

# STAR TREK

## NIGHTFALL

### THE SLAYER CRISIS

SOME THINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



## HOSTILE RECEPTION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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

## **HOSTILE RECEPTION**

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

The crew of the *USS Nightfall* are asked to negotiate access to Slaver ruins on a planet where they have become the basis for a religion that is highly influential with the native society. Events take a turn for the worse when fanatical believers opt to take matters into their own hands and strike directly at the ship's ambassadors, stranding them in hostile territory and cut off from the *Nightfall*.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:  
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Stardate 69406.6 *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A

There were three vessels in proximity to the *USS Nightfall* when the Starfleet Akira-class heavy cruiser dropped out of warp. All three of the other starships were much smaller than the *Nightfall* and only one of them was also of Federation origin. This ship was an unarmed transport vessel that had been chartered by a science team conducting research into the ancient Slaver Empire that had dominated the galaxy a billion years before the present. The *Nightfall* had been assigned to provide support to this research team while it was also conducting surveys of the Meltara Sector for Starfleet. On the other hand the other two vessels originated in the star system that the four vessels were on the outer reaches of. Both ships were warships that were part of the defence fleet constructed by the local native civilisation but even with a two-to-one advantage they were no match for the *Nightfall* even ignoring the squadron of attack fighters it carried. "We're being scanned captain." Lieutenant Nayal, the *Nightfall's* Romulan operations officer said when her console indicated that the local warships were both scanning the Starfleet ship.

"Are they locking weapons?" Captain Cole, the *Nightfall's* commanding officer responded.

"Negative captain. It looks like they're just curious." Nayal answered.

"Return the favour. I want to know everything about them." Cole ordered

"Analysis shows that our initial information was correct captain. They are warp capable but far behind us in technology." Lieutenant Commander Sodyne said from the science station behind Cole, "Their warp cores are primitive, I doubt that they can even make warp two. Tactically they're the same, each ship is armed with three pulse cannons and what appear to be nuclear tipped torpedoes and has a hull that includes a weak polarisation system."

"A single phaser blast would take them out." the *Nightfall's* tactical officer, Lieutenant Commander Martin, commented.

"Without shields we could take them out with our mass accelerators." Ghroc, the Bolian helmsman added, referring to the two massive projectile weapons that the *Nightfall* was armed with in addition to the usual complement of phasers and torpedo launchers.

"Captain the general construction of the two warships is interesting." Sodyne continued.

"Please explain lieutenant commander." T'Lan, the *Nightfall's* Vulcan first officer who also happened to be the wife of Captain Cole said, glancing at the Betazoid science officer.

"Externally both ships are identical but a deep scan suggests slight differences between them that suggest they were custom built." Sodyne explained.

"That figures. The locals are just starting to build warp capable vessels. They probably make each one individually and incorporate what they've learned from previous ships into the design." Cole said.

"It also means that the crews likely have little to no practical experience. They'll have been trained in simulators but probably never fired a shot in anger. Even without our technological advantage we'd still have the edge." Martin pointed out.

"Hopefully that is something we will not have to put to the test." T'Lan said and she looked at Cole and added, "Perhaps we should hail Professor Denning."

"Nayal open hailing frequencies." Cole ordered and Nayal nodding.

"Hailing them now captain." she said and moments later the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge changed from showing an image of the other three starships present to the interior of the flight deck aboard the Federation transport where a fair haired man sat at the helm.

"Hi there captain." the man said, smiling and waving briefly, "I can't believe I'm saying this about Starfleet but it sure is a relief to see you. I'm pretty sure that my ship's shields would have withstood a few hits from the pop guns the natives around here have fitted to their ships but I'm not so sure I'd be able to get to warp fast enough if they decided I was worth a torpedo."

"You're quite welcome Mister Foster." Cole said to the man, "Now is Professor Denning available? He summoned us here after all and I'm guessing it has to do with you currently facing down a pair of warships."

"Yes, I think the professor can probably explain it better than I can. He and the others are waiting in the lounge right now for you. We've no transporter so-" Foster began.

"Yes I understand. We'll beam them over. Tell the professor that we'll hear what he has to say in our briefing room. *Nightfall* out." Cole interrupted and then he closed the channel, causing the screen to revert to the image of the other starships, "I want all senior staff to assemble in the briefing room in ten minutes to hear what Professor Denning has to say." he added.

In addition to his bridge officers, Cole was joined by the *Nightfall's* chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Davis and medical officer Doctor Hamill in the ship's briefing room as Professor Denning and his senior assistants were shown in. As well as the professor himself there were three others in his group. Trellan was his Romulan assistant, Erica Hewitt a graduate student studying under the professor while Doctor Susan Terry not only looked after the medical welfare of the team she also functioned as an expert on life sciences. The professor had more junior researchers working for him but these three, along with Foster who owned the transport ship they travelled aboard were his equivalent of Cole's senior staff.

"Thank you for responding so quickly captain." Denning said as he and his team members sat down at the table with the *Nightfall's* officers.

"I take it that you're having some local trouble." Cole replied and Denning smiled nervously.

"Ah, yes." he said, "How much do you know about Prenus captain?" he said.

"Only that they're a species relatively new to warp travel." Cole answered.

"There has been limited diplomatic contact with the inhabitants by the Federation using subspace communications but your vessel will be the first to have visited the system." T'Lan added.

"Yes and we found out that there are quite a few things that the Prenans left out of what they told your diplomats captain." Trellan said.

"Such as?" Nayal asked.

"Such as they're a bunch of primitive sexist savages." Hewitt said, frowning.

"That's true. I felt safer when I was stripped by the Ferengi than I did on Prenus." Terry added.

"The problem is that there is a certain religious sect active on Prenus that has some rather backwards ideas about women." Denning said.

"They consider them the property of their male relatives." Trellan explained.

"That's true. The sect makes up only about a tenth of the population but they have considerable influence over their society, largely because they have a habit of attacking people and burning down buildings whenever they get offended by anything." Denning said.

"And they get offended by a lot." Hewitt added.

"Perhaps you should just explain what happened." Cole said.

"Of course captain." Denning replied, "The information we recovered from the Slaver outpost listed Prenus as the site of one of their colonies so we came here to investigate. We were able to establish communications with the locals and got a copy of one of their planetary encyclopedias. That confirmed that there was a civilisation present here about a billion years ago and there are structures scattered across the entire planet. Some are on the surface but there are more in the thousands of tunnel systems that exist almost everywhere."

"Then the planet is an ideal site for study." Sodyne said.

"It would be if not for the fact that the ruins are all considered sacred by the religious fanatics." Trellan responded, "They believe that some of their holy figures were directed to leave them alone and if anyone goes near them they form a mob."

"According to local academics this had made study of the Slaver ruins almost impossible." Denning added.

"What about the central government?" Davis asked, "Can't they do anything?"

"I'm not sure that they took us seriously." Denning said, "I was able to get to speak with a junior government minister but he didn't seem interested in anything I had to say about the truth behind the ruins."

"We tried surveying some of the surface ruins from the air but even that was enough to anger the religious locals and we were asked to leave." Denning said, "Of course we left the planet but I didn't want to give up on the planet entirely so we just came out here to the outer region of the system and called for you. The locals must have spotted that we were still around because their warships turned up a few hours later. They haven't tried to make contact though so I think they're just here to make sure that we don't try to return to Prenus."

"It doesn't sound like the Prenans will be happy to see us." Hamill commented and Nayal nodded in agreement with her.

"Maybe we should give this system a miss." she said.

"We've already lost GL four-four-seven." Trellan pointed out, mentioning the star system that had been destroyed when its star went nova because of Ferengi tampering with the Slaver weaponry left behind.

"If we have to ignore another then the Federation Science Council may start to ask why they should continue to support our mission." Denning said, "It's my hope that you'll be able to get access to a higher level of government that I could and convince them to allow us to study the ruins."

"And deploy a security team to protect you?" Martin asked.

"That could help, yes." Denning admitted.

"A security team is not practical in the long term. We could protect your initial survey but the follow up team would be unprotected." T'Lan pointed out.

"If we find something valuable I'm sure we can use that to get the locals to provide protection instead. I'm sure that their own academics would want to join in the research if we could show there was something there worth studying." Hewitt said.

"It can't hurt to try captain." Ghroc said and Cole nodded.

"No it can't." he said, "At the very least we can hail the government and try to get permission to beam down and speak with them in person."

"That won't be possible captain." Terry said, "It's impossible to beam down to Prenus."

"Why?" Davis asked.

"There's a layer of charged particles that creates a permanent electrical storm effect. It blocks communications and makes high altitude air travel difficult. It will also block transporters and render deflector shields useless inside the atmosphere." Denning told him.

"Then how did the locals develop spaceflight?" T'Lan asked.

"It's quite impressive really." Trellan replied, "They've built a number of space elevator towers that can get them above the storm layer."

"They aren't true orbital elevators so they've been able to build them near the poles instead of the equator. The storms aren't quite as bad there so I suppose the construction was easier." Denning added, "The towers act as launching platforms for small spacecraft and repeaters for off world communications but transporter technology is beyond the locals' capability."

"Then if we are able to obtain permission to send down an away team a shuttle will be necessary." T'Lan said.

"Mister Ghroc I want a course laying in that will take us into a standard orbit around Prenus at full impulse." Cole said, "We'll hail the planetary government from there. Sodyne I want you to conduct full spectrum scans of the planet, see if our sensors can penetrate the storm layer and tell us about what's underneath. Even if we can't get permission to land maybe we can at least find out more from space."

"What about those warships out there captain?" Martin asked.

"If they attempt to make contact when we move off then we'll answer but so far other than basic scans they don't seem to have bothered with us so we'll ignore them for now. If there are any signs of hostility from them or any other ships in the system then we'll go to red alert and raise shields. We won't fire unless fired upon though." Cole said. Then he looked at Denning and added, "Professor are you willing to follow us?"

"I think Foster will be happier being closer to the *Nightfall* while there are alien warships pointing pulse cannons at us captain." Denning replied and Cole smiled.

"Then have him match our course and speed. Keep close and we'll make sure that you're covered. We'll need all your data on the Prenans and their culture, we don't have much so anything you have could be helpful." he said.

"Of course captain." Denning said and he slid the PADD he had brought with him across the table towards Cole, "This contains a copy of everything we know. I hope it's of use to you."



When the *Nightfall* turned and headed towards Prenus and the transport carrying Professor Denning's research team followed the two Prenan warships in turn attempted to follow them both. However, the Federation vessels' impulse drives were far superior to those aboard the native warships and they soon began to fall behind.

"Captain one of the warships is engaging its warp drive." Nayal announced when the *Nightfall's* sensor picked up the warp field forming around the other ship.

"Are they trying to overtake us or just keep up with us?" Martin said.

"Using their warp drive to keep up with our superior impulse system you mean?" Sodyne replied.

"Even at the maximum speed Lieutenant Commander Sodyne calculated for it, that vessel is still more than an hour and a half travel away from Prenus." T'Lan said as she studied the sensor readings of the ship through the display of the headset she, like the other bridge officers wore, "I also do not think that the vessel's warp drive is capable of maintaining a stable warp field at our current speed. It is far more likely that they will simply-" she continued before all of a sudden the Prenan warship tumbled and dropped back rapidly.

"Captain it appears they stalled." Nayal said.

"As I suspected they would." T'Lan added.

"It looks like the other ship is falling back to help them." Cole commented when he saw the second warship giving up the chase, "What about the rest of their fleet?"

"Sensors indicate three ships in orbit around Prenus that are powering up captain." Sodyne said as she checked the *Nightfall's* sensors, "If there are more ships on the far side of the planet then I can't read them, the usual atmospheric corona is getting lost in the storm layer."

"But they know we're coming." Ghroc said.

"Mister Martin if it came down to it how many of those ships do you think we could fight off?" Cole said.

"Captain I'm pretty certain that a single quantum torpedo would obliterate one of those ships. If we load full salvos into all our launchers and fire them in one go then we could take out a hundred and fifty of them in under thirty seconds." Martin said.

"There are no indications that the Prenans have anywhere near that number of warships, although they could maintain fighter and satellite defences." T'Lan said.

"Presumably those would be of similar technology to their warships?" Cole said.

"That is a logical assumption captain." T'Lan answered.

"Then I don't think we have anything to worry about. Mister Martin be ready to raise our shields if there are any signs that anyone is targetting us but hold off on shooting down everything they have for now. It might upset the Prenans somewhat and I'd like to get on their good side." Cole said before he got to his feet,

"T'Lan you have the conn. I'll be in my ready room studying the material Professor Denning gave us. Let me know if there are any changes." he added.

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied as she moved from her seat to the captain's chair beside it.

Although Professor Denning had failed to gain permission to study the ruins he believed had been left by the long extinct Slaver Empire he had been able to gather a considerable amount of information on the Prenans and their culture. The more he read though, the more he came to believe that it would not be a good idea to follow standard Starfleet protocols when dealing with them and he tapped his combadge.

"T'Lan could I see you for a moment?" he said.

"Yes captain. I will be with you momentarily." T'Lan responded then a few seconds later the door to his ready room slid open as she entered, "You wished to see me." she said.

"Yes I've been reading the information that Professor Denning provided." Cole said as T'Lan was sitting down and he turned the screen mounted on his desk so that she could see it as well. The image being displayed appeared to have been taken in the office of the government representative that the professor had been able to meet with. It showed Denning, Trellan and Hewitt along with a pair of male Prenans in what looked like formal suits. The Prenans were clearly a near human species, differing from ordinary human features only in their incredibly pale skin and bright yellow eyes.

"The Prenans appear to be humanoid." T'Lan commented when she saw this and Cole nodded.

"Yes, according to the notes added by Doctor Terry they are likely an offshoot of humanity seeded here by the Preservers. Their anatomy is identical and they are close enough to use genetically for interbreeding to be possible without medical intervention." he said.

"That should make negotiations easier. Their psychology will likely be similar to that of humans as well." T'Lan said.

"Perhaps, but unfortunately it looks like their society is far more primitive and it's easy to see why the Federation has never had more than basic contact with them." Cole said.

"You refer to their treatment of women?" T'Lan asked.

"Yes. That religious group that blocked the professor's study of the ruins may only be a minority but their influence is widespread. Their beliefs may not be law but there aren't many politicians who appear willing to oppose them in public. So there may not be any laws explicitly making women second class citizens but in practice they are. The religious sect makes women the property primarily of their husbands or fathers if they are unmarried. Any woman without a close male relative can simply be claimed by any man who wants her either as a wife or surrogate daughter of sorts." Cole explained.

"Primitive indeed." T'Lan agreed.

"That's why if we do get permission to go down to the surface and meet with someone from the government I'll be going instead of you." Cole told her.

"Robert, Starfleet regulations call for the captain to remain aboard the ship and the first officer to lead an away team." T'Lan pointed out.

"Yes I know that T'Lan but given what I've read I don't think that the Prenan government will be willing to be seen negotiating with a woman. I'll take a shuttle down with Martin and a team of our ground combat specialists." Cole said.

"That seems appropriate." T'Lan replied before the intercom activated.

"Captain we're being hailed from Prenus." Nayal said, "They want to speak to you."

"I'm on my way lieutenant." Cole replied and he and T'Lan both got to their feet and returned to the bridge.

Two Prenans were shown on the main view screen when Cole and T'Lan entered the bridge. Unsurprisingly both were male and they wore what looked like military uniforms that were heavily decorated.

"Captain this is General Meere and General Klek from the Prenan Department of the Armed Forces." Martin said.

"Generals." Cole said as he sat down, "I am Captain Robert Cole of the Federation starship *Nightfall*."

"You are from Starfleet?" Meere asked.

"We are." Cole answered.

"Then I should warn you that we are prepared to defend ourselves captain. Your warship may be more powerful than ours are but do not underestimate our resolve." Meere said.

"I think you misunderstand our intentions general." Cole said, "Starfleet may have a mandate to defend the Federation but we aren't a military organisation and our mission here is one of peace. I would like to come down to the surface of your planet to open talks with your government."

"Talks about gaining access to our ruins I take it." Meere said.

"Yes. The ruins on your planet could be of great significance and there are a lot of people who would like to learn about them." Cole replied.

"I can't make any promises captain but I'll pass along your request. You may enter orbit but you aren't to attempt a landing without permission. Any craft you send into our atmosphere without permission will be fired upon. Am I clear captain?" Meere said sternly.

"Perfectly general. We will wait to hear from you." Cole said and Meere leant forwards to shut off the channel, "Well that was encouraging. At least they didn't say 'no' out of hand." Cole added.

