

STAR TREK

NIGHTFALL

THE SLOVER CRISIS

SOME THINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



HIDDEN TREASURE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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

HIDDEN TREASURE

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

The discovery of relatively intact Slaver facilities offers the promise of answering all the questions posed about the long dead species. However, the *USS Nightfall* is not alone in the system and when Daimon Krom seizes control of a hidden command centre the Starfleet crew must find away to prevent the Ferengi from mastering a potent weapon.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 69301.2 *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A in the Meltara Sector.

The Akira-class heavy cruiser had arrived at its rendezvous point ahead of schedule and the unexpected period of waiting gave its commanding officer, Captain Robert Cole, the opportunity to complete some of the paperwork that was the bane of every senior Starfleet officer's life.

"Captain we've got a signal coming in." the voice of Lieutenant Nayal, the *Nightfall's* Romulan operations officer said over the intercom and Cole looked around from the monitor he was staring at.

"Is it Professor Denning?" he asked.

"No captain, the professor's ship is still on approach. They should be here in about twenty minutes. This is a long range pre-recorded signal from Earth. It's addressed to you and marked private." Nayal told him.

"Okay put it through to me." Cole told her and he turned back to the monitor on his desk, expecting to see the image of a senior Starfleet officer appear on it at any moment. However, although the message began with the seal of the United Federation of Planets before it cut to a room that looked like it could have been in almost any Starfleet facility the person that the camera focused on was not a Starfleet officer, instead the young woman was a civilian that Robert was familiar with and he smiled when he saw her face, "Nikki." he commented.

Nikki Carr had been the teenage daughter of the previous *USS Nightfall's* first officer. Although she had completed an intern programme with Starfleet she had done so only to gain the reference she needed to get into university and had not pursued a career in Starfleet. This made a message from her using Starfleet resources unusual to say the least.

"Hi Robert." Nikki began and Cole noticed a seriousness to her voice. Following the death of her mother, Cole had promised her that he would always do whatever he could to help her should the need arise and he suspected that she was now calling for help, "I know you're probably really busy out there with whatever you're doing but Starfleet was kind enough to let me send you a message directly. Henry King died two nights ago."

Cole felt his heart jump when he heard this. Commander Henry King had been the chief medical officer aboard the original *USS Nightfall* and he had been one of those crewmembers fortunate enough to survive the vessel's destruction. Although Doctor King had been past retirement age when he was first assigned to the *Nightfall*, having come back into service during the manpower shortage that plagued Starfleet for many years following the Dominion War the news of his death came as a shock for Cole.

"Henry." he said to himself.

"It was a heart attack." Nikki began to explain, "Emma told me that he'd been feeling unwell the previous day and went to bed early. Then he just never woke up." The Emma that Nikki referred to was the former emergency medical hologram of the previous *Nightfall*. As a result of experimentation in creating her a physical body she could inhabit her program had developed to the point where she became self aware and when he evacuated from the ship he had taken her program with him to prevent her destruction, "Anyway the funeral is going to be next Thursday. I don't know if you'll even have received this message by then and I doubt you'll be able to make it back anyway but I thought you should know. I've already spoken to Major Shry on Andoria and he's going to be coming in. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news but I thought you deserved to know." Nikki then glanced aside before adding, "Anyway I've got someone waving at me to tell me that my time is nearly up. I hope you and T'Lan are both well, T'Sal as well. Oh and give my love to Nayal-"

It was at that point that the signal was cut off, the limited amount of time that Nikki had been allowed by Starfleet to send her message having expired.

Cole leant back in his chair for a few moments, surprised and upset by the news of Henry King's death but he soon recovered and activated the intercom.

"T'Lan, I'd like you and Lieutenant Nayal to join me in my ready room immediately." he said.

"Of course captain." Cole's Vulcan wife and first officer responded and moments later the door to his ready room slid open for T'Lan and Nayal to enter.

"Please sit down, I'm afraid that I have bad news." Cole told them and he indicated the chairs on the other side of his desk.

"So does Starfleet have a new mission for us?" Nayal asked as she and T'Lan took their seats.

"No, it's nothing like that." Cole replied.

"Logic suggests that you summoned us here because of the contents of the message from Starfleet though." T'Lan commented.

"The message wasn't actually from Starfleet, it was from Nikki Carr. Starfleet just allowed her to make brief use of their equipment out of courtesy." Cole explained.

"Is she okay?" Noyal said.

"Nikki's fine, but she called to tell us that Henry King died a couple of days before she sent the message." Cole told her, "I thought I should tell the pair of you since the three of us are the only members of the crew who served aboard the original *Nightfall* with him."

"I don't believe it." Noyal said, just as shocked as Cole had been when he heard the news.

"Doctor King was elderly for a human." T'Lan pointed out, looking at Noyal before she turned to Cole and added, "I assume that the causes were natural?" and Cole nodded.

"Nikki said that he suffered a heart attack during the night." he said.

"Is that all you can say? He was elderly?" Noyal said, glaring at T'Lan.

"Noyal, Doctor King's death upsets me as much as it does you and Robert. However, that does not mean that I have to let my grief control my actions." T'Lan responded.

"So will you at least join me in toasting his memory? I have some kali-fal in my quarters I think will be suitable." Noyal said.

"I think that would be a suitable means of remembering him." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"We can meet at the end of shift." he said.

"Okay but I need a few minutes now." Noyal said, "Henry King is dead and I need to mark my face for mourning."

"Of course." Cole said, nodding again before the intercom activated.

"Captain we've just received a signal from Professor Denning's ship. They're on approach and will be with us in ten minutes. The professor wants permission to beam aboard as soon as they arrive." the voice of Ghroc, the *Nightfall's* Bolian second officer and chief helmsman said.

"Understood commander. Tell the professor that we'll be waiting for him." Cole replied.

"The professor's ship is signalling ready for transport now captain." the crewman on duty in the transporter room said and Cole nodded. Stood with him in the room ready to meet Professor Denning and his senior researchers were T'Lan and also Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, the *Nightfall's* chief science officer. "Energise." Cole said and the transporter operator reached out to activate the system. The transport ship that Professor Denning and his research team used to move around the Meltara Sector lacked a transporter system of its own so the *Nightfall* was required to use its own system to bring the professor and his team aboard.

When the transporter was activated five clusters of lights began to form on the transporter pad. These then coalesced into Professor Marcus Denning himself along with his two research assistants Erica Hewitt and the Romulan, Trellan. Accompanying them were Doctor Susan Terry who functioned as the team medical officer as well as biologist and Jack Foster, the owner of the transport ship that carried the team.

"Permission to come aboard captain?" Denning asked, smiling as he stepped off the transporter pad.

"Granted professor." Cole responded, stepping forwards to shake the grey haired man's hand, "I take it you have an update about your research mission?"

"You could say that." Foster commented, "They've been going crazy for a week."

"You found more Slaver remains?" Sodyne asked, looking at Denning.

"A small outpost." Denning answered.

"A small outpost that contained a stasis box. Inside which was data relating to a much larger one, possibly a sector command post." Trellan added. A Slaver stasis box was a rare and valuable find but also potentially dangerous and the Federation had decreed that they could only be opened by Starfleet.

"You opened the box yourselves?" T'Lan commented.

"Ah, yes." Denning said, "An unfortunate oversight. One of my students got a little too excited when the box was found and he opened it immediately."

"Nevertheless I'll need a full report. The Science Council will have to be informed of what happened." Cole said before Sodyne spoke up.

"Captain, a sector command post could contain a telepathic amplifier." she pointed out, ignoring the issue of how the stasis box had been opened. Although Sodyne was a Betazoid she had never developed the telepathic abilities that were near universal in her species and her only experience with telepathy had come when she had been connected to one of the machines that the ancient Slavers had used to control their empire.

"I think perhaps we should discuss this elsewhere." Denning suggested.

"By the way, can I speak with your engineer about replicating some parts? I'd like to do some work on my ship that I can't produce the parts for myself." Foster said before Cole could reply.

"And I'd like to run the results of the tests I ran on the team after the box was opened by Doctor Hamill if that's okay." Terry added.

"Of course." Cole said and he looked towards the transporter operator, "Chief could you have someone escort Doctor Terry and Mister Foster to where they need to be?"

"Yes captain." the transporter operator replied and Cole turned back towards Denning, "If the rest of you would like to come with us we can go over your findings in the briefing room."

"Actually I'd like to speak with Nayal if I could." Trellan said.

"You wish to send another message home?" T'Lan commented. She knew that the subspace transmitter aboard the science team's transport lacked the range to get a signal as far as the Romulan Free State and that Trellan instead made use of the *Nightfall's* communications system to send reports and personal messages to his family.

"Yes, my latest report." Trellan said.

"Maybe this will be the one that will get you the attention you've been looking for." Hewitt commented.

Although like Hewitt his role in the research team was as an assistant to Professor Denning, Trellan was the most experienced member of the team and he had accepted a junior position far from his home simply because there were few opportunities for archaeologists in Romulan space.

"Lieutenant Nayal is on duty. She is on the bridge." T'Lan told him.

"If you'd like to come with us then we can go via the bridge." Cole said and he indicated for Denning and his assistants to accompany him towards the exit from the transporter room.

Cole and his officers led Denning and his two assistants to the nearest turbolift and used it to take them to the *Nightfall's* bridge. Here Trellan split off from the rest of the group, making his way towards the front of the bridge while the others walked across the rear to another exit leading to a hallway that would in turn take them to the briefing room. As Trellan approached the operations station he noticed that Nayal had narrow, vertical patterns marked on each side of her face and he knew immediately what the significance of them was.

"I'm sorry for your loss." he said as Nayal looked up at him, "Who was it?"

"The doctor from the previous *Nightfall*." Nayal told him.

"A human?" Trellan commented.

"Yes. Does that matter?"

"I suppose not. We've all lost so many people that we ought to be glad of anyone we have left." Trellan answered.

"So do you have a message you want me to send?" Nayal asked and Trellan produced an isolinear chip.

"It's the usual, news of our progress and some personal messages for my family." he told her as she took it from him.

"Okay, I'll get it sent right away. I take it that it's to the usual address?" Nayal said.

"Yes, they'll see that everything gets to the people it needs to reach." Trellan replied.



"This is incredible." Sodyne said, looking at the wall mounted display in the briefing room just as Trellan was entering the room. The image was of a map of a solar system showing several planets as well as two asteroid belts. There were numerous points on the map that were specifically marked as key points of interest but there were too many of these for any significant information to be provided for them without swamping the map in data. Instead the markings were given different colours according to the priority that Professor Denning had assigned to each.

"It was clearly a major system for the Slavers." Hewitt said.

"Have you determined its function?" T'Lan asked but Denning shook his head.

"No, not for certain. Although Trellan does have a theory, don't you?" he said, looking at the Romulan as he sat down in the first vacant seat he came to.

"Yes." Trellan responded and he pointed to the display, "None of the planets shown there are even remotely close to being Class M so the Slavers were unlikely to have been interested in general settlement. Far more likely was that there was some sort of mineral resource they wanted and I think it's telling that there are two asteroid belts in the system."

"You suspect that they are the remains of planets that broke apart?" T'Lan commented.

"Dilithium." Sodyne added and Trellan nodded.

"Exactly." he said, "Planets that contain too much dilithium in their crust experience extreme tectonic disturbances and break up. I think that's what happened here and the Slavers came along to mine the dilithium."

"Assuming that they didn't exhaust the entire supply that system could be valuable to the Federation even without any Slaver artefacts to be studied." Cole said.

"Logic suggests that there are still dilithium deposits present." T'Lan said and Cole frowned.

"How can you tell T'Lan?" he said.

"There are too many facilities marked on this map. If the resources that drew the Slavers to the system had been depleted then most of them would have been relocated to where they could be used more efficiently." T'Lan explained.

"The information we recovered indicated that the primary facility was located on a moon orbiting the sixth planet in the system, the largest gas giant." Denning said.

"Hydrogen from the gas giant could have been used to run fusion generators." Sodyne pointed out.

"There are at least a dozen other major facilities in the system in addition to the primary one as well as more than a hundred smaller outposts." Hewitt added.

"Have you confirmed the presence of a telepathic amplifier?" Sodyne asked.

"A system as developed as this must have made use of tens of thousands of workers and the only way the Slavers could have maintained control over that many is with an amplifier." Trellan said.

"The presence of such a device remains purely hypothetical though." T'Lan pointed out.

"Yes, we haven't been able to conduct any direct scans of the system yet." Hewitt admitted and Denning turned to look directly at Cole.

"Quite simply Captain Cole this system could be our biggest find and that's why I requested this meeting." Denning said.

"You need the *Nightfall* to search and secure the system." Cole said and Denning smiled.

"Yes captain." he said, "Jack may be very proud of his ship and it's perfectly adequate for moving us and our equipment around the sector but it lacks the capabilities of the *Nightfall*. With your ship, its fighters and its probes we could survey the entire system in days rather than years."

"Well Starfleet's mission is exploration and research and we have been ordered to support you so I don't see that I do anything other than agree. Plus of course I'd never hear the last of it from my first officer or science officer if I refused." Cole said and then he tapped his combadge, "Cole to Ghroc." he said.

"Ghroc here captain." Ghroc's voice responded.

"Commander there's a system in our catalogue with the reference GL four-four-seven. I want a class five probe launched to it immediately and a course plotted, we'll be heading there with Professor Denning's team as soon as they're ready." Cole told him.

"Yes captain." Ghroc responded before he closed the channel.

"Captain I'd like to study this information before we get to GL four-four-seven." Sodyne said as soon the intercom was shut off.

"Professor do you have any objection to that?" Cole asked, looking at Denning.

"No, of course not. I'll provide you with everything we have." the professor said.

"Do you want me to assist you? I can-" Hewitt began before Sodyne interrupted.

"No thank you. I'd rather look at it fresh." she said.

"Sure." Hewitt commented.

"Captain I'd also like access to the probe data as soon as we receive it." Sodyne added, looking at Cole.

"That is logical. The two independent data sources would provide a superior picture of the system." T'Lan added.

"Okay, you can set the forward the feed directly to your system as soon as we receive it if you're not on the bridge." Cole said.

"I'd like to see what you find as well captain." Denning added.

"I don't see a problem with that, do you?" Cole said and he looked at T'Lan.

"It is unlikely that the probe telemetry will reveal any data that would be considered classified. Sharing the data with Professor Denning is also logical." she replied.

"In that case Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I want you to make sure that the probe telemetry is forwarded directly to the professor's transport as well as whatever terminal you want to review the data on." Cole ordered and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain, I'll get right on it." she said.

"So I guess now we just wait to see what the probe picks up while Foster finishes working on the ship." Trellan added.

"I'll speak to Commander Davis. I'm sure that as well as providing parts he can find a few engineers to speed things along." Cole said.

In order to study the data provided by Professor Denning's team without distraction, Sodyne made her way to her quarters. The first thing she did when she got there was set up an automatic relay between the *Nightfall's* communication system and her terminal so that as soon as the probe launched towards the target system sent back its findings they would be forwarded to her. Almost as an afterthought she also added a similar relay so that the telemetry would be sent on to the science team's transport ship.

She then turned her attention to the data that the research team had gathered. As well as the map presented in the *Nightfall's* briefing room the files Sodyne now had access to included details of the original source material. Given that the Slaver Empire had fallen a billion years earlier it was rare to find anything other than ruins. The main exception to this were the stasis boxes that caused time to stand still inside once they were closed and because of this whatever had been placed inside during the time of the Slaver Empire would still be in exactly the same condition now as it had been a billion years ago. In some cases the contents of opened Slaver stasis boxes proved to be dangerous items such as weapons or hostile lifeforms that had not aged a day in a billion years.

Professor Denning and his team had been lucky that all the stasis boxes that they had found had contained were physical and electronic records and the data provided to Sodyne included images of all of the physical documents as well as the original digital scans of the electronic storage devices. Sodyne began with the electronic data, running it through a translation program to turn the stored text into something she could understand, or at least largely understand. Despite many of the galaxy's best minds attempting to translate the Slaver's language there were still significant gaps to be filled. The translation program was able to do a good job on the data files discovered by Professor Denning's team though and Sodyne concluded almost immediately that the findings of the professor and his team were correct, the files described a significant industrial capacity in the star system known to the Federation as GL-447 and given the likelihood of significant dilithium deposits in the system the most likely purpose of that industry was shipbuilding. The problem with this was that the Slaver Empire had collapsed at the end of a war in which many of their subject races rose up against them, finding ways around the Slavers' telepathic control and destroying them wherever they could. A shipyard would have been a significant military asset during this war and either side could have opted to destroy it rather than let the other side have it.

Then there was a chiming sound from the door to Sodyne's quarters and she looked up from her terminal.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Sally." the voice of Doctor Hamill, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer responded.

"Come in." Sodyne told her and the door slid open to let Hamill enter.

"Well it's official, none of the research team have been infected by alien parasites that will devour us all from the inside." Hamill said as she walked into Sodyne's quarters, "So are you up for coming to the officer's lounge?"

"I'm sorry Sally, I would but there is just so much data to go through. You should see everything that was inside that stasis box. In fact that reminds me, I must get a look at it."

