

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

PANDORA'S BOX

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

The newly commissioned *USS Nightfall*, successor to the original ship of the *Nightfall* program is ordered to the remote Meltara sector where a civilian research team has uncovered ruins left behind by the ancient Slaver Empire. The artefacts found here are potentially deadly but are also immensely valuable and the prospect of riches brings others interested in obtaining them for themselves.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 68110.18 Federation research team on moon catalogued as Vega-468.

"Trellan are you down here?" the woman called out, shining her palm beacon down the underground passageway she was standing in.

"Down here Hewitt." a male voice responded and moments later a man appeared from one of the side passages. Hewitt was human but the man who had just responded to her summons had the pointed ears and sloping eyebrows of Vulcans. However, the smile that he wore on his face exposed him as a Romulan instead.

"Professor Denning wants to know if the sensors are in place." Hewitt said as he walked towards her.

"I just set the last one. I also spotted a few markings that were missed during the initial excavation." Trellan told her.

"Did you get pictures?" Hewitt asked.

"Of course." Trellan answered and he held up his PADD.

"Good, then let's go and show the professor. I'm sure he'll want to see them." Hewitt said and she turned around so that the pair of them could make their way back through the complex of excavated passageways, following markers placed to guide them back to the research team's camp. This camp consisted of a number of prefabricated structures that had been set up in a large cavern that appeared, unlike the passageways, to be of natural origin. Although large, the entrance to the cavern was not big enough for the transport ship that had brought them to this remote moon and it was visible just outside.

Trellan and Hewitt made their way into one of the structures where they found more members of the research team, including its leader Professor Denning and medical officer Doctor Terry. The structure was lined with analysis equipment while a large table in the centre showed a plan of the dig site, with the excavated areas clearly marked.

"Professor the sensors are set but you might want to take a look at this first." Trellan said and he handed his PADD to Denning.

"Where did you find these?" the other man asked.

"In the passageway near sensor number four. Right here." Trellan replied and he pointed at the map close to where Hewitt had found him, "I've not run them through the translator yet but they look like what we were hoping for." "How come they weren't spotted earlier?" Terry said and Trellan looked at her.

"They were clogged with dirt when the excavation was carried out. Enough of it must have stuck to the wall to hide them and fallen out later." he told her before another voice called out from the cavern outside.

"Professor!"

"In here." Denning responded and another man appeared in the doorway, "What is it Foster?" Denning asked.

"I just spotted our friends again. They're in a low orbit hugging the horizon. I'd say that they're trying to avoid being spotted while still keeping an eye on us." Foster said, gesturing with his thumb back towards the transport ship he had just come from.

"You should never have hired them." Terry said and Denning sighed.

"What choice did I have? It was either that or we rely entirely on what we've brought with us." he said.

"Do you think they know what we've found down here professor?" Hewitt added.

"Krom's science officer could have figured it out." Terry commented.

"Krom's science officer was an imbecile." Trellan replied, "I doubt he could have told him anything."

"And Krom himself seemed more interested in the two of you." Foster added, looking at Hewitt and Terry.

"Ugh. Don't remind me." Terry said, shuddering.

"Do we proceed with the scan professor?" Hewitt said and Denning considered this for a few moments.

"Yes. Our time out here is limited. We need to be able to provide results to the Federation Archaeology Council or they'll pull their support for this mission." he said and then he looked at Trellan, "Would you like to do the honours?" he said and the Romulan smiled.

"I do love to push the button." he said, walking over to a nearby console and as the others joined him he pressed the button to trigger the network of sensors that the team had laid in the excavated passageways. The simultaneous pulses of energy released by each sensor were detected by all of the others and with each sensor operating on a slightly different frequency the origin of each energy pulse was easy to identify. The strength of the detected signals gave an indication of the type and amount of material between any two sensors and from this the computer the research team were looking at was able to create an image of what remained buried.

"There must be a hundred kilometres of tunnels still to excavate." Hewitt said.

"Looks like we've got a few neutronium signatures professor." Trellan commented and he pointed to where there were several bright points of light in the scan.

"What happened there?" Terry added, pointing to an area where the computer had failed to fill in information. This gave the appearance of three voids in the image.

"A signal glitch?" Foster suggested, "I could always take a look at your sensors for you."

"The offer is appreciated but I don't think that that will be necessary." Denning said as he turned towards Trellan, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked and Trellan smiled.

"Cuboid and blocking energy pulses capable of penetrating ten thousand metres of solid rock? What else could they be?" Trellan replied.

"But three of them together? Finding even one would be a chance in a million." Hewitt said.

"Hey, none archaeologist over here." Terry said, raising her hand and waving it.

"Likewise. If they aren't signs of a glitch then what are they?" Foster said.

"Stasis boxes Mister Foster." Denning said, leaning closer to the display and looking at the three shadows in the scan readings, "Time inside each of them has not advanced one microsecond since they were sealed around a billion years ago. If not even time can penetrate one of them then what chance do our scans have?"

"So they're important then?" Foster said.

"Priceless." Trellan answered.

"It'll take days to dig to their location." Hewitt said.

"Could there be anything alive in them?" Terry asked.

"Easily. Anything from microbes to sentient lifeforms could be perfectly preserved in a stasis box." Trellan replied.

"At least one was known to contain a piece of meat that was still fresh." Denning added.

"In that case we'll need to consider quarantine procedures when we open them." Terry said.

"Ah. I'm afraid that we won't be opening them at all Doctor Terry." Denning said.

"What?" Foster said in surprise, "You find something you call priceless and you're not even going to look inside?"

"Oh we'll find out what's in them alright but after a stasis box was discovered that contained a live disruptor bomb the responsibility for opening them all was given to Starfleet. We'll have to tell Starfleet Command what we've found and have them send a team to investigate." Denning said.

"Oh great." Foster said, frowning, "Starfleet."

Stardate 68110.23. *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A. In orbit around Earth.

The shuttle that approached the newly finished Akira-class *USS Nightfall* as it orbited the capital world of the Federation. The first of them was the heavy cruiser's new commanding officer, Captain Robert Cole. Cole had served as the tactical officer and second officer aboard the previous *USS Nightfall*, the experimental vessel developed to be a test bed for new ideas about protecting the Federation from multiple threats but with special focus given to combating the Borg. When that ship had been destroyed its captain had recommended that Cole be given a command of his own and Starfleet had given him the ship intended to replace it.

Cole stood with one arm around one of the shuttle's other occupants, a Vulcan woman who like Cole wore a red collared command division uniform. Commander T'Lan had been the chief science officer aboard the original *USS Nightfall* and was also Cole's wife. Now that Cole had been given command of the new vessel he had chosen her as his first officer. Right now she held the shuttle's third occupant, their infant daughter in her arms as she looked at their new ship through the shuttle's cockpit viewports. The fourth and final occupant of the shuttle sat at the helm. Like T'Lan she had the pointed ears of a Vulcan but was instead a Romulan. Nayal had been present aboard the previous *Nightfall* as an advisor while it patrolled the border region between the Federation and Romulan Star Empire. Since then she had taken Federation citizenship and swapped her Romulan commission for a Starfleet one. Now she was to serve as the ship's chief operations officer.

"Shuttle *Turing* to *Nightfall*, requesting permission to land." Nayal signalled.

"Confirmed *Turing*. Please pass our regards to Captain Cole. Senior officers are prepared to meet him." the voice of one of the ship's flight controllers responded.

"Copy that *Nightfall*. We're on our way in now." Nayal said, steering the shuttle towards one of the aft hangar doors. Designed with the role of carrier in mind, Akira-class cruisers featured a large hangar with a through deck design. There was a single large door at the front of the primary hull that served as a launch door while at the rear of the saucer section there were two smaller doors for use by shuttles and fighters when landing. As the shuttle passed through the forcefield that kept the hangar pressurised a group of individuals in Starfleet uniforms became visible standing beside a lift used to move shuttles between the main launch and

recovery hangar and the storage area on the level below. This group was organised into three rows, with four in the first and more than twice that number in the other two. This was clearly the welcoming committee for the *Nightfall's* new commanding officer and so Nayal brought the shuttle in to land on the lift itself before releasing the rear hatch.

"We're down." she said and Cole smiled and looked directly at his wife.

"Shall we go and meet our crew then?" he said.

"It would be logical." she replied and the pair of them walked down the ramp together. Now that they were closer to the waiting reception committee it was easy to pick out that the front row consisted of lieutenant commanders from command, services and science divisions while the second and third rows were made up of junior officer and non-commissioned service division personnel.

"Captain on deck." one of the waiting officers, a tall blue skinned Bolian in a command division uniform said and all three rows snapped to attention.

"At ease." Cole said as he and T'Lan stood in front of them before addressing the Bolian directly, "I take it that you are Lieutenant Commander Ghroc."

"Yes sir. Helmsman and also your second officer." Ghroc answered and Cole looked along the line. Next to the Bolian were two human men, one with dark skin and one the same lighter shade as Cole's. Having already studied the personnel files of his senior staff Cole knew that the darker skinned man was Martin, his security and tactical officer while the other was chief engineer Davis. This just left the woman in the science division uniform at the end of the row. Although she looked almost human her jet black eyes showed that she was the ship's Betazoid science officer Sodyne.

Cole then activated his PADD and read from the display.

"By order of Starfleet on stardate six eight one one zero point two three I, Captain Robert Cole do hereby assume command of the *USS Nightfall*." then he lowered the device and looked at Ghroc again, "Lieutenant Commander Ghroc you are relieved."

"Yes captain." Ghroc replied and he tapped his combadge, "Computer transfer command to Captain Cole."

"Confirmed. All command codes transferred." the computer responded and Cole then looked at the four senior officers present.

"I've already received the personnel files on each of you as well as a Lieutenant Commander Hamill, our medical officer but so far nothing about a fighter squadron leader or ground forces officers and I can't help but notice that this hangar is somewhat empty." he said.

"Our fighter squadron will rendezvous with us in two days captain." Ghroc said and Cole nodded.

"And our ground forces?" he said, looking at Martin. Part of the *Nightfall* program involved stationing a force of ground troops aboard a starship along with light armoured vehicles and assault shuttles to provide superior surface combat capabilities compared to the ordinary security force that a Starfleet vessel would have.

"So far we haven't had any ground troops assigned to us captain." Martin replied.

"That is most unusual." T'Lan commented.

"Yes it is. We're supposed to deploy tomorrow so we should have a full crew compliment." Cole said as he moved on to Davis, glancing at his PADD again, "Engineer Davis I see you rose up from the ranks."

"Yes captain. I was given a battlefield commission during the war." he said.

"For outstanding bravery I understand. I hope we won't need to put that to the test commander." Cole said before turning to the last of the senior officers present, "And you must be my chief science officer." he added.

"Lieutenant Commander Leyla Sodyne." Sodyne answered.

"I served as science officer aboard the previous *Nightfall*." T'Lan commented, "I expect we will be working together frequently. I would be interested to discuss how you have arranged your department."

"I'd warn you that T'Lan has very exacting standards but you can probably already sense that about her."

Cole said as he prepared to address the rest of the crew present but Sodyne responded quickly.

"Actually I can't captain. Unlike most Betazoids I don't have any telepathic ability." she said and Cole frowned.

"Really? None at all? I've never heard of a Betazoid who wasn't a telepath before." he said.

"It happens. I'm one of the fewer than one in a hundred thousand have no ability. I possess all the right genes but doctors can't explain why none of them can be activated, even by medical means." she explained.

"I see, I'm sorry if-" Cole began.

"I'm not offended if that's what you're worried about." Sodyne interrupted and Cole nodded.

"Thank you" he said, "No as for the rest of you I'm sure that I'll be meeting many of you in due course, hopefully under good circumstances. For now though you may all return to your duties."

"Dismissed." one of the non-commissioned officers in the second row then called out and the crewmen began to disperse.

"Commander Ghroc, I notice that our medical officer isn't here. Where is she?" Cole asked.

"Sickbay. She had a patient to treat so I gave her permission to skip this." Ghroc answered, "Do you want me

to summon her?"

"No, that's okay." Cole replied and he turned to T'Lan, "Perhaps you should check in with her though. I think I need to beam back down to the surface." he said.

"That suggestion is logical." T'Lan said, "But why do you need to return to Earth already?"

"To find out about our ground troops. I was expecting two companies of MACOs to at least be ready to embark." Cole told her.

"Captain perhaps I should go with you." Martin suggested and Cole nodded.

"Yes that's probably a good idea. T'Lan you have the ship until I get back." he said.

"Yes captain. I shall begin by visiting Doctor Hamill." T'Lan responded and Ghroc smiled.

"If in doubt just follow the high pitched screeching sound." he said.

"So what do you suppose Ghroc meant about a high pitched screeching sound?" Nayal asked as she and T'Lan walked through the corridors of the *Nightfall* towards its sickbay.

"I do not know. Though I suspect we will find out." T'Lan replied before they both heard the sound of music coming from up ahead.

"That doesn't sound like a recording." Nayal commented, "Just one instrument."

"I agree and it is coming from sickbay." T'Lan added and the two women walked up to the door of sickbay which opened automatically for them. Entering sickbay it was obvious that the music was coming from the chief medical officer's office and they followed the sound. Standing in the open doorway T'Lan and Nayal saw a woman in a science division uniform standing with her back to them while she played the violin.

"Doctor Hamill?" T'Lan said and the woman turned, continuing to play until she saw T'Lan and Nayal standing in the doorway.

"You must be Commander T'Lan." Hamill said, smiling as she lowered the instrument, "I'm sorry I wasn't able to meet you as I got caught up in things here."

"Playing the violin?" T'Lan commented.

"It helps me think. Whenever I get stuck with a problem I just play and answers come to me. I expect that sounds highly illogical though."

"I'll bet." Nayal commented.

"Not so doctor. The use of music to focus the mind in an age old practice even among Vulcan society." T'Lan said as Hamill put the violin down on her desk.

"You play better than we were led to believe doctor." Nayal said and Hamill sighed.

"Let me guess, Ghroc. He just doesn't appreciate good music. For a Bolian he's a real grouch." she said, then she walked towards T'Lan.

"I do have one rule though." she said, "If anyone brings a baby into my sickbay then I get to hold them."

"If that is your rule then I must follow it." T'Lan replied, handing the child she held to the doctor.

"Aren't you a cutie?" Hamill said, "What's her name?"

"T'Sal." T'Lan told her.

"She's very warm." Hamill commented.

"She is a Vulcan-human hybrid. Her immune system has not yet settled. That is why I came to see you. She will require frequent checks to ensure her metabolism stabilises properly." T'Lan said.

"Sure. Let me do a quick scan." Hamill said, walking over to where she had a medical tricorder and with one hand she picked it up and opened it so that she could scan T'Sal without putting her down.

"Okay she's running a slight fever but that's to be expected for any hybrid of her age. I want to check her every other day though just to make sure it doesn't get any worse and bring her straight to me if she starts getting sick." Hamill said.

"So no violin playing needed then?" Nayal commented.

"No, not for this one." Hamill said as she returned T'Sal to her mother.



While T'Lan and Nayal had gone to meet Doctor Hamill, Cole and Martin both beamed down to Earth to a town in England called Sandhurst. This was the location of the headquarters of the United Earth's armed forces, known as Military Assault Command Operations or MACOs for short. Although as Starfleet officers neither Cole nor Martin were agents of the United Earth government they were still granted immediate admittance and escorted through the ancient building to the office of General Tanaka. The walls of the hallways they were led through were lined with paintings, some depicting well known MACOs while others showed historical military leaders from before the nations of Earth united in the aftermath of the Third World War.

"Gentlemen, do take a seat." the general said as they were shown into his office.

"Thank you general." Cole replied, sitting down.

"Now what brings you here today captain?" Tanaka asked.

"General you may be aware that I've been given command of the new *USS Nightfall*. I've come to ask you about providing ground troops for the ship." Cole told him.

"No." General Tanaka said.

"Just no?" Martin commented.

"No." General Tanaka repeated.

"General the MACOs provided three companies of troops for the previous *Nightfall* ships before." Cole said.

"Indeed we did. Three entire companies, not one of which came back. Your Captain Edwards took them all into action without consulting the United Earth Department of Defence and more than ninety percent were lost. Captain Cole, the United Earth does not maintain a standing army on the same scale as before we became united. Those three companies, who represented some of our finest troops I might add, were a significant part of our forces and now they must be replaced. When I heard that Starfleet was continuing with the *Nightfall* program even after losing all three ships as well as the test bed vessel I spoke with Earth's Secretary of Defence and we agreed that we will not provide you with more troops. The first company we provided Starfleet with was seconded to you for almost an entire decade despite the initial agreement being for just three years until Starfleet could train it's own forces to our standard. What exactly happened to that idea captain?" Tanaka responded sternly.

"The program had resistance within parts of Starfleet." Cole said.

"And if Starfleet won't commit fully to the program then why should Earth?" Tanaka said.

"General I understand that the MACOs provided far more than their fair share of resources but even a single platoon would be greatly appreciated." Cole said.

"Captain I don't think you're listening to me. MACO will not provide so much as a single soldier. If Starfleet Command wants to discuss help in training its own troops then I suggest that they contact General Farrow at West Point. He may be willing to let a small number join his next intake. Other than that you have had my final answer." General Tanaka said.

"Very well. Thank you for your time general." Cole said, getting to his feet and then he and Martin left the general's office.

"So now what captain?" Martin asked, "Do we try another planet for troops? Andoria maybe?"

"No I don't think so. Anyone else we ask is going to want to know why Earth won't provide troops and when we tell them they'll probably think twice about providing any either. The Andorians lost a company of troops as well. The Vulcans lost two."

"So do you have any alternative ideas?" Martin said.

"Maybe. I read your record commander, it says you've shot competitively. Do you think you could handle a ballistic assault rifle?" Cole replied and Martin smiled.

"You mean like the ones we've got in the armoury? I've already tried them out." Martin told him.

"And?"

"And it took a bit of getting used to not having to work the action each time and firing fully-automatic was an interesting experience I won't soon forget but I can use one just fine." Martin said.

"Good. I spent several years serving with MACOs and Imperial Guard and they taught me how to use their weapons as well as them. If we can't get experienced soldiers for the *Nightfall* then it's going to be up to the pair of us to train them ourselves. You did a tour as a ground combat specialist, right?"

"Two years during the Dominion War. I failed the grade for starship tactical by two points. Mind you after the war my experience and the manpower shortage more than made up for my scores." Martin said, nodding.

"So how would you feel about training other ground combat specialists in their use?" Cole asked.

"I'm willing to give it a go captain. But what about the other skills MACOs and other ground troops have? Do you think you can teach them as well?" Martin answered.

"Not on my own, no. But we have a holodeck and I don't see why Earth Department of Defence would object to us using the training programs they have already provided. I know it's not perfect but right now it's the only choice we have if we're going to keep a ground combat capability aboard the *Nightfall*. I'll speak to Starfleet Command as soon as we get back to the ship." Cole said just as they were reaching the transporter room at the Sandhurst facility, "Two to beam to the *USS Nightfall* in planetary orbit." Cole told the MACO transporter operator.

"Co-ordinates set sir." the MACO replied as Cole and Martin took their places on the transporter pad. "Thank you corporal. Energise." Cole said.