"Their government may still refuse to allow you to land captain." T'Lan commented.

"Perhaps, but I think we should be ready to go anyway." Cole said, "Commander Martin I want a team of ground combat specialists ready as a security detail. Make sure all of them are men for this mission. You and I will take a shuttle down with them."

"Captain I should go with you as well." Sodyne said.

"I'm sorry lieutenant commander but given the locals' attitude towards women I don't think that that is a good idea. At least to begin with I'm going to take an all male team down. Perhaps I'll be able to get a guarantee of safety for you to go down later though." Cole responded.

"Captain you need an expert on the Slavers and I'm the best you've got." Sodyne pointed out, "You can do all the negotiating but you'll need me to answer any questions the Prenans have about the Slavers."

"That is a logical suggestion." T'Lan said.

"I just don't know how the Prenans will respond to a woman being present. Doctor Terry said she found being down there uncomfortable." Cole replied.

"Captain I can handle myself. Besides I'll have you, Commander Martin and a team of ground troops to protect me if it comes down to it." Sodyne said.

"Very well Sodyne. You can join the team." Cole said before Nayal looked up from her console.

"Captain the Prenans are calling again. Audio only this time." she said.

"Put them through lieutenant." Cole ordered.

"Starfleet vessel *Nightfall* this is the Prenan Office of the President. Your request to open talks has been approved. You may send two people down to meet with our President. Be aware that they should be unarmed." a voice said.

"Understood Prenan Office of the President. I will be with you shortly. *Nightfall* out." Cole said and then he looked towards Sodyne, "Okay commander, I think that that's our cue to go."

"Captain I must object." Martin said, "Going down there unarmed and without a proper security detail is too great a risk. At the very least I should go with you."

"Lieutenant Commander Martin is correct captain. The risk is significant." T'Lan added.

"T'Lan they are offering us direct access to their President. That's too good an opportunity to pass up and as Sodyne has pointed out I need her to answer any scientific questions the Prenans may have that are more complicated than 'what were the Slavers?'"

"Thank you captain." Sodyne said.

"T'Lan you have the conn. The ship is yours while I'm gone." Cole told T'Lan as he got out of his chair again.

"Captain the Prenans have sent flight instructions." Nayal announced, "They recommend penetrating the storm layer at a point between five and ten kilometres from one of the space elevator towers. They've also sent the co-ordinates for the airfield at the Presidential palace."

"Excellent. Have the information transferred to the stand by shuttle and tell the hangar that we are on our way down. We'll leave immediately." Cole said while he and Sodyne were walking towards the turbolift.

From the bridge Cole and Sodyne went directly to the *Nightfall's* massive launch bay. This stretched the entire length of the primary hull with a large launch door at the front and two smaller doors at the rear end for landings. The intention of this design was to permit the rapid launch and recovery of multiple auxiliary craft, especially attack fighters. When Cole and Sodyne entered the hangar there were only two fighters present though, on standby just in case they were needed in a hurry. The craft they would be taking to the surface was located at the side of the hangar though, a Type-VI shuttlecraft that had been brought up from the storage and maintenance hangar on the level beneath. This was large enough to carry up to a dozen people so in the absence of the ground combat unit Cole had been planning to take to the surface with them it would be largely empty.

"Shuttle *Archer* to bridge, departing now." Cole said into the communication system as he engaged the shuttle's thrusters and it lifted off the deck, heading for the launch door at the front of the bay.

Switching to the shuttle's impulse drive as soon as he was clear of the *Nightfall*, Cole steered the craft towards the space elevator that the Prenans had indicated he should aim for when entering the planet's atmosphere. Technically the shuttle was also warp capable and could have carried Cole and Sodyne from well outside the system but given that this was just a short journey the warp core had not been charged with anti-matter, rendering the warp drive inoperable.

"Storm activity appears less towards the poles captain." Sodyne said as she scanned the planet's atmosphere.

"That explains why the locals advised we head for this particular tower then. It looks like it's not far south of their northern arctic region." Cole replied.

"How far is the capital from there?" Sodyne asked and Cole checked the navigational details he had been given.

"About three hundred kilometres. We should be there in about a quarter of an hour." he told her.

Ahead of the shuttle the space elevator tower could be seen rising out of the clouds. The intention of the structure was just to give a boost to space vehicles, enabling them to be launched from above the storm layer that shrouded almost the entire planet but not to get objects into geostationary orbit without the use of spacecraft at all. This massively reduced the height that was required but the towers were still around two hundred kilometres tall and had required a vast investment of resources.

Entering the atmosphere relatively close to the tower, the shuttle soon entered the storm layer and clouds obscured everything outside, forcing Cole to rely on his instruments.

"Looks like our structural integrity field is holding. At least that still works." Cole commented.

"Captain I'm losing the *Nightfall*." Sodyne said as the disruption from the storm increased massively.

"Can you interface with the tower's communications and use it as a relay?" Cole asked, "I think that's how the locals get signals through the storm."

Sodyne quickly checked the shuttle's communications, searching for any available communication node.

"Not now captain." she said, "I don't think we're going to be able to communicate with anyone while we're inside the storm."

"Well we should be clearing it soon." Cole replied and seconds later the shuttle emerged from the clouds.

Although the amount of sunlight that penetrated the storm layer was limited, leaving the surface of Prenus in a perpetual gloom the space elevator tower was still visible close by but here it was wider, with massive buttresses flaring out towards its base to keep the massive structure stable. To reduce the chance of aircraft colliding with the tower there were numerous warning lights mounted on the structure that flashed at a slow rate, "I wonder how long it took them to build something like that?" Cole commented.

"It is impressive." Sodyne agreed, "Typically by the time civilisations develop the engineering ability to build space elevators they have also developed efficient space flight and don't need them. Obviously the existence

of the storm layer provided the incentive to develop the technology to construct the towers rather than attempting to launch rockets through it."

"Probably yes." Cole agreed.

"Captain I've got a relay channel." Sodyne added, picking up an open communication link from the tower.

"Can you reach the *Nightfall*?" Cole asked.

"I think so." Sodyne said, "Shuttle *Archer* to *Nightfall*." she transmitted.

"*Nightfall* here, go ahead lieutenant commander." T'Lan's voice responded.

"We have cleared the storm layer commander. We are suffering some system disruption but our flight controls and structural integrity field are holding." Sodyne said.

"Tell her we'll be landing in eight minutes." Cole said.

"Our ETA at the capital is eight minutes." Sodyne repeated.

"Understood." T'Lan replied.

"Be advised that our communications will have to be routed through the tower relays. *Archer* out." Sodyne said, concluding the conversation and then closed the channel.

Cole continued to fly the shuttle towards the Prenan capital, guided by a beacon that identified the city's location. Then once the shuttle was within a few kilometres he decelerated and changed course to follow a secondary beacon. By this time the city was already visible through the viewport, lit up in the gloom of Prenus' atmosphere by thousands of artificial lights.

"Starfleet shuttle you are cleared to land at the Presidential palace." a voice said over the communication system.

"Understood control. I have the beacon." Cole responded, continuing on the same course until a large open area came into view on the ground below that was marked with an official looking symbol. There were several small craft already here, lined up neatly as if ready for use, "I think we've arrived."

As Cole descended towards the landing area a group of uniformed men who were clearly armed emerged from the nearby building, waiting close to until the shuttle touched down. As soon as it had landed the armed men rushed towards the shuttle but instead of surrounding it they formed a line leading from the hatch at the rear and stood at attention with their weapons shouldered.

"Looks like a welcoming committee." Cole said, "Come on, let's go and meet our hosts."

Cole and Sodyne walked to the back of the shuttle and opened the hatch, waiting for it to open fully before walking out onto the ground of the landing area. As well as the row of soldiers with pulse rifles Cole saw that General Meere was standing at the end of the row looking towards them.

"Welcome to Prenus captain." the general said.

"Thank you general. Allow me to introduce my science officer Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. She is an expert on the species we believe created the ruins that are spread across your planet." Cole replied.

"Of course. If you'd like to come with me I'll show you to the President." Meere said and Cole and Sodyne followed as he started to walk back to the nearby palace. Behind the Starfleet officers two members of the honour guard left the line and also followed them, obviously intended to act as a security detail, "Captain if you don't mind me saying it was a mistake to bring a female with you." the general added as they were entering the palace.

"I'm aware of your culture's attitude to women general, but-" Cole began.

"My culture doesn't have a problem with women captain." Meere interrupted, "Technically neither does the President. The problem though is that he depends on fanatics for his majority in congress and this is an election year."

"Are you saying he can't even be seen talking to me?" Sodyne asked.

"I'm afraid so lieutenant commander." Meere answered, "The members of the Tribe of Issan represent only a small fraction of our population and they contribute next to nothing to our society but our politicians indulge them at every turn. Most are relatively harmless of course but around half will protest strongly if they encounter anything that offends them. More significant of course are the tiny minority who are willing to use violence to get their way. Of course our law enforcement and sometimes my forces have been tasked with dealing with these fanatics but unfortunately even the more peaceful members don't want to co-operate with us. They may not be violent themselves but they don't have a problem with others committing acts of violence."

"You must have more technical means of gathering information." Cole said, remembering his history as a security officer and being involved in numerous criminal investigations.

"Oh we do. We can intercept electronic communications and use aerial drones to monitor remote locations but there are enough of the Tribe of Issan who are members of the police and military that they'll warn fellow members of upcoming operations. I'd conduct a purge of my forces if I could but this isn't the first president to need their support to stay in office and I've always been blocked from taking action." Meere explained before he halted in front of a large door, "Here we are captain. The Presidential Office." he said before opening the door.

Inside the officer there were several Prenans, all of them dressed formally and including two who wore earpieces and had a build that suggested to Cole that they were the President's personal security officers. "Ah General Meere," the Prenan sat behind the large desk that dominated the room said, standing up as Cole and Sodyne were shown into the office, "I take that these are our guests from Starfleet."

"President Kyre may I present Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne from the *USS Nightfall*." Meere said.

"A pleasure to meet you captain." President Kyre said as he rounded the desk, "If you could stand here then we can get a photograph."

"Of course Mister President." Cole said, "Sodyne stand beside me."

"Err just you if you don't mind captain." Kyre responded.

"If that's what you want Mister President." Cole said, understanding that the Prenan leader did not want his meeting with a woman to be recorded.

Cole stood beside President Kyre and another of the men in the room held up an image recorder, taking a picture of the two men together before stepping back again.

"There, now please take a seat captain." Kyre said as he returned to his seat.

"And Commander Sodyne?" Cole asked.

"Of course captain." Kyre answered.

"He'll sit and talk with me, he just doesn't want there to be a visual record of it." Sodyne whispered into Cole's ear and he nodded in response.

"So captain I understand that you are here to discuss the ruins on our planet." Kyre said.

"That's right Mister President. We have information that they were created by a species called the Slavers who had an empire a billion years ago that controlled most of the galaxy. It collapsed in a civil war that also wiped out most of the galaxy's intelligent life. The Slavers had an advanced technology and created a number of artefacts that are of interest to our scientists. We know that at least one such item is present on this planet and it would mean a lot if you could grant us permission to search for it as well as studying the ruins in general." Cole told him.

"I see. You know that Professor Denning has already told one of my ministers all of that?" Kyre said.

"I do." Cole replied.

"So you also know that I have turned down his request." Kyre said.

"Yes Mister President. However, I was hoping that a more formal request might obtain a more mutually agreeable result." Cole said.

"Captain Cole, when Professor Denning was making his request he explained that his research team would be only the first of many if his theories were correct and that a much larger team would follow, all of which would antagonise the Tribe of Issan for no good reason." Kyre said.

"Isn't improving your knowledge a good reason?" Sodyne said suddenly, "You're sitting on ruins whose value is incalculable."

"And a significant part of my population regards them as sacred. Now if you could assure me that we'd be gaining something tangible in return, perhaps some of that technology I'm told is so much more advanced than our own then I could sell that to my people." Kyre said.

"That's out of the question Mister President. You'd have access to anything that was found on your planet of course but our laws forbid interfering in the development of other cultures." Cole said.

"And yet here you are asking me to antagonise one of my planet's cultures to benefit yourself." Kyre pointed out, "I'm sorry captain but this is an election year and I don't want my government to be dealing with planetwide protests and riots while people are filling out their ballot forms. If you don't have anything concrete to offer then I think we're done here."

"If that is your final word on the matter then I think we're done here." Cole said, getting to his feet and Sodyne stood up with him.

"Show them back to their ship." Kyre told one of his staff.

"I'll see to it Mister President." Meere responded before the assistant could and he opened the door for Cole and Sodyne to leave.

"Thank you general." Cole said as he walked through the door. Then when Meere closed the office door behind him and he and Sodyne were alone in the corridor with the general and his two men he added, "I suppose I can't say that you didn't warn me about any of that."

"I truly wish things had gone differently captain." the general replied, "But unfortunately the President can't see past his chances of re-election and he thinks that pandering to the Tribe of Issan is the way to secure that."

"Thank you for your input general." Cole said, "When I get back to my ship I'm going to contact my government. There may still be some way of reaching an agreement yet."

"You are far too optimistic captain." Meere replied, "However, it has been a pleasure to meet you. You as well Lieutenant Commander Sodyne."

"General the ruins on this planet are very important. You should try and investigate them yourself if you can."

Sodyne replied and Meere smiled.

“Commander if I were to even suggest that then my career would be over. I’m afraid that my world is a long way from confronting the Tribe of Issan.” he said.

As the Starfleet shuttle rose up off the ground with Cole and Sodyne inside one of President Kyre’s staff watched it depart and he took a communicator from his pocket.

“The off-worlders have just taken off but I suspect they won’t give up. No-one brings a ship like theirs to a planet just to turn around and leave.” he said.

“Then we need to ensure that they are made aware of the consequences of their actions.” the voice of the man he was speaking to responded.

“What do you mean?”

“Just leave that to us. There is a penalty for blasphemy.” the other man said before the communicator suddenly went silent.

### 3.

"Captain perhaps we could send a covert group down to the surface to study some of the remains." Sodyne suggested.

"No that's out of the question." Cole replied, "This is a sovereign world and Starfleet is bound to respect that sovereignty. The Federation Diplomatic Corps may be able to negotiate some sort of access after the election but for the time being at least Professor Denning and his team will have to look elsewhere."

"Of course. It's just so annoying that there could be thousands of artefacts right here for the taking, including at least one stasis box that we know of."

"Yes and millions of people who will riot if we even suggest-" Cole began before there was a flash of light from outside the shuttle. However, this did not come from above like lightning, instead it came from below the shuttle, "That was ground fire. Someone's shooting at us." he said and Sodyne quickly looked the sensor console in front of her.

"Not enough energy to be a dedicated anti-aircraft unit captain. Most likely small arms fire." she said before there was another flash of light followed by a 'thud' sound.

"Looks like that one hit us." Cole said, relieved that the shuttle's hull was sufficiently armoured to resist even a direct hit from a pulse rifle. His relief was short lived as an alarm sounded.

"Incoming." Sodyne exclaimed as the shuttle's sensors showed a missile racing up towards them from the ground.

"Taking evasive action. Channel all excess power into the structural integrity field. Without shields that's our best defence." Cole said and the shuttle lurched as he turned it sharply, hoping that either the missile's targeting system or its propulsion would be unable to follow. Unfortunately the missile was better than Cole had hoped and it maintained its lock as the shuttle turned, closing to within a metre before its proximity fuse triggered the warhead and sent a blast of molten shrapnel into one of the impulse engines.

Multiple alarms sounded inside the shuttle's cockpit.

"We've lost thrusters." Cole said, "Impulse engine won't engage. We're going in."

Smaller explosions were heard in the cockpit, coming from the rear section as the damage from the missile spread and there was the acrid smell of burning electronics.

"Our structural integrity field just failed captain." Sodyne exclaimed as another of the readouts on the console in front of her flashed a warning in red. This was followed by a crashing sound accompanied by a rush of air as part of the shuttle's hull was ripped open. Luckily this damage was localised and the shuttle remained otherwise intact.

"Contact the *Nightfall*. Tell them what's happening." Cole said

"I can't get a clear signal through." Sodyne replied, "Someone's blocking our relay through the tower."

"Hopefully I'll be able to get us down without making a fireball big enough for them to see even through the storm layer. Hold on." Cole said as the shuttle continued to plummet towards the ground and Sodyne gripped the arms of her chair tightly right before the craft hit it.

