

STAR TREK

NIGHTFALL

THE SLAYER CRISIS

SOMETHINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



RIVAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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

RIVAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

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

Intent on ending all research into the ancient Slaver Empire, the group who attacked the crew of the *USS Nightfall* on Vulcan gather a number of starships so they make their way to the Meltara Sector themselves. A vessel as powerful as an Akira-class heavy cruiser is not an easy target though and the terrorist group instead takes inspiration from the *Nightfall* itself to prepare a devastating trap.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 69576.4 *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A in the Meltara Sector.

Captain Robert Cole, commanding officer of the *USS Nightfall* timed his return to the vessel's bridge to coincide with the heavy cruiser's projected arrival in a system believed to hold ruins left behind by the ancient Slaver civilisation. The Meltara Sector had apparently been a major part of their empire before its collapse a billion years previously and they had left many artefacts behind. This had drawn the interest of a research team from the Federation and Starfleet had deployed the Akira-class *Nightfall* to support them.

"Report." he said as he stepped from the turbolift.

"We are approaching the K-seven-four-six system captain." his first officer T'Lan replied from the captain's chair, "ETA is seven minutes."

As Cole approached his chair T'Lan got to her feet but for a moment she appeared to lose her balance and Cole caught her. In addition to being his first officer T'Lan was also Cole's wife so his immediate reaction to even this minor stumble was one of concern.

"T'Lan are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"Just a slight moment of fatigue captain." she responded, "I am fine."

"You wouldn't lie to me would you?" Cole commented with a slight frown.

"You are my husband and my captain, besides which I am a Vulcan. I could never lie to you." she replied as she sat down in the chair beside his.

"Very well T'Lan." Cole said as he too sat down, "So what do we know about this system Sodyne?" he then asked the *Nightfall's* Betazoid science officer.

"The system is uninhabited captain although one of the planets is class-M." she replied.

"But that's not where we're expecting to find the Slaver remains, right?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Correct captain. The age of the planet and its development suggest that it became habitable at least three hundred million years after the Slavers became extinct." she said, "The information recovered by Professor Denning and his team indicate that the remains we are looking for can be found in the outer system where the Slavers built a small outpost."

"Captain I'm picking something up from the system. A ship." Noyal, the *Nightfall's* Romulan operations officer said unexpected and Cole turned towards her.

"Can you identify it lieutenant?" he asked.

"It appears to be a Federation ship captain, the warp signature and transponder both match the parameters of Federation craft." Noyal answered.

"Professor Denning's ship isn't supposed to be here. Who else could it be?" Lieutenant Commander Martin said from the tactical station at the rear of the bridge.

"Should I adjust course to intercept captain?" the Bolian helmsman added.

"I think so Commander Ghroc." Cole said.

"Lieutenant Noyal check the transponder signal against our database." T'Lan added.

"Running the check now commander." Noyal said and after a moment's delay she added, "I've got it. The transponder matches the *USS Quicksilver*, Soyuz-class."

"Soyuz-class haven't been in service for a century." Martin pointed out.

"The registry indicates that the ship was sold off and currently operates as the *SS Eternal*." Noyal said,

"Should I hail them?"

"What's a commercial ship doing this far out?" Martin said.

"Where are they located in the system?" Cole said.

"In the outer system captain. About where we're heading in fact." Noyal said.

"Captain they must be after the Slaver remains. We need to stop them." Sodyne said.

"We know that the presence of Slaver remains in this sector has become public knowledge. Given their value it is only logical that groups other than Professor Denning's would come in search of them." T'Lan said.

"Sodyne what's the stasis box doing?" Cole said. In one of the *Nightfall's* laboratories there was an example of a Slaver stasis box, one of the most valuable of their artefacts discovered so far. Inside these boxes time effectively ceased to exist and anything placed inside, whether alive or dead would be perfectly preserved. An interesting quirk of the devices was that whenever more than one active example of them came within a light year of one another they would begin to emit a glow and this was used as a means to detect them from a distance.

"No activity captain." Sodyne said, shaking her head.

"Then there isn't a stasis box there for them to find." Noyal commented.

"Unless they've opened it and left it open." Sodyne pointed out.

"Such an act would violate Federation law. We may be beyond the Federation's borders but that is a Federation registered vessel so its crew are subject to the law." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Agreed." he said, "Ghroc take us in as close as possible before dropping out of warp. Nayal, delay hailing them until then. Let's see if we can surprise them. Go to yellow alert. Lieutenant Commander Martin I want our shields raised and weapons ready just in case. That ship will have been disarmed when it left Starfleet service but a hundred years is long enough for a crew to find alternate armaments.

"Aye captain. Raising shields and powering weapons." Martin replied as he readied the *Nightfall* for combat. When the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp a few minutes later the *Eternal* was in orbit around a small planet at the edge of the star system. If the crew had noticed the approach of the Starfleet ship then they had taken no action. The ship itself appeared intact, resembling the common Miranda-class destroyers that continued to serve Starfleet despite having been out of production for many years but with the addition of several prominent sensor pods mounted above and either side of the secondary hull section.

"Nayal open hailing frequencies." Cole ordered.

"SS *Eternal* this is the *USS Nightfall*, respond please." Nayal said into the communication system. Then she looked towards Cole and added, "Hailing frequencies open captain, they are responding."

"On screen." Cole said and the main view screen at the front of the *Nightfall*'s bridge changed from a view of the *Eternal* in orbit above the small planet to one of the vessel's own bridge and the woman sat in the captain's chair in the centre, "I'm Captain Cole of the Starfleet vessel *USS Nightfall*. We were due to carry out a research mission in this system, what is your purpose here?"

"Your arrival here was something of a surprise *Nightfall*, I don't mind admitting that before we identified you as a Starfleet ship we were somewhat concerned. I'm Louise Turner and I suppose you could say that I'm the captain of the *Eternal* captain." the woman in the captain's chair aboard the older vessel responded, "Our mission here is also scientific. We're investigating some ruins left behind by the ancient Slaver civilisation."

"What a co-incidence Captain Turner, it is the Slaver Empire that brings us here as well." Cole said and a hint of a smile appeared on Turner's face.

"I'm afraid you're too late Captain Cole." she said, "There was no-one else here when we arrived three weeks ago and we've laid claim to the site and its contents."

"Captain Turner's legal case is sound." T'Lan commented and Cole nodded.

"Of course it is." he said, "However, perhaps the captain would be willing to give us some access to it as well. I suspect that our instruments will be superior to those aboard the *Eternal* and-"

"Captain perhaps I should clarify the purpose of our investigation. We came out here to the Meltara Sector so we could collect Slaver artefacts that we can sell back home. We've taken just about everything from down there and were getting ready to move on." Turner interrupted.

"Captain we can't just allow them to loot whatever they want." Sodyne said.

"Actually Lieutenant Commander Sodyne the crew of the *Eternal* are entitled to do just that. As long as nothing they take back to Federation space is considered contraband they are free to remove it from this system." T'Lan explained.

"Hey look, I'm not looking for trouble with Starfleet." Turner said, "If you want to send someone over here to inspect what we've found then I'm happy to welcome you aboard. You can scan everything we have to make sure that it conforms to Federation ordnance and hazardous materials laws. I promise you that we haven't found any stasis boxes. Which of course you can see for yourself if you want."

"A physical inspection is a logical solution." T'Lan said and Cole smiled.

"Agreed." he said, "Lieutenant Commander Ghroc please take an away team across to the *Eternal*. Captain Turner our team will be with you shortly. *Nightfall* out."

"Captain as first officer I should lead the away team." T'Lan responded as the viewscreen switched back to the external view of the *Eternal* and planet below, surprised that Cole was not following the usual protocol. However, Cole then leaned over towards her.

"T'Lan as you pointed out when I had to catch you I am your husband and your captain. So as your husband I'm asking you to go to sickbay and ask Doctor Hamill to check you out and as your captain I'm ordering you to." he said softly.

"Of course captain. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc is the next in line of seniority and should command the away team." T'Lan said.

"very good. Commander Ghroc you may proceed. Lieutenant Nayal please take over at helm." Cole said and Nayal looked at him with a confused expression.

"Excuse me captain but is this some sort of Starfleet job swap scheme nobody ever told me about?" she said.

"No lieutenant but since you are attempting to gain your bridge command officer's qualification I thought you might appreciate the extra practice at filling multiple roles. You have been taught to pilot an Akira-class ship of the *Nightfall* program?" Cole said and Nayal smiled.

"Yes captain. Bradley taught me, although my qualification hasn't been formalised yet." she said.

"Then take the helm lieutenant. I'm sure that Lieutenant Commander Davis can replicate us some learner plates if we need them." Cole ordered and Nayal got up from the operations station before walking over to the helm station to take Ghroc's place there.

"Sodyne with me." the Bolian said as he turned around and the *Nightfall's* chief science officer immediately got to her feet as well, ready to follow Ghroc to the *Eternal*.

Captain Turner was waiting in the *Eternal's* transporter room when the away team from the *Nightfall* beamed aboard her ship. As well as Ghroc and Sodyne there was also the *Nightfall's* chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Davis, a junior medical officer and a pair of security guards.

"Welcome aboard the *SS Eternal*." Turner said with a smile and Ghroc smiled back at her.

"Thank you captain. I am Lieutenant Commander Ghroc, second officer of the *USS Nightfall* and with me are Lieutenant Commander Leyla Sodyne, our science officer and most experienced officer when it comes to dealing with the Slavers, Lieutenant Commander Ashley Davis, our chief engineer, Doctor Fenn and Crewmen George and Best."

"So where would you like to start?" Turner asked and Ghroc glanced at Sodyne.

"I'd like to see what's been taken from the site." she said.

"Then follow me. Everything is in our holds." Turner replied and she turned to leave.

"How long have you been here?" Ghroc asked as the away team followed Turner and he positioned himself directly beside her.

"Oh about a month." Turner answered, "We got the location from a contact at a university."

"In exchange for a percentage of whatever was found no doubt." Sodyne said.

"Of course. I'm well aware of the academic value of what we've found as well as the value to private collectors." Turner said.

"What have you found exactly?" Sodyne asked.

"Not much I'm afraid. The outpost was subterranean so it had some protection but all that was left when we arrived was the structure itself. Luckily for us though, whatever this place was the Slavers thought it necessary to cover a number of the walls in their carvings. We quickly found out that there were no artefacts that we could just pick up and beam aboard so we've spent the last months in spacesuits removing the outer layers of the walls instead." Turner explained.

"You destroyed the entire site?" Sodyne said, glaring angrily at Turner.

"We're preserving it for future generations." Turner responded with a smile, "Who knows what could happen to it if it was just left all the way out here? This way the entire site can be recreated in the Federation. Ah, here we are."

Turner halted outside the door to one of the *Eternal's* cargo holds and typed a code into a lock panel beside it before it slid open. Inside there were numerous cargo containers, all of which were relatively shallow in depth compared to their lengths and widths. They were laid out in rows on the floor and because they all had transparent covers but were not stacked it was possible to see what was in each without opening them. Every container that was visible to the away team held a single metal panel about two metres square and each of them was engraved with patterns that suggested they could be placed together like a jigsaw.

"Is this everything?" Ghroc said.

"No, we have three holds like this. I made sure that the exact spot that each of these was taken from was recorded and we have a full map of the site that I can give you." Turner said as both Sodyne and Fenn took out tricorders and began to scan the ancient metal panels.

"I'm not reading any signs of biological contamination." Fenn said.

"Of course not. I'm not bringing anything aboard my ship that could cause an epidemic that would wipe out my entire crew." Turner said.

"Sodyne, do you have anything to add?" Ghroc said.

"I think this should have been left where it was found." she replied sternly, "Quantum dating confirms that it is all about a billion years old so it fits with the time frame of the Slaver Empire and the carvings match the Slaver alphabet. I'd say that it was all genuine."

"Could I have a formal report to that effect?" Turner said.

"Ah so that's why you're being so co-operative. You want Starfleet to provide you with a certificate of authenticity." Ghroc said.

"Okay lieutenant commander, you caught me." Turner replied with a smile, "Look, about ninety percent of all Slaver artefacts that come on the market are modern forgeries. If I can show customers an official Starfleet report that states with one hundred percent certainty that all this is real then it will make selling them far easier."