Upon returning to the *Nightfall* Cole headed for his ready room, located adjacent to the ship's bridge where T'Lan, Ghroc and Nayal were all at their stations reviewing the status of the ship's systems.

"So how did it go down there?" Nayal asked when Cole stepped from the turbolift.

"We're not getting any MACOs." Cole replied, "I'm going to speak to Starfleet about it now and see if I can get a couple of companies of our ground combat specialists instead. Martin's checking our holodeck training programs now to see if we can put together a training program." then just as he reached the doorway to his ready room he stopped.

"Is something wrong captain?" Ghroc said.

"It's just that I'm used to walking through a doorway like this to talk to Captain Edwards and Commander Carr. It feels strange that they're both gone and this is my own ship." Cole replied.

"Would you like me to join you while you speak to Starfleet?" T'Lan suggested.

"No thank you T'Lan. I'm going to need your report into our status. Keep working with Ghroc and Nayal while I see what Starfleet Command has to say about this." Cole answered before he finally entered his ready room and as the door closed he took a look around. Only just launched from the Beta Antares shipyards, there had been no time for the ready room to be decorated to anything other than Starfleet construction specifications and its walls and desk were unadorned. As Cole walked across the room though he was already deciding where he was going to place personal items such as copies of photographs of himself and T'Lan at their wedding and following the birth of T'Sal. He also made a mental note to obtain a large image of the command crew of the previous *USS Nightfall* so that it could be displayed prominently as a reminder to him of those friends he had lost to the Iconians.

Sitting down behind his desk Cole activated the communication system, connecting to Starfleet Command in San Francisco.

"Starfleet Command." a communication officer said.

"This is Captain Cole of the *USS Nightfall*. I need to speak to the Chief of Starfleet Operations." Cole said and moments later an image of a Starfleet admiral appeared on the screen in front of him.

"Admiral Harris." Cole said, "Thank you for speaking to me."

"Actually I need to speak to you as well captain. I have an assignment for the *Nightfall*. How soon can you leave orbit?" the admiral asked.

"My first officer is checking our status but there's an issue with my crew admiral. I don't have any ground troops. I just spoke with General Tanaka and he told me that the United Earth government is refusing to supply them." Cole told him.

"Damn it. Why can't they just tell us this in advance? Perhaps if I put in a call to the Federation Council they can apply pressure." Harris said.

"The general seemed pretty rigid in his views. It seems the MACOs aren't happy about losing the troops they provided us with previously. Admiral having troops from member worlds aboard our ships was only supposed to prove the concept could work and I think that we've already done that. I'd like to move on to the next phase and train Starfleet personnel instead. I've got my chief of security reviewing the training material we have aboard so we can use it to train some of our ground combat specialists. I'd like to request two companies of them be deployed to the *Nightfall* immediately."

Admiral Harris hesitated.

"Finding volunteers shouldn't be hard enough. Most ground combat specialists applied for starship roles and failed to make the grade. Convincing the rest of the admiralty to let you have them permanently might be more difficult." he said.

"What if we call it a temporary assignment until you can talk the other admirals around?" Cole suggested and Admiral Harris smiled.

"Captain you're as devious as a Romulan." he said, "I'll have two companies and their equipment beamed up in under an hour. Officially you'll be transporting them to the outpost in the Meltara Sector."

"Meltara? That's pretty remote." Cole commented.

"Yes it is. All we have out there is a deep space sensor array but that's where your assignment is so it's along your route." Harris told him.

"Is the array damaged?" Cole asked

"No. There's a small Federation archaeological team on a moon in the sector that has contacted us. They think that they've uncovered a cache of Slaver stasis boxes." the admiral replied and Cole's eyes widened when he heard this. Like every Starfleet officer he had heard of the ancient Slaver Empire but by reputation only. In the billion years since it had collapsed almost all evidence of its existence had been lost. The discovery of just a single stasis box was considered a big event so to find three could make a scientist's career. Of course that depended on the contents and that was where Starfleet came in.

"So I'm to take the *Nightfall* to this moon and open the boxes?" Cole said and Admiral Harris nodded.

"The usual. Ensure that none of the contents pose a danger. If they do then disarm or dispose of them safely. If not they can be turned over to the research team that found them." he said.

"Okay. What about the boxes themselves?" Cole said.

"Those are a matter for the Federation Science Council. Unless they are needed to keep the contents intact you are to bring those back to the Federation. So far no-one has been able to reverse engineer the technology used to create them so every one we can study is of use. The leader of the expedition is Professor Marcus Denning. I'll send you his file along with all the other information you need in the data packet. I needn't tell you that if word gets out about these boxes then every raider in the quadrant will be looking to get hold of them. This could turn from a scientific mission into a shooting match at any point."

"Yes admiral I understand. We'll depart as soon as I have my troops. *Nightfall* out." Cole said before he ended the link. Then he switched to the intercom, setting it to broadcast to the entire ship, "All senior officers report to the briefing room immediately." he ordered.

3.

Sodyne and Hamill were the last to arrive in the *Nightfall's* briefing room, by which time the other officers had already sat down.

"Did we miss anything?" Hamill asked.

"Nothing, the captain won't even tell us what this meeting is about." Martin answered.

"I was saving the surprise until everyone got to hear it. We have a mission. In the Meltara sector." Cole said.

"The Meltara Sector is beyond Federation space." T'Lan commented.

"Way beyond it. Your ship breaks down out there and you better get comfortable because it could be a week before help arrives." Ghroc added.

"Is it a rescue mission captain?" Davis asked.

"No, scientific. Who here has heard of the Slaver Empire?" Cole responded.

"The what?" Nayal asked.

"Seriously, you've never heard of the ancient Slavers?" Martin said.

"History wasn't my strong point at school, okay?" Nayal replied.

"The beings we know only as Slavers lived approximately a billion years ago. They are said to have ruled an empire that spanned the entire galaxy until it fell in an uprising by at least one of their subject species." T'Lan said.

"That's only part of it." Davis added, "Tell her about how the war that brought down the Slaver Empire destroyed almost all sentient life in the galaxy."

"Seriously? So how come we're all still here?" Nayal said.

"Evolution started again." Sodyne told her, "None of the species we know to be active now were anywhere close to being sentient a billion years ago."

"We were slime basically." Martin commented.

"Most of what we know about their empire comes from the stasis boxes they created. These have survived where pretty much everything else has been destroyed." Cole said.

"Has a stasis box been found?" T'Lan asked.

"Three. By a Federation research team on a moon in the Meltara Sector. The moon's designation is Vega four-six-eight." Cole said, "The *Nightfall* has been ordered to secure them and open them. Sodyne, Davis, Martin, I'll need you to come up with a plan to do it safely."

"Safely?" Nayal said, "What's so dangerous about historical research?"

"There was a war on when these boxes were sealed up." Martin said, "At least two have contained live weapons."

"Captain perhaps I should be involved in the planning as well." Hamill suggested.

"Thank you doctor but I'd like to limit the number of people that could be in harm's way when the boxes are opened. By all means have a medical team on standby but-" Cole began.

"You misunderstand captain." Hamill interrupted, "I'm not thinking about injuries to any of our crew. I'm thinking about the possibility that there could be something alive in one of those boxes. Something that could need medical treatment."

"After a billion years won't it have run out air?" Nayal commented.

"A billion years may have passed outside the box but if there was a living creature inside when any of them were closed then it won't have taken a single breath during all of that. Time literally stands still inside them." Sodyne told her.

"If they're big enough then they make the perfect prisons." Martin added, "No matter how long you're inside you'll never have enough time to try and escape. Even if the lid is left unlocked."

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I recommend that you consider the possibility that the boxes may have been closed in a hostile environment. The boxes may also contain toxic gases that will be released when they are opened." T'Lan said and Sodyne frowned.

"I know the risks commander." she responded.

"How soon do we depart captain?" Ghroc asked.

"As soon as our troops arrive. We'll need a course that will still allow us to pick up our fighters en-route." Cole said and Martin smiled.

"So the admiral agreed to let us have some then?" he said and Cole nodded.

"Officially we're just giving them a ride out to the sensor array in the Meltara Sector. Unofficially Admiral Harris is going to try and get them assigned to us on an ongoing basis. Do you think we have enough material aboard to put together a training program?"

"Easily. Though we're going to have to do something about our equipment. Those ground combat specialists will be coming aboard with hoppers to ferry them about. Those things are no good in a fight, that's been

proven in the Klingon and Dominion Wars.” Martin said.

“The MACOs may not be willing to supply us with troops but I'm sure Starfleet can acquire some of their assault shuttles and heavy lifters if we need them. If not then we'll have to rely on beaming our troops into combat and use our fighters to give them air cover.” Cole said.

“Captain do you think that this mission will require the large scale deployment of troops?” Sodyne said.

“Stasis boxes are immensely valuable. If anyone else becomes aware of their existence they could be tempted to try and seize them by force.” T'Lan pointed out.

“The research team hasn't communicated the discovery of the boxes to anyone other than the Federation Archaeological Council. Apart from them and a handful of senior officers in Starfleet the only people who know about them are sat in this room.” Cole said, “For now I'd like to keep it that way as well. No-one is to discuss our mission with anyone off the ship without my prior approval. Is that understood?”

“Yes captain.” Martin responded.

Admiral Harris was as good as his word and in under an hour two companies of Starfleet ground combat specialists were arriving aboard the *Nightfall* in hoppers a platoon at a time. Once aboard the ship they disembarked from their craft and lined up for inspection, arranging themselves in rows before Cole entered with Martin who carried a long rigid case that he set down on top of a case of spare parts.

“Captain on deck!” one of the platoon commanders called out and the troops all snapped to attention.

“Starfleet ground combat forces.” Cole said as he looked at them, paying close attention to the lightly armoured uniforms they wore instead of his own general service uniform. Most of the troops were human which was understandable enough in orbit around Earth but there were also a handful of troops from other Federation worlds among them, “Glorified security guards I've heard you called by a MACO officer I served with. Washouts who failed the test for the branches they really wanted to serve in. Well let me tell you this, you have just landed the worst possible assignment you could get because it's now your job to prove the naysayers wrong. Ever since the Khitomer Accords scaled back Starfleet's ground combat arm to a force intended to protect our ground installations or to provide manpower for humanitarian relief operations the idea of planetary warfare has been relegated to a secondary role. Some of you look old enough to have served in the Dominion War and before that the Klingon War and if you did then you'll know how often you found yourselves outclassed by enemies who had long prepared to combat man to man. As of today your training change radically. Forget the Starfleet program, I intend to turn you all into soldiers. Real soldiers who can fight a war whether it be against Breen, Tholians, Jem'Hadar or even the Borg.” at that point Cole walked to where Martin stood and the tactical officer opened the case he had brought with him so that Cole could remove the weapon that it contained, “This is a ballistic assault rifle.” Cole told the assembled ground troops as he held up the weapon, “It fires a six millimetre duranium tipped bullet at a rate of eight hundred rounds per minute. You may notice that this particular example is also fitted with a type two phaser emitter in an over/under configuration for use against targets resistant to projectile fire. This weapon was designed to be able to take down Borg drones but I've seen it used to deadly effect against a wide number of opponents. The first part of your training will consist of learning to use this weapon as well as the phasers you are used to. Anyone who thinks this sounds too difficult should raise their hand now and you can be beamed back down to Earth. Well, anyone think they aren't cut out to be a soldier?” Cole then waited, looking around at the troops to see if anyone raised their hand but no-one did and he smiled, “Good. Now get your personal gear stowed and then draw your new weapons and armour. We leave orbit in ten minutes and then you'll have a week to train before we get to our destination.”

Denning, Trellan and Hewitt all stood in one of the tunnels, watching as Foster checked one of the ultrasonic boring machines they were using to excavate the earth that filled the tunnel ahead of them. The machine used directed high frequency sound to break up the earth so that it could be easily removed while leaving the tunnel walls and any solid objects buried along the way intact.

“Here is the problem.” Foster said as he peered into the machine, “Some of the dirt managed to get inside and clog the coolant fans. The bore just overheated. Try it again.”

Trellan then activated the bore with his PADD and there was a high pitched squealing sound. At the same time the wall of compacted dirt ahead of them began to crumble.

“See? I told you it would work.” Foster said.

“So do you think we'll still reach the chamber by the time Starfleet get here?” Hewitt asked, looking at Trellan

“Unless the equipment fails again we'll reach the chamber in four days. Then we have to dig out the actual chamber itself.” the Romulan replied.

“Then let's hope that Starfleet don't get here sooner.” Foster said, “Trust me on this, they won't hesitate to use phasers to dig out anything left in their path to get at those Slaver boxes you're all so impressed by and you can kiss goodbye to anything else that's buried in the way.”

“I won't permit that. Starfleet may have authority over the Slaver boxes but everything else here is subject

Federation laws on the protection of antiquities. I'll make sure that they are held to account for any damage they cause." Denning said before a voice called out his name.

"Professor Denning." Terry shouted, "We've just received a signal from the Federation Archaeological Council. Starfleet have despatched a starship to open the boxes. They'll arrive in a week."

"Did they say what type of ship?" Hewitt asked and Terry nodded.

"They gave the name, class and registry of the ship. It's the *USS Nightfall*, an Akira-class heavy cruiser." Terry answered.

"Where do I know that name from?" Foster commented, frowning.

"And what about our friends in orbit?" Trellan said.

"Still in position apparently." Terry said, "At least with a heavy cruiser to protect us we won't need to worry about Krom trying to take the boxes."

"Do you still have that phaser?" Denning asked, looking at Foster.

"Of course I do. I told you when you hired me that I wasn't leaving it behind. I don't care how peaceful this expedition of yours is supposed to be." he replied.

"Good. I'd like you to go and get it. Krom has been trustworthy enough until now but there's a starship on it way and depending on how much he knows he may decide that it's more profitable to just take what we've found before it gets here. They can't just beam the boxes away so that means they'll have to come down here to take them. I want this tunnel guarded around the clock from now on." Denning ordered.

Cole covered his ears with his hands when he entered the *Nightfall's* holodeck. On many Starfleet vessels the holodeck was used largely as a means of entertainment for the crew but the modifications made to the ships of the *Nightfall* program left little internal space for a holodeck and so what there was was mainly reserved for training purposes. The program running when Cole entered was one he had seen and taken part in many times during his time on the previous ship of the same name, it was a basic training program used by the ground troops to practice marksmanship using holographic recreations of their assault rifles against simulated targets. Now a platoon of ground troops were lined up firing at targets that appeared to be several hundred metres away while Martin monitored their performance on a PADD.

"So how are they doing?" Cole asked as he walked up to Martin.

"Their average score is sixty-five." Martin replied.

"A passing grade is seventy. That's not bad after just under a week." Cole commented.

"At one hundred metres." Martin added, "At three hundred it falls to thirty and at five hundred it's not even in double digits."

"What?" Cole said in surprise. Then he sighed and added, "Perhaps another platoon will do better."

"This is our best platoon." Martin told him.

"With respect captain I think you're asking too much. Perhaps if the difficulty level was lowered-" the officer in command of the platoon said when he overheard the two senior officers talking.

"Lowered?" Cole exclaimed, "Lieutenant this is the basic program. The guns don't jam, there is no crosswind and the targets aren't moving. Watch this." Cole then picked up a nearby holographic rifle and loaded it.

Taking aim at a distant target he fired several individual rounds, all of which struck it. Then he switched to fully automatic and emptied the magazine into a closer one, "See how easy it is? If your men can't handle this then what are they going to do when they're facing Borg drones?"

"Borg drones have to close to point blank range to assimilate you. They'll be easy targets then. For everything else we'll have the phasers." the lieutenant said.

"Cease fire!" Cole yelled and the soldiers all lowered their weapons, "Computer load program MACO seven four."

All of a sudden the interior of the holodeck changed to resemble that of a Borg cube, the Starfleet personnel standing on a platform that overlooked a vast internal space lined with Borg alcoves.

"Pick a fire team lieutenant. I want to see them deal with the Borg up close." Cole said.

"Team Epsilon stand to." the lieutenant ordered and as five of his soldiers took up positions the rest of the platoon stood back.

"Computer start program." Cole said and the simulation came to life.

"Intruders in grid one six eight." the voice of the Collective announced, "Tactical units respond."

At that moment a group of Borg drones appeared on one of the walkways leading towards the platform. The troops of Team Epsilon promptly took aim and fired the phasers mounted beneath their rifles. One of the drones fell under the phaser fire before they adapted and their shields blocked the rest of the attacks. At that point the soldiers switched to their ballistic rifles and fired repeated shots with their weapons set to semi-automatic to conserve ammunition. The soldiers scored a number of hits as the Borg advanced but despite being designed to pierce body armour most of the bullets failed to slow down the drones. Only when a round disabled a key component or organ did a drone collapse and in the meantime they continued to close on the Starfleet soldiers. As the Borg got closer the soldiers switched to fully automatic fire and more of the drones

fell, their shields unable to adapt to the physical impacts, but in firing bursts instead of single shots the soldiers expended their ammunition more rapidly and were forced to reload. It was when two of them were doing this that all of a sudden another Borg drone dropped down from the level above and grabbed hold of one of them.

“Pause program.” Cole called out and the Borg drones froze, “You can't wait for the Borg to get within a hundred metres.” he told the gathered soldiers, “Unless you can start picking them off across that gap,” and he pointed across to the far side of the simulated chamber, “then they will be on you before you can take them all down. The Borg don't care about casualties. You can kill a hundred and the next will happily just step over their corpses so that you can take their place in the hive. Above all you can't afford to leave any approach unguarded. Someone has to watch the others' backs. Computer end program.”

The interior of the Borg cube then vanished, replaced by the much smaller looking interior of the holodeck. “So what do you want to do about them captain?” Martin asked.

“Issue regular phaser rifles for now.” Cole told him, “Concentrate on the tactics training programs, especially the armoured vehicle training. But I want every man to train with an assault rifle at least twice a week until everyone either makes the grade or quits.”



As soon as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp it became apparent that they were not alone in the system.

"Captain I'm picking up a warp signature in orbit around the target moon." Noyal announced.

"The research team has a courier vessel with them." Cole said.

"No captain, this is bigger and I'm not picking up any transponder." Noyal said.

"Yellow alert." T'Lan ordered.

"Raising shields. Diverting power to weapons." Martin added.

"Helm take us straight to Vega four-six-eight at one half impulse. Noyal see if you can raise the research team."

"Yes captain." Noyal responded.

"Captain I think the unidentified vessel is a Ferengi transport." Sodyne announced.

"You are certain?" T'Lan asked.

"Not one hundred percent but everything fits. The frequency of the warp signature matches the output of a Ferengi warp core while its strength is that of a mid-sized vessel." Sodyne replied.

"Your logic is sound lieutenant commander." T'Lan said. Then she looked at Cole and added, "The Ferengi are unlikely to attack as long as they cannot guarantee victory with a single strike."

"If they've upgraded their weapons then there's nothing here to show it." Sodyne said.

"How long until we have a visual on them?" Cole said.

"We should have had it by now." Noyal said, "It looks like they're falling back."

"Shall I increase speed captain? I doubt a transport can outrun us at impulse or warp." Ghroc said.