Cole had been able to keep the shuttle level enough that instead of just breaking apart immediately it skidded along the ground, ripping away the nacelles and plating from the ventral hull. Debris from the ground struck the forward viewport repeatedly as the shuttle continued to skid and it began to chip before cracks appeared. These cracks multiplied and before long the entire viewport shattered, only the inner protective layer holding the pieces together and preventing Cole and Sodyne from being showered with fragments.

"Are you okay?" Cole asked, looking at Sodyne when the shuttle finally came to a halt and she nodded.

"Just about captain. At least our warp core wasn't charged with antimatter or we'd be vapour right now." she answered and Cole got to his feet.

"Let's see what we've got left." he said and he made his way into the rear of the shuttle.

Here the shuttle was a mess. Many panels had come loose either as a direct result of the missile hit or the crash and there was a small fire burning at one side that had not been put out by the shuttle's automated firefighting system. Cole quickly grabbed hold of a fire extinguisher and aimed this towards the flames, releasing a blast of carbon dioxide that put out the flames but he then frowned when he saw the damage behind it.

"Damn." he said, "The emergency kits."

Every Starfleet shuttle carried emergency equipment intended to help the occupants survive in the event of a crash or massive system failure but some of the lockers had been ripped apart, their contents lost through the jagged hole in the hull while others had suffered damage from the secondary explosions and fire.

"There must be something left." Sodyne said.

"Let's check but be quick. Whoever fired that missile is going to come and check on their handiwork sooner or later." Cole responded and the two officers began to inspect each of the lockers in turn.

The results of this search were not encouraging, revealing just one locker after another of ruined equipment. However, rummaging through one of these still revealed a small packet that Sodyne held out towards Cole. "At least we have one emergency blanket." she said, knowing that the packet contained a thermally insulating foil blanket that had been tightly folded.

"It's better than nothing and we may need it given how cold it is out there." Cole replied as he took the packet and attached it to his uniform at the waist.

The next equipment locker that Sodyne checked had somehow escaped damage and it contained half a dozen SIMs beacons, powerful flash lights that could be worn on the wrist to keep the user's hands free. "This looks better." she said, taking one of the devices and strapping it to her arm before testing it by shining it into the corner. As she had hoped the beacon was fully functional and the bright light illuminated the interior of the wrecked shuttle, "Here captain." she added, taking another of the devices from the locker and handing it to Cole.

"Thank you commander." he responded, testing it and confirming it too was functional before he turned it off again to preserve the battery and strapped it to his wrist.

Then he turned around again and pulled as hard as he could on the door of another locker that he knew contained several phasers. Although this had been warped slightly he was still able to pull it open. Unfortunately the damage had spread to this locker as well and most of the weapons had been destroyed by shrapnel. Two of them appeared intact though and he removed these from the locker.

"One each?" Sodyne commented, "That's all we really need."

"It would be yes," Cole said as he inspected one of the phasers, "but the emitter coil of this one is damaged."

"What about the other?" Sodyne asked and Cole activated the second phaser to check its status display.

"It looks good." he said, nodding but then he frowned.

"What's wrong captain?" Sodyne said.

"The energy capacity remaining just dropped to ninety-nine percent." Cole told her, "Now ninety-eight." and he quickly shut down the phaser.

"There must be circuit damage creating a continuous drain." Sodyne said.

"Which means it will lose power whenever its activated whether we fire it or not. Plus actually using it will drain power even more than usual." Cole replied.

"I suppose it's better than nothing though captain." Sodyne commented and Cole nodded in agreement.

"Yes. Hopefully we won't need it at all but it should be good for a few shots if nothing else." he said as he attached the phaser's holster to his uniform beside the emergency blanket that represented all of the equipment they had been able to salvage.

"So now what captain?" Sodyne said.

"Now we get out of here and make sure that there is nothing left of this shuttle for the locals to recover." Cole told her and Sodyne walked to the door at the rear of shuttle. However, when she tried to open it it remained stuck fast, "We'll have to go the other way." Cole added and he made his way back into the shuttle's cockpit where he sat in the pilot's seat again. Lifting his feet he then kicked the already smashed viewport as hard as he could, pushing it out of its fitting to create a hole large enough for him and Sodyne to climb through and exit the shuttle.

"It's freezing out here." Sodyne said as she felt the cold air against her skin.

"Well this will warm things up a bit." Cole responded, holding up the phaser with the damaged emitter. Then he activated the weapon and began to adjust its settings.

"Is there enough power left to destroy the shuttle?" Sodyne asked.

"It's reading full. That should leave nothing but a crater." Cole answered as he finished setting the phaser to overload before tossing it in through the vacant viewport into the cockpit, "Run!" he added as the phaser began to emit a whining sound and she and Cole broke into a run, heading directly away from the shuttle as fast as they could.

After going for a little over a hundred metres they reached a sudden drop in the ground and they leapt down it, crouching down and using the drop as a shield when the phaser reached critical and exploded with the force of a photon grenade. This was enough to utterly destroy the already wrecked shuttle, sending a ball of flames skywards and debris in all directions, some of which landed around Cole and Sodyne. Cole then climbed back up the drop and peered over.

"Is there anything left?" Sodyne said.

"No, nothing. With luck whoever shot us down will assume that we were inside when it blew and think we're dead." Cole replied.

"So what do we do now captain? Our combadges will never get through the storm layer to the *Nightfall*."

"No. Fortunately there is an obvious solution." Cole said and he pointed into the distance where the base of one of the planet's space elevator towers was visible, the two hundred kilometre tall structure vanishing into the clouds.

"What about over there?" Sodyne suggested and she pointed in a different direction to where lights could be seen, "That looks like a town and it looks much closer."

“Yes it does Commander Sodyne.” Cole agreed, “But we don’t know where the population’s loyalty lies. If we turn up there then they could help us contact either the capital or the *Nightfall* for help or they could hand us over to the Tribe of Issan. The space elevator tower on the other hand will definitely be under the control of the central government.”

“But captain that must be about fifty kilometres away.” Sodyne pointed out.

“Forty-two according the shuttle’s navigation system before we were shot down. With luck we can do that in just over a day. Of course if we can find transport then we may be able to get there even faster.” Cole said.

“We’ll need more than transport captain. Our uniforms may provide some protection against the cold here but the further north we get the colder it’s going to be.” Sodyne said.

“Then we’ll keep an eye out for some warmer clothing lieutenant commander. Now let’s get a move on, the sooner we start the sooner we’ll be able to get back to the *Nightfall*. Plus if we’re still here when whoever shot us down turns up they’ll know for certain that we’re still alive.” Cole told her and then he turned around and began to walk towards the distant tower.



"General we have a problem." one of Meere's subordinates said as he burst into the general's office.

"What's wrong?" Meere asked.

"Tracking control just called, they were monitoring the Starfleet shuttle as it departed and they say it disappeared from their screens about twenty kilometres south of tower sixteen." the subordinate told him.

"That area is almost totally controlled by the Tribe of Issan, did it land?" Meere said, concerned about the consequences of Cole and Sodyne making an unauthorised landing to investigate any of the planet's ruins.

"Tracking control doesn't think so sir. They say that it looks like it was shot down."

"Shot down?" Meere exclaimed.

"Yes general. There was a heat bloom that looked like a missile followed by another that was probably an explosion before the shuttle vanished from our sensors."

"Does the *Nightfall* know?" Meere said, his concern switching to how the crew of a shuttle to that of a starship that was vastly technologically superior to anything the Prenans possessed would react to the news of their captain and another officer being murdered.

"Who knows general? The shuttle was shot down beneath the storm layer but for all we know they may be able to penetrate it with their sensors. So far they haven't reacted though."

"They could be testing us. I'll need a channel to the *Nightfall* but first I need to speak to the President. I need his permission to send a rescue team to investigate." Meere said.

"Yes general." his subordinate said before he turned and hurried from the office.

"What is so urgent general?" President Kyre asked when Meere was shown into his office.

"Mister President it seems that there has been a terrorist attack by members of the Tribe of Issan." Meere responded.

"Are you certain general? I don't want to risk widespread disorder by labelling something as a terrorist attack when it turns out to be something far less serious." Kyre said.

"Tracking control says it looks like a surface to air missile was used, so yes I am sure." Meere said.

"I see and has the precise nature of the missile been determined? After all such things are restricted to the military. The military you are responsible for." Kyre pointed out.

"And we both know that because I'm not allowed to carry out the security purges we need weapons are being stolen and passed to religious fanatics." Meere responded.

"But you have no proof that a missile attack has taken place yet." Kyre said stubbornly.

"Mister President, members of the Tribe of Issan just shot down the shuttle carrying Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne back to their ship. How do you think their crew will respond when they find out?" Meere said.

"Calm yourself general. Civilian search and rescue can investigate the crash site while I will pass on our regrets to the crew of the *Nightfall*. Of course if evidence of a missile attack is found then of course your forces can begin a hunt for the terrorists responsible but not before. Now that is all general, except of course to say that you are not to contact the *Nightfall* and start making any baseless accusations about terrorism. Am I clear?"

"Of course Mister President. But you'd better hope that the Starfleet crew doesn't take offence to any of this because if they choose to wipe us out then there isn't a damned thing my people could do to stop them."

Meere said and without waiting to be dismissed he turned and exited the President's office.

"Follow the general. Make sure he doesn't try anything stupid." Kyre told one of his bodyguards and then he activated the communicator on his desk, "I need a channel to the *Nightfall*." he said.

"Of course Mister President. We were just establishing one for General Meere"

"The general won't be needing one. In fact you are to refuse all requests from his office to contact the Starfleet vessel in orbit. I'll be handling the call." Kyre ordered.

"Very well Mister President, I can put you through now."

"Commander we're being hailed via a relay on the space elevator tower." Nayal announced.

"Is it the *Archer*?" T'Lan asked.

"I don't think so commander. The signal looks to be originating from the surface." Nayal answered.

"Maybe the captain is calling with good news." Ghroc suggested.

"Put the signal on the main screen please Lieutenant Nayal." T'Lan said and the image on the screen changed to show President Kyre sat behind his desk, "This is the *USS Nightfall*. I am Commander T'Lan, first officer." T'Lan said to him.

"Commander I am President Kyre, head of state of the United Prenan Nation. I'm afraid that I have some bad news. Your Captain Cole and his Lieutenant Commander Sodyne had concluded their talks with me and were returning to your ship. Unfortunately it seems that their shuttle met with an accident of some kind and crashed." Kyre said and T'Lan hesitated, stunned by this news and it was all she could do to control her emotions.

"Are Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne safe?" she asked.

"That hasn't been determined yet commander." Kyre responded, "I have ordered a search and rescue team to be despatched and you'll know as soon as there is any news."

"Mister President I would like to contribute the resources of the *Nightfall* to the operation. Although our sensors cannot reliably penetrate your atmosphere we have numerous smaller craft than can operate at a lower altitude." T'Lan said.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that." Kyre said, "To allow shuttles bringing representatives to the surface on a diplomatic mission is acceptable to my people, having military craft conducting operation in our airspace is not. As I said you will be informed as soon as there is new information." and then he closed the channel.

"Lieutenant Nayal can you get the signal back?" T'Lan asked but Nayal shook her head.

"Sorry commander, I don't think they want to talk right now." she replied.

"Have you had any success in penetrating the storm layer with our sensors?" T'Lan added.

"None. I've tried increasing the power and searching for specific frequencies that might be able to get through but so far nothing coherent will both penetrate and reflect back to us reliably. The level of noise is far too great to get any meaningful data from any of the sweeps I've run so far. Passive scans aren't any better either, there are energy discharges in the storm layer that rival high yield phaser blasts for their intensity. I couldn't tell you if I was looking at a lightning strike or an air strike." Nayal said.

"So you cannot confirm the crash of the captain's shuttle or the cause?" T'Lan said.

"No commander. Sorry." Nayal responded.

"Then get me the professor's ship." T'Lan said and Nayal nodded.

"Putting you through now." Nayal said and then an image of Foster appeared on the main view screen.

"Hello *Nightfall*, how can I help?" he said.

"Mister Foster from what you saw when you visited Prenus do you think it possible that the religious extremists there would have access to the means to shoot down a Starfleet shuttlecraft?" T'Lan asked.

"Easily. Especially considering that deflector shields don't work in their atmosphere because of all that weird storm activity. Why? Has something happened?" Foster answered.

"Perhaps. It has been reported that the shuttlecraft carrying Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has crashed. So far we have not been given a reason for the crash though." T'Lan said.

"Commander from what I saw the government of Prenus will do whatever it can to cover up a terrorist attack if they can. They want everyone to believe that their world is peaceful and harmonious when the opposite is true. No-one's declared war and there are no armies taking to the field yet but everything I saw tells me that that's exactly what's coming. I saw it with the Maquis too when I was younger, gathering weapons and growing in strength until ready to strike. The difference is that the Federation and Cardassians weren't afraid to confront the Maquis whereas the government of Prenus is very much afraid of confronting these fanatics in case it provokes wider discontent." Foster responded.

"Mister Foster would you mind beaming across to the *Nightfall*? I intend to plan a rescue operation and you are the only pilot with experience of flying in the atmosphere of Prenus." T'Lan said and Foster smiled.

"I'd be glad to Commander T'Lan." he said.

"Very well. We shall beam you over in ten minutes. *Nightfall* out." T'Lan said before closing the channel.

"Commander are you serious about this?" Ghroc asked, looking around from the helm station.

"Absolutely Mister Ghroc. I do not believe that we can rely on the government of Prenus to undertake an honest operation, therefore it is only logical to prepare such an operation ourselves." T'Lan replied.

"The Prenans are likely to have a problem with that from what their President just said." Martin pointed out.

"Indeed they are Mister Martin." T'Lan said, "Therefore, I will need a full tactical assessment and a means to circumvent their defences without resorting to firing on their vessels. Consult with Lieutenant Commander Davis and Mister Foster when he beams aboard."

"I get it. I'll see what I can do." Martin said.

## 5.

The limited amount of sunlight that reached the surface of Prenus meant that there was nothing in the way of vegetation as Cole and Sodyne were used to it but there were still numerous plants that were a pale milky colour.

"I'm guessing that these things don't use photosynthesis to survive." Cole commented as they passed by a large cluster of pale fernlike growths.

"As strange as it may seem given how cold it is I'd say that they probably derive their energy from a thermal source somewhere underground." Sodyne replied, "The leaves are probably just to capture carbon dioxide so that the carbon can be stripped out."

"Wait! There's a light moving up ahead." Cole said suddenly and both he and Sodyne quickly took cover and shut down their SIMs beacons while they waited to see what it was.

Moments later they saw a child come into view, pointing a flash light at the ground as he chased a small creature between the ferns.

"It's just a kid." Sodyne whispered and Cole nodded.

"Obviously he isn't armed but the question is how will he react to seeing us?" he replied.

"I'm willing to bet he hasn't seen anyone from another planet before." Sodyne pointed out.

"Which begs the question of what will he think of us? He could know someone who could help us get in touch with the Nightfall or alternatively he could turn us in to whoever shot down our shuttle." Cole said.

"What choice do we have captain?" Sodyne said.

"None. If he does try to turn us in then at least we'll still have a head start unless there's someone hiding around here that we don't know of." Cole said and then he and Sodyne stood up from their hiding place and stepped out into the open, "Hi there." he said to the boy who in turn came to a sudden halt, "My name is Captain Robert Cole of the Federation starship *Nightfall* and this is my science officer Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." Cole continued and he pointed to Sodyne who smiled at the boy.

"Hi." she said.

"Outsiders!" the boy suddenly screamed, "Outsiders!"

"I guess the kid doesn't like women." Sodyne said as she and Cole looked at one another.

The boy then started to run away from them, still yelling as loud as he could and in the distance there were more voices, accompanied by the light from more flash lights.

"I think we should be going. Those lights are getting closer." Cole said and Sodyne nodded quickly.

"Yes captain." she said and the two of them started to run in the opposite direction.

Behind them they could hear the sounds of the locals pursuing them and when Cole glanced back over his shoulder he saw numerous flash light beams.

"I think we're staying ahead of them." he said, noticing that they did not seem to be getting any closer.

"I'd still feel better if I had some idea of how we were going to lose them captain. Or are we supposed to sprint twenty kilometres to the tower?" Sodyne said.

"Point taken." Cole replied, "We need a hiding place."

"And quickly captain. Look." Sodyne said as she saw a second group of flash light beams coming from the side, this one much closer than the ones behind them.

"What's over there?" Cole said, noticing a patch of darkness on the ground not far ahead and he and Sodyne run towards it.

The dark patch turned out to be a hole in the ground about a metre across and Cole crouched beside it.