"You expect Starfleet to endorse you plundering a valuable site of scientific interest?" Sodyne said.

"It would of course mean that you would have to make detailed scans of everything we've found Lieutenant Commander Sodyne. Detailed enough that combined with the map I'll provide you with you could recreate the original complex on any holodeck." Turner pointed out.

“We aren’t here to help you sell these artefacts Captain Turner.” Ghroc told her, “But if Lieutenant Commander Sodyne wants to certify their authenticity for you then I’m sure Captain Cole will agree.” Turner then looked at Sodyne while she continued to scan the contents of the cases.
“Well lieutenant commander what do you say? Do we have a deal?” she asked.

T'Lan sat on the edge of a biobed while Doctor Hamill, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer used her tricorder to run a detailed scan on her.

"It was a minor event doctor." T'Lan said but Hamill stayed focused on her tricorder.

"You felt unwell recently though didn't you?" she said shortly after.

"That is correct doctor, but my symptoms were mild and short lived." T'Lan replied before Hamill closed her tricorder and tapped her combadge.

"Hamill to Captain Cole." she said.

"Cole here doctor." his voice responded.

"Captain I'd like to see you in sickbay as soon as possible." Hamill said.

"Very well doctor I'll be with you in a few minutes." Cole said.

"Thank you captain. Sickbay out." Hamill added before she tapped her combadge again.

"Doctor there is no need to summon Captain Cole. I can relay the results of your tests to him without taking him from his duties." T'Lan said.

"No I think he needs to be here for this T'Lan. Let's wait in my office, I'd like to process some of the data I gathered in more detail. This shouldn't take long." Hamill replied.

"As you wish doctor." T'Lan said, standing up from the edge of the biobed and the two women made their way into Hamill's office.

Hamill sat down behind her desk while T'Lan sat on one of the chairs in front of it while Hamill brought up the data she had gathered with her tricorder on her screen and then instructed the sickbay computer system to begin processing it. After that she looked at T'Lan again.

"Do you mind if I practice while we wait for the captain?" she asked.

"If you wish to doctor." T'Lan said and Hamill smiled before she reached for the violin that was mounted on a stand nearby. Picking up the accompanying bow as well she placed the instrument under her chin and began to play a gentle tune while T'Lan remained where she sat.

As Cole had said he arrived soon after and as soon as he entered sickbay and Hamill returned her violin to its stand.

"Captain thank you for coming so quickly. Please take a seat." she told him.

"Of course doctor. Is there something wrong?" Cole replied and he sat down beside his wife.

"Doctor Hamill was waiting for you to arrive before she informed me of the results of her tests Robert." T'Lan told him.

"Is it serious?" Cole said, looking across the desk at Hamill.

"T'Lan suffered a minor infection recently." Hamill said and Cole nodded.

"Yes, it was something like flu but it only lasted a couple of days." he said.

"I recovered fully." T'Lan added.

"Your symptoms may have vanished but it looks like the infection left your immune system weakened slightly." Hamill said.

"I have contracted a second infection then?" T'Lan said.

"No, not quite T'Lan. You see although your immune system did recover there was a window where it was weaker than normal and that meant that when you and Robert had intercourse during that period it did not prevent conception. Congratulations T'Lan, you're pregnant. About three weeks."

"Pregnant?" Cole exclaimed and he smiled as he looked at his wife, "You're certain?" he added as he turned back towards Hamill.

"Yes captain." she she said, nodding her head, "My scans are conclusive. I have all the details here." and she pointed to her computer monitor but kept it facing away from Cole and T'Lan so that it would not reveal anything to them that they might not want to know.

"Doctor I did not experience such symptoms during my first pregnancy." T'Lan pointed out.

"No, you wouldn't have." Hamill said, "In around eighty percent of Human-Vulcan hybrid pregnancies the Vulcan biology is dominant but in this case your child has inherited more of Robert's genes and that's what is making you unwell. There is an increase in the iron level in your bloodstream."

"Do you think I am at risk because of this?" T'Lan asked calmly.

"At risk? Is it dangerous doctor?" Cole added nervously, concerned for the health of his wife.

"Oh no, it's not that serious. You will have to take extra care though, you'll find yourself getting tired more easily and according to the information available the hormonal changes may affect your emotional control more than a pregnancy with a more Vulcan child." Hamill said.

"What about the baby doctor?" Cole asked.

"Your baby is fine. I haven't detected any genetic issues but I do have a chromosome analysis. Do you want to know the sex?" Hamill asked and Cole and T'Lan looked at one another.

"Should we?" he said.

"I see no reason why we should refuse the information if it is available." T'Lan responded before she looked at Hamill and added, "Please tell us doctor."

"Okay, it's a boy." Hamill said and Cole's smile widened.

"We're having a son." he said.

"Yes. Is that all doctor?" T'Lan replied.

"For now, yes. But I want to see you regularly, at least once a week and immediately if you start to suffer any ill health or discomfort." Hamill told her.

"Of course doctor. Thank you." T'Lan replied before she and Cole got to their feet and left sickbay.

In the corridor outside T'Lan checked to see that they were alone before she looked at Cole.

"Robert does my pregnancy upset you?" she asked, coming to a halt.

"Upset me? T'Lan we're having a baby. That's wonderful news." he answered.

"But we had not planned on it. Before we had T'Sal we discussed the idea and Doctor King prescribed me with immune suppressors." T'Lan pointed out.

"T'Lan just because we didn't plan on this doesn't mean that I'm upset or angry. Our family is going to get bigger and I can't wait to meet our son."

After Cole said this T'Lan checked that they were alone in the corridor again before she embraced him, pressing her head against his chest.

"I love you Robert." she said.

Leaving Sodyne to scan the engraved panels Ghroc and the rest of the away team accompanied Turner to the *Eternal's* mess hall where the vessel had been retrofitted with modern replicators in place of the original food synthesizers.

"Here you go. The menu is pretty varied. I got the replicators as Starfleet surplus just like the ship." Turner said.

"So what are your plans when you leave here?" Ghroc asked Turner as they went to the replicators to make their selections.

"Oh we have a number of leads for where there are more Slaver sites." Turner answered, making her selection quickly. Then she removed the tray that materialised from the replicator and stepped aside to allow Ghroc to use the replicator after her.

"I don't suppose you'd like to share that information with me would you?" he said before he looked at the replicator and scrolled down its menu screen until he came to a Bolian dish he enjoyed and selected it.

"Sorry commander but I know that your ship can move a lot faster than mine and probably carries at least a dozen fighters that can outrun me as well. I won't do very well from this expedition if every system I get to already has a Starfleet beacon there proclaiming it as protected from examination." Turner replied.

"And just when you'd been so co-operative." Ghroc commented and then he took his own meal from the replicator and the pair made their way to a nearby table before sitting down opposite one another, "Some might even say you've been keen to go beyond what you're required to do. Letting Sodyne conduct high resolution scans of everything in your hold for example."

"I told you commander, with a certificate from you I can get a better price for it." Turner said as she began her meal.

"Yes you did say that." Ghroc responded and he lifted a spoonful of his own food to his mouth, chewed and swallowed before he added, "But I'm just not buying it."

"Why not?"

"Because anyone who could provide you with the locations of Slaver sites will know how to run a quantum dating scan on anything you bring back. Anything fake would be worthless and you can pretty much name your own price for everything shown to come from that time period." Ghroc pointed out and Turner raised her hands.

"Okay you caught me." she said, "I really just wanted to make sure that as the only Starfleet ship in the sector you had a favourable opinion of me and my crew. That way if we need help then you'd be more willing to provide it instead of us having to wait a month for a rescue ship to reach us from the Federation. Assuming that we were even able to send a signal that far. Of course there are some issue we could encounter that waiting a month to resolve just won't be an option. We've heard about other groups in the sector that seem to want to short cut digging this stuff out of the ground."

"You mean pirates?" Ghroc commented and Turner nodded.

"Our source warned us about the pirate group that had a stasis box and was using it as bait to lure in anyone who had another." she said.

"Don't worry about them. We dealt with them." Ghroc replied, remembering the group that had been operating out of an abandoned Suliban helix.

"Yes but where one pirate group is destroyed others won't be far behind. The money involved in Slaver artefacts is just too good. Tell me Mister Ghroc, is it true that there's a Ferengi vessel in the sector that is operating illegally? My source said that they've even threatened your ship on a few occasions." Turner said.

"Yes, that's true but their ship is just a transport." Ghroc told her.

"And the *Eternal* is an obsolete Starfleet destroyer that was decommissioned without its phasers and photon torpedoes." Turner said.

"You haven't replaced the weapons?" Ghroc asked.

"Partially but Starfleet specification weapons are hard to come by for law abiding crews. I have three high yield pulse cannons and a probe launcher that can be used to launch warp capable probes. My engineer tells me that the independent warp drive of a long range probe can be used as an improvised torpedo in an emergency." Turner said.

"True, though you'd be lucky to score a hit against a target as manoeuvrable as a warship. Transports would be easier targets." Ghroc confirmed.

"And there you have it. I need the *Nightfall* for protection and I'm not going to get that if you think that I'm a smuggler, thief or pirate myself now am I?"

"True. Though Captain Cole is unlikely to base our operations around being able to provide protection for your ship over our primary mission of supporting Professor Denning." Ghroc warned Turner.

"So Marcus Denning is out here. My source said it was him."

"You know him?"

"We've met. He was looking for a ship to bring his team out here and I offered him mine. I'd have got the contract too if he hadn't found someone with a faster one. That's how I found out about the Slaver remains out here and I went looking for someone who could tell me more about where they were to be found." Turner explained.

"Then I'm sure you can appreciate that our duty is to him." Ghroc said.

"Is everything okay with T'Lan captain?" Martin asked when Cole returned to the bridge alone. With all three senior command officers away from the bridge the tactical officer had been left in command and he stood up as soon as Cole stepped from the turbolift so he could reclaim his chair.

"Yes, she's just resting in our quarters and she'll be back at the start of her next shift." Cole replied, "Is there any word from the away team yet?"

"No further sir." Martin told him.

"Very well, return to your station commander." Cole said and he nodded before walking to the tactical station behind the captain's chair. Then as if on cue the officer sat at the operations console looked up.

"Lieutenant Commander Ghroc is calling from the *Eternal* sir." he said.

"Put him through lieutenant." Cole replied.

"Ghroc to *Nightfall*." Ghroc's voice then said over the communication channel.

"Go ahead commander." Cole said.

"Captain we've finished our inspection and are ready to return." Ghroc replied.

"I take it there were no problems then?" Cole asked.

"None captain. The captain and crew have been fully co-operative and there is nothing to suggest any illegal activity." Ghroc answered.

"Very good commander. Report to my ready room immediately upon your return and you can brief me fully. *Nightfall* out." Cole told him.

As soon as the away team returned from the *Eternal*, Sodyne looked at Ghroc.

"I'm going to go and upload my scans to the laboratory computer. I think I can use them to make a simulation of the site before Turner and her people ripped it apart." she said and Ghroc nodded.

"Okay, I'll let the captain know." he said and she hurried from the transporter room.

"What's got her so impatient?" Fenn asked as he and Ghroc stepped down from the transporter pad more calmly.

"Beats me doctor. Those ruins have waited a billion years but the way she acts you'd think that they were all about to vanish overnight." Ghroc replied with a sigh. Then he looked at Fenn and added, "I'm going to go and report to the captain. I expect that Doctor Hamill will be waiting for the same from you."

"Yes sir." Fenn responded and when the two men reached the exit from the transporter room they went in opposite directions.

Ghroc made his way straight to the bridge and once there walked straight to the door leading to Cole's ready room, pressing the intercom beside it.

"Captain it's Ghroc." he said.

"Come in commander." Cole told him and the door slid open.

Ghroc entered the ready room and immediately noticed that Cole was alone. Martin currently had the conn and this meant this left T'Lan unaccounted for.

"Is T'Lan okay captain?" he asked as he sat down opposite Cole.

"She's fine. She just needs some rest for a few hours then she'll be back on duty for her next shift. Now what about this Captain Turner? Did she explain what she's doing out here?" Cole replied.

"Plundering the past for profit captain. She found out about the link between the Slavers and this sector from Professor Denning when she was trying to get his transport contract." Ghroc told him.