"Well that's something you can definitely count me out of." Hamill said, "Those things are just creepy." Hamill had become trapped inside a stasis box for a short time and the experience had left her with a strong aversion to the technology, "But I think you should give yourself a break Leyla. I know you and every time we come across anything to do with the Slavers you throw yourself into it. You need to relax. Whatever's been

found is what, a billion years old? A few more hours of waiting for you won't hurt it." she continued before an alert flashed up on Sodyne's computer terminal.

"We're receiving the first telemetry from the probe." Sodyne said as she looked at the screen in front of her and Hamill sighed.

"I suppose that means that there's no way I'm going to be able to talk you into taking a break now then." she said.

"Sorry no, I need to study this. It could be-" Sodyne began before she suddenly stopped talking.

"Leyla what's wrong?" Hamill asked and she walked across the room to stand just behind Sodyne and looked over her shoulder at the screen, "What is that?" she said when she saw the image of the massive web-like structure floating in space.

"I think it's a shipyard," Sodyne told her, "and it looks intact."

"After all this time? How is that possible?" Hamill asked.

"Blind luck maybe? But however it managed to survive it means that we could be about to get a good look at the technology the Slavers used to create their starships. I'm sorry Sally but I really need to study this so I can let Captain Cole know what we've found. I'll grab a drink with you later though, I promise." Sodyne replied and Hamill smiled.

"I'm holding you to that Leyla." she said.

"The shipyard orbits the same gas giant as the settlement we've labelled as the primary one." Sodyne said as she presented her findings in the *Nightfall's* briefing room. This time Cole had gathered his entire senior staff along with Denning and his trio of assistants.

"I'm impressed that it's been able to remain in orbit for a billion years." Ghroc said as he looked at the image of the Slaver construction sent back by the probe.

"I don't know." Lieutenant Commander Davis, the *Nightfall's* chief engineer responded, "A shipyard would need massive amounts of power to operate and if the production facility was properly shut down before the crew died then the fuel reserves that would have been used to drive the construction would become available for the thrusters instead."

"Enough to last a billion years?" Hamill asked.

"There may also be some form of automatic refuelling system in place to gather hydrogen from the gas giant's atmosphere." T'Lan suggested and Davis nodded.

"Yes and if it was based on tractor beam technology then there wouldn't be any moving parts to wear out." he said.

"How many different facilities are we talking about here?" Lieutenant Commander Martin, the *Nightfall's* chief of security and tactical officer added, looking at the map of the system shown beside the close up image of the shipyard.

"The information we found listed more than two hundred." Denning answered.

"So far the probe has confirmed the presence of more than half of the potential sites previously identified." Sodyne added.

"I see why you wanted our help." Martin commented, glancing towards the civilian researchers.

"There's no way we could determine which of them are worth investigating in detail in a sensible time frame." Trellan said.

"Ghroc, Martin, the pair of you will have to come up with a flight pattern for our fighters." Cole said, "Use both runabouts as well. We need to carry out a survey of every planetary body in the system in the shortest time possible. The *Nightfall* itself will hold position around the sixth planet to support the teams we send down to the moon's surface to investigate the primary site and across to the shipyard."

"That shouldn't be too difficult." Martin said.

"No." Ghroc agreed, "A pair of fighters per planet and a runabout for each of the asteroid belts."

"That still leaves you one planet short." Nayal pointed out, "If the *Nightfall* is scanning the sixth planet's subsystem then there are seven others to be searched and splitting our fighters into pairs will only cover six of them."

"I'd suggest that the planet with the fewest possible points of interest is ignored to begin with." Ghroc said,

"Then we can send a pair of fighters to check it out when they've done with their first assignment."

"That sounds reasonable." T'Lan said, "With each runabout having to search an entire asteroid belt alone they are unlikely to complete their assigned task before the fighters can search a single planet and the moons orbiting it."

"What sort of timescale are we talking about here?" Denning asked and Ghroc and Martin looked at one another.

"A couple of days?" Marting suggested and Ghroc nodded.

"I think so. I doubt some of the inner planets will even take a day to cover." he said, "As they finish we can redeploy them to help with the larger subsystems and the final planet. Then two days for a runabout to complete an orbit around the star while scanning all the asteroids they pass."

"That will still leave more than a hundred rogue objects, including some that show signs of a previous Slaver presence." Sodyne said.

"Are we talking about major sites?" Davis said.

"No, not according to the data found in the stasis box." Hewitt told him, "The major sites are all located on planets or moons. The asteroid facilities are more minor."

"A lot are probably empty." Denning added, "If this system was used for dilithium mining-

"That looks highly likely." Sodyne interrupted.

"Then the Slavers would have moved from one asteroid to another as deposits ran dry." Denning continued.

"What about another stasis box?" Davis said, "Could there be another of them here? Or maybe even more than one?"

"It's a distinct possibility." Denning replied.

"In that case the *Nightfall* should proceed ahead of the professor's transport." T'Lan said and NayaI frowned.

"How do you figure that cousin?" she said and Trellan smiled slightly when he heard this.

"Need I remind you again that we are not related?" T'Lan responded, "But referring to the point you raised we have a single stasis box aboard the *Nightfall* while there are at present two aboard the professor's transport.

The presence of a second box will prevent detection of another through the luminescent phenomena that they exhibit when brought together."

The phenomena that T'Lan was referring to was the glow that an active stasis box produced whenever it was brought within a light year of another. Given that no sensor technology had yet been developed that could detect a stasis box, using one to detect another by this glow was regarded as the most effective means of locating them.

"A stasis box would most likely be in the primary surface facility or the shipyard." Sodyne said.

"Which is where we'll be beginning our search of the system anyway."

Cole then looked at Denning.

"I'd like to remind you that if we do find a stasis box it will be opened under controlled circumstances and by a team drawn from my crew professor." he said.

"Yes, I understand captain. I'll remind my team of the procedure." Denning replied.

"At warp eight we could be at GL four-four-seven in two days captain." Ghroc said.

"Professor we'll probably be about a day behind them at our stop speed. Perhaps it would be best if I remained aboard the *Nightfall* so I can monitor their findings before you arrive." Trellan suggested.

"I've got no objection to that." Cole added and Denning nodded.

"Very well, thank you captain." he said, "We'll beam back over to my transport and let you proceed to GL four-four-seven. Foster informs me that he can complete his overhaul of our systems in about twelve hours, that should give you enough of a head start to reach the system with at least a light year between us."

"What about the Starfleet engineers still aboard the transport?" NayaI asked and Cole looked at Davis.

"Commander Davis are those personnel needed aboard the *Nightfall*?" he said but Davis shook his head.

"No captain, we can manage without them. At least for a couple of days." he replied.

"In that case if Foster still wants their help then they can remain aboard the transport and follow with the professor's crew." Cole said.

"Thank you captain. I promise you'll have your people back as soon as possible." Denning responded.

3.

The Ferengi transport ship *Latinum Lobes* waited in space not far from the GL-447 system, running one sensor scan after another while its senior officers gathered around the central console in the ship's bridge. "Still the same leader." the only female officer present said to Krom, the ship's owner and captain as she studied the results of the scans, "Definite presence of alloys that have to be artificial in origin and some minor power sources, but nothing major. Easy to miss if you weren't looking for them specifically." "And no response from our stasis box." Krom's first officer, Druk added. Krom then looked across the console at his chief engineer. "What about you Mugtek?" he asked, "Do you have anything to add?" "No leader." Mugtek responded, "Our source indicated that this system would make for a valuable prize but these readings offer us very little. Perhaps if we could find a way to tap into the Starfleet probe we might be able to see what they have found." "Starfleet could detect the intrusion." the female science officer pointed out. "Neeradel is right leader, it would be a considerable risk and we cannot stand up to a Starfleet cruiser with our weapons." Druk added, "Perhaps we have overestimated our source. Perhaps the deal they have offered is not as rewarding as was promised." "Then what would you suggest instead Druk?" Krom said. "Return home. We have the stasis box, we can easily make a profit from that." Druk replied. "There is another stasis box aboard the science team's vessel as well as one on the Starfleet ship. Why settle for one when we can have all three? Plus whatever secrets the Slavers left in this sector? No, as long as I remain daimon we will remain here. The information our source has provided has been reliable so far so we will continue to act on it." Krom said sternly before one of the more junior bridge officers called out. "Leader we are receiving another signal from our source." he said as he turned and Krom looked at him. "Let me see. Transfer it to this station." Krom ordered and he turned back around to look at the central console just as the contents of the message appeared on the screens in front of the officers gathered around it. The message that had just been received was a data file, the contents offering no indication of the identity of the sender. However, it did show that whoever had sent the message had access to all of the information gathered by the *Nightfall's* probe as well as the initial data obtained by Professor Denning's team. As well as the raw data there was a copy of the analysis that Sodyne had carried out, identifying the most significant sites and details of the search pattern that had been planned, including a warning about the risk of detection.

THE NIGHTFALL WILL ARRIVE IN ADVANCE OF THE TRANSPORT. IF YOUR STASIS BOX IS WITHIN ONE LIGHT YEAR OF THEM AND THERE ARE NO OTHERS PRESENT THEY WILL DETECT YOU.

"Leader we know that there are no other stasis boxes in the system." Neeradel pointed out, "Perhaps we should place it aboard a pod and have it move further away so Starfleet do not detect it." "And who could we trust with it?" Krom said, glancing around him and knowing that the temptation to steal an almost priceless Slaver stasis box could prove too much for most of his crew. "There is also the risk of theft by an outside source." Druk added, "We know that more ships are coming to this sector to plunder what the Slavers left behind and a lone pod would be vulnerable to attack." "Starfleet expects a stasis box to be kept on the moon here or this space station leader." Mugtek said, pointing to the two primary sites identified in the sensor data, "As long as we stay away from them we will be safe for a while at least." "Agreed." Krom said, "But where?" "Starfleet's search pattern is focusing on the planets and asteroid belts leader. Perhaps one of the rogue objects?" Mugtek suggest. "Interesting, they are certainly low on Starfleet's search priority but according to these scans they hold little of interest." Krom said. "I suggest here leader." Neeradel said and she pointed to an object on the map of the system that was currently located far from any of the planets but that was marked as being on a course that was taking it close to the star at the centre of the system. "A comet?" Druk commented. "Exactly. We can hide the *Latinum Lobes* in its tail. Also, although it has not been scanned by the Starfleet probe it is listed in the original source data so it must have interested the Slavers." Neeradel replied, nodding her head, "There does not appear to be anything special about the structure of this comet so anything of interest must have been put there by the Slavers themselves."

"Then that is where we will hide. Helm lay in a course at maximum warp. We need to reach the target before Starfleet can get within sensor range." Krom ordered.

"We will need to evade the Starfleet probe leader. I recommend we approach the comet from a sun-ward direction." Neeradel said.

"Helm do as the science officer says." Krom said, resting his hands on the edge of the console as he gave the order.

The *Latinum Lobes* was already aligned towards the GL-447 system and all that was needed was for the helmsman to engage the ship's warp drive, accelerating the ship to faster than light speed.

By dropping out of warp on the far side of the local star the *Latinum Lobes* was able to avoid its warp signature being detected by the probe from the *Nightfall* before circling around at impulse power and moving into the shadow of the comet itself the helmsman kept the ship out of the probe's field of view. As the ship drew closer to the comet Neeradel began to scan it, taking readings on its size and structure.

"The radius of the nucleus is just under two thousand metres across leader." she announced.

"Can you determine what the Slavers left here?" Drurk asked.

"Not yet, but the overall mass indicates that the nucleus has an extremely high density." Neeradel began before she looked up and directly at Krom, "Leader I do not think this is a natural object."

"Explain." Krom responded.

"Our sensor readings indicate a significant metallic mass at the core of the comet. Duranium, tritanium and traces of neutronium. The quantities are too great to simply be a facility placed on the surface. I think the core was constructed artificially and then encased in a shell designed to mimic a comet." Neeradel explained.

"A treasure vault?" Drurk commented.

"The Slavers kept their treasures in stasis boxes and we know that there are none of them present in this system." Neeradel pointed out.

"Nevertheless, whatever the Slavers hid here had to be important and that makes it valuable." Krom said, "Helm take us in closer. One quarter impulse until we get within ten thousand metres. Then use thrusters to match the course and velocity of the comet, or whatever that object is."

"What if it is armed? It could attack." Drurk said.

"Shields up." Krom added, seeing the sense in being cautious.

With its shields raised the *Latinum Lobes* approached the fake comet cautiously, continually scanning for any signs of activity that would indicate that the presence of the Ferengi vessel had been detected. However, the object remained completely inert even as the transport ship moved into position alongside it, matching its movement exactly.

"Now running alongside the object leader." the helmsman reported, "Distance ten thousand metres."

"Shields picking up impacts from debris." the tactical officer added and Krom looked at Neeradel.

"Report." he said.

"The debris is water leader." she replied, "Micro ice crystals from the tail as they break off from the surface. Harmless even if they hit our hull."

"Can you tell what is inside yet?" Drurk asked.

"Not yet but I can confirm that the object is hollow and divided into numerous decks. There is an atmosphere but no active power sources to run a life support system. Whatever this facility is, it is shut down." Neeradel said as she studied the sensor readings she was continuing to take.

"What about the position of the Starfleet probe?" Krom asked.

"Circling the system's sixth planet leader. It will be over the horizon in eight minutes and out of sight for twenty-three minutes after that." another of the bridge officers reported.

"Is it safe to beam aboard?" Krom asked.

"I think so leader. I would recommend breathing apparatus for the boarding party just in case there are toxins our sensors have not detected but there is adequate pressure to maintain humanoid life." Neeradel told him.

"Good. Drurk, take Neeradel, Mugtek and three other crewmen of your choosing aboard. Determine the condition of the facility and its purpose. I want to know what we have found."

"And how much we need to share with our source leader?" Drurk responded and Krom bared his teeth as he grinned back at his first officer.

"Exactly. If they don't know what this place is then they can't possibly know if we remove anything without telling them about it." he said.

The Ferengi materialised inside the structure concealed within the fake comet wearing oxygen masks connected to tanks on their backs and using compact lamps to illuminate the otherwise pitch blackness around them. With no active artificial gravity field inside the comet one of the Ferengi immediately began to float off the floor.

"Activate your magnetic boots you fool!" Drurk snapped and the floating Ferengi promptly dropped back to

the floor with a 'clunk'. Drurk then looked at Neeradel who had already activated her hand scanner and was using it to conduct a scan of the local area, "Well?" he asked.

"I am detecting electrical and power conduits behind the bulkheads." she replied, "The power appears to spread out from an area beneath us while the control lines become denser in that direction." and she pointed along the darkened corridor.

"A command centre?" Drurk suggested.

"Possibly. At the least a significant control point. If not a command centre then maybe a computer core that we could use to gain control of this facility." Neeradel said.

"*Latinum Lobes* to boarding party, do you read me?" Krom's voice then sounded from Drurk's communicator badge and Drurk tapped it activate the device and respond.

"Yes leader." he said.

"What is your situation?" Krom said.

"We are all safe leader. We are in a corridor and there is no power or gravity. Neeradel believes that she has located something that could be a command centre so we are going to investigate." Drurk told him.

"Hurry up." Krom said, "Our stasis box has begun to glow. The Starfleet vessel must be close by."

"Yes leader." Drurk said before turning off his communication badge and waving the boarding party onwards.



"Captain our stasis box is glowing." Sodyne announced from the *Nightfall's* science station as the starship neared the GL-447 system.

"Then there is another such device in the GL four-four-seven system." T'Lan commented and Cole nodded before he glanced to where Trellan sat beside him on the bridge.

"It looks like you've really hit the jackpot this time." he said before looking ahead at the main view screen again, "Lieutenant Nayal is there any more information from the probe?" he asked.

"No captain. The probe is locked into an orbit around the gas giant and aside from a minor power source coming from the shipyard the entire system looks dead." she answered.

"Lieutenant Commander Ghroc what is our ETA at the system?" T'Lan said.

"We're holding steady at warp eight and the warp drive is stable. Just under eight and a half hours to the target commander." Ghroc replied.

"That's more than enough time to get everyone prepared." Cole said, "Commander Martin are our ground troops fully briefed?"

Part of the project that had resulted in the creation of the modified Akira-class heavy cruisers of the *Nightfall* project was the inclusion of ground combat troops along with assault shuttles and light armoured vehicles for support. Two full companies of Starfleet's ground combat specialists were therefore, stationed aboard the *Nightfall* and these would provide the capacity to deploy away teams to more than a dozen moons orbiting the gas giant.

"Yes captain. Company and platoon commanders are handing out assignments based on the feed from our probe." Martin replied.

"How far behind us is the professor?" Trellan said.

"Nayal?" Cole added.

"The research team's transport is six light years behind us captain. Maintaining warp seven." Nayal answered.

"Then they will reach the system approximately three and a half days behind us." T'Lan said.

"Long enough for us to secure the gas giant's subsystem and hopefully have found that stasis box." Cole said.

"That way we can make sure that it's opened properly instead of leaving it to amateurs." Martin commented, remembering how a member of Professor Denning's team had opened a stasis box instead of leaving it for a Starfleet team.

"Captain I suggest that we launch more probes towards the gas giant." Sodyne said.

"Is there something in particular you think we'll find lieutenant commander?" Cole asked, glancing over his shoulder towards her.