"If they have upgraded their weapons then a strike from over the horizon would be the easiest way for them to achieve a one shot kill." T'Lan pointed out and Cole nodded.

"Noyal launch the alert fighters. Martin drop the shields long enough for them to launch and then get them right back up again. We'll send them ahead to scout for us. No matter what upgrades the Ferengi have installed they won't be able to take out us and two fighters in a single volley. Someone will get away to tell Starfleet." he said.

"Lowering shields." Martin said.

"Launch bay this is the bridge. Launch the alert fighters." Noyal said into the intercom.

"Copy that. Launching fighters." the flight controller responded and seconds later a pair of the *Nightfall's* fighters shot out of the hangar ahead of the larger cruiser.

"Shields up." Martin announced.

"Captain I have the research team for you." Noyal added.

"Put them through lieutenant." Cole said.

"Hello *Nightfall*? A man's voice said.

"Yes this is the *USS Nightfall*. Who I am speaking to?" Cole replied.

"I'm Professor Denning, head of the research team here. Starfleet told us you were coming. Your timing is perfect, we've just reached the chamber where the boxes are located." Denning said.

"That's good to know professor but we're not alone up here. There's a Ferengi ship up here as well. We've not managed to identify it yet though." Cole said.

"I might be able to shed some light on that for you captain. The Ferengi came here by our invitation." Denning said.

"You told the Ferengi about the Slaver stasis boxes?" T'Lan asked.

"No, not at all. Only the Federation ought to know about them." Denning said, "There's only a limited amount of room aboard our ship so we couldn't bring everything we might need for the expedition aboard it. I wasn't going to risk stranding my people out here without a ship so instead of sending ours back for more equipment and supplies we contracted for a supply ship to follow us up. The Ferengi Krom seemed to offer the best deal and he delivered on time. I thought that he'd just go back to civilised space after that but for some reason he hung around."

"That behaviour is atypical for the Ferengi." T'Lan said, "Their actions are almost entirely motivated by profit."

"I know. My guess is that he ran some scans when he arrived and his science officer told him that we were digging up a billion year old ruin." Denning said.

"We'll be in orbit in ten minutes professor. My first officer will beam down then and we'll make sure that this Ferengi leaves you alone. *Nightfall* out." Cole said before he shut off the communication channel.

"Captain the Ferengi ship is coming over the horizon now," Noyal said suddenly and all eyes on the bridge turned to the main view screen where the Ferengi ship was seen coming around Vega-468. Sodyne's assessment had been correct, the ship was a mid sized transport vessel that was most often seen in areas regarded as secure. As standard it carried only a single weak plasma array but this could be upgraded if the

owner desired. The ship's hull had an insectoid appearance to it, being split into three rounded sections. The smallest of these was at the front and contained the primary control areas of the vessel as well as its primary subspace sensor and communications arrays. Behind this in the centre section were the crew's quarters as well as the shuttle bays in the lower decks, three doors on either side of the ship indicating where the shuttlepods would emerge from. Finally there was the bulbous rear section where the cargo holds were located as well as the engineering section and the vessel's warp engines were visible on the underside of the ship's hull.

"They're scanning us captain." Nayal said, "No signs of a weapons lock though."

"What about hails?" Cole asked.

"Nothing so far. They know we're here but it looks like they're trying to act as if they don't care." Nayal said.

"Captain shall I alter course to intercept?" Ghroc said.

"No, stay on course for the research team's camp. Let our fighters do a flyby and see if that provokes any sort of reaction from-" Cole began.

"Captain they're hailing us." Nayal said suddenly.

"Put them through." Cole said and the main view screen changed to show the interior of the Ferengi vessel's bridge.

As was typical of Ferengi vessels the interior was brightly lit and the most senior officers were gathered around a central console.

"I am DaiMon Krom of the Ferengi trade vessel *Latinum Lobes*. Why do you approach us in such a hostile manner hu-man?" the Ferengis' leader snapped.

"I am Captain Robert Cole of the *USS Nightfall*. We weren't expecting anyone other than our research team to be here daimon." Cole replied, "Of course we mean you no harm at all."

"We were asked to come here by your research team. Why are you here captain?" Krom said.

"We are here to assist the research team on the surface." T'Lan replied and Krom snorted.

"A female speaks for you captain?" he said.

"My first officer speaks." Cole told him, "We've already spoken with Professor Denning and he tells us that your contract with him has ended. What is there left here for you to profit from?"

"We know of the ruins on the moon below." one of the other Ferengi said, "They are a million years old and do not belong to the Federation. If we find more of them then they are ours."

"My science officer is scanning for ruins your researchers have not laid claim to." Krom added.

"We will not allow you to plunder archaeological sites that are protected by treaty." T'Lan said.

"Leader we should not be talking with them. They let their females speak." the third of the Ferengi at the central console said.

"Silence your females captain." Krom said, "They will be your undoing." and then the screen returned to the exterior view of the Ferengi vessel.

"Friendly bunch weren't they?" Cole commented.

"I did not think so." T'Lan replied.

"Sarcasm T'Lan." Cole said, "You better prepare your away team."

"Captain did anything about that Ferengi science officer seem odd to you?" Sodyne asked.

"Don't tell me you sensed something from him Sodyne." Martin said and Sodyne glared at him for a moment.

"No." she said before turning back towards Cole, "He said that the ruins were a million years old when they are around a billion. Their sensors should be able to tell them that."

"A slip of the tongue perhaps? Million. Billion." Cole said.

"Captain the Ferengi were addressing us in their own language. The universal translator let us understand them." Nayal pointed out.

"And the Ferengi words for million and billion do not sound alike." T'Lan added.

"If they are up to something I want to know that you'll be safe down on the surface." Cole said to her, "You better take a squad of ground troops with you just in case."

"As you wish captain. As you know we cannot beam the stasis boxes aboard so we will need a shuttle instead. Perhaps a runabout would provide us with better protection as well." T'Lan suggested and Cole nodded.

"Okay, take one of our runabouts. We'll alert you if the Ferengi try sending down any shuttles of their own." he said.

Aboard the *Latinum Lobes* Krom turned to the Ferengi that he had introduced to Cole as his science officer and growled.

"You worthless fool!" he snapped, "They know how old the ruins are, as any scientist would. That mistake could have alerted them. Get back to your post."

"Yes leader. I apologise." the other Ferengi replied.

"Leader they gave no indication of noticing anything was wrong." the other Ferengi added.

"Humans are devious Drurk." Krom told his first officer, "They pretend to be above profit but mark my words they would not tell you if you were on fire if it would profit their Federation." then he turned to look across the bridge to a console that had not been visible on the Nightfall's viewscreen. Here sat another Ferengi officer but this one was much different to the others on the bridge. Shorter and with much smaller ears, even from behind it was obvious that this Ferengi was a female, "Science officer Neeradel, report."

"Leader the arrival of this starship proves what we heard." she responded, "The Federation fears Slaver stasis boxes enough that it bans its researchers from opening them. Only Starfleet may do so. This ship must have come to investigate a box found on the moon below."

"What will they do next if that is the case?" Drurk asked.

"They will launch a shuttlecraft. Stasis boxes disrupt transporter fields so the one they have found cannot be beamed aboard their starship. As long as that shuttle cannot lift off again, they cannot remove the stasis box."

"Excellent. Work with engineer Mugtek. I want a way to obtain this stasis box without alerting Starfleet." Krom told her.

"What about the hu-man captain, leader?" Drurk said and Krom grinned, baring his teeth.

"Stall him. His first officer is female, as are his operations and science officers. Try to arrange for one them to need to come aboard our ship. Once she is made to comply with Ferengi custom we will be able to find out everything they are doing." he said and both he and Drurk began to laugh.

5.

There was plenty of room aboard the runabout for the away team and all of their equipment. Naya! took the helm while T'Lan sat beside her. Then behind them Sodyne and Davis occupied the last two positions in the cockpit. This left Martin and Doctor Hamill along with Davis' engineering team and the squad of ground troops who, after loading their equipment aboard the runabout made their way to the rear compartment where there was plenty of seating for them all.

"Runabout *Rhine* to *Nightfall*, are we cleared to launch?" Naya! transmitted.

"Confirmed *Rhine*. Take care down there, we'll keep an eye on things from up here." Cole responded and Naya! smiled as she engaged the runabout's thrusters, lifting off from the hangar deck before exiting through the forward launch door.

"That ship gives me the creeps." Davis commented as he looked at the Ferengi vessel that had given up attempting to stay out of sight and now orbited Vega-468 not far from the *Nightfall*.

"It does look kind of like it needs a giant boot to squish it, doesn't it?" Naya! replied.

"It was probably modelled after the favourite snack food of the designer." Sodyne said.

"Yes, I've never seen the appeal in eating bugs. Even combat rations are better." Davis said.

"Many invertebrates are excellent sources of protein." T'Lan pointed out, "Of course a balanced diet need not include animal products."

"Is that how it is with you and Robert, cousin?" Naya! asked, "Have you banned him from eating meat at home? Because I've seen him tucking into food that definitely once had horns and went 'moo'."

"It is Captain Cole and must I continue to remind you that we are not related?" T'Lan responded and Naya! smiled.

"For the record T'Lan doesn't like being reminded of the relationship between Romulans and Vulcans." she told Davis and Sodyne, "But if either of you ever want to spice up your respective love lives I can give you a copy of her list of sexual fantasies. Although I should warn you that at least one entry comes with the severe risk of getting some kind of fruit preserve in your eyes."

"Lieutenant Naya! perhaps you should focus your attention on piloting this craft." T'Lan said.

"As you wish commander." Naya! said as the runabout entered the moon's atmosphere.

Although at one point during its history Vega-468 had been a lush world, the cooling of its sun had caused temperatures to drop sufficiently that many of its native plants and animals had died off. Now the moon's surface was largely barren with just a few of the hardier species remaining.

"I'm picking up the research team's beacon." Sodyne announced, "Naya! steer twelve degrees starboard. The range is ninety-two kilometres."

"Starboard twelve degrees, aye." Naya! said as she turned the runabout towards the source of the beacon. Dropping beneath the level of the clouds the runabout's crew were able to see the small courier vessel that had brought the researchers here at the base of a cliff.

"I don't see any shelters." Naya! commented.

"The research team has constructed its camp in a natural cavern." T'Lan said.

"Makes sense. I imagine that the wind would cause some pretty nasty dust storms in this environment." Davis said.

"So where should I set us down?" Naya! asked.

"I would suggest beside the research team's vessel." T'Lan told her.

"Okay, taking us in. Standby for landing." Naya! said.

As the runabout came in to land the entrance to the cavern in which the camp had been constructed came into view and from it emerged a figure that waved at the approaching runabout.

"At least there's someone friendly down there to welcome us." Davis commented.

"I'll try not to land on his foot then." Naya! said as the runabout decelerated before hovering for a moment and then descending to ground level.

"Looks like a Vulcan." Sodyne said when she saw Trellan walking towards the runabout but then he smiled, "Strike that, Romulan. Definitely Romulan." she added.

"Attention away team," T'Lan said into the intercom, "We have now landed. Prepare to disembark."

T'Lan was the first off the runabout, followed by Davis and Sodyne just as Trellan approached.

"Hello there, I'm Doctor Trellan. Thank you for coming." he said and he held out his hand.

"You are Romulan?" T'Lan commented.

"What gave it away? Was it the ears?" Trellan joked as he shook hands with the three officers and before Naya! emerged from the runabout behind them.

"Commander T'Lan is very observant." she said in the Romulan language, "Jolan tru, I'm Lieutenant Naya!."

"You hold a Starfleet commission?" Trellan asked and Naya! nodded.

"I spent five years as an advisor on a Starfleet vessel and after that I applied for citizenship. What about you? How did you end up working for humans?" she replied.

"I spent more than eighty years conducting archaeological research for the empire. Then Romulus was destroyed and all of a sudden I was given the choice of digging trenches for my colony's troops in the civil war or graves for the ones that died in it. I preferred to leave and Professor Denning offered me a job. Come with me all of you, the professor is expecting you." Trellan said but before anyone could move the first of the Starfleet ground combat specialists emerged from the runabout and the squad began to spread out to cover the area, "What's this?" he asked.

"Captain Cole and I are concerned that the Ferengi may make an attempt to acquire the stasis boxes you have uncovered. We intend to prevent that." T'Lan explained as Martin and Hamill exited the runabout to complete the disembarkation.

"Is this the only way to access the ruins?" Martin asked as they all walked towards the cavern entrance.

"That we know of." Trellan answered, "Of course the builders of the complex probably put in alternative entrances somewhere that we just haven't uncovered yet."

"Secure this entrance." Martin told the soldiers accompanying them, "And make sure that no-one gets near the ships."

"Doctor Trellan, the report I saw indicated that you had only detected the stasis boxes on a subsurface scan. Have you been able to excavate them yet?" T'Lan asked.

"Thinking about blasting through the dirt with your phasers?" a voice called out from close by and Trellan smiled when he saw Foster exiting the module that served as the mission's control centre.

"Commander T'Lan may I introduce Jack Foster? He's the pilot of the ship that brought us here and also our mechanic." Trellan said.

"And unless there's anything specific you need me for I'll be keeping as far from you all as I can." Foster added. Then he looked at Trellan and said, "I'll be on my ship."

"Is he always that unfriendly?" Nayal asked as the group continued towards the control module.

"I'm afraid that Foster isn't a fan of Starfleet." Trellan said, "Fortunately Professor Denning appreciates the situation better."

There was a small flight of steps leading to the entrance to the control module and Trellan led the Starfleet officers inside to where Denning, Hewitt and Terry were standing around the map of their excavation.

"Professor Denning this is Commander T'Lan of the *USS Nightfall* and Lieutenant Nayal. I'm afraid I didn't catch anyone else's names." Trellan said.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is our science officer, Lieutenant Commander Davis is our chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Martin serves at tactical and Doctor Hamill is our chief medical officer." T'Lan said, pointing out the remaining members of the away team present.

"They have a squad of soldiers outside as well." Trellan told Denning.

"Soldiers? Commander we're not at war here." Terry commented.

"I'm sure the commander is just being cautious doctor." Denning said and then turned to T'Lan, "Doctor Terry is our team medic and also provides biological support while Trellan and Erica Hewitt are my assistants." he added.

"We've just met your mechanic. He doesn't seem to like us." Martin said.

"No, I'm sorry about that. I hope it won't cause any trouble." Denning said.

"We have also spoken with the Ferengi DaiMon Krom. He did not attempt to hide his intention to try and remove artefacts from this moon." T'Lan added.

"Yes, I'm regretting ever hiring him." Denning said, "Take my advice commander and limit your dealings with him to messages over a view screen. If anyone from your ship does need to meet him face to face then make sure they're male."

"Why?" Hamill asked.

"Krom has some very old fashioned and extreme views about women doctor." Denning said and Terry shuddered.

"Too right. When he turned up I wanted to inspect the medical supplies he'd brought before we took delivery. It was only after I'd beamed aboard that I was told that if I wanted to be on the ship I had to be naked. Krom said it was enough of an insult to his Ferengi heritage that I was allowed to speak to him without me wearing clothes as well." she said.

"He did come across as a bit of a misogynistic little troll, even over subspace." Sodyne said.

"So what did you do?" Hamill asked.

"We needed the supplies and I was the only one who could make sure we were getting what we'd asked for." Terry answered, "Fortunately I had a PADD I could use to protect some of my modesty and thankfully they gave my clothes back when I beamed back down."

"It would have been nicer if they'd let you put them back on before beaming down though." Hewitt added.

"I will remember your warning professor." T'Lan said and then she looked at the map on the table in front of

them, "Is this a map of the ruins you are excavating professor?" she asked and Denning smiled.

"The section we know about, yes. So far we haven't been able to determine the exact limits."

"The scale of this map is huge." Hamill commented, "How big is it?"

"Sixty kilometres square so far." Hewitt told her, "It's the biggest example of Slaver era construction ever found."

"Where are the stasis boxes?" Davis asked.

"Right here." Denning answered, pointing to the map, "They're in a large chamber that also contains some machinery that I'd like your input on Commander Davis."

"My input? I'm afraid my specialisation is modern technology professor." Davis said.

"Maybe but no-one here has any idea what the machinery we've found is meant to do. I was hoping that perhaps you would be able to shine some light on it." Denning said.

"Well I'll happily take a look at it for you." Davis said.

"Professor we should remember that the *Nightfall* was ordered to Vega four-six-eight to investigate the stasis boxes your team uncovered. Perhaps you could show us to them." T'Lan said and Denning nodded.

"Of course, come with me and I'll take you to them now." Denning replied.

"Lieutenant Nayal might I have a word with you in private?" Trellan added and Nayal glanced at T'Lan before replying.

"Sure. Why not?" she said.

While the rest of the away team were being shown into the tunnel complex being excavated Trellan took Nayal to his quarters where he opened up a locker.

"I hope you'll forgive me for this lieutenant but I was hoping that you'd just share a drink with me." he said as he produced a bottle of Romulan Ale, "Everyone else here is human and although Foster has been willing to try it, none of them can handle their ale."

"Technically I shouldn't but I suppose just one can't hurt." Nayal replied and Trellan began to pour a pair of drinks, "I did have a small supply myself that I'd brought with me but it was lost along with the *Nightfall*." Trellan frowned.

"But I thought the ship you arrived on was the *USS Nightfall*." he said, confused.

"Oh it is. The second one. The original *USS Nightfall* was destroyed in the Iconia system. I'd tell you more but Starfleet have classified large parts of the story. The best parts if you ask me." Nayal told him and he nodded.

"All governments have their secrets. When I still living in the empire every dig I went on was accompanied by at least two agents from the Tal Shiar to make sure that anything we found could be kept secret if they deemed it a threat or matter of national security. I don't expect things will have changed much under this new Romulan Free State or whatever they end up calling it." Trellan replied.

Nayal took a drink.

"So does it bother you that you've clearly more experience than Professor Denning but you're working for him?" she asked.

"Oh it's more than that. His work here would be nowhere without me." Trellan said.

"How so?" Nayal responded.

"The Romulan Empire found stasis boxes as well you know. Four of them to be exact. Of course they didn't share any of the contents with anyone else but I got to study the contents of one. It was filled with audio and visual recordings that were educational in nature and we managed to translate them. We don't just have to guess at what happened a billion years ago, we know. We even know why it resulted in the death of almost all sentient life in the galaxy. The Slaver's were telepathic you see, they could control how people behaved." Trellan told her.

"I guess that's why the empire classified the discovery." Nayal commented.

"That sort of power would make an empire almost unbeatable." Trellan said.

"The Slavers were beaten." Nayal pointed out.

"Yes they were. Although they could control the minds of others, they couldn't read them and that gave the slave species the chance to plan their rebellion. Individually a single slaver could control a handful of beings at once and that wasn't enough to control a galaxy so they built devices to enhance their powers by orders of magnitude. With such a device they could control an entire planet by themselves. Then at the end of the war, when it was obvious they were going to loose they turned those same devices into weapons. They enhanced their power so they would cover areas light years across and then all at the same time they sent out one single command. Die. Every sentient life form in the galaxy that heard that command, including the Slavers themselves, killed themselves in a single day. That's why the professor wanted me. Using my translations he was able to identify this sector as somewhere the Slaver empire had dozens of colonies and outposts. Vega four-six-eight was their headquarters. When the revolt happened that caused the downfall of their empire the Slavers will have co-ordinated their actions from here." Trellan continued.

