it leapt away from the engineer, disappearing into the darkness of the cavern. At the same time there were more whistling sounds from the darkness all around the crew from the transport. Raising their weapons the crew shone their palm beacons into the darkness and as small areas of the cavern wall were illuminated they were able to see movement but could not determine exactly what it was they were looking at.

Coster looked down at the engineer and he could tell immediately that the man was dead, the body was completely motionless and it lay in a large pool of his blood. A phaser blast into the darkness suddenly attracted his attention and as he looked up he saw that his crew were starting to open fire even without clear targets. Coster knew that this was no way to conduct an operation and he came to a quick decision.

"Fall back to the ship." he called out, "We're getting out of here."

"We're just leaving?" Gravis asked.

"Yes, we're leaving. I think we know now the real reason that the science team pulled out. We've already lost one man and got another that's injured. I don't want to lose any more. Now move."

Having recovered nothing from Vega Four-six-eight meant that the trip to the remote Meltara Sector had been a waste of time and expense for Coster and his crew but remaining on the moon was far too

dangerous. Instead as soon as Coster returned to the transport's bridge he began the process of taking off and piloting the ship along a heading that would take the ship out of the system as rapidly as possible.

"What next captain?" the navigator asked when the ship was clear of the atmosphere.

"Back to familiar territory." Coster replied, "This mission has been a bust and we need some regular work to try and make up for the loss. There's a job on Bolarus that might still be open."

"You'll be wanting a course plotting back to Federation space then." the navigator commented and Coster nodded.

"Yes. Make it quick but quiet. We may not be carrying anything restricted aboard but there's no sense in calling attention to us so let's try and avoid any involvement with Starfleet, okay?" Coster told him.

"Understood captain. I'll take us past the outpost at Salgara. We know we can slip past their sensors without being seen easily enough." the navigator said.

"As soon as you've plotted the course load it into the autopilot. I'll be damned if I'm going to fly this hulk manually all the way back. I intend to get drunk and forget how much of a disaster this trip has been."

Although Coster was in a hurry to return to Federation space he did not want to take any risks that could result in the ship and its crew being stranded so he kept the transport at impulse power while he flew beyond the reach of the system, a trip that took several hours given the transport's limited speed and only then did he turn to the navigator again.

"Is our course set?" he asked.

"Yes captain." the navigator answered, "Just turn on the autopilot and it'll get us home."

"Good. Engaging autopilot." Coster said and the moment that he activated the system the stars on the main viewscreen blurred as the transport immediately went to warp.

Gravis entered the bridge right as the ship accelerated to faster than light speed and he paused for a moment to look at the viewscreen before he spoke.

"The crew aren't happy captain." he said.

"The crew are never happy." Coster responded.

"Well this time it's worse. A number of them are talking about jumping ship as soon as we get back." Gravis said.

"Fine, that's less that need paying. How's Ollafson?" Coster said

"Doctor Kal got the bleeding under control and sealed the wound. He's concerned that there could be some kind of infection though. The doc's dropping in as much medication as he can but we'll need to get Ollafson to a proper medical facility when we get back." Gravis said, "In fact I just met the doc in the corridor. He said he was going to check on Ollafson now."

All of a sudden there was the sound of a distant scream and everyone in the room turned towards the exit from the bridge.

"That sounded like it came from the sickbay!" Coster exclaimed and eh leapt from his chair.

He and Gravis then ran from the bridge, hurrying along the corridor outside towards sickbay where the ominous scream had come from. As they ran they saw a flash of red and a familiar whining sound as someone fired a phaser. This was followed by another familiar sound, the same whistling that the alien creatures on Vega-468 had produced when they were injured and both men immediately realised that although they had left the moon far behind they had not escaped yet.



Stardate 69192.5 *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A in the Meltara Sector.

The Akira-class heavy cruiser *USS Nightfall* dwarfed the smaller transport ship that it had rendezvoused with in interstellar space. The Starfleet vessel was deployed here beyond the borders of the Federation to support the science team carried aboard the transport and this was just one of their regular meetings so that the science team could be resupplied and the crew of the *Nightfall* brought up to date with the team's findings. "The Fernus system proved a waste of time." Professor Denning, the leader of the science team told Captain Cole and T'Lan, the Vulcan who was both Cole's first officer and his wife while the three sat in the captain's ready room so they could talk in private.

"Then the Slavers never had a colony there?" Cole replied.

"Oh someone did and at about the right time period." Denning told him, "Unfortunately in the billion years since the Slaver Empire collapsed and took all the Slavers with it others have moved in to plunder it."

"Then there is nothing left." T'Lan commented and Denning nodded.

"It could have been attacked during the war and the Slavers' enemies took everything or maybe scavengers came in afterwards but everything was destroyed. Anything that they missed was lost to the elements." Denning said.

"You have further leads though?" T'Lan asked.

"Yes, there are several other systems nearby that are supposed to have been used by the Slavers. Fernus was just the most likely system. From what we know the primary world acted as a regional command point." Denning said.

"So what's your next destination?" Cole said.

"Trellan thinks that the next most promising lead is in the GL four-sixteen system. He thinks that the local star shows abnormalities given its age that could be explained by Slaver technology affecting it." Denning said and Cole frowned.

"The Slavers destabilised a star?" he commented.

"Stellar manipulation has been theorised. The Vulcan Science Academy believes that depending on the degree of manipulation a device capable of altering the outer layers of a star could be small enough to be held in the hand." T'Lan said and she held out her empty hand to demonstrate what she meant by this.

"Will you require support from the *Nightfall* professor?" Cole said.

"No, I don't think so. You can continue your survey of the sector for the time being. We'll call if-" Denning began before the intercom on Cole's desk activated.

"Captain." a female voice said.

"Yes Nayal?" Cole asked the *Nightfall's* Romulan chief operations officer.

"Captain we've received a signal from Starbase Sixty-four. They'd like to speak to you." Nayal said.

"Okay, put them through." Cole replied and the display on his desk changed to show another Starfleet officer,

"Admiral Ivanov, what can I do for you?" Cole said.

"Captain are you familiar with the *SS Fortitude*?" the admiral said.

"Yes sir. She used to be the *USS Dynamic*, an Oberth-class ship before she was decommissioned. She's been carrying out independent geological surveys here in the Meltara sector. We've seen her a few times." Cole said.

"Yes. She normally sends regular updates on her surveys back to her sponsors on Tellar via us but she's a week overdue with her last update now. We've tried making contact with them but can't get a response. I want you to take the *Nightfall* and see if they're in trouble." Admiral Ivanov told him.

"Yes sir. Do you know where she was supposed to be?" Cole said.

"According to her last transmission she had completed a survey of the Nerva system and was moving on to the asteroid belt around the secondary star in the Dytan binary pair." the admiral told him.

"Okay admiral, we'll finish things up here and get there as quickly as we can. *Nightfall* out." Cole said and as he shut off the communication system he looked up at Professor Denning, "Well professor it looks like we'll have to cut this meeting short." he said and then he turned to T'Lan and added, "T'Lan I want a course for the Dytan system laid in at warp nine. Then assemble the senior officers for a briefing. We'll need all the information we have on both the Dytan system and the *Fortitude*."

"Yes captain. I will see to it immediately." T'Lan replied.

Once the *Nightfall* was underway to the Dytan system all of the ship's senior officers gathered together in the ship's briefing room so that Cole could explain the specifics of their mission. In addition to himself, T'Lan and

Nayal the ship's Bolian helmsman Ghroc was present as were the tactical officer Martin, Betazoid science officer Sodyne, chief engineer Davis and chief medical officer Doctor Hamill.

"As some of you are already aware we are en route to the Dytan system." Cole began, knowing that this information may not have made its way to Davis or Hamill whereas the other officers would have all been on the bridge when the course was set, "Our mission is to locate the *SS Fortitude* and find out why she's missed her scheduled check-ins with Starbase Sixty-four."

"She's an old Oberth-class ship isn't she? Maybe something just wore out and they broke down." Martin suggested.

"Should be easy enough to fix if it did." Davis added.

"We're hoping that it isn't even that serious." Cole replied, "With any luck there's just something that's blocking their subspace communications and they aren't aware of it. Of course we can't guarantee that so we have to be prepared for something more."

"Casualties?" Hamill said and Cole looked at her.

"We can't rule it out doctor." he told her.

"How many people are aboard?" Hamill asked.

"T'Lan I think this is where you come in." Cole said, turning to her and she got up and walked to the wall mounted display, setting it to show a diagram of the *Fortitude*.

Visually the vessel looked the same as other ships of the Oberth-class that had first been introduced into Starfleet service more than a hundred years earlier. However, as T'Lan began to explain a number of changes had been made since the vessel passed into private hands.

"This is the *Fortitude* as she is last known to have been configured." she began, "As is standard for vessels removed from Starfleet service the weapons and classified communication systems were removed although records indicate that as well as replacing the communications suite the new owners also installed a new phaser bank for defence. This has been inspected and confirmed to be within legal civilian limits for such a weapon. A torpedo launcher was also refitted although this was approved on the basis that it was to be used exclusively for the deployment of probes."

"So they can defend themselves but they aren't a gunship." Martin commented.

"Unless they bought some torpedoes we don't know about." Ghroc pointed out.

"There is no reason to believe that that is the case lieutenant commander." T'Lan said before she returned to her briefing, "The original crew compliment of eighty appears to have been significantly reduced. At its last docking at Starbase sixty-four the *Fortitude* registered a total ships company of fifty-two. Although we cannot confirm this, the most likely crew positions to have been eliminated come from the security and medical personnel to reflect the fact that the vessel would not be undertaking tactical or rescue operations." T'Lan then changed the image on the display to show a star system. It was easy to see that the system was a binary one, with a large primary star shown in blue with a smaller companion shown in a dark red, "This was the *Fortitude's* last known destination." she said, "The Dytan system. As you can see this is a binary system. Dytan-A is a blue giant while the companion Dytan-B is a red dwarf. Although there is no evidence that planets of any kind have formed in the system there is a significant amount of debris in the form of asteroids, a number of which pass between the two stars frequently and the combination of gravity and radiation absorbed may have produced novel materials that may be of great interest to Federation industry. The *Fortitude* was assigned to survey these asteroids and determine their usefulness. The ship's last check in date was seven days ago but nothing has been heard of the ship during this time."

Her part of the briefing finished, T'Lan returned to her seat and sat back down beside Cole.

"So does anyone have anything they want to say?" Cole asked, looking around the table at his officers.

"Captain, binary systems are a nightmare to search. If either star is particularly active then the radiation flares can screw up pretty much everything other than short ranged scans. Worst case scenario we'd be down to running visual searches only." Martin said.

"If the ship has been disabled while they were passing between the stars then it could easily have been caught up in the gravitational pull of one of them." Sodyne pointed out, "Of course there would be detectable traces of the warp core breach that would result from that."

"As long as the original escape pods are still in place then the crew should have been able to abandon ship." Davis said.

"There is no indication in Starfleet records that the *Fortitude's* emergency evacuation systems have been altered since the ship was transferred to private ownership. However, the required safety testing records show that the escape pods fitted were regarded as being in full working order." T'Lan responded.

"I want to be able to search the entire system in the shortest possible time." Cole said, "For that reason I want us to come in above the orbital plane where we'll launch a spread of class one probes. We'll also deploy our runabouts to pass through the plane and take up a position on the opposite side relative to us. Meanwhile we'll launch two pairs of fighters that will orbit both stars as close as possible. All craft will relay their sensor readings back to us for analysis."

"A system wide scan conducted from both sides of the orbital plane backed up by probes and close in scans of the stars themselves." Sodyne said, nodding her head slowly, "We should be able to cover the entire system in a few hours."

"Three point four hours from when all our search assets are in position." T'Lan added and Sodyne frowned for a moment.

"Well if there's nothing more I'll leave you all to prepare your departments for our arrival at the Dytan system." Cole said and he gave his officers a short time to indicate that they had anything else to add and then he began to get to his feet, "Dismissed." he said.

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As Cole had intended the *Nightfall* approached the twin stars of the Dytan system from above their orbital plane so that both of them were visible on the main screen as the starship got closer. The only parts of the system that were left invisible to the crew of the *Nightfall* by following such an approach were the areas immediately on the other side of the two stars and also in the various sensor shadows created by the numerous asteroids.

"Open hailing frequencies." T'Lan said when the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp.

"Hailing frequencies are open. We're not getting any connections." Nayal responded.

"Probes loaded and ready to launch captain." Martin announced.

"Launch." Cole said simply and Martin launched a volley of probes from the torpedo module mounted at the rear of the *Nightfall*. As soon as these left the *Nightfall's* launchers they began to spread out in pre-programmed flight paths designed to take them towards the various clusters of asteroids in the system that could conceal either the *Fortitude* itself or any of the ship's escape pods, "Lieutenant Nayal please inform Starfleet that we have arrived at Dytan and are commencing our search."

"Aye captain. Hangar reports fighters and runabouts ready to launch captain." Nayal said.

"Tell hangar control to launch." Cole replied and as Nayal was passing along his order he activated the intercom, "Bridge to sickbay. Doctor Hamill we've arrived in the Dytan system. Are you ready to receive casualties?"

"We've been ready for the last hour captain. Right now my people are just listening to me practice." Hamill replied with the sound of violin music in the background and Ghroc winced.

"In that case I hope you are not called away from your music doctor." Cole told her with a smile before he shut off the intercom.

"Hangar reports launches successful captain." Nayal said after four of the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron and both runabouts exited the starship's cavernous hangar bay.

Like the probes before them, the six smaller craft spread out as they flew away from the *Nightfall*, the runabouts passed right through the orbital plane and split up so that they could scan the system from the opposite side to the *Nightfall*. At the same time the four fighters headed for the two stars at the heart of the system. This area would have been of greatest interest to the crew of the *Fortitude* so it was likely that they would have moved in closer themselves to study the effects of the stars' radiation and gravity on the asteroids as they moved between the orbits of them both.

The result of the multiple probes as well as the smaller craft launched by the *Nightfall* was that between them they were able to scan nearly every part of the system simultaneously and all of this data was fed back to the *Nightfall* in real time.

"Data feeds are all operating as planned captain." Sodyne announced and Cole immediately used the headset he wore to show him this information, "Virtual system model is already at forty-two percent. We should reach fifty in about six minutes and eighty-five within the hour. Then it's just the shadows inside the asteroid fields to fill in with the probes."

"I see no indications of Federation hull alloys in the scans." T'Lan said as she monitored the data coming back from the other craft and probes.

"Captain our own ships are the only active warp fields as well." Nayal added.

"So if the *Fortitude* is here then she's definitely adrift." Martin commented.

"Perhaps we should launch additional fighters towards the stars." Sodyne suggested.

"We already have four fighters in position lieutenant commander. In the time taken to prepare and launch more they will have completed their orbits." T'Lan pointed out.

"I agree." Cole said, "We've got enough craft out there already. T'Lan you can direct the search, I'll be in my ready room." he added as he then got to his feet and headed for his ready room.