"The contract that went to Jack Foster?" Cole commented and Ghroc nodded.

"Yes captain. His ship is probably faster and more efficient to operate than the *Eternal*. Obviously Turner knew the potential value of anything connected to the slavers and she was able to find a source at one of the universities supporting the professor's operation who gave her details of the sites to be investigated in exchange for a cut of the profit. She wouldn't discuss exactly how much she knew though. She didn't want us racing to get to them all first."

"Understandable I suppose. I was told that the *Eternal* broke orbit as soon as you beamed back aboard. I ordered that she be tracked when she went to warp but I wouldn't be surprised if they just went as far as needed to get out of sensor range before changing course to prevent us from plotting their next destination." Cole told him.

"Yes, I get the impression that that's the sort of thing Turner would do. Her interest is in taking everything she can from a site before moving on to the next. At some point she'll return to the Federation and sell everything. She claimed that she wanted to use our checks to act like a certificate of authenticity. She let Sodyne conduct all the scans she wanted and also provided a detailed account of exactly where each item was located when it was discovered. You know what Sodyne's like with this sort of thing, she rushed off to her lab as soon as we beamed back aboard to start putting all that together. I expected that she'll have recreated the entire site in its original condition by tomorrow morning." Ghroc continued.

"I suppose the scans would include quantum dating to confirm the time period the artefacts originate from? Couldn't anyone do that?" Cole asked.

"Exactly captain. I pressed her a bit more and then she admitted that really she just wants to keep on our good side." Ghroc said.

"Our good side? While she's out here destroying what we and Professor Denning's team have come to study?" Cole said in amazement.

"It's true captain. She wants us to be her support ship as well, ready to help if she breaks down or is attacked by anyone who won't be driven off by a few pulse cannons and improvised torpedoes." Ghroc said.

"She knows that there are raiders in the sector then?" Cole commented.

"Oh yes captain. Her source also warned her about the risk of piracy, right down to the raiders using a stasis box as bait and the Ferengi that had been running supplies for the professor before we found out that they were planning to steal what he found." Ghroc said.

"Of course you told her that Starfleet is not in the habit of providing support to vessels involved in the destruction of sites of scientific interest. If she breaks down I may consider giving her a tow back to the Federation but there's no guarantee that I won't insist that Turner and her crew abandon their ship and its contents and we'll just give them a lift." Cole said and Ghroc smiled.

"I did point out that we're here to support Professor Denning and that she shouldn't count on us being there

to help." he said, "Will you be contacting the Professor to tell him about Turner and her crew captain?"

"Yes I better had. If someone back in the Federation is leaking information for financial reward then he may want to rethink how he's sharing his findings with anyone outside the Federation Science Council itself." Cole said, "Thank you commander, you may return to duty."

"Of course captain." Ghroc said, nodding his head slightly before he got to his feet. Meanwhile as he was leaving the room Cole reached for the intercom.

"I need a channel to Professor Denning." he said.

"Yes captain." the officer at operations responded and then there was a pause of just under a minute as a subspace communications channel to the transport used by the professor and his research team was established, "Putting you through now sir." the operations officer added and the display on Cole's desk suddenly showed an image of Denning and his assistants Hewitt and Trellan sat either side of him.

"Captain Cole." Denning said in greeting, "Have you found something at K-seven-four-six?"

"In a sense, yes professor. However, it's not what you'd want us to have." Cole told him and he frowned.

"What do you mean by that captain?" Hewitt asked after she first glanced at the professor.

"I mean that when we arrived here there was already another ship in orbit. One with a captain that I believe the professor may be familiar with."

"You mean Daimon Krom?" Trellan said and the Romulan archaeologist scowled.

"No, not the Ferengi. A human captain from the Federation by the name Turner." Cole said.

"Turner? You mean the captain of the Eternal?" Denning said in surprise, "But I didn't tell her about any of the sites I'd found clues to when I met with her."

"You do know her then professor?" Hewitt said, looking at Denning again and he nodded.

"Yes. When we were putting our expedition together she was one of the captains I considered to transport us. Her ship was good but the resources assigned to us by the Federation Science Council wouldn't have allowed us to use her and be able to maintain a team large enough to be useful." Denning explained.

"She told one of my officers that you did tell her about the possible presence of Slaver artefacts though professor." Cole pointed out, "That was all she needed to start looking for someone willing to give her the locations you were going to investigate."

"I don't even include that in any of my reports home," Trellan said, "and even though it may not be as tight lipped as it used to be the Romulan government wouldn't make such information public."

"Neither should anyone who has access to my reports." Denning said.

"I think that there is an element of greed involved here professor." Cole said, "I understand that whoever provided the information did so in exchange for a percentage of the value. I thought you ought to be informed so that you can consult with the Federation Science Council about how this information is shared."

"Will Starfleet investigate the leak captain?" Trellan said.

"I doubt it. That's a job for either Federation Security or local law enforcement and since the leak comes from a university it may not even be illegal. Academics don't tend to sign non-disclosure agreements or even be security vetted." Cole replied.

"In the meantime though we've lost one site entirely and who knows how many others Turner will destroy before we can see them?" Denning commented.

"Ah now there I do have some good news professor." Cole said, "Although Captain Turner's primary interest is in removing artefacts to sell she had no objection to my science officer scanning them. She also provided details of the site. Her intention may be to enrich herself but she doesn't want to antagonise us in particular."

"Why not?" Denning asked and Cole smiled.

"Because we're a long way from home professor and Captain Turner wants to know that help will be close at hand if she needs it." Cole said and a smile spread across his face as he spoke.

"Help that will be at your discretion I suppose captain?" Denning commented.

"Quite correct professor. I may be obliged to protect the lives of Federation citizens but there's nothing in Starfleet regulations that says I have to help them transport their cargo home." Cole answered.

"So what's your next move captain?" Denning then asked.

"I'm going to confer with Lieutenant Sodyne to make sure that there's nothing left here at K-seven-four-six but if she believes that there isn't then we're going to move on to the next system you given us, Outer Orim." Cole said and Denning nodded.

"Very good captain. I estimate that we've still got another three weeks of work here but we'll keep to our scheduled check ins." he said.

"I look forward to hearing from you professor. *Nightfall* out." Cole responded and then he shut off the subspace communication channel. Immediately after this he tapped his combadge, "Cole to Sodyne." he said but the combadge just beeped, indicating that it had not been able to connect to Sodyne's. However, if he could not speak to Sodyne via her combadge he could still speak to her face to face and Cole up and walked out of his ready room onto the bridge where Ghroc now occupied his chair.

"Captain." Ghroc said as he stood up.

"You still have the conn lieutenant commander." Cole told him, holding up his hands, "I'm going down to Sodyne's lab to see what she's up to. I don't suppose that she's checked in has she?"

"No captain." Ghroc replied.

"We've heard nothing from her since she came aboard." Martin added and Cole nodded.

"Well I'll know in a couple of minutes if she's found anything," he said as he walked to the turbolift and then stepped inside.

The turbolift took Cole to within a few metres of the laboratory that Sodyne used, the same compartment where the Slaver stasis box kept aboard the *Nightfall* was stored and he made his way straight there.

However, when he walked up to the door it did not open automatically as he had expected it to. He paused a moment to see if there just a delay in the system that he would have to report to the *Nightfall*'s engineering department but the door remained closed and so instead he tapped his combadge.

"Computer, open door to physics lab." he said. Even though only a limited amount of the research related to the Slaver Empire was in the field of physics, this laboratory was used to conduct it because it was best equipped for monitoring the stasis box that was stored inside. Instead of the door opening in response to Cole's order though there was a brief shrill sound instead.

"Door is security sealed." the computer's automated voice told him.

"Security override. Authorisation Cole echo-six-four." Cole said and the door promptly slid open.

Entering the laboratory Cole saw nothing amiss. The stasis box was still exactly where it was normally kept on a raised surface at the side of the room, closed but dull without any other such devices within a light year to trigger the characteristic glow and all the usual equipment was intact.

"I sealed the door because I don't want to be disturbed." Sodyne said from where she sat at the far end of the room with her back towards Cole and as he looked towards her he noticed that her combadge was lying on the desk beside her instead of being attached to her uniform.

"I presume the same goes for why you turned off your combadge lieutenant commander." Cole said and Sodyne suddenly spun around.

"Captain!" she exclaimed, "I'm sorry I didn't know it was you."

"Then who were you expecting exactly?"

"I thought maybe Nayal or a security patrol." Sodyne answered.

"Well it's me and I tried to get you on your combadge. Now perhaps you'd like to explain why you decided to seal yourself in here." Cole said.

"As I said captain, I just don't want to be disturbed. I've got an enormous amount of data that I need to transfer into the laboratory computer. Then I need to combine it with the layout plan I was given by Captain Turner so that I can build a virtual model for the holodeck." Sodyne told him.

"Maybe so but that doesn't excuse cutting yourself off." Cole said.

"I wasn't cut off captain. I would still have been warned of a yellow or red alert. I just wanted to be able to keep my focus while I work. I may need to work overnight."

"No." Cole said sternly, "Leyla you're pushing yourself far too hard when it comes to the Slavers. Need I remind you of what happened on Prenus?"

"No captain but-

"You went rushing off after a stasis box and ended up being captured by the local fanatics." Cole interrupted, though Sodyne was relieved that he did not mention the pair of them ending up naked and sharing a single survival blanket before almost freezing to death, "I don't mind my officers putting in a few extra hours if they want to, we all do it when we have to, but you're taking that too far. You don't need to finish this tonight. All I need to know is whether you think that there is a reasonable chance that the crew of the *Eternal* missed anything that we should take a look at. If not then we're going to move on to the Outer Orim system where if you recall Professor Denning thinks the Slavers maintained an outpost that allowed them to control an indigenous species."

"No captain." Sodyne responded without hesitation, "In my opinion the *Eternal*'s crew took everything of note from the planet's surface and there is nothing left there for us to study."

"Thank you commander. I will give the order for us to move on and I'll be checking that as soon as your shift is over you leave this room and take a proper break. Otherwise I'll speak to Doctor Hamill and see if she agrees that you're working too hard and need to be relieved of duty entirely for a time. That includes the study of whatever may be at Outer Orim. Lieutenant Fisher can study the planet instead." Cole said.

"Yes captain." Sodyne replied reluctantly.

"Understood captain, setting course for Outer Orim and engaging at warp nine." Ghroc said when Cole issued the order to depart K-746 and he looked at Nayal who was still sat at the helm station, "Well lieutenant, think you can handle this ship at warp?" he asked and Nayal smiled.

"Bradley always said it was easy." she said, "It's not like there's much to run into and you only every travel in a straight line."

"Try not to broadcast the secrets of helmsmen to the entire universe lieutenant." Ghroc responded and he smiled back at her.

"Course laid in commander. Set for warp nine." Nayal said and Ghroc nodded.

"Engage." he ordered and Nayal pushed her hands forwards on the *Nightfall*'s manual flight controls. Unlike most Starfleet vessels, ships of the *Nightfall* program were fitted with old fashioned flight control sticks in addition to the more modern touch sensitive consoles. These were primarily intended for when rapid manoeuvres were required in combat but they functioned just as well for more mundane travel whether travelling slower or faster than light.

Nayal first flew the *Nightfall* away from the planet and then out of the system's orbital plane entirely before she activated the cruiser's warp drive and the ship shuddered slightly as it accelerated.

"Oops." she said nervously.

"Don't worry lieutenant. That wasn't bad for a first attempt. We may make a command officer out of you yet." Ghroc replied.



"Are you sure you're okay?" Cole asked as he stood behind T'Lan and placed his hands on her shoulders while she looked at herself in their full length bedroom mirror.

"I am fine Robert." she said and she moved her hands from her stomach to where his rested. Then after a moment's pause she added, "It is strange though. I know my pregnancy will not become visibly obvious for a number of weeks yet but I still wonder if anyone will notice it before we decide to make an announcement."

"You could always replicate a looser uniform." Cole suggested.

"Then the crew would notice the difference in how I dress." T'Lan pointed out and she glanced at the wall mounted clock and added, "We should leave. We will be arriving at Outer Orim in under half an hour."

"Good point. It wouldn't do to be late." Cole replied and he stepped back.

Cole and T'Lan then made their way to the bridge together where they found Ghroc in the captain's chair.