"Sounds like you should be running this team then." Nayal said, taking another drink and Trellan sighed.

“Of course I should. Like you said I’ve got far more experience than Professor Denning. I did my work on the Slavers before he was even born but the Federation Archaeological Council wanted one of their own in charge. At least this way I get to be here for any discoveries the professor makes.” he said before gulping down the rest of his drink, “Care for another?” he asked and Nayal smiled as she held out her glass. “You mean like the contents of three stasis boxes?” she said.



"You may have to stoop in places." Denning said as he led the way through the network of underground tunnels towards the chamber that contained the stasis boxes, "From what we can tell the Slavers were somewhat on the short side."

"Thanks for the warning." Davis said, rubbing his head.

"It was my understanding that the only reliable means of detecting a stasis box was the reaction they have on one another when brought within a light year. How did you detect these boxes professor?" Sodyne asked.

"Ah yes, the energy feedback created by two stasis field operating in proximity. The universe doesn't like it when the normal rules of entropy are messed with. Our discovery was quite by chance I assure you. I had hoped that we would find a stasis box in the sector but the Federation Archaeological Council was unwilling to release any of the ones they held to act as detectors. We deployed a sensor net to try and map the tunnel network. That was successful in showing us a large area that still needs digging out but it also came up with three total voids where the sensor sweep couldn't penetrate. It had to be stasis boxes." Denning said.

"How did you eliminate the possibility of neutronium? That would also defeat your scans professor." T'Lan pointed out and Denning nodded.

"Yes it would, but the scan was multi-spectrum and neutronium would still have absorbed energy in several frequencies. Especially infra-red." he said.

"That's true commander." Davis added, "Neutronium can absorb vast amounts of energy. That's what makes it so useful."

"If only we could make it." Martin commented.

"Maybe once we're done here we will be able to." Hewitt said, "We picked up several neutronium signatures as well."

"This is the chamber now." Denning said, pointing to where the passageway they were walking down opened out into a large space that was lit by a number of free standing lamps. The chamber was already occupied by members of the research team, working to clear away the dirt as the ultrasonic bores loosened it from around the machinery that stood in the middle of the chamber. In addition to the light from the lamps there was a yellowish glow coming from one side and as the group reached the entrance to the chamber they saw that this was being cast from a trio of featureless boxes in a row of alcoves along one wall. There were more alcoves in the wall as well but all of them stood empty. Each of the boxes was identical, approximately two meters long and half that wide and tall.

"Stasis boxes." Sodyne said and she darted forwards, taking out her tricorder and trying to scan them, "It's true." she said, smiling, "No scans can penetrate them at all and they are emitting no energy. A perfect closed system."

"Violating any number of the laws of physics." Davis added as he walked up to one of the stasis boxes and reached out to touch it.

"Are you sure you should be doing that Davis?" Martin asked.

"Don't worry. I'm a professional." Davis said and he placed his hand against the side of one of the glowing stasis boxes before letting out a scream that caused everyone to turn towards him.

"Help him!" Terry exclaimed and she, Martin and Hamill all rushed forwards before Davis stood up straight and laughed, holding up his unharmed hand.

"Ah the old man-eating stasis box act." he said, "Gets people every time."

"Not funny." Hamill said, frowning.

"Careful there Ashley." Martin said, holding up the phaser he had drawn, "Those things are big enough for a person. Someone might accidentally push you into one and no-one would find you for a billion years."

"Hang on," Hamill then said, looking at the boxes, "if Sodyne's tricorder isn't picking up an energy emissions from these things then how come we can see them glowing?"

"Another mystery of stasis boxes." Sodyne said, "Like their mass. It's a fixed value defined by their volume. No matter how heavy the contents are it doesn't affect the overall mass of the box."

"The Vulcan Science Institute has postulated that a stasis box may in fact be an access point to a parallel universe." T'Lan said.

"Never mind that, at least it means they're easy to shift." Davis said and he turned to Martin and added, "We'll need two antigravs per box I think. Then we'll move them outside the cavern."

"These things look big enough to hold photon torpedoes. I'd suggest a pretty big margin of safety." Martin replied.

"Agreed. Ideally I'd like to load them onto the runabout and fly them around the other side of the moon." Davis said and he looked at T'Lan.

"The *Nightfall* cannot protect this location and the runabout if it is on the other side of the moon. Would a

distance of ten thousand metres be sufficient?" she replied.

"Depends on the size of the bomb one of them could contain." Martin said.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, what is your opinion?" T'Lan asked but Sodyne did not replied.

"Hey Sodyne." Davis added and she looked up from her tricorder.

"Sorry, what was that? Has anyone else started getting a headache from these things?" she said.

"No-one's complained of that before now." Denning said, "My people have spent hours near them."

"Could it be because she's a Betazoid?" Terry suggested and Hamill took out her medical tricorder and held the probe to Sodyne's head.

"Sally it's just a mild headache." Sodyne said.

"Well I'm picking up some interesting readings from the parts of your brain that are associated with Betazoid telepathy." Hamill told her.

"Professor are any of your team Betazoids?" T'Lan asked and Denning shook his head.

"No and no Betazoid ancestry as far as I know." he answered.

"In that case it is logical to assume that Lieutenant Commander Sodyne's biology is the reason for her headaches. I will take her place in the opening of the boxes while she remains here, hopefully out of range of their influence." T'Lan said.

"Commander I'll be fine. Opening these boxes is a once in a lifetime opportunity, you can't make me miss it." Sodyne protested.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, my primary concern must be for your well-being, not your emotional need to be present when the boxes are opened." T'Lan told her, "Doctor Hamill please remain here with Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and monitor her condition."

"So I miss it now as well?" Hamill exclaimed, "What if there's something alive inside them?"

"Doctor Terry would you be prepared to join us when the boxes are opened?" T'Lan asked, looking at the research team's medical officer.

"You bet." Terry replied. Then she looked at Hamill and added, "Sorry."

"Then Lieutenant Commanders Davis and Martin will carry out the opening of the stasis boxes with myself and Doctor Terry in support." T'Lan said.

"Looks like it'll be just us in the command centre then Erica." Denning said to Hewitt before he turned to Sodyne and Hamill and added, "Unless you ladies would like to join us."

"Thanks professor but if it's alright by you I wouldn't mind studying the rest of this place a while longer."

Sodyne replied, waving her arm at the machinery being excavated around them.

"I guess that means I better stay and keep an eye on you then." Hamill added.

"Professor I saw some transport vehicles in the cavern when we first arrived." Davis said and Denning nodded.

"Yes, we use them for getting around on the surface. We don't have a transporter so we need them for travelling when it's too far to walk in a reasonable time." he replied.

"Commander I recommend we use antigravs to move the boxes to the cavern and then load them onto separate transports to take us far enough away to open the boxes safely. We should ship them out one at a time just in case one of them does contain something dangerous. I'd hate to lose all three just because there was a bomb in one of them." Davis said.

"Agreed lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded and then she looked at Martin, "Lieutenant Commander Martin would you oversee the loading of the stasis boxes? Lieutenant Commander Davis, Doctor Terry and I will select a suitable location at which to open them and beam out there to set up our equipment." then she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to *Nightfall*." she said but there was no response.

"Communications don't work too well down here commander." Denning told her, "This was some sort of command centre and the Slavers seem to have shielded the roof. The plan is to set up some communication repeaters but so far we've had other tasks that have kept us busy."

"Very well professor, we shall return to the runabout and communicate with the *Nightfall* from there." T'Lan replied.

"T'Lan it's good to hear from you. I was starting to worry." Cole said when his first officer made contact from the surface.

"There was no logical need to worry captain." T'Lan responded, "Our position is quite secure."

"Very good." Cole said, smiling, "So why are you calling?"

"We have confirmed the presence of three Slaver stasis boxes at he dig site. Lieutenant Commander Martin is currently overseeing their transfer to transport vehicles while our equipment will be set up at a remote location where they can be opened safely." T'Lan said.

"Where is this location T'Lan?" Cole asked.

"We have picked a point ten kilometres north of here. Davis and I will beam there along with Doctor Terry from the research team to prepare for the arrival of the boxes." T'Lan answered.

"Hold on, did you just say you were going? And a member of the civilian research team as well?" Cole said when he heard this.

"Yes captain. The proximity of the stasis boxes appears to be making Lieutenant Commander Sodyne unwell. Therefore, I will be taking her place and Doctor Terry that of Doctor Hamill." T'Lan said.

"Okay but be careful T'Lan. I don't want to lose anyone, especially not you." Cole said.

"Worrying will not produce any benefit. However, I am aware that moving the stasis boxes across country creates a security issue. We have only one squad of ground troops to protect all three." T'Lan said.

"Mister Ghroc how much area can we cover from orbit?" Cole asked.

"We can easily provide orbital cover over a distance of ten kilometres captain." Ghroc replied, "Of course if our people do come under attack we may have difficulty making sure we target the enemy and not them. Especially if we use the mass accelerators."

"I know, I've seen how effective they can be." Cole said, "Okay T'Lan I'm going to have three more squads beam down. With a full platoon you'll have enough men to protect all three stasis boxes and your test site at the same time. I'll have our fighters on standby as well. Any sign of a shuttle launch from the Ferengi and I'll have them intercepted."

"Understood. I shall provide you with the co-ordinates of the opening site. T'Lan out." T'Lan said and then the channel went dead.

"Captain the Ferengi might notice when T'Lan and the away team start moving the stasis boxes around in the open." Ghroc commented.

"Yes I'm aware of that. They must be being careful just in case any of the boxes hold anything dangerous. Obviously we can't raise our shields just in case the away team need beaming out in a hurry but I want us ready to take action against the Ferengi if they are stupid enough to try anything." Cole told him.

"What is happening?" Krom demanded when he entered the *Latinum Lobe's* bridge to find both Drurk and Neeradel standing beside the central control console.

"Leader we have just overheard a conversation between the Federation ship in orbit and their team on the surface. They are moving the stasis boxes." Drurk told him.

"They have opened them?" Krom asked.

"Not yet leader." Neeradel answered, "They plan to open them at a remote location just in case the contents are dangerous."

"So they will be outside." Krom said.

"Yes leader, though not unguarded. The Federation captain has deployed guards to protect them and is going to deploy more. They plan to use fighters to prevent our own shuttles from launching." Drurk said.

"Have you and engineer Mugtek found a way to acquire the boxes for ourselves?" Krom said.

"Not yet leader." Drurk admitted.

"Leader this still offers us an opportunity." Neeradel said.

"How so?" Krom replied.

"The Federation plan to open the stasis boxes. That means that the contents will be removed from the stasis field that prevents transporter function. If we could get close enough to get a precise fix on whatever is removed from them then we could simply beam it aboard." the female science officer explained.

"We would have to be very close." Drurk said, "Plus there is still the matter of the stasis boxes themselves. They too are valuable. Worth many times their weight in latinum."

"Better to have just the contents than nothing at all." Neeradel pointed out.

"Yes but we should not abandon the boxes themselves." Krom responded, "Drurk I want you and engineer Mugtek to take a party down to the surface as soon as the place where the stasis boxes are to be opened is found. Watch what the hu-mans do and report in."

"Yes leader." Drurk said.

When T'Lan, Davis, Terry and the engineering team from the *Nightfall* materialised they immediately looked around at their surroundings. The site chosen to open the Slaver stasis boxes was a small valley surrounded by gently sloping hills, all of them barren grey and devoid of life.

"I am detecting no life readings other than us. This area should suffice." T'Lan said as she scanned the valley with her tricorder.

"Okay let's get unpacked." Davis ordered and the engineers set down the equipment cases they held and began to remove their contents.

"Commander T'Lan what do you want me to do?" Terry asked.

"We will find a suitable spot from which to observe the opening of the stasis boxes doctor." T'Lan told her.

"So we won't be opening them ourselves?" Terry said, disappointed.

"No. Lieutenant Commander Davis will carry out the actual opening along with Lieutenant Commander Martin who will assess the danger posed by any ordnance they may contain. We will monitor them from a

safe distance and be prepared to assist them should they need our help. Are you familiar with the use of a spacesuit?" T'Lan replied.

"A spacesuit? No. Why should I be? I'm a doctor not an astronaut."

"The contents of the boxes may be hazardous. Everyone present will wear a spacesuit for protection from any dangerous gases or pathogens released when they are opened." T'Lan explained as she walked over to a large equipment case that had been beamed with them from the *Rhine* and opened it to reveal a number of Starfleet issue spacesuits, "I will instruct you on how to use one."

While T'Lan was explaining the use of a spacesuit to Terry, Davis and his engineers were setting up the other equipment they had brought with them. Central to this was the work bench on which the stasis boxes would be placed so that they could be opened without the person doing it needing to bend down. A few metres back from this a number of spotlights were erected, the moon Vega-468 was currently in the process of moving into the shadow of the gas giant it orbited and the ambient light level was dropping significantly. These spotlights would provide all the illumination needed for the Starfleet team to see what they were doing without the need to hold palm beacons. Accompanying the spotlights were numerous sensors, including cameras to send video footage to the PADDs held by T'Lan and Terry as well as up to the orbiting *Nightfall*. To avoid the risk of an active sensor triggering any explosive inside one of the stasis boxes all of the sensors were passive ones and their data was carried away along fibre optic lines to the PADDs as well as a single narrow angle transmitter aimed upwards into the sky.

It was just as the last of these sensor arrays was being set up that the air nearby sparkled as a squad of ground combat specialists, all already wearing spacesuits with built in armour plates were beamed down from the *Nightfall*.

"Not taking any chances are you?" Terry commented when she saw the well armed troops materialise. Each soldier carried a phaser rifle and had photon grenades attached to his suit.

"Logic dictates that it is preferable to have unneeded resources than to lack those that turn out to be required doctor." T'Lan said and Terry smiled.

"You mean better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it?" she said.

"That is what I just said doctor." T'Lan replied.

"Commander where do you want my men to deploy?" the leader of the squad of newly arrived troops asked as he walked towards T'Lan.

"Have them deploy in pairs. Two each to north, south, east and west. You and your second in command should stay here with myself and Doctor Terry." T'Lan told him.

"And make sure you've no equipment radiating any active energy signatures." Davis called out, "I don't want to get blasted into a thousand pieces because your men were talking to one another over a comm frequency that matches the remote detonation trigger circuit of a billion year old tricobalt device."

The soldiers then began to spread out, finding positions that offered them protection if they came under attack before crouching down and pointing their weapons towards the tops of the hills that surrounded the valley unaware that they were being watched.

"They bring in soldiers. They know we are here." one of the Ferengi said when he saw the ground combat specialists materialise in the valley below.

"Then why are they spreading out?" Drurk responded as he studied the situation below through a set of light amplifying magnifiers, "These soldiers are here as a precaution."

"There are more of them than us." Mugtek the engineer pointed out, looking around at the half dozen Ferengi crewmen who had beamed down from the *Latinum Lobes* at the same time the Starfleet team had beamed in from their runabout. By matching the times of the transports, the Ferengi had hoped to hide their arrival from the *Nightfall* and the sudden appearance of the Starfleet soldiers had worried some of them that this ploy had failed.

"Not so many that a few shock charges will not even the odds. Plus these Starfleet fools didn't even have the lobes to select a position on high ground." Drurk said, "Now tell me what you think of their equipment Mugtek."

"They are cautious leader." Mugtek told him, "See how they all don spacesuits even though the air is breathable here? They anticipate that the Slavers may have booby trapped their precious boxes. I'd wager an entire brick of gold pressed latinum that all those sensors are set to passive modes of operation. Luckily for us, it means that they won't detect our presence either."

"But where are the Slavers' stasis boxes?" another of the Ferengi said impatiently.

"The boxes cannot be moved using a transporter. The stasis field itself prevents it." Mugtek said, "They will be brought by vehicle."

"A vehicle that approaches now I think. Listen." Drurk added as he heard the sound of an electrically powered vehicle making its way across the uneven terrain between the valley and the archaeologists' camp. Sure enough a small wheeled vehicle soon came into view behind the Ferengi, heading in their general

direction but along a route that would not bring it within a hundred metres of their position as it drove past up the hill and then down into the valley on the other side.

The vehicle was driven by a junior member of Professor Denning's research team while beside him sat Martin. Then behind them a pair of ground troops sat either side of one of the Slaver stasis boxes, the ancient artefact glowing in the darkness thanks to the presence of the other two boxes back at the camp.

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More of the ancient Slaver machinery had now been revealed as the dirt surrounding it was broken up by the ultrasonic bores before being cleared away although there was no obvious function to it that Sodyne or Hamill could discern.

"So it's true. You two did stay behind. What are you doing here?" Nayal asked as she entered the chamber.

"Trying to figure out what all this is for." Sodyne answered.

"And complaining about Commander T'Lan. We're stuck down here instead of finding out what's in those boxes all because of a mild headache." Hamill added.

"That hasn't gone away by the way. So much for the stasis boxes causing it." Sodyne commented.

"What about you? Where have you been?" Hamill said before she leant closer to Nayal's face and sniffed, "Wait, have you been drinking?" she asked.

"I may have had a beverage or two, yes. Trellan asked me to share a drink with him and I took the opportunity to find out about what's going on here." Nayal answered.

"Watch it lieutenant. Commander T'Lan will probably have you scrubbing out plasma conduits with a toothbrush." Sodyne said.

"I wouldn't worry about that." Nayal said as she sat down on a step that had been uncovered, "T'Lan may seem like a heartless ice queen but underneath that humourless exterior the fires of her Vulcan ancestors burn deeply. Look." and as she took out her PADD Sodyne and Hamill sat down either side of her, "First a bit of back story. This goes back to when T'Lan and Robert Cole got married, a wedding that none of the rest of the crew were invited to I might add. Anyway they had the official ceremony on Vulcan and then went to Earth for a second one that Captain Cole's family could attend. It was then that Cole's sister gave T'Lan a stupid magazine that among other pointless articles had one about keeping passion alive in a marriage and our dear Commander T'Lan was inspired to create this." Nayal then opened up a document she had stored on her PADD and held it so that the other two women could see what it contained.

"Is this a list of sexual fantasies?" Hamill said.

"Oh yeah, written by our very own first officer Commander T'Lan." Nayal replied.

"Whoa!" Sodyne exclaimed, "I thought you were joking on the runabout when you told us about this."

"T'Lan really wrote this?" Hamill said, "It's even categorised."

"It does make it easier to navigate." Nayal said.

"Hang on, how did you get hold of this?" Sodyne asked, "T'Lan doesn't seem like the sort of person to distribute this."

"She wasn't very careful with it." Nayal said.

"You mean you stole it." Hamill said and Nayal smiled.

"So do you want copies? I'm telling you there's some good stuff in here. Take a look at this one." she said and she scrolled down the file and pointed to one of the entries.

"As a doctor I'd advise against that." Hamill commented.

"Yes, when Bradley and I tried it he did end up in sickbay. It was totally worth it though." Nayal said.