"Nothing in particular captain. But a probes targeting the command centre and shipyard specifically could reveal something." Sodyne explained.

"There is logic to the suggestion captain." T'Lan added.

"In that case I want a class three probe set to land five hundred metres from the primary target facility and a pair of class one probes towards the shipyard, have them take up positions on opposite sides of the station." Cole ordered.

"Yes captain, loading probes now." Martin said as he loaded the probes into the *Nightfall's* torpedo launchers.

"Two probes aimed at the shipyard captain?" Trellan commented.

"You are hoping that you will be able to detect the stasis box if it is aboard the station." T'Lan said, looking at Cole.

"The shadow effect. You're hoping that we can get the stasis box directly between the two probes." Sodyne added and Cole smiled.

"Exactly. We know that nothing can penetrate a stasis field. Perhaps we'll get lucky and it will block a direct communications link between the two probes. Our regular sensors won't detect a stasis box so I'm open to trying almost anything to find a way of detecting them." he said.

"And if the stasis box is elsewhere in the system captain?" Trellan asked.

"Then we've lost nothing by trying. We'll recover the probes when we get to the target and we'll still have the data they gather." Cole said.

"I'd like access to the telemetry from the probes if that's okay captain." Trellan said and Cole nodded.

"Of course." he said, "Sodyne please make sure that Trellan is cleared to receive the probe telemetry."

"Yes captain." she said.

"Probes loaded and ready captain." Martin announced.

"Deploy probes." Cole ordered and in rapid succession the three probes were launched from the torpedo launcher mounted on the ventral side of the *Nightfall's* saucer section and sped towards the star system that the cruiser was heading for.

Following the route of the control conduits led the Ferengi boarding party to a large, closed door. This remained closed as the Ferengi approached and forced them to stop.

"There is no power to this door." Mugtek said, shining his lamp around the edges of the door frame and then pointing it directly at the control panel.

"You brought a portable power unit with you did you not?" Drurk said.

"Yes but it has limited capacity and we may need it restart the station's control systems." Mugtek replied.

"Then as our engineer what do you suggest?" Drurk said.

"I don't see any signs of a manual, mechanical override but it may be possible to pry the doors apart with the tools I brought." Mugtek suggested.

"Then get started. Who knows how long we have before Starfleet arrives?" Drurk said and he stepped back from the doors to enable Mugtek to get closer.

Mugtek set the holdall he carried down on the floor at his feet and took a powered pry bar from it before walking up to the doors, standing where the two segments connected. Then he pushed the tip of the pry bar to the join and looked around at the Ferengi crewmen, "You three be ready. When there is a gap large enough you need to all pull at the same time on the same half."

The three crewmen approached the door as well, standing to one side of Mugtek before he pressed a button on the side of the pry bar to activate it. This triggered a replicator built into the tip of the pry bar that created an extending point forcing its way between the two halves of the door. This push created a narrow gap as the two halves were forced apart and as soon as it was wide enough the three Ferengi crewmen all pushed their fingers into it. With all three of them pulling in the same direction they still had to strain but they were able to drag the heavy door open further until there was enough room for the boarding party to get through one at a time and Mugtek quickly shone his lamp through the gap to see what was on the other side.

"Well? What do you see?" Drurk asked.

"This is it." Mugtek replied excitedly, "I see control consoles, it looks like a command centre of some kind and then he quickly squeezed through the gap in the doors.

Neeradel was quick to follow Mugtek, the female Ferengi being slightly smaller than the others and being able to slip through before Drurk could.

"Wait, I command here." Drurk said sternly as he struggled through the gap as well, anxious not to give Neeradel or Mugtek the chance to take anything from the room beyond without his knowledge.

When he got through the gap he took a few more steps into the room and looked around, using his lamp to illuminate what he was looking at. Just as Mugtek had said the room was filled with control consoles but all of them were as dark and lifeless as everything else about the facility was. This annoyed Drurk, as scrap the control consoles would bring a good price from collectors but even partial functionality would increase that value by ten or even a hundred times.

"I am not detecting any power readings." Neeradel said as she scanned the room.

"Agreed." Mugtek added, looking at his own handheld scanner, "Although there does appear to be a power storage unit over here." and he pointed to a corner of the room.

"If there is a power storage unit then why is there no power?" Drurk asked.

"The internal drain has depleted it." Mugtek said.

"Yes, even the smallest of drains over a billion years would add up to a considerable amount." Neeradel agreed.

"What about the power source you brought with you Mugtek?" Drurk said.

"It will probably suffice but I will require assistance in determining the required output. If the Slavers' circuitry is inadequately protected then plugging this in could cause damage." Mugtek told him.

"Then you think that this equipment can be reactivated?" Drurk said, thinking of the additional profit.

"Perhaps, yes. It may depend on the amount of fuel left for the main reactor. Our power cell should be able to trigger a system wide restart but it will not be strong enough to keep the entire station running." Mugtek said.

"And then we should be able to find out what the Slavers intended to use this place for." Neeradel added.

"Proceed. Be as quick as possible but do not take risks that could damage anything. I won't suffer a reduced profit margin on this expedition because of your foolishness."

Mugtek then directed the Ferengi crewmen to begin removing the wall panels that the Slaver power pack was located behind until it was fully exposed. This allowed him and Neeradel to examine the exhausted power pack more closely and they carefully inspected the manner in which it was connected to the command centre's systems.

"The chemistry of this power cell suggest we should set ours to seventy-four point three percent of its maximum output." Neeradel said.

"Seventy-four point three." Mugtek repeated as he adjusted the power pack he had brought with him.

"How long will it last?" Drurk asked.

"At maximum current flow approximately sixteen minutes." Mugtek answered. Then after a brief pause he added, "I doubt that any start up sequence would come close to that amount of time."

"Then carry on." Drurk said watching as Mugtek and two of the crewmen began to remove the Slaver power pack from its mounting before linking the connectors to the sprung grips at the ends of the leads coming from the device Mugtek had brought with him. However, even when this was done the consoles of the command centre remained dark, "Why isn't it working?" Drurk added.

"Because the power pack is not in circuit yet. We need to find the trigger switch." Mugtek said, "It will be a mechanical switch that will allow at least one of the consoles in here to draw power from this pack."

"What will it look like?" Drurk said as he looked around, hunting for a lever of some kind.

"I don't know." Mugtek admitted, "But I expect it will be close by."

"Over here!" one of the Ferengi crewmen called out as he shone his lamp on a nearby section of wall that had a hinge at one side and the three officers rushed to see for themselves.

"This could be it." Mugtek said and he carefully reached out to touch the panel. He found that it was sprung slightly so he pressed it gently, producing a soft 'click' and when he withdrew his hand the panel swung open to reveal another control console behind it. This was as inactive as the others on the room but there was also a prominent lever that Mugtek reached out and took hold of, "Ready?" he said, looking around at the other Ferengi.

"Just get on with it." Drurk ordered and Mugtek pulled the lever.

As far as Drurk could tell this had absolutely no effect whatsoever. The room remained dark and all of the console inactive and he glared at the Ferengi engineer. However, before he could speak Neeradel pointed to the console that had been hidden behind the panel.

"It worked. This console is now active." she said and Drurk saw that she was correct. Now instead of just a blank screen the console's monitor had a cluster of flashing symbols in one corner.

"We need to hurry. We have to find the start up menu before the power pack is drained." Mugtek added, turning his attention to the now active console.

With eight hours before the *Nightfall* reached the GL-447 system they had the chance to rest before they got there. However, there was still the matter of the extra probes they had launched and Cole and T'Lan were in their quarters, sat at the table eating with their daughter T'Sal when the intercom activated.

"Sodyne to Captain Cole." Sodyne's voice said.

"Yes commander?" Cole responded.

"Captain we're receiving telemetry from the probes. I think you should see this."

"Okay Sodyne, can you come to our quarters?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain, I'm on my way." Sodyne responded before the channel went dead.

It did not take long for Sodyne to get to Cole and T'Lan's quarters and when T'Lan let her in Cole was sat on a couch holding T'Sal.

"You may connect to our terminal there lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and Sodyne quickly established a wireless connection from the PADD she had brought with her to the desktop terminal so that she could access its larger screen.

"So what have we found?" Cole said, "Did the pair of class one probes manage to find the stasis box?"

"I'm sorry captain but no, we still haven't pinpointed the location of the stasis box in the system."

"That is unfortunate." T'Lan commented.

"What I really wanted you to see were the images that the class three captured of the primary facility."

Sodyne went on and she brought up an image on the computer screen for Cole and T'Lan to see.

This image showed the barren landscape that was common to many moons in the galaxy, with no signs of an atmosphere or any sort of indigenous life. However, as well the natural landscape the image also showed a large cluster of structures that were clearly of artificial origin.

"This is the Slaver facility on the lunar surface captain." Sodyne explained.

"That looks like a pretty extensive facility." Cole commented, "Would you say it was about the size of a Starfleet starbase T'Lan?"

"Given the available data, yes." T'Lan replied.

"The probe's readings agree with that assessment captain." Sodyne added, "The issue is some of the more close in shots we got when the probe carried out an overhead flight before landing."

Sodyne then called up a montage of different camera shots of the same facility but from an overhead angle instead of taken from the surface and these showed extensive damage.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin is checking these now but it looks like damage caused by a bombardment from space captain." Sodyne said, "Of course after a billion years all traces of any radioactive residue that would have let us identify the type of weaponry used has been lost."

"How much of the facility does this affect?" T'Lan said.

"About thirty percent." Sodyne answered.

"So most of it is still intact." Cole commented, "Will this affect our plans to send an away team down there?"

"Not from what we've seen so far captain. Of course the team will have to wear space suits until we can secure and pressurise the areas we want to work in but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. Like I said, the excess radioactivity from the bombardment is gone now so there aren't any risks from that."

"Doctor Hamill should go along with the team investigating this facility just in case." T'Lan said, "She is most qualified to monitor our away team."

"Yes, I was planning on sending her with you to the shipyard but I think she's better off going down to the surface." Cole said.

"Commander T'Lan isn't going to the surface?" Sodyne commented when she heard this and Cole shook his head.

"No commander. We have two main objectives in the system, this lunar facility and the shipyard. Since T'Lan was the science officer aboard the previous *Nightfall* we both decided that it was best if she went to one and you to the other. I assume that you would rather go to the surface?" he said.

"Yes captain, definitely." Sodyne replied.

"I thought so. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc will take command of your team and Lieutenant Commander Davis will also be accompanying you. Lieutenant Commander Martin and Lieutenant Nayal will go to the shipyard." Cole said.

"What about Trellan? He'll want to go with one of the away teams." Sodyne pointed out.

"I'm sure he will." Cole said, "But I think that he can wait here aboard the *Nightfall* with me until Professor Denning arrives. If one of our away teams finds that stasis box then I don't want anyone getting so excited that they open it 'by accident'."

"That will also apply to the members of the away team Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan added, "If a stasis box is discovered then it is not to be opened before suitable precautions can be put in place. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do." Sodyne replied, frowning for a moment, "I know what I'm doing."

"Very good." T'Lan said.

"Is there anything else commander?" Cole asked.

"No sir, that's all for now." Sodyne said.

"In that case you can go now. T'Lan and I will look at your full report and get back to you if we have any questions." Cole told her and she nodded.

"Yes captain." she said as she got to her feet and then turned to leave Cole and T'Lan's quarters.

When the doors closed behind her Cole looked at T'Lan and smiled for a moment.

"A little harsh with her weren't you?" he said, "Reminding her not to open a stasis box before we can do all we can to contain anything that could be inside."

"Perhaps. However, I have noticed that Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has shown herself to be extremely keen to investigate anything related to the Slavers in person. I am concerned that this could lead to her becoming reckless if her behaviour is not kept in check. Do you think that this is unreasonable Robert?" T'Lan replied.

"No." Cole said, "In fact T'Lan I'd be more worried about you if you weren't keeping an eye on her."

5.

By making use of the translation database provided to them by their source the Ferengi boarding party was quickly able to begin the startup sequence for the facility concealed deep with the fake comet. Initially this just triggered scrolling text on the console found hidden behind the panel but all of a sudden it was as if the entire command centre came to life at once. First the lights came on and then the Ferengi felt themselves being pulled downwards as the facility's artificial gravity field powered up. After that the other consoles came to life one after another with displays first showing more scrolling text while each control console was restarted before they switched to their default configuration and a mix of text and image based data filled them all.

"I believe that we have power." Neeradel said and Drurk activated his communicator badge.

"Leader this is Drurk. I have good news for you, the station is functional. We have restored power." he transmitted and both Drurk and Neeradel noticed the way he had not mentioned how all he did was stand back and watch while they did all the work.

"Good. Congratulate Mugtek and Neeradel." Krom responded, guessing who was really responsible for the successful reactivation of the facility, "Now find out what everything does. Starfleet is almost here." he ordered.

"Yes leader, I-" Drurk began but Krom cut off the channel before he could finish and he looked at the rest of the boarding party, "You heard the daimon, we must have full control of this station as soon as possible."

"We should check the consoles and determine what each of them does." Neeradel said and Mugtek nodded.

"Yes, there should be a pattern related to this station's purpose." he said.

"Very well everyone get moving, you three as well. See if you can tell what the consoles are for but do not touch anything. Nothing here belongs to you." Drurk said, looking at the three Ferengi crewmen as he gave his order.

All six members of the boarding party then spread out and began to move from one console to the next to try and determine what each one was for. As was to be expected a significant number of them were designed to assist in the running of a space station and could have been found on any number of different facilities, regardless of their purpose. However, there also seemed to be a large number of consoles related to tactical functions.

"Is this place a fortress?" one of the Ferengi crewmen asked.

"If it is then where are all the weapons?" Neeradel responded.

"Explain." Drurk said.

"I scanned this comet as thoroughly as I could. I found only limited evidence of weapons, enough to cover all approaches at once but limited in their output." Neeradel explained.

"Some of these consoles suggest a power output for particle weapons that could cut a starship in two with a single blast," Mugtek pointed out and then he pointed to one of the consoles close to him, "and the torpedoes that this controls-"

"This station has no torpedo launchers." Neeradel interrupted.

"Then see for yourself. This is a torpedo control console. Ammunition, guidance protocols, arming. All of it is for torpedoes." Mugtek snapped back at her.

"That is impossible. My scans were conclusive. Limited yield particle arrays and no torpedoes." Neeradel said as she walked across the room to inspect the console Mugtek had pointed to.

"Perhaps the torpedoes were all fired." one of the Ferengi crewmen suggested.

"I would have still detected the launchers themselves as gaps in the armour protection of the outer hull."

Neeradel pointed out as she looked at the console and then something caught her eye, "This console is also tied into a subspace transmitter array." she said.

"The torpedoes could be guided from here. Inefficient but-" Mugtek began but Neeradel interrupted him again.

"No, I don't think so." she said and she moved to another tactical console, one that she knew related to a particle weapon that required neither ammunition nor guidance. Here she found evidence of another subspace link, "This one is the same." she said, "The console is designed to transmit targeting information and firing orders outside of the station."

"What for?" Drurk said.

"Remote weapon platforms." Mugtek said and Neeradel nodded in agreement.

"Yes. This station is a fortress of sorts but it is designed to control an array of weapons deployed elsewhere in the system." Neeradel said.

"Each one would be able to operate independently of each other but ultimately all of them would be controlled from here." Mugtek added.

"Then this entire star system can be controlled from this room?" Drurk said and Mugtek grinned at him. "Exactly." he said, "From the looks of these consoles there must have been at least a hundred weapon platforms in the system. Possibly even more. Drurk quickly activated his communicator badge again. "Drurk to Latinum Lobes. Daimon Krom are you there?" he said. "Go ahead Drurk." Krom responded. "Leader I have news. This space station is a military command post that controls a vast tactical network." Drurk told him. "Weapons?" Krom said. "Yes leader, mounted on individual weapon platforms all controlled from here." Drurk said. "Powerful enough to take on a Federation starship?" Krom asked and Drurk looked at Mugtek and Neeradel. "If they still function, yes." Mugtek said. "If they still function?" Drurk repeated. "We haven't found any of the weapon platforms yet." Neeradel pointed out. "Leader we-" Drurk began. "I heard." Krom interrupted, "I'm coming over there now with more crew. I want that station fully operational and I want the weapons it controls found and brought online. Do you understand Drurk?" "Yes leader." Drurk replied. "Good. Now prepare for my arrival."

The *USS Nightfall* carried a squadron of twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters that were meant to increase the heavy cruiser's already formidable tactical capabilities and as soon as the Starfleet vessel dropped out of warp in the GL-447 system these began to launch. They emerged two at a time from the large launch door located at the very front of the *Nightfall's* primary hull. They launched in this fashion instead of at a slower rate despite there not being any obvious threat to the *Nightfall* and began to spread out. Without waiting for the entire squadron to deploy the fighters already launched began to go to warp, enabling them to move towards their targets much faster than they could at impulse. This required the *Nightfall* itself to come out of warp slightly above the systems orbital plane to avoid the risk of the fighters colliding with any of the objects within the system but this did not add significantly to the time it would take the starship to reach its destination at impulse. After the fighters had been launched they were followed by the two Danube-class runabouts that the *Nightfall* carried and these turned towards the system's asteroid belts before also going to warp themselves.