"We're approaching the Outer Orim system captain. Right on schedule." the Bolian officer told Cole as he stood up.

"Very good." Cole replied and as he sat down he looked towards the operations station where Nayal had returned to her regular duties, "Lieutenant I don't suppose that our sensors are picking up any ships that have beaten us there are they?" he said.

"No captain, our screens are clear." Nayal replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, what can you tell us about the planet we are to investigate?" T'Lan added, glancing briefly over her shoulder towards the science station.

"The professor's information appears to be somewhat out of date commander." Sodyne responded.

"How so?" Cole said.

"Well the fourth planet in the system where the ruins are to be found is supposed to be Class M but if it is then it barely qualifies. I'm picking up a lot of particulate matter in the atmosphere and high levels of surface radiation." Sodyne explained.

"A billion years is a long time." Martin commented.

"The data came from long range scans conducted six years ago." Sodyne replied, "At that time the planet was believed to have an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere."

"So either somebody screwed up or something major happened here recently." Cole said, "Keep scanning, I want to know what happened to affect the planet's environment before I'm letting an away team beam down."

"A class eight probe would allow us to gather additional data ahead of our arrival." T'Lan suggested and Cole nodded.

"Yes. Lieutenant Commander Martin prepare a class eight probe for launch." he said.

"Aye captain. Probe ready for launch." Martin said as he quickly configured one of the *Nightfall's* torpedo launchers to deploy a probe instead of a quantum torpedo.

"Launch probe." Cole ordered.

"Probe launched." Martin said as the device was launched from the torpedo launcher.

"Receiving probe telemetry now captain." Nayal announced even though all that she was receiving was the basic data concerning its flight path, "ETA to target seven minutes."

Class eight probes were equipped with their own miniature warp drive rather than simply maintaining a warp field generated by the launching vessel and this allowed the probe to control its speed more than a basic device, decelerating gently as it neared the system without needing to drop out of warp entirely and it was at this point that the target planet came within the range of the probe's sensors and it immediately began to send the data it gathered back to the *Nightfall*.

"Captain the probe is scanning the planet now." Nayal announced when this telemetry began to arrive at the *Nightfall*.

"Analysis Commander Sodyne." Cole said.

"Probe confirms our long range readings of the atmosphere captain but the conditions appear to be limited to one specific continent. The rest of the planet still has the conditions previously detected." Sodyne said as she studied the data closely.

"How can a planet maintain two such widely different sets of environmental conditions?" Martin asked.

"It cannot." T'Lan responded, "Winds would carry the pollution affecting one zone across the rest of the planet."

"And I don't think this one is any exception to the rule." Sodyne added, "The area affected is growing as the wind carries the debris and radiation."

"Can you determine a cause yet? Or at least tell whether it is a natural phenomena?" Cole said.

"Whatever the trigger event was it appears to have begun in the equatorial zone captain. Based on prevailing wind I'd say it was-" Sodyne began before she suddenly stopped.

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

"Captain comparing the probe's telemetry to the information provided by Professor Denning indicates that the source of the atmospheric disruption is the projected location of the Slaver ruins." Sodyne said.

"How can billion year old ruins explode like that?" Nayal commented.

"The reason Starfleet was given sole authority to open Slaver stasis boxes was that one such device contained a live disruptor bomb. If another such weapon was found in a stasis box here then that could be the source of the damage." T'Lan said.

"So someone got here before us?" Martin said.

"It can't be Turner and the *Eternal*. They went in totally the other direction. Plus we're much faster than they are." Ghroc pointed out.

"The time period is wrong as well." Sodyne added, "The rate at which the debris and radiation is spreading I think this happened between four and five days ago. The *Eternal* was still in the K-seven-four-six system at that time."

"Maybe our Ferengi problem just went up in smoke." Nayal said, only half joking.

"It is possible that the Ferengi have been here." T'Lan agreed, "We know that Daimon Krom has a stasis box in his possession so he would know if there was another active one on the planet. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, has the probe detected any warp trails that would indicate that the Ferengi vessel has recently left the system?"

"If the Ferengi were at Outer Orim their ship could have been destroyed as well." Martin commented.

"Perhaps not lieutenant commander, but you are forgetting their stasis box." T'Lan replied, "We know of no force that can destroy an active Slaver stasis box. Even if their vessel was destroyed then the box would survive and we are now close enough that the box aboard the *Nightfall* would react to its presence. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is there any change in the status of the stasis box in the physics laboratory?"

"No commander. There are definitely no other active stasis boxes within a light year." Sodyne said.

"So unless they have opened their box then Daimon Krom and his ship are not in the Outer Orim system." T'Lan said.

"In answer to your question commander the probe isn't picking up any warp trails, though it is still pretty far away. We'll have a better idea when it gets closer." Sodyne then told T'Lan.

"A warp trail can be masked." Ghroc pointed out.

"Maybe so but we shouldn't stop looking." Cole responded, "Take us to yellow alert. Something obviously happened in this system recently and I don't want us to end up a cloud of debris and radioactive particles as well."

"Raising shields and powering weapons." Martin announced, activating the *Nightfall's* tactical systems.

Ahead of the *Nightfall* the probe dropped out of warp in the Outer Orim system and entered orbit of the fourth planet, from where its sensors could make more detailed scans of the atmosphere and surface.

"Captain the radioactive traces in the atmosphere indicate a recent antimatter annihilation." Sodyne said when she saw this more detailed telemetry and Martin immediately brought up a copy on his own console.

"Captain these fallout patterns look like photon torpedo detonations. I think that someone bombarded this planet from space." he said.

"The ruins were deliberately targeted?" Nayal said.

"We cannot know that for certain. It is possible that the destruction of the ruins was collateral damage." T'Lan replied.

"Collateral damage?" Sodyne commented.

"The attack could have been targeted at someone occupying the area, possibly without even knowing the significance of the ruins." T'Lan explained, "We will be able to find out more when we arrive in orbit ourselves."

The *Nightfall* dropped out of warp close to where the probe was already orbiting the fourth planet of the Outer Orim system. Below the planet's surface was obscured by the thick cloud of debris that had been created by the torpedo impacts and Sodyne directed the cruiser's primary sensors into the heart of this.

"That's more than just a casual bombardment. Someone really wanted to destroy something down there."

Cole said while he looked at the cloud on the main view screen at the front of the bridge.

"Captain I'm seeing some interesting patterns to the fallout here." Martin said as he also studied the readings from the *Nightfall's* sensors.

"Can you be more specific Mister Martin?" Cole asked.

"Captain I'm pretty certain that the damage we're seeing was caused by weapons of Federation origin." Martin answered.

"Federation?" Cole repeated in surprise and Martin nodded.

"Yes captain. I'm picking up trace particles that result when the casings of Starfleet class six photon torpedoes are annihilated by the detonation of their warheads." Martin told him.

"Who would have weapons like that out here? We're the only Starfleet ship in the sector," Nayal said, "and even we aren't carrying class six photon torpedoes aboard."

"Exactly. The *Nightfall* herself only uses quantum torpedoes and our fighters and runabouts use different patterns of photons." Martin added.

"Although the Federation is not in the habit of providing such weapons to anyone outside Starfleet we cannot overlook the fact that many vessels were lost during the Dominion War and their weapons may have been recovered." T'Lan pointed out.

"Prestus." Cole commented, remembering the Federation colony that while under the influence of Iconian infiltrators had built up a small fleet of Starfleet vessels that had been declared destroyed but in fact secretly salvaged along with a vast arsenal of photon torpedoes.

"Precisely." T'Lan added, "We saw their arsenal ourselves."

Cole winced when T'Lan mentioned this, remembering how he had reacted when she told him that the photon torpedo he was resting his hand on had a live warhead.

"Yes thank you T'Lan." he said, "Lieutenant Commander Sodyne I want you to scan for anything that might be left of the torpedoes used to do this. First I want to confirm that they did originate in the Federation and then see if we can find anything to identify the particular source. Maybe those torpedoes were salvaged before being sold on the black market or maybe there's someone providing them to someone other than Starfleet."

"Captain what about the ruins? Shouldn't I be trying to find anything that might be left of them?" Sodyne replied.

"I think we can assume that they've been destroyed lieutenant commander. If by some chance some of them have survived then we can come back to study them later." Cole said and then he looked at Nayal and added, "Lieutenant I think you'd better call Professor Denning. He needs to be informed about this."

"Yes captain, I'm just glad your people gave up shooting the bearers of bad news." Nayal replied and she was just about to activate the *Nightfall's* subspace communications transmitter when her console informed her of an incoming signal instead, "Captain I'm picking up an emergency signal. It's the *Eternal*." she said. Cole and T'Lan looked at one another for a moment before Cole responded.

"Put them through lieutenant." he said and Nayal nodded.

"*Nightfall* can you read me?" Turner's voice said over background noise that indicated a state of panic from those around her, "We're under attack I repeat we are under attack. One primary vessel and two smaller ones, all broadcasting Starfleet ID codes. We're trying to outrun them but they're keeping pace with us and their weapons are far superior. Can you help us *Nightfall*?"

"Lieutenant do you have their location?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. Their present location, speed and heading was all embedded in their signal. At maximum warp we can intercept them in four hours." Nayal told him.

"That's a long time to be coming under fire." Martin commented.

"Lieutenant Nayal, if the *Eternal* adjusts her heading can the intercept time be reduced?" T'Lan asked.

"If they come to zero-three seven mark two-five then we can rendezvous in about three and a half hours." Nayal said.

"Assuming they can make the turn. They'll have to drop out of warp to make a change that big." Ghroc pointed out.

"Taken under advisement commander." Cole said before he pressed the button on the arm of chair that would give him access to the *Nightfall's* communications, "*Eternal* this is the *USS Nightfall*. Come to zero-three-seven mark two-five and maintain maximum warp. We will rendezvous with you in approximately three point five hours."

The *Nightfall's* bridge crew then waited tensely for a response from the *Eternal* and Cole found himself relieved when Turner's voice spoke again.

"*Nightfall* thank God." she said, "We're making the turn now. See you in three and a half hours."

"See you then captain. *Nightfall* out." Cole replied before he closed the channel. Then he looked at Ghroc and added, "Helm lay in an intercept course. Maximum warp."

"Aye captain. Engaging at maximum warp." Ghroc responded as he turned the *Nightfall* away from the planet.

"Captain are we really going to divert from our mission to assist a ship that is using information acquired by questionable means to disrupt it?" Sodyne asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne," T'Lan responded before Cole could answer, "if the *Eternal* had suffered some sort of technical failure then your point may be valid. However, they are coming under attack and we are obliged to help them as Federation citizens. Added to which Captain Turner stated that the ships attacking her were showing Starfleet identification. Logic suggests that there is a connection between them and the parties responsible for the destruction on Outer Orim Four."

"All stations to red alert." Cole ordered, "Nayal I want our fighter squadron ready for immediate deployment by the time we rendezvous with the *Eternal*." then he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering." he said into it.

"Engineering, Lieutenant Commander Davis here." the voice of the *Nightfall*'s chief engineer replied.

"Commander we may be going into combat. What's the status of our warp cores?" Cole asked.

"All functioning normally captain. You have full power available for all systems." Davis answered.

"I'm glad to hear it commander. We'll be at maximum warp for three and a half hours. Let me know the instant you see anything that could affect our ability to maintain that. Bridge out." Cole added before shutting off the intercom.

Making anything other than the most minor course change while at warp would result in a starship being ripped apart by the extreme forces placed upon its space frame, 'Faster than light, no left or right' the saying went so before the *Eternal* could change course it had to drop to impulse speed and Turner knew that this would give their pursuers the chance to close the gap between them.

Providing they were able to react in time of course. If done correctly then dropping out of warp could actually give the crew of the *Eternal* the chance to increase their lead.

"Stand by. I want that warp field collapsed as fast as possible. Don't give them any warning." she told her helmsman.

"Deflector primed captain." he responded, "Field frequency will invert in three seconds. Two. One. Now!"