Then he stuck his arm that had the SIMs beacon mounted on into the hole and turned it on, illuminating the inside.

"What can you see?" Sodyne asked.

"It looks like there's a tunnel down there." Cole answered.

"There are networks of tunnels all over the planet captain. Perhaps this one will allow us to get to the tower unseen." Sodyne suggested.

"It's certainly worth a try." Cole said before he turned towards the tower and tapped his combadge, "Log direction." he said. A Starfleet combadge possessed a variety of secondary functions, including a basic navigational function. This was most effective on a Federation world where it could access a global positioning system but even if such a system could exist here on Prenus Cole's combadge would not have access to it. Instead the combadge would use simple inertia, monitoring every turn made by the badge so that it could always determine when it was facing in the same direction again.

"Direction logged." an automated voice responded from the combadge and Cole looked at Sodyne.

"Okay now we'll always know which way the tower is. Now let's get down there." he said before he climbed down into the hole, lowering himself as far as he could before he dropped the rest of the way.

"Captain are you okay?" Sodyne said, peering into the hole after him.  
"Fine." Cole called out as he looked around him, using the SIMs beacon to illuminate the tunnel. This showed nothing unremarkable about the structure of the tunnel, with uneven walls and ceiling while the floor was partially covered in a thin layer of dirt that was probably a result of it falling down through the hole after being blown into it by the wind. Significantly there were no larger pieces of debris on the tunnel floor that would suggest that it was prone to collapse, "This place looks stable and empty. Come on down." he added and then above him Sodyne began to lower herself into the hole as well.

Cole caught Sodyne as she dropped into the tunnel and then waited while she activated her own SIMs beacon.

"I was hoping it might be a little warmer down here." Sodyne commented as she shivered.

"No such luck. At least if it starts to rain or snow we'll be sheltered down here. Now I think we should go this way, it's closer to the direction of the tower." Cole replied and the two officers began to walk down the tunnel, illuminating their path with their SIMs beacons now that the light emitted by them would not give them away to their pursuers on the surface.

"Where are they?" one of the Prenans said as the two groups met up and looked around for any signs of Cole and Sodyne. All they could find though were footprints on the ground and one of the group shone his flash light at these, following them to the hole in the ground.

"They have gone underground." he said, "They violate the sacred caves."

"Infidels!" another exclaimed, ignoring the fact that the two Starfleet officers would have had no case to go into the caves if they had not been shot down by the missile fired by his own comrades.

"We can't let them defile the caves. We have to go in there after them and remove them." another added.

"We'll need more men. Call around and get everyone we can." another said.

When Foster materialised in one of the *Nightfall's* transporter rooms he was met by Martin and Davis.

"Mister Foster, thanks for coming." Martin said.

"Hey look guys, I get the 'Mister Foster' from your Vulcan boss lady but between us I'm Jack, okay?" Foster replied stepping off the transporter pad and he held out a PADD towards Davis, "Here, I think this is what you want." he added.

"What is it?" Davis asked, taking the PADD and looking at the device. The PADD was an older model but still one that Davis was familiar with and that could be interfaced easily with the *Nightfall's* computer network.

"It's a copy of my flight logs when I was flying in the atmosphere of Prenus. It's got a full record of the environmental conditions I encountered plus the sensor scans the locals ran on my ship. I think they were keen to find out everything they could. I was asked a few questions while I was on the ground as well."

Foster told him.

"That's understandable. I've been looking at the scans we ran of their warships and Starfleet exceeded that level of technology when the old NX class was launched. Your ship is centuries ahead of them."

"So what does that mean for the *Nightfall*?" Foster said and Martin smiled.

"It means that we've run the numbers and the entire Prenan fleet wouldn't even last two minutes against us." he said.

"If you'll come this way we can go over this data in engineering. T'Lan is understandably keen to recover the captain." Davis said.

"Not that she'd show it." Martin added.

"Yeah, I can bet she is." Foster replied as the men exited the transporter room.

When they reached engineering Davis downloaded the log files from Foster's PADD to the *Nightfall's* computer system and brought up the data on the main console in engineering

"This looks pretty bad." Davis said, "I wouldn't want to fly a ship through this."

"It wasn't pleasant." Foster said.

"Are these the sensor scans the locals ran?" Martin added, looking at another section of the data and Foster nodded.

"Their sensors have a high output power to overcome all the atmospheric disturbance. It made it easy to pick up when I was being scanned and build a profile of the way they worked." he said.

"This is good." Martin said, "Look, we've got wave frequencies and cycle times."

Davies turned to look at this for himself and nodded in agreement.

"It all looks EM based. Radar and lidar with some microwaves thrown in." he said.

"Yeah, they only seem to use basic electromagnetic detection systems. So you think you can block them?" Foster said.

"Possibly, yes. Ordinarily I'd just adjust the shield frequency of a shuttle to absorb the radar and microwaves, although the lidar would still be an issue but with these atmospheric conditions that isn't even an option."

Davies responded.

"Active countermeasures?" Martin suggested.

“Yes, I should be able to put together a jamming system that would block these scans while looking like a strong atmospheric effect on the Prenans sensor screens.” Davies said.

“And how long will that take?” Foster said.

“Five, maybe six hours. The jamming is easy, in fact any of our shuttles could be modified to do it in about ten minutes but it would be obvious that someone was jamming their sensors.” Davies explained, “I need to make it look natural and that’s where your logs of the atmospheric conditions will come in.”



"This place is a maze." Sodyne said as she and Cole made their way through the tunnels. The various passageways turned frequently and there were numerous junctions that forced them to choose one direction over the other. With no map to follow and no tricorder to be able to scan the area ahead the best they could do was follow whichever tunnel most closely matched the direction of the tower and hoping that this did not take them off in entirely the wrong direction.

After making several turns in this way they saw a light coming from ahead of them and Cole quickly turned out his SIMs beacon.

"Turn out your light." he said softly and as Sodyne shut off her SIMs beacon as well they both took cover behind a rock outcrop.

Rather than being plunged into total darkness though Cole and Sodyne could still see light coming from ahead of them and soon there were voices as well.

"It looks like we're not alone down here any more captain." Sodyne whispered as a group of Prenans appeared at the junction at the end of the passageway.

"No and I don't think that's an official search party sent to rescue us." Cole replied as a flash light beam was briefly shone in their direction but the beam passed above them without illuminating them before the group moved on and passed out of sight, "Just as I thought. They aren't properly checking side passages."

"So what do we do now captain?" Sodyne asked.

"Well given that our only phaser could run out of energy at any moment if we use it I think our best course of action is to avoid all contact with the locals. Especially if they're carrying guns." Cole answered. Then noticing that the tunnel was getting much darker now that the Prenan mob was getting further away and the light from their flash lights could no longer reach them he turned his SIMs beacon back on, "We'll head the way they came from for a while and see where it takes us. That should put some distance between us." he said.

"And if it just takes us back to the surface?" Sodyne asked and Cole shrugged.

"Then if there's no-one around we'll head for the tower above ground." he replied.

Hurrying along the passageway Cole and Sodyne paused at the junction and looked in the direction that the group hunting for them had gone to make sure that they were definitely moving away from them before they headed in the opposite direction.

The tunnel soon brought Cole and Sodyne to another junction and Cole tapped his combadge.

"Find direction." he said and the combadge began to emit a bleeping sound. Cole then turned slowly so that the bleeping became faster until finally it became a continuous tone to indicate that he was facing in the direction of the space elevator tower.

"So this way is closer." Sodyne commented, pointing down one of the tunnels that branched off from this point while Cole tapped his combadge again to shut off the tone and Cole nodded.

"Let's go." he said and they both started walking along the tunnel, pointing their SIMs beacons ahead of them.

There were more than a dozen ground vehicles of various types parked close by as members of the Tribe of Issan gathered outside a large cave entrance. Most were civilians but among them were a small number of police and military uniforms

"The off worlders defile the caves where the first generation of the Tribe of Issan sheltered from their enemies." a man called out while standing on the back of an open topped cargo vehicle. Around him more men were unloading crates so that in turn others could open them and distribute the weapons that they contained to those that had not brought their own with them. These were all pulse weapons of various types so they represented the most advanced class of weapons that the Prenans could produce but very few of them were rapid firing military weapons, most were civilian weapons instead that although powerful had a significant recharge time that would limit how quickly they could be fired, "You will be divided into groups and assigned a leader who will know the area each group is to search."

"What do we do when we find them?" one of the crowd called out.

"They must be brought from the caves and made to answer for their actions. They will repent or they will die." the man standing on the vehicle responded.

"Commander it looks like we have an answer to our problem." Davis' voice said over the intercom.

"Explain please Lieutenant Commander Davis." T'Lan responded from the captain's chair she occupied while Cole was missing.

"Jack Foster has provided us with a full profile on the atmospheric sensors used by the Prenans and I've devised an active countermeasure system that will conceal our ships without making it obvious that their sensors are being disrupted." Davis said, "I want to modify the main deflector of one of our assault shuttles." The *Nightfall* carried a total of four assault shuttles, a heavily armed variant of the more typical Starfleet aeroshuttle. These were more often used by the planetary militaries of Federation member worlds and as well as reinforcing the hull and deflector shields replaced the warp core with additional seating capacity and the nacelles with wing mounted weapon pods.

"You believe the deflector can be made to work in the atmosphere of Prenus lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.

"It will do what I want it to, yes commander. It won't be able to form a stable shield bubble but it can generate enough interference to overwhelm EM-based sensor systems. Plus if it doesn't work and the shuttle does come under fire then an assault shuttle has a much better chance of surviving a direct hit than a regular shuttlecraft has." Davis said.

"Very well Lieutenant Commander Davis, you may carry out the relevant modifications." T'Lan said, "Will your process conceal just the assault shuttle or will it also prevent detection of any other craft we send along?"

"Providing they're close enough the jamming should protect other craft as well commander. This is a pretty crude system overall but it'll block out an entire area of the sky from the Prenan defences." Davis told her.

"Very good lieutenant commander. Continue with your work and inform me when the assault shuttle is prepared. Is Lieutenant Commander Martin still with you?" T'Lan said.

"Right here commander." Martin's voice responded.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin I want you to prepare an assault team from our ground combat specialists.

"Equipped for hostage rescue commander?" Martin commented.

"Yes Lieutenant Commander Martin. If Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne have been abducted by native forces then I do not believe that we will be able to negotiate their release." T'Lan told him.

"Okay commander. I'll put together a platoon now." Martin said.

"Thank you lieutenant commander. Bridge out." T'Lan replied before shutting off the intercom. She then looked at Nayal and added, "Lieutenant Nayal please prepare a flight of four attack fighters as escort for the assault shuttle."

"Four fighters? Isn't that a little excessive?" Nayal asked, knowing that because of the disruptive effects of the storm layer on atmospheric craft the Prenans had little in the way of aircraft.

"The Prenans have proven themselves capable of bringing down our craft lieutenant. Logic dictates that we take a sufficiently strong force to deter any anti-aircraft defences from revealing themselves. Four attack fighters in addition to the assault shuttle represents such a force while still being able to operate in close formation." T'Lan told her.

"What about getting them into the atmosphere without being seen commander?" Ghroc asked from the helm, station, "There are seven Prenan warships watching us right now. Not to mention their satellites and space elevator towers."

"Quite. We will need to blind their sensors temporarily. When the time comes to launch our rescue craft we will deploy a number of probes equipped to broadcast subspace interference while we take the *Nightfall* into the upper layer of the atmosphere to deploy our rescue force." T'Lan said and Ghroc frowned.

"Commander this ship isn't designed for atmospheric operation." he pointed out.

"I am aware of that Lieutenant Commander Ghroc. However, I am also familiar with the design specifications of this vessel, I was a part of the design team for the *Nightfall* project after all. With full warp power transferred to the structural integrity field it should be possible to enter the atmosphere for a brief time. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne did indicate that the shuttlecraft's structural integrity field continued to operate even through the storm layer." T'Lan said.

"Have you done that before Ghroc?" Nayal said, looking at the Bolian helmsman.

"Not with a ship this big, no." he replied.

"Nevertheless it is possible and I have every confidence in your ability Lieutenant Commander Ghroc. However, if you would rather I can replace you with Lieutenant Aden who has experience in conducting landing operations aboard an Intrepid-class vessel." T'Lan said.

"No I'll do it commander." Ghroc said, "Besides, Aden has less than half the experience I have."

"I am aware of that as well Lieutenant Commander Ghroc. If he were more experienced then I would have ordered him to take the helm while you had the conn." T'Lan said.

"Won't you be in charge T'Lan?" Nayal asked.

"No. I will be going with the rescue team lieutenant. Mister Ghroc will have command until I return." T'Lan answered.

"Mister President I have the report from the search and rescue team." one of President Kyre's staff told him.

"What did they find?" Kyre asked in response.

"They found the remains of the Starfleet shuttlecraft right where tracking control said it would be sir." the assistant told him.

"Were there any survivors?"

"Not at the site sir. The craft was utterly destroyed. The rescue team said it appeared to be the result of an explosion that occurred after the crash took place."

"Then Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are dead. That is unfortunate." Kyre said.

"The rescue team could not confirm that Mister President. However, among the debris from the shuttlecraft they did find this." the assistant said and he held out the Prenan equivalent of a Starfleet PADD. The device was far more primitive than the Starfleet version but it was still good enough to be able to show President Kyre a clear image of a piece of wreckage that had been found at the shuttle's crash site, "It was found about two hundred metres away from the main crash site and as you can see it didn't come from the shuttle itself." the assistant added.

The piece of wreckage shown in the image was twisted and partially burned but enough of it was intact to show writing that was painted on it and this was clearly of the common Prenan alphabet instead of the English used by Starfleet. Part of the writing was a serial number while the rest clearly identified the debris as being part of a surface to air missile.

"This is deeply disturbing." Kyre said.

"Yes Mister President. If the Tribe of Issan have access to more of our missiles then-" the assistant began.

"No." Kyre interrupted, "If this were to show that the Tribe of Issan deliberately shot down the Starfleet shuttlecraft then I will be forced to order General Meere to deploy troops to locate those responsible and that will only serve to escalate the situation before the election."

"Mister President I don't think that there is any doubt that the missile is what brought down the shuttlecraft." the assistant said.

"You said it yourself, this was found hundreds of metres from the crash." Kyre said, "It may have been there for years."

"But Mister President-"

"Listen to me, the deaths of Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are a tragedy but they were off worlders. No Prenans have been harmed yet and it is my job as President to see that none are. The *Nightfall* will be told that their captain and science officer have succumbed to a terrible accident as a result of the conditions in our atmosphere that the pilot of the shuttle was not used to." Kyre said and he slid the PADD back across his desk towards his assistant.

## 7.

"Commander we've got a signal coming in via the tower relay." Nayal said, "It's the President's office again." "Put him through Lieutenant Nayal." T'Lan ordered and the image of President Kyre sat at his desk appeared on the bridge's main view screen, "President Kyre." T'Lan added when she saw this.

"Commander T'Lan I am afraid that I have terrible news to deliver." Kyre said, "When our search and rescue team arrived at the location your captain's shuttle crashed they confirmed that it was totally destroyed on impact and I'm afraid that both Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne were killed." This startled the *Nightfall*'s bridge crew apart from T'Lan all of the officers present exchanged concerned glances.

"You have recovered their bodies?" T'Lan asked.

"No commander. The crash destroyed everything but the rescue team confirmed that no-one survived." Kyre said.

"I see." T'Lan said, "Have you determined the cause of the crash?"

"Yes, a lightning strike. It must have disrupted the flight systems of your shuttle and caused the pilot to lose control." Kyre said.

"Of course. Thank you for informing us Mister President." T'Lan said.

"I'm sure you'll understand if I suggest that you don't send any further craft into our atmosphere." Kyre added.

"That is a logical suggestion Mister President." T'Lan agreed, "However, we will remain in orbit while I await further instructions from Starfleet. *Nightfall* out."

"T'Lan I-" Nayal began but T'Lan ignored her.

"Is Mister Foster still aboard?" she asked and Nayal nodded.

"Yes, he's in the hangar with Lieutenant Commander Davis." she said and T'Lan tapped her combadge.

"Bridge to Mister Foster." she said.

"Foster here." he responded.

"Mister Foster what can you tell me about the electrical storms in Prenus' atmosphere?" T'Lan asked.

"They can be pretty hair raising commander. When I was running aerial surveys for the professor I flew through a couple of bad ones."

"Were you at risk?" T'Lan said.

"Not really. I know how to fly in bad weather."

"Is it your opinion that a lightning strike would be enough to bring down a shuttlecraft?" T'Lan added.