T'Lan's calculation for the time it would take to search the entire system proved to be correct and it was just over three hours later that she contacted Cole using the intercom.

"Our search of the system is complete. There are no signs of the *Fortitude*." she told him.

"I'm on my way." Cole replied and he returned to the bridge. As he entered the room he saw that part of the main viewscreen had been given over to the virtual model of the system. This looked somewhat like a tactical display, including icons for the positions of every probe, fighter and runabout in the system as well as the *Nightfall* itself.

"So if the *Fortitude* isn't here are there any indications that she was?" Cole asked.

"Negative captain." Nayal answered, "There are no warp trails other than our own within sensor range."

"Logic suggests that whatever happened to the *Fortitude* happened before they reached the Dytan system." T'Lan said.

"Do we know where they were before they were supposed to come here?" Sodyne asked.

"The Nerva system." Cole answered.

"Nerva is nine light years away captain." Ghroc said, "At warp nine we could be there about fifty hours."

"Nayal recall our ships. Mister Ghroc lay in a course for Nerva at warp nine." Cole ordered. Then after a moments hesitation he looked at Nayal again and added, "Lieutenant try signalling them as well. If they have suffered damage then they may have been making repairs."

"Yes captain." Nayal replied.

The *Nightfall* had been underway for more than twelve hours when Cole and T'Lan were woken by the sound of the intercom and Cole frowned.

"This had better be good." Cole said as he reached for the panel beside their bed, "Cole." he said.

"Captain it's Martin. I'm sorry if I woke you but we may have something." Martin's voice said.

"What is it commander?" Cole asked.

"Captain we may have found the *Fortitude*." Martin told him.

"May have? Have you or haven't you?" Cole said.

"We're picking up a Federation warp signature captain. We're too far away to be able to identify the ship but it's definitely of Federation origin." Martin said.

"Have you tried hailing them?" Cole said.

"Yes captain. There's no response so far though."

"Keep trying. I'm on my way now." Cole told him and as he shut off the intercom he started to get out of bed.

"Should I come with you Robert?" T'Lan asked, looking up at him and he smiled back at her.

"No, you better stay with T'Sal." Cole replied, referring to their baby daughter who was asleep in another room, "There's no point in waking Harriet Davis to look after her yet." he added as he picked up his uniform and began to put it on.

"Very well." T'Lan said. Then she added, "I shall await your return."

Martin was the only senior officer on the bridge when Cole arrived. Being on the night shift he was in command while the other positions were all currently held by more junior officers.

"Okay so show me what you've got." Cole said, looking towards the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge and it changed to show the relative positions of the *Nightfall* and the unidentified Federation vessel.

"We've been trying to hail them but so far there's no response." Martin answered.

"So it's just a warp field profile so far? How long until we're close enough for a visual?" Cole asked.

"She'll be in visual range in about three minutes captain." the officer sat at the operations console responded.

"At our current speed we'll intercept in just under an hour." Martin added.

"If we can't establish contact by the time we get into visual range then drop out of warp and hold position." Cole ordered.

"Aye captain." the helmsman responded.

Cole and Martin did not have long before the *Nightfall* got close enough to the unidentified vessel that it could be picked up on the heavy cruiser's long range optical sensors. These use a subspace enhancement to get around the limitation of the speed of light so despite the other vessel still being more than a light year away the image that appeared on the main viewscreen was in near real time.

"That's an Oberth alright." Martin said when he saw the characteristic design of the surplus Starfleet vessel with its saucer section mounted between the warp nacelles while the sleek secondary hull hung below this.

"The ship still has power and the thermal profile suggests that life support is functional." the operations officer said.

"I doubt there are many Oberths drifting out here but we need to be certain. Get me an ident." Cole ordered.

"We're picking up a transponder now captain." the officer at operations said, "It's the *Fortitude*."

Cole then tapped his combadge.

"Cole to Sodyne." he said and he waited for a few moments before she responded.

"Yes captain?" she said, clearly having just woken up.

"I'm sorry to disturb you commander but we've located the *Fortitude* I need you to interpret the sensor data." Cole told her.

"I'll be with you in five minutes captain." Sodyne said and she shut off her intercom.

Sodyne was true to her word and she stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge just a few minutes later.

"Ah commander, take your station please." Cole said.

Walking around the back of the bridge Sodyne took over the science station from one of her subordinates and began to study the information being collected by the *Nightfall's* sensors.

"We've already had the basics." Martin said, "We know she has power and life support."

"Yes and there's something living over there as well." Sodyne replied.

"The crew?" Cole asked.

"I don't think so captain. The readings I'm looking at here indicate respiration of some kind but the patterns don't look right for humanoids. Do we know if the crew were any sort of exotic species?" Sodyne said.

"No, as far as I know they were pretty representative of Federation member species." Cole replied.

"Then there's definitely something not right over there captain." Sodyne told him.

"Helm take us in closer." Cole ordered, "Tactical raise shields and divert power to phasers. Yellow alert, it's time to wake everyone up."

"Aye captain. Yellow alert." the tactical officer responded and as the *Nightfall* began to approach the *Fortitude* once again the alarm sounded.



T'Lan was the last of the command staff to arrive on the bridge and she took her place beside Cole.

"I have left T'Sal in sickbay with Harriet Davis." she said, "Lieutenant Commander Davis had already left for engineering."

Cole nodded.

"Yes, he's checked in." he said.

"What is the status of the *Fortitude*?" T'Lan asked, using her headset to study the sensor readings.

"She's powered and looks intact. Sodyne says that there's someone alive over there but it doesn't look humanoid and there hasn't been any response to our hails." Cole told her.

"We're coming into transporter range now captain." Ghroc announced from the helm station.

"All stop." Cole ordered.

"All stop." Ghroc repeated as he brought the *Nightfall* to a halt relative to the drifting *Fortitude*.

"Okay let's see if we can find out what's going on over there." Cole said, "Lieutenant Nayal put a laser on the *Fortitude*'s hull."

"Aye captain. Deploying ventral laser turret." Nayal replied.

The *Nightfall* was equipped with a pair of turrets in its primary hull, one mounted on top close to the bridge and the other beneath where most vessels of similar size instead carried an executive shuttle of some kind. The laser emitters within these turrets were meant primarily as an alternative detection system to the cruiser's more conventional subspace arrays. Originally they had also been intended to act as a close in weapon system to protect the ship from torpedoes but this had never been perfected, however the turrets had been improved over the versions fitted to the original *USS Nightfall* to the point where they were capable of dazzling the sensors of nearby ships if correctly aimed. Now though Nayal deployed the ventral turret to take advantage of a quirk of laser technology that had been known about for centuries and was deployed on a smaller scale on worlds across the Federation. The turret fired a single continuous beam towards the *Fortitude* so that it hit the Oberth-class ship's hull adjacent to the bridge module. This beam was nowhere near strong enough to burn through the hull even though it remained focused on a single point but this was not the intention anyway. Instead the beam was allowed to vibrate as the hull itself did as internal sound was carried through it. These vibrations could then be turned back into sounds by the *Nightfall*'s computer, enabling the crew to effectively hear what was happening on the other ship even through the vacuum of space.

"I'm not picking up any voices captain." Nayal said as the audio data began to come in, "Most of this sounds mechanical in nature."

"Most?" T'Lan commented.

"I'm not sure, there are some sounds that the computer is picking out that I can't identify. They could be organic in origin though, respiration perhaps." Nayal replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne can you give us any more information?" Cole asked, looking around at the science station.

"I'm sorry captain but I'll have to defer to Nayal's superior sense of hearing." Sodyne said, "I can't identify anything that she can't."

"Captain the logical path is clear. We cannot determine what has happened aboard the *Fortitude* from here and there is no response to our efforts at communication. We must beam an away team over to investigate in person." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Okay T'Lan. A team of six. Go." he said and she got back to her feet.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne you are with me. Lieutenant Commander Martin I will require two of your men. Lieutenant Nayal please inform Lieutenant Commander Davis and Doctor Hamill to meet us in transporter room one immediately." she said.

"Do you have a lock on the *Fortitude*'s transporter room?" T'Lan asked the *Nightfall*'s transporter operator.

"Yes commander, you should arrive right on their pad. Our shields are down ready for beaming." the crewman responded.

"Very good." T'Lan said and she took a look at her away team. All six were armed with phasers as a precaution but only the two security guards had these in their hands while T'Lan, Sodyne, Davis and Hamill all still had their sidearms holstered. T'Lan then turned back towards the transporter operator and added, "Energise."

The crewman immediately activated the transporter and the away team vanished in patterns of sparkling lights. Moments later they materialised again on a transporter pad but this time it was an older model aboard

the *Fortitude*. The two security guards immediately looked around the room, their phasers following where they looked just in case there was anything hostile in the room but they saw nothing.

"T'Lan to *Nightfall*." T'Lan said, tapping her combadge, "Transport is complete, we are all safely aboard the *Fortitude*."

"Good. Keep us informed T'Lan." Cole responded.

"I shall do so captain. T'Lan out." T'Lan said and then she tapped her combadge again to turn the device off as she stepped down from the transporter pad.

"I'm definitely picking up life readings." Sodyne said, stepping down from the transporter pad as well.

"Same here. But it's not humanoid." Hamill added.

"Power readings look good." Davis said as he also looked at his tricorder. He then folded this up and placed it in the pouch on his waist and walked towards the transporter control console to inspect it and determine whether it had been used recently before the away team arrived. However, the moment he rounded the console and was able to see the floor behind it he came to a sudden stop, "Doctor Hamill I think you should see this." he said and Hamill darted forwards to see what he had found.

"What is-" she began before she was also able to see behind the console and she let out a gasp.

Next to the wall there was a pile of bones mixed in with a badly damaged and blood stained set of overalls on top of a large patch of dried blood and nearby there was a human looking skull that appeared to have rolled away from the rest of the skeleton.

"I'm guessing that was one of the crew." Sodyne commented as the rest of the away team gathered to see what was happening while Hamill moved in closer to examine the bones.

"Definitely human." Hamill said, scanning one of the bones with her tricorder.

"Can you determine a cause of death doctor?" T'Lan asked but Hamill shook her head.

"No, not yet at least. There are no signs of toxins that have been absorbed into the bones or radiation." she said.

"Would a disease or radiation need to rip apart those overalls?" Davis commented.

"No they wouldn't and I'm not sure what happened to them either. The blood stains give me an idea of how long it is since this happened though." Hamill said, looking at the dried blood that was on the floor and also splashed onto the wall, "From the rate of decomposition I'd say that this person died about twelve days ago."

"And no-one was able to clean up the body. That's not very encouraging." Davis said.

"We should make our way to the bridge." T'Lan said, "The ship's log may contain information about what happened here and it will be easiest to access from there."

"Well if we're going to be wandering around where there could be things that can do that to a person I'm going to be prepared." Davis said and he drew his phaser.

"Good idea." Sodyne agreed and she also drew the weapon from her waist.

"A logical suggestion." T'Lan added as she also drew her phaser before walking towards the door.

The doors out of the transporter room did not open automatically as they were supposed to but when T'Lan then reached out for the control panel beside the door they moved apart as soon as she pressed the button. Outside the transporter room the corridor was empty and T'Lan looked in both directions before she stepped out into it.

"Do we take a turbolift or the Jefferies tubes?" Davis asked as he followed her.

"If the turbolifts are still working we will use them. They are more efficient." T'Lan answered.

Being a standard Oberth-class vessel, the layout of the *Fortitude* was well known to the members of the *Nightfall's* away team and they immediately headed for the closest turbolift. The corridor between the transporter room and the nearby turbolift was entirely deserted, with no indications that anything untoward had happened aboard the ship. However, when they reached the turbolift it did not react to their presence and T'Lan had to summon the car manually.

When the car finally arrived it too was empty, allowing the entire away team to fit inside.

"Bridge." T'Lan said when they were inside but the turbolift car did not react.

"Looks like all the automatics and voice systems are offline." Davis said and he entered their destination into the control panel beside the door instead. The turbolift car then began to move, heading for the *Fortitude's* bridge.

Because of the small size of the Oberth-class vessel it took only a few seconds for the turbolift to reach the bridge module at the top of the primary hull but once again the doors failed to open when the car came to a halt.

"Looks like we have to open it ourselves again." Hamill said.

"At least we can be ready if there's anything waiting for us outside." Davis pointed out and he aimed his phaser towards the door as he reached for the controls with his other hand.

When the doors slid apart it revealed the *Fortitude's* bridge and there was a set of remains similar to those the away team had discovered in the transporter room lying on the floor beside a nearby console. Stepping out of the turbolift ahead of the others Davis turned towards the front of the bridge and he saw that this was

not the only set of remains here, more were scattered around the helm and he could see a skull on the opposite side of the bridge as well.

"Looks like we've got at least three more sets of remains here." he said, "Same as the one in the transporter room."

"Let me see." Hamill said and she followed Davis from the turbolift before darting towards the nearest set of remains.

While Hamill was studying these T'Lan, Sodyne and Davis began to inspect the various consoles on the bridge. As a commercial science vessel these were somewhat different to those aboard a Starfleet vessel, with far more emphasis placed on sensor operation and data processing than on tactical systems. The particular consoles on the *Fortitude's* bridge were also single function instead of being the multi-purpose touch screens used aboard the *Nightfall*. Davis stopped as soon as he found an engineering console and he began to bring up system reports for the entire ship. Being a dedicated science vessel the *Fortitude* had numerous consoles relating to scientific functions and Sodyne made her way between them, looking for any that looked like they held information relevant to what had happened aboard the ship. The layout of the bridge was still similar to a Starfleet starship and the captain's chair was located in the centre of the room, along with a small console beside it. Wanting access to the ship's logs T'Lan made her way to this chair and sat down to study the console. Like all the other instruments on the bridge the commanding officer's console had been left active and T'Lan was able to start browsing the files it contained right away.

"The warp core looks stable." Davis said from the rear of the bridge, "All systems are operational but set in standby modes."

"Can you tell if that was done deliberately or if the computer was responsible?" Sodyne asked but Davis shook his head.

"No. I can see that it happened twelve days ago though." he said.

"Twelve days?" Hamill commented, looking up from the remains she was studying, "That's a coincidence."

"That was how long you said the body in the transporter room had been dead. Is the same true for the bodies here?" T'Lan asked.

"No. I think whoever this was died more recently, perhaps a day or two later than the transporter operator." Hamill answered.

"So whatever happened it didn't happen that quickly. I wonder why a distress signal wasn't sent?" Davis said.

"You're the engineer. Is the subspace antenna working?" Hamill said and Davis turned back to the console he was stood in front of.

"Locked in standby." he said and then he frowned.

"Is something wrong lieutenant commander?" T'Lan said.

"I think I know why everything's in standby." he said.

"Well are you going to make us guess?" Sodyne added when he did not explain further.

"This isn't a Starfleet ship so the systems work differently. Crew roles are more highly specialised, there's no assumption that a crew member can automatically fill in for another like there is on one of our ships." Davis said.

"Logical since commercial crews may lack the cross-departmental training of Starfleet." T'Lan said.