"Bradley? Is he your boyfriend?" Sodyne asked.

"He was. He was killed. Murdered." Nayal answered.

"I'm sorry." Sodyne said as she held out her PADD, "I'll take a copy though. I may be single now but I may want to try some of that when I'm not."

"You better give me a copy as well then. My boyfriend is currently more than four hundred light years away but I may need to know what preparations I need to make for patients coming into sickbay with injuries sustained from number seven on that list." Hamill said.

"For medical purposes only? Sure doc." Nayal replied as she was copying the file to Sodyne's PADD.

"Well if you're going to be going to the effort of preparing for it maybe I'll just grab the next guy I meet and ask him to-" Sodyne began.

"Do what?" Foster suddenly asked from behind where the three women sat and Sodyne jumped, pulling her PADD back towards her and pressing it to her chest so that Foster could not see it.

"Don't do that!" she snapped.

"Do what?" Foster asked.

"Creep up behind people." Sodyne said.

"I wasn't creeping. You all just happened to have your backs to the way in. Besides I thought Betazoids could sense people behind them." Foster said and Sodyne frowned.

"Not this Betazoid thankfully." she said, "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you wanted nothing to do with us Starfleet types."

"Oh I don't. But I have a message for you and the professor, Erica and Trellan won't leave the command

centre so I got told to bring it to you.”

“So what is it?” Nayal asked.

“The first of those stasis boxes has reached the site picked for the grand opening. If any of you want to watch it you'd better get a move on.” Foster said.

“Thanks I-” Sodyne said as she got to her feet but then she suddenly flinched, grabbing her head in her hands.

“Leyla, are you okay?” Hamill exclaimed as she leapt to her feet and took hold of Sodyne,” Sit back down again while I scan you.” and she took out her tricorder to perform another scan of Sodyne.

“I think I just stood up too fast. That's all.” Sodyne said.

“I don't think so Leyla. I'm picking up a massive increase in neurotransmitters. If you were a normal Betazoid then I wouldn't think anything of them but-” Hamill said.

“What's not normal about here?” Foster interrupted.

“She doesn't have any telepathic ability. That's why she didn't sense you behind us.” Nayal told him.

“It's as if your brain is suddenly producing the chemicals used by the parts governing your species' ability.” Hamill said.

“But why? The doctors on Betazed all said that there was nothing that could be done to activate the telepathic centres of my brain.” Sodyne said.

“And they aren't active. I think that's why you've got these headaches. The chemicals are flooding your brain but not being used.” Hamill told her.

“Your still not telling me why though.” Sodyne said.

“I'm sorry, I don't know.” Hamill replied and Nayal slowly turned to where the Slaver machinery was being excavated.

“What exactly is this stuff?” she asked.

“I don't know. I'm a doctor not an ancient historian.” Hamill said.

“It probably doesn't do anything any more. It's been buried down here for a billion years.” Foster said.

“Well I think part of it still works and I think I know what it is.” Nayal said and the others all looked at her.

“So tell us. I want to know why I feel like I've just been through a head butting contest with a Klingon. A dozen Klingons in fact.” Sodyne said.

“Trellan explained it to me. He said that the Slavers were all telepaths of a sort. They could force anyone to do anything. That was the basis of their power. They didn't have much technology of their own because they never needed it. They forced other species to make stuff for them.” Nayal said and Sodyne snorted.

“Typical telepaths then. Lording it over the rest of us.” she commented.

“So you don't like telepaths? An interesting opinion for a Betazoid.” Foster added and Sodyne glared at him.

“You try growing up on a planet where you can't keep a secret from anyone but all of them can keep whatever they want from you. Try being the butt every practical joke because you're the only one who won't know that it's coming.” she said.

“Can I continue? I have a really important story to tell here.” Nayal said.

“Go ahead.” Hamill told her.

“Well one Slaver on their own couldn't keep control of very many people at once and only when they were close by so they constructed, or rather their slaves constructed, telepathic amplifiers that allowed just one of them to dominate an entire world of hundreds of millions of beings. A dozen of them could keep control of a planet of billions. At the end of the war they had their servitors push the technology even further and went from devices that would let them control a planet to ones that would let them exterminate every sentient being in the galaxy.” Nayal said and then she pointed to the Slaver machinery being dug out of the dirt, “I think that's what this is. A telepathic amplifier.”

“There's no such technology. Nothing can block or enhance telepathic skill that way. There are a few drugs that can-” Hamill began before Nayal interrupted her.

“No technology that the Federation or Romulans have doctor.” she said, “But to an alien empire a billion years ago? It was child's play to them.”

“The professor will want to know about this.” Foster said.

“I need to stay.” Sodyne said, “I need to know if this really is having an effect on me like you say.”

“In that case I better stay and keep an eye on you.” Hamill told her.

“I guess that leaves us then Mister Foster.” Nayal said.

“What and leave this in the hands of Starfleet and a bunch of students? I'm the expedition mechanic so if machinery is to be dug up I want to make sure that nothing gets broken.” Foster replied.

“Off you go lieutenant. We're all staying put.” Sodyne said.

The stasis box had been placed on the work bench and Martin and Davis now stood with it right in front of them. Both men wore armoured spacesuits of the same kind used by the ground combat specialists for protection. Everyone else had withdrawn to what was hoped would be a safer distance if there did turn out to

be anything dangerous inside.

"I didn't expect it to be so difficult to walk in this thing. It's like my feet are glued to the ground." Terry commented, looking down at her feet.

"You have the artificial gravity system engaged doctor." T'Lan told her, "It is applying an additional gravitational pull."

"What? Oh thanks." Terry said, looking at the control panel on the leg of her suit and shutting off the artificial gravity system that was intended as an aide to movement in zero gravity.

T'Lan then turned towards Martin and Davis.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin. Lieutenant Commander Davis. Are you both prepared?" she called out, raising her voice rather than use the communicator built into her spacesuit. Most of the spacesuits' communicators had been shut down while the stasis boxes were being opened to make sure they did not trigger anything that was inside. Only T'Lan's communicator was still active and it had been connected via a land line to the nearby transmitter so that she could communicate with the *Nightfall* in orbit.

"Almost set." Martin responded as he picked up a small cylindrical device that fit in the palm of his hand. This also had a fibre optic cable coming out of one end while at the other was a button and a trigger that could be depressed with his thumb and forefinger, "As soon as I press these together the dead man's switch will activate. Release them both and the *Nightfall*'s computer will execute an emergency beam out of everyone here. Letting go of one and then the other will disable the switch until they are both pressed again."

"I'm ready whenever you give the word commander." Davis added and T'Lan activated her communicator.

"T'Lan to *Nightfall*, everything is in place. We are ready to open the first box." she transmitted via the nearby transmitter array.

"Copy that T'Lan." Cole responded, "We're receiving the feed clearly and the computer has acknowledged the activation of Martin's dead man's switch. Our transporter is ready to beam you out." then he smiled as he looked at the image being transmitted from the surface of the stasis box surrounded by spotlights, "I just hope it's not full of face melting ghosts. If it is then remember to close your eyes and don't look at them."

"I will do so." T'Lan said and Terry frowned, having also heard the message.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It is something an old colleague once showed us." T'Lan answered.

"Really? You work with some weird people." Terry commented.

"Yes I have done." T'Lan said before turning her attention back to her link to the *Nightfall*, "We are proceeding. Do not irradiate any active energy emitters towards this site until further notice. T'Lan out." T'Lan then looked towards the Slaver stasis box again and waved to the two men standing next to it, "You may proceed." she told them.

Martin and Davis looked at one another and smiled.

"Here goes." Davis said and Martin nodded, looking down at the stasis box, ready to trigger the emergency transport procedure if there was any danger. Davis then began to feel around the sides of the box.

"What are you waiting for?" Martin asked.

"Do you see any instructions on this billion year old box? I'm looking for the latch. They're always hidden."

Davis replied before he felt part of the surface of the stasis box give way under the pressure of his touch, "A-ha." he said and then there was a 'click'.

Martin and Davis looked at one another again.

"No explosion yet." Martin said and then they looked back at the box before Martin lifted the lid so that they could see what was inside.

"Well? What are they waiting for?" Terry commented when neither man announced what they were looking at.

"Be patient doctor." T'Lan told her, "If there was any danger then Lieutenant Commander Martin would have triggered the emergency beam out."

Inside the box Davis and Martin found themselves looked at a large number of neatly packed bottles. All were labelled in an alien script but the were opaque so the contents could not be seen.

"I'm going to open one." Davis said and he removed one of the bottles from the stasis box that rattled when he picked it up.

"Sounds like it's full of beans or pills or something." Martin said.

"Let's see." Davis replied as he gripped the top of the bottle and tried to unscrew it, "It's stuck." he said.

"Maybe they opened their bottles backwards." Martin suggested but Davis shook his head.

"I tried that already." he said before he suddenly felt the top shift, "A-ha. Push down twist, push and twist back." he said.

"Complicated." Martin commented as Davis removed the lid from the bottle and looked inside to see a large number of tiny yellow capsules.

"Probably an anti-child feature. We should give them to those ground combat troops and see how long they keeps them busy." Davis said, putting the lid back on the bottle before setting it down on the bench beside

the stasis box. Then he removed another bottle and looked closely at the label, "I don't know what any of this says but they all look the same. Unless someone's been reusing the bottles the contents are probably identical."

"And safe?" Martin asked.

"If they are poisonous then you'd have to eat them for them to cause any harm." Davis said and Martin released the trigger on the cylinder he held, followed by the but on top to shut off the emergency beam out. Then he turned and waved at T'Lan and Terry.

"All clear." he called out.

"What have you found Lieutenant Commander Davis?" T'Lan asked as she and Terry walked towards the workbench and the stasis box on top of it.

"Looks like medicine." Davis answered, "Of course medicine for what is another matter." and he tossed one of the bottles to Terry, who then struggled to try and open it.

"There's a knack to it doctor." Davis said, demonstrating how to open the bottles on another of them.

"Hopefully Trellan will be able to translate these labels. Who knows, they could be a cure for something."

Terry said, grinning.

"Or maybe they're just vitamins." Martin commented.

"That would still be of scientific interest lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "It would reveal information about the biology of the species that created these."

"Commander I recommend returning these to stasis and then bringing along the next box." Davis said and T'Lan nodded in agreement before she activated her communicator.

"T'Lan to *Nightfall*, have you been observing?" she signalled.

"Yes T'Lan, we saw everything." Cole replied, "If you're in agreement then Doctor Terry should be allowed to analyse some of the contents but I want the rest brought back up here along with the stasis box. I think you, Sodyne and Doctor Hamill will be able to study them better using our equipment."

B.

In the underground complex more of the Slaver machinery was being uncovered and Sodyne stood back, running repeated scans with her tricorder to try and determine how it worked. Meanwhile Fowler was performing a close visual inspection instead, shining a palm beacon over areas still covered in dirt and scraping it away to expose what lay beneath.

"Strange, I'm not picking up any internal mechanism." Sodyne said.

"There don't seem to be any external controls either." Fowler added.

"Perhaps it doesn't work like that." Hamill suggested, "Maybe a Slaver just hooks themselves up to it and it runs automatically."

"Which would mean any telepath could use it. Assuming it still functions of course." Sodyne said and Fowler snorted.

"Then Starfleet can bend everyone to their will." he said.

"You really don't like Starfleet do you Mister Fowler?" Hamill commented.

"Hell no I don't." he replied, "Let me tell you about my family doctor. We lived on a frontier colony along the Cardassian border. We had to sleep with one eye open just in case a Cardie raiding party came calling but it was home. Then one day the Federation tells us that they're giving our home to the Cardies and Starfleet pulls out. As if that wasn't bad enough when we fought back, formed the Maquis and got armed and organised Starfleet actually sided with the Cardies. They hunted my parents down and put them in prison while the Cardies literally got away with murder on our planets while all you Starfleet types remained safe in the Core Worlds. If you had any idea what the Cardies were like-"

"I'm Betazoid. I grew up on Betazed." Sodyne interrupted angrily, "I was in high school when the Dominion invaded. Our government always thought we were safe in the core of Federation space so we had no more than a token defence force. It took just hours from the first photon torpedo hitting our capital for them to be in charge of our world. Everyone knew someone who got dragged off by the Jem'Hadar on the orders of their Vorta masters and was never seen again but even with their mass arrests and firing squads they were nothing compared to what happened when any of their Cardassian allies stopped by. All those bored soldiers looking for some entertainment and my people were it. They expected women to agree to any demand they made and some didn't even bother asking. They hunted in packs, surrounding their victims so that the women couldn't help but sense what was about to happen to them. Just like when I was walking home from school one day."

"Oh God Leyla, did they-" Hamill began.

"I was lucky I suppose." Sodyne replied, "I was with two friends when the Cardassians appeared. My friends knew what they had planned and screamed. When I didn't react it tipped the Cardassians off that I was different. Apparently it was no fun for them to have a victim that didn't have to know what they were thinking so I was just made to watch while my friends were abused. Then when they were done they actually gave us all rides home so that they'd know where we lived. They told us that they'd be seeing us again the next week and if we didn't show they'd come after our families. I don't know if they were serious or not because three days later more torpedoes started falling when the liberation came. But don't tell me about the brutality of Cardassians Mister Fowler because I've seen it first hand and Starfleet wasn't responsible." then she turned back towards the machine and continued with her scans.

"Hey look I-" Fowler said but once again he was interrupted.

"I think you should just keep your mouth shut for a while." Hamill told him.

"I must say I was hoping for something a little more impressive." Trellan said, looking at the feed from the stasis box opening.

"It's better than the box being empty." Hewitt pointed out and Trellan smiled.

"Always looking on the bright side?" he said just as Noyal came rushing into the command centre.

"Professor!" she exclaimed.

"Lieutenant Noyal. What's wrong?" Denning responded.

"Nothing but I think you need to see this." and she handed him her PADD on which she had an image of the machinery being excavated.

"That's the chamber where the boxes were found." he said and Noyal nodded.

"Yes and it wasn't the boxes that was giving Sodyne headaches, it was that." she said.

"Headaches? What is it?" Hewitt asked.

"It's when you get a pain in your head but that's not important right now." Noyal replied and Hewitt frowned,

"What is important is that I think that machine is a Slaver telepathic amplifier. Sodyne may have no more telepathic ability than any of us but she does have the latent genes and Doctor Hamill thinks they're

producing some chemical because of the presence of the machine.”

“I should go and check it out.” Trellan said and Denning nodded.

“Go.” he said, “We'll keep monitoring the situation with the stasis boxes here.”

Trellan followed Nayal from the command centre, running across the cavern to the entrance to the tunnel network. Hurrying through the tunnels they reached the chamber where the excavation was taking place, arriving just as an alcove in the machinery was revealed, inside which there was an object that looked like an egg that was open at the front. Fowler and a pair of junior researchers were busily digging the dirt out of this.

“Did I miss anything?” Nayal asked.

“We think we've found a control point.” Sodyne answered.

“Incredible.” Trellan said and he rushed to where Fowler and the other two researchers were working, “Let me help.” he told them, grabbing a trowel and starting to dig at the dirt.

“I think I've got it.” Fowler said and then he promptly pried a large chunk of compressed dirt from inside the egg, causing everyone standing nearby to leap back as it fell to the floor and shattered.

“There's nothing in there.” Nayal said as she looked inside the now largely empty egg.

“It could be a seat.” Trellan suggested.

“It doesn't look very comfortable,” Nayal said.

“The cushioning could have decayed over a billion years. I doubt it would have been as durable as the machinery itself.” Sodyne said.

“How's your headache?” Hamill asked, holding the probe of her tricorder beside the Betazoid's head.

“No better than ten minutes ago.” Sodyne replied.

“Still no sign of any instrumentation. My guess is that the operator just sits in there.” Fowler said.

“Well the size matches for what little we know about how big Slavers were. It'll be a squeeze for any of us of course.” Trellan said.

“You don't seriously expect any of us get in that do you?” Hamill said, “Who knows what it would do to us?”

“It's a telepathic amplifier and none of us are telepaths.” Sodyne replied.

“It's obviously having some effect on you.” Hamill pointed out and Sodyne looked at Trellan.

“I should try sitting in it.” she said.

“No way. It's too dangerous.” Hamill said, “I'm your doctor and your friend and I'm not letting you take the risk.”

“What risk? At worst my headache gets worse and I get right back out again. On the other hand maybe I can turn it off and my headache goes away.” Sodyne said.

“Maybe we should check with Captain Cole first.” Hamill suggested.

“He's busy with the stasis boxes. Everyone is.” Nayal said.

“Besides,” Sodyne added, “by the time you can get to somewhere where you can get a signal out and back I'll have already tried it. Now wouldn't you rather be here to make sure I'm okay?”

Hamill sighed.

“Okay fine. But at the slightest hint of any problem I'm having Nayal drag you out. Okay?” she said and Sodyne smiled.

“Deal.” she replied.

With the first stasis box on its way back to the camp, the second had been delivered and was in the process of being placed on the work bench.

“Same procedure as before.” Davis said to T'Lan, Martin and Terry, all of who were stood close by, “I expect this box will open in exactly the same way so I'll just lift the lid and open it.”

“Very good lieutenant commander. Doctor Terry I suggest we withdraw.” T'Lan replied.

“You know with that emergency beam out device your man has we're probably just as safe here as back there.” Terry said as they started to walk away from the box.

“While I have every confidence in Lieutenant Commander Martin's reactions I cannot be one hundred percent certain that they will be fast enough in every case doctor. Therefore, logic dictates that we take further precautions.” T'Lan said before they got to where they had stood while the first box was opened and T'Lan turned and waved at Davis.

“Opening the box now.” Davis told Martin and he pressed the sides where latches had been on the first box. Once again the box opened easily and the two men looked inside. Like the previous box this one was filled with numerous objects but unlike previously they did not all look the same. Instead there were several electronic devices of various designs that would fit in the palm of a human hand and a number of glass containers, each of which held a row of coloured rods.

“Any idea what any of this is?” Martin asked but Davis shook his head.

“None. It looks like there's another layer of stuff under this though. I'm going to try lifting this lot out to see what's underneath. Keep that trigger handy.” he said.

“Right here.” Martin said, holding up the trigger he held.

"Get ready. I'm lifting up this first layer now." Davis said.

In the command centre Denning's eyes widened when he saw the contents of the stasis box.

"Erica do you see those?" he said, pointing to the coloured rods.

"Yes, they're memory devices aren't they?" she replied.

"I think so. We could do with Trellan here, He's seen those devices before so he could confirm it." Denning said and he reached for the communication link to the orbiting *Nightfall*, "Captain Cole are you there?" he said.

"Yes professor. Do you have any idea what nay of those objects are?" Cole responded.

"Possibly captain. The rods look like memory devices and from what Trellan's told us about them that collection potentially represents an entire library of information. I could pack up my expedition and spend the rest of my life back in the Federation translating them all." Denning told him.

"As soon as T'Lan makes contact again I'll let her know professor but for now I can't risk transmitting to her or her team." Cole said.

"I understand. I'm sure that Trellan will be eager to get a look at them as well though when he gets back." Denning said and Cole frowned.