"No way. Even a big strike doesn't have the energy to overcome the surge protection in a shuttle. Why? Are the Prenans trying to fob you off with some nonsense about lightning strikes?" Foster said.

"That is exactly what their President has claimed. However, it is my belief that he is lying and if he is lying about the cause of the crash then logic suggests that he is also lying about Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne being dead. Thank you for the information Mister Foster. Bridge out." T'Lan said before she shut off the intercom, "Mister Ghroc you have the conn." T'Lan added and she got to her feet before walking to the captain's ready room and going inside.

T'Lan just had time to sit down behind the desk when the door to the bridge slid open again and Nayal entered as well.

"Is there something I can do for you lieutenant?" T'Lan asked.

"You can cut out all the logical crap." Nayal replied, sitting down opposite T'Lan, "A guy just told you that your husband is dead and you didn't bat an eyelid."

"The information provided by Mister Foster indicates that President Kyre was lying." T'Lan pointed out.

"But you didn't know that when he said it." Nayal said.

"I suspected that he was though so I sought additional information. Now I know that Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are likely alive."

"Robert. Your husband's name is Robert." Nayal said in frustration, "I know you must have feelings for him so how about you let some of them show?"

"Lieutenant Nayal," T'Lan said, "as you know Vulcans were once a passionate race and I assure you that I am concerned for the safety of my husband. I can also promise you that if any harm befalls him that could have been prevented by the government of Prenus if they had been open with us then they will find out why modern Vulcans are trained from childhood to suppress their rage."

Meere pushed his way past the bodyguard standing just inside the doorway of President Kyre's office, prompting the others present to draw their weapons.

"Stand down." Kyre told them as the guard by the doorway grabbed hold of the general, "I'm sure that the general has a good reason for bursting in here unannounced. Haven't you general?"

"Are you insane? Didn't you hear a word I said to you about the risks of provoking Starfleet?" Meere exclaimed.

"I don't know what you mean general." Kyre said.

"Oh really? So it's not true that you've been told about evidence of a surface to air missile being used to down the shuttle carrying Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" Meere asked angrily.

"Debris from a missile was found close to the crash site, yes. However, the rescue team could not confirm that it was the cause of the crash."

"And of course you don't want me sending any of my people out there just in case it upsets the barbarians you want the support of in congress." Meere said.

"General!" Kyre snapped, "I am your President and it is not your place to set government policy, that policy being to take all necessary steps to avoid triggering a civil war that will not advantage anyone."

"Three minutes Mister President." Meere hissed.

"What?" Kyre replied, frowning in confusion.

"That's how long my staff project our forces could hold out against the Starfleet ship in orbit. In that time they'd take out our entire fleet, the relays on every space elevator tower and all our satellites, leaving us entirely blind to what's happening outside the atmosphere. After that they can sit up there in perfect safety and drop as many bombs as they want. We'd never see them coming." Meere said.

"I have spoken with the crew of the *Nightfall* general and they accepted my explanation entirely as well as agreeing not to send any further craft into our atmosphere. The only way that they could find out what happened is if someone down here tells them and that would be an act of treason." Kyre said, "Even you can't avoid that general. I could have you replaced in ten minutes."

"Only with the support of congress." Meere pointed out.

"Which as you have already stated, I have thanks to the coalition I have negotiated with various factions on the planet.." Kyre responded.

"And what about the Tribe of Issan? Supposing Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne did survive the crash and have been taken hostage? They could start making demands directly to the *Nightfall*." Meere pointed out.

"In that case my government would of course welcome the involvement of Starfleet in securing the release of their fellow crewmembers." Kyre said with a smile.

"Just as long as they do all the shooting, correct Mister President? No blood on your hands you'll say." Meere commented.

"If their technology is so far in advance of our own then I think that would be a reasonable expectation." Kyre replied, "Now if you don't mind general I have rather a lot of work to be getting on with."

"Of course Mister President. You have a campaign to run." Meere said, shaking the President's bodyguard grip off him before turning around and storming out of the office.

The tunnel Cole and Sodyne were following unexpectedly opened out into a large cavern that was largely filled with water. The surface of this was still and there was no indication of where it had come from.

"An underground lake." Cole commented.

"Captain this could be related to the thermal energy that the native vegetation depends on." Sodyne said and she started to walk towards the water's edge.

"Really? It doesn't feel any warmer in here." Cole responded and he exhaled strongly to form a brief cloud of vapour in front of his face.

"I mean the water captain." Sodyne said, crouching down by the edge of the water and dipping her hand into it, "It's warm."

"How warm?" Cole asked and he walked over to where Sodyne was crouched, crouching beside her and dipping his own hand into the water as well. Although it was not as warm as the water from a heated tap it was still far warmer than the ambient temperature in the cavern would suggest it ought to have been.

"There must be a geothermal source somewhere below us captain. Perhaps just a few hundred metres. There's probably a spring somewhere around and the water is drawn into the rock around us before being drawn up to where the surface vegetation can absorb it." Sodyne explained.

"This place makes for a pretty good landmark." Cole said, taking his hand from the water and shaking it before wiping the remaining water off on his uniform jacket. Then he looked around the cavern, taking note of the numerous exit points. I want to take a proper look around to try and get a feel for what's down here. Just trying to find a route to the tower isn't a bad idea but there may be other options open to us so I'd like to try and find them if we can."

"I assume you want me to wait here so you can home in on my combadge captain?" Sodyne asked and Cole nodded.

"Exactly. You are probably best off hiding over there among those rocks." Cole replied and he pointed to a cluster of rocks of various sizes at the side of the cavern that had no entrances near it, "Stay out of sight and alert me if anyone else comes. I won't go more than a couple of hundred metres in any direction before I come back so I should be able to come back pretty quickly."

"Yes captain." Sodyne said and as Cole headed for one of the exits from the cavern she made her way over to the rocks and climbed between them until she found somewhere that she could conceal herself. Once Sodyne was alone she reached to turn off her SIMs beacon so that the light from it would not give her away if anyone other than Cole entered the cavern but before she did so she glanced back in the direction of the water behind her and she noticed that without the bright light of a SIMs beacon illuminating it directly a portion of the water appeared to have taken on a greenish tinge.

"Enter." T'Lan said when there was a chiming sound from the door to the ready room and it slid open to reveal Professor Denning, "Professor, I was not aware you were aboard. What do you wish to discuss?"

"Before he beamed over Jack Foster told me that the shuttle Captain Cole took to the surface had crashed and that you suspect the Prenans are lying about the cause." Denning replied as he sat down facing T'Lan.

"That is correct professor. The claims made by the Prenan President are inconsistent with the information provided by Mister Foster." T'Lan explained.

"And I take it that you are planning to send more people to the surface?" Denning asked.

"You are correct again professor. Mister Foster is currently assisting Lieutenant Commander Davis in modifying one of our assault shuttles to evade the Prenan sensors." T'Lan answered.

"You realise that any chance of my team being able to examine any of the Slaver remains on the planet will vanish if you do that commander." Denning commented.

"The Prenan President gave no indication that his government had reversed its position on the excavation of the ruins. Logic indicates that whether or not action is taken to locate and rescue Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne you will be denied permission to carry out any research on Prenus." T'Lan pointed out.

"This will be the second system in a row where my research has been blocked Commander T'Lan. The Federation Science Council expects results." Denning commented.

"Of course professor. I am aware that there is considerable competition for the resources of the Science Council. However, you may rest assured that the Science Council will be told that you could not have prevented the loss of either the GL four-four-seven system or Prenus." T'Lan said.

"That's very reassuring commander, but I need more than excuses to present to the council. They could just decide that the Meltara Sector itself isn't worth expending time and resources on and then my mission here is over, yours too."

"In that you are incorrect professor." T'Lan said and Denning frowned.

"Really? What makes you say that?" he said.

"The *Nightfall's* survey mission is independent of yours professor. Even if you are recalled to Federation space we will remain in the Meltara Sector." T'Lan pointed out.

"That isn't particularly reassuring commander." Denning said.

**B.**

Sodyne looked around, double checking each of the passageways to make sure that the light she was seeing coming from the water was not just being reflected from a source coming from one of them. Seeing nothing she turned her SIMs beacon back on to light her way as she emerged from behind the rocks and headed towards the water's edge again. However, when she shone the beacon towards the water the green light coming from beneath it vanished.

Turning off her SIMs beacon Sodyne looked into the water and saw that she had been correct, there was definitely a soft greenish glow coming from somewhere beneath the surface and the only thing she could think of that would cause that in a place like this was a Slaver stasis box. Now that she was reasonably certain of the source of the glow she turned the SIMs beacon back on to properly illuminate the area around her in the cavern while she considered her next move. Obviously the only way to retrieve the box was to swim down to it and hope that it was small enough for her to be able to bring to the surface by herself but this was not without complications. Firstly, even if she had had a tricorder it would have been no use in finding the exact location of the stasis box but she would at least have had some idea of how deep down it could be and whether she would need breathing apparatus that she did not have. More significantly though was the fact that despite the fact that the water was being heated by some underground thermal source somewhere it would cool rapidly once she got out and cause her to develop hypothermia.

The only solution that Sodyne could think of to get around this problem was to remove her clothes and she quickly began to undress, placing her SIMs beacon, uniform and boots several metres from the edge of the water to avoid it getting splashed. The SIMs beacon was fully waterproof to a greater depth than Sodyne could dive to without oxygen but she did not want the powerful light it could cast overpowering the weaker glow of the stasis box so she decided to leave it with the rest of her belongings. The plain bodysuit she wore as underwear then joined this, being naked was not something that Sodyne relished but if she used it as a swimsuit she would have had to abandon the garment when she left the water and this way she could instead use it as a towel to dry herself before getting dressed again. Of course there was the risk that Cole would return for her before she resurfaced but Sodyne was confident that he would agree to turn around or leave the cavern briefly while she got out of the water and put her clothes back on.

Sodyne then walked cautiously into the water, aware that there could be hidden hazards beneath the surface. She waded out until the water was almost chest deep, following what she thought to be the source of the green glow. Taking a deep breath she then dived beneath the surface and searched for the glow again and she saw that it was coming from a hole that had edges far too straight to be natural. Luckily for Sodyne the hole was not too deep and she was able to swim down to it and peer inside in just a few seconds.

Although she could not focus on details without goggles to establish a layer of air over her eyes Sodyne could still see the cuboid object that was producing the glow that had drawn her here and to her relief she saw that it was relatively small in size, perhaps half a metre long and half that in width and depth.

Pulling herself down into the hole Sodyne swam the short distance to the box and took hold of it at each end, attempting to lift it. However, the box did not move at first and even though she was starting to run out of air in her lungs Sodyne pushed the box backwards, doing her best to get it to tilt so she could get her fingers underneath it. She was relieved that this worked and she was able to get a hand beneath the stasis box far enough to get a proper grip on it before lifting it again.

The stasis box came free but it still felt heavy in Sodyne's hands as she swam back towards the hole leading up to the surface after which she swam straight up, desperate to get to the surface for air. With the stasis box still in her arms she broke the surface and gasped, sucking in the oxygen she desperately needed as she tread water long enough to get her breath back. She then began to swim back to the shore until she was able to stand on the bottom of the underground lake while still keeping her head above water where she staggered towards the shore, still breathing heavily from the exertion before she set the box down on the shore by the edge of the water.

Sodyne then turned towards where she had left her clothes and was about to return to them when there was a sudden flash of light and the sound of a pulse weapon discharging. Sodyne watched in horror as the energy blast struck her carefully folded clothes with the SIMs beacon on top and they burst into flames, the SIMs beacon exploding as its power cell was breached.

Turning towards the source of the blast Sodyne saw a group of half a dozen Prenans standing at a nearby entrance to the cavern. One of them appeared to be wearing a uniform of some kind and all of them were armed with a variety of crude energy weapons. Sodyne was about to raise her hands in surrender when she remembered that she was naked and instead quickly tried to cover her body instead while the Prenans rushed towards her and surrounded her.

"Please-" Sodyne began before one of the locals interrupted.

"Silence infidel!" he hissed before looking at the others and adding, "We should kill her now."

"She took that box from the water. It must be one of the treasures of the gods her people came here to plunder." another said and he snatched the stasis box away from Sodyne.

"Blasphemer!" a third snapped.

"No wait." she said as he made to open the box without any precaution but the uniformed Prenan suddenly grabbed her from behind, wrapping an arm around her waist and clamping his other hand over her mouth. Sodyne tried to wriggle free but with her arms being used to preserve what little modesty she had remaining his grip on her remained secure.

"Weren't you raised to know that women do not speak unless spoken to?" he said into her ear, "Well we'll teach you to keep quiet." and he looked at what remained of her clothes on the cavern floor, "Grab some of those, as much as will fit in the blasphemer's mouth."

One of the group picked up a handful of pieces of what had been Sodyne's shirt before the uniformed man uncovered her mouth just long enough for these to be pushed inside far enough to make spitting them out difficult. The uniformed man then released his grip on Sodyne but only long enough to instead take hold of the arm she was using to cover her chest and pull it behind her back. The purpose of this became apparent almost immediately as he locked one end of a set of handcuffs around her wrist before her other arm was also pulled behind her and her wrists were bound together.

"Now on your knees blasphemer." he said, forcing the helpless Sodyne to kneel down on the ground, "Watch as we find out what treasure you tried to steal from the gods' true children."

Then to Sodyne's horror the local holding the stasis box simply opened the lid. With the stasis field deactivated the moment the box was opened it stopped glowing and the locals gasped, unaware of why this was so. The man holding the box itself was so startled and afraid that he may have incurred the wrath of his gods that he immediately dropped it but as it landed Sodyne saw that it had been empty all along. Of course this did nothing to improve her immediate predicament but at least she did not have to contend with an explosive device or ancient predatory life form while she was bound and naked.

"It is destroyed. The gods have shown their anger. Kill the blasphemer now." the man who had dropped the box said, glaring at Sodyne and he raised the pulse rifle that had been hanging by his side.

"No." the oldest of the group said suddenly, having remained silent up to this point.

"She is a blasphemer. The scripture is clear, she must die." the uniformed man said.

"Or repent." the older man responded.

"A woman cannot repent of her own accord and she has no-one to repent for her." another of the group commented.

"I claim her." the older man said, "This outsider has no family that the gods recognise so I claim her into my household so that she might marry my son." and he then looked towards the youngest member of the group, "Do you agree to take her?" he asked and the young man grinned at Sodyne.

"Yes father." he said.

"Are you serious Meddec?" the uniformed man said, "She's an alien."

"From what information the government has released they are enough like us. Certainly if it wasn't for her bright skin and dark eyes she'd look like one of us. This Federation Starfleet are probably prime physical specimens even if they are godless. She will bear strong sons."

Sodyne let out a muffled whimper at this.

"Very well she can live." the uniformed man said, "But mark my words Meddec, if your boy can't keep her under control I'll see her flayed for her sins."

"Take her Aster, she's yours." Meddec told his son and the younger man stepped forwards, reaching out towards Sodyne before there was a flash of red light as a phaser beam struck him in the back and he collapsed where he stood.

Sodyne looked around to see Cole standing in the entrance to a nearby passageway as he fired two more shots from his phaser that felled Meddec and another of the locals.

By this time the other Prenans were able to react and the uniformed man pulled Sodyne back to her feet to use her as a shield while the others dived out of the way. Cole advanced from the passageway and fired again, hitting one of the locals as he was readying his weapon before crouching behind a boulder just as the other man fired his pulse rifle and the energy bolt blew a chunk from it. The rifle was not a military weapon that was capable of rapid fire and there was a whining sound as it recharged, giving Cole the chance to emerge from behind the boulder and fire again as he charged towards where the uniformed man was holding Sodyne hostage, shooting the other man before he had the chance to fire again.

This left only the uniformed man and while still holding Sodyne with one hand he reached for his weapon with the other. Cole did not risk firing his phaser while Sodyne was in the line of fire and instead holstered the weapon while he charged towards her and the uniformed man. With her captor distracted by reaching for his weapon Sodyne was able to twist free of his grip before dropping to the ground. Rather than waste time trying to draw his phaser again Cole tackled the uniformed man instead and the pair of them fell into the

water with a large splash. Gripping the uniformed man by his throat Cole forced his head under the water as he struggled, holding him until he went limp and there were no more bubbles.

Emerging from the water Cole darted to where Sodyne was desperately trying to spit the rags from her mouth. Taking the foil emergency blanket from his waist he draped this over her naked body before looking her in the face.

"Here, let me get that." he said, pulling the rags out and tossing them away while she gasped for air again.