"All craft deployed captain." the junior officer filling in for Nayal at operations announced and Cole nodded. With T'Lan and all of his department heads assigned to away teams Cole was the only senior officer remaining on the bridge but he was confident that the bridge crew he currently had were competent enough to run the ship even if he had to leave for some reason. "Very good." Cole said, "What about our away teams?" "Assembling in transporter rooms and the hangar now captain." the operations officer replied. "Good. Helm plot a course to the primary target that takes us past the shipyard and all the target moons. One half impulse power. Instruct the transporter rooms to deploy away teams as we come into range." "Course laid in captain. Engaging impulse drive." the helmsman replied and he pushed forwards on the manual flight controls fitted to the arms of his chair.

As the *Nightfall* passed by each of the gas giant's moons a squad of ground troops was deployed to the surface using the various shuttlecraft that the ship carried. These would provide the squads not only with a means to evacuate if necessary without needing the *Nightfall* to return but also a ready made shelter on the airless lunar surfaces. Meanwhile the two primary away teams assembled in the *Nightfall's* transporter rooms in space suits to be beamed across to the ancient shipyard as the starship flew by it and then to the moon that was the primary target.

"Sorry I'm late." Hamill said as she hurried into the transporter room with the helmet of her suit in her hands. Ghroc, Sodyne and Davis were already present along with a pair of engineers and two security guards. When Ghroc looked around at her he noticed that in addition to the medical kit she had slung over one shoulder she also had a second, unmarked case with a more irregular shape.

"You're bringing a violin?" he said, frowning. "Well this is largely an engineering and physical science mission." Hamill pointed out, "I might not have anything to do so I may as well practice."

"Oh great, just what I need." Ghroc commented.

"Our scans suggest that the interior of the target is a vacuum. Sound won't travel." Davis pointed out.

"Then I better get started now." Hamill said, putting her helmet on before she opened the violin case to remove the instrument. Unable to rest it under her chin while wearing her sealed spacesuit she instead rested it against the base of the helmet and began to play, smiling at Ghroc as she did so.

The Bolian sighed when this began and he started to put his own helmet on.
“Approaching beam down point now commander.” the transporter operator told Ghroc.
“Okay everyone into position.” Ghroc ordered and the away team took their places on the transporter platform, those who had not yet put on their helmets doing so now.
“Twenty seconds commander.” the transporter operator said.
“Energise when ready chief. Put us down within walking distance of the central core but not so close that we might trigger any security precautions the Slavers left behind them.” Ghroc said and despite not knowing of any threat on the surface he drew his phaser as a precaution.
Seconds later the transporter chief engaged the transporter and the away team dematerialised.

When Ghroc’s team materialised on the surface they immediately looked around to see where they were. They had obviously materialised in a corridor that had been struck by weapons fire at some point in the past and there was a large hole in one wall.

“Ghroc to *Nightfall*, we’re all down and safe.” Ghroc transmitted.

“Understood commander.” Cole responded, “What’s that sound?”

Ghroc turned to Hamill who was still moving her bow back and forth over the strings of her violin. Even though they were surrounded by a vacuum the vibrations being produced were able to pass through her helmet and a muffled sound was still being picked up by the communicator built into her spacesuit.

“That would be Doctor Hamill’s violin captain. Permission to use my phaser?” Ghroc said and Hamill lowered the instrument.

“I don’t think will be necessary commander.” Cole said.

“I sound good even in a vacuum.” she said as she started to put it back in its case.

“Better than normal if you ask me.” Ghroc muttered.

“Carry on commander. Report anything you find. *Nightfall* out.” Cole said before he shut off the channel.

“Any ideas Sodyne?” Ghroc asked, looking at the Betazoid woman who had been using her tricorder to scan the area around them since they had materialised.

“That way I think.” she replied, pointing along the corridor past the damaged section, “From my scans and the probe telemetry I think that the complex is controlled from a point about six hundred metres that way.”

“Then let’s move.” Ghroc said and the away team began to advance along the corridor.

As they passed by the hole in the base’s hull each of the away team members took the opportunity to look out onto the barren lunar surface. From here they could see a number of the other interconnected structures that made up the facility. Many of these showed at least some signs of damage but the lack of an atmosphere to degrade them they had remained standing even after a billion years of being abandoned.

A closed door blocked the away team’s path at the end of the corridor but Davis had made sure that the team had magnatonic grips with them. These large two-handed grips could be clamped to any surface and allowed even the doors to be simply pulled open to reveal the junction that lay on the other side.

“Scans indicate that the side passages run around the outer edge of this structure.” Sodyne said, “The route ahead would take us into its core.”

“So which way should we go?” Davis asked.

“West.” Sodyne answered, “If we circle around that way we ought to reach the connecting corridor to the central core of the facility.”

“Assuming that this corridor goes that far.” Hamill pointed out.

“Any way could lead to a dead end doctor.” Ghroc commented, “So we may as well take the most direct route and see how far we get. Davis, Sodyne, I want both of you to scan ahead of us. Look for any indication of functional technology or booby traps.”

While Ghroc was taking his team through the surface facility T'Lan's had beamed directly to the operations centre of the shipyard and the engineers she had brought with her were busy examining the various consoles. Despite the station having been empty since the fall of the Slaver Empire some of the consoles remained active, operating at a bare minimum level of power to conserve fuel. As was to be expected all of these dealt with the functions that would be required for the station to remain intact while orbiting the gas giant. One monitored the fusion reactors that were at the core of the shipyard, only one of which currently operated at a reduced level while another controlled the limited steering capacity provided by the station's thrusters that had kept it from plummeting into the gas giant's atmosphere in the years since it had been abandoned but there was also another console active that was of more interest to Martin and he, T'Lan and Nayal studied it closely.

"It certainly looks like a tactical station." Martin said.

"But one that appears to control only a single weapon." T'Lan pointed out.

"That seems very inefficient." Nayal added.

"It's also odd that it's the only tactical console that's active." Martin said as he examined the targeting interface. Then he smiled.

"Your expression suggests that you have an idea." T'Lan said and Martin nodded.

"I do." he replied, "I don't think that this is a tactical station at all. It's the refuelling system." he said.

"A gravitational scoop to draw hydrogen from the gas giant?" Nayal asked.

"Yes, we figured it would be something like this but I just didn't think that it would have its own console. I'd have thought it would have been included with the reactor controls." Martin said.

"If the Slavers operated their shipyards in a similar way to we do now then it would have needed significant tractor beam capability. Perhaps the operation of the scoop was based on their method of operating ordinary tractor beams. In that case a dedicated terminal for the refuelling system would make more sense. Any tactical officer could operate it without the need to involve a more valuable engineer."

Nayal grinned when she heard this, looking at Martin.

"Speaking as a tactical officer commander, I'll try not to take that too personally." Martin said before he noticed one of the away team's engineers approaching them, "Ah, here comes one of your valuable engineers." he added.

"Yes lieutenant? You have something to report?" T'Lan said.

"Yes commander." the engineer responded, "We completed our analysis of the reactor system and bringing it back up to normal operation should be straight forwards. There's adequate fuel to run the station at full power for about six weeks. The issue is that although the Slavers left the reactor, thrusters and refuelling system running on automatic when they left they didn't bother with the station's defences and it has been operating without shields for a billion years."

"There's damage? I thought our scans showed that the station was intact?" Martin said.

"They did." Nayal said replied.

"And the scans are largely accurate." the engineer told them, "However, there have been minor impacts recorded by the station's computer over the years. Possibly from the debris that tends to build up in the orbital space of any planet where space travel takes place or maybe just naturally occurring micro meteors. In either case there are hull breaches we won't be able to find without bringing the damage control system back online but powering up the damaged sections could cause more problems if the impacts hit anything important. We could end up dumping power straight into the hull and that could trip the entire system, leaving us without even the power we have now."

"Sounds like you need to isolate the damaged sections from the power grid before you start turning anything else on." Martin said.

"Exactly sir." the engineer said.

"The *Nightfall's* sensors should be able to isolate the impact points if used from close range." T'Lan suggested before she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to *Nightfall*." she transmitted.

"Go ahead T'Lan." Cole said, smiling when he heard his wife's voice.

"The engineers have reported that the shipyard has suffered damage captain." T'Lan told him.

"I suppose finding it fully operational was too much to hope for." Trellan commented when he heard this.

"How serious is the damage T'Lan?" Cole asked.

"The precise extent is unknown but it has been caused by a succession of minor impacts against the unshielded hull. We need the *Nightfall's* sensors to determine the locations of the impacts so we can assess whether trying to reactivate the station's systems will cause more difficulties." T'Lan explained.

"Okay T'Lan. I'll make sure that the away team on the lunar surface knows we're leaving orbit and then we'll be with you. *Nightfall* out." Cole responded. Then after he shut off the channel he immediately opened another, "*Nightfall* to Lieutenant Commander Ghroc." he said.

"Ghroc here captain." the Bolian replied.

"Commander we're about to leave orbit for a while. T'Lan reports that the shipyard is damaged and her team needs the *Nightfall's* sensors to determine the extent of the damage. Will you be alright?" Cole said.

"I think so captain. We've just entered the building where Lieutenant Commander Sodyne believes the facility is controlled from and so far there are no indications that the Slavers left any security measures behind when they abandoned it." Ghroc said.

"In that case we'll be heading out now. We'll be out of basic com badge range so we'll make sure we keep an active channel on you from this end. If you do need help we're only a call away." Cole said.

"That's good to know captain." Ghroc replied.

"My pleasure commander. *Nightfall* out." Cole said before he closed the channel again and looked towards the bridge's helm station, "Helm take us out of orbit. One quarter impulse power to the shipyard."

"Aye captain. One quarter impulse power." the officer filling in at the helm while Ghroc was off the ship said and then turned the *Nightfall* away from the moon below and accelerated away.

Ferengi technicians scurried around the command centre while Krom watched, all of them anxious to bring the station's remote weapon systems back on line as quickly as possible. With the station's fusion reactor operating at full power again the life support systems could be re-established and the Ferengi no longer needed either magnetic bots or oxygen masks.

"Leader we have located another of the weapon platforms." Neeradel called out and Krom turned towards the console she was stood at with another Ferengi of lower rank.

"What is its condition?" he asked.

"Its weapons are disabled leader. The log indicates it came under attack and suffered damage." Neeradel told him.

"Then what use is it?" Krom responded.

"By comparing its location to the other two we have found we can use it to plot where other platforms can be found." Mugtek said and Krom was about to reply when his communication badge activated.

"Leader." the voice of one of the Ferengi officers still aboard the *Latinum Lobes* said and Krom tapped his badge.

"Speak." he said.

"Leader the Starfleet vessel is moving." the other Ferengi reported.

"Is it coming this way?" Krom asked, concerned that the *Nightfall* would arrive before his crew had got the Slaver weapon platforms under their control. The *Latinum Lobes'* weapons and shields were not strong enough to take on a Starfleet heavy cruiser, even without its fighters and the weapons built into the fake comet would only go part of the way to making up the difference.

"It is heading towards the space station orbiting the sixth planet." the Ferengi officer said and Krom relaxed somewhat. The *Latinum Lobes* had monitored the *Nightfall* as it deployed its fighters and shuttles and detected the use of its transporters as it beamed away teams to the shipyard and also down to one of the gas giant's moons. Seeing the *Nightfall* now breaking away from the team on the surface and heading for the space station meant that at least Starfleet had not detected the Ferengi's presence in the system yet but the further implications could be good or bad. It could mean that the away team aboard the shipyard was in trouble and needed urgent help, however it could also mean that they had located something so valuable that it required the immediate protection of their starship.

"Keep monitoring the starship." Krom ordered, "Gather all the data you can but do not use active sensors, I don't want our position given away under any circumstances. Is that understood?"

"Yes leader." the Ferengi officer said before Krom abruptly shut off his communication badge and turned back towards Mugtek, "How long before you can plot the positions of the other weapon platforms?" he asked the engineer. In response Mugtek looked back at him and smiled.

"I have already found the others in that cluster leader." he said, "Twenty-eight platforms arranged in an orbit three billion kilometres from this system's sun."

"Leader each time we communicate with one of the platforms we risk the Starfleet vessel detecting our presence. To check all twenty eight at once would be very risky." Neeradel added.

"Then communicate one at a time. Limit our subspace emissions as much as possible." Krom said before he paused for a moment and then added, "And while you are doing that I want someone to find me the rest of the weapon platforms. I was told there would be more than a hundred of them in the system and I want every last one accounting for."

Even at just one quarter impulse power the *Nightfall* was able to reach the shipyard in just a few minutes and with the image of the station looming large on both the main view screen at the front of the bridge and the eyepiece of the headset he wore Cole gave the order to begin searching for the damage to the hull.

"Full spectrum scan. Visual sensors and bring the lidar turrets on line. They should be able to pick up the exact surface contours at this range." he ordered.

"Aye captain, deploying lidar turrets now." the operations officer responded.

Among the modifications made to the ships of the *Nightfall* program compared to ordinary Akira-class vessels were a pair of lidar turrets mounted above and below the primary saucer section. These provided an alternative means of detection to the conventional subspace based sensors fitted to all Starfleet vessels. Originally it had been hoped that these could double as a form of close in protection from torpedoes but that was a function that never been successfully implemented and so short range scanning was their only purpose. However, the resolution available to them was as good as any subspace sensor and they were ideal for the task now at hand. The laser beams from the two turrets passed over the hull of the ancient Slaver shipyard and were reflected back towards the *Nightfall*, the time taken for the light to return giving a precise measurement of the distance between the Starfleet vessel and that exact point on the shipyard's hull. Wherever there was a hole of course the return time either increased dramatically or the beam failed to return at all, highlighting the hole's precise position. The laser could only be aimed at what the *Nightfall* had a direct line of sight to though and in order to cover the entire station the Starfleet cruiser had to circle around it slowly, giving the twin laser beams the chance to reach every point on the surface of the hull.

"I'm impressed." Trellan said as he watched the scan progress and an image of the shipyard with all of the damaged sections of the hull highlighted began to take shape on the monitor built into the chair he sat in. Cole was watching the same image forming as Trellan but instead of needing to look down at his chair he saw it through his headset.

"We've used the lidar system to detect cloaked warbirds before now." he said with a smile on his face and Trellan frowned.

"How does such a primitive system penetrate a cloaking device?" the Romulan asked, having been raised on the propaganda of the now fallen Romulan Star Empire that their cloaking technology was an almost infallible means of concealing a starship.

"We set the turrets to sweep the beams all around us. Of course most of the energy was lost into space but if a beam passed over the hull of a cloaked ship then even the slightest noise from inside would set up a vibration in the beam that we could detect." Cole explained, "In fact we can demonstrate for you." he added and he looked at the operations console, "Ensign run the beams through the audio processing system for our guest." he ordered.

"Yes captain. On speaker now." the operations officer responded and immediately there was the sound of multiple voices talking over one another combined with some rhythmic, mechanical sounds.

"That's our away team and the shipyard's systems." Cole said, still smiling at Trellan, "Okay ensign, that's enough." he added and the junior officer shut off the sound.

"That's incredible." Trellan said.

"As you said, primitive." Cole replied, "What was really incredible was the way the design team were able to make all these technologies that are four hundred years old work with the control systems of a modern starship. If T'Lan weren't Vulcan I'm sure she'd admit to being proud of herself for her role in it."

"Your wife helped design this ship?" Trellan commented and Cole nodded.

"Yes. Of course she wasn't in charge. Grace Carr was the lead designer and of course Max contributed a lot of the necessary knowledge." he said.

"I've heard of Grace Carr but I don't think I know who this Max is." Trellan said.

"Ah yes. Lieutenant Maximillian. He was a former Borg drone who was among the group separated from the collective when the drone Hugh was infiltrated back into the hive. He chose to retain all of his implants even after he joined Starfleet and as well as doing a lot of the design work for these ships he also served as chief engineer aboard the original *USS Nightfall*. Sadly he was one of the many killed in the attack on the Iconian's headquarters in their pocket dimension." Cole told him.

7.

Sodyne's guess that moving around the outside edge of the structure would bring the away team on the lunar surface to the corridor they needed to take to reach the primary command and control structure proved to be correct and the away team was soon walking down the connecting corridor.

"So where is the command centre likely to be?" Ghroc asked when they reached the end of the corridor and were faced with another junction that gave them the choice of circling around the outside of the structure or heading towards the centre.

"Underground I think." Sodyne answered, "The complex on Vega four-six-eight housed the telepathic amplifier below ground so maybe the same will hold true here."

"Even if it doesn't then there will probably be vital systems down there that we can use to trace the location of a command centre." Davis added.

"Okay so next question, how do we find a way down?" Ghroc said

"Wouldn't it make sense to put an access point to major areas of the building in the middle?" Hamill suggested.

"It's as good a suggestion as any I suppose doctor." Ghroc replied, "So I suppose we should keep straight on." and he began to walk forwards.

As the rest of the away team followed the Bolian Hamill made her way towards Sodyne.

"Are you sure you'll be okay with this Leyla?" she said.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Sodyne responded.

"Because the last time we found a telepathic amplifier those Ferengi forced you inside it and it almost burned your brain out." Hamill pointed out.