"Well that means that only certain individuals can access particular systems." Davis said and he reached out to the console and tried pressing one of the buttons shown on the touch screen. However, the only reaction he got was a sharp buzzing sound, "I thought so." he added, "This console is active and I can read off all the information I want but the computer won't let me make any changes."

"What would cause that?" Hamill said.

"I think that this console was just being used as a monitoring station for engineering functions, not an active control station." Davis replied, "All the actual engineering tasks were being carried out in engineering itself. For some reason though the decision was taken to evacuate engineering and move system control to the bridge. Of course there weren't any engineers here at the time so none of them were able to swap this console to being a control station."

"You're about to tell us that none of the engineers made it up here aren't you?" Sodyne said and Davis nodded.

"It looks that way. With no-one in control the computer just locked everything down." he said, "Whatever made the crew evacuate engineering without already having someone up here to take over must have happened very quickly."

"I do not think that the captain's logs will help us either." T'Lan added, "The last entry is dated twelve days ago."

"There's that number again." Sodyne commented.

"Logic suggests that the commanding officer was among the first to be killed and the survivors were more concerned with staying alive than maintaining a log. Unfortunate since we now have no record of what happened." T'Lan said.

"Yes, how remiss of them." Hamill muttered as she got back to her feet, "Well what's left of this body is pretty

much the same as the one we found in the transporter room. Something stripped it of all the flesh but left the bones. No signs of poison, radioactivity or teeth marks on the bones.”

“These science stations aren’t very informative either. It doesn’t look like they’ve been used since the ship left the Nerva system.” Sodyne added.

“The answers we seek are obviously not here.” T’Lan said.

“Surely we’re not giving up.” Sodyne said.

“Of course not lieutenant commander. However, logic indicates we go to the one place on the ship that we know something significant happened in.” T’Lan replied and Hamill winced.

“You mean engineering don’t you commander? Where something happened that made all the engineers want to get out of there very quickly.” she said.

“That is the logical place to start doctor.” T’Lan responded.

“Oh I had a bad feeling you were going to say that.” Hamill said.

5.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this T'Lan." Cole said when T'Lan contacted the *Nightfall* to inform him of the away team's progress.

"I can have a platoon of ground combat troops in the transporter room in ten minutes." Martin commented from the tactical station behind him.

"I see no need for a delay." T'Lan said when she overheard this, "We are all armed and so far there have been no indications of a threat."

"Apart from a ship full of dead bodies." Cole pointed out, "No wait strike that, a ship full of the bones of dead bodies since whatever killed the entire crew decided to take all of their flesh with it."

"I see no other way to discover what happened here captain." T'Lan said and Cole sighed.

"Very well T'Lan, you may proceed. *Nightfall* out." he said before he shut off the communication system.

Then after a brief pause he looked at Naya and added, "Lieutenant tell the transporter room that I want them to maintain an active transporter lock on the away team. Be ready to beam them back aboard at the slightest hint of trouble."

"Yes captain." Naya responded.

Aboard the *Fortitude* the *Nightfall's* away team used the turbolift to make their way to the engineering section. On an Oberth-class vessel the turbolift should have been able to take them all the way to engineering but the car stopped short and the team felt it changing direction.

"There must be an obstruction in the shaft." Davis said.

"I don't like the sound of that." Hamill replied.

"We will investigate it later. For now I wish to investigate main engineering." T'Lan said.

"Assuming we get there." Sodyne commented moments before the turbolift came to another halt. This time however, it did not begin to move again.

"Everyone ready?" Davis asked and he drew his phaser. He then waited while the rest of the away team also drew their phasers just in case there were any threats outside the turbolift car.

"Proceed lieutenant commander." T'Lan told him.

"Okay commander. Let's see where we are." Davis said and he opened the turbolift door.

As soon as the doors were open the away team exited the turbolift as quickly as they could to avoid all being caught in a confined space. They emerged into a corridor that from its markings was obviously close to main engineering, the turbolift control system having diverted them to the next nearest exit when it was unable to reach main engineering itself. Worryingly as they emerged they found several more sets of skeletal remains scattered on the floor of the corridor. This time in addition to the remains of the crew there was something else as well though.

"That one had a phaser." Hamill said when she saw the weapon. The phaser was of Federation manufacture but was of an older pattern than the weapons carried by the members of the away team.

"And they managed to use it. Look." Davis added and he pointed along the corridor to where there were scorch marks on the walls and floor of the corridor.

Sodyne took out her tricorder again and she walked towards the phaser burns, scanning them.

"This was definitely caused by a Federation phaser." she said, "Set to level seven or eight."

"A lethal setting." T'Lan said.

"Very lethal." Hamill added, "Enough to vaporise you."

"That could explain why there is nothing left of whatever they were shooting at." Davis said.

"Assuming that whatever they were shooting at is even affected by phasers." Hamill pointed out, "Silicon and energy based lifeforms are highly resilient to direct energy attacks."

"No, there's cellular residue here." Sodyne replied as she scanned a scorch mark left on the floor by a phaser blast, "Someone hit something here."

"Let me see." Hamill replied and she darted to where Sodyne stood and took out her own tricorder as well.

Scanning the area around the scorch mark, "Yes, I'm picking up organic material."

"Humanoid?" T'Lan asked but Hamill shook her head.

"No, it's not like anything I've seen before. It's definitely organic but the way the molecules are bonded is totally alien." she said.

"Something they found in the Nerva system maybe?" one of the security guards suggested.

"As far as we know the last status report from the *Fortitude* did not mention bringing any biological samples aboard." T'Lan said and then she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to *Nightfall*." she added.

"*Nightfall* here. Go ahead T'Lan." Cole's voice responded.

"Captain a suspected blockage in the turbolift shaft has forced us to take a diversion to reach engineering but

this has allowed us to discover evidence of an alien life form aboard the *Fortitude*. We have only found cellular residue so far but Doctor Hamill has confirmed its exotic nature.” T’Lan said.

“I take it you think it’s hostile?” Cole said.

“Yes captain. The residue was found in a phaser burn. It appears that the creature was shot and likely killed by one of the crew.” T’Lan explained.

“Do you think that it’s the same sort of life form to what we’ve been picking up on our sensors?” Cole asked.

“That is logical captain.” T’Lan answered.

“Well if the crew were killing these lifeforms they are probably hostile. Do you want those reinforcements?” Cole said.

“Negative captain. There is no logic to placing more of the crew in danger. We will continue as we are.” T’Lan replied.

“Okay T’Lan. Just so you know though we’re keeping a transporter lock on your entire team. We can beam you out of there any time you want.” Cole told her.

“Thank you captain, that is appreciated.” T’Lan said.

“You’re welcome T’Lan. Take care. *Nightfall* out.”

When the channel was shut off T’Lan looked at Hamill.

“Doctor is there anything else that you can tell us about the alien cellular residue?” she asked.

“No.” Hamill replied, shaking her head, “There was barely enough to identify.”

“Can you detect any more of the creatures from a distance doctor?” T’Lan said.

“I’ll try.” Hamill said and she reset her tricorder to perform a scan over a wider area instead of a short ranged but highly focused scan. Then she held the device up in front of her and began the scan, “I’m definitely picking up non-humanoid life forms in the area but the readings are too vague to match to the residue here.” she told the others.

“Where are they?” Davis asked and Hamill looked at him.

“All around us.” she said.

“Then we must stay alert. If these creatures are intelligent we may be able to communicate with them but be prepared to take defensive action if necessary.” T’Lan said.

“What level of force should we use commander?” one of the security guards said and T’Lan glanced at one of the phaser burn marks.

“It appears that they have killed the *Fortitude*’s entire crew. You may use lethal force.” she replied. Then she looked at Doctor Hamill and added, “Doctor Hamill please maintain your tricorder scans. I do not want to be taken by surprise by any of the creatures aboard this vessel.”

Hamill nodded in response and T’Lan began to walk towards the *Fortitude*’s engineering section followed by the other senior officers while the two security guards brought up the rear.

“You know it looks like whatever’s aboard that ship is moving.” Nayal said as she studied the *Nightfall*’s sensor readings of the *Fortitude*.

“Show me.” Cole replied and he used his headset to see the same data the Romulan was looking at.

“Look this is right before the away team beamed aboard.” Nayal began and she showed Cole a false colour image of the Oberth-class vessel.

“Okay, what am I looking at?” Cole asked.

“That image shows a spectral gas analysis. You’re looking at the density of gas reaction processes going on.” Nayal told him.

“You mean like breathing? Turning oxygen into carbon dioxide?” Cole said and Nayal smiled at him.

“Exactly captain. Now let’s move forwards about five minutes and you’ll see the pattern changes.” she said and she moved the image on to one from just after the *Nightfall*’s away team beamed aboard the *Fortitude*.

The same spread of colours was visible in this image as in the last one but the pattern of them was noticeably different. There was an area of brighter colour centred on the transporter room where the away team had arrived and in other nearby areas the colours became brighter closer to this point and darker further away, “And this is what we’re seeing now.” Nayal added, changing the image again. It was impossible to pick out the away team now that they had moved away from the transporter room but the way in which the colours making up the image became brighter towards the engineering section indicated the area of the ship they were in.

“Those things are following them. Whatever they are.” Cole said.

“That’s my guess captain. I’m no science officer but I’ve worked with Lieutenant Commander Sodyne enough to know my way around our sensors.” Nayal responded and Cole looked towards the science station.

“Lieutenant?” he asked the junior officer who was filling in for Sodyne while she was aboard the *Fortitude*.

“Err, I think Lieutenant Nayal is correct captain.” he said.

“You think?” Cole commented.

“I’m an astrophysicist captain. Biological processes aren’t my strong point. Perhaps I could get Lieutenant-” the man began.

"No lieutenant, that won't be necessary." Cole interrupted, "Nayal get me a channel to T'Lan. She needs to know that her team could be being hunted."

"Yes captain, putting you through now." Nayal said.

"*Nightfall* to T'Lan." Cole said when the channel was established.

"Yes captain?" T'Lan's voice responded.

"T'Lan, Nayal has just been showing me a series of sensor readings that seem to show that the creatures aboard the *Fortitude* are aware of your presence and that they're converging on your position. Have you seen any signs of them yet?"

"Negative captain. Doctor Hamill is running a continuous scan with her tricorder and has detected what she believes to be large quantities of the lifeforms close by. They are remaining out of sight for the time being though." T'Lan said.

"Are you still happy to proceed? We can beam you back if-" Cole began.

"Captain I am confident that my team is capable of defending themselves. We will continue to investigate what happened aboard this ship." T'Lan interrupted,

"Okay T'Lan, but take care and don't hesitate to request a beam out if you need it. We're maintaining a lock on your combadges. *Nightfall* out." Cole told her before he closed the channel.



Like the other doors the away team had encountered the entrance to main engineering did not open automatically as they approached it.

“Stand by.” T’Lan ordered and the team positioned themselves to cover the door with their phasers, “Doctor are you detecting anything on the other side of this door?”

“I’m not sure. There are life readings very close to us but I think that there’s more than just this door between them and us.” Hamill said and T’Lan then reached out to open the door.

As expected the doors slid open and revealed the engineering section of the *Fortitude* on the other side. Unlike the bridge the consoles in this compartment had been shut down and the touch screens were all blank. Like the bridge though there were the remains of several crewmembers scattered around, all of them stripped of their flesh to leave only bones. At the far end of the compartment as the away team entered it was the warp core that was still glowing although this was not as bright as it would normally be while the ship was adrift and not consuming much power.

“Looks like most of the engineers died here.” Sodyne commented as the team moved through the room.

“But what happened to the creatures that did it?” Davis added.

“They’re still around.” Hamill said as she turned around to scan a wider area with her tricorder.

The away team was spreading out across engineering, searching behind consoles for anything that would provide any clues about what had happened. With all of the consoles locked down there was nothing that any of the instruments could tell them but the distribution of the bodies of the engineering crew did seem to form a pattern.

“The bodies are focused towards this direction.” T’Lan commented when she noticed it.

“Does that fit with their duty stations?” Hamill asked.

“Hold on, I’ll try to get these consoles back on line.” Davis answered and he walked over to the main engineering console. Like all the other consoles and displays in engineering this was blank. However, Davis was able to open a small panel beside the main display and beneath this there was a smaller touch panel that was still active, “This should do.” he said.

“What happened to needing authorisation to access the controls?” Hamill asked.

“I’m hoping that won’t matter here since no-one on the bridge enabled the engineering functions they should still be active here and all that’s needed is to reset the consoles.” Davis explained while he tapped the touch screen. As he had hoped he was able to restart all of the consoles and all around engineering they came back on line together, each one running through the same start up process that took several seconds before they returned to whatever status they had been in before someone had locked them down, “There we go.” he added.

“Well done lieutenant commander.” T’Lan said and she joined him by the central console while he looked around to see what each of the displays was showing.

“I’d say that there was a pretty even distribution of duty stations before they were shut down.” he said.

“Then the pattern of the bodies is definitely not natural.” Sodyne said, looking down at one of the sets of remains.

One of the two security guards noticed another set of remains, this one just beside an access point to the ship’s Jefferies tubes. As he was looking down at the collection of bones and clothing he heard a ‘clump’ sound from inside the Jefferies tube and he frowned. This sound was followed by a scrabbling noise and he crouched down.

“Commander T’Lan,” he called out, “I think there’s something down-” then before he could finish his sentence a translucent tentacle suddenly lashed out from inside the Jefferies tube and wrapped itself around his ankle before pulling him towards the Jefferies tube.

The other members of the away team rushed to try and help the security guard when they heard him scream. Sodyne was the first to reach the man and she found him already pulled almost entirely into the Jefferies tube, struggling to maintain a grip on the sides of the tube to prevent him from being pulled all the way in.

“I’ve got you.” Sodyne said, grabbing hold of the guard’s arm and trying to pull him back out of the Jefferies tube.

Whatever was pulling the guard into the Jefferies tube was strong though and it continued to drag the helpless security guard further in. The other members of the away team soon reached the Jefferies tube as well and they joined Sodyne in trying to pull the security guard back out. T’Lan used her feet to brace herself against the wall as she grabbed hold of the guard. Her Vulcan strength seemed to halt the guard being dragged any further into the tube but she was not strong enough to be able to pull him back out even with Sodyne’s help.

Davis was next to the Jefferies tube and he also grabbed hold of the security guard. Between them the three officers were finally able to start pulling the guard back out. However, the progress was slow and there was not enough room for anyone else to get in close enough to help.

"Sodyne can you see what's going on in that tube?" Davis said and Sodyne drew her phaser as she bent down further to look into the tube. Unfortunately the interior of the tube was dark and the limited amount of light able to seep in from engineering meant that all she could see was shadows. To solve this problem she took her palm beacon from her belt and shone it into the Jefferies tube.

The powerful beam of light illuminated the creature with its tentacles wrapped around the security guard's legs. Sodyne gasped when she saw this, partially in horror at what she was seeing but mainly because she realised that she had seen something like this before. However, the creatures she had seen like this one had been much smaller.

"Lieutenant commander, what do you see?" T'Lan asked.