"What do you mean 'when he gets back'? I thought he was with you." he said.

"No. Your Lieutenant Nayal came and told us that the machinery being excavated from the same cave the stasis boxes were found in could be one of the Slaver's telepathic amplifiers. He's gone to take a look."

Denning said.

"Okay. But if you see any of them tell my people I don't want them trying to turn anything on until Commander T'Lan and Davis have had a chance to examine it." Cole told him.

With the egg shaped control point now clear of almost all the dirt it had been packed with Sodyne walked up to it, considering the best way to get inside. It was clear that she could not get entirely into the egg but she could sit in it like a chair. However, even as she perched on the edge it became apparent that her head would not quite fit.

"You'll have to tilt your head sideways." Trellan told her.

"I know." Sodyne replied, "I just don't want to add a sore neck to my headache." and she tried tilting her head at various angles to see if she could get it past the edge of the opening in the egg.

"Try moving forwards and then lean back. Push your head upwards." Nayal suggested and Sodyne moved forwards, resting on the very edge of the bottom part of the egg as she leant backwards and this time her head made it into the interior.

The result of this was something that no-one had expected however, as Sodyne let out a loud and shrill scream.

"Get her out! Get her-" Hamill began, starting to rush forwards but she made it no further than a single step before she and everyone else in the chamber apart from Sodyne herself collapsed unconscious on the floor.

In the research team's command centre Denning and Hewitt were focused on the feed from the opening of the second stasis box when all of a sudden they heard Sodyne's scream in their minds and they doubled over, clutching at their heads as they too fell unconscious along with the other researchers in the room.

At the site of the opening of the stasis box Davis had removed the tray on which the upper layer of objects inside the box sat and was about to set it down on the bench when all of a sudden Sodyne's psychic scream reached everyone present in the valley and just as with Denning and his staff they doubled over in pain as they blacked out. In Martin's case this meant that he released the trigger for the emergency beam out and even as they fell to the ground the entire team was suddenly wrapped in the energy of a transporter field and beamed up to the *Nightfall*.

The effect of Sodyne's scream was not limited to the surface of Vega-468 though and in orbit every member of the *Nightfall's* crew suddenly doubled over in pain and collapsed, leaving the entire ship operating only on automatic.

3.

From their vantage point overlooking the valley where T'Lan's team was opening the stasis boxes, Drurk and the other Ferengi saw the Starfleet personnel all suddenly collapse in unison just before they were beamed away.

"There is a weapon in the box! We should flee." one of them exclaimed.

"Wait!" Mugtek snapped, watching the now abandoned box closely, "The hu-mans all wore spacesuits and my scanner detected no energy emissions."

"So you believe there is no danger?" Drurk asked.

"Nothing I can detect." Mugtek said and then he pointed down into the valley, "Look, the Slaver device is unguarded. Ripe for us to take along with whatever it contains."

"Take two others and investigate." Drurk told Mugtek, not wanting to risk his own life on the word of the disgraced Ferengi engineer. Drurk was well aware that to reduce his costs Krom had hired all his senior officers from among Ferengi who could not easily find employment elsewhere, himself included.

"You and you. Come with me." Mugtek said, pointing to the two Ferengi closest to him and all three of them promptly scurried over the top of the hill, Mugtek leading the way down into the valley while constantly checking his scanner for any indication of what may have happened to the Starfleet team.

Along the way one of the Ferengi paused and slung his weapon over his shoulder at the spot where two of the Starfleet ground combat specialists had been deployed to keep watch. When they had collapsed the two soldiers had let go of their phaser rifles and one of them had not secured it to his armour, meaning that the weapon was now lying abandoned on the ground. Deciding that it was superior to his battered disrupter, the Ferengi now picked up the state of the art phaser rifle and grinned.

"Hurry up. With your share of the latinum from that stasis box you'll be able to buy yourself a thousand phasers." Mugtek told him.

"Why waste the latinum when I can get this one for free?" the other Ferengi responded before starting to run once more.

Mugtek's hand scanner detected no environmental threats and he ran between the spotlights that ringed the stasis box, heading right up to the workbench on which the box sat before coming to a halt. Seeing no danger he set his scanner down and took a communicator from his pocket.

"Engineer Mugtek to *Latinum Lobes*, do you read me?" he signalled.

"This is DaiMon Krom. Go ahead Mugtek." Krom responded.

"Leader the hu-mans have abandoned one of the stasis boxes." Mugtek told him.

"What do you mean abandoned?" Krom asked.

"They all appeared to collapse when they opened the box and they were beamed away, but the box was left here. I am with it now. It contains numerous electronic devices as well as some coloured rods, the purpose of which is not obvious." Mugtek explained and aboard the orbiting Ferengi starship Krom turned to his science officer.

"Our sensors did detect the transport leader. The hu-mans beamed back to their ship." she said.

"But why leave the box if it is not dangerous? What are they doing now?" Krom replied.

"Nothing leader." Neradeel answered, "I can detect no signals to or from their starship or positions on the surface."

"Nothing from Denning's people either?" Krom said and Neradeel shook her head.

"Nothing at all leader." she said.

"Perform a full scan of their vessel." Krom ordered.

"Leader they will detect such a scan." Neradeel reminded him.

"I know that. Remember your place female. Now perform the scan." Krom snapped.

"Yes leader." Neradeel said and she looked down at the console in front of them while she performed the scan before suddenly looking back up again, "Leader according to these readings the entire crew of the Federation vessel is unconscious."

"Unconscious? But how can this be?" Krom said.

"I don't know leader. We detected nothing but perhaps whatever happened to their team on the surface was transmitted through the transporter beam when they were evacuated." Neradeel suggested.

"But you say that their outpost on the surface has also stopped transmitting." Krom said before returning to the communication channel to his men on the surface, "Drurk are you there?" he said.

"Listening leader." Drurk responded.

"Drurk I want you to secure the stasis box then take your team to Denning's base of operations. Find out what is going on there and report back." Krom ordered.

"Yes leader." Drurk said before turning to his men, "Get that box loaded onto the hu-man vehicle. We will ride

it to their camp.” he told them.

The transport vehicle used to move the stasis boxes was just large enough for the Ferengi to cram themselves along with the box onto it before they began to drive in the direction of the archaeologists’ camp. Mugtek drove the vehicle and his inexperience in operating it combined with the uneven terrain to cause a bumpy ride. However, the path to the camp had been left clearly marked by the tracks from the previous journeys made transporting the first two boxes. As soon as the entrance to the cavern where the camp was set up came into view it became apparent that something was wrong, a body could be seen lying in the entrance although from the distance the Ferengi were at it was impossible to tell whether the person was alive or dead.

“Mugtek stop.” Drurk ordered and the engineer brought the transport vehicle to an abrupt halt, “We walk from here. Keep scanning for poisons or radiation.”

“Yes leader.” Mugtek replied as the Ferengi disembarked from the vehicle.

Advancing towards the cavern, around the small starship that had brought the archaeologists to Vega-468 the Ferengi saw that there were in fact five people lying on the ground outside the entrance and that all of them wore armoured Starfleet uniforms and carried phasers.

“Federation soldiers.” one of them said.

“This is unusual.” Drurk commented.

“How so?” Mugtek asked.

“I’ve encountered Starfleet vessels before, They do not carry soldiers such as these.” Drurk told him.

Proceeding inside the cavern the Ferengi immediately came across more of the Starfleet ground combat specialists, all of them clustered around a row of transport vehicles identical to the one that the Ferengi had ridden here. On the backs of two of these were the other stasis boxes, one of them labelled with its contents after they had been packed inside. The Starfleet troops were not the only ones near these vehicles though, one of the research team was also lying unconscious on the ground beside one of them. However, given that she was not wearing the armour that the Starfleet troops were the Ferengi were able to see that she was still breathing.

“She still lives.” Mugtek said and Krom nodded.

“Then these soldiers and those soldiers outside are probably alive as well and could awaken. We must make haste. The command centre is this way, follow me.” he said and he hurried towards the camp’s command centre, dashing up the steps and going inside.

Professor Denning, Hewitt and several junior team members were lying on the floor when the Ferengi burst into the command centre and just like everyone else that they had seen so far the archaeologists were all unconscious.

“They are still alive as well.” Drurk commented

“They were watching the opening of the boxes when it happened.” Mugtek added, looking at the live feed that was still coming from the site chosen for the opening of the Slaver stasis boxes.

“Perhaps whatever caused this can be transmitted over energy waves. The data feed to here and either this feed again or the transporter up to their starship.” Drurk said.

“In which case we are fortunate that our monitoring of the hu-mans was disrupted.” Mugtek replied, “Or we too could have been incapacitated by whatever weapon did this.”

“Look at this map. This must be the structure the hu-mans came here to study.” Drurk said, taking out his communicator, “Drurk to *Latinum Lobes*.” he said.

“Go ahead Drurk, I am listening.” Krom’s voice responded.

“Leader we are in the hu-man command centre. Everyone at their camp has been rendered unconscious as well. It appears they were observing events when the box was opened.” Drurk told him.

“Interesting.” Neradeel said when she overheard this.

“There is also a map of the tunnels they were studying. The chamber where the boxes were found is clearly marked.” Drurk said.

“Leader there may be other valuable items in that chamber.” Mugtek added.

“What about the stasis boxes themselves?” Krom asked.

“All here at the camp leader. We brought one back with us from where the hu-mans had opened it and the others were here, including the one not yet opened.” Drurk answered.

“Good. Make sure they are guarded while you head for the chamber where they were found. I want everything Drurk. Do you understand? We will send a pod down to collect one of the stasis boxes that the hu-mans have already confirmed as safe right away but everything else will need preparing for transport as well.” Krom ordered.

“Yes leader. I understand.” Drurk replied before shutting off his communicator. Then he looked at the other Ferengi, “We will secure all of the hu-mans in one of their structures before they can wake. Then two of you will stay behind while the rest of us investigate this chamber.” he ordered.

Aboard the *Latinum Lobes* Neeradel was studying the scans she continued to take of the *Nightfall*. "Leader there may also be profit in investigating the Starfleet vessel. Our scans show that it is heavily armed. Those armaments could bring a good price." she suggested. "Perhaps but I do not want to lose out on anything down on the surface because our attention was divided." Krom said, "Maintain your scans of the Starfleet vessel though. If there are any signs that the hu-mans are recovering I need to know. Lock our weapons onto them as well while they will not be aware of it. If they do recover then we will at least be ready to engage them immediately." "Yes leader." Neeradel replied.

"These hu-mans have nothing of real value." one of the Ferengi left behind to watch over the two stasis boxes said as he emerged from one of the camp's structures. Not being included in the group Drurk was taking to investigate where the boxes had been found meant that they would not have the chance to obtain anything from there that could earn them a profit. Instead they took the opportunity to go through the contents of the camp in the hope that there would be something there worth stealing. However, apart from a few basic electronic devices and the badly damaged fragments of billion year old artefacts that the Ferengi could not identify there was nothing to be found.

"Have you forgotten the Slavers' stasis boxes?" the other Ferengi asked.

"DaiMon Krom knows how many of them there are." the first replied, "Beside which how would we smuggle one back aboard the ship?"

"I was not thinking of the boxes themselves. Only the contents. No-one knows what is in this third box. We could take whatever we wanted and who could say what had been in there?" the other Ferengi told him and he placed a hand on the unopened stasis box.

"The hu-mans thought it wise to open them far from here."

"Perhaps, but they had not opened any of them at that time. Why would the contents of the third box be any more dangerous than the first two?" the second Ferengi said and then after a moment's pause as they both stared at one another they both laughed.

After slinging their weapons the two Ferengi rushed to the unopened stasis box and began to feel the surface.

"How did the hu-mans open the others?" the first said.

"It looked like they pressed the sides." the second replied immediately before finding the hidden latches on either end of the box, "Here, I've found the release." he said and he pressed the latches at the same time. With the box now unsealed the Ferengi was able to lift the lid but the moment he did so the stasis field that had frozen time inside for a billion years was shut off and something pushed against the inside of the lid so hard that it flew open rapidly and the startled Ferengi leapt backwards. Before either of them could unsling their weapons a translucent tentacle lashed out from inside the now open stasis box and wrapped itself around the neck of the Ferengi who had just opened it. This tightened rapidly and before the Ferengi could cry out there was a 'crunch' as the tentacle crushed his neck.

The surviving Ferengi was able to unsling his disruptor rifle and pointed it at the stasis box, waiting for whatever was inside to reappear so he could shoot it without risking damaging the box itself and thus earning the ire of Krom for costing him a priceless artefact. His hearing was sensitive enough to hear the sound of something moving inside the box but he saw nothing until all of a sudden a mass of tentacles leapt straight upwards before the Ferengi could react. Leaping high enough to disappear from the Ferengi's field of vision the ancient creature came back down more than twenty metres away and landed behind a stack of coolant gas cannisters, knocking them into one another.

The Ferengi looked around nervously, searching for somewhere safe that he could retreat to. The problem was that he did not know exactly what the creature was capable of. He knew that it was both fast and strong but not exactly how fast or strong. He looked back towards the gas cannisters when he heard them banging against one another again and he looked down the sights of his disruptor, ready to fire if the creature reappeared. The translucent mass shot from behind the canisters and the Ferengi fired a burst of disruptor blasts at it but he was too slow and the creature disappeared behind one of the camp's structures without being hit by any of them. Cautiously the Ferengi advanced, keeping his distance from the structure just in case the creature leapt out at him unexpectedly. However, what he did not consider was how close this brought him to the stasis box that still sat open on the back of one of the transports. Nor did he consider that it might not be empty and as he crept past the stasis box another pair of tentacles suddenly lashed out from inside the box and wrapped themselves around his body, pinning his arms to his sides as he was dragged back towards the box screaming at the top of his voice. Pulled head first into the box, the Ferengi's legs kicked out at random as he struggled in vain to get free of the second creature inside the box but his struggles were in vain and seconds later his body went limp and was pulled entirely into the box.

It was then that the first creature reappeared from behind the structure it had used for cover and advanced towards the body of the first Ferengi before settling down on top of it.

"Quiet!" Drurk said suddenly as his team neared the chamber where the stasis boxes had been found and the Ferengi halted and fell silent.

"What is it leader?" Mugtek asked after a few seconds.

"Do you not hear that? There is someone else awake down here." Drurk said softly so that his voice would not carry and as Mugtek listened again he heard the sound of sobbing in the distance.

"Perhaps the weapon's effects did not reach this far underground leader." Mugtek suggested, "We know communications cannot penetrate this deep."

"Perhaps, yes. Everyone be ready with your weapons. I will not let a bunch of hu-mans keep us from whatever lies ahead." Drurk said and he began to advance down the tunnel again.

The Ferengi halted just outside the entrance to the chamber when Drurk held up his hand. Then he signalled for them to advance again and they rushed into the chamber and spread out. All around them they could see more figures lying unconscious on the floor but it was undeniable that there was also someone in the chamber who was awake. Drurk looked at each of the unconscious people in turn, doing his best to determine who was producing the sound of sobbing and he saw that although most of them were obviously civilians there were also three Starfleet officers in the room and it was one of these that did not look like everyone else in the chamber. Whereas most of the occupants were lying sprawled out as they had fallen Sodyne was curled up in a foetal position with her arms clasped over her head as if to shield it.

"Her. She is awake. Seize her." Drurk said and a pair of Ferengi rushed forwards to grab hold of Sodyne's arms, dragging her to her feet and revealing her tear soaked face.

"I saw them! I saw them all!" she shrieked.

"Look at her eyes. She is a Betazoid." Mugtek said and Drurk smiled.

"Indeed. Interesting that she has remained conscious while all of the others here did not. Perhaps the weapon that caused this is telepathic in nature." he said.

"Possible leader. As a telepath herself she could have had some defence against it and our brains are superior. They are not vulnerable to telepathic probes or assault." Mugtek replied.

Drurk then looked at the contents of the chamber. All of the portable equipment present was of obvious Federation origin but it was equally obvious that the central machine was not. This meant that it had to be a creation of the ancient Slaver Empire and as such was priceless.

"How long do you think it would take to dismantle this and get it aboard our ship?" Drurk asked Mugtek.

"I would have to examine it leader but it will not be quick. I think a day at least." the engineer told him.

"The hu-mans may recover in that time." Drurk said.

"It is unavoidable leader. Act too quickly and we may damage the mechanism. DaiMon Krom will not forgive that, it would reduce the value of the find" Mugtek said.

"Then we must make ready to defend this place from the hu-mans. Secure all of them. We will put them with the others at the camp. Except for the officers. Isolate them with Professor Denning and his senior researchers. They may help convince the hu-mans not to attack." Drurk ordered.

"Yes leader." Mugtek responded.

While Mugtek went to inspect the Slaver machine the remaining Ferengi immediately set to work securing the unconscious Starfleet officers and researchers. A toolkit was found that contained a large number of plastic cable ties that were used to bind their wrists before they were loaded onto antigrav trolleys that had been used to bring the lighting and excavating equipment down into the chamber. Sodyne could walk but she did need to be supported by a pair of Ferengi who accompanied Drurk back to the camp ahead of the others. However, they did not expect to find what awaited them there.

Instead of the two Ferengi standing guard over the camp and the precious stasis boxes there were instead a pair of corpses lying beside a stasis box that had been closed when Drurk took the other Ferengi into the tunnels but that now stood open. What had happened to the Ferengi was not immediately clear but as Drurk and the others advanced slowly towards the bodies they saw that there were swarms of tiny creatures crawling all over them. These looked like translucent tentacled blobs barely a centimetre across and they seemed to be crawling out of the bodies themselves.

"Leader what are they?" one of the Ferengi holding Sodyne asked.

"I don't know but they probably came out of that stasis box. The fools must have opened it to steal whatever was inside while they thought they could get away with it." Drurk said.

"What do we do about them?"

"If they can do that to a person we need to make sure they are exterminated." Drurk responded and he brought up his disruptor, adjusting it to its maximum setting before he fired it at the closest body. The energy

blast struck the corpse and it was instantly vaporised along with the creatures that covered it. Then he turned his attention to the other corpse and fired again to destroy it along with the creatures.

Just then there was the sound of a spacecraft operating on thrusters from outside the cavern and the Ferengi looked around to see a compact shuttlepod from the Latinum Lobes coming in to land.

“Quickly, we must get one of the stasis boxes outside.” Drurk ordered, holstering his disruptor and then he and one of the other Ferengi rushed to pick up the nearest stasis box, the one standing empty in front of them that they believed had contained the swarm of tiny creatures and closed it before picking it up between them so they could carry it outside, leaving the other Ferengi behind to guard Sodyne.

The pod held just a single pilot and its cramped interior provided just enough room for the stasis box to be loaded aboard.

“Tell DaiMon Krom that this is the box the humans had left unopened. The two men I left to guard them proved to be untrustworthy. They must have opened it and the creatures it contained killed them both. I had to vaporise them to protect the rest of us. Also we have secured the chamber where the boxes were found. Engineer Mugtek is investigating the best way to get the machinery it contains-” Drurk began before he was interrupted by the sudden high-pitched squealing sound of a panicking Ferengi and the three beside the shuttlepod all whirled around to see what was happening.