"Captain they were going to—" Sodyne began before there were voices from the same passageway that the group of locals had emerged from.

"Sorry but we don't have time to discuss this lieutenant commander." Cole interrupted, helping Sodyne to her feet and he began to lead her towards the passageway he had appeared in. He paused to pick up one of the pulse rifles but before anything else could be recovered from the locals flash light beams shone into the cavern, indicating the imminent arrival of more of them, "Time to go." Cole added, still holding Sodyne as he led her from the cavern before the locals could arrive.

"Commander T'Lan?" Hamill's voice said while T'Lan was continuing her study of Prenus and its inhabitants. There was only limited information available from Professor Denning's notes and the reports filed by the diplomats who had contacted the Prenans via subspace but T'Lan was keen to make sure that she had everything committed to memory.

"Yes doctor?" she responded.

"I just wanted to check in with you commander." Hamill said.

"I have not requested any information from you doctor." T'Lan replied.

"No, I mean I wanted to find out how you are doing. According to my system you've been active for more than twenty-four hours now. Are you sure you don't need to take a break?" Hamill said.

"I am fine doctor. I am in no danger of becoming fatigued for some time yet." T'Lan said.

"Yes I realise that your Vulcan physiology makes you less prone to fatigue but that doesn't mean that you won't benefit from taking a break. I've read the reports on Prenus so you must have been able to read them at least three times by now. What do you expect to achieve by re-reading them over and over again?" Hamill said.

"There is no harm in being prepared doctor." T'Lan said.

"No and there's no harm in being rested either commander. One hour. I want you to go back to your quarters and get something to eat. Once that hour's up you can go back to re-reading what you've already read several times."

"Very well doctor." T'Lan said.

"Great. I'll meet you in five minutes."

"Meet me?" T'Lan commented when she heard this.

"Yes, I'm about to knock off as well so isn't it logical that we eat together?" Hamill said.

"Most are just unconscious but Deputy Korlos is dead. Drowned I think." a Prenan said as his group inspected the bodies of the group that had taken Sodyne by surprise.

"What about the off worlders?" the group's leader said and he looked towards the exit from the cavern that the Prenans had seen Cole and Sodyne leave through. Here two more members of the group shone flash lights into the tunnel while aiming their weapons down it.

"Gone." one of them said, "There are several turnings they could have taken. We should have gone after them instead of seeing to these men."

"They are our brothers Hebbbral." another member of the group replied.

"That does not mean that they are not fools. There were six of them against two off worlders, they should have been able to handle them." Hebbbral said.

"We don't know what happened." the leader pointed out, "It could have been a trap. Spread the word to the other groups that the off worlders are armed, they should only be approached when they are outnumbered."

"It will be done." another member of the group replied before he turned and hurried from the cavern.

## 3.

With her arms still cuffed behind her back Cole supported Sodyne as he led them through the underground passageways, also making sure that the reflective foil blanket remained in place to keep her covered.

"Captain your clothes, you'll freeze. We need to get somewhere you can dry them." Sodyne said when she noticed that Cole was starting to shiver now that the warm water from the underground lake that had soaked him was cooling down.

"I know." he replied, nodding, "But we also need to stay ahead of the natives. Since one of the men who attacked you looked like he was law enforcement I don't think we can trust anyone we encounter. I found a small cave in this direction that I think may make a good hiding place though. I was hoping it would lead to the surface but it was a dead end."

"How far is it? If you don't get out of those clothes soon-" Sodyne began.

"Yes I know. I'll freeze to death. It's just around this corner though. Look." Cole interrupted and he aimed his SIMs beacon towards a small opening in the rock at the side of the tunnel ahead of them. Much smaller than the tunnels they had used so far it was obvious that they would have to crouch to be able to move along it, "Mind your head." Cole warned Sodyne as he bent down and used one hand to lower her head at the same time.

Although it was small, it was clear to Sodyne why Cole had chosen to investigate this tunnel as they made their way along it, the floor had a distinct upwards slope that continued for about twenty metres before it opened out into a roughly circular cave that had a single large boulder in the centre but it was something embedded in the wall that most caught Sodyne's attention.

"Slaver carvings." she said.

"Yes, I thought they might be." Cole said, looking at the single row of carvings along the wall as he unslung the pulse rifle from his shoulder and leant it against the cave wall.

"It shows how sheltered this place is if they've lasted a billion years without being eroded away." Sodyne added.

"I'll take your word for it lieutenant commander. Now we need to get you out of those handcuffs. Okay?" Cole said and he drew his phaser again, checking the display as he adjusted the setting.

"Captain with limited energy in the phaser perhaps-"

"Leyla we've got a better chance of getting out of here if you have the use of your arms. Agreed?" Cole said.

"Yes captain." Sodyne replied, "Let's get this done then." and as Cole let go of the foil blanket covering her she shook her shoulders so that it fell to her feet.

Sodyne turned to give Cole a view of the handcuffs and he pressed the muzzle of his phaser against one end before firing briefly. The handcuffs were made of a primitive alloy and in the less than one second that Cole fired his phaser for the beam burned all the way through, releasing one of Sodyne's wrists and she sighed with relief.

"That's so much better." she said.

"Hold on, I'll do the other wrist." Cole told her.

"Captain there's no need to." Sodyne said, rubbing her freed wrist.

"It's obviously causing you discomfort. Now let me see your other wrist." Cole said and Sodyne held out her other hand so that Cole could cut the cuff from her wrist again. As soon as this was done Sodyne bent down to pick up the foil blanket and wrap it around herself.

"Now you need to get out of those clothes captain. I can see you shivering." she said and Cole smiled.

"You realise that we don't have a second blanket?" he said.

"I know captain. But shared body heat is the best way for us to keep warm anyway." Sodyne said.

"As long as we're clear." Cole said, handing her his combadge and SIMs beacon and placing his phaser on the boulder before he began to undress. He placed his clothes on the boulder as well, laying each item out on the surface until everything he had been wearing was laid out in front of him. Then he picked up the phaser again and aimed it at the base of the rock. Firing the weapon on the same thermal setting he had used to free Sodyne from the handcuffs he maintained the beam to steadily increase the temperature of the rock until it began to glow a dull red. However, he was still heating the rock when all of a sudden the beam cut out and he looked at the display only to see that it had gone blank.

"Well this is useless now." he said, "There isn't even enough residual power to tell me there's no power to fire."

"We'll just have to hope that that rock has enough thermal energy in it to dry out your clothes. Now get under this blanket." Sodyne replied and she held out one side of the foil blanket so that Cole could get under it with her, "I was right. You're freezing." she added when she felt the coldness of his flesh against hers.

"I know. Now let's just sit down and wait for my clothes to dry." Cole said and the pair of them carefully sat down against the wall of the cave beside where Cole had placed the pulse rifle, sitting as close to one another as they could to keep warm, "We should turn out the SIMs beacon. It had a full charge to begin with but I don't want to waste it if we can help it." Cole added and Sodyne nodded as she turned off the wrist mountable device, leaving the red glow from the boulder as the only source of light left in the cave. "It'll make it harder for the locals to find us as well." she commented.

"Yes there's that as well. Once my clothes are dry you can take my shirt, socks and underwear. I'll take the jacket trousers and boots. Agreed?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Thank you captain." she said.

"I can't leave you walking around naked lieutenant commander."

"Not just for the clothes captain. For saving me from those men. That's the second close escape I've had like that."

"The occupation?" Cole commented, knowing that Sodyne had been in school on Betazed when it was invaded by the Dominion and occupied by a combined Dominion and Cardassian force. Although the Vorta and Jem'Hadar had no interest in taking sexual advantage of anyone the Cardassians had gained a reputation for brutality that extended to sexual assault during their earlier occupation of Bajor that they had lived up to on Betazed as well.

"A group of Cardassians made me watch while they raped my friends." Sodyne said.

"I'm sorry." Cole responded.

"You don't need to be. It wasn't your fault and I know I can trust you."

"I suppose right now being able to trust one another is more important than anything." Cole said, "Talking of which, can I rely on you to let me be the one to tell T'Lan about this? Being naked under a blanket with another woman is the sort of thing that can cause problems in a marriage if not handled correctly."

"What' doesn't that list of your wife's sexual fantasies include bringing in extra women?" Sodyne said with a smile and Cole frowned.

"That damned list." he said, "It's all my sister's fault."

"How?" Sodyne asked.

"T'Lan and I got married on Vulcan in a Vulcan ceremony and then went to Earth to repeat it in a human one. That's when my sister got her to read some trashy magazine article about how to keep your sex life interesting and T'Lan really took it to heart at first, coming up with that list of things she thought she needed to do to keep a human husband satisfied. The worst thing is though that I think I'm the only person aboard either *Nightfall* that hasn't read it."

"You've not even read it?" Sodyne said and Cole shook his head.

"No. I thought it would be intruding on something T'Lan wrote when she wasn't acting on reliable information. I didn't want to embarrass her." he explained.

"So if you've never read it then you've never even tried any of what's in it?" Sodyne said.

"I've never seen the point. What we have is enough." Cole replied and Sodyne tilted her head to rest it on his shoulder.

"Then if it will make you happy captain I promise not to say anything to T'Lan until you've had the chance to speak to her." Sodyne said. Then after a brief pause she added, "Though I do need to tell Nayal she's right."

"What?" Cole said, suddenly nervous.

"About how good you look naked. She told me that when you, her and T'Lan were held captive on a Ferengi vessel all three of you were made to strip. She took a good look while she could."

"Trust Nayal to remember that. Most of what I took away from that incident were bruises and scars that Doctor King had to heal. Although it was then that T'Lan mind melded with me and I found out she felt about me the way I feel about her."

"She loves you so much. I remember."

"You remember?" Cole commented.

"Yes, I felt it the one time I was able to sense the thoughts of others. When I was inside the Slaver telepathic amplifier. That's the only time I've been able to exercise any telepathic ability. After all the doctors tried and failed it was that machine that for one moment fixed whatever it is inside of me that's broken."

"Leyla you aren't broken." Cole said but this did not calm Sodyne.

"Yes captain I am. Right now I should be able to tell you if any of the natives are close by just by sensing their thoughts but I can't. Let's face it there's nothing about me that's right for a Betazoid, the best thing I did was leave and take Earth citizenship."

"You shouldn't think like that."

"Why not? Pretty much everyone else I meet does. Take us now for example."

"What about us?"

"We're both naked and to a lot of Betazoids that wouldn't be an issue but do you think I planned this? If you'd been standing by the edge of the lake when I surfaced I would have asked you to leave while I got out and dressed. A lot of Betazoid women would have just walked out and stood there right in front of you with

nothing on but I've never liked being naked around other people. I hated every wedding I was made to go to, I just wanted to hide in the corner and hope no-one looked at me."

"That hardly indicates that there is something wrong with you. I felt pretty uncomfortable when T'Lan's father got remarried on Betazed." Cole pointed out, "In fact he and I have an understanding that neither of us will ever bring it up in conversation with one another. Now what's this about you being in the lake? I thought the natives took your clothes."

"No, I saw the glow from the stasis box we knew was on the planet somewhere coming from under the water so I went in to get it." Sodyne said and Cole sighed.

"You take too many risks where the Slavers are concerned." Cole said, "If you'd waited for me to get back we might have been able to come up with a better plan than the pair of us ending up like this."

Sodyne snorted.

"Especially considering that all I found was an empty box." she said.

Davis stood in front of the assault shuttle he and his engineering team had been working on and took out his tricorder. Looking around the hangar he saw several other groups of technicians preparing the Peregrine-class attack fighters intended to escort the shuttle for launch and performing standard maintenance on some of the hangar's systems. He then opened his tricorder and looked at the range of electromagnetic emissions that it was currently picking up caused by the equipment being used elsewhere in the hangar.

"Secure all systems for scanning." he called out and he watched as the strength of the signals he was detecting dropped to almost zero. Davis then looked at the pilot sat in the cockpit of the assault shuttle and raised one hand, "Being emitting." he said and the pilot nodded.

The strength of the electromagnetic signals being detected by Davis' tricorder suddenly leapt in strength across the particular range of frequencies that the information provided by Foster indicated was used by the Prenan surface based sensor systems. Setting the tricorder to emit highly directional electromagnetic pulses of its own. Encouragingly even standing just a few metres away from the assault shuttle he was sending the pulses towards there was no change to what the tricorder was detecting, meaning that the tricorder's emissions were being swamped by the assault shuttle's new jamming system.

"How does it look commander?" one of the other engineers present asked.

"Perfect." Davis responded, smiling at the results he was seeing. Then he lowered his hand and called out to the pilot again, "Okay shut it down." he told him before looking to the members of his engineering team and adding, "Okay let's get this sealed up. Then make sure she's fuelled and armed, I think that Commander T'Lan will be wanting to depart as soon as possible."

Cole and Sodyne sat quietly as they waited for his clothes to dry when they suddenly heard the sound of distant voices.

"Sounds like a search party." Cole whispered.

"Do you think they're coming this way?" Sodyne said softly as they listened to the sound. The voices were too far away for them to make out what was being said clearly but it was obvious that there was a group of a significant size relatively nearby.

"Possibly. We need to investigate, come on." Cole said and he began to get to his feet with the pulse rifle.

"Both of us?" Sodyne asked.

"Well unless you have a way for this blanket to be in two places at once, yes." Cole answered.

"Sorry captain." Sodyne commented.

Crouched side by side and with the foil blanket wrapped around both of them, Cole and Sodyne made their way cautiously down the passageway that led back to the main tunnel and waited at the end, turning off the SIMs beacon on Sodyne's arm and staying low while Cole aimed the pulse rifle in the direction of the voices.

"I think they're getting closer." Cole said.

"And it sound like there are a lot of them." Sodyne added as she picked out several distinct voices.

The voices were close enough for Cole and Sodyne to be able to make out some of what was being said now and they heard orders being given to search various passageways.

"That sounds pretty organised." Cole said.

"Could it be the army?" Sodyne suggested, "Maybe General Meere has sent a rescue team."

"I don't know. I'd like to think so but I think we should avoid revealing our location for the time being." Cole replied.

"If it's not the army then that means the mob has got some organisation to it. That can't be good." Sodyne said.

"No it's not." Cole said before he heard the sound of footsteps heading towards them.

"Maybe we should go back into the cave." Sodyne said and Cole considered this. He had chosen the cave as a hiding place because it seemed to him that it was unlikely that it would be covered in a random search but now that there seemed to be a more organised pattern to the search he was reluctant to back into a dead end and leave himself and Sodyne trapped.

"We need to draw them away." Cole said, "There's a tunnel that runs about ten metres parallel to this one we can use to circle around after getting them to go past us."

"Are you sure about that captain?"

"As sure as I can be. I'm not so sure about the cave being something they'll go past without bothering about any more." Cole said.

The two Starfleet officers then backed away from the direction the voices were coming from, Cole keeping the pulse rifle aimed towards them just in case any of them turned out to be closer than he had estimated. They halted when they reached a junction and Cole glanced at Sodyne.

"This is it. Hold the blanket while I take aim." he said and Sodyne made sure the blanket continued to cover Cole as he used both of his hands to steady the pulse rifle.

He waited until he saw the light from a flash light at which point he used it as an aiming mark and fired the pulse rifle towards it. The entire passageway was illuminated for a brief moment as the energy blast shot down it and struck the lead Prenan whose flash light Cole had seen first.

"Go!" Cole hissed, knowing that the flash would dazzle the Prenans long enough to conceal him and Sodyne as they headed down the side passage and as they retreated they heard the sound of a volley of pulse rifle blasts followed by a loud 'crash' before they were plunged into total darkness.

"I don't like the sound of that captain." Sodyne said.

"No, I don't either." Cole agreed and they both came to a halt and listened.

Now there were no voices and no sounds of footfalls as a mob charged after them. The tunnel around the corner was also dark, with no indications of anyone using a flash light anywhere along its length.

"This definitely isn't good." Cole added and he led Sodyne back to the junction, feeling their way along the wall until they reached it and peered around the corner.

"I can't see a thing." Sodyne said.

"I think we can risk the beacon." Cole replied and Sodyne activated the SIMs beacon on her arm, pointing it down the tunnel where they both saw that the volley of pulse rifle fire from their pursuers had triggered a collapse that had blocked it entirely.

"The cave." Sodyne said, aiming the SIMs beacon at the section of tunnel wall where the entrance to the side tunnel that led to the cave where they had sheltered had been. Now though it was buried under tonnes of rubble that had fallen from the ceiling, "What are we going to do now?"