"It's got his legs." Sodyne responded as she recovered her senses and she reached for her phaser. In accordance with T'Lan's earlier instructions the weapon was set to a lethal level so she aimed the weapon carefully into the Jefferies tube before she fired.

Because she was taking care not to hit the security guard Sodyne's shot was directed as far away from him as possible while still aiming for the creature's bulbous body. The result of this was that although the beam hit the creature's body it was not a clean hit. Instead the beam sliced across the creature's body and it let out a shrill whistle as it let go of the security guard, its tentacles flailing and hitting the sides of the Jefferies tube before the creature retreated rapidly out of sight.

Without the creature actively pulling the security guard into the Jefferies tube T'Lan and Davis were easily able to pull him back out of it and this revealed the extent of the injuries he had suffered. The creature had torn through his trousers and dug into the flesh of his legs.

"He's losing blood rapidly. I need to get him to sickbay right now." Hamill said as she crouched down and T'Lan nodded.

"Agreed doctor." she said.

Hamill then tapped her combadge.

"Hamill to *Nightfall*. Medical emergency. Beam me and Crewman Van Dahl to sickbay immediately." she said. With the *Nightfall* maintaining a constant transporter lock on the away team there was no delay between Hamill requesting the evacuation and both her and the injured security guard vanishing in the blue glow of a transporter field, leaving the rest of the away team still aboard the *Fortitude*.

"We need to get out of here as well." Sodyne said.

"We still do not know exactly what happened here Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan pointed out.

"Maybe not but we can figure out what to do now from the safety of the *Nightfall* commander. I've seen the creature I saw in the Jefferies tube before, on Vega four-six-eight."

"The creatures that you told us killed the Ferengi?" Davis commented and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes, only the ones I saw then were much smaller. Just a couple of centimetres across whereas the one I just shot at must have been more than a metre." Sodyne said.

"Your suggestion has a degree of logic to it lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and she tapped her own combadge, "T'Lan to *Nightfall*, we are ready to beam back aboard."

"Give me a hand to get him onto a biobed." Hamill said when she and the injured security guard materialised in sickbay and a pair of her staff rushed towards her. Meanwhile she took a hypospray from the medical kit she carried and used it to deliver the anaesthetic that she had not had time to administer aboard the *Fortitude*. As soon as this was injected the guard who had still been screaming in pain passed out and was finally silent.

The medical staff then lifted the man onto the biobed and when Hamill activated it it began to conduct a full scan of his body to determine the exact extent of his injuries.

"Okay I've got it from here." she told the other medical staff beside her and they nodded before returning to their duties.

As soon as the rest of the away team returned to the *Nightfall* T'Lan, Sodyne and Davis made their way to the bridge.

"T'Lan what happened over there?" Cole asked as they stepped from the turbolift.

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has information regarding the creatures aboard the *Fortitude* that is deeply concerning." T'Lan told him and he nodded.

"We'll discuss it in my ready room." he said, "Mister Ghroc you have the conn."

"Yes captain." Ghroc replied and both men got out of their seats, Cole to head to his ready room and Ghroc to take his place in the captain's chair while his own was taken by one of the junior officers present.

As soon as Cole and the away team members were in his ready room they sat down around his desk and Cole looked at Sodyne.

"Okay then Sodyne, what do you know about what happened aboard the *Fortitude*?" he asked.

"Captain the *Fortitude* is infested with the creatures that were inside one of the Slaver stasis boxes on Vega Four-six-eight. The ones that killed some of the Ferengi. Only these are a lot bigger, the ones I saw last time must have just been infants." Sodyne answered.

"Commander we know that there is no stasis box aboard the *Fortitude*. If there was then the box we have aboard the *Nightfall* would have started glowing as soon as we came within a light year of it. Has it?" Cole said.

"No captain." Sodyne replied, shaking her head, "I've been maintaining my monitoring of the stasis box and it hasn't reacted."

"Then how do you think the creatures got aboard the *Fortitude*?" Cole said.

"Perhaps they picked them up in the Nerva system." Sodyne suggested.

"I thought they didn't report bringing any biological specimens aboard." Davis commented.

"That is correct. Unless their reports were falsified the crew did not recover biological specimens from their previous stopover." T'Lan replied.

"Not intentionally, no. But maybe the crew didn't realise that they were aboard until it was too late." Sodyne said, "Captain we have to check out the Nerva system. If there's even a chance that there's another Slaver stasis box there then-

"Commander I'm not going to divert to Nerva without a good reason. I want more information on where those creatures came from. Now you said that you saw them on Vega Four-six-eight correct?" Cole interrupted.

"Yes captain. They were swarming over the body of a Ferengi that had opened one of the stasis boxes there. The other Ferengi vaporised them all." Sodyne told him.

"The ones you saw at any rate. There could have been more of them." Davis pointed out.

"It seems unlikely that a colony of the creatures could exist anywhere else." T'Lan said, "If they lived a billion years ago then logic tells us that evolution would have changed their form since then."

"The one I saw on the *Fortitude* was much bigger than the ones on Vega Four-six-eight." Sodyne pointed out,

"Besides, we're more than ten light years from there. If the *Fortitude* was last in the Nerva system and was heading for Dytan then how could they have got to Vega Four-six-eight?"

"If they did then it'll be in the flight recorder log." Davis said.

"And to get it I have to send an away team back aboard that ship." Cole said.

"Captain I believe that if suitable precautions are taken then sending personnel back to the *Fortitude* can be done with a reasonable degree of safety." T'Lan said.

"What would you regard as 'reasonable precautions' T'Lan?" Cole asked.

"The creatures have shown that they can penetrate the fabric of Starfleet uniforms but the body armour worn by our ground forces is likely to be able to resist their attacks." T'Lan said.

"That armour only covers their torso and head. That's still a lot of places those things can attack." Sodyne pointed out.

"Which is why I recommend that we instead make use of the armoured space suits we have aboard." T'Lan responded, "Their armour covers a greater area and they are made of a tougher material in general."

"You know if we're going to be wearing spacesuits anyway then that gives us a way to deal with those creatures all in one go." Davis said.

"You are suggesting that we decompress the ship?" T'Lan said and Davis smiled.

"Exactly." he said.

"Our sensors have confirmed that they respire, so they must need air." Cole added.

"Wiping out all of the creatures poses a problem though." T'Lan said and Cole sighed.

"You mean we don't know if there are any more of them anywhere else?" he said.

"Yes captain. Starfleet regulations forbid causing the extinction of a species except in the case of infectious diseases." T'Lan said.

"That species should have died out a billion years ago." Sodyne commented.

"Perhaps, but they are alive now." T'Lan replied.

"As captain this is my call." Cole said and he looked at Davis, "Commander Davis, how easy will it be to decompress the *Fortitude*?"

"An Oberth-class ship? Pretty easy if it was still a Starfleet vessel, although the process would be involved. I could just override the safeties and blow all the hatches. It'd take about an hour." Davis said.

"But the *Fortitude* is not a Starfleet vessel." Cole commented.

"Exactly. The company that operates it definitely made changes to the control systems and that could include the procedure for an emergency decompression. Plus the doors we passed through all needed opening manually. If the central control has been disabled then I'm going to need to get that back on line. It will still be possible but it will take longer." Davis said.

“Then you’re going to need a larger force to cover you while you work.” Cole said, “I think that platoon of troops Martin said he could provide is going to be needed after all.”

7.

Hamill slowly drew a dermal regenerator over the wounds to the security guard's legs while synthetic blood was used to replace what the man had lost to the creature's attack. Although there were numerous wounds most of them appeared minor and shallow. These could be easily treated but it was obvious that some of them would need further reconstructive treatment. Thankfully it seemed that the attack had been stopped in time so the guard would be able to make a full recovery.

However, while she was working Hamill noticed something strange. At first she thought it was a trick of the light reflecting off the newly regenerated skin but then she realised that there were patches of the security guard's flesh that were moving. Acting quickly she set the dermal regenerator down and picked up a scanner that was linked to the biobed. Holding this over a moving patch she looked at the main display mounted on the wall above the biobed and her eyes widened in horror at what she saw.

The injured security guard's wounds were infested with tiny versions of the creature that had attacked him.

"Computer I need a containment field around this biobed." she said as she backed away quickly. As soon as she was clear of the biobed there was a brief flash as the forcefield was erected, preventing anything getting in or out. Then she tapped her combadge, "Doctor Hamill to Captain Cole."

"Cole here. Go ahead doctor." Cole's voice responded.

"Captain we've got a problem here. I need you, T'Lan and Sodyne to come and take a look at this as soon as possible." Hamill told him.

"Understood doctor. We're on our way now. Cole out." Cole told her and then he shut off his combadge.

Cole, T'Lan and Sodyne entered sickbay a few minutes later and they found Hamill looking at a monitor just outside the area enclosed by the containment field.

"Captain thank you for coming." Hamill said.

"What do you have for us doctor?" Cole replied.

"This. I've found an infestation around the wound sites that you need to see." she said and she stepped aside so that he, T'Lan and Sodyne could see the monitor she had been looking at.

"That's what I saw on Vega Four-six-eight and in the Jefferies tube." Sodyne said, nodding when she saw the tiny tentacled creatures swarming around the wound.

"Perhaps the creatures you saw then were not responsible for the death of the Ferengi." T'Lan said as she studied the creatures as well, "These can only have entered Crewman Van Dahl's body during the attack aboard the *Fortitude*. I suspect that the species reproduces by infecting its victims with its larva."

"Doctor can you destroy these creatures without harming Van Dahl?" Cole asked and Hamill looked at the display again as she considered this.

"I'm not sure captain." she replied, "We've got a wide range of anti-parasitical drugs available but these creatures have a different biology to anything in our database."

"That is understandable doctor. They come from an era when most of the worlds we are familiar with bore only single celled life forms." T'Lan said.

"Life, but not as we know it." Sodyne muttered.

"I'll need to extract some of the creatures to run some tests and find out what works on them." Hamill added.

"Do that doctor." Cole said and then he looked at Sodyne and added, "Commander Sodyne I want you to assist her. This is a new species we're dealing with here, well new to us even if it is a billion years old. Any insight may be useful."

"Captain I feel I ought to help in discovering where the creatures originated from. If there is a repository of Slave knowledge in the Nerva system then-" Sodyne began.

"Then T'Lan and Commander Davis will find it in the *Fortitude*'s logs Sodyne." Cole interrupted.

"But captain-" Sodyne said.

"The captain has made his wishes clear Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan told her, "If you are unable to follow his orders then perhaps we should request a replacement science officer from Starfleet."

"Okay I'll help Doctor Hamill." Sodyne said, "But I think we'd be better off if I was helping with the *Fortitude*."

"Well you're entitled to an opinion commander, but at the end of the day I'm the captain of this ship." Cole said before he turned to T'Lan and added, "Okay T'Lan, let's go and see how Davis is getting on."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied and the pair of them turned to leave sickbay.

"Leyla are you okay?" Hamill asked Sodyne as soon as Cole and T'Lan were gone.

"What? Oh yes I'm fine Sally, sorry. I just don't think I can help you here as much as I could help aboard the *Fortitude*. I've no chance of convincing Captain Cole of that though, not while T'Lan's around with her scientific expertise to flaunt while she flutters her eyelashes at him. I may never have developed my people's telepathic abilities but can I still tell that he'll always go along with whatever she says." Sodyne replied.

"I have never seen Commander T'Lan flutter her eyelashes Leyla." Hamill told her with a smile.

"Do you wish to take any further action against Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" T'Lan asked as she and Cole walked towards the nearest turbolift..

"I don't think that's necessary T'Lan." Cole replied, "I think the warning you gave her will be enough."

"I have observed a pattern of behaviour from her in regards to anything related to the Slavers. She seems unusually determined to be closely involved in any investigation." T'Lan said and Cole smiled.

"T'Lan I think you've just described every science officer in the fleet. Or at least all the good ones." he said.

The *Nightfall* program had introduced several unconventional ideas into the design and capability of a Starfleet starship. In addition to the lidar turrets a number of other tactical features had been added. The most obvious among these were the pair of massive mass accelerator cannons that ran for much of the heavy cruiser's length but there were also some features that were not integrated into the starship itself. Chief among these was the inclusion of two companies of ground troops. During the Klingon and Dominion Wars, Starfleet had suffered from the lack of the ability to rapidly deploy expeditionary forces and those ground combat specialists it did have proved inferior to their more militaristic opponents. To try and correct this shortfall the original *USS Nightfall* had trialled the inclusion of a company of Earth MACOs and one of Andorian Imperial Guard, both professional military forces instead of Starfleet's own ground combat specialists who were more suited to peacekeeping and planet side security roles than that of true infantry. After the destruction of the previous *USS Nightfall* and both her sister ships the standing militaries of the Federation's member worlds had been unwilling to provide more of their limited numbers of troops to Starfleet and these had been replaced by two companies of ground specialists instead. However, the *Nightfall* retained all of the equipment that the troops from the planetary militaries had used so the ground forces still had access to the heavily armed assault shuttles, light armoured vehicles and support weapons that their predecessors had used and they had spent months learning to use it effectively.

The armoured spacesuits that the platoon preparing to beam aboard the *Fortitude* were wearing were part of this new equipment and as T'Lan and Cole entered the staging area they found Martin and one of the ground combat specialists helping Davis into one of the suits.

"You are leading the platoon in person Lieutenant Commander Martin?" T'Lan asked when she saw that the *Nightfall's* security chief was also wearing an armoured spacesuit.

"A boarding action is technically a security assignment rather than infantry." he answered, nodding, "I've told Lieutenant Ward to stand down and I'll be taking her place. There's a suit set aside for you as well commander. Do you need help getting into it?"

"T'Lan and I have both practised in these suits already before. Everyone aboard the original *Nightfall* did."

Cole pointed out to him and he smiled.

"Of course captain. I knew you were familiar with the suits, I just wasn't so sure about Commander T'Lan." Martin said.

"They seem pretty easy to get to grips with." Davis added, flexing his arms in the suit and noticing how the armour plates carried in the external pockets moved, "Are there any tricks to actually walking around in one?"

"No, the armour was designed by Andorian engineers to provide mobility as well as protection. It's heavier than a regular suit of course but you shouldn't have any trouble walking or running. We trialled a hardshell suit that gave all over armour protection but it was rejected because you could get locked up if you turned or twisted incorrectly." Cole told him then he looked around and added, "Your troops look almost ready to move out Martin."

"Yes, once we finish with Commander Davis we're just waiting on T'Lan and we can deploy to the *Fortitude*." Martin said.

"In that case perhaps I ought to help you anyway." Cole said to T'Lan, "It'll speed things up."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

"Your suit is in that room over there commander." Martin said and he pointed to one of a row of doors. Each of the rooms behind these were intended to give troops a degree of privacy as they changed into spacesuits, a process that required them to remove all their other clothing in order to fit the waste recycling parts of the suit and when Cole and T'Lan entered the room they found it empty apart from all of the pieces of an armoured spacesuit that had been laid out for the female Vulcan. As soon as the door closed behind them T'Lan began to remove her clothing and she glanced at Cole.