The deflector field being used to clear debris out of the path of the *Eternal* before it could collide disastrously with the vessel at superluminal speed suddenly and dramatically changed to an inverse one and the accompanying magnetic pulse collapsed the ship's warp field in an instant, dropping it to sublight speed. The ship lurched violently when this happened but the crew were already braced for it and the ship's inertial compensation had been increased to maximum to counteract as much of it as possible. The *Eternal*'s pursuers had been several million kilometres behind them when this happened and their crews barely had time to register that their target had dropped out of warp before they sped by at more than two hundred times the speed of light.

"Helm come to zero-three-seven mark two-five. Then go to maximum warp." Turner ordered even though the helmsman was already setting the new flight information. The *Eternal* then turned to its new heading and then re-entered warp, accelerating to its maximum speed in under a minute.

"Now at maximum warp." the helmsman reported once this was achieved.

"Okay what's the status on those guys chasing after us?" Turner asked.

"They all came out of warp individually." the navigator told her, "Looks like they're still trying to get organised before they come after us. Looks like your plan worked captain."

Turner then smiled.

"I told you it would." she said, "What about the *Nightfall*? Are they in sensor range yet?"

"No captain." the navigator answered, "Akira-class ships use baffled warp drives to prevent permanent subspace disruption. It makes their warp fields much harder to detect at long range."

"You will spot them before they suddenly appear right in front of us this time though won't you?" Turner said, referring to how the *Nightfall* had been able to sneak up on them at their first encounter.

"Yes captain." the navigator responded.

"Captain the *Eternal* is in sensor range now. They have changed their heading for optimum interception." Nayal announced when she saw the out dated Soyuz-class vessel appear on her sensors.

"Are there any signs of their pursuers lieutenant?" T'Lan asked.

"Not yet commander." Nayal replied before three more contacts appeared on her console display, "Wait a moment, I have three more contacts. Captain, all of them are showing Starfleet IDs."

"Let me see." Cole said and he and T'Lan both used the headsets that they, like all the other bridge officers, wore to bring up the identification data from the three ships pursuing the *Eternal*.

"*USS Liberation*, Freedom-class light frigate. *USS Infinite* and *USS Cosmos*, Sydney-class transports." T'Lan said.

Both of these classes of starship were considered obsolete by Starfleet, although vessels of the Sydney-class were still in use for basic duties the Freedom-class frigate had been retired some years before the outbreak of the Dominion War, replaced by the more modern Norway and Steamrunner classes.

"Give me tactical." Cole said and the main viewscreen switched to show the relative positions of the *Nightfall*, *Eternal* and the three vessels chasing it, "Looks like that frigate is holding back. Sticking with the transports." Cole commented.

"I agree." T'Lan added, "A Freedom-class vessel is capable of warp nine and given that I do not believe that the crew of this vessel is concerned with the damage to subspace that their model of warp drive can cause. That suggests that their armament is not up to the specification it was when in Starfleet service."

"That's true." Martin added, "I was an ensign aboard a Freedom-class ship and the main phaser cannon could have punched through the shields of ships four times our weight class."

"Are we in danger?" Sodyne asked, her console indicating that the *Nightfall* came within that band.

"Not really. Even if they've kept that cannon, which as Commander T'Lan suggests they haven't, then our shields are a generation more advanced than their technology." Martin reassured her.

"Nevertheless I expect that whoever they are the frigate is their primary vessel and I want it prioritised as a target if they don't stand down when ordered to." Cole ordered.

"Marking Freedom-class vessel as priority target." Martin confirmed.

"Do you think that they will stand down?" T'Lan asked, looking at Cole.

"I doubt it. My guess is that when they get a good look at us and realise what they're up against they'll immediately turn tail and run. We need to be able to hit that frigate before they can. Commander Martin make sure you target their warp drive. With just one nacelle it should be pretty easy to knock out with one good shot." Cole said, "Are our ground troops ready to go?"

"Yes captain." Martin answered, "I had them stand to just in case we needed them for something."

"Well hopefully we will. Get as many of them to the transporters as will fit in them. Once the frigate's warp drive is disabled we'll need to send over a boarding party." Cole told him.

"We will need to disable their shields first." T'Lan pointed out and Cole nodded.

"If we can take their warp drive offline then we'll have all the time we need to deal with their shields. They won't be going anywhere after all. They may even change their minds about surrendering." he replied.

"Captain I've got a Starfleet warp signature six hundred million kilometres dead ahead. It's the *Nightfall*." the *Eternal*'s navigator said.

"Drop us out of warp and start taking evasive action. Make sure that the pulse from shutting off our warp drive is nice and big, maybe those guys behind us won't have picked up the *Nightfall* yet." Turner ordered and moments later the *Eternal* dropped to sublight speed. This time the helmsman made sure that there were indications that he was about make such a manoeuvre and so instead of overshooting the three ships chasing them dropped out of warp within a million kilometres of them in a rapid succession of brilliant flashes of light. The helmsman was already in the process of making a sharp impulse turn though and this delayed the ability of the frigate and two transports to get an adequate target lock on the *Eternal*. One of the Sydney-class transports fired a brief blast from a particle cannon but this barely impacted on the *Eternal*'s shields and the old Soyuz-class ship continued its pattern of evasive turns right up until there was yet another bright flash of light as the *USS Nightfall* also came out of warp.

"This is the *USS Nightfall* to the vessels identifying as the *USS Liberation*, *USS Infinite* and *USS Cosmos*." Cole's voice said as it was broadcast, "Surrender and prepare to be boarded."

In response the *Liberation* fired a pair of torpedoes at the *Nightfall* in rapid succession and the ship shook slightly as they impacted on its shields.

"No damage captain. Shields holding." Nayal said, her console confirming that the hastily executed attack had failed to cause any damage.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne what is your analysis?" T'Lan asked.

"Shields indicate that the torpedo hits came from Starfleet class six photon torpedoes commander." Sodyne responded.

"What a co-incidence." Cole commented, "Commander Martin do we have a lock?"

"Yes captain. Firing now." Martin replied, however just as he fired a quantum torpedo from the weapons pod mounted towards the rear of the *Nightfall* the trio of raiding vessels engaged their warp drives and fled. Each vessel had been facing along a different heading when they did this and the *Nightfall* was left tracking three separate warp trails, each one heading in a completely different direction.

"Captain the *Liberation* is leaving at warp nine, the *Infinite* and the *Cosmos* at warp seven." Nayal said.

"Each is doing maximum warp for their class." Ghroc pointed out.

"And being on different headings makes it difficult for us to chase them all." Cole said.

"Captain I can have platoons of troops on both our runabouts in five minutes." Martin said, "They can go after the transports with half our fighter squadron each while we go after the frigate."

"No I don't want to risk our people running into an ambush with us too far away to help them." Cole replied,

"Nayal hail the *Eternal*. Tell them that I'm beaming over with Lieutenant Commander Davis and Doctor Hamill to assess their situation."

"Captain I should join you." Sodyne said, "If the Slaver artefacts-"

"No not this time lieutenant commander." Cole interrupted, "I want you to go over the sensor readings of those three ships. Look for anything that could tell us who we're facing. Nayal, check the Starfleet registry to see what the history of those ships is. Maybe that can shine some light onto what we're facing here as well."

"Yes captain." Nayal replied.

"Do you have orders for while you are aboard the *Eternal* captain?" T'Lan asked and Cole considered this for a moment.

"Yes." he replied, "The fact that these raiders are making use of Starfleet vessels and weapons could be a serious issue if someone starts supplying them to outlaw groups closer to home T'Lan. I'd like you to collate all the information we have on those ships and their activities ready to alert Starfleet."

"Very good captain. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc you will have the conn." T'Lan said.

"So much for your grand plan Captain Copeland." the former Maquis operative Gregory Kaye told the man whose image appeared on the main viewscreen of the Freedom-class *USS Liberation*. The frigate was still heading away from the point in space where it had briefly engaged the *Nightfall* at its maximum speed while the two Sydney-class transports followed their own courses. No attempt had yet been made to have the three ships rendezvous with one another yet and Kaye wanted to report in to his associates before taking any action.

"What happened?" Copeland asked in reply.

"We took out the ruins on Outer Orim Four just like we agreed, I guarantee that there's nothing left to be found there now and then we found a scavenger ship that our sources had told us about. We were pursuing them but the *USS Nightfall* turned up." Kaye explained.

"Is everyone okay?" Copeland said.

"The last I heard, yes. I fired a couple of torpedoes at the *Nightfall* but we could not even put a dent in their shields with them. That's when I had everyone just get out of there. Each ship heading in a different direction so that Starfleet ship couldn't just come right after us. As far as I can tell they stayed with the scavengers." Kaye explained and Copeland paused to think.

"This is a problem. Engaging the *Nightfall* directly wasn't part of our plan. She's too powerful. How soon until you can make it back here?" he said.

"The *Liberation* can be there in two days at maximum warp. The others will take a day longer." Kaye told him.

"Then do it, get back here as fast as you can but make sure that the *Nightfall* can't track your warp trail. Now that they know we're out here they'll be looking for us and we need to come up with a way of taking them out." Copeland said.

"You've got it. See you in two days. *Liberation* out." Kaye said before he shut off the channel.

"Captain Cole I presume." Turner said when Cole materialised aboard the *Eternal* in the company of Davis and Hamill.

"Yes and you must be Captain Turner. May I introduce my chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Davis and medical officer Doctor Hamill." Cole responded.

"Pleased to meet you both. I'm sorry to say that they may have had a wasted journey though. Fortunately there isn't much need for your services. We didn't sustain any casualties and our shields kept most of the damage out." Turner said.

"Having no-one hurt is nothing to apologise for captain." Hamill replied.

"I'm not fussy about how serious the damage is that I fix." Davis added, "I'm even happy to run a diagnostic to make sure that there's nothing your engineers have missed."

"They are somewhat short handed." Turner commented, "I've only got five of them to maintain every system on this entire ship."

"I take it that that's a 'yes'?" Cole asked.

"It's a yes. Engineering is-" Turner said but Davis held up his hand for her to stop.

"That's alright captain. I know the rough layout of every class of Starfleet vessel produced for the last hundred and fifty years. I'll be able to find it." he said and then he walked towards the exit.

"Perhaps you should return to the Nightfall doctor." Cole suggested as he stepped off the transporter pad as well and she nodded.

"Yes captain." she said and Turner looked towards the transporter operator.

"Energise when ready." she told the man and moments later Hamill was surrounded by blue light as she dematerialised. Then when the transport process was complete Turner looked at Cole again, "I've got to say captain, I'm more than grateful for you and your ship coming to help us. Honestly I wasn't sure if you would. Your Lieutenant Commander Ghroc made it clear that we aren't a priority for you."

"That's true but your crew are still Federation citizens and when you come under attack we will respond."

Cole said, "Plus we'd just seen that the Slaver ruins in the Outer Orim system had been destroyed by Federation weaponry so as soon as you reported that you were under attack by vessels that appeared to be from Starfleet linked the two incidents. Now perhaps there is somewhere that we can discuss this in more detail. The more I know about what happened and how they may have found you the easier it will be to stop them."

"Come this way, I'll show you to my office." Turner told him.

T'Lan was using Cole's ready room while she was collating the available information on the raiding vessels into one single report for Starfleet when the intercom at the door sounded.

"It's Nayal. I have information for you." Nayal's voice said.

"You may enter lieutenant." T'Lan told her and the door opened to allow the Romulan to enter.

Nayal did not wait to be asked before she walked over to the desk and sat down opposite T'Lan.

"Here," she said, handing a PADD to T'Lan, "There's a copy on the main system of course but I thought I should show you this directly. It seems pretty important."

"The complete service history of the *USS Liberation*, *USS Infinite* and *USS Cosmos*." T'Lan said as she read from the PADD's screen.

"Exactly. Most of it is pretty mundane. None of those ships is the type of vessel that tends to get high profile assignments, they're secondary support ships. I suppose the crew of a frigate might come across some major incident by chance but-" Nayal said before T'Lan interrupted.

"I get the point," she said and Nayal frowned for a moment.

"The one interesting thing about all three that I found out has nothing to do with their service though," she continued, "After Starfleet decided that they were surplus to requirement all three of them were sent to the same surplus depot within the space of about a month. None had suffered any serious damage, or any damage at all for that matter and so they were all listed as suitable for commercial service. Of course Starfleet went over them and removed anything that could be considered dangerous or restricted before they were supposed to be listed as available."

"What do you mean by 'supposed'?" T'Lan asked.