Yes but I'm fine now aren't I?" Sodyne said, "Just because you're terrified of stasis boxes because of one bad experience doesn't mean I'm scared of finding another telepathic amplifier."

This reply startled Hamill, wondering whether Sodyne had meant to insult her and for a moment she did not know how she should respond.

"Leyla that's-" she began before Ghroc interrupted.

"Enough of the chit chat on an open channel." he said, reminding them both that their communications were being shared among the entire away team. Then the lights built into his spacesuit revealed that the corridor opened out just ahead of them and had a cluster of closed doorways located close to one another, "Davis does this look like a turbolift cluster to you?" he added, thinking of the clusters of turbolift shafts used in Federation starbases and other large facilities.

"Yes it does. Which means we should be able to follow the shafts downwards." Davis replied, "We just need to get some of these doors open."

Using two of the magnatomic grips again Davis and one of his subordinate engineers were able to pull one of the sets of doors open to reveal an empty shaft on the other side and Ghroc peered inside. Looking down he saw that the shaft extended beyond the range of the lights mounted on his spacesuit.

"How deep is this?" he said.

"About a hundred and twenty metres." Davis answered, looking at his tricorder as he spoke.

Ghroc then took a chemical glow stick from a pouch, snapped it and shook it to mix the chemicals it contained before dropping it into the shaft. In the low lunar gravity the glowing stick took some time to reach the bottom but when it finally did it proved what Davis had said about the depth. Then he looked up again.

"Gravity's too strong for us to just jump" he said, "We'll have to rappel down instead."

"Lines." Davis added, closing his tricorder before putting it away. At the same time the junior engineers and security guards unslung the lines that they had brought with them for just this purpose. Davis fixed four more magnatomic grips to the floor a short distance from the open shaft and these formed anchor points that the lines could be safely secured to before the other ends were tossed into the shaft.

"I'll go first." Ghroc said, "Sodyne, Davis and Clarke with me. The rest of you wait for us to reach the bottom before following."

Ghroc and the other three members of the away team he had selected to go down the shaft first all connected themselves to a different line and stood on the very edge of the floor, gripping the line and leaning backwards. Ghroc was then the first to jump back and with the others following close behind he bounced down the shaft.

To begin with he moved past several sets of sealed doors as well as a horizontal shaft that extended off to the side but then the sides of the shaft became featureless.

"There are no floors down here." he said.

"A solid layer of rock would help protect anything underneath against bombardment or the collapse of the surface structures." Davis pointed out from above him.

Ghroc turned to look at his new surroundings and unsurprisingly he saw that there was just a single exit from the shaft, although it was not aligned with those on the levels above. He placed his hands against the door and tried to pull it open manually, only to find that it was stuck fast.

"Need a hand there?" Davis asked when he landed behind Ghroc moments later.

"Yes. You've not got another of those grips have you?" Ghroc responded and Davis nodded as he stepped forwards at the same time as Sodyne and Clarke also landed at the bottom of the shaft.

"Two right here." he said and he proceeded to clamp the magnatomic grips to the turbolift shaft doors. The two officers then took hold of these and pulled the doors apart as hard as they could, dragging them a short distance apart.

"Let me take a look." Sodyne said, standing in front of the gap between the doors to look through, hoping to see what lay beyond. Rather than the intact Slaver command centre she had been hoping for though she instead found herself looking at another darkened corridor, this one just a few metres long and lined with more doors. Although as with the previous passageways the away team had made their way along there were no signs of recent use here, there were several loose objects lying on the floor that gave the impression of a hurried evacuation during which they had been discarded without anyone returning to collect them.

"Anything interesting?" Davis said.

"Another corridor. At least there is something down here though, I'd hate to have to climb all the way back this shaft.

"Let's finish getting this door open then and Doctor Hamill and the others can follow us down." Ghroc said and he and Davis pulled on the grips again, this time pulling the door wide open so the away team could pass through.

The first four members of the away team halted just beyond the door, with both Sodyne and Davis scanning the area with their tricorders while they waited for the second half of the team to catch up with them.

"Find anything interesting?" Hamill asked.

"Some odd returns ahead." Davis commented and a smile spread across Sodyne's face.

"A telepathic amplifier." she said.

"Are you sure?" Ghroc asked and she nodded.

"As sure as I can be. I've studied the scans that we were able to get of the machine on Vega four-six-eight and even when it was shut down it produced some odd returns, just like what I'm seeing here now." she explained and she pointed along the corridor, "This way." she said before she began to walk.

"I guess we're following her then." Davis commented and Ghroc glanced at him.

"I guess so." he replied before the two men started walking after the Betazoid.

"Wait for me." Hamill said and as she hurried after them she looked at the objects on the floor, "What about these?" she asked.

"Don't tread on them doctor. They might be important." Davis responded as he carried on walking.

The corridor curved as the away team followed it and as they rounded this bend the team saw that it suddenly opened out into a wide area filled with control consoles. However, it was not the controls that was the dominating feature of the chamber, instead it was the telepathic amplifier located at the centre.

"Captain the scan is now complete." the operations officer then announced and Cole focused his attention back on the image that had been generated of the shipyard's hull. This had numerous points highlighted where the hull had been punctured by impacts over the centuries. These holes were limited in size but the force of the impacts had often been strong enough to penetrate deep into the unshielded station.

As he looked at the image Cole activated the communication system built into his chair.

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

"Yes captain?" T'Lan responded.

"T'Lan we've completed our lidar scan of the station's hull and it identifies a total of sixty-two impact points that penetrated the hull. They all look to be in relatively remote sectors of the station though, so with any luck you should be able to just isolate them entirely." Cole told her.

"Thank you captain. If you could transmit a copy of the results I will organise personnel to investigate them." T'Lan said and Cole smiled.

"I'll have it sent over straight away. We'll stay close to you for a while longer as well. If you need any extra people to investigate the damage just let us know. We can have a team over there in under fifteen minutes." he added.

"Yes captain. I will inform you of any need. T'Lan out." T'Lan said and then she shut off the channel.

"She's very formal for your wife." Trellan commented.

"T'Lan and I understand the importance of maintaining a professional appearance on duty." Cole told him before the officer at the science station spoke up.

"Captain we're picking up some odd subspace energy pulses." she said.

"Source?" Cole asked, suspecting that one of the many away teams had triggered something without realising it.

"Varying captain." the science officer said, "I've detected signals that look to be coming from various locations in the system. I can't see a pattern to them so far."

Cole frowned, regretting sending both Sodyne and T'Lan off the ship but overall he still felt that the presence of these two officers was needed with the away teams.

"Captain, perhaps I might be able to tell something about them. Professor Denning and I have had some limited success with Slaver technology and we made considerable notes about the presumed function of different devices." Trellan suggested and Cole nodded.

"Okay, you can take a look." he said before he looked at the science officer again, "Lieutenant please give Mister Trellan access to the signal data."

"Yes captain." the science officer responded.

Sodyne ran past the consoles positioned between her and the telepathic amplifier but ground to a halt as soon as she saw what was lying at the base of the machine.

"We've got a body!" she exclaimed and Hamill ran to join her.

"Let me see." she said, looking down at the floor in the centre of the room.

Here she saw the corpse that Sodyne had discovered. Vaguely humanoid, although with the addition of a tail the figure was not wearing any sort of environmental protection, or any other clothing and all the moisture had been lost to the vacuum around it. However, this same vacuum had prevented any form of decomposition and so the body was now a perfectly preserved, if dessicated husk. Hamill crouched beside the body and began to study it closely, scanning it with her medical tricorder but taking care not to touch it just in case she damaged it in any way. The body was small for a humanoid, barely one and a half metres in length and in addition to the tail at the base of its spine it possessed a snout that extended forwards of its face. The hands and feet of the body had fewer digits than a human, with only three fingers and an opposable thumb on the hands and a matching number of toes. Significantly the creature had been a cyclops, with just a single eye socket located in the centre of its face although the eyeball that had once filled it had since shrivelled up as it dried out.

"Is that a slaver?" Davis asked.

"I think so, yes." Hamill answered.

"There have only been a few images discovered over the years that are thought to show Slavers." Sodyne added, "As far as I know this is the first actual body discovered though."

"Any idea what killed it doctor?" Ghroc asked.

"No, there's not much I can tell here. My scans are picking up traces of DNA other than that of the corpse itself but I can't tell whether it comes from some sort of pathogen or something that's supposed to be present inside this body." Hamill said.

"Is there any danger of contamination?" Ghroc added.

"I don't think so. But to be on the safe side I could carry out an autopsy down here instead. Providing you can get the life support for this place back online." Hamill said.

"I think I may be able to take care of that." Davis said from beside one of the consoles. Unlike the others that were all inactive, this one had a small cluster of controls still illuminated, "Sodyne what do you think of this?"

"Hold on." Sodyne replied and she made her way across the chamber to where he stood, "Yes, this is a system restart panel."

"And it's still active after all this time?" Ghroc said.

"Probably hooked up to a solar panel to keep it running. Of course it's pretty impressive that a solar panel could keep going for a billion years as well." Davis replied. Then he looked at Sodyne and added, "So what do you suggest we press?"

"This one." Sodyne replied and she reached out and pressed one of the illuminated switches.

When the control was pressed the rest of the console immediately came to life as the start-up procedure began.

"This looks localised." Davis said, noticing that the visual element of the process showed only the control chamber the away team was now in and the surrounding area, not extended to any of the levels above.

"Yes, the panel was indicating that this section is on an isolated system." Sodyne said, "The damage to the main complex shouldn't cause us any trouble."

"Unless any of that damage has extended down this far. There could still be damaged subsystems that will prevent the section as a whole restarting." Davis pointed out just as more of the consoles in the chamber activated and the lights mounted in the ceiling came on, causing Sodyne to smile.

"I think it looks pretty good so far." she said. However, now that the room was fully illuminated she saw that the chamber was not entirely undamaged and there were several open panels that exposed smashed machinery, all of it in the telepathic amplifier itself, "No." she exclaimed, rushing to inspect the damage for herself.

"These signals look very basic Captain Cole." Trellan said as he looked at the data being picked up by the *Nightfall*'s subspace communications array. Although the *Nightfall*'s communications system could not translate the signals the computer had recognised their nature and was logging them accordingly, "Nothing more than a statement confirming the presence of whatever is sending them."

"Any I take it you still don't know what that is." Cole commented.

"Sorry captain, no." Trellan replied.

"Captain we're getting a signal from one of our fighter flight leaders." the operations officer then announced.

"Put him through ensign." Cole ordered and the junior officer nodded.

"*Nightfall* this is Blazer." The voice of the pilot said, using his call sign instead of name and rank.

"This is *Nightfall*. Go ahead Blazer." Cole responded.

"Captain I can confirm that the third planet is dead. We've picked up what look like they could have been structures at one time but a low-level fly over showed no signs of anything intact." the pilot said, "But we have picked up a subspace signal from zero six three, mark zero point five. Are you seeing anything out there *Nightfall*?"

"That must be one of the signals we've been picking up." Trellan said and Cole nodded.

"Yes it sounds like it." he said before returning to the communication channel to the fighter pilot and adding, "Blazer I want you and your wingman to head towards the source of that signal. We've been detecting emissions from all over the system but we haven't been able to determine an exact source or their purpose."

"Copy that *Nightfall*. Changing course now. Blazer out." The fighter pilot replied before the channel went dead.

"Now maybe we'll find out what's going on here." Cole said.

B.

At full impulse speed it did not take long for the two Peregrine-class fighters from the *Nightfall* to reach the source of the subspace signal they had detected, an object just within the orbit of the system's third planet. From further away this had looked like nothing more than a rogue asteroid but as the fighters approached closer and got a better look at it, it became obvious that the object was artificial in nature. Roughly triangular in shape, the object appeared to have control thrusters at each corner and tapered to a point where there was a narrow opening of some kind. The surface had remained smooth even after a billion years drifting in space and appeared as if it could have been deployed just the last week.

"*Nightfall* this is Blazer, do you read me?" the lead pilot transmitted.

"Reading you Blazer. Do you have the target in sight?" Cole's voice responded.

"Affirmative captain. It looks like some kind of satellite or probe. Definitely artificial but it was running dark, that's why we didn't see it before now." Blazer reported.

"Can you forward us your feed Blazer?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain, establishing data link now. You should be seeing what we're looking at." the pilot said.

"Does it look like you've been detected?" Cole asked.

"I don't think so captain, there are no signs of activity at all. We're going in for a closer look." Blazer said.

"Leader, craft from the Starfleet vessel are approaching one of the weapon platforms." one of the Ferengi in the command centre called out and Krom and Drurk both hurried to where he stood.

"Can you show me on this thing?" Krom asked.

"I think so leader." the junior Ferengi responded and after a few seconds of trying to find the right controls on the alien console he was able to bring up an image showing the pair of Starfleet attack fighters from head-on as they closed with the weapons platform.

"Leader if they mean to attack then-" Drurk began.

"Then we should get in the first strike." Krom interrupted before he looked at the junior Ferengi and added,

"Is that weapons platform functional?"

"Yes leader. According to Engineer Mugtek it mounts a high yield particle weapon similar to-" the Ferengi said.

"I don't care. As long as it works. Bring the platform online and destroy those Starfleet craft now." Krom ordered.

"Blazer this is Easy Rider, I'm picking up an increase in energy emissions. Whatever that thing is I think it's turning on." Blazer's wingman said.

"I see it Easy Rider." Blazer responded, "Raise shields but don't power weapons yet. I don't want us to look too hostile."

"Copy that Blazer. Raising shields now." the other pilot said and both craft continued to fly straight towards the waiting weapons platform. As they got closer to the weapons platform it suddenly reorientated itself, aiming the opening towards them.

"*Nightfall* this is Blazer. We're seeing activity from the object, it just turned towards us I think and-" Blazer transmitted before his sensor detected a massive energy spike from the object and there was a flash as a particle beam erupted from the opening at its tip. This beam shot out across space towards the two fighters and hit Blazer's wingman head on. Powerful enough to punch right through the attack fighter's shields the beam then burned along the entire length of the craft and there was an explosion that destroyed it completely.

"Blazer what's happening out there? We've lost Easy Rider on our sensors." Cole's voice said urgently over the communications channel.

"*Nightfall* I'm under attack. Easy Rider is gone, vessel destroyed without ejecting." Blazer responded, "High energy particle weapon fired by the object. Taking evasive action now."

"Blazer disengage and return to *Nightfall*." Cole ordered as the fighter pilot began to take evasive action, hoping to confuse whatever targeting system the ancient Slaver weapons' platform was equipped with. This was only partially effective though as the weapons platform rotated again to fire on his craft and the beam sheered one of the wings off in an instant.

"Mayday! Mayday!" Blazer transmitted as he reached for the ejection lever in the cockpit beside the seat he sat in, but before he could grab hold of it there was another blast from the weapons platform that struck the forward section of the fighter where the cockpit was located and Blazer died along with his craft.

"Red alert. Shields up." Cole ordered as soon as the *Nightfall's* sensors showed the destruction of the two fighters, "What's the position of our runabouts compared to where the fighters were?" he added.

"The *Rhine* is closer captain." the operations officer told him.

"Then have them break off from sweeping the asteroid belt. I want to know exactly what happened to those fighters. Tell the *Rhine* to investigate but warn them not to take chances, at the first sign of weapons powering up aboard that object they're to engage at warp and get out of there. Recall all the other craft, I don't want to lose anyone else to any more of those things that could be out there." Cole said before he activated the communication system built into the arm of his chair so that he could address the away teams aboard the shipyard and on the surfaces of the gas giant's moons, "This is *Nightfall* to all away teams. One of our flights of fighters has come under attack and been destroyed. Report in any unusual activity from your search areas immediately." He told them.

"That doesn't sound good." Martin said as he and Nayal exchanged glances.

"Follow the captain's orders." T'Lan announced, looking around at the other members of the away team,

"Has anyone observed any unusual activity?"

"Unusual activity? Commander this place is dead." Nayal replied, "Until we can figure out whether or not it's safe to turn the power back on nothing is going to be happening here."

"Perhaps we should return to the *Nightfall* commander. If the ship is going to go into battle then Captain Cole is going to need at least some of his senior staff by his side." Martin suggested.

"That is logical. We can return here once the system is secure." T'Lan said and she tapped her combadge,

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

"Go ahead T'Lan." Cole responded.

"Captain my team is ready to beam back to the *Nightfall* to support you." T'Lan said.

"Okay T'Lan. Stand by for transport. We'll drop our shields just long enough to bring you back." Cole told her and she nodded.

"We will be ready. T'Lan out." she said and she tapped her combadge again. Around her the other members of the away team quickly checked that they had everything that they had brought with them before all their combadges activated and the voice of the *Nightfall's* transporter operator spoke.

"Ready for transport. I have a lock." he said.

"Energise." T'Lan responded.

"Leave?" Sodyne exclaimed when it was suggested that Ghroc's away team also return to the *Nightfall*, "But we've only just got this place running and the telepathic amplifier—"

"The telepathic amplifier is a write-off." Davis interrupted, "My engineers could poke around inside that thing for a decade and maybe tell you something about what the various parts are meant to do but we can't repair it."