"Robert I suspect that watching me undress is as much of a reason why you volunteered to assist me as wishing to improve the speed of the process of my putting on this spacesuit." she said and Cole smiled at her.

"T'Lan, what husband wouldn't want to see his beautiful wife naked?" he replied.

"Then it is logical to assume that upon my return you will be equally as willing to help me out of this suit?" T'Lan said.

"If that's what you want." Cole responded.

"It is."

B.

The *Nightfall*'s standard personnel transporters were not large enough to handle a full platoon of ground troops so once the full away team was prepared they moved to one of the ship's cargo holds to make use of one of the much larger cargo transporters. These were not usually used for the transport of people but it was possible to reconfigure them to operate at a quantum level of resolution so that they could handle the complex patterns of living beings.

"Beam us over to the *Fortitude*'s cargo hold." Davis instructed the transporter operator as the away team stepped onto the pad. He, T'Lan and Martin moved to the centre of the pad while around the ground troops that made up the bulk of the away team deployed to face in all directions before they brought their phaser rifles up to their shoulders.

"Take care over there T'Lan." Cole said as he watched from beside the control console.

"Don't worry captain, we won't let anything happen to her." Martin told him and he lifted his own rifle to his shoulder.

"Energise." T'Lan then ordered and the entire away team was promptly surrounded by the glowing lights of a transport field before they vanished from sight.

Cole then turned to leave the cargo hold and he tapped his combadge as he did.

"Cole to bridge." he said.

"Yes captain?" Nayal's voice responded.

"Nayal I'm on my way up to my ready room now." Cole told her, "I'm going to need a channel to Professor Denning. I want to find out what information he can give us."

"Yes captain. I'll have one open for you by the time you're there." Nayal replied.

Sure enough by the time Cole reached his ready room there was already a subspace link in place to Professor Denning's research team. However, rather than the professor himself Cole found himself looking at an image of Trellan, Professor Denning's Romulan assistant. Given the species' long lifespan, Trellan was actually more experienced than the professor himself but the situation in the Romulan Star Empire following the destruction of Romulas and the subsequent civil war had left few opportunities for archaeologists and he had been forced to accept a more junior position with Professor Denning.

"Trellan, I was hoping to speak with the professor." Cole said.

"Unfortunately he's about two thousand metres underground at the moment captain." Trellan told him, "We've found what looks like an artificially constructed wall with Slaver era markings on it and he's down there now trying to decipher it. Unfortunately that means that he's too deep down for a communication signal to reach him. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Perhaps." Cole said, "A Federation research vessel was reported missing recently and we've been able to locate it. Unfortunately the crew are all dead."

"Dead? Do you know what happened to them?" Trellan asked.

"Yes, that's why I'm calling. The ship is infested with a type of creature that Lieutenant Commander Sodyne reported seeing on Vega Four-six-eight. That's what appears to have killed the crew. They were contained in one of the stasis boxes discovered there. I've got an away team over on the ship now trying to get into the log as well as clear out the creatures but I was hoping that the professor might be able to shed some light on the species as well." Cole explained.

"I'm sorry captain but none of our research on Vega Four-six-eight or any of the other worlds we've looked at have had any information about any hostile alien species." Trellan said.

"What about the Nerva system? Have you had any leads that would suggest there was ever a Slaver colony there? That was the last place visited by the ship before we found her adrift." Cole said.

"Nerva? It doesn't sound familiar. Hold on a moment though I'll just run a check on our database." Trellan said and he looked aside briefly while he looked up the Nerva system in the list of likely sites of Slaver remains that Denning and his team had compiled so far.

"No, I don't see the Nerva system here. Are you sure you've got the right one?" he said when he came up with no results for his search.

"Positive. The crew filed a flight plan and we found the ship along the course they'd have to follow from there to get to their next destination." Cole told him.

"Then I'm sorry captain but I'm afraid that I can't help you. I'll let the professor know that you wanted to speak to him but it could be a day or two before he returns to the surface." Trellan said and Cole smiled at the screen.

"Thank you Trellan. That would be appreciated. *Nightfall* out." he said before he shut off the communicator and leant back in his chair.

As soon as the away team arrived aboard the *Fortitude* the platoon of ground troops checked to see if there were any signs of movement among the stacks of crates that filled the compartment. At the same time T'Lan took out her tricorder and began to scan for the same life signs that Hamill had on their previous visit to the drifting ship. Like then she detected numerous signs of life but it all appeared to be keeping out of sight.

"Commander, are we clear?" Martin asked.

"It would appear so." T'Lan answered and Martin pointed a hand towards the door out of the cargo hold.

"Okay let's move." he ordered and the ground troops formed themselves into two rows with T'Lan, Martin and Davis in between them as they headed for the doors. However, as they moved there was a sudden crashing sound as a large drum fell from a high shelf and burst open when it hit the floor. Immediately the Starfleet troops came to a halt and those on the same side as the fallen drum turned towards it, some looking at where it had landed while others looked up at where it had come from and it was these troops that saw one of the translucent alien creatures pulling itself through an open panel in the wall.

"Contact!" one of the soldiers yelled at the same moment he fired his phaser and when the bright red beam hit the creature it exploded, spraying cloudy liquid over a small area.

This time though the creature was not alone and another burst through the opening, leaping from the shelf before the soldier could fire again. More creatures followed this and in just a few seconds there were several of them descending the shelves while more continued to emerge from the open panel.

While the ground troops were firing on the creatures Davis rushed to the door leading out of the hold and pressed the control to open it.

"Okay let's go." he said, jumping through the doorway as the doors slid apart and the away team began to move through. T'Lan and Martin were first and then the platoon of ground troops began to move through in groups that allowed others to maintain their fire against the creatures that continued to pour from the open panel and climb down the shelves. One of the creatures leapt from near the top of a shelf and landed on top of one of the soldiers, immediately wrapping its tentacles around him but the barbs were unable to penetrate the armour plates that covered most of his body. Having the creature wrapped around him did prevent him from firing his phaser rifle though and as he struggled to try and pull it off him two more of his comrades stepped forwards to help. One of these men attempted to help pull the creature loose with his bare hands while the other drew a knife instead and used it to cut through the tentacle that was wrapped around the first soldier's neck. With his helmet still secure the soldier was in no danger of being strangled but it was the most obvious place to start so the soldier with the knife plunged it into the tentacle. This produced a spurt of fluid and the creature whistled as it thrashed about, releasing its grip on the soldier so that it could be pulled off and thrown to the floor. Then before it could either flee or try attack again another nearby soldier turned towards it and fired his phaser rifle from close range. The energy blast hit the creature where its injured tentacle joined its body its side split open to spill out the fluid from within.

"Fall back." Martin ordered, waving what remained of the platoon through the doorway and the soldiers still in the hold all began to back away, the creatures forming a carpet of translucent tentacles as they followed in a large mass. This made them easy to target and the soldiers killed dozens as they retreated but there seemed to be an endless number of others to take their place.

Davis stood by the controls to the door, watching as the platoon of ground troops came through it and the moment that the last of them was through he slammed his hand down on the controls to close it again. A few of the creatures were caught in the path of the doors as they closed and those that could not get out of the way were crushed between them or had tentacles ripped off. Three of the creatures ended up on the same side of the door as the *Nightfall's* away team and there was a rapid barrage of phaser fire to wipe them out. Meanwhile a continuous pounding sound came from the other side of the now closed door as the mass of creatures behind it struck at it with their tentacles in a hopeless attempt to batter it down.

"Status report." T'Lan said and Martin looked around.

"Looks like we got out of that one without any injuries commander." he replied, "This armour works just like you hoped it would."

"A logical deduction Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan said before she knelt down besides the remains of one of the creatures and took a sample container from the bag on her belt, using it to store a small piece of flesh from it before she she looked up at Davis and added, "Lieutenant Commander Davis, where do you recommend we go to carry out the decompression process?"

"Engineering. We know the systems there are on line and we'll be able to override all of the safety protocols from there." Davis responded.

"Just point the way." Martin told him.

3.

"The cellular structure of these creatures is incredible. I don't think I've ever seen this combination of elements in a life form before." Hamill said as she studied the readings taken of the tiny creatures infesting Van Dahl's body.

"Makes you wonder what sort of world they evolved on or even if they're naturally occurring." Sodyne said and Hamill frowned.

"Are you suggesting that someone would artificially create these? Why would they do that?" She asked.

"As a weapon probably. If just one of these things can create this many offspring in a single attack then just think about how many of them you'd end up with if you dropped a dozen on a small town." Sodyne answered, "Of course if they are a weapon then that probably means that they're going to be difficult to kill while they're inside Van Dahl's body."

"I need to run a physical analysis of their body chemistry. Proper reaction tests, not just scans and simulations." Hamill said.

"And to do that you're going to have to drop the containment field to collect samples." Sodyne said and Hamill nodded.

"Even if I used the EMH to gather the samples I'd still need to get them out of there somehow. Then there's the issue of containment. Isolating micro-organisms is relatively straight forwards but these are a different matter all together."

"A different matter, yes." Sodyne responded, "These scans show that they are very mobile even in their current state of development. All it would take would be for one to escape and get to the ventilation system and they could end up anywhere on the ship."

"Then I'm going to have to get some from the Fortitude." Hamill said and she tapped her combadge, "Hamill to Nayal." she signalled.

"Yes doctor?" Nayal asked from the bridge.

"Lieutenant I need to speak to Commander T'Lan." Hamill said.

"Understood doctor, I'm putting you through now." Nayal told her.

"Thank you Nayal." Hamill replied before she heard T'Lan's voice instead.

"T'Lan." she said simply.

"Commander I need to ask a favour of you." Hamill said.

"Go ahead doctor, I am listening." T'Lan said.

"Commander I'd like to be able to study the chemistry of the creatures aboard the Fortitude without having to risk dropping the containment field around Crewman Van Dahl. If it's at all possible could you-" Hamill said before T'Lan interrupted her.

"You wish me to acquire a sample of the creature's tissue doctor?" she said.

"Yes, that's right. I don't want you to take any risks to get it though." Hamill replied.

"Your concern is unnecessary doctor. I have already been able to collect a sample of material from one of the creatures." T'Lan told her.

"Thank you commander." Hamill said.

"I will have it transported to you immediately. T'Lan out." T'Lan added before she shut off her combadge.

Seconds later there was the sound of a transporter in operation and the sample container that T'Lan had used to collect the biological sample from the dead creature aboard the Fortitude materialised in the middle of sickbay.

Hamill immediately walked over to this and picked it up, carrying it across sickbay to a scanner that she inserted the sample case into. Once inside the sealed interior of the scanner it opened the sample case and began to probe the material inside it. This produced largely the same sort of readings that she had already been able to take from her scans of the smaller infant creatures infesting Van Dahl but she reviewed it anyway while the scanner unit then moved on to dividing up the contents of the sample case and placing smaller pieces of the material into individual capsules that would allow Hamill to directly introduce various chemicals into them without contaminating the entire batch of material.

"The fluid content is remarkably high even in the adult creature." she commented, "Over ninety percent."

"Are you thinking that we could find a way to dry them out?" Sodyne asked.

"It's possible but I think they'll be more vulnerable to the effects of dehydration when they've left their initial host victim. If I tried microwaving the ones inside Van Dahl I'd probably end up cooking him as well." Hamill replied, "Hopefully there's something mixed in with that water than will be vulnerable to chemical attack instead."

The away team was too large to fit into a single turbolift car and so to avoid splitting their force up T'Lan and Martin agreed that they would make the journey to main engineering on foot, climbing through the turbolift shafts instead of riding the cars.

With the cargo hold located in the *Fortitude's* secondary hull this meant that the away team had to climb through the wide warp engine nacelles that connected the two main parts of the ship's structure together.

"These readings are concerning." T'Lan said when the door to the turbolift shaft was forced open to give the away team access without summoning a car.

"Are you saying that there are creatures in the shaft commander?" Martin asked.

"Not necessarily in the shaft itself but my tricorder does indicate a large concentration of them within the nacelle." T'Lan told him.

"What would bring them here?" Martin said.

"Possibly searching for food." Davis suggested, "The base materials for the ship's food replicators are stored in the nacelles. I mean those things must have to eat to grow, right? And this number of creatures can't have grown on just what they got from living off the ship's crew."

"Lieutenant Commander Davis makes a good point. It is illogical to think that all these creatures gained access to the *Fortitude* at their current size. There they must have multiplied and grown while they were here. The crew would not be able to provide enough nourishment for this so the creatures must have located an alternate food source." T'Lan added in agreement.

"Then maybe we should get to engineering as quickly as we can and flush them all out into space." Martin said.

Climbing the turbolift shaft required rifles to be slung and even holding a phaser in one hand meant slowing progress considerably. Therefore, a system of alternating movement was decided on. There were numerous places in the vertical shafts where it was possible to step off the emergency ladder and stand and these places made useful points for a team of ground troops to provide cover from. In this way the speed at which the away team climbed from the secondary to the primary hull could be maximised.

As the team climbed though they began to hear a noise like the one they had heard when Davis closed the door to the cargo hold, a pounding sound as if a large number of the creatures was trying to break through the wall of the shaft to get to them.

"I don't like the sound of that." Davis commented as he climbed and heard the pounding from what seemed like right on the other side of the wall in front of him.

All of a sudden there was a loud 'crash' from below the away team as an inspection panel gave way and tumbled downwards towards the bottom.

"They're in the shaft!" Martin exclaimed as below the away team the creatures began to spill into the turbolift shaft and climb up after them. Their tentacles gave them the ability to latch onto any surface feature on the inside of the shaft rather than just relying on the handholds of the emergency ladder to be able to chase after the away team, "Cover team do you have a line of fire?" Martin added.

"Yes commander, firing now." one of the current fire team deployed to cover the rest of the platoon responded and there was the flash of a phaser beam down the shaft as they began to fire. The drawback to the covering team being above some of the climbing away team members was that they had to be careful not to hit their own people by mistake and the angles of fire available to them were limited. This enabled the creatures to gain on the away team and when the soldier bringing up the rear glanced downwards he saw a number of them closing on him by scaling the ladder as well.

Unable to increase the speed at which he was climbing the ladder because of the other members of the away team ahead of him the soldier instead came to a halt and drew the phaser he had holstered on his leg. Pointing this back down the ladder below him he fired the weapon, holding his thumb down on the trigger to maintain the beam. This burned through several of the creatures, their bodies bursting open before the remains tumbled down the shaft but there were more to take their place and one leapt across the shaft and landed on his outstretched arm. The creature wrapped its tentacles around his arm and although the barbs were unable to penetrate his armoured spacesuit it was still able to force him to drop his phaser as its tentacle coiled down his arm to his hand.

Without the phaser to hold back the creatures further down the ladder, more of them began to climb towards the soldier while he was banging his arm against the wall to try and dislodge the and the first to reach him coiled around his leg and pulled it off the ladder. The soldier's other foot slipped from the ladder at the same time and this left him holding on by just one hand for a few seconds until he lost his grip and fell screaming down the shaft.

"Dunst is down! The creatures are right below me." the next soldier said using the communicator built into his spacesuit to broadcast his warning to the rest of the away team.