Although she had seemed incoherent when they had brought her from the underground chamber, Sodyne had by this point recovered enough of her senses to be aware of her surroundings and when she was left being guarded by just one Ferengi she made the most of the opportunity. With her wrists bound behind her back she had no use of her arms so instead she leant in close to the alien while his attention was on the nearby slaver boxes and opened her mouth wide before suddenly biting down on one of his ears. Then as he dropped his weapon and screamed as he clamped his hands to his head she kicked his legs out from under him and he collapsed in a heap on the ground. Seeing a knife tucked into the Ferengi’s belt Sodyne squatted down beside him and drew the weapon before standing up and breaking into a run, heading behind the closest of the camp’s structures while Drurk began shouting.

“Get the stasis box to the ship.” he ordered the pilot. Then he looked at the other Ferengi and added, “Come with me. We need to recapture her.”

On the other side of the structure Sodyne had run behind she pressed herself up against the wall as she carefully turned the knife so that its blade pointed upwards and she applied steady pressure against one of the cable ties around her wrists until it snapped and her arms were freed. The Ferengi had taken her phaser, tricorder and combadge so now all she had to work with was the stolen knife but she was satisfied that it would be enough as she started to move again, looking for a way to contact the orbiting *Nightfall*.

Cole awoke to find himself lying on the floor of the bridge by his chair. Looking around him he saw that the rest of the bridge crew were likewise unconscious, either sprawled on the floor or slumped across their consoles. Thankfully the officer at the helm had not fallen across the manual controls the *Nightfall* included or the ship could easily have spun out of control.

“Ghroc. Ghroc can you hear me?” he said, crouching by his chief helmsman and shaking the Bolian gently until his eyes suddenly flickered open.

“Captain, what happened?” he asked as he sat up and looked around.

“I don’t know, I remember Davis was just opening the second stasis box and then all of a sudden I found myself lying on the floor.” Cole replied.

The command crew of the *Nightfall* were issued with headsets including heads up displays that enabled them to access the ship’s systems from anywhere on the ship without the need for a console and Ghroc quickly grabbed his from where it had landed and put it on.

“Our orbit is still stable and all systems appear functional but I’d say we’ve been out a couple of hours at least.” he said.

“If something went wrong on the surface then the emergency transport should have triggered.” Cole said and he looked upwards, “Computer where is Commander T’Lan?” he asked.

“Commander T’Lan is in transporter room one.” the computer responded and Cole smiled.

“Ghroc stay here and try to find out what’s going on in other areas of the ship. You may want to try waking some of this lot up as well. I’m going to transporter room one.” he said before he ran towards the turbolift.

Rushing through the *Nightfall*’s corridors Cole saw several other members of the ship’s crew and he paused briefly to check that they were still alive before continuing to the transporter room. In here he found the operator unconscious behind his console and several figures in spacesuits lying on the transporter pad itself. He quickly identified his wife among them and crouched down beside her, removing the helmet from her spacesuit.

“T’Lan can you hear me? I need you to wake up.” he said but she did not respond so instead Cole picked her unconscious form up and carried her across the transporter room to an emergency equipment locker, knowing that it contained a medical kit. From this he took a hypospray and loaded the device with a

stimulant, "I hope this works." he said as he pressed the injector nozzle against T'Lan's neck and then triggered the device.

T'Lan gasped as her eyes suddenly opened wide and she saw Cole looking down at her.

"Robert." she said, "What happened?"

Cole leant down and quickly kissed T'Lan.

"I was hoping you'd be able to help explain that. Davis opened the second box and then all of a sudden it looks like everyone here and down on the surface was knocked out. Martin must have let go of the trigger because the computer beamed you all back up here. Ghroc is on the bridge assessing our situation." he explained and T'Lan looked towards the other unconscious figures lying on the transporter pad.

"We should attempt to awaken Davis, Martin and Doctor Terry. They may also be able to help." T'Lan suggested and Cole nodded.

"Good idea." he said before he tapped his combadge, "Cole to bridge."

"Ghroc here captain. Is T'Lan okay?" Ghroc replied.

"She's fine I think. What's the situation up there?" Cole asked.

"I've been able to rouse the bridge crew captain but it seems that we're the only ones aboard who are awake." Ghroc answered.

"T'Sal." T'Lan said, unable to hide her concern for their child.

"You go and check on her. I'll deal with everyone here. We'll meet on the bridge." Cole said.

"That is logical." T'Lan replied.

"Captain I think you should see this." Ghroc said when Cole returned to the bridge with Martin, Davis and Doctor Terry. The Bolian was standing by the tactical console and when the three newly arrived officers joined him they saw that he was watching the feed from the site where the stasis boxes had been opened. While the Nightfall's crew had been unconscious the sensors on the moon had continued gathering data including the video footage Ghroc was now watching.

"That's where we opened the stasis boxes." Martin said.

"And there's no box there now." Davis added.

"Track the footage back." Cole ordered, "It should show what happened to it."

Ghroc skipped back through the video footage to the point immediately before the crew had been knocked out. He then allowed the footage to play at an accelerated speed, showing the collapse and beaming out of Martin and Davis. Then after a short period of the footage showing no-one near to the stasis box Drurk suddenly came into view.

"The Ferengi? How did they do this to us?" Terry asked.

"I could see them hitting us with some sort of stun weapon on the surface but if they'd attacked the Nightfall we'd already know about it." Cole replied, "I think that the Ferengi were just watching while you were opening the boxes. Somehow they were unaffected by what happened and took advantage of you being beamed out."

Just then the turbolift opened again and T'Lan entered the bridge.

"I have checked on the ship's children." she said.

"Are they okay? What about Harriet?" Davis asked.

"The children and your wife are all unharmed lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "I revived Harriet but advised her that leaving the children in her care unconscious for now was logical. They may become distressed if they are woken. She is monitoring their conditions."

"T'Lan take a look at this." Cole said and he transferred the footage the other officers had been watching to the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge, showing her the segment in which Drurk entered the shot, "The Ferengi were watching while the boxes were being opened. Then they took the opportunity to steal this one while it was unguarded." he told her.

"Interesting. The fact that the Ferengi walk into shot rather than beaming in supports your suggestion that they were already watching. However, that raises the question of how they knew to be watching us there." T'Lan said.

"Well couldn't they have seen us arrive there?" Terry said.

"The same energy pattern from our transporter that could have been detected by the Ferengi would also have allowed our sensors to detect their arrival doctor." T'Lan pointed out, "Logically that must mean that they arrived at the same time as us, using our arrival to mask their own from our sensors. A more detailed study of our sensor logs will show whether there was a second transporter signature at the same time as ours."

"But surely that means they must have known exactly when we were beaming there. How would they have known that?" Martin asked.

"Perhaps because they were monitoring us." T'Lan said, "The Ferengi knew about the stasis boxes even though they had supposedly not been told about them."

"That means someone from Professor Denning's team must be feeding them information." Martin pointed out.

"Correct and I believe that that person is Doctor Terry." T'Lan said and the Starfleet officers all turned to look at Terry.

"Hey, I'm no spy." she protested, frowning as she stepped back away from them.

"No you are not Doctor. However, I think that you have been used to inadvertently pass information to the Ferengi Krom." T'Lan said.

"How?" Martin asked.

"Yes how?" Terry added.

"Doctor Terry you said that you beamed aboard the Ferengi vessel. Correct?" T'Lan said.

"Yes, that's right and the perverted little trolls made me strip." Terry said.

"But your clothes were returned when you left their vessel. I believe that while they had them in their possession the Ferengi attached monitoring devices to each item of clothing. As long as your were wearing at least one item you had been when you boarded their ship they could listen in on what was being said around you." T'Lan explained and Terry frowned.

"I'm not sure what I find more disturbing." she said, "That the Ferengi wanted to see me naked or that they didn't care about that because they were more interested in my clothes themselves."

"Are you wearing anything you wore aboard their ship now doctor?" Davis asked.

"No but I was wearing the same jacket when we were discussing the opening of the boxes." Terry replied.

"This still doesn't explain how we were all knocked out but the Ferengi obviously weren't. It sure sounds like they attacked us to me." Martin said.

"Then why not destroy the *Nightfall* while they could? Even the lowly pulse cannons their ship is carrying would have been enough with our shields down and us helpless." Cole said.

"Captain by eliminating the impossible whatever remains, no matter how improbable must be the truth." T'Lan said, "We know that the contents of the stasis box were safe so whatever affected us did not come from the site of the opening. If the attack also did not come from the Ferengi ship then that suggests that whatever rendered us unconscious came from Professor Denning's camp or the ruins being excavated."

"We haven't heard anything from them." Ghroc said.

"Captain I'm picking up a Ferengi pod coming from the surface." the officer at operations announced and the senior staff looked at him.

"Main viewer." Cole ordered and an image of the tiny Ferengi pod heading out of the atmosphere appeared on it.

"Where exactly did it come from?" Ghroc said.

"Tractor beam captain?" Martin suggested.

"No, if the Ferengi were watching then they obviously know that we were knocked out. For now let's see if we can keep them thinking that that is still the case. Commander Martin as soon as enough your staff and our ground troops are awake I want you to prepare strike teams to transport either to the surface or to the Ferengi ship." Cole said and Martin nodded.

"Yes captain." he replied.

"In the meantime I want to know what happened to us. T'Lan, Davis, see what you can find in our sensor logs. Doctor Terry would you mind assisting in waking my crew up?" Cole said and Terry smiled.

"Sure, I'm glad to help." she said.

Sodyne could hear Drurk and the other two Ferengi moving around the cavern looking for her as she concealed herself behind a generator, hoping that the steady 'hum' it produced while operating would hide her from their sensitive hearing. She wished that she had been able to take a disruptor from her Ferengi guard as well as the knife but with her hands bound at the time that had not been possible. As far as she could tell there were just two ways that she could realistically attempt to contact the *Nightfall*, or failing that try to send a message back to Starfleet. Firstly she could try to get to the camp's command centre where the research team had a subspace communications array but the drawback with that was that the Ferengi would easily be able to force their way inside. On the other hand the runabout *Rhine* still sat outside the cavern and if she could get aboard it then Sodyne knew that she would be safe. Even if the Ferengi attacked she could raise the craft's shields and watch as they fired their weapons against it helplessly. She would also have access to the store of equipment aboard the ship and be able to arm herself just in case she needed to leave it again. The problem with that plan though was that she needed to get all the way outside without being seen and shot by the Ferengi. Hoping to see a safe route to the runabout she cautiously peered over the generator and tried to spot where her hunters were.

Sodyne could see Drurk and one of the Ferengi from where she was but there was no sign of the third until he came walking around one of the structures. Ominously it was obvious that he was walking towards her and would undoubtedly see her if he got much closer to her. She considered the possibility of trying to hide so that he would only see her at the last moment and she might have the chance to drive the knife into him but then another thought occurred to her and she turned around and hurled the knife as hard as she could towards a structure that was only partially assembled.

The knife struck the lightweight wall and produced a loud 'clang' that made all three Ferengi turn towards it. Then just as she had hoped they started to run in that direction, mistakenly believing that she was behind the wall and had accidentally knocked into it. This gave Sodyne the opportunity she had been wanting and she leapt out of hiding and immediately broke into a run, heading for the cavern entrance as quickly as she could while the Ferengi were distracted.

Vega-468 was now in eclipse behind the gas giant it orbited and once Sodyne was clear of the camp's illumination she found herself in darkness, something that she was grateful for as it meant that the Ferengi would be less likely to spot her even if they could hear her running at this distance. She reached out as she got near to the runabout, extending her hand towards the panel beside the hatch facing her and she pressed the control to open it. In the absence of her combadge, the runabout's security system scanned her fingerprint and the hatch slid open to allow her inside but it was only when the hatch slid shut behind her that Sodyne allowed herself to relax. The lights inside the runabout had come on automatically when she entered and Sodyne quickly turned them off again to reduce the chance that the Ferengi would notice and realise where she was. Even though she had every confidence in the runabout's shields to resist the small arms the Ferengi carried she saw no reason to give away her position needlessly.

"*Rhine* to *Nightfall*, this is Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, do you read me?" she said into the communication system.

"*Rhine* this is the *Nightfall*. It's good to hear your voice commander. What's happening down there?" Cole's voice responded.

"Captain, thank the gods you're okay. Everyone down here was knocked out and the Ferengi have taken them captive. They're in total control of the research team's camp. I was able to escape and make it back to the runabout." Sodyne said.

"Sodyne how come you're awake?" Cole asked.

"Ah." Sodyne said, "Captain I'm afraid that it's my fault that everyone was knocked out."

"What do you mean commander?" Cole said.

"There's a machine in the ruins captain. A Slaver telepathic amplifier. That's what was causing my headaches, it was triggering a chemical release in my brain. I tried getting into the machine to turn it off but instead I triggered some kind of telepathic blast." Sodyne said.

"Commander I thought you didn't have any telepathic ability." Cole commented.

"I don't but the technology of the Slavers seems to get around that captain. I can't tell you what it felt like, for one moment I could sense everyone in the system." Sodyne replied.

"That may explain why the Ferengi were unaffected. The four-lobed structure of their brain makes them immune to the telepathic and empathic abilities of Betazoids." T'Lan said.

"You love him." Sodyne said suddenly when she heard the Vulcan's voice, "You love him so much it's unbelievable but I felt it. You work so hard to keep your feelings from controlling you."

"Sodyne listen to me." Cole interrupted, "What are the Ferengi doing now?"

"Some of them are still trying to find me captain. I think that the others are in the chamber where we found the machine. My head was a bit fuzzy when they found me but I think they're planning to dismantle it and take it away. Captain there's something else though. They loaded one of the stasis boxes aboard a shuttlepod and sent it back up to their ship." Sodyne said.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, we opened two boxes. One held electronics and the other some sort of medicine. Do you know which box it was?" T'Lan asked.

"It was neither of them. I think the one they sent up had contained some sort of creatures. When a pair of Ferengi opened it the creatures got out and killed them." Sodyne answered and aboard the *Nightfall* Martin and Davis looked at one another.

"That could have been us." Davis commented.

"Commander is your position secure?" Cole said.

"I think so, yes captain. Though I need to replicate a new combadge and I'll feel better when I've got a phaser from the arms locker." Sodyne replied.

"Good. In that case I want you to sit tight for now while we work out what to do. Do you understand?" Cole told her.

"Yes captain. I'll wait to hear from you. Sodyne out."

"Leader I am detecting subspace transmissions between the surface and the Starfleet vessel." Neeradel announced and Krom looked at her.

"Then the hu-mans are starting to recover." he said before activating the communication system, "Drurk, report. What is going on down there? We are detecting transmissions to the hu-man starship in orbit."

"Leader the Betazoid we found awake but disorientated managed to recover and escape. We are hunting for her now. The others prisoners are all secured. We have separated out Denning and the other two senior Starfleet officers in their command centre but I assure you that they are still unconscious and being guarded. The Betazoid must have found a way to communicate with their ship." Drurk told him.

"Someone aboard that ship must be awake as well Drurk. See if you can revive the more important prisoners. We will tell the hu-man captain that we will kill them if he tries to interfere." Krom ordered.

"Yes leader." Drurk replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin I want a full tactical analysis of the Ferengi vessel." Cole ordered, "If we have to engage them then I want to be able to disable them as quickly as possible without destroying them."

"Yes captain." Martin replied.

"T'Lan in the absence of Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I want you to scan the surface. Tell me if there is anything about that complex we can use to our advantage. Also confirm Sodyne's report about the Ferengi moving one of the Slaver stasis boxes to their ship." Cole added and T'Lan just had time to nod before the officer at the operations console looked around.

"Captain the Ferengi are hailing us." she said.

"Main screen." Cole said and an image of Krom standing beside the central console of his own bridge appeared on the screen at the front of the *Nightfall's*.

"DaiMon Krom this is Captain Cole. I hereby order you to release the prisoners you have taken on the surface, return the stolen Slaver stasis box and depart this system." Cole said sternly.

"You are in no position to make demands captain!" Krom snapped, "Your people were all incapacitated whereas mine were left unaffected. My crew have secured the surface installation to guarantee its continued safety and operation. Your people on the surface are safe for now but that could change if you attempt to dislodge us. See for yourself." at that point the image on the screen split to also show a feed from the surface. This second feed showed Hamill and Nayal alongside Denning, Hewitt and Trellan all lined up on their knees, their wrists and ankles bound.

"Speak to your captain." Drurk said, pressing the muzzle of his disruptor against Hamill's neck.

"Captain the Ferengi revived us. I haven't seen any of the others. They are being held elsewhere." she said.

"Captain there's a Slaver weapon here. You have to-" Nayal suddenly exclaimed before a rifle butt struck the side of her head and she fell forwards.

"Silence Vulcan!" Drurk called out, obviously not realising that Nayal was a Romulan thanks to her Starfleet uniform.

"I expect you're thinking that you can just beam the prisoners away captain so I'm going to remove that temptation from you now." Krom said before he simply added, "Put them in."

As soon as he said this the two Slaver stasis boxes still on the surface were dragged into view and opened. Then pairs of Ferengi picked up Hamill and Hewitt.

"No! No you can't!" Hewitt cried out as she was dragged towards the nearest stasis box and pushed inside before the lid was slammed shut.

Hamill was able to keep her composure but she squirmed helplessly as she was taken to the final box and

forced into it. Then as the lid to this was close as well Krom addressed Cole again.

"Those two females will remain frozen in time until we are ready to depart Captain Cole. Once the stasis boxes and everything else of value is aboard my ship we will let them out and beam them down to the surface. Try to mount a rescue and I will have them killed. Also be aware that my weapons are already locked onto your vessel. If you attempt to raise your shields or target us we will open fire before you can do either." he said and then the viewscreen changed back to the view of space outside the *Nightfall*.

"Captain we can't beam Hamill up while she's trapped inside that stasis box." Davis said.

"No but we can beam down a rescue team. Do it the old fashioned way." Martin said.

"A military strike?" T'Lan said.

"We do still have almost two hundred ground combat specialists aboard. Send some down to the surface and some over to the Ferengi ship." Martin said.

"And if the Ferengi raise their shields?" T'Lan asked.

"They can't." Cole said, "Raising shields means that they can't beam anyone or anything up from the surface and they can't launch or recover shuttlecraft. It would cut them off entirely from everything they hope to obtain. The problem is though that if we did beam over a boarding party then they'd detect it and could open fire before we can secure their ship. Thankfully we do have weapons that can be used without a lock on their target." Cole said.

"The mass accelerators." Ghroc said and Cole smiled.

"The mass accelerators." he replied.

"Perfect for orbital bombardment. Nayal seemed pretty keen to warn us about the Slaver tech down there." Davis added and Cole nodded.

"The problem is that the Slaver complex is deep underground and so heavily reinforced that it blocks communications and transporters." he pointed out.

"Perhaps I can find some weakness captain." T'Lan said.

"Get to it. I want initial reports from everyone within an hour." Cole replied.

"Mugtek! The DaiMon demands an update." Drurk yelled as he strode into the chamber where Mugtek and three other Ferengi were busy examining the telepathic amplifier, "The crew of the Starfleet vessel have recovered. DaiMon Krom has told them of the hostages and our intention to leave with the Slaver equipment."