"Well it looks like either there was a book keeping error or someone deliberately didn't want them appearing on that list because when I checked it they never made it onto it. Officially they were all just supposed to sit in that surplus yard until Starfleet decided it needed a target drone to shoot a new type of torpedo at." Nayal explained, "Thinking that maybe there was a technical reason for the error instead of something malicious I took a look at the depot's records for that month of other ships that it took custody of and looked into them. I found six more ships that weren't described as being unspaceworthy but that then never appeared on the list of ships available for private use. I've sent a request to the depot that they carry out a visual inspection on them all to see if any of them are missing. If they are then we could have big problems."

"Why do you say that lieutenant?"

"Oh because two of those ships that were placed in reserve are Ambassador-class heavy cruisers. If they'd been logged properly then they would have been reactivated and refitted during the Dominion War but since the records suggested they were no use Starfleet overlooked them. Getting hold of the weapons needed to bring them back up to their original condition may be beyond the capabilities of anyone not directly involved with Starfleet logistics but I don't think that we should discount the possibility entirely."

"This is impressive work." T'Lan said and Nayal smiled.

"Was that a compliment cousin?" she replied.

"It was a statement of fact lieutenant." T'Lan said, "You are studying for the bridge command officer qualification and this standard of work is what would be expected."

"May I ask a personal question Commander T'Lan?" Nayal said.

"Very well." T'Lan responded, lowering the PADD and looking across the desk at her.

"What's wrong with you?" Nayal said, "First you seem either irritated or impatient and then you don't point out that we aren't actually blood relatives when I call you 'cousin'. None of that is normal for you."

"I am fine." T'Lan said, "There is nothing wrong with me."

"There has to be. How long have we known one another?"

"Vulcans do not lie." T'Lan said.

"Unless it is logical to do so." Nayal said and then after a moment's pause she added, "Plus they do have a way of choosing their words very carefully so that they say something that is technically true while also being entirely false. 'From a certain point of view' as Bradley used to say to me. It's in a film apparently."

"Lieutenant Commander Hamilton was fond of quoting Earth entertainment." T'Lan commented.

"And now you're trying to shift the subject to Bradley. Now let's see what would make you do that." Nayal responded, "We start with the fact that whatever is causing you to act less like a machine isn't considered to be anything wrong with you but at the same time it can bring out emotional responses, even if they are minor." then Nayal smiled, "Or at least they are for now but they might not stay that way. They could get more noticeable, couldn't they T'Lan? They did the last time."

"What do you mean by 'the last time'?"

"The last time you were pregnant. That's it isn't it?" Naya! said, still smiling, "I remember your little outburst to that moron Mackey when you told him exactly what the entire crew thought of him."

T'Lan set the PADD down on the desk and looked directly at Naya!.

"Robert and I were waiting before we made my condition public. I take it that asking you to be discrete about it would be a waste of time?" she said.

"Only because I wasn't going to tell anyone anyway cousin. We Romulans do like our secrets after all." Naya! replied, "Just remember that if you need someone to cover for you for anything then just remember that you can count on me."

"Thank you lieutenant. Your discretion is appreciated." T'Lan replied.

"We first spotted them in interstellar space." Turner began, "We picked up the Federation warp signatures and thought that maybe it was you and your professor rendezvousing in deep space."

"How long until you realised it wasn't us?" Cole asked.

"About thirty seconds. It soon became clear that what we thought was your warp signature was actually coming from two different ships that were close enough together from our point of view that they looked like a single, bigger ship. They have the older warp drives that put out a bigger subspace field. Of course once we saw that there were three ships we thought that maybe they were another independent team like ours but then they hailed us and ordered us to hold our position. They said that they were from Starfleet and claimed that they needed to carry out a 'health and safety inspection.' Of course since you'd just been aboard we knew that it had to be untrue so instead of responding we just turned and ran."

"And called us for help." Cole added and Turner nodded.

"It seemed like a wise idea." she said.

"Oh I agree." Cole said, nodding his head, "When they hailed you was it a visual communication or audio only?"

"Audio. What difference does that make?" Turner answered.

"Oh just that it would help figuring out who is responsible for this if we had a face to go with a voice. You can fake video signals of course but it's easier to spot than just a voice. I'd like a copy of the log if you have one though. If they thought they were going to destroy your ship then they may not have bothered doing anything to disguise their voices."

"Well our system does all incoming and outgoing messages so you're welcome to the log." Turner told him.,

"Thank you. Do you want your crew to fish it out or shall I ask Lieutenant Commander Davis to find it? I assume that the logs will be in the same place that Starfleet would have put them when this vessel was in Federation service?" Cole said and Turner nodded.

"Yes we didn't make any significant changes and maybe it would be better for your engineer to find it. To be blunt my people have enough on their plates right now. Running the warp drive at full power will have put considerable stress on it." she said.

"Consider yourself lucky that you only have one core to worry about. The *Nightfall* has four." Cole said.

"Four? How on earth do you keep them all in balance?" Turner said in surprise.

"With great difficulty. Commander Davis knows more about it than I do and my wife as well."

"Your wife?" Turner commented, "I noticed the wedding ring of course. But I didn't know she was an engineer."

"Scientist actually. She was part of the design team for the Nightfall program. She worked with a former Borg drone to try and adapt the Borg method of decentralised warp cores. The idea is that even if one has to be taken offline then we can still maintain warp power." Cole explained, "Anyway, I'd better let Lieutenant Commander Davis know about the communications log." he added and then he tapped his combadge, "Cole to Davis." he said.

Davis was in the *Eternal's* engineering section when his combadge sounded when Cole called him.

"Davis here captain." he said, tapping his combadge to activate it.

"What's your status commander?" Cole asked.

"Still trying to run a full system diagnostic captain. It's pretty slow going with these outdated interfaces and an operating system that would have to install about five million updates to be regarded as current." Davis replied.

"Well I'm afraid that I have something else to add to your job list commander. Captain Turner has confirmed that the computer system still logs all communications. Do you think that you can find the messages that the raiders sent? They were masquerading as Starfleet and sent an audio-only signal. I'm hoping that there could be useful evidence in there. That takes priority over the diagnostic, just leave it running and The *Eternal's* engineers can deal with any issues found."

"Understood captain. I'll get right on it. It would be easiest if I had direct access to the main computer core." Davis said and Cole looked at Turner who nodded her approval.

"Okay you've got it. Let me know when you've found the file. Cole out." Cole said and then he tapped his combadge again, "That should do it." he then said to Turner.

The Ambassador-class *USS Hurricane* had enjoyed a typical service life for a Starfleet vessel of its type. When it was first launched during a time of peace it had been deployed beyond Federation borders to explore and apart from a brief redeployment during the conflict with the Cardassians it had continued in this role until the continual development of technology had produced ships that could travel further and faster and Starfleet relegated it permanently to service within Federation territory as a patrol ship until finally decommissioning her. Eventually though the *Hurricane* had been removed from the surplus depot and put into service by others who saw the value in such a ship.

The *Liberation* came out of warp close to the *Hurricane* and the two ships quickly took up positions close to one another with their shields lowered so that Kaye could beam across from the smaller vessel.

"Welcome aboard sir." the woman standing behind the transporter control console told him. Like Kaye the woman wore functional civilian clothing rather than a uniform and she had a more conventional communication device clipped to her belt instead of a combadge on her chest, "I'm Catherine Jackson, Captain Copeland asked me to take you to him."

Kaye noticed that the woman did not use a rank to introduce herself, suggesting that she had not served in Starfleet before being recruited to this cause.

"Please lead the way." Kaye replied, stepping down from the transporter platform.

Kaye and Jackson walked through the corridors of the *Hurricane* towards a nearby turbolift. Originally the vessel would have carried well over a thousand crew and even the few examples of the class still in service that had been updated with superior automation carried a large crew, however the corridors of the *Hurricane* appeared almost deserted.

Entering a turbolift Jackson used the keypad controls to set their destination instead of simply telling the car computer where they wanted to go.

"We haven't been able to get any of the voice interface systems working yet." she told Kaye, "The captain decided that they weren't as important as the other systems that needing fixing.

"I hope that doesn't include waste recycling." Kaye commented and Jackson smiled.

"No, thankfully. Starfleet obviously didn't have need for any of those parts aboard other ships when this old girl was put out to pasture." she replied before the door slid open again to reveal the ship's bridge.

Here only the major consoles were manned and some of the support stations had been dismantled.

Copeland was not present though, the captain's seat in the centre of the bridge being vacant and as Jackson stepped from the turbolift she glanced back over her shoulder at Kaye.

"The captain is in his ready room." she said before leading him across the bridge to the entrance to the ready room. Here she did not use the intercom to announce their presence though, instead she just used the panel beside the door to open it and then went inside where she found Copeland studying something on his computer terminal, "Captain, Mister Kaye is here." she told him.

"Very good. Come on in Gregory." he responded, looking up as Kaye entered the room as well and then he pointed to a portable replicator that had been set up in the corner of the room, "Help yourself to coffee. That unit does a pretty good cup."

"Thanks." Kaye said and he walked over to the replicator. Then he looked at Jackson and added, "What about you?" he asked.

"I prefer my coffee real, with genuine caffeine in it." she said, "That replicated stuff can't keep me awake for five minutes."

Kaye nodded and was about to tell the replicator what he wanted when he remembered the issue with the *Hurricane*'s vocal interface systems.

"Can I just tell it or do I need to use the keypad?" he said.

"No, that unit has a self contained control system. You can just tell it what you want." Copeland told him.

"Coffee. Strong. Black. No sugar." Kaye said clearly and a mug of hot coffee materialised inside the replicator. Taking this out he lifted it to his lips and took a sip, "You call this strong?" he commented as he lowered the mug again.

"My thoughts exactly." Jackson said with a smile.

"If we can get to more important matters now?" Copeland said and both Kaye and Jackson sat down opposite him, "Now I've been doing what research I can on the *Nightfall* and its crew. Unfortunately none of our contacts have enough pull to get her recalled to the Federation."

"Not even Doctor Mitchell?" Kaye asked but Copeland shook his head.

"No. She may have been on the Federation Science Council for a number of years but when she left she burned a fair few bridges. Calling the rest of them reckless fanatics that were just one mistake away from armageddon made sure that none of them would take her calls again and anyone who will doesn't have any authority to do anything." Copeland explained about another of their co-conspirators.

"Then we have to destroy her." Kaye said.

"Something easier said than done my friend." Copeland said, "During your time in the Maquis how many times did you openly attack Starfleet or Cardassian warships?"

"Personally, none." Kaye replied.

"And only a handful were struck by any Maquis cell before the Klingons started supplying you with arms. Now the *Hurricane* is in the same weight class as an Akira-class cruiser like the *Nightfall* but we aren't anything like a one on one match for her. We've managed to replace our torpedo launchers and three phaser emitters but that's it. Even if we were fully armed the *Nightfall* is still a generation ahead of us in technology. Plus I'm sure you've noticed that we're running on a skeleton crew here." Copeland said.

"We have more than just the *Hurricane* captain." Jackson pointed out.

"Yes we do. However a direct assault is still out of the question. We could never overwhelm the *Nightfall* before she took out at least half our ships, none of them are heavily armed enough to penetrate her defences in one go. When I was in Starfleet I may have been ready to issue orders that I knew would cost the lives of some of my crew if I thought it necessary but that isn't what any of our people signed up for. We're out here to eliminate the remains of an Empire that died a billion years ago and good riddance to it. Obviously anyone trying to plunder those remains makes themselves a target but apart from that I'm not in the business of throwing lives away needlessly." Copeland said.

"So how do we deal with the *Nightfall*?" Kaye asked and Copeland smiled as he looked at his computer terminal again so he could read from the screen.

"As a matter of fact we're going to take a leaf out of the book of Captain David Edwards, the commanding officer of the previous ship called *Nightfall*," he said, "You see that ship encountered a Borg cube that was threatening a Federation colony and there was no time to call for reinforcements. The only other starship in the system was a Klingon freighter there to deliver weapons that the colonial government had bought to bolster their defences. The *Nightfall* was able to persuade the Klingons to sacrifice their ship to destroy the cube. They removed the warp from the ship and buried it, using the warp field to lure the Borg cube into orbit above it, at which point the core's containment was shut down."