Further up the ladder Martin paused his climb and looked down. From his position and even with the away team members directly below him obscuring the creatures climbing the ladder he could see that the number of creatures in the turbolift shaft had to number in the thousands. The covering fire team was still picking

them off but only a few with each volley and at that rate it was obvious that the creatures would overwhelm the away team before long.

“Cover team reset phasers to wide angle area stun and open fire.” he ordered. Martin knew that this would flood the entire shaft with phaser energy, including hitting the away team themselves. However, he had also seen demonstrations of the effectiveness of the armour worn by the *Nightfall's* ground forces, both the standard armour and the spacesuits that the away team currently wore so he knew that it would resist a stun blast almost indefinitely, “Everyone hang on and look away.” he added and the away team members on the ladder all halted and braced themselves right before the fire team above them opened fire again.

This time instead of firing concentrated beams of energy though the phaser rifles unleashed expanding waves of energy that quickly grew to envelope the entire width of the shaft. The energy refracting armour plates and fabrics that made up the away team's spacesuits was able to block any of this energy from reaching their wearers and disrupting their nervous systems but the alien creatures lacked any such protection. Martin had known that using a stun setting against the creatures was a gamble, there was a chance that their alien biology would be so different to that of the galaxy's current collection of humanoid species that they could not be stunned. His gamble paid off rapidly though and as the wave of energy swept over the creatures they went limp and lost their holding on the shaft, dropping in their hundreds towards the bottom. Seeing that the shaft was now clear the fire team ceased fire and the other members of the away team slowly lifted themselves away from the wall and looked downwards to see for themselves that the creatures were gone.

“T'Lan to *Nightfall*.” T'Lan said, activating her communicator.

“*Nightfall* here T'Lan.” Cole responded.

“Captain we have come under attack by a large swarm of the alien creatures. They have been repelled but Corporal Dunst fell down a turbolift shaft while we were under attack. Are you still reading his life signs?”

T'Lan asked and Cole looked at Nayal.

“Lieutenant?” he said.

“Checking now captain.” Nayal replied, looking at her console and she smiled, “Yes, we're getting a signal from Dunst's suit and it still registers that he's alive. Only just though, these signs are pretty weak. Do you want him beaming to sickbay?”

“In a moment Nayal.” Cole told her and he tapped his combadge, “Cole to sickbay.” he said.

“Sickbay here captain.” Hamill's voice said.

“Doctor we have a casualty to send you. Corporal Dunst suffered a serious fall, his spacesuit indicates he is badly injured but alive.” Cole said.

“Understood captain, you can send him to us.” Hamill said.

“There's a complication. He was under attack when he fell so there's a chance that he's been infected. You'll need to set up a containment field before we beam him aboard just in case.” Cole said.

“Yes captain. Please beam him directly to biobed seven.” Hamill replied.

“Of course doctor. Transport will take place in about thirty seconds. Cole out.” Cole said and then he tapped his combadge again, “Are you ready Nayal?” he asked and she nodded.

“Yes captain, transport in fifty-five seconds.” she said.

“Captain have you given any thought to what you want doing with the *Fortitude* once we've got everything from it that we need?” Ghroc then asked, looking over his shoulder at Cole, “I know the plan is to flush all of the creatures out into space but what if one or two manage to stay sealed in somewhere?”

“Ghroc's right captain. They could become an epidemic.” Nayal added and Cole nodded.

“I agree. The ship can't be safely salvaged, there'll always be the chance of contamination. Tactical I want a weapons lock on the *Fortitude's* warp core. A full power phaser strike will trigger a breach and anything left alive will be killed in the blast.”

“Computer I want a containment field around biobed seven. Then activate the emergency medical hologram within it.” Hamill said and Sodyne frowned when she heard this.

“The EMH?” she said.

“Well you don't think I'm sending anyone into test for the presence of these creatures do you?” Hamill replied as the hologram of a tall woman in a Starfleet sciences division uniform appeared beside the empty biobed that was now surrounded by a containment field.

“Please state the nature of the medical emergency.” the hologram said. Then when she noticed that she was surrounded by a forcefield she added, “What's going on? I'm a doctor, not a convict.”

“We're about to receive a casualty that may be infected by a type of parasite. I need you to test for the presence of alien life forms such as these.” Hamill told her and she pointed to a nearby display that showed an image of the infant sized alien creatures currently infecting Van Dahl.

Before the hologram could respond to this there was the glow and whining sound of a transporter in action and the unconscious form of Corporal Dunst materialised on the biobed still wearing his armoured spacesuit.

At first glance the suit appeared to still be sealed and intact but there was a prominent crack running all the way down the centre of his helmet visor.

"I'll get to work." the EMH said and she walked over to the equipment rack beside the biobed so she could run some preliminary scans before she proceeded to open the armoured spacesuit.



In the aftermath of the wide area phaser attack no more of the alien creatures entered the turbolift shaft even though T'Lan's tricorder scan showed that there were still a significant number of the creatures relatively close by. Whether they would be sufficiently intimidated enough that they would avoid the away team from this point on remained to be seen though.

The route that the away team took through the network of turbolift shafts aboard the *Fortitude* meant that they were able to make it all the way to main engineering this time instead of having to emerge a short distance away as the first team had done, forcing open the door from the inside. As they emerged T'Lan and Davis saw that the engineering section was exactly as they had left it, with displays all around the compartment showing all systems operating at a minimal level.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis, kindly begin the preparations to decompress the ship." T'Lan ordered.

"Certainly commander." Davis replied as he walked over to the main engineering console and began to access the *Fortitude's* life support system controls.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan added.

"Yes commander?" he asked.

"This area needs to be secured. Have your troops identify every means of entrance and post sentries. If possible I would like at least two men on each point. Remember that the alien creatures are able to make use of much smaller sized ducts than we can and any that cannot be sealed will need to be guarded.

"Yes commander." Martin said and he began to direct the platoon of ground troops towards the obvious entry points in engineering that would need protecting. Meanwhile T'Lan activated her communicator.

"T'Lan to *Nightfall*." she said.

"Go ahead T'Lan." Cole responded.

"Captain we have reached engineering without coming under further attack. Lieutenant Commander Davis is now working on triggering the decompression and Lieutenant Commander Martin is securing the area."

T'Lan told him.

"Acknowledged T'Lan. Be advised that we have locked our phasers onto the *Fortitude's* warp core. When you're finished over there we'll destroy the ship." Cole said.

"That is logical captain. I will return to the bridge and attempt to access the ship's log as soon as the decompression is completed." T'Lan replied.

"Very good T'Lan. We'll wait for your signal." Cole said.

"Yes captain. I will be in touch. T'Lan out." T'Lan said.

"Commander," Martin said as soon as T'Lan had finished talking to Cole, "we're secure. I've got men on every access point and an extra fire team ready to react to any attacks."

"Very good." T'Lan replied and then she looked at Davies, "Lieutenant Commander Davis, can you give me an initial assessment of how long it will take you to decompress the ship?"

"About an hour and a half I think commander. There don't seem to have been any significant changes made to the system from the Starfleet one but there is an issue with the door controls that I need to correct, it's why we've been having to open them manually. I've already terminated the air recycling and distribution system though I'm guessing it won't matter if we lose all the reserve atmosphere as well." Davies said.

"You are correct Lieutenant Commander Davis." T'Lan said, "We will leave the *Fortitude's* interior in a state of vacuum while we carry out our investigation. If any of the alien creatures survive then their movement will be impeded while we will still be able to move about freely."

Davis continued to work on overriding the safety systems intended to prevent what he was intending to do and flush all of the *Fortitude's* internal atmosphere out into space. As he had predicted he was able to achieve this in about an hour and a half.

"Okay commander I'm all set here." he announced, "All I need to do is hit this button here and then we have a twenty second countdown.. Internal doors will open at ten seconds and the external ones at zero." he told T'Lan.

"Okay you heard the engineer," Martin called out, "everyone check your suits are secure and magnetise your boots to the deck. Captain Cole will not be happy if he has to pick anyone up because they ended up being blown into space as well."

T'Lan gave the away team a short time to double check that the seals on their spacesuits were secure before she looked at Davis.

"Now lieutenant commander." she ordered and he nodded once before pressing the button that would trigger the decompression.

All around the *Fortitude* hatches and air locks opened, as did all of the internal doors to expose the entire ship to the vacuum of space and even inside their spacesuits the away team heard the rush of escaping air.

Aboard the *Nightfall* it was obvious to the bridge crew when the *Fortitude's* decompression was triggered. The air itself appeared on the main screen as a quick blast of vapour before debris picked up by the rush of escaping atmosphere was drawn out into space with it. This began as small objects that had not been secured before these were joined by hundreds of the alien creatures that flailed their tentacles for a time before becoming still.

"Looks like the plan worked." Ghroc commented and Cole nodded.

"With any luck that means T'Lan will now be able to access the *Fortitude's* logs safely and we can get back to our real job out here." he replied.

"That's it commander." Davis said, looking at a life support display that showed the entire ship to be a vacuum, "Zero atmospheric pressure throughout the ship. I'm sure there'll be a few pockets of air left but as long as we keep the rest of the ship airless then opening them up will decompress them as well."

"Thank you lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied and she activated her spacesuit's communicator, "T'Lan to *Nightfall*. Decompression process complete. I am taking a team to the bridge to access the *Fortitude's* logs. Stand by for data transfer."

"Understood commander. We'll be awaiting your signal. *Nightfall* out." Noyal responded and T'Lan turned towards Martin and Davis.

"Taking the entire away team to bridge will not be required. The three of us should be sufficient to reach it safely and access the ship's log. Other than a single fire team just in case of unforeseen circumstances the platoon can remain here until we are ready to return to the *Nightfall*." she told them.

"Yes commander." Martin said and then he looked at one of the fire teams he had held in reserve just in case the alien creatures had attacked engineering, "You, with us." he ordered before T'Lan led them out of the engineering section towards the nearby turbolift that would take them to the bridge.

"Well that's another one failed. I'm not getting any reaction to our standard range of anti-parasitical medications on these samples." Hamill said, looking up from the test unit she was working at.

"Are there any drugs that might react with the aliens' body chemistry?" Sodyne suggested.

"You mean a brute force approach?" Hamill asked and Sodyne nodded.

"Exactly. I'd suggest injecting a few million nanites from our hive to deal with them but that's not they're designed for. They could easily miss some." she said before the EMH that was examining Dunst stepped back from the biobed he was lying on and turned around.

"I have good news." she announced.

"He's clean?" Hamill asked and the holographic woman nodded.

"Yes. Although the crack in his visor did break the seal of his suit it doesn't look like any biological or chemical contaminants were able to get inside and a blood test shows no signs of the parasitic infection currently-" she began before there was an alarm from the biobed occupied by Van Dahl.

"He's going into arrest!" Hamill exclaimed as she rushed across the room to stand right outside the containment field around his biobed. Van Dahl was still unconscious thanks to the sedative being pumped into his body but the display above the biobed showed that many of his body's functions were suddenly shutting down.

"You can't go in there. You'll risk letting those creatures out." Sodyne said to her and Hamill hesitated before she looked across sickbay to the EMH.

"Computer, transfer EMH to biobed four." she said and the hologram promptly vanished from its current position, causing the scanner it held to abruptly drop to the floor.

Almost immediately after it vanished from beside Dunst, the EMH reappeared next to Van Dahl and she immediately took hold of another scanner.

"He's haemorrhaging. The parasites have spread and they're starting to attack his organ tissue." she said.

"They're growing too fast." Sodyne said, "Two millimetres bigger than when they arrived already. They're just far too large to exist in the blood stream now."

"My God, they're eating him alive." Hamill said and she quickly considered the available options, "We're going to have to carry out surgery." she decided, "We don't have time to develop a toxin to kill these things. EMH you'll have to carry it out. I want you to start around his heart and-" but before she could finish the alert being put out by the biobed changed.

"He's gone." the EMH said, "What are your instructions for the remains doctor?"

"They're still infected by the creatures." Hamill said, "The body will have to be-"

"Doctor we may have a problem here." the EMH interrupted and she stepped back from the body of Van Dahl just as more blood stains began to appear on his clothing.

"What's happening?" Sodyne asked.

"Some of the creatures are emerging from him." the EMH said.

"Computer!" Hamill snapped, "Emergency sterilisation. Biobed four. Maximum power. Authorisation Hamill echo-echo-four."

All of a sudden there was a flash of light that consumed everything inside the containment field around Van Dahl's biobed as a tissue destroying disruptive energy pulse was released from an emitter above it. This pulse left all of the medical equipment within the containment field untouched but it rapidly burned the body of Van Dahl into ash, along with all of the alien creatures it had contained and when the light faded the biobed was empty apart from a scattering of this ash while the EMH, who had also been caught in the pulse but left unaffected by it looked at Hamill.

"That was a most unusual sensation." she said.

"Did it work?" Hamill asked and the EMH reached for a tricorder before staring to scan the area inside the containment field.

"Yes doctor, it worked. I am detecting no life signs of any sort within the containment field. We can safely assume that all of the parasites are dead." the EMH replied as she put the tricorder away again and Hamill tapped her combadge.

"Hamill to Captain Cole." she said.

"Yes doctor?" Cole asked in reply.

"Captain I'm afraid that Van Dahl is dead." Hamill told him, "The parasites spread and grew too quickly and I'm afraid that we still don't have any leads on what treatment might prove effective."

"I understand doctor. What about the creatures inside Van Dahl? Are they still alive?" Cole said.

"Negative captain. I performed an emergency sterilisation that was effective in killing them all. Given that Dunst has been confirmed to not be infected the only thing we have left of their biology are the samples that Commander T'Lan took aboard the *Fortitude*."

"It looks like the creatures aboard the *Fortitude* have been purged as well doctor. Davis was able to decompress the ship. I want those samples secured for transport back to Starfleet medical. Even if we can't figure out a way to deal with the creatures I'm sure that they'll be able to." Cole ordered and Hamill nodded.

"Yes captain. I'll prepare them for shipping." she said as Sodyne stepped closer to her.

"Captain it's Sodyne." she said so that Hamill's combadge was able to pick up the sound of her voice clearly.

"Yes commander?" Cole said.

"Captain now that there is no need for me to assist Doctor Hamill I'd like to return to the *Fortitude*." Sodyne said.

"Negative commander." Cole told her, "I want you back here on the bridge as soon as possible. T'Lan is going to transfer the *Fortitude*'s logs to us and I want you to start going through them immediately."

"Yes captain. I'll be right there." Sodyne said.

Although decompressing the interior of the *Fortitude* had required Martin to take control of all of the internal doors the process had not re-established the automated opening and closing functions of any of them and manual control panels still had to be used to operate the turbolift that then took them to the Oberth-class starship's bridge. The consoles here were still all active and T'Lan made her way to the captain's chair while Martin and the ground combat specialist fire team remained on guard just outside the turbolift.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis," T'Lan said, "I will require your assistance in unlocking the full ship's logs."