"First we stay calm lieutenant commander. We still have a pulse rifle, my combadge the SIMs beacon and our blanket. More importantly though we're both alive and uninjured." Cole said.

"We also don't have any clothes. Are we supposed to walk all the way to the tower completely naked?" Sodyne said.

"If we have to, yes we do."

"But we'll freeze."

"We can make it. We should get moving again though. Right now that group on the other side of all this rubble will probably be looking for a way around it and I'd rather not run into them again." Cole said.

"Yes captain." Sodyne replied.

"Commander the modifications to the assault shuttle are complete." Davis told T'Lan when he entered the captain's ready room after she had returned to it.

"How extensively have you been able to test them lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked in response.

"I've run several simulations but of course I don't have the exact specifications of the Prenan sensors." Davis admitted.

"Of course not lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "You believe that the modifications will be effective though?"

"If I wasn't then I wouldn't be here commander." Davis commented.

"Your logic is undeniable." T'Lan said, "Are there any limitations to the system that I should be aware of?"

"The range I suppose." Davis said, "The countermeasures will create a zone of interference that ought to conceal any of our craft within about three kilometres."

"Then maintaining a formation that places a flight of attack fighters two thousand metres around the assault shuttle will prevent detection by the Prenan defences?" T'Lan said and Davis nodded.

"It should, yes. The emissions from the shuttle will overwhelm their sensors and mask our craft. Of course they'll still be visible to optical detection and if the formation descends too far below the lower limits of the storm layer then the Prenans will probably get suspicious about why the disruption it causes is more active than normal." he said.

"That is logical." T'Lan said, "I expect that the Prenans have spent many decades studying the behaviour and effects of the storms that envelope their planet. Now please see to the *Nightfall's* structural integrity field. It will need to be operating at maximum efficiency and will likely require reinforcement."

"Yes commander." Davis said before he got up and turned to leave the ready room.

As he left T'Lan tapped her combadge.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin and Mister Foster please report to the captain's ready room immediately." she said before tapping the combadge again to shut off the intercom before Martin or Foster could respond. It did not take long for the two to arrive in the ready room though and they sat down opposite T'Lan.

"I assume you've got more questions about Prenus." Foster said.

"And you would be correct Mister Foster." T'Lan replied, "As you know we are going to send a force into the atmosphere of Prenus to rescue the captain and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. What I want to know before we do this is the amount of resistance that can be expected."

"I thought that the jamming system your engineer has installed on your assault shuttle was supposed to stop the Prenans from detecting you." Foster commented.

"That is the intention, yes. However, there is still a chance that the Prenans may become aware of our presence. The assault shuttle and escorting attack fighters will still be visible and there may be some aspect of the storm layer that we are unaware of that will render the jamming ineffective. If this happens then we need to know what the Prenans are capable of."

"Well they do have ground based missiles and pulse cannons that could bring down one of your shuttles. I wouldn't be surprised if it was something like that that was used against your captain's shuttlecraft." Foster said.

"What about atmospheric combat craft?" Martin added.

"Oh they have some alright, but not many. Jets don't work too well in their atmosphere so they use rocket powered planes when they need fast aircraft. I saw a couple of them when I was flying down there but I don't think they use them much. I don't think they like flying near the storm layer." Foster said and Martin looked at T'Lan.

"Then their pilots will be inexperienced." he said.

"What about your guys? Do they know how to handle a fighter in storm activity?" Foster asked.

"Starfleet runs exercises in the badlands." Martin told him.

"Rest assured Mister Foster, our pilots are well trained. It does not matter whether they are operating attack fighters, an assault shuttle or the *Nightfall* itself. I have every confidence in them." T'Lan added and Foster

frowned.

"Wait, you're not planning on taking this ship down into the atmosphere are you? I may not be a Starfleet officer but I know that an Akira-class heavy cruiser isn't meant for atmospheric operations even under the best conditions. I'm telling you, if you take this ship into that storm layer it's going to just drop out of the sky and I hate to think of the consequences of a warp capable ship crashing and suffering a core breach on the surface." Foster said in disbelief.

"A warp core breach at surface level by the *Nightfall* would devastate approximately twenty percent of the surface of Prenus." T'Lan said, "However, your concern is misplaced. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc will take us into the upper atmosphere but not into the storm layer. We will descend only as far as is necessary to conceal the launch of our rescue force."

"Well that sounds better but if you don't mind I'd rather return to my own ship before you do that." Foster said.

"That is acceptable Mister Foster." T'Lan said before she looked at Martin and added, "Is there anything further that you require Mister Foster for lieutenant commander?"

"I don't think so commander." Martin responded.

"In that case Mister Foster you may return to your vessel now. However, I request that you do not break orbit yet. The Prenan warships would undoubtedly report this to their headquarters and the Prenans may become suspicious." T'Lan added. After shutting off the intercom T'Lan stood up and exited the ready room, returning to the bridge with Martin and Davis, "Lieutenant Nayal please establish a communications channel to the Prenan President's office, I wish to speak with him." she added as she and Martin took their seats and Davis headed for the turbolift.

"Yes commander." Nayal responded but when she established a link to the Prenan government it was not to the President himself.

"*Nightfall* I am Deputy Communication Secretary Tollok." the man whose image appeared on the main viewscreen said.

"I wish to speak with President Kyre." T'Lan said.

"That will not be possible *Nightfall*." Tollok replied.

"May I ask why not?" T'Lan asked.

"The President has important matters of state to deal with. He has instructed me to pass on any further information we receive." Tollok explained.

"I see. Then there is no further information regarding the shuttle crash?" T'Lan asked.

"No, no further information has been provided to me." Tollok answered abruptly.

"Very well Deputy Communication Secretary Tollok, we shall take that under advisement." T'Lan said before closing the channel before Tollok could speak again.

"Your orders commander?" Martin asked from the tactical station behind T'Lan.

"We have given the Prenans every opportunity to be truthful and they have opted to lie. We will proceed with the rescue plan. Order the assault team to embark and have Doctor Hamill meet me in the hangar. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc, you are in charge." T'Lan ordered.

Moving in unison while wrapped only in the foil blanket was tough for Cole and Sodyne. Each of them had an arm around the other to keep them close together to share as much of their body heat as they could while Cole used his other hand to grip the edges of the blanket where they met in front of them and Sodyne poked the SIMs beacon out from under blanket to light their way. This was particularly important given the two Starfleet officer's total lack of protection for their feet, any sharp object on the tunnel floor could easily cut them and not only risk injury or infection but also leave a trail that would be very easy for the groups hunting them to track them down. This arrangement was far from perfect though, even putting aside the embarrassment that was sure to result from being discovered by the *Nightfall's* crew if they were unable to obtain replacement clothing there was the more serious problem that they were still losing body heat through the inevitable gaps in the coverage offered by the foil blanket, especially their heads. This continued loss of heat placed a sense of urgency on getting to the space elevator tower so Cole and Sodyne moved as quickly as their situation would allow, pausing only occasionally to check that they were going the right way using Cole's combadge and it was then they found that they in danger of being discovered.

"That's machinery." Cole whispered, listening to the dull rumbling sound coming from one of the tunnels they had the choice of going down.

"An engine maybe? That means we must be near the surface if they could get a vehicle down here." Sodyne responded.

"Yes, that sounds likely." Cole said before he frowned.

"What's wrong captain?" Sodyne asked when she saw this expression.

"A vehicle could get us to the tower far more quickly than we can manage on foot, especially like this." Cole answered.

"Plus there's bound to be someone with it that we could take clothes from. Even just a pair of boots would be nice right about now." Sodyne added, nodding in agreement.

"Yes, but the problem is that we've no way of telling how many of the locals are guarding it or what weapons they have. We've got one pulse rifle between us." Cole pointed out.

"So we're going the other way then captain?" Sodyne said.

"Yes commander, I think we have no other choice." Cole said and the pair of them began to walk down the passageway heading in the other direction without even checking which of the two seemed to take them closer to the space elevator tower they were heading for.

Worryingly this tunnel seemed to slope downwards, taking the two officers deeper underground and the temperature fell further the deeper they got. However, with no choice other than to continue they pressed on until they heard another sound coming from ahead of them in the tunnel.

"Is that water?" Sodyne said when she heard what sounded like rapidly flowing water.

"I think so. It's coming from right up ahead." Cole replied and Sodyne raised the SIMs beacon. This showed that the narrow tunnel they were following widened out into a cave about twenty metres in front of them. As they continued to advance though they saw that instead of being a cavern like the one where Sodyne had found the Slaver stasis box the tunnel crossed a much larger one at a lower level that was filled by a fast flowing river and the spray from this made the air even colder than usual. The only way across was a narrow stone bridge that led to an opening directly across from where Cole and Sodyne stood.

"Captain this doesn't look natural." Sodyne said, looking down at the bridge. Although this appeared to be made of the same stone as the walls of the tunnel there did not seem to be a way that it could have formed as a result of natural erosion.

"Never mind that now we need to get across. Lift the blanket, we need to cover our heads." Cole said.

"Cover our heads captain?" Sodyne said.

"The spray from the river commander." Cole said, "It will lower our body temperatures if it gets on us."

Holding the foil blanket over their heads, Cole and Sodyne made their way carefully across the stone bridge. Knowing that one wrong step could result in them plunging over the side of the bridge into the freezing water below they looked down at their feet to make sure they stayed clear of the edge.

"Captain I hear voices." Sodyne said when she heard the sound of people calling out to one another over the noise of the river below them.

"I know. Just keep going though." Cole replied as they continued to shuffle forwards until they reached the far end of the bridge, "Okay we made it." he added as he looked up and lowered the blanket so he could see ahead of him. The tunnel on the far side of the river was as dark as the one on the other though and he could not see anything until Sodyne also uncovered her head and also brought out the SIMs beacon she wore. This revealed another stone tunnel that was the same in structure and appearance as those that exited elsewhere in the underground network. This particular tunnel stretched directly ahead for some distance before bending to the right and going out of sight.

"I don't think we're going to be able to lose them down here captain." Sodyne said.

"Maybe not," Cole replied and he looked over his shoulder at the bridge they had just crossed, "but I think we have the opportunity here to stop them coming after us." and he lifted the pulse rifle.

"We know they are effective against the stone down here." she commented and they both turned around.

Cole pointed the pulse rifle down at the bridge not far from their position before firing it at the centre. He then waited for the weapon to recharge before firing a second blast at the same spot. He repeated this process several more times until finally the weapon failed to fire.

"I guess that was the last of the energy in the power cell," Cole said, frowning, "and this damned bridge is still standing.

"Or maybe not." Sodyne responded as there was a grinding sound from the bridge.

"Over there!" a voice yelled and Cole and Sodyne both looked across the bridge to see a group of armed Prenans standing on the opposite side. Those at the front of the group immediately raised their weapons and fired across the bridge, causing Cole and Sodyne to duck. In the process Cole let go of the now empty pulse rifle and it clattered across the tunnel floor onto the bridge and then over the side into the fast flowing water below.

The Prenans saw the weapon fall and almost immediately they began to advance across the bridge towards the two Starfleet officers. This triggered another grinding sound from the bridge where Cole had shot it and all of a sudden the bridge collapsed, sending debris and screaming Prenans into the water where they were washed away.

"Back! Stay low." Cole said as the handful of Prenans still on the other side of the river fired towards them again. Cole and Sodyne crawled backwards along the tunnel until the pulse blasts died down, at which point they got back to their feet, "With any luck that was the only way across and we've lost them." Cole added.

"Yes because being naked and unarmed puts us in such a strong position captain." Sodyne commented.

"We just need to keep moving." Cole replied and he took out his combadge and squeezed it, "Find direction." he said, turning the combadge while it emitted a bleeping sound until the beeps became a constant tone to

indicate that it was pointing in the direction Cole had told it to store, "And it seems like following this tunnel takes us in pretty much the right direction." he added.



"Secretary Tollok, is something wrong?" President Kyre asked when the low ranking minister was shown into his office.

"Possibly Mister President." Tollok responded, "The *Nightfall* just attempted to contact you regarding the loss of their shuttle and their officers."

"I see. Did they have anything specific to say?"

Kyre said.

"No Mister President. They made no specific allegations or demands. Their female commander simply requested an update on our investigation from you." Tollok told him.

"I see and what did you tell them?"

"I told them that you had assigned me to handle all communications with them." Tollok said.

"That much at least is true." Kyre commented.

"I also said that there was no new information available to me." Tollok added.

"Again true." Kyre said.

"Yes Mister President. However, the *Nightfall's* first officer simply said that she would take what I said under advisement. I got the sense that they are planning something. I thought you ought to know." Tollok explained.

"I see." Kyre said and he activated the intercom on his desk, "Get me space tracking." he said.

"Connecting you now Mister President." a voice responded before another spoke moments later.

"Space tracking." the man said.

"This is President Kyre, I want a report on the Federation ships in orbit."

"Both vessels are holding their orbital positions Mister President. This has been confirmed by our tower sensor arrays and warships." the man Kyre was speaking to told him.

"Yes, our warships. What is their current status?"

"Also holding their assigned positions monitoring the Federation vessels Mister President. Do you want me to update you if there are any changes?"

"No, I don't think that will be necessary thank you." Kyre replied and he abruptly shut off the intercom and looked at Tollok again, "I think we can relax for now. If the *Nightfall* calls again continue to tell them that there is no new information. You may tell them that we have a team searching for witnesses that may have seen what happened but avoid giving them any timescales for when that team might report in. Do you understand Secretary Tollok?"

"Of course Mister President. Deny and deflect." Tollok said and Kyre grinned.

"Exactly." he said.

T'Lan watched as the platoon of Starfleet ground combat specialists embarked on the assault shuttle. Each member of the platoon wore rigid body armour and helmets and were heavily armed with phaser rifles and grenades. This equipment had been vastly upgraded since the performance of Starfleet's ground forces during the Dominion War as well as the brief conflict with the Klingons before that that had been mediocre at best. The perception of Starfleet's ground combat specialists had become that they were little more than glorified security guards and so when it was decided that the ships of the *Nightfall* project would carry two companies of ground troops for rapid deployment the original *USS Nightfall* had instead made use of Earth MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard troops that had been shown to be far more effective than Starfleet's own troops but these had not been made available for the new vessel. However, Cole and Martin had been working to train the ground combat specialists that had taken the place of these other troops and now T'Lan could only hope that this training had been effective.

As well as the assault shuttle there were four of the *Nightfall's* Peregrine-class attack fighters in the launch bay undergoing final preparations for launch, intended to act as an escort for the shuttle.

"I'm here." Hamill's voice called out from behind T'Lan as she hurried across the launch bay and the Vulcan turned to look at her. Like T'Lan, Hamill wore a set of body armour identical to the ground troops boarding the shuttle. T'Lan's plan did not call for either herself or Hamill actually going into combat but she saw no point in denying them the best protection available, "I hope I'm not late."

"You are not doctor." T'Lan said before one of the ground troops approached them. Unlike the other troopers this man had the rank markings of an officer that marked him out as the platoon commander, "Yes lieutenant?" T'Lan asked.

"The platoon is aboard and our equipment is stowed." the lieutenant told her and she nodded.

"Very good. Then let us board." she said and the three officers all walked up the ramp leading into the assault shuttle.

Inside the troop compartment was filled with the ground combat troops, strapped in with their phaser rifles clamped beside their seats and the lieutenant sat down with them and began to strap himself in. On the other hand both T'Lan and Hamill made their way to the front of the shuttle. Ordinarily an assault shuttle had a crew of two but on this occasion there was only a pilot and no weapons officer. Instead T'Lan herself took this second position while Hamill sat down in a vacant seat at the back of the cockpit.

"We're all set commander." the pilot told T'Lan and she nodded.

"Assault shuttle to bridge." she then said into the assault shuttle's communication system.

"Bridge here commander." Noyal's voice responded.

"We are ready to launch. What is our status?" T'Lan asked.

"All set here commander. We can go on your mark." Noyal answered.

"Very well Lieutenant Noyal, inform Lieutenant Commander Ghroc that he may proceed at his own discretion. Assault shuttle out." T'Lan told her before closing the channel.

"Okay everyone better strap in because I'm taking us in now." Ghroc announced and the bridge officers who had not already secured the harnesses designed to keep them in their seats quickly moved to do so, "Are those probes loaded?"

"Loaded and ready." Martin responded.

"Then launch them." Ghroc ordered and Martin pressed the control to launch the probes loaded into the *Nightfall's* torpedo launchers.