"They shut down the containment?" Kaye exclaimed, "That would blast half the planet into space."

"Not quite that much." Copeland said, "But it did hurl enough physical debris into orbit to deal with the cube. If it works with a cube then I see no reason why it wouldn't work with the *Nightfall* as well."

"Where will you get the warp core?" Kaye said.

"The *Infinite*. We don't need a very big one and those two Sydney-class ships are the most expendable of our fleet." Copeland told him.

"Gerry Scott won't be happy about losing his ship." Kaye commented, mentioning the name of the *Infinite*'s commanding officer.

"He and his crew can transfer to the *Hurricane* for now. God knows I could do with the added manpower. Then when we get another ship he can have that one." Copeland said.

"How will we get the *Nightfall* into position? We've no idea of their deployment." Jackson said.

"No but we do have a list of possible sites of Slaver artefacts that we need to destroy and we know that the *Nightfall* is aware of them all as well. We'll go to one of them and place the warp core. Then once it's ready we'll trigger a nice big subspace pulse, one that the *Nightfall*'s sensors will be able to spot from three sectors away. They'll know where it came from and since thanks to their involvement in protecting the *Eternal* they know that there are scavengers in the sector who could easily be starting up some piece of technology they've found." Copeland said.

"And the *Nightfall* will come running to see what it is." Kaye said with a smile and Copeland nodded.

"They'll have to. The only functional Slaver technology discovered so far has been their stasis boxes and whatever was inside them. We'll leave one of our shuttles on the surface to make it look like there are people down there and when the *Nightfall* enters orbit-" Copeland began.

"Boom." Jackson interrupted.

Cole and Davis returned to the *Nightfall* together and as they stepped from the transporter pad Cole glanced at his engineer.

"So did you find everything you were looking for?" he asked and Davis smiled as he held out an isolinear chip.

"Everything captain. The messages from the raiders-" he began.

"And the other material?" Cole interrupted.

"It's all there captain. Once they let me into their main computer core it was easy to find their recent navigation logs. I tracked them all the way back to Federation territory and with any luck it should tell us where they were heading next. As you requested I also managed to track down their list of potential Slaver remains, Turner had it behind a firewall but it was so out of date that I was able to bypass it easily and copy the list without leaving any traces that I'd been there." Davis answered. Then he added, "Wouldn't you have rather I wiped them from the computer?"

"No." Cole replied, shaking his head, "If I were Louise Turner then I'd have a backup of this just in case the core was damaged so wiping it wouldn't slow them down. On the other hand it would make them suspect sabotage by us. This way we have the information that we can pass on to Professor Denning and hopefully

identify the source of the leak and we'll also know of the systems that the *Eternal* is likely to visit next. I'm sure that Sodyne can give us the latest information on those systems and those that still look promising can move to the head of our list to investigate before the *Eternal* gets there. Did you get chance to see if there were any communication logs that would lead us to Turner's university source?"

"Sorry captain. That core had literally thousands of messages in it. Without a rough stardate or something to search by I couldn't tell you if they had a direct subspace link to God."

"Oh well I suppose that would have been too easy. I guess that now we'll have to rely on the investigative skills of Jack Martin. Which fortunately aboard this ship rival my own." Cole responded before he tapped his combadge and added, "Lieutenant Commander Martin and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, meet me in my ready room in ten minutes."

7.

"Robert you have returned." T'Lan said when Cole entered his ready room to find his first officer still sat behind his desk and she got to her feet.

"Yes, how's the report going?" Cole replied as he walked around the desk so that they stood face to face.

"I was just proof reading it prior to submitting it to you." T'Lan told him, "I might add that Nayal was very helpful. The analysis provided by Lieutenant Commander Sodyne gives us an accurate view of the capability of the raiding vessels we encountered but Nayal has uncovered an error in Starfleet records that could indicate a much larger problem."

"Okay I'll review it as soon as I've spoken with Martin and Sodyne. I'd like you to sit in as well, just in case I bring up anything you found out about in your report."

"Of course Robert." T'Lan said. Then a moment later she added, "There is one other matter I should mention, also concerning Nayal."

"What is it T'Lan? Is this anything to do with her command test because Starfleet-" Cole began but T'Lan interrupted him.

"She is aware of my condition Robert." she said.

"You mean she knows about the baby?" Cole asked and T'Lan nodded, "How did she find out?" Cole asked.

"She deduced it in a rather logical manner." T'Lan answered.

"Logical?" Cole commented.

"Yes, my emotional control is not as reliable as it would normally be and she connected that to my previous pregnancy."

"You mean when you told Mackey what the crew thought of him and his skills both as a councillor and also a human being?" Cole said.

"That was the example she quoted, yes." T'Lan said, "However, she has assured me that she does not intend to make the information public before we do. She instead suggested that we might make use of her should we need to help of someone who already knows that I am pregnant."

"Maybe she's worried we'd block her promotion if she talked." Cole suggested, only half joking.

"Unfortunately I still have difficulty in assessing the feeling of others at times." T'Lan said

Cole then smiled and put his arms around T'Lan before kissing her forehead.

"As long as you know I love you." he said.

"I do." T'Lan replied.

When Martin and Sodyne entered Cole's ready room Cole had already loaded the data from the isolinear chip into his computer and he was studying the screen while T'Lan sat on one of the chairs opposite him.

"You wanted to see us captain?" Martin said.

"Yes. Lieutenant Commander Davis was able to recover some useful information when he had access to the *Eternal's* computer." Cole replied.

"So that's why you were so willing to assist Captain Turner even after we'd driven the raiders off." Sodyne said when she heard this, "You were spying on them."

"They've been gathering intelligence on what we and the professor are doing in this sector, it seemed only fair to return the favour commander." Cole said.

"But why didn't you tell us captain?" Sodyne asked.

"Because you didn't need to know." Martin said and Sodyne looked at him.

"You knew?" she said.

"Of course Lieutenant Commander Martin knew. He is chief of security aboard this vessel so the captain included me and him in the planning." T'Lan told her.

"So what did Davis find captain?" Martin said.

"Fortunately the *Eternal* keeps recordings of all external communications so we have copies of the audio message sent by the raiders. I want you to run the voice print through Starfleet security and find out if it's anyone who is known to them." Cole said. Then he turned to Sodyne and added, "I want you to take a look at the other information that Davis obtained. He got us the course that the *Eternal* was taking when they first encountered the raiders so that could give us their destination and he also recovered their list of Slaver sites. I'm going to forward this to Professor Denning so he can try and find the leak. In the meantime I'd like you to see what you think of the list. I know it's been revised several times as we and the professor's team gather more information. I want to know which sites the *Eternal* is likely to go to first and whether it's worth us making sure that we can get there sooner."

"Yes captain." Sodyne replied, "I don't suppose that Davis was able to access any information about other sites that the *Eternal* may already have visited?"

"Yes, he said that he copied their navigation logs from when they left Federation territory but didn't you inspect the contents of their hold? Was there anything from other systems?" Cole said.

"I was thinking that maybe they could have visited some and found nothing at them. Then we could cross them off our list to prevent us wasting time on them later." Sodyne said, "Plus it's still possible that they did find something that they kept hidden from us. I went over the holds they showed me but we didn't exactly tear that ship apart looking for anything they didn't want us to see."

"All I told him to get were the communication and navigation logs along with the list of sites their contact told them about. You may want to try asking Commander Davis himself. Even if he didn't download any files he may have seen more of what was contained in the *Eternal's* computer core." Cole told her, "But the list of systems is important. I'd rather not lose any more sites to Captain Turner and her band of tomb robbers."

"An interesting label given what it is that we and Professor Denning's team are doing out here captain."

Martin commented with a smile and Cole frowned, "Aren't we digging up and taking anything that the Slavers left behind just like them?"

"Our motivations are different though Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan said.

"Yes they are." Cole agreed, "Captain Turner's crew are motivated by personal profit. We and the professor will expand the Federation's shared knowledge of the galaxy's history."

"It appears that the late Lieutenant Commander Hamilton was right again." T'Lan commented and all the other officers present looked towards her.

"What does Bradley have to do with this T'Lan? As far as I know he didn't know anything about the Slaver Empire." Cole said.

"Perhaps not, but he was knowledgeable enough to know that much of what we think depends entirely on our point of view." T'Lan pointed out.

"Shutting yourself away again Leyla?" Davis said when he entered the physics lab that Sodyne used for most of her research into the Slavers and their technology.

"I just like the peace and quiet it gives me. Lieutenant Mencil is quite capable of taking the science station on the bridge, especially if T'Lan's there to tell him how to do his job as well and if something comes up that demands my attention I can be there in three minutes." Sodyne replied.

"Okay so what did you want to see me about? Is something broken?" Davis asked.

"Oh no, There isn't much in here that would require our chief engineer's attention if it broke. I want to ask you about the *Eternal's* computer core." Sodyne answered.

"That old piece of junk? That particle scanner over there has more computing power than the *Eternal's* core does. It was out of date when the ship was put into mothballs a century ago." Davis said.

"I'm more interested in what might have been in it." Sodyne said and she pointed to the screen she had been studying when Davis entered the laboratory, "According to the navigational log you downloaded the K-seven-four-six system was the *Eternal's* third stop since leaving Federation space. Their second was a system Professor Denning has said contains nothing of interest and the *Eternal* only spent about two days there, which would seem to show the professor was right to write it off. On the other hand they spent almost three weeks at their first stop. Now maybe they were honing their search techniques but I'm thinking that they found something that was worth spending time digging up."

"So what you need is access to any files that might relate to that system?" Davis said and Sodyne nodded.

"Pretty much. Of course for you to just go poking around without a warrant would-" she said before Davis produced an isolinear chip like the one he had given to Cole.

"Would mean that nothing on this chip could be used as part of a criminal investigation even if it shows that Turner's people have the largest collection of stasis boxes since the Slavers themselves." he said, tossing her the chip and Sodyne smiled as she caught it.

"Ashley I could kiss you." she exclaimed.

"Please don't. I don't think that Harriet would understand." Davis said.

"Don't worry Ashley, I wouldn't want to upset your wife." Sodyne replied, "But why didn't you tell Captain Cole that you found this?"

"Like I said, we can't use it in any official capacity and technically the captain would have to declare that we had it. We're probably on thin ice enough with what I did give him but at least nothing is going to be used in any official capacity. What do you think that Turner could have found anyway?" Davis said.

"Well it has to be something that they don't want us to see and there are only two things that spring to mind. They were perfectly happy for us to see the wall carvings from K-seven-six-four so by that standard they ought to have wanted to show off anything else they found as well. The most obvious thing that they'd want to hide would be a stasis box of course." Sodyne said and Davis looked across the laboratory at the Slaver stasis box kept in the room they were in.

"Shouldn't that be glowing if the *Eternal* had one aboard. They may have set off again but even at their top speed they won't be more than a light year away yet and we got within a thousand kilometres of them." he pointed out.

"If they're smart then they could just leave the box open. That would shut off the stasis field and it would be undetectable. They could just close it each time they entered another system and they'd know immediately if there were more in it before opening theirs again. The odds of them having a stasis box are pretty slim though. We know of only five that were found in the sector so far and three of them were found at a single location." Sodyne explained.

"Then what else could they have that they want to keep secret from us?" Davis asked.

"The locations of more Slaver sites," Sodyne said, "and that's worse than them having a Stasis box. At least if we caught them with that we could ask for proof that they didn't open it without us. On the other hand if they are able to obtain a list of sites that we don't know about then their movements could become totally unpredictable and we'd have no way of stopping them plundering whatever they want."

"Well that isolinear chip contains all the files I found with titles relating to the two systems the *Eternal* visited before we found them at K-seven-six-four. I can't guarantee what you'll find in them though, I was on the clock and if I'd opened them all to see what was in them I'd probably still be aboard the *Eternal* now." Davis said.

"That's okay, I'll take a look at it myself and see if I can figure out what they found that needs to be kept secret." Sodyne said.

"In that case I think I ought to be getting back to engineering. Let me know if you need anything else." Davis said and he turned to leave.

"Don't worry, I will." Sodyne said. Then just as the laboratory door slid open she turned around to face Davis before he could leave, "Ashley." she called out and Davis turned back towards her, "I owe you one for this." she told him and he smiled.