Martin then joined T'Lan at the captain's chair and he looked at the console beside it. This still showed a summary of the captain's log entries from when T'Lan had called them up earlier but the more technical data from the flight recorder was not available.

"This all looks straight forward enough. The captain didn't lock his console so we should be cleared for full file access." Davis said as he studied the console closely.

"Can it be transferred to the *Nightfall*?" T'Lan asked.

"I think so. Short ranged communications are still operational but we're locked out from the main antenna so the data rate will be slow. Looking at this I'd say it would take at least fifteen minutes just to get the full captain's log across, let alone all the technical data. It would be quicker just to pull the drives from the main computer core and beam them back to the ship."

T'Lan then looked towards the turbolift and the troops standing beside it before she looked back at Davis.

"Very well Lieutenant Commander Davis." she said, "Take two of our escort to the computer core. I will remain here and begin reviewing the most recent entries in the captain's log for any significant information."

"Yes commander. I'm on my way." Davis responded. Then as he walked back to the turbolift Martin walked over towards T'Lan and stood beside her while she began to open the log files. Each entry consisted of a text file that the *Fortitude*'s captain had created by dictating the information he wanted including and T'Lan was able to rapidly skim through these.

"Can you really take all that in that fast commander?" Martin commented.

"Speed reading of this form is a skill that can easily be acquired lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "I do not need to commit all parts of the log to memory, I only require to pick out certain words that can be associated with how the alien creatures got aboard. For example I can see here that this entry has no

mention of any alien creatures which suggests that it happened before they were first encountered.”

“So does it say where they were at the time?” Martin asked.

“Yes, it says that the ship was on its way to the Dytan system.” T’Lan answered and Martin frowned.

“So basically right here where it was supposed to be? Does this mean they brought those things from Nerva after all?” he said.

“I do not think so lieutenant commander. This log entry mentions a slight course alteration that was made in response to an emergency beacon apparently of Federation origin.” T’Lan told him.

“Another Federation ship out here?” he commented.

“A vessel of Federation origin yes, though there is no indication that it was either a Starfleet ship or any other vessel on official Federation business. More likely it was another independent vessel.” T’Lan told him.

“But it was a ship in distress? So where is it now?” Martin said.

“It was not a starship.” T’Lan added as she continued to read through the captain’s log, “It was an escape pod.”

“An escape pod would probably have been brought into the shuttle bay with a tractor beam.” Martin said.

“Indeed, which means that it is probably still in there.” T’Lan replied.

Despite the shuttle bay's exterior door being open to space following the *Fortitude* being decompressed there were still three small shuttlecraft of different types in it, these having been too heavy to be blown out into space by the force of escaping air. All were in good condition despite not being the latest models but there was also another tiny craft present that was significantly different to these. This was smaller even than the smallest of the *Fortitude's* craft and had a significantly more battered appearance and T'Lan and Martin made their way directly towards this. The escape pod was sealed and when they reached it Martin placed a gloved hand against its hull.

"I've not seen one of these in a while." he said.

"This model was discontinued more than twenty years ago." T'Lan replied as she took out her tricorder and began to scan the escape pod.

"Anything interesting commander?" Martin asked.

"I am detecting organic material inside but there are no life signs." she answered.

"Not even any of those things?" Martin said.

"By 'things' I presume that you mean the creatures that wiped out the crew and attacked us lieutenant commander." T'Lan said but rather than wait for a response she added, "In which case no, there are no indications that there are any of them inside. There is an atmosphere, however. The life support system is shut down so the atmosphere is likely a mix of what is left from before it was shut down and air from the *Fortitude* when the hatch was opened."

"Speaking of which what do you want to do? Do we open the pod?" Martin said.

"We have no choice if we are to access the flight log." T'Lan said and Martin nodded.

"Okay then commander. You might want to step out of the way though." he said and he reached for a panel on the outside of the pod that was labelled 'EMERGENCY RESCUE'.

T'Lan stepped back out of the way of the escape pod's hatch as Martin opened the panel to expose a large lever that he then took hold of. Double checking that T'Lan was clear he then pulled this sharply. This caused the escape pod's hatch to slide open and there was a rapid blast of air as the atmosphere inside escaped in one sudden rush. There was too little air inside the escape pod to drag any significant objects out with it though so when T'Lan and Martin looked inside they saw a collection of bones on the floor among a set of clothing.

"Well I think it's fair to say that this is how those creatures got aboard." Martin commented when he saw this.

"Yes, that is a logical conclusion. Most likely the individual whose remains are inside abandoned ship while infected with the larval form of the creatures. These then hatched out and devoured them before the pod was recovered by the crew of the *Fortitude*. They opened the pod and the creatures were released onto the ship." T'Lan said.

"So how about we get the log and get back to the *Nightfall*?" Martin suggested and T'Lan climbed into the escape pod.

The flight logs of all escape pods were intended to be easy to access so that investigators could determine the reason for the loss of a starship if even only a single pod was recovered so there was no complicated downloading procedure to worry about as there was with extracting the logs from the *Fortitude*. Instead T'Lan simply walked across the interior of the escape pod, stepping over the remains of the sole occupant so that she could reach the detachable data module that was clearly marked as the flight recorder. Although this used the same technology as standard Federation isolinear rods the module was significantly larger, possessing an outer casing that was designed to protect it from fire and explosions powerful enough to destroy the pod itself. This detached easily and T'Lan carried it back out of the escape pod into the shuttle bay.

"I have it. We may return to the *Nightfall* now." she said.

"Transporter room confirms that we have all members of the away back on board now captain." Noyal said and Cole nodded as he looked at the image of the Oberth-class starship on the main viewscreen.

"Tactical do we still have our weapons lock?" he asked.

"Yes captain." the officer on duty at the tactical station located behind Cole replied, "Phasers are locked on the *Fortitude's* warp core."

"At this range we'll be within the likely blast radius captain." Ghroc pointed out.

"Back us away commander." Cole told him, "Nice and slow. One quarter impulse power. Tactical hold that lock and raise our shields just in case."

"Engaging impulse reverse captain." Ghroc said, twisting the manual flight control levers in his hand to gently propel the *Nightfall* away from the drifting *Fortitude* under impulse power, "One light second range captain.

This should do it.” he said a few seconds later as he brought the *Nightfall* to a halt again. Three hundred thousand kilometres was considered extreme range for a phaser strike but against a target that could not manoeuvre that the *Nightfall* had been maintaining a precise lock on it made little difference. The additional distance did more to limit the potential damage either from the release of antimatter or debris though.

“Very good Mister Ghroc.” Cole said, “Tactical, fire phasers.”

“Firing phasers captain.” the tactical officer replied and a beam of bright red energy leapt from the *Nightfall* to the *Fortitude*. This hit the smaller vessel exactly where it was supposed to in the engineering section and almost instantly burned its way through the hull and into the ship’s warp core to trigger a breach. In an instant the image of the *Fortitude* was replaced by a brilliant flash of light from the uncontrolled mixing of matter and anti-matter.

“Target destroyed captain.” the tactical officer said.

“Are there any signs of live organic material among the wreckage?” Cole asked.

“Negative captain.” Sodyne responded as she studied the sensor readings of the wreckage. This was bathed in radiation from the explosion but it was still possible to tell that any organic material that had been aboard the *Fortitude* had been destroyed along with the ship itself.

“Very good.” Cole said as he got up out of his seat, “Now my shift is over so I am going to go and help my wife to get out of her spacesuit. Commander Ghroc you have the conn. Lieutenant Nayal I’ll want a report on the contents of the escape pod’s flight recorder log.”

Cole frowned when he was woken by his combadge sounding.

“Again?” he said as he reached for it, “Cole.” he said as he picked it up but the device did not activate, Huh?” he commented.

“From the sound I believe your combadge has fallen on the floor. That one is mine.” T’Lan told him and he rolled over to look over the side of the bed where he saw his own combadge lying on the floor. Rather than pick it up he reached down and tapped it where it was.

“Cole.” he said again.

“Captain I’ve completed my analysis of the escape pod’s flight log.” Nayal said.

“Okay I’m on my way.” Cole told her before he shut off the combadge again and he rolled back over, “I really need to stop telling people to call me when I know they are on the night shift.” he said.

When Cole returned to the bridge Ghroc was sat in his chair and the Bolian began to get up.

“Could you join Nayal and I in my ready room Mister Ghroc? I need coffee.” Cole said.

“Of course captain.” Ghroc responded and the three of them made their way from the bridge to Cole’s ready room.

“Anyone else want something?” Cole asked as he walked over to the replicator.

“I’ll take a coffee as long as it’s not Klingon captain. Black and unsweetened.” Nayal replied.

“Same here thank you captain.” Ghroc added.

“Three black coffees.” Cole told the replicator and three mugs of dark, hot liquid materialised. Cole took two of these and passed them to Ghroc and Nayal before he took the third for himself, “Okay lieutenant what have you found?” he asked as he sat down behind his desk.

“The escape pod came from a vessel called the *Miller’s Luck*, a commercial transport ship that according to Federation shipping records is registered but has avoided annual status reporting for the past eight years.” Nayal told him.

“Sounds like a fringe trader.” Ghroc commented and Cole nodded in agreement.

“Just the sort of ship that would go hunting for Slaver artefacts if they heard about a prospective source without worrying about safety issues.” Cole added. Then he looked at Nayal again, “Did the ship visit Vega Four-six-eight?”

“I can’t tell from the escape pod’s log captain. Obviously the transport log wasn’t transferred to the pod before it was ejected. All we have is the name of the ship and also the flight path of the escape pod itself.” Nayal answered.

“How far did it come?” Ghroc asked.

“Not far. The pod has no warp drive and it was only ejected about two days before the *Fortitude* recovered it. The pod’s impulse drive could only have taken it about five billion kilometres in that time.” Nayal said and Cole frowned.

“At five billion kilometres our sensors ought to have already detected the transport.” he pointed out.

“The hull could have been coated with a refractive material to scatter sensor scans.” Ghroc pointed out, “That would explain why the owners didn’t want to submit to official status reporting.”

“Another alternative is that the *Fortitude* dropped out of warp long enough to recover the pod and then went straight back into warp.” Nayal added.

“Or whoever was in the escape pod when it was ejected from the *Miller’s Luck* set the ship to self destruct before abandoning it.” Cole said, “Nayal you’re going to have to check the logs from the *Fortitude* at the time

they recovered the escape pod. The crew are bound to have run scans of their own that may be able to tell us more than we know now."

Cole did not return to his quarters, instead he took his position on the bridge while Ghroc sat beside him and Nayal returned to her station. Here she accessed the logs from the *Fortitude* that Davis had recovered from the Oberth-class vessel. The computer storage drive that he had removed from the *Fortitude's* computer core had been connected to the *Nightfall's* own network and Nayal was able to access its contents as easily as she could access any part of the *Nightfall's* systems.

The *Fortitude's* logs included not only personal entries by senior officers but also technical data that the ship's computer had and it was this that interested Nayal. Thanks to the log taken from the escape pod she knew the stardate on which it had been taken aboard the *Fortitude* and now she matched this against the technical logs of the research ship, paying particular attention to the sensor logs.

"Captain it appears that the *Fortitude* began an active sensor sweep shortly before the escape pod was recovered." Nayal said.

"Sounds like they started scanning for more pods as soon as they picked up the beacon from the first." Ghroc commented and Cole nodded in agreement.

"Did they find anything lieutenant?" he asked.

"It doesn't look like it captain. There is only one contact listed and that's the escape pod." Nayal answered, "A tractor beam was engaged a few seconds later and the pod brought into the hangar."

"Did the *Fortitude* return to warp?" Cole said.

"No captain. The next major system event was when someone in engineering transferred all control systems to the bridge." Nayal told him.

"So what happened to the *Miller's Luck*?" Ghroc said and Cole considered this for a few moments.

"Maybe we've been looking at this backwards." he said eventually, "If the *Miller's Luck* isn't in sensor range and the *Fortitude* didn't go back to warp after recovering the escape pod then perhaps the *Miller's Luck* never stopped moving for the pod to be ejected."

"You mean the occupant of the pod was so desperate to escape that he ejected at warp? That's pretty risky. Who knows what you could smash into at a relativistic velocity?" Ghroc pointed out.

"Maybe the rest of the crew knew he was infected and ejected him in the pod before the creatures could leave his body." Nayal suggested.

"Why waste the pod when they could just beam him into space and scatter his atoms across a million miles?" Cole responded.

"Every answer we get just seems to leave us with more questions." Ghroc commented.

"Quite so commander." Cole responded. Then he looked at Nayal again and added, "Lieutenant do the records for the *Miller's Luck* give an indication of the ship's top speed?"

"Checking captain." Nayal replied as she called up the information she had previously compiled regarding the transport ship, "Yes captain but the data is eight years old. At that time she was rated to warp five point six unladen."

"She could be moving almost a light year a day." Ghroc said.

"Yes and she's got a head start on us of about two weeks." Cole replied, "Lieutenant Nayal I need a map. Start with the position of Vega Four-six-eight then add in the position recorded for the escape pod when the *Fortitude* detected it. Use those two points to extrapolate a course for the *Miller's Luck*."

"Yes captain." Nayal said and after just under a minute of work the map Cole had requested appeared on the bridge's main view screen, starting at Vega Four-six-eight and passing through the spot when the escape pod had been discovered.

"I was afraid of that." Cole said when he saw the line, "It's heading back into Federation space."

"She'll be intercepted. Even if she gets past the Starfleet border patrols the moment she enters a settled system local forces will knock her out of warp."

"Yes and then they'll board her or tractor her to a space station." Cole added.

"Those things will spread." Nayal said in horror, "If even one of them gets onto a colony-"

"Then millions could die and the world would have to be quarantined." Cole said.

"Captain we've no way of knowing how accurate that map is." Ghroc said, pointing to the main view screen at the front of the bridge, "If it was ejected at warp then it could have been hurled millions of kilometres in any direction before the residual field around it collapsed. Extrapolate that out to the Federation border and the *Miller's Luck* could cross almost anywhere across half a second."

"Then we'd better get started. Helm lay in a course that follows the one shown on screen, we'll deal with any inaccuracies later. Then engage at warp nine point eight." Cole ordered.

"Captain at warp nine point eight if the *Miller's Luck* is moving at her maximum warp then given her head start we won't catch her before we're forced to reduce speed even if we have got her course matched exactly." Ghroc said.

"I know but we'll have put a dent in her lead at least. I'm sure that Davis will be able to keep our warp cores going in a sequence that will let us at least keep up with the *Miller's Luck*." Cole responded, "Lieutenant

Nayal I want you to contact Starfleet. Warn Starbase sixty-four that they could have an intruder on the way in and send them a copy of that map. Tell them that any patrol ship that sights the *Miller's Luck* needs to force her out of warp immediately. If she doesn't answer hails then she should be shot down but under no circumstances is anyone to go aboard. The ship is to be considered toxic."

"Aye captain, opening subspace frequencies now." Nayal said.

"And with that done I think it's time to wake the senior staff for the second night running. I want that transport finding before our she can get close enough to any other vessel that they are tempted to try and board her." Cole said.