"I'm sure the captain will let you come back later and examine it more closely with a full science and engineering team." Ghroc said, "But until then we need to return to the ship."

"What about the body?" Hamill asked and Ghroc glanced down at the floor to where the corpse of the Slaver had been carefully packed inside a sealed bag.

"We can take that back with us as long as it's kept quarantined." Ghroc told her.

"I'll tag it." Hamill replied before she took a small tag from the kit she had brought with her and clipped it to the bag. After that she reached out for where she had set down her violin case and picked it up, "Okay I'm ready to go." she said.

"Really? I had hoped you'd be leaving that thing behind." Ghroc said and Hamill pulled a face at him as he tapped his combadge, "Ghroc to *Nightfall*. Ready for transport. Be aware that tagged object is to be subject to quarantine and beamed directly to sickbay."

"Understood commander." the transporter chief said, "Energising now."

Inside the fake comet Krom and his Ferengi watched the reaction of the Starfleet craft in the system with interest, noticing very quickly that with the exception of a single runabout all the other auxiliary craft launched by the *Nightfall* had turned around and were now heading back towards the cruiser. Meanwhile the *Nightfall* itself had returned to orbiting the moon where the primary Slaver facility in the system was located and was now operating with its shields raised.

"They are scared." Drurk said, baring his teeth as he grinned.

"Yes they are." Krom said in agreement, "They will use their runabout to try and gather information about the weapon without risking their cruiser."

"Should we shoot down the runabout?" Drurk asked and Krom considered this for a moment.

"Neeradel, what do we know about the weapons platforms right now?" he said and the female Ferengi checked her PADD.

"We have established contact and control over seventy-two platforms in various orbits. These are armed with

a mix of particle weapons similar to disruptors, pulse cannons and plasma torpedoes. We also have control of a cluster of nine satellites in a close solar orbit. We know that they function together as some form of weapon but not how." she said, reading from the PADD.

"But know that it is powerful, you said that the system reports show they can channel great energy." Drurk added. Then he looked at Krom and added, "They are starship killers leader."

"We don't know that." Neeradel pointed out.

"You don't know that, but what else can they be?" Drurk responded.

"Shoot down the runabout." Krom said, "I want as much information as possible on the effectiveness of the weapons before I contact the Starfleet vessel."

"You intend to contact them leader?" Neeradel commented, "But I thought you wanted our presence in the system to remain a secret."

"That was before we had control of this command centre and its weapons." Krom replied, "When I contact the humans I will claim ownership of this entire star system and its contents by right of first discovery. Then I'll demand they surrender the stasis box we know they have aboard their vessel as compensation for their trespass before they leave."

"And if they refuse?" Neeradel asked.

"Then I will turn the full force of the weapons we now have at our control towards them." Krom answered.

"What about Professor Denning? His vessel is approaching and will be here soon." Drurk reminded him.

"The human Denning had his chance to work with us profitably. If he makes the mistake of coming here as well then we will take his stasis box from him too."

3.

"Ah Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." Cole said when Sodyne entered the *Nightfall's* bridge with Ghroc, now wearing their regular uniforms instead of the spacesuits they had worn on the surface, "We need your help with a problem."

"Of course captain. Anything that would mean I could get down to the surface more quickly." Sodyne responded while she walked around the back of the bridge past where Martin had already taken his place back at tactical to get to the science station and Ghroc headed towards the helm station at the front.

"I didn't realise you were in such a hurry commander." Cole commented.

"There's a telepathic amplifier down there captain." Ghroc told him.

"The first we've found since Vega four-six-eight." Sodyne added as she took her seat.

"Davis said that it was beyond repair." Ghroc said.

"Even if that is true captain we could still learn a lot by examining the machine. Combined with the scans taken of the other device we might even be able to repair it after all." Sodyne said.

"I'll leave that up to you and Lieutenant Commander Davis." Cole said, "But for now I want you to join T'Lan and Nayal in taking a look at the subspace signals we've been picking up. One of these led a pair of our fighters to their destruction so anything you can come up with would be welcome. Ideally I want to know where all these signals are coming from and what they are saying."

"From what I saw they are just basic status reports but maybe you can find something more meaningful." Trellan commented from his seat beside Cole.

"Captain the *Rhine* is approaching the point where our fighters were destroyed." Nayal then announced from the operations station.

"Get me a channel." Cole said and Nayal nodded.

"Channel open now captain." she said.

"*Rhine* this is *Nightfall*. What's your status?" Cole asked.

"We've got the object on our sensors captain. It's powered up but doesn't seem to be doing much right now, it's just sitting there." one of the officers aboard the runabout responded. "We've scanned for pilot personal distress beacons as well just in case but we haven't found anything. It looks like both the fighter pilots were killed when their ships were destroyed."

"Understood lieutenant." Cole said. He had not held out any hope of either of the pilots surviving given that their beacons had not been detected by the *Nightfall's* sensors but the report from the *Rhine* still grieved him.

"Captain the object is in firing range and still hasn't reacted. Do you want us to engage it?" the runabout pilot then asked and Cole considered this for a moment.

"Why not?" Trellan asked, "One photon torpedo could solve our problem."

"If each subspace signal represents another of these objects then destroying one will do little to solve our problem Mister Trellan." T'Lan pointed out from where she sat on the opposite side of Cole, "In addition we cannot be certain that a single photon torpedo will be sufficient to destroy it."

"Lieutenant feed your scans back to us." Cole told the officer aboard the *Rhine* before he added, "T'Lan, Sodyne, see what you make of these scans. The subspace signals can wait a few minutes."

"Object is manoeuvring. Turning towards us." the voice of another of the runabout's crew said when the *Rhine's* sensors detected the energy output of the weapons platform's thrusters firing, bringing its main weapon to bear on the craft.

"Shields up." the lieutenant commanded the runabout ordered.

"Lieutenant get your ship out of there. It's going to fire." Cole ordered.

"Stand by." the lieutenant said, "Altering heading to zero zero five mark five and engaging at warp two."

The *Rhine* accelerated to warp speed right at the same moment that the weapons platform opened fire again and the energy beam passed beneath the runabout, missing it by mere metres.

"The *Rhine* is clear captain." Nayal said, watching the runabout's withdrawal on the sensor display in front of her.

"The telemetry from the *Rhine* is quite informative." T'Lan commented as she studied the data that the runabout had continued to send even as it went to warp to escape the weapons platform, "Thanks to the object firing its weapon again there is considerable data on the beam as well as the object itself."

"I'm sure the crew of the *Rhine* will be glad to know almost getting roasted alive at least provided us with some good sensor readings." Trellan said and T'Lan looked at him.

"Obtaining sensor data was the purpose behind sending them to the object's location in the first place." she pointed out.

"Okay T'Lan, so what can you tell me about that weapon?" Cole asked.

"It appears to be a type of phased polaron beam similar to the weaponry carried aboard Dominion warships captain." T'Lan replied.

"Can your shields withstand that?" Trellan asked and Cole nodded.

"They should be able to. By the time the war started our shield technology had been upgraded to be effective against polaron weapons." he said.

"If the weapon's use against the *Rhine* is indicative of its maximum yield then our shields should be able to resist at least two strikes before failing." T'Lan said and the other officers on the bridge glanced at her nervously for a moment.

"Give that information to Lieutenant Commander Davis. See if he can do anything to improve our shields' effectiveness against the weapon." Cole told her.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"Captain these scans also indicate that the device has other weapons. They look like pulse cannons of some kind." Sodyne added as she went over the same data T'Lan was looking at.

"Point defence?" Martin said.

"That may indicate that the primary weapon has a limited rate of fire." T'Lan suggested, "The pulse cannons would provide a means of protecting the object from fighter or torpedo attacks that could involve multiple targets."

"What about the other signals we detected? Are they all coming from objects like this?" Cole said.

"Logic would indicate that that is likely for at least a significant number. However, I would expect there to also be some sort of command and control system for them that is currently co-ordinating these signals." T'Lan said.

"A system like that is going to need a headquarters." Martin pointed out, "If found that then we might be able to knock out the whole system."

"Find it." Cole ordered, "Failing that I want some way found of blocking the command network and shutting down any more of these devices that may be in the system."

"What happened?" Krom demanded.

"We missed." Neeradel responded flatly.

"What do you mean missed? How could we miss?" Krom said.

"Leader the Starfleet runabout went to warp just as the weapon fired. The targeting system could not react to this in time." the Ferengi stood at the control console for the weapons platform explained.

"And what is the Starfleet cruiser doing now?" Drurk added.

"It appears to be holding position." another of the Ferengi crewmen replied, "The other craft are converging on its location."

"Gathering their forces." Krom muttered, "What of the other weapons platforms we have control of? Are any of them in suitable positions to attack the Starfleet craft before they can link up with the cruiser?"

"Yes leader. There is a torpedo platform positioned between the orbits of the sixth and seventh planets. It is currently out of alignment to fire on any of the Starfleet craft but if they all maintain their current headings and speeds then its thrusters should enable it to move into a firing position when the Starfleet fighters that had been surveying the outermost planet cross its orbit."

"Make the adjustment." Krom ordered, "When those fighters come into range I want them shot down immediately."

"Captain I'm picking up something. It looks like a low energy propulsion system of some sort. Possibly a vessel using its thrusters to manoeuvre." Nayal announced when the minor energy signal showed up on her console.

"The energy profile matches that of the thrusters used by the device that destroyed our fighters and fired on the *Rhine* captain." Sodyne added.

"Another one moving into attack position?" Ghroc said.

"Are any of our ships close enough for it to attack them?" Cole asked.

"Assuming that the polaron beam has the same range limitation as our phasers then no captain. The energy attenuation would render it ineffective against even the lightest shielding." T'Lan answered.

"We've got an energy spike. It's firing." Nayal said suddenly.

"What happened to that limited range T'Lan?" Cole added but before she could reply Nayal spoke up again.

"It's not a polaron beam captain. I'm detecting warp signatures, four of them moving at warp one point six. The object just fired torpedoes. Trajectory indicates that they are targeting two of our fighters."

"Tell them to raise shields and take evasive action. Can we get there in time to help?" Cole said.

"Negative captain." Ghroc said, checking the relative position of the threatened fighters to the *Nightfall*, "We can't go to warp at this location, there are too many obstacles."

"They're on their own." Martin added.

"Nevertheless, I don't intend to just sit here." Cole said, "Engage at full impulse and get us into free space. I

don't want to get caught trapped by that gas giant and its moons if one of those devices turns its sights on us."

Cole then used his headset to show him the sensor data relating to the torpedoes and the two fighters they were targeting. As instructed the fighter pilots were trying to evade the torpedoes and they had begun by turning directly away from them to try and buy themselves more time before impact, followed by another series of sharp turns intended to try and break the target lock that the torpedoes had on them.

The warning from the *Nightfall* proved decisive as each turn that the torpedoes made in their effort to maintain their lock bled off a little more energy from their warp fields until the point where the torpedoes could no longer remain at warp and dropped to impulse. In turn this forced them to burn more of their limited store of fuel before they ran out without having reached the fighters yet. The ancient Slavers who had built the torpedoes had not intended to have unexploded munitions drifting through their systems and so once this happened all four of them self destructed in brilliant flashes of light.

"All torpedoes destroyed captain. No damage to either fighter." Nayal reported and Cole breathed a sigh of relief.

"Order the pilots to-" he began before Nayal looked at him again and interrupted.

"Captain we're picking up a subspace broadcast. It's not Starfleet." she said and Cole frowned.

"Where is it coming from?" he asked.

"Everywhere." Nayal answered.

"The torpedoes missed!" Drurk snapped.

"I see that." Krom said softly and then he turned towards Neeradel, "Is the communications system prepared?" he asked her.

"Yes leader. The signal will be relayed through all of the weapons platforms to prevent the source being plotted." she told him.

"Then make sure that you are out of the shot and activate it. I will address the humans now and I don't want them to see a female." Krom said and Neeradel nodded at one of the Ferengi crewmen.

"Krom." Trellan said when the Ferengi's face appeared on the main viewscreen of the *Nightfall's* bridge and he began to speak.

"Federation starship," he said, "you are trespassing in a star system that I have laid claim to. I have demonstrated my ability to defend my territory and I order you to surrender."

"Surrender?" Cole commented before Krom continued.

"I will permit your vessel and its crew to leave this system safely only on the condition that you hand over to me the Slaver stasis box we have detected aboard your ship. All you need to do is eject it into space and then you may leave. If you attempt to depart without ejecting the stasis box or refuse to leave within one of your hours then I will turn this system's weapons on your vessel. There will be no negotiation and no extension to the deadline but you may signal your intent to comply on this channel. Your hour starts now." he said before the screen returned to a view outside the *Nightfall*.

"Nayal can you get him back?" Cole said and Nayal looked at her console before she shook her head.

"I'm sorry captain but there was never a lock to trace back to its source, we were just picking up a broadcast sent to every point in the system." she said.

"But not from his ship." Trellan commented, "Captain I've been aboard the *Latinum Lobes* and the background of that broadcast didn't look like any area that I saw."

"That didn't look like any Ferengi ship I've ever seen." Ghroc added, "But I tell you where I have seen architecture like that before."

"Down on the lunar surface." Sodyne said, "The Ferengi are in a Slaver installation."

"And one that they've brought fully online." Martin added.

"Options?" Cole said.

"I think we're all agreed that complying with his demands is out." Martin said and Cole nodded.

"Yes. I'm not handing over our stasis box to anyone and I've no intention of leaving a pirate like Krom in command of a Slaver weapon system. Who knows what else could be in this system that he could use against us?" he said.

"Krom mentioned that he had detected our stasis box." T'Lan pointed out, "This suggests that he still has the box his crew was able to recover from Vega four-six-eight."

"Yes and if they have that then that means there might not be another one in the system after all." Cole added.

"But if we can locate the Ferengi then we could seize his." Ghroc suggested.

"As well as arresting him." Martin added.

"What if we did just withdraw?" Trellan asked.

"The condition of withdrawal was that we had to give up our stasis box." T'Lan reminded him.

"We can't give that up captain. It's the only means we have to detect other stasis boxes." Sodyne protested. "Don't worry lieutenant commander, I've already said that we aren't going to do that and I meant it." Cole said.

"I was thinking that we just make a run for it at warp. Head straight up out of the orbital plane before any of the weapons Krom has under his control can fire on us." Trellan said

"That may be possible but it requires us to be certain of a safe passage out of the system. Something we cannot predict right now." T'Lan said.

"Nayal, Sodyne, I want you two to use every sensor we have to sweep the area. If there are any Slaver weapons close enough to attack us then I want to know about them." Cole ordered, "No probes other than the ones already deployed though. Any launch would be detected and it may provoke Krom into attacking early."

"Captain what about Professor Denning?" Trellan asked, "His ship will arrive in a couple of days and it can't defend itself against these weapons."

"Nayal alert the transport. Warn them not to come within a light year of the system until we can secure it." Cole said and Nayal nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"While Lieutenant Nayal and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are searching for Slaver weapons in the area I would like to examine the message from Daimon Krom." T'Lan said.

"You think that there's something in there that could be used to trace the source T'Lan?" Cole responded.

"It is possible and in the absence of any other data I see no other course of action." T'Lan said.

"Very well, go ahead. Remember that we have less than an hour before Krom has promised to attack." Cole said.

"Do you think they will comply leader?" Neeradel asked.

"No, of course not. Starfleet does not back down, even when they should. They will look for a way to locate us and deny us control of the weapons platforms. I want to know which weapons are best placed to attack their starship." Krom answered and Neeradel checked her PADD again.

"There are nine platforms that we know of within the subsystem of the sixth planet, plus another five whose interplanetary orbits put them close enough that they can be manoeuvred into firing range within the time you have given the humans." Neeradel told him.

"And what of the weapons orbiting near the star? Have you and Engineer Mugtek determined what they are yet?" Drurk added.

"Only that they are somehow related to the manipulation of gravity. However, we can't determine what effect they produce or even how they are targeted if they are indeed a weapon." Neeradel replied.

"What else would they be?" Drurk snapped, "This is a military fortress, not one of Starfleet's science stations." then he turned to Krom and added, "We should concentrate on bringing them on line and destroy the starship as soon as we can. You said it yourself, they won't run so we must fight."

"Leader without knowing what the exact purpose of the satellites is activating them would be reckless." Neeradel warned.

"Yes but the more you and Engineer Mugtek work on reactivating them the more you will learn of their function. I want every weapon available for the battle against Starfleet and that includes those satellites. Make it so." Krom ordered.

"Yes leader." Neeradel responded.

Cole was sat in his ready room studying the sensor readings of the weapons platform that had destroyed the *Nightfall's* two fighters and fired on the runabout Rhine. As a former tactical officer aboard the original *Nightfall* he was familiar with a wide range of weapon technology and he was hoping that he could learn something about this new threat that was currently in the hands of a group of Ferengi renegades. He looked up though when the door intercom chimed.

"Come in." he said without waiting to see who was outside and the door slid open for T'Lan, Sodyne and Davis to enter, "You have progress to report?" Cole asked.

"Sorry captain, we're still pretty much at square one." Sodyne replied as the trio of officers all sat down opposite Cole, "I have picked up several objects that match the sensor profile of the Slaver weapons within ten light seconds of us but I can't tell you anything about their capabilities yet."