As soon as he did so the probes were fired in unison and immediately spread out around the heavy cruiser. Each probe began to broadcast subspace static that overloaded the relatively primitive sensors of the nearby Prenan warships as well as the satellite and tower mounted systems. On the other hand the more advanced sensors of the *Nightfall* remained effective and Ghroc saw the Prenan vessels holding position as he fired the *Nightfall's* thrusters and took the heavy cruiser into the atmosphere of Prenus.

"Structural integrity field holding." Noyal announced.

"Shields are offline." Martin added.

"Lieutenant Noyal, use the power from our shield system to reinforce structural integrity." Ghroc said and Noyal nodded.

"Yes commander, transferring power now." she replied.

This did not stop the *Nightfall* shuddering as it entered the atmosphere though and Ghroc carefully used the ship's thrusters to prevent it from spinning out of control.

"That should do it." Ghroc said when the view of the altimeter he had in his headset showed the *Nightfall* to be within five kilometres of the upper limit of the storm layer, "Deploy rescue team."

"Bridge to launch bay, you are clear to launch." Noyal then said into the intercom.

"That's our cue." the pilot of the assault shuttle said and he fired its thrusters, lifting it off the deck.

Two of the Peregrine-class attack fighters left the launch bay ahead of the assault shuttle and then the other two followed it to form a box formation around it. Behind them the *Nightfall* pulled up again and while the assault shuttle and fighters descended the *Nightfall* headed back into space.

"All fighters remain within two thousand metres." T'Lan broadcast as the small force continued to descend towards the storm layer below them.

"Is it going to be this rough all the way down?" Hamill the asked as the assault shuttle shook.

"Actually it's about to get a lot rougher doctor." the pilot replied just before the assault shuttle entered the storm layer.

The effect of this was felt immediately as the shuttle shook even more violently and lightning flashed in front of it.

"We're perfectly safe from that lightning, right?" Hamill said.

"Perfectly doctor." T'Lan reassured her, "The energy of the lightning cannot damage our craft. The only danger comes from the atmosphere's magnetic fluctuations." then she glanced at the pilot and added, "I am activating the jamming field."

The assault shuttle immediately began to broadcast as disruptive electro-magnetic signature designed to mimic Prenus' natural storm activity. Within the storm layer this would have no effect but the hope was that when the Starfleet craft emerged from it they would be undetectable to the Prenan sensors.

"I can't see the fighters on our sensors commander." the pilot said when he checked his instruments.

"Can you maintain a visual fix on the two craft ahead of us?" T'Lan asked.

"I think so commander. Their running lights are still working at least." the pilot said as he looked through the cockpit canopy and saw the pulsing lights mounted on the wing tips of the two attack fighters flying in front of the assault shuttle.

"Then do so lieutenant." T'Lan said, "Maintain formation with the attack fighters ahead of us and trust the pilots behind to do the same with us."

"Yes commander." the pilot said.

The assault shuttle and its escort of attack fighters soon burst through the bottom of the storm layer and immediately levelled out. In order for the jamming to look natural it needed to be able to blend in with the storm above and this was best achieved by staying as close as possible to it.

"Are we through now?" Hamill asked, relieved that the worst of the shaking had now stopped.

"Sensors back on line." the pilot said, "I'm picking up all four fighters right where they should be."

"Very good lieutenant." T'Lan responded, "I am commencing scanning for any signs of the captain and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne."

"That's it we're clear of the atmosphere." Ghroc said when the *Nightfall* returned to a low orbit, "Nayal what's our status?"

"It doesn't look like we've taken any damage and there are no casualties being reported." Nayal responded, "I've lost track of T'Lan's group though. They entered the storm layer and that was it."

"We'll just have to trust that they know what they're doing lieutenant." Ghroc said, "Martin what are the Prenan warships doing now?"

"Right now? Nothing." Martin answered, "They aren't taking up attack positions or locking weapons."

"I'm picking up increased communications activity commander. I think they're asking for orders." Nayal added and Ghroc smiled.

"I guess that proves what you had to say about their level of experience Martin." he said, "They don't know what to do so they're asking for new orders."

"Should we raise our shields?" Nayal suggested.

"No, let's not do anything to provoke them. We'll just act natural until they decide to take action." Ghroc said, "Keep a close eye on what they're doing though. If it looks like they're going to attack then I want our shields raised immediately."

"You called for me?" General Meere asked as he walked into the tracking centre in the Prenan Defence Command headquarters.

"Yes general." his subordinate replied and he pointed to a nearby screen that showed the relative positions of the *Nightfall* and the Prenan warships that had been deployed to keep watch on the Starfleet vessel. This was purely a symbolic deployment, Meere knew very well that the entire Prenan fleet was no match for the *Nightfall*.

"Has the *Nightfall* changed position?" Meere said.

"It did briefly general." the other officer said, nodding, "The ship entered the atmosphere and descended to just above the storm layer we think before it returned to space again. I didn't even know that the Starfleet ship could operate in our atmosphere."

"Neither did I, I thought it was too big. Were our ships able to determine what the *Nightfall* did?" Meere said.

"No general but they must have done something. Before they entered the atmosphere the ship launched a series of jamming devices that blocked our ships' sensors."

"Then they definitely did something or they wouldn't have had to hide what they were up to." Meere commented and he looked at the command centre's main display that showed a large map of the planet's surface, "Where did they enter the atmosphere?"

"Sector forty-two general."

"Forty-two." Meere repeated and he frowned.

"Yes general."

"That's where we tracked their shuttle to before it was shot down, yes?" Meere asked.

"Yes general. Do you think they were intending to try and deploy a search party of their own?"

"It makes sense. Has tracking control picked anything up?"

"No general, but the Starfleet vessel didn't even enter the storm layer."

"But they jammed the sensors of our ships. Maybe they just didn't see the launch." Meere pointed out, "If they can jam our warships' sensors then they may be able to jam our ground tracking as well."

"Do you want to launch a patrol?" Meere's subordinate suggested and Meere considered this for a moment. His instinct was to send a patrol aircraft into the area to see if they could find any intruders but then he considered President Kyres actions so far. The President had rejected all of Meere's advice in favour of trying to curry favour with the Tribe of Issan and if the crew of the *Nightfall* were sending in a search team of their own then there was the chance that they would be able to achieve more than Meere himself was capable of.

"No. The President has specifically instructed me not to deploy any forces that could inflame the situation." he said.

"But general if Starfleet is violating our airspace then we have a duty to respond. The President needs to be informed." his subordinated protested.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of that now." Meere told him.

Making his way to the President's office again, Meere waited outside to be announced by one of Kyre's staff. Then when the door was opened for him he went inside.

"Mister President." he said simply.

"General Meere. I take you have a good reason for disturbing me again." Kyre responded and Meere smiled.

"Yes Mister President. I thought you might like to know that it is highly likely that a Starfleet strike force has penetrated the storm layer and may even now be on the surface." he said and Kyre's eyes widened.

"Are you certain about this general?" he asked.

"It is the only answer for their behaviour that makes sense Mister President. They jammed the sensors of our ships and other detection systems in orbit before bringing their starship into the upper atmosphere." Meere said.

"Their ship is atmosphere capable? Did you know that?" Kyre asked.

"I had no idea Mister President. The ship only entered the upper atmosphere though, whether it could truly operate within a planetary atmosphere even without a storm layer such as ours is still debatable. The Starfleet ship returned to space very quickly though and I suspect that the manoeuvre was intended purely to conceal the deployment of an assault team. Our analysis of the starship suggests that it has a significant hangar capacity and it could easily hold enough shuttles of the type Captain Cole and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne used to carry around four hundred soldiers." Meere answered.

"Do you think that they have sent a force of that size?"

"That depends on what their mission is Mister President. If it is search and rescue then the Starfleet force is most likely much smaller. On the other hand it could be a more punitive expedition, in which case a significantly larger force would be required." Meere said.

"What do you mean by that general?"

"I mean that you lied to the crew of the *Nightfall*. You know full well that the Tribe of Issan shot down that shuttle and yet you've done everything in your power to stop me from responding to what is clearly a threat to planetary security. The next missile they fire could be aimed at a school that refuses to change its curriculum to suit them. If Starfleet does have the means to find that out then they may hold you responsible for the loss of their officers. I know I do. If that's the case then I'd expect their assault force to land here at any moment. Unfortunately they seem to be able to jam our surface sensors just as well as those in orbit so we don't have a clue to their numbers or position."

"I see. What do you recommend general?" Kyre said and Meere snorted at the idea of the President suddenly wanting his input.

"I'd recommend contacting that Starfleet ship and telling them that new information has come to light and authorising them to conduct a search and rescue operation. Then hope that they have some way of contacting the force they've deployed because it would be a shame if they arrived here right as you were finally doing what you should have done to start off with Mister President." Meere told him.

"Commander we've got another signal coming in from the surface." Naya announced. Then she smiled and added, "And it's the President himself, not the deputy assistant boot lick boy."

"I guess those important matters of state just got less important than us." Martin said.

"Put him through lieutenant." Ghroc ordered and Kyre appeared on the main view screen, "President Kyre, how may I help you?" he asked.

"I have a message for Commander T'Lan. Is she available?" Kyre replied.

"Not at present, no. I am Lieutenant Commander Ghroc, the *Nightfall's* second officer and I am currently in command." Ghroc told him.

"In that case I should tell you that further evidence has emerged concerning the loss of your captain's shuttlecraft." Kyre said, "It appears that it may have been deliberately shot down by a terrorist unit and there is a chance that they could be alive. Unfortunately it will be difficult for us to deploy our forces to the area around the crash site rapidly to find out."

"I see. Perhaps if you gave us the location of the crash we might be able to deploy a search unit." Ghroc suggested.

"Of course. The shuttle crashed approximately twenty kilometres south of the space elevator tower they passed through our storm layer close to." Kyre said.

"Thank you Mister President, we will be sure to review this new information. *Nightfall* out." Ghroc replied before he closed the channel.

"What do you want to do about that Ghroc?" Martin asked from the tactical station and Ghroc sighed.

"Nothing." he replied, "It sounds to me like the Prenans suspect that we've managed to infiltrate a force into their atmosphere and they want to make sure that it isn't targeted at them."

"Which isn't the case anyway." Nayal commented.

"But if the Prenans don't know that then it tells us that they haven't detected Commander T'Lan's rescue team." Martin said.

"Which is a good thing because we haven't got a way of warning them that the Prenans know they're down there somewhere." Ghroc added.

"Did you feel that?" Cole asked when felt a draft of air on his face.

"Captain I'm not sure I have any feelings left at all." Sodyne responded, shivering.

"It felt like a breeze. It came from this way I think." Cole said, turning his head, "Maybe there's a way out of the tunnels that way."

Cole and Sodyne then began to walk in the direction of the breeze. The temperature continued to drop around them and as they turned a corner they saw that there was a light covering of snow on the tunnel floor that had blown in through the exit leading out to the surface.

"Snow?" Sodyne commented.

"We have to check this out. We can't just wander around down here at random." Cole said before he started to lead Sodyne towards the exit from the tunnels.

When they reached the end of the tunnel and looked out Cole and Sodyne saw that the landscape ahead of them was largely barren and covered in snow while more fell from the sky. In the distance though the horizon was dominated by the base of the space elevator tower. However, despite being such a prominent feature the tower was still clearly some distance away from the tunnel exit.

Cole lifted his combadge to his mouth and squeezed it.

"Cole to *Nightfall*, do you read me?" he said but there was just a squealing noise, "They're still jamming us. We have to get to the tower." he added.

"It must be five kilometres. It's too far." Sodyne said.

"We don't have a choice." Cole said.

"Maybe there's a tunnel that will get us closer." Sodyne suggested.

"Even if there is we don't know how long it would take to find it or if it will be blocked by the Prenans hunting us. Come on, we can make it. Just hold tight and keep walking." Cole said.

Cole and Sodyne walked out of the tunnel and started to head towards the tower. Away from the shelter of the tunnel they were left fully exposed to the elements and they had to keep a tight hold on the foil blanket to prevent it from being blown away by the wind that managed to find its way inside. This flushed the warmer air that had built up underneath the blanket out, replacing it with much colder air and reduced their temperatures even further.

"It's too cold." Sodyne said as she began to stagger. "I can't feel my toes."

"Just keep focused on the tower. We can make it. Come on Leyla, one foot in front of another." Cole replied as he continued to walk. The two officers did not get much further though before Sodyne stumbled, pulling Cole down with her, "Get up." he told her.

"I can't." Sodyne said, "I'm too tired."

"I said get up Leyla!" Cole snapped, dragging the Betazoid back to her feet but she just collapsed again.

"Just leave me." she gasped.

"No, we make it together or we fall together." Cole said as he lifted her again. This time Sodyne took several faltering steps with Cole, "That's it Leyla, keep going." Cole said but after a few more steps she collapsed again.

"I can't go any further." she said softly.

"We'll rest for a few minutes then but we have to get going soon." Cole told her but then he noticed her eyes closing, "Wake up!" he yelled, shaking her until her eyes opened, "We can't fall asleep."

"So tired." Sodyne said and her eyes started to close again and she went limp in Cole's arms.

"Just a few minutes then." Cole said, lying down beside her on the ground and holding her as close as he could to try and preserve what little body heat they still had.

Cole found himself feeling very tired as well and although he struggled to keep his eyes open he found himself drifting off to sleep. As he was starting to close his eyes he thought he heard the sound of shuttle thrusters though and soon after there were voices.

"Commander they're over here! We need a stretcher to carry them."

"Are they alive doctor?"

"Yes commander but we need to get them inside quickly."

Cole was then certain he saw a familiar face looking down at him and he smiled.

"T'Lan I love you." he said before he fell asleep.

"How is he cousin?" Nayal asked when she entered sick bay to see T'Lan sat next to the biobed that Cole was lying on.

"Doctor Hamill is confident that he will recover but he has not regained consciousness yet." T'Lan replied and

Nayal noticed that she did not comment on her use of the term 'cousin' as she normally did, stressing that the two women were not related in any way, "Did you come just to check on his condition?"

"No, I wanted to see how you were as well. Oh and to tell you that we've left the Prenus system. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc spoke with the Prenans before we entered warp and left them in no doubt that the Federation will remember what happened on their planet. Of course he rejected my suggestion that we drop a few rounds from our mass accelerators onto their planet."

"That would be nothing but an act of vengeance that would achieve nothing practical." T'Lan said.

"Perhaps, although it would feel good all the same. You may be glad to hear though that I picked up a civilian broadcast as well, it seems that someone leaked news of it all to the press and President Kyre is being blamed for the failure of his government's security." Nayal told her.

"I have no feelings at all about President Kyre or his government. We are unlikely to ever return to Prenus." T'Lan commented and Nayal pulled up a chair to sit beside her.

"Mind if I wait with you?" she said.

"I have no objection. I am curious as to why you would want to though." T'Lan said.

"I admit he's not my husband but he is my friend. There aren't that many of us left from the original *Nightfall* and with Doctor King gone there are even fewer of us."

"He has spoken favourably of you as well." T'Lan commented.

"Really? What did he say?" Nayal said.

"That he thinks you should be studying for the bridge command officer's test. Counting the years you spent aboard the previous *Nightfall* you have served more than six years aboard a Starfleet vessel. Even if most of those were spent as a non-Starfleet advisor it still means that you have a significant amount of experience and you are wasting that." T'Lan told her.

"That would come with a promotion wouldn't it? I'd be a lieutenant commander."

"That is correct. You would have to pass the test first though." T'Lan said before Doctor Hamill and Sodyne also approached, Sodyne now wearing a robe, "Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, you are awake." T'Lan commented and she nodded.

"Thanks to Captain Cole. He refused to leave me. I owe him my life." she said.

"How are you feeling?" Nayal added.

"Cold. When I'm done here I think I'll take a nice hot bath for an hour or two." Sodyne replied.

"Just be careful not to fall asleep." Hamill said as she walked up to the readout on Cole's biobed to check it, "Well the captain's life signs are stable. He could wake up at any time."

"Then there will be no permanent damage?" T'Lan said and Hamill smiled.

"No, he'll be fine. If we'd got to them much later then I think that he and Leyla would have been at risk of losing a few toes but we found them in time." she said.

"In that case I think I'm going to go and run that bath." Sodyne said and she turned to leave. However, before she walked away she turned back and looked at T'Lan, "Commander you know that there's nothing between the captain and I don't you?"

"Of course Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. You were in an emergency survival situation and took only what action was necessary to preserve your lives. Both your lives." T'Lan said.

"Good. Then you'll understand that this doesn't mean anything but I still need to do it." Sodyne said and she walked up to the biobed and leant over it to kiss Cole while he still slept.