"We need more time leader. There are no manual controls or readouts that we have been able to find. Without them we will have no way of determining what can be dismantled and what should be left intact. We don't even know exactly how far the machine extends. It appears to go upwards through the ceiling but nothing up there has been excavated." Mugtek replied.

"Well hurry. That Betazoid has still managed to evade capture and if I know humans the Starfleet captain will already be working on a way to ruin our plans." Drurk ordered.

Immediately after replicating a new combadge for herself Sodyne went to the weapons locker aboard the *Rhine* to arm herself. The runabout did not carry a large stock of small arms but she was able to get a hand phaser to replace the one the Ferengi had taken from her and also a lightweight rifle. This second weapon was not the latest design in service with Starfleet forces, lacking an integral stock and designed to be fired without being braced but its enhanced energy capacity would allow her to fight off a greater number of opponents if the need arose. She had heard the Ferengi outside the runabout searching for her but with the interior lighting deactivated she had been able to remain hidden.

"Sodyne to *Nightfall*." she said, tapping her combadge.

"Nightfall here. What is your situation Sodyne?" Cole responded.

"Captain the runabout is secure. I was just checking to test my new combadge." Sodyne said.

"Very good commander, we're reading you loud and clear. The Ferengi have been in touch and made demands. Basically they've told us that they're holding everyone on the surface as a hostage while they loot the dig site for everything they can get their hands on. We can't beam the hostages out either because they've trapped Doctor Hamill and Hewitt inside the two stasis boxes they still have on the surface. We're looking for a way to get an assault team down there without drawing too much attention." Cole explained to her.

"Captain what about using the *Rhine's* transporter pad as a reception station? Transport requires less energy with a localised receiver station. It may take longer beaming a platoon down two at a time and it will get pretty cramped in here but it could be done." Sodyne suggested.

"T'Lan considered that but she thinks that the Ferengi will still detect the transport." Cole replied and Sodyne sighed.

"I scanned their ship captain, you can blind their sensors for a while I'm sure." she said.

"How?" Cole asked.

"Use the *Nightfall's* lidar. Focus the beams on their sensor array and it will mask the EM signature of the transport." Sodyne said.

"T'Lan-" Cole began but Sodyne interrupted him.

"Captain you and your wife may have more experience in the *Nightfall* program than I do but I know this *Nightfall's* sensors better than either of you. The lidar system has been massively upgraded since the first ship was launched. The turrets still don't reach the original requirement for anti-torpedo defence but they are significantly more powerful than on your last ship. Trust me captain, they'll overwhelm the Ferengis' EM sensors. Check with commander Davis."

"Okay I'll do that. In the meantime hold tight down there. If it looks like the Ferengi have found you then I'll leave it up to you whether you want to try to take off in the Rhine or beam back up to the *Nightfall*." Cole told her.

"Understood captain. Sodyne out." Sodyne said before tapping her combadge again to shut it off.

Aboard the *Nightfall* Cole turned to the science station where T'Lan now sat.

"I assume you got that T'Lan?" he said.

"Yes, I heard and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne may be correct." T'Lan replied, "Her sensor analysis of the Ferengi vessel is sound, as are her comments about the increased power of our lidar system."

"So how long would it take to configure them to jam the Ferengis' sensors?" Cole asked.

"Less than a minute captain." T'Lan answered, "Also I have the scans you requested of the Slaver installation on the surface and I believe that the telepathic amplifier may indeed be vulnerable to a strike by our mass accelerators."

"Let me see." Cole said and T'Lan brought up the scan results she was looking at on the bridge's main viewscreen. This showed a representation of the underground Slaver command centre. The thick layer of armour intended to protect the facility from attack limited the details that could be determined through an orbital scan but there was a strange structure extending upwards through the defensive layer to just below the surface, spreading out from a narrow point where it emerged from the complex and spreading out like a fern, "So that's what knocked us out?" Cole commented.

"Logic suggests that it is, yes. The base is located right above the chamber that contains the telepathic amplifier." T'Lan said.

"And since it's outside that layer of armour it's vulnerable." Martin commented from the tactical station.

"Captain dropping a round onto that will be easy." Ghroc said, "I recommend that we fire on the Ferengi ship first though. I can put a round through their engineering decks then realign us to fire on the planet."

"Lieutenant Commander Martin, what about our assault force?" Cole said, looking behind him to the tactical station.

"I've got three platoons of ground combat troops waiting for the order to deploy." Martin said.

"That is a large force lieutenant commander." T'Lan commented.

"We haven't finalised a deployment method so I had each platoon to prepare for a different one. There's one in the hangar aboard hoppers, one in the transporter rooms and a third in the torpedo bays hoping they don't draw the short straw and have to deploy in drop pods that they haven't been able to practice with." Martin explained.

"T'Lan I want you to jam the Ferengi EM detectors. Then our troops can commence beaming down to the *Rhine*. They're to go in as soon as we hit the Ferengi ship." Cole ordered.

Sodyne stood by the controls to the runabout's transporters, activating them at the same time as the orbiting *Nightfall* activated its own transporters to establish a link. With the de-materialisation and re-materialisation stages of the process the power requirement was far less and there were no signs of a response from the Ferengi as the ground combat specialists materialised in the *Rhine's* cockpit in groups of five at a time. The process of beaming down an entire platoon in small groups took several minutes but it took place without anyone outside noticing and as soon as the last group was down Sodyne activated the communication system built into the transporter control console.

"*Rhine* to *Nightfall*, the troops are down." she said.

"Understood commander. What about the Ferengi?" Cole responded and Sodyne looked at the platoon commander who was stood nearby looking out of one of the cockpit's viewports.

"I don't think they have the slightest idea we're here captain." the soldier responded, "We can move out now and be waiting for your signal."

"Confirmed lieutenant. Commence deployment. *Nightfall* out." Cole said and then Sodyne reached for the phaser rifle she had set down while working the transporter.

"What do you think you need that for commander?" the ground combat lieutenant asked.

"Err, to fight with. You just said we were deploying." Sodyne replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne you are the ranking officer here so I can't order you to stay put but I'd highly

recommend that you remain in the runabout. My men are professionals, we know what we're doing." the lieutenant told her, "You might want to get this ship ready for take off though just in case anything goes wrong."

Sodyne smiled, secretly relieved that she would not have to lead the assault.

"Very well lieutenant." she said before the man opened one of the cockpit hatches and he and his troops began to disembark.

The ground combat specialists' dark grey uniforms blended in in the darkness of the eclipse and they did not illuminate any of the lights they carried as they made their way towards the nearby cavern. The research team's own transport was located closer to the cavern than the runabout and so some of the ground combat specialists headed for this, using its landing gear for cover as they set up and aimed their weapons towards the cavern entrance. Inside the cavern, the lighting around the research team's camp enabled the Starfleet troops to observe it clearly while the Ferengi could not see out into the darkness. Positioned beneath the transport and to either side of the cavern entrance the ground troops then waited for the signal to begin their attack.

"Leader I think you should see this." Neeradel announced and Krom looked at her.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Leader the Starfleet vessel has been communicating with the surface again though I am still unable to isolate the exact location." Neeradel said.

"Drurk reported the Betazoid female that escaped. She obviously has a communication device. It will do them no good though, they cannot act without our knowing it." Krom replied.

"Leader I think that they are trying to jam our sensors. There is some sort of electromagnetic interference, possibly from a laser of some kind being aimed at our main sensor array."

"What about their other systems?" Krom asked.

"Their weapons and shields remain unpowered leader." Neeradel said.

"Then they are not ready to strike yet. Tell Drurk to make sure that his position is secure, Beam down more men if he asks for them and also send down a pod. It is time we brought those other stasis boxes aboard." Krom ordered.

"The Ferengi are launching a shuttle. It is heading for the surface." T'Lan announced.

"They must be trying to recover the other stasis boxes. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc are we in position to fire the mass accelerators?"

"It'll take two seconds from your order for me to fire the first round at their ship captain. No more than five more before I can fire the second at the surface target." Ghroc replied.

"It'll take more time to power phasers and take out that shuttle captain." Martin added.

"Ignore it. Contact Sodyne, tell her that there's a Ferengi shuttle on the way to watch out for. Mister Ghroc you may fire at your discretion" Cole ordered.

Grasping the *Nightfall's* manual controls in his hands Ghroc suddenly turned the Starfleet heavy cruiser so that it faced directly towards the *Latinum Lobes* and squeezed one of the triggers built into them. Instantly a heavy duranium projectile was fired from one of the mass accelerators that ran the length of the *Nightfall's* secondary hulls. Travelling at high speed, the projectile hit the *Latinum Lobe's* engineering decks and smashed all the way through the ship destroying everything in its path before bursting out through the other side.

Ghroc then pulled sharply on the controls, watching the view through his heads up display as the ship turned to face the surface of Vega-468 until it was perfectly aligned with the telepathic amplifier and he pulled the other trigger to launch a second projectile.

"What happened?" Krom cried out as alarms sounded aboard the *Latinum Lobes*.

"Leader we were struck by a solid object. A projectile of some kind. There is another heading for the surface now. It will impact some point above the Slaver complex though I do not think it has enough penetrating power to destroy it." Neeradel responded.

"A projectile? Ridiculous. Projectiles are not starship weapons. What is our situation?" Krom said, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"Our warp drive is damaged but still reading functional and our weapons have only enough power for a few shots." Neeradel told him.

"What about shields?" Krom asked.

"Off line." Neeradel answered and Krom snarled.

"Contact Drurk. Tell him to start killing hostages and return fire on the Starfleet vessel." he hissed.

The Ferengi had had plenty of time to plan how best to attack the *Nightfall* while its shields remained inoperative and the *Latinum Lobes*' two pulse cannons rapidly turned to face their allotted targets. One of the turrets was aimed at the *Nightfall*'s engineering section, the intention being to take the cruiser's weapons off line and a series of plasma blasts hit the ship in this area to produce several small explosions. Meanwhile the second turret was aimed towards the *Nightfall*'s hangar. The Ferengi had already seen evidence of the fighters that the cruiser carried and did not want any being launched against them. Again the *Nightfall* was hit several times and one of the blasts was able to penetrate the forcefield across the forward hangar door. This struck a shuttle positioned to be ready for rapid launch and the tiny craft exploded, triggering alarms as the hangar crew all rushed for exits before the external forcefields would be fully deactivated to open the hangar to space in order to extinguish the blaze. Even though the fire could be easily put out the damage to the hangar deck was enough to achieve the Ferengis' aim and prevent any fighters from being launched any time soon.

Firing these two rapid bursts of energy pulses was enough to deplete the turrets' stored power though and they fell silent.

"Damage report." Cole said, activating the intercom.

"Mains are off line captain. The Ferengi knew what they were doing and they hit the primary distribution feed. We've no warp drive and I can't give you phasers or photon torpedoes." Davis responded from engineering, "The nanite hive may be able to get us a work around but it'll take a while. If the Ferengi hit us again we're in trouble."

"The Ferengi do not appear to have weapons capability either." T'Lan said from the science station.

"I think T'Lan's right captain." Martin added from tactical, "I think they just used up what charge was already in their weapon arrays."

"So neither of us can shoot. I guess it's up to our people on the surface now then." Cole said.

The second projectile launched from the *Nightfall*'s mass accelerators lit up the sky of Vega-468 with a fireball as it passed through the moon's atmosphere before striking the ground within a few metres of its aim point. Penetrating deep into the ground the projectile created a shock wave that shattered the telepathic amplifier and sent fragments of it along with the surrounding rock and dirt flying up into the atmosphere. The shock wave also penetrated further downwards and although the projectile itself struck the thick layer of armour protecting the underground complex the shock wave found its way along the structure of the telepathic amplifier and in the chamber where it was controlled from the device exploded and sent fragments in all directions. Mugtek and his engineers were caught up in this blast and hurled towards the edge of the chamber, slamming into the walls before dropping to the floor.

Meanwhile in the research team's command centre Drurk looked upwards as the force of the impact was felt even there.

"What is happening?" he exclaimed.

"Leader we are under attack!" another of the Ferengi responded.

"Watch them." Drurk ordered, pointing at the prisoners they had lined up against a wall and he moved to the exit, looking out into the cavern just as the Starfleet ground combat specialists began their attack, firing their phasers at any Ferengi they saw. From the numbers he saw it was obvious that the Starfleet troops vastly outnumbered his men and even though a number of the Ferengi had taken Starfleet weapons for themselves the attacking forces were obviously more skilled in their use.

Drurk saw a squad of the Federation troops head towards the command station and he threw himself over the side of the steps before they could notice him. Not caring any longer about the hostages he picked

himself up and broke into a run. He knew that trying to get out of the cavern was futile, the Starfleet troops were between it and him and so he instead decided to take his chances in the underground tunnels.

Informed of the approaching Ferengi pod, Sodyne lifted off and the *Rhine* rose into the air. The runabout was much bigger than the pod and lacked the agility of the Ferengi craft but this was countered by the superior firepower and shielding that Sodyne had at her disposal. Even so she was not a combat pilot and there was a flash of yellow light from above as the Ferengi pilot was able to get in the first shot and the *Rhine* shuddered. The runabout remained airborne though and Sodyne quickly acquired a phaser lock on the pod before firing and twin beams of red phaser energy blasted the Ferengi pod apart.

"Rhine to Nightfall, target destroyed." Sodyne transmitted.

"Good work commander. Can you get back up here? We're staring the Ferengi in the face but neither of us have weapons capability. We could use your phasers." Cole said and Sodyne checked her console.

"Sorry captain my impulse engines are hit. I could get out of the atmosphere on thruster alright but if the Ferengi have any engine power they'll be able to keep ahead of me." she reported.

"Understood commander. Stay down there and provide air cover for our ground troops. I doubt they'll need it but you better be ready just in case." Cole ordered and Sodyne dipped the *Rhine's* nose, taking it back down to a lower altitude from where she could more easily fire on ground targets.

The door to the camp's command centre opened suddenly and the two Ferengi still inside to guard the hostages both spun around and fired several rapid energy blasts towards the doorway. There was no-one standing there though and they soon held their fire.

"Stay back!" one of them yelled, grabbing Professor Denning and dragging the man in front of him as a shield while holding his weapon to his head. However, before he could inform the soldiers outside that he had a hostage the Ferengi saw a small object come flying in through the open doorway and it was only when he saw it land that he realised it was a stun grenade, just moments before it exploded.

The blast immediately incapacitated everyone inside the command centre before a squad of ground combat specialists came charging through the doorway with their weapons held ready. While his men were restraining the helpless Ferengi and checking on the prisoners who had also been affected by the stun grenade blast the leader of this squad tapped his combadge.

"*Nightfall* the camp is secure. All hostages appear safe and there are two stasis boxes still here." he said.

Drurk heard the cries of the other Ferengi as he fled the camp but these cries were soon left behind as he headed for the chamber where the telepathic amplifier was to be found. The Ferengi reasoned that not only would he find reinforcements there in the form of Mugtek and his engineers but the chamber was also easily defensible. This made him all the more shocked when he arrived to find the chamber in ruins because of the orbital strike by the *Nightfall*. Most of the lights had been destroyed but there were still two functioning and the chamber remained dimly lit. Looking around he saw only dead Ferengi and he was wondering what his next course of action ought to be when he heard a voice.

"Over here." Mugtek said hoarsely and Drurk turned to see the engineer raising a hand for attention, "What happened?"

"The hu-mans attacked." Drurk told him as he rushed to his side, "They have taken back the camp. I came here hoping that we could hold them off but now we are trapped down here."

"No." Mugtek replied and he pointed to where the telepathic amplifier had stood but now there was just a pile of wreckage and rubble from where the ceiling had collapsed, "Look up there." and Drurk turned to see a hole in the ceiling, "Help me up." Mugtek said and Drurk pulled the other Ferengi to his feet before supporting him as they made their way towards this hole. Looking upwards they saw that this was at the base of a crater created by the impact of the mass accelerator round.

"Do you think it is enough?" Drurk asked.

"There is only one way to find out." Mugtek replied and Drurk activated his communicator.

"Drurk to *Latinum Lobes*." he said into it.

"Drurk what is your situation? Have you executed any of the hostages?" Krom responded.

"No leader. The hu-mans attacked the camp with overwhelming force. Only Mugtek and I are left and he is injured. Can you lock onto us and beam us up?" Drurk said.

"We have a lock on you." Neeradel replied.

"Although by all rights I should leave you both down there." Krom added, "You may count yourself lucky that we will need Mugtek to repair our ship. Stand by for transport. We will leave this system as soon as you are both aboard."

"There is an energy build up in the Ferengi vessel." T'Lan said.

"Are they preparing to fire again?" Cole asked.

"I do not think so." T'Lan answered, "I have monitored a transporter signature from the surface and the energy build up suggests that they are about to go to warp."

"In orbit? That's crazy?" Ghroc said.

"Desperation can cause illogical action." T'Lan replied before all of a sudden the *Latinum Lobes* engaged its warp drive and accelerated away, leaving the *Nightfall* alone in orbit around Vega-468.

"I think we just won." Cole said.

"Professor, come in." Cole said when Denning appeared in the entrance to his ready room.

"Thank you captain." Denning replied as he entered the room and sat down.

"How are your people doing?" Cole asked.

"Well all things considered. Hewitt shows no signs of any ill effects from being inside that stasis box. What about your Doctor Hamill?" Denning said.

"Fine as well. Although I don't think she appreciated the exact way she was released from the box." Cole said, "I wanted to speak to you about your future in this sector."

"I expected as much. Thanks to that orbital strike of yours there's nothing left on Vega four-six-eight worth investigating so we'll be moving on to another site. Our information suggests that the Slavers were widespread in this sector." Denning said.

"Yes, I'm sorry about that but from what I've heard it was probably for the best that that machine was destroyed. Although my science officer had also hoped that the amplifier could be studied further." Cole responded.

"I think Trellan would disagree captain. He seems far more upset about losing it than I am. He seemed to think studying it could have enabled him to return to Romulan space with enough prestige to get a senior research position." Denning told him.

"Maybe he'll be able to find something else to make a name for himself." Cole said, "In the mean time there is the issue of the two stasis boxes we were able to recover. I've managed to convince the Federation Science Council to permit us to retain them both."

"That's incredible. How did you manage that?" Denning asked.

"Oh I simply pointed out that by giving one to your team and leaving the other here on the *Nightfall* would give us both the capability to locate other stasis boxes if we get close to them. I have little doubt that the Ferengi will be using the one they managed to take with them in the same way." Cole explained.

"Then you're staying out here?" Denning said.

"Our duties will allow us to spend a lot of time in this sector, yes. There are a lot of unexplored systems out here that we can chart. Plus the Federation Archaeological Council has taken a keen interest in your research and they've requested Starfleet provide you with support. After all your previous supply contractor is no longer available is he?" Cole told him.

Krom was alone in his quarters when the intercom activated.

"What is it?" he said impatiently, angry at being disturbed.

"Leader there is a private message coming in for you. Text only." Neeradel told him and he sighed.

"Put it through." he said and he turned to a nearby display that suddenly displayed a simple message that made him smile.

I HAVE A BUSINESS PROPOSITION FOR YOU KROM.