"And I've tightened our shields against polaron beams like the ones used to take out our fighters but it won't do much more than give us the ability to take one or two more hits before we lose shield integrity and I can't do anything about the torpedoes without knowing more about them." Davis added.

"So what about your examination of the Ferengi's message? I take it that there's nothing there to tell us where they are hiding." Cole said, looking at his wife.

"Unfortunately not. Although there were a handful of consoles in shot that when the image was enhanced permitted Lieutenant Commander Sodyne to plot the position of more of the Slaver weapon systems." T'Lan replied.

"So is there any good news? Or have all three of you just come here to confirm that we're all screwed if we stay here?" Cole said.

"We have to come to explain the means by which we can leave the system without having to first surrender our stasis box to the Ferengi." T'Lan told him.

"Then once we're clear we can figure out how to come back and reclaim the system from them." Sodyne added.

"Okay, I'm listening." Cole said.

"We use a holo emitter from one of the holodecks." Davis said and Cole looked at him.

Although the *Nightfall* was equipped with holodecks, it had fewer than most equivalently sized Starfleet vessels and they were rarely used for recreational purposes. Instead they were most often used for physical training or running other virtual simulations.

"A hologram?" Cole said.

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied, "By rigging the emitter for independent operation we can eject it into space and make it appear that we have ejected the stasis box instead."

"And by making sure that the hologram is set to be non-reflective of energy we can make it invisible to sensors. Any subspace scan will pass right through it." Sodyne added.

"But the Ferengi will just think that the energy was absorbed." Cole commented, a smile spreading across his face.

"Of course the emitter and power source would be detectable but the Ferengi would have to be right on top of the hologram to detect them." Davis pointed out.

"Logically we would have already left the system by the time the ruse was discovered." T'Lan said.

"We've then got several options." Sodyne continued, "If we move more than a light year away then the Ferengi will know that we've moved out of range when their stasis box stops glowing but will pick us up the same way when we come back into range."

"Optionally we could transfer the stasis box to another vessel such as a runabout or perhaps Professor Denning's transport before returning. Since the Ferengi expect us to have a stasis box aboard it may be possible to re-enter the system unnoticed." T'Lan added.

"How long would it take to put this into effect?" Cole asked.

"My people can have the holo emitter rigged in about an hour captain." Davis told him and Cole nodded.

"Then go ahead. We'll give the Ferengi the impression that we've given them what they want. Then load the real stasis box aboard the Seine so it can stay out of detection range of the Ferengi's. We'll still have three probes in the system and we can send more until we figure out where the Ferengi are operating from before we return." he said.

"The Ferengi are unlikely to simply surrender and leave captain." T'Lan said.

"I know T'Lan." Cole replied, "But they've already destroyed two of our fighters and killed their pilots. That's all the justification I need for shooting back at them."

Davis and his engineering team were as good as his word and within an hour they had prepared a holo emitter with a self contained power source, entirely independent of the *Nightfall's* computer or power systems. The device had been constructed inside a modified probe casing that had had most of the internal workings removed and the outer plating itself replaced by an energy refracting material designed to scatter subspace scans and reduce the return to almost nothing. The intention was to make the object at the core of the hologram as difficult to detect as possible.

"All set." Davis said to Sodyne in the workshop where the machine had been assembled, "All we need is the program to run."

"Here." she replied, handing the engineer an isolinear chip, "I designed this program based on the observations I've made of our stasis box since we found it. It will produce a perfect image."

"Okay let's see how well it runs." Davis said as he took the ship from Sodyne and plugged it into the holo-emitter. Initially this had no effect but when Davis picked up his PADD and activated it by remote the emitter seemed to instantly vanish, replaced by a sealed Slaver stasis box that was producing the characteristic glow that such devices gave off when brought close enough to another, "Looking good." Davis said, smiling as he looked down at his PADD to check the operation of the holo emitter, "From these power readings I'd say that the emitter will keep running for about sixteen hours if it's just left alone." he added and Sodyne tapped her combadge.

"Sodyne to bridge." she said.

"Go ahead lieutenant commander." T'Lan's voice responded.

"Commander I'm in engineering with Lieutenant Commander Davis and the holo emitter." Sodyne told her, "He has confirmed that the device is working and that it will last up to sixteen hours."

"Very good lieutenant commander. Is it compatible with our torpedo launchers?" T'Lan asked and Sodyne looked at Davis who nodded his head.

"Yes commander." he said loud enough for Sodyne's combadge to pick up his voice, "The energy pulse used to engage the launcher will disrupt the hologram so we'll have to fire it in an inactive state, but even if the Ferengi are watching they shouldn't detect the emitter itself."

"In that case Lieutenant Commander Davis please have the device loaded in one of our ventral launchers and report back when it is ready to be deployed." T'Lan told him.

"There is one more thing commander." Davis added.

"What is that lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.

"There is still some spare space within the casing of the emitter. More than enough to hold a small charge of anti-matter. It won't be as powerful as a photon torpedo but-" Davis began.

"Are you suggesting that we use the device as a mine lieutenant commander?" T'Lan interrupted.

"The idea did occur to me." Davis responded.

"Prepare the charge but do not install it yet lieutenant commander. I will have to confirm this with the captain, though I suspect that he will approve. Bridge out." T'Lan said before closing the channel.

"A mine?" Sodyne commented, looking at Davis and he shrugged.

"Why not?" he responded.

"I just hadn't considered it, that's all. My focus is getting back down to that moon and getting that telepathic amplifier to work." Sodyne said and Davis sighed.

"Do you know what a Spitfire is Leyla?" he asked and she frowned for a moment.

"I think I heard the term when I was at Starfleet Academy but I never got the reference." she replied.

"It's a type of atmospheric combat craft, or at least it was." Davis said, folding his arms, "Back in the twentieth century it was one of the best of its type for a while and for people from Britain, that's where it was made by the way, it's still remembered fondly even though it was outclassed and obsolete within a few years. Anyway when I was at the Academy a bunch of us were sent to Britain along with some MACOs, you see someone had found the remains of a crashed Spitfire in some wetlands and the local government wanted to recover it so it could be put on display. Ideally they wanted it to be in working order so that they could even fly it around on special occasions. There still are a few dozen that can be flown so the idea wasn't entirely out of the question."

"I don't see what that has to do with a telepathic amplifier Ashley." Sodyne said.

"Oh I'm getting to that." Davis replied, "You see when we got there and took a look at what was left of that Spitfire after being buried in the mud for more than four hundred years we quickly found out that the only way that it would fly again would be if pretty much every single key component was replaced. Not just the control wires that were used to pull the flaps that steered it but the engine, the fuel system and most of the instruments. There would have been nothing left of the actual Spitfire itself, everything would have been fake and it would have been easier and safer just to order a brand new replicated aircraft. That's the state of that telepathic amplifier Leyla. I looked inside that thing and I've been over the scans of the first one we found enough to know that we can't fix the damage that was inflicted, the internal circuitry was deliberately smashed. The Slavers obviously didn't want that thing falling into the hands of their enemies so they made sure that there was nothing that could be gained from it. Maybe we'll be able to learn something more about

how it was supposed to work, but that thing will never work again. I'm sorry but that's just it. Now if you don't mind I have a booby trap to prepare before we leave."

"The emitter is loaded into the torpedo launcher captain." Martin announced when the holo emitter had been loaded, along with the anti-matter charge that it now contained, "I can fire whenever you give the order."

"Mister Ghroc are you ready?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. Course laid in at zero mark eight-five. Warp seven." Ghroc replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, are there any signs of enemy weapons in the local area?" Cole added.

"I have a possible contact bearing one six three mark fourteen. Range approximately one hundred thousand kilometres. I can't tell if it's a particle weapon or torpedo launcher though."

"Tactical, what is the status of our shields?" Cole said.

"At one hundred percent captain. They'll take a hit from a polaron beam but I can't guarantee how effective they'll be against an enemy torpedo." Martin replied and Cole nodded.

"Understood commander." he said, "Launch the holo emitter on my command. Helm accelerate to warp seven as soon as its clear and engage."

"Yes captain." Ghroc said.

"Now Commander Martin, launch emitter." Cole then ordered.

Martin immediately activated the torpedo launcher that the holo emitter was loaded into and the device was fired out into space and at the same time Ghroc began to transfer power to the *Nightfall's* warp drive.

"Leader the Starfleet vessel just fired a torpedo." one of the Ferengi technicians called out.

"At us?" Drurk responded, afraid that their location had been compromised.

"I don't know." the junior Ferengi said, "I detected the launch but I can't find the torpedo. Wait, the humans are powering their warp drive."

"They intend to flee." Drurk said.

"Full scan." Krom ordered.

"I have it leader." Neeradel replied almost instantly, "It wasn't a torpedo. Look." and she pointed to a console that showed a visual image of a rectangular object drifting through space, "We can see it but it isn't on our other sensors. It must be the stasis box."

"They gave in?" Drurk said in surprise.

"Yes. Now destroy them before they get away." Krom ordered.

The weapons platform closest to the *Nightfall* turned towards the cruiser and fired the powerful beam weapon that was its main armament. The beam struck the ship's shields before it could get to warp and the entire vessel shuddered under the impact.

"Shields at sixty-five percent captain." Martin exclaimed..

"Helm get us out of here." Cole said.

"Engaging now captain." Ghroc responded as he activated the *Nightfall's* warp drive and the ship rapidly accelerated away before the weapons platform could fire a second shot.

"Damage report." T'Lan said when the stars on the view screen had blurred and she knew that they had escaped.

"It looks like the shields absorbed everything commander." Nayal replied, "All decks are reporting secure and there are no reports of casualties."

"Well at least that's something." Cole said, "Helm keep us going for half a light year and then drop out of warp. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is the stasis box loaded aboard the *Seine*?"

"Yes captain. She can launch as soon as we're out of warp." Sodyne answered.

"Very good. Nayal clear the *Seine* for launch as soon as we come out of warp." Cole said, "Then I want the ship to go dark. As far as the Ferengi are concerned, I need them to think that we're gone for good."

"The starship is gone leader. Their shields were strong enough to absorb the attack." the Ferengi gunner reported and Krom frowned.

"What about the stasis box?" he asked.

"Adrift leader." Neeradel answered, "We are tracking it visually but we can't detect it any other way."

"Contact the *Latinum Lobes* and have them send a pod to collect it. Sooner or later the humans will attempt to return and I want it in our possession before they get back."

One of the Ferengi pods detached from the *Latinum Lobes* and exited the tail of the fake comet before accelerating towards what they believed to be a drifting Slaver stasis box. Capable of significant speeds, the pod reached the drifting object in just a few minutes before decelerating and pulling alongside.

"Leader we have the object in sight now. It is a stasis box." the pilot transmitted.

"Engage your tractor beam and bring it aboard. Then return it to the *Latinum Lobes*." Krom told him.

"Yes leader." the pilot responded and he looked at the other Ferengi in the pod's cockpit, "Engage the tractor beam." he added.

"Be patient." the second Ferengi said, "I can't get a lock so I've got to do this manually."

A beam of green light erupted from beneath the pod as the Ferengi co-pilot engaged the tractor beam and he gradually adjusted the direction towards what he thought was a stasis box until it made contact and caught hold of it. The moment that this happened though a sensor within the holo emitter detected the presence of a significant gravitational field and reacted by disengaging the magnetic containment field surrounding the anti-matter placed inside the holo emitter by Davis. This allowed the anti-matter to spread out and make contact with the matter of the emitter itself and the resulting explosion not only ripped apart the emitter and its casing but also the Ferengi pod itself.

"Leader our pod has been destroyed!" a Ferengi exclaimed when the station's sensors detected the anti-matter explosion.

"The humans must have booby trapped the stasis box." Drurk said, "A bomb placed inside it."

"No." Neeradel said, rushing to a nearby console and replaying visual footage of the explosion, "The explosion occurred when the box was caught in the beam, before it could be brought aboard the pod and opened."

"What about the stasis box itself? Is it damaged?" Drurk asked.

"The stasis box no longer appears on our sensors." Neeradel answered.

"But a stasis box is indestructible." Krom pointed out.

"Yes leader. What we saw must have been a fake." Neeradel said and Krom activated his communicator badge.

"Krom to *Latinum Lobes*. What is the status of our stasis box?" he signalled.

"It is still glowing leader." one of the crew aboard the Ferengi vessel responded.

"Monitor it closely. I want to know if there is any change in its state immediately. Krom out." Krom told the crewman before he shut off his communicator badge and looked at Drurk and Neeradel, "The Starfleet vessel must still be within a light year. If they decide to return we must be ready for them. Continue your work on getting more weapons platforms operational and give me control of the satellites orbiting the star."

"You asked to see me doctor?" Cole said as he walked into Hamill's office in sickbay to find her practising her violin, something she was known to do whenever she had a few spare minutes.

"Yes captain." Hamill replied as she returned her instrument to its case, "I've completed my autopsy on the corpse of the Slaver we found in the lunar facility."

"Excellent. So what can you tell me about it?" Cole asked.

"About him captain. I was able to determine that the body we have is that of a male. I can't tell you much about how old he was when he died but he appears to be in reasonable physical condition." Hamill responded.

"For someone who is dead." Cole pointed out and Hamill smiled for a moment.

"Quite." she said, "Anyway the cause of death appears to be a large laceration to the base of the neck. This penetrated what appears to be a major artery and caused him to bleed to death."

"Was it shrapnel? Or was he stabbed?" Cole asked.

"Neither actually captain." Hamill replied, "From the angle and the position of the wound and by comparing this to the general physiology of the body it is my opinion that the wound was self-inflicted."

"He ripped his own throat open?" Cole commented and Hamill nodded.

"Yes captain. Like so." she said and she drew her right hand across her neck at the shoulder on the light hand side.

"What on Earth would make him do that?" Cole said, "No wait, I think I know. The Slaver War is supposed to have ended when the Slavers sent out a telepathic command that prompted every intelligent life form in the galaxy that was vulnerable to their influence to commit suicide. That included the Slavers themselves."

"As if being exposed to a vacuum when the air was blown out of the facility wouldn't have been fatal anyway." Hamill added.

"We still don't know why there was no atmosphere in the lunar facility. The shipyard was probably decompressed to save power on keeping it in position. Even just normal atmospheric pressure would have added significant weight to a station that size." Cole said.

"We know that the facility was attacked, at least above ground. Maybe it was being invaded at the moment the suicide command was sent out." Hamill suggested.

"We may never know doctor. On the other hand it could be the first and most obvious piece of information that Professor Denning discovers when he gets there." Cole said.

"Leyla won't be happy if you don't let her be the first to go back to the facility when we've dealt with the Ferengi." Hamill replied, smiling and Cole smiled back.

"No, I'm sure she won't be. Right now dealing with the Ferengi is something we still need to do. Finding them would be a good start." he said.

"So we still don't know where they are?" Hamill asked and Cole shook his head.

"No. T'Lan is still going over that message to try and find some sort of clue but so far she's drawing a blank." he said before he felt a slight shudder in the ship, "We just dropped out of warp. The Seine will be launching with the stasis box at any moment and it won't be long before the Ferengi notice that it's gone. Hopefully when we do figure out where they are we'll be able to use that to our advantage."

"Leader the stasis box has stopped glowing." the Ferengi crewman Krom had spoken to earlier told him through his communicator badge

"Then the humans have gone." Krom said, "Continue to monitor the stasis box. If it starts glowing again I need to know immediately. Krom out." after shutting off his badge Krom walked across the command centre to where Neeradel and Mugtek were stood together by a console, "Report." he told them.

"We can definitely activate the satellites leader but we still haven't found any trace of a targeting system." Neeradel said.

"We have found a partial status indicator though leader." Mugtek added, "This shows no signs of any ammunition so they must be an energy weapon of some kind."

"Possibly a verteron array or subspace weapon." Neeradel added.

"Or it could be something entirely unknown to us." Mugtek pointed out, "Perhaps if I could study one of the satellites in person I could-"

"I do not think we have the time for that." Krom interrupted, "The stasis box aboard the Latinum Lobes has stopped glowing so the humans must have removed theirs from within a light year."

"If they have fled then surely we have more time to properly research the technology in this system leader." Mugtek said.

"No, I suspect that it is a trap." Krom said, "The humans rigged a booby trap and lured in our pod. Now they seek to make us think we are safe. I think that they have taken their stasis box away but their starship is still close at hand."

"You think they will return soon leader?" Neeradel asked.

"I do. They may already be close by. We may yet need the weapon those satellites hold." Krom answered then he turned and called out across the room, "Drurk." he said.

"Yes leader?" Drurk responded as he walked towards the daimon.

"I want all these weapons consoles manned at all times. Have the operators conduct a continuous search of the system." Krom told him.

"Yes leader. Are they to look for something in particular?" Drurk said.

"Starfleet vessels and probes. Probably not their cruiser itself but the humans may try to slip a fighter or shuttlecraft into the system without us noticing it. If one is detected then it is to be destroyed immediately, do you understand?" Krom said.

"Yes leader. Destroyed immediately." Drurk replied.

T'Lan quickly located Davis when she entered the *Nightfall's* engineering section and she approached him.