"I'm sure I'll remind you at some point Leyla." he replied.

As soon as Davis left the laboratory Sodyne inserted the isolinear chip he had given her into her computer terminal and called up the list of files stored on it.

"Now let's see what you're hiding Captain Turner." she said to herself.

The former Slaver world where the trap against the *Nightfall* was to be sprung was largely barren but still qualified as class-M. Orbiting by three small moons there was also a debris field circling the world as well. "Sensors show the presence of a network of alloy-lined tunnels captain." Kaye's navigator told him when the *Liberation* entered orbit, "It looks like they are largely filled with debris."

"Not surprising after a billion years." Kaye commented, "Tactical, what's the status on our phaser cannon?"

"Functional and armed but the output is limited to twenty percent." the tactical officer replied. This did not come as a surprise to Kaye, the weapon that had been installed in the mounting was a more basic phaser emitter than the cannon originally fitted, manufactured by the Bajorans immediately following their liberation from Cardassian occupation to form part of their planetary defence system. Then when more advanced weapons had become available it had been sold off and eventually been installed aboard the *Liberation*.

"Can we shoot straight?" Kaye asked and the tactical officer smiled.

"Yes captain. Our targeting system is working correctly and calibrated." he said.

"Good. I want a two hundred metre shaft dead centre of that tunnel complex." Kaye ordered.

"Aye captain. Powering phaser cannon and locking on target." the tactical officer said and then moments later Kaye saw on the main view screen at the front of the bridge the bright red phaser beam that shot down through the atmosphere of the planet and towards the surface.

Even after passing through the atmosphere the beam was still strong enough to vaporise the ground where it struck, burrowing down through it. The beam passed through a section of the ancient tunnels and they were also vaporised but to Kaye and his crew this counted for nothing. They had come to the sector to eliminate all trace of the Slavers and so using the phaser cannon to create this shaft just meant that one small part of the site was destroyed some time ahead of the rest.

The beam cut off suddenly and the tactical officer looked up from his console.

"I'm afraid I was slightly out captain." he said, "The shaft is two hundred and four metres deep."

"That will do thank you." Kaye replied and he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering, what's the status on that warp core we've been towing?"

The warp core removed from the *Infinite* had been towed behind the *Liberation* using its tractor beam but in order to do this it had been emptied of all antimatter and deactivated first.

"Intact captain." the *Liberation's* engineer told him, "I've got a lock on the shaft and it looks good enough to house the core but I'll need to take a team down there first to check it out."

"Okay. Use the shuttle, we need to get it to the surface anyway so you may as well fly it down. We'll beam you back up when you're done and the shuttle can stay put." Kaye told him.,

"Yes captain. We're on our way now." the engineer replied and then he shut off the intercom channel.

Among the files on the isolinear chip Sodyne found a large number of images that had been sorted into different albums and she began to go through these by using her computer to generate an index that showed smaller versions of all of the images in a particular album. This allowed her to assess the subject of the albums and sort them further into those that were more likely to contain relevant information and those that could be ignored for the time being.

One of the albums contained a large number of objects that all appeared very dark when viewed in the index but when she opened one to look at it closer she saw that it contained exactly what she was looking for. Each image was a section of a wall that had carvings set into it but unlike the panels she had seen in the *Eternal's* cargo holds these carvings appeared more graphical although there were sections of writing as well. Some of the images were detailed close ups but there were also some that covered larger areas in less detail and from these it was possible to determine that the carvings had been located in a hemispherical chamber.

"Sodyne to Captain Cole." Sodyne said, tapping her combadge.

"Go ahead commander." Cole's voice responded.

"Captain I'd like to see you and Commander T'Lan in the physics lab as soon as possible. There's something here I think you ought to see." Sodyne told him.

"We'll be there as soon as possible commander. Cole out." Cole told her before he closed the channel and Sodyne focused on the images stored on the isolinear chip again while she waited for them.

Cole and T'Lan arrived a short time after and Sodyne moved aside so that they could see the screen she had been studying.

"Captain you need to see this." she said.

"What is that lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked as she and Cole walked over to the computer terminal when Sodyne sat.

"I'd say that Davis brought back more than I asked him to. I suspected that he might do something like that." Cole commented.

"Will this material compromise any investigation into Captain Turner's activities?" T'Lan said.

"No, there's no indication of any illegal activity that I've found so far commander." Sodyne replied, "However, it does show that Captain Turner was hiding the extent of her discoveries from us."

"I thought she was supposed to be trying to ingratiate herself to us." T'Lan commented.

"That's the impression I got from Ghroc as well." Cole added.

"Oh I think he was right about that captain," Sodyne said in agreement, "but the information that Davis recovered suggests that the crew of the *Eternal* know more about this sector than just what their source told them. If you look at these images you'll see that they show a large chamber that is marked with patterns that look like constellations. It's my belief that it is a star chart of sorts and that the carvings indicate the locations of other Slaver worlds."

"A logical deduction lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, looking at the images of the chamber and its carved walls.

"Obviously there's a billion years worth of stellar drift to take into consideration but I've seen some of these patterns before in information provided by Professor Denning and so some of the systems are familiar. However, there could be up to about fifty that are new." Sodyne said.

"That's a lot of systems to cover." Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain." she said.

"Perhaps Starfleet should be asked to send additional vessels to the sector." T'Lan suggested.

"Given how many of these sites we're told about turn out to be just billion year old rubble I'm not sure how willing Starfleet Command would be to invest more resources in the Meltara Sector. At least we're adding some planetary survey data but there's very little groundbreaking work here that would justify sending more ships. I'll pass on your suggestion though." Cole replied.

"Captain I doubt that the crew of another ship would be able to carry out research into the Slavers as efficiently as we can. We already have about eighteen months of experience that they'd be lacking." Sodyne said, "They might miss details that we wouldn't."

"Maybe commander, but there's only so much space that we can cover and despite your efforts to unlock the secrets of the Slavers yourself. Even you need to sleep." Cole said.

"If Starfleet does send additional ships then I'd like to request that they be subordinate to the Nightfall captain." Sodyne said, "That way I – we can be sure of what they're doing."

Cole smiled when he noticed Sodyne correcting herself mid-sentence.

"Don't worry lieutenant commander, I'm sure that when it comes to handing out the Zee-Magnees Prize your part in the discoveries made in this sector will be remembered." he said.

"A career in Starfleet should not be regarded as a path to personal glory Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." T'Lan added.

"Of course not, I'm sorry captain but after a year and a half of always feeling like we're just on the cusp of a major discovery I'd hate to not be there to witness it." Sodyne said.

"That's okay Leyla, we all get caught up in our work sometimes." Cole said, "Now I understand that you were converting your scans of the artefacts you were shown aboard the *Eternal* into a single model."

"Yes captain." Sodyne responded, nodding, "I wanted to recreate the site that the crew of the *Eternal* plundered on the holodeck. Assuming that you'll allow me the time." she added. Unlike many Starfleet vessels where holodecks were regarded as the primary means of entertainment for the crew, the *Nightfall* had only limited holodeck space and this was largely reserved for official use such as mission training.

"That is a good idea." T'Lan said, "There may be something in the layout of the site that Captain Turner and her crew would have been unaware of when they were dismantling it that will be more obvious to someone as experienced as Lieutenant Commander Sodyne."

"Did you just crack a joke commander?" Sodyne said when she heard this.

"It was a statement of fact." T'Lan replied.

"It is a good idea Sodyne," Cole added, "and I think the same goes for this star chart chamber. Is there enough information in these images to recreate it as well?"

"I think so, yes captain." Sodyne answered.

"Then do it. When we next rendezvous with Professor Denning I'd like you to show them both to him. Is that reasonable?" Cole said and Sodyne smiled.

"Yes captain. I've already got most of the K-seven-six-four simulation compiled and the star chart chamber should only take three or four days at most." she told him.

"Then carry on commander. But don't put too much pressure on yourself. I don't want you making mistakes because you're too tired to work properly." Cole said. Then he looked at T'Lan and added, "Shall we get back to the bridge?" he said.

"Of course." T'Lan responded and the pair of them turned and exited the laboratory, leaving Sodyne to her work.

In the corridor outside Cole looked around to see that he and T'Lan were alone as they walked before he addressed her again.

"You'll have to watch that sense of humour of yours T'Lan. You may have been able to give Leyla the brush off just then but some others might notice when you let your logic slip." he said. Then he smiled and added, "Of course feel free to be as happy as you like when we're alone. I still think you have a beautiful smile."

T'Lan then also checked that the corridor was empty.

"Then this is for you Robert." she said and she smiled at him before kissing him briefly.

The *Infinite's* warp core could not simply be lowered into the shaft bored by the *Liberation's* phaser cannon, instead once the shaft had been surveyed for its structural soundness a mounting had to be constructed. This only had to last for a few days at most so all it needed to be was a base section made from metal sections beamed down while fixing points were embedded in the sides of the shaft. These included platforms for men to stand on safely and would be used as mountings for strong cables that would hold the warp core vertically in the base section. The core would still need to be charged with antimatter of course and this would be drained from the containment vessels that had been carried down in the shuttle that had brought the engineering team to the surface.

Despite there being no reason to hurry, the *Nightfall* not heading towards the selected system yet, Kaye still found himself waiting impatiently for the signal from the surface that would tell him that the preparations were complete and that the warp core could be lowered into place.

"Baxter to *Liberation*." the voice of the frigate's chief engineer said over the communication channel and Kaye sighed with relief.

"Please tell me you're ready." he responded.

"Yes captain. All the mountings are in place and we've got the antimatter containment conduit in place to feed the core from the shuttle. You can send the core down to us now." the engineer told him.

"Very good Mister Baxter. Stand by. *Liberation* out." Kaye said and he turned to his tactical officer, "Over to you now." he told the man.

"Yes captain, starting descent procedure." he replied.

Carefully, the tactical officer began to manipulate the *Liberation's* tractor beam emitters so that instead of holding the warp core taken from the transport in a fixed position they gave it a push towards the planet below. The core could not be released entirely though, to do this would result in it being destroyed as it passed through the atmosphere in an uncontrolled fall and only small fragments even reaching the surface. The aim was retain a hold on the core while still guiding it towards the planet and limiting the rate at which it

would fall. This also had the effect of protecting it against entry into the atmosphere. Normally when a craft entered a planet's atmosphere it would be exposed to incredible heat from the friction of the air passing over its hull but by keeping the speed of the core to just a few hundred kilometres per hour, below even the speed of sound there would not be any significant friction and the core would reach the surface safely.

The drawback to this was that the core still had to be lowered almost a thousand kilometres while the *Liberation* used its thrusters to maintain a stable orbit. The ship's computer could control the orbit but the tactical officer had to guide the warp core down manually and this was a difficult task. Initially progress was straightforward, the core was simply lowered into the atmosphere and towards the target site that the *Liberation* orbited above. However, the last few hundred metres were more difficult. At this altitude there was the chance that even the slightest error in the tractor beam coming from orbit would fling the core a kilometre or more off target and the *Liberation's* tactical officer relied on instructions coming from the engineering team about how to lower it into the shaft.

Chief engineer Baxter himself stood at the bottom of the shaft, directly beneath the base section and looking upwards as the core was lowered towards him.

"You're right on target," he transmitted to the *Liberation*, "Just a few metres more. Twenty. Ten. Five. There! Hold it right there."

As soon as the other engineers waiting on the platforms above who had been listening in heard this they rushed to fix the bracing cables to the top of the core while Baxter watched from below. As well as the cable to hold the warp core in position the feed from the antimatter storage vessels was also connected so that the currently inert core could be activated.

While this process was underway Kaye activated the *Liberation's* subspace communication system.

"*Liberation* to *Hurricane*. Captain Copeland do you read me?" he said.

"We read you *Liberation*. What is your status?" Copeland responded.

"The core is in place and being set up now. If my chief engineer's estimates are right then we should be ready to send the pulse within two hours." Kaye told him.

"Very good captain. If our estimate for the *Nightfall's* position is good then they should be able to reach you within eighteen hours after the pulse is triggered. Have you identified a suitable hiding place?" Copeland asked.

"Yes captain. The planet is orbited by a debris field that our sensors suggest has a high metallic content. It looks like another moon that broke up at some point in the past and is now held in orbit by the competing gravitational pulls from the other