"You know having your sleep regularly interrupted isn't good for your health." Hamill commented as she and Sodyne entered the briefing room together.

"Dreaming about something that was getting you excited?" Nayal asked with a smile when she overheard this but Hamill did not respond.

"I apologise doctor. Hopefully tomorrow night we'll all be able to sleep well."

"I've got the night watch for the next three nights." Sodyne commented as she sat down.

"How did you manage that?" Hamill said.

"I swapped a couple of shifts with T'Lan and Martin. There are some system checks I'd like to run that will be easier if I've got the conn and I've not got a full day shift under my feet." Sodyne told her.

"Just try not to wake me." Davis commented, "Harriet won't forgive you."

"Well since everyone's here I think we should get started." Cole said, looking around the table at his senior staff, "Lieutenant Nayal, if you'd like to do the honours."

"Yes captain." Nayal replied as she got to her feet and walked to the wall mounted screen. She used this to show a map similar to the one that she had created under the guidance of Cole but instead of a single line starting at Vega Four-six-eight there was a cone marked on it. This had its point at the moon where the Slaver complex along with the three stasis boxes had been found and spread out from there, "We've identified the escape pod that the crew of the *Fortitude* found as coming from a ship called the *Miller's Luck*, a commercial transport vessel from the Federation." Nayal began, "Given that there are no signs of the ship anywhere near where the *Fortitude* recovered the escape pod we're working on the assumption that the pod was ejected while the transport was still moving at warp speed. Based off the maximum distance that the pod could have been thrown before the warp field broke down we've been able to extrapolate this cone as the volume of space that the *Miller's Luck* could be travelling in. We're assuming that the alien creatures will have killed the crew by now and that the ship will just be carrying on on autopilot."

"And heading right for Federation space." Martin commented.

"So that's why we're running at maximum warp." Davis added, "I always check what our engines are doing when I wake up. You're trying to catch up with that ship before it gets to the Federation."

"A logical move." T'Lan said, "I take it that when we are forced to reduce speed you intend to repeat the strategy used to search the Dytan system."

"Exactly. At warp eight or less our fighters and runabouts will be able to keep up with us. Plus I've already had a dozen class eight probes loaded into our torpedo launchers. They'll be launched as soon as we drop to warp nine. Starfleet has also been apprised of our situation and is moving ships to intercept." Cole said.

"The problem of course is the volume of space involved." Nayal added, "Even with all of the observation posts and sensor buoys along the border there are still gaps where the ship could slip across. Its history indicates that the crew may operate somewhat outside the law so they're probably aware of any that exist and will have aimed their ship for them."

"What are your intentions when the ship is located?" T'Lan asked.

"We'll hail them of course but if they don't answer we'll open fire." Cole answered.

"A single torpedo, quantum or photon, will crack a transport like an egg." Martin said and Cole nodded.

"I want our runabouts armed with torpedoes as well." he said, "If they or one of our fighters finds the *Miller's Luck* first then I don't want them to have to wait for us to drop out of warp, change course and then rendezvous with them. I want them to be able to take her out themselves."

"And what if she does respond to hails captain? Some of the crew may have been able to barricade themselves into an isolated part of the ship." Hamill pointed out.

"Some of our torpedoes will be configured to emit inverse graviton pulses. If the ship responds to hails or if we detect life signs that suggest any of the crew are alive then we'll force her out of warp and beam them direct to sickbay doctor. You'll need to have containment fields established of course." Cole told her and she nodded.

"Of course captain. The EMH can carry out the testing to see if they are infected." she replied.

"If any of them are then can you do anything about it yet doctor?" Ghroc asked and Hamill and Sodyne looked at one another.

"No. So far the creatures' biology has resisted every attempt to kill them." Hamill said, "I still have some of the sample material Commander T'Lan was able to gather though so I can keep running tests."

"Please do doctor." Cole replied. Then he looked at Martin and added, "Lieutenant Commander Martin I'll need you to oversee the arming of the fighters and runabouts before you report to tactical."

"Yes captain." Martin said, nodding his head once.

"Very good. I need everyone else at their stations. Lieutenant Commander Davis I want to maintain warp nine point eight as long as possible. What's the best sustained speed your engineering team will be able to give me when we have to reduce it?" Cole said, turning towards Davis.

"Warp eight might be achievable captain. We'll pull one core at a time and leave the other three running but until they've been overhauled we won't be able to run them at full power." Davis told him.

"Very well commander. Whatever speed can be maintained we'll have the runabouts and fighters match. I don't want to spread our ships out too wide out here." Cole said, "Now if no-one has any questions we'll wrap this meeting up and get to work."

It had been a feature of most technology for centuries that there were two limits to its endurance. The first was how hard it could be continually pushed without failing but there was also a second limit, a higher capability that the technology could tolerate for a short time without serious damage providing that it did not have to operate at this level for long. Warp drives were no different to this and the maximum speed of a starship was considered in two ways. First there was the maximum cruising speed, the speed that the ship could maintain for almost as long as it had fuel but there was also the higher speed that could be maintained only for a few hours before the stress and excess temperatures generated put too much strain on the warp core and the ship would be forced to slow down. It was at the second of these that the *Nightfall* travelled as it attempted to catch the Miller's Luck and after just over twelve hours the strain on the warp drive was starting to show.

"Core number three is approaching the red line commander." one of the engineering staff warned Davis and he nodded.

"What about the others?" he called out.

"Number one is at twenty percent over optimum." another engineer responded.

"Number two is fifteen percent over."

"Number four is eighteen percent above optimum. Wait, nineteen."

"Okay I'm calling it." Davis said and he tapped his combadge, "Davis to bridge." he said.

"Go ahead commander." Cole replied.

"Captain we're hitting the red line down here now. If we push the warp drives any more we're going to lose containment." Davis told him.

"Okay commander, we're dropping to impulse shortly. How long until we can have warp drive again?" Cole asked. Ordinarily a starship that pushed its warp drive to its maximum would have to spend a significant amount of time at sublight speed while the warp core was given an overhaul. However, the multiple redundant warp cores that were a key part of the *Nightfall* project meant that individual cores could be taken offline while the ship still retained some warp capability.

"We should have you back online in about five minutes captain. We're going to pull core number three and I'd to give the others the chance to cool down before we go to warp again." Davis told him.

"Thank you Mister Davis, that will give us chance to launch our fighters and runabouts. Bridge out." Cole said before turning off his combadge, "Tactical deploy probes now. Helm drop us to impulse once they're launched. Lieutenant Noyal what's the status in the hangar?"

"All craft standing by captain. They just need us to drop out of warp." Noyal responded.

"Probes away captain." Martin added as the volley of probes was launched from the *Nightfall's* dorsal weapons pod. The launch of these was timed to match the heavy cruiser's deceleration, being launched just as it dropped to warp eight. This was the maximum speed that the probes could maintain on their own so as the *Nightfall* continued to decelerate they pulled ahead of the ship, each following a slightly different course.

"At impulse speed now captain." Ghroc said as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp.

"Instruct hangar to commence launch procedures." T'Lan said.

"Bridge to hangar. Scramble. Scramble. Scramble." Noyal said into the intercom.

With this instruction the large launch doors at the front of the *Nightfall's* massive launch bay slid open, and the squadron of fighters assigned to the ship shot out into space in pairs. Then when all twelve fighters had launched they were followed by the *Nightfall's* two runabouts. These craft circled around after launch to create a ring formation that was centred on the *Nightfall* and about a thousand kilometres across.

"All craft are in position." T'Lan said as she tracked the progress of the fighters and runabouts, seeing them drop into their assigned positions and matching the speed of the *Nightfall*.

"Helm do we have warp drive?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. Warp drive shows active." Ghroc answered.

"Then engage warp drive. Start slow and take us up to warp eight if you can." Cole ordered and Ghroc pushed forwards on the flight controls.

"Engaging warp drive." he said as the *Nightfall* accelerated again. The fighters and runabouts surrounding the ship accelerated in unison with it so that they were able to keep up but each of them had a heading that pointed outward from the centre of the circular formation by a few degrees. Initially this did not make a significant difference but over a distance of light years the difference would increase to billions of kilometres and serve to increase the area of space that could be scanned, "Warp two." Ghroc added as the *Nightfall* continued to accelerate, "Warp three. Warp four. Warp five. Warp six. Warp six point four, captain I'm getting a warning."

"Engineering can you give us any more power?" T'Lan said into the intercom.

"Sorry commander. That's all I can give you right now without overloading core number one." Davis responded.

"Six point four is still faster than the *Miller's Luck* is capable of." Nayal pointed out.

"Our probes are still moving at warp eight as well." Martin added.

"Hopefully that will be enough." Cole said, "Are we getting anything yet?"

"Negative captain." Sodyne replied as she studied the combined sensor data from the *Nightfall* and all the craft and probes launched from the ship, "I'm not picking up any subspace distortions or warp fields."

"Very well Commander Sodyne. Keep monitoring the sensor data, I want to know if we detect anything out of the ordinary." Cole told her.

The *Nightfall* continued to follow its course towards Federation space while the auxiliary craft it had launched spread even further out to expand their sensor coverage. However, it was the *Nightfall* itself that picked up the first signs of another vessel.

"Captain we've got a contact." Sodyne announced, "Directly ahead of us. It's definitely the subspace distortion left by a non-stabilised warp drive of Federation origin."

When it was discovered that warp drives were capable of permanently damaging the barrier between real space and subspace the Federation and other powers had put in place restrictions to limit the damage by ordering all vessels to keep to a maximum speed of warp five. This had continued until a new generation of warp engines could be developed that stabilised space again as they moved through space and the speed limitations had been lifted once more. These new drives had made sense from a tactical as well environmental point of view with the warp fields they created being harder to detect at long range and so Starfleet had been quick to retrofit them to as many of its ships as it could. However, there were still many older vessels operating in the commercial sector that still used the previous type of warp drive.

"It is logical to assume that this is the *Miller's Luck*." T'Lan commented.

"Can you tell how far ahead the ship that made it is?" Cole asked.

"Approximately four light years captain." Sodyne answered, "Moving at warp three point eight and closing in on the Federation border. I'm not picking up any Starfleet patrols that will be able to intercept it."

"At our current speed they will cross into Federation space before we can intercept them." T'Lan said.

"We could order our runabouts to intercept." Nayal suggested.

"Hold that thought lieutenant." Cole replied and he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering.

Commander Davis how long until we can have at least warp eight again?" Cole asked.

"You can have warp eight now captain but if you give me three hours I can give you maximum warp. I'd not recommend exceeding maximum cruise speed though." Davis told him.

"At warp nine point two we can intercept the *Miller's Luck* in approximately fifteen hours. Before it can enter Federation space." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Then that's what we do. Mister Ghroc drop us out of warp. Nayal send the recall order to our fighters and runabouts. I don't want to leave them cut off all the way out here. As soon as they're aboard and we have maximum cruising speed again I want us to go to warp nine point two." he ordered.

"This is getting to be a habit Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." Cole said as he and T'Lan entered the bridge in the middle of the night. Ghroc, Martin and Nayal were all already at their stations and Sodyne returned to hers as Cole and T'Lan walked to the centre of the bridge.

"Sorry captain but we're coming up on the *Miller's Luck*." Sodyne replied.

"You have positively identified the vessel then?" T'Lan asked. As she and Cole looked at the image of the fleeing ship on the main viewscreen.

"The class matches but we can't get an exact ID." Nayal answered, "She's running with some kind of dampening field that's blocking her transponder."

"Probably to avoid being logged by the border sensors." Martin said, "As long as they can bypass or bribe their way through local checks no-one will know they were ever here."

"Then we should make a note to have Starfleet investigate the local traffic control system." Cole said, "Sodyne see what you can get with a high resolution scan. If I'm going to order that ship shot down I want to make sure that it's the right target."

"Yes captain. Scanning now." Sodyne replied and then after a few moments she added, "Still no transponder captain. It could have been deactivated. But I can confirm that an escape pod has been ejected from the ship."

"Just one?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain. All the others are still in place." she said.

"Then at least we don't need to worry about having to hunt for another." Martin said.

"Nayal try hailing her. Order her to come to a halt." Cole said.

"Aye captain, opening hailing frequencies." Nayal said as she activated the *Nightfall's* communications system, "*Miller's Luck* this is the *USS Nightfall*. You are ordered to halt and respond." she signalled but there was no response.

"Be a little sterner lieutenant." Cole said and Nayal smiled.

"*Miller's Luck* this is the *USS Nightfall*. If you do not halt and respond then you will be fired upon." she said.

"Tactical will the dampening field prevent a weapons lock?" T'Lan said.

"Negative commander. Locking quantum torpedoes now." Martin responded.

"Still no response from the *Miller's Luck* captain." Nayal said.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne what about life signs?" T'Lan asked and Sodyne shook her head.

"I'm not reading any commander. At least nothing humanoid." she said.

"The alien creatures?" Ghroc commented and he glanced over his shoulder at her for a moment.

"Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. It's hard to tell with the dampening field in place." Sodyne said.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin," Cole said, "fire torpedoes."

Martin did not hesitate and a pair of quantum torpedoes burst from the *Nightfall's* forward launchers. Both of these sped towards the *Miller's Luck* and slammed into the rear of the ship at almost exactly the same time. These both struck the transport's engineering section and there was a huge explosion as the vessel's warp core was breached.

"Target destroyed captain." Martin reported.

"Analysis of the debris. Are there any sections that could contain the alien lifeforms?" T'Lan said.

"Negative commander." Sodyne replied, shaking her head, "That blast destroyed everything. No escape pods or sealed sections survived."

"In that case I think we can safely say that our mission is complete. Good work everyone." Cole said, "Now I have to update Starfleet but everyone else can go back to bed."

T'Lan sat up in bed when Cole finally returned to their quarters.

"Were you able to speak with Starfleet?" she asked as he sat on the edge of the bed and the pair touched their fingers together.

"Yes. Admiral Ivanov is going to pass the information about the creatures on Vega Four-six-eight to Starfleet Command and the Federation Science Council." Cole replied as he began to remove his uniform,

"Unfortunately it looks like things could be about to get worse for us."

"Why is that?" T'Lan said as Cole got into bed with her and slid right up to her.

"The cat's out of the bag T'Lan." he said, kissing her briefly, "People know that the Slavers had a significant presence in this sector and just because it's well outside Federation territory isn't going to stop them coming to try and discover some artefact that will make them rich for themselves. Even before there were enough ships coming through for it to be worth those raiders setting up here. Think what it will be like when there are a hundred ships a month coming here."

"Will Starfleet send more ships?"

"The admiral didn't say. Or the time being it's just us T'Lan." Cole said.

"That has always been enough in the past Robert." T'Lan replied and Cole reached for the light switch, turning their bedroom lights out.

All of a sudden Cole's combadge activated.

"Captain there's something here you may want to take a look at." Sodyne's voice said from it and Cole groaned. Then he rolled over and reached out for where he had set the combadge down. However, rather than answering the call he simply picked up the combadge and hurled it across the room.

"Goodnight T'Lan." he said as he rolled over again and wrapped an arm around his wife.