"Yes commander, how may I help you?" he said when he noticed her walking towards him.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis I have been examining the Ferengi broadcast for any clues to their location. Unfortunately the content of the message has revealed nothing. However, I believe that there may still be evidence to be uncovered in the system logs. I would like your assistance in searching them." T'Lan explained.

"Of course." Davis replied and he turned towards the nearest console to access the *Nightfall's* system logs, "I assume you want the time we received the signal?"

"Yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan answered and then when she saw Davis frown for a moment she added, "Is there something wrong with the logs lieutenant commander?"

"No but the computer usage went through the roof when we received the signal, take a look here commander." Davis said and he pointed to the display he was looking at. Looking for herself T'Lan saw a

graph of the *Nightfall*'s available processing power that was being used and during the time that Krom was delivering his ultimatum there was a marked increase in this.

"Can you tell what happened here lieutenant commander?" she asked.

"According to the system log it was the communication system that needed the extra processing power." he answered.

"But why? Was the signal degraded in some way that required significant reconstruction?" T'Lan said.

"No, it wasn't reconstructed. This is phase filtering. We were being bombarded with literally more than a hundred copies of that signal all at slightly different times. The system had to pick one and then filter out all of the other copies so that it would make sense." Davis said.

"Can the individual signals be identified?"

"Yes, they're all still in the system even if they weren't viewed." Davis answered.

"And what about the source?"

"That might be more difficult. I can give you a bearing then I can tell you which copy came from it but I don't know that I can use a single signal to pinpoint the device that sent it."

"That may be enough lieutenant commander." T'Lan said before she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to Captain Cole." she said.

"Cole here T'Lan." he responded.

"Captain I think I may have a way to locate the Ferengi." T'Lan told him.

Cole gathered all of his senior staff together in the *Nightfall*'s briefing room so that T'Lan and Davis could deliver their findings.

"So there was something hidden in the message after all." Nayal commented.

"Not quite. The content of the message doesn't reveal a thing about where the Ferengi are hiding." Davis replied and Hamill frowned.

"But I thought Commander T'Lan was examining the message." Hamill said.

"That is correct doctor." T'Lan said, "However, it was only when I looked for any wider effects the signal had had on our systems that Lieutenant Commander Davis uncovered the excessive use of processing power that was required to interpret the contents of the signal."

"Why was that? Starfleet has been processing alien communications for centuries, there's nothing especially difficult about it." Martin pointed out.

"There is when you have hundreds of copies of the same signal coming in at slightly different times." Martin responded.

"The signal appears to have been sent from one source to all of the Slaver devices in the system, each of which then rebroadcast the signal itself." T'Lan began, "Therefore, we received one copy of the signal for each device, plus the original."

"All slightly out of phase with one another. Hence the need for the extra computing power." Sodyne said, nodding her head.

"Precisely." T'Lan said before she got up from her seat and approached the large wall mounted display. This showed an icon representing the *Nightfall* at the centre of a map that showed a large portion of the GL-447 system, "Four of the signals are key to this." she continued, "Firstly there is the original signal that we know came in on this vector." and she added a straight line to the image that extended from the *Nightfall* to the edge of the screen, "This was identified by being the first copy to be received although it could not be traced back to its point of origin with just this single vector as a reference. However, we were also able to isolate two other copies of the signal that came from known points from the vectors they were received from. The first of these came from the object equipped with a particle weapon that destroyed two of our fighters." T'Lan went on and she added another line to the image, this one connecting the *Nightfall* to the first of the Slaver weapons platforms that the cruiser's fighters had encountered, "The second comes from the torpedo launcher that attempted to shoot down another pair of our fighters while they were returning to the *Nightfall*." and she then added a third line to the image, "Finally we can add in the copy of the signal that came from the device that engaged us directly as we were leaving the system." T'Lan continued and a fourth line was added to the pattern on the screen.

"We know exactly when the relayed signals from those three objects reached us and from that we can determine when they in turn received it from the original source." Davis added, "This allowed us to produce a computer model that determined where a transmission would have had to have come from to reach each of those objects at those times and also reach us at the time of the earliest received signal. That's where the Ferengi are."

"Where?" Cole asked and T'Lan changed the image shown on the display from the map to one of an unremarkable looking comet.

"A comet." Martin commented.

"Exactly. This object was at the location the signal was sent from at the time the initial broadcast was made." T'Lan said, "Logic dictates that either it or something hidden within it was the original source of the Ferengi

signal.”

“You could easily hide a ship from sensors inside the tail of a comet. Providing it keeps its power levels low anyway.” Ghroc said.

“The comet is also large enough to hold a significant facility itself lieutenant commander. Almost two thousand metres across at the nucleus.” T’Lan added.

“Would you say it was likely that the Ferengi ship was hidden in the tail as well T’Lan?” Cole asked.

“That is logical, yes captain. We know that their vessel is within the system and Daimon Krom is unlikely to be willing to be parted from his stasis box more than necessary. The chances of rebellious crewmen making off with it would be too high for him to take the risk.”

“Then it seems that the solution is obvious. We destroy the comet.” Cole said.

“Mass accelerators?” Martin added immediately and Cole nodded.

One of the changes made to the basic Akira-class heavy cruiser design for the *Nightfall* program was the addition of two massive mass accelerator cannons running the length of the ship’s two secondary hulls. These were designed specifically for use against Borg vessels, the impact of a physical projectile travelling at thousands of kilometres per second being something that the Borg could not possibly adapt to. The weapons were almost useless against a fast moving and conventionally shielded starship but they could also be used for planetary bombardment, inflicting terrible damage on a planet’s surface and the installing of such weapons aboard a Starfleet vessel remained highly controversial with some Federation member worlds and even within elements of Starfleet itself.

“A comet’s orbit is fixed so lining up the shot should be easy and with no shields to defend it it will be a sitting duck. T’Lan what would you say would be the effect of an impact from our mass accelerator cannons on a comet that big?” Cole said.

“Assuming that the comet is of typical structure then the near simultaneous impact of a projectile from each of the mass accelerator cannons would destroy it entirely captain.” T’Lan replied.

“For a comet to produce a tail like that when it’s close to the star means that at least the outer surface must either be ice or something similar.” Davis said.

“Captain, beaming an assault force to the comet would allow us to take control of it instead. There may be valuable Slaver technology there that does not exist elsewhere in the system.” Sodyne pointed out.

“I’m sure our ground combat specialists would relish the chance to conduct a direct assault captain.” Martin added.

“Maybe they would but sending in the troops represents a risk to life that we can avoid by striking from a distance and the mass accelerator cannons should leave enough wreckage intact for you to be able to study the contents for any technology left behind.” Cole replied, “We’ll start our operation with the mass accelerators. I want a course plotted that brings us out of warp one light second from the target. Then as soon as we’re back at impulse I want a three round volley from each accelerator cannon before we carry out evasive manoeuvres to avoid any return fire. Once we have assessed the effectiveness of the mass accelerator rounds we can decide how to proceed.”

“What about the Ferengi vessel? It must be somewhere in the system. Probably hiding in the comet’s tail.” Ghroc commented.

“It’s only a transport. We can take her easily.” Martin replied and Cole nodded.

“Yes we can. Assuming that the Ferengi ship is being hidden in the comet’s tail then I want us to be ready for it. Lieutenant Commander Martin you are target the Ferengi transport’s warp drive initially to prevent it from leaving the system before disabling her weapons and shields. With luck the Ferengi will opt to surrender once we’ve crippled their vessel but if they don’t then and only then will I order a boarding party to be assembled to take the ship by force.”

“There is no targeting system anywhere.” Mugtek said as he continued to search through the console he knew was used to control the network of satellites orbiting the system’s star.

“Then you obviously aren’t looking hard enough!” Drurk snapped back at him.

“I’m telling you that I’ve looked everywhere. If you know so much about this system then why don’t you take a look for yourself?” Mugtek yelled and the argument drew the attention of Krom who strode across the room to find out exactly what was going on.

“Explain yourselves.” he said, glaring at his two subordinates.

“Leader I was just reminding Engineer Mugtek that-” Drurk began when he was interrupted by Krom’s communicator badge activating.

“Leader we have picked up a Starfleet warp signature. The human vessel is returning and will be here in moments.” a panicked Ferengi voice said from aboard the *Latinum Lobes*.

“Why didn’t the stasis box detect their presence?” Drurk asked when he heard this.

“As I suspected, the humans must have transferred it off their vessel to another one. Possibly one of their own runabouts.” Krom answered before he addressed all of the gathered Ferengi, “Activate all weapons platforms. You are to open fire on the Starfleet vessel as soon as it comes within range of-”

“Leader!” Neeradel called out before Krom had the chance to finish and when he looked in her direction he saw that she was looking at a feed from the *Latinum Lobes*’ sensors on her PADD, “That won’t do any good. The human vessel’s course isn’t taking it back towards any of the system’s planets.” she added.
“Then where is it heading?” Druk said.
“Here. It’s coming right at the comet.” Neeradel responded.
“They’ve found us.” Krom said.

The course followed by the *Nightfall* left the heavy cruiser pointing directly at the comet when it dropped to impulse and through his headset Ghroc saw that while the mass accelerator cannons were aligned at the forward end of the object the projected point of impact of the projectiles allowing for its motion was almost dead centre.

"Firing." he announced and he squeezed the triggers that were built into the manual flight controls he held, firing a rapid burst of three rounds from each of the four hundred metre long weapons. The moment that the final projectile was clear of the *Nightfall* he then pulled sharply on the controls to turn the ship aside before the Ferengi could get a target lock and return fire.

The *Nightfall's* sensors were able to track the projectiles only until they reached the haze that surrounded the comet as part of its tail, at which point they vanished from view. However, this had also meant that the Ferengi had failed to detect the projectiles when they were fired and an instant later they struck the surface of the fake comet. The energy released by the successive impacts was enough to shatter the shell surrounding the ancient Slaver facility constructed at its core and the two kilometre wide lump of rock and ice broke apart, turning into a cloud of smaller objects that bounced off one another as they spread out. A sizeable number of the objects struck the hull of the *Latinum Lobes* as they spread out from what had been the nucleus of the comet but they were moving too slowly and lacked the hardness to inflict and significant damage to the starship so instead they merely broke into smaller pieces as they formed a new cloud of debris around it.

"Captain I have the Ferengi vessel." Nayal announced, "It was hiding in the tail of the comet.

"Right where we expected her to be." Cole said, smiling, "Tactical?"

"I can't get a lock captain. There's too much debris in the way that's scattering our sensors." Martin said.

"Best guess Mister Martin. Fire phasers." Cole ordered and Martin fired one of the *Nightfall's* phaser banks into the cloud of debris surrounding the Ferengi vessel. The beam melted through several pieces of debris but the energy was refracted with each hit, diverting enough away that by the time it reached the *Latinum Lobes* it could not penetrate the hull.

Krom and the other Ferengi were forced to steady themselves on whatever was within reach when the projectiles ripped apart the fake comet, those unable to do so being thrown across the command centre as alarms sounded.

"What happened?" Krom demanded.

"Multiple impacts from fast moving projectiles leader." Neeradel responded over the sound of the alarms.

"The humans are using their mass accelerator weapons again." Drurk commented as he picked himself up.

"Leader we are under attack!" the voice of the Ferengi left in charge aboard the *Latinum Lobes* added from Krom's communicator badge.

"Is the ship damaged?" Krom replied.

"No leader. We are surrounded by debris and this dispersed the humans' phaser fire." the other Ferengi told him, "Should we return fire?"

"No. if the debris is blocking the humans' fire then it will block yours as well. Raise your shields and remain within the debris field." Krom ordered before he turned to Mugtek, "Engineer Mugtek, which weapons are in range of the Starfleet vessel?"

"Just our point defences leader." Mugtek answered.

"What about the satellites orbiting the star?" Krom said.

"But leader we still don't know what their function is." Mugtek pointed out.

"They are a weapon and we need weapons." Krom snapped, "Activate them and target the starship."

"But leader-" Mugtek began.

"Now!" Krom yelled and Mugtek jumped. Then reluctantly he hurried to the console that controlled the network of satellites surrounding the system's sun and pressed the control that he and Neeradel had determined would initialise them. As soon as he did this the console display changed to show a diagram that obviously had the star at its centre and icons corresponding to the satellites circled around it.

"Satellites are powering up leader." Mugtek announced.

"What are you waiting for? Target the human vessel," Drurk said and Mugtek looked at the display again, searching for the targeting system.

"I can't find a targeting system." he said eventually.

"Leader we are picking up gravitational pulses from the satellites, they are building power." Neeradel added, looking at a sensor display.

"Perhaps they will fire automatically." Drurk suggested to Krom.
"Someone find out. I need to know what's happening." the daimon responded.

The *Nightfall* continued to fire its phasers as it circled the cloud where the comet had once been but the debris continued to disrupt not only targeting but also absorbed some of the energy before they could even strike the shields of the *Latinum Lobes* and no further damage was inflicted on the Ferengi vessel.
"Still no return fire from the Ferengi captain. I'm not even picking up any attempts to lock onto us." Martin said.

"The debris field is likely disrupting their sensors as much as it is ours." T'Lan pointed out.

"I'm picking up increased energy readings from the Ferengi starship captain." Nayal added, "It looks like they've raised their shields."

"Captain there's something going on near the system's star." Sodyne said.

"Can you be more specific lieutenant commander?" Cole asked.

"There appears to be a network of satellites in close orbit around the star captain. Close enough that the star's energy shielded them from our sensors until now." Sodyne explained.

"What changed?" Ghroc said.

"It looks like someone turned them on." Sodyne replied simply.

"The satellites appear to be emitting some kind of gravitational pulses that are growing in intensity." T'Lan added as she looked at the sensor readings for herself.

"A graviton beam?" Martin said.

"Perhaps. Although gravitons are limited to the speed of light so they would be useless as a long ranged weapon." T'Lan said.

"Captain the pulses appear to be disrupting the gravity of the star itself. We're reading increased surface activity." Nayal added.

"Perhaps the satellites are designed to create a particle beam out of stellar matter." Martin said.

"I do not think so Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan replied, studying the sensor readings and seeing the extent of the effect the satellites were having on the star.

"Then what's going on?" Cole asked.

"Captain I think the star is getting ready to go nova." Sodyne said and Cole stared at her.

"Can you tell how powerful it will be?" he asked and Sodyne checked the sensor readings again before she stared back at him.

"Captain if these readings are right then then the blast will occur in approximately eight minutes and will destroy all the Slaver facilities in the system." she said and it was at that point that Trellan, who had been sat quietly beside Cole while the *Nightfall* engaged the Ferengi spoke up.

"Captain we have to try and stop that." he said.

"Captain if we destroy enough of the satellites then we should be able to-" Sodyne began.

"No. Eight minutes isn't enough time." Cole interrupted, "Mister Ghroc get us out of here. Warp three."

"Leader the human vessel is withdrawing." one of the Ferengi technicians reported as the *Nightfall* entered warp, heading out of the system.

"Why didn't you fire?" Krom demanded, turning to Mugtek.

"Because there is no weapon to fire leader." Mugtek responded, "The satellites aren't a weapon. They're a self destruct system."

"Self destruct? Self destruct of what?" Drurk asked.

"Everything. The entire star system, including this station." Mugtek said.

"Engineer Mugtek speaks the truth leader." Neeradel added, "The satellites are destabilising the local star so it will go nova. Obviously the Slavers did not want anything in this system falling into the hands of their enemies."

"Then shut it down. Stop it." Drurk said and Mugtek stared at him.

"I can't." he said, "If there is a way to cancel the process I don't know what it is and there isn't time to find it."

"How long do we have?" Krom asked.

"A little over seven minutes." Neeradel answered, "Leader we have to leave. Now."

"Leave?" Drurk exclaimed.

"We will die if we stay." Mugtek said and Krom activated his communicator badge.

"Krom to *Latinum Lobes*, we are evacuating. Beam us aboard and be ready to go to warp. This system is dying and I don't intend to die with it."

The light being cast out by GL-447's star suddenly brightened on the *Nightfall*'s main viewscreen as it went nova, expelling massive amounts of energy in an instant in every direction.

"Nova confirmed captain." Sodyne said.

"What about the Ferengi?" Trellan asked.

"There was a warp signature that looked like another ship leaving the system." Nayal replied.

"Then we'll probably be meeting up with Krom again." Martin commented.

"I don't suppose anything in the system survived did it?" Cole said, looking at Sodyne while the Betazoid checked the sensor readings in front of her.

"No captain." she said, "It looks like the energy from the nova reacted with the dilithium ore in the asteroid belts to magnify the force of the blast considerably, way beyond the normal range for a nova from a star of this type. I'm not reading any objects massing over a quarter of a million tonnes and then only in the outer system. It looks like every planet and moon was shattered."

"What about signs of Slaver artefacts?" Cole asked.

"The Slaver self destruct was thorough." T'Lan commented, looking at her own display and quickly examining the remains of each of the planets that had been present before the nova took place, "A blast of that magnitude will have destroyed all trace of their presence in the system as well as consuming the dilithium and rendering it worthless in terms of resources."

"The greatest find of Slaver technology ever and it's all gone in an instant." Sodyne said and Trellan looked at her.

"Don't worry Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." he said, "There were more leads in the records we found in the stasis box. We're not finished in this sector yet, not by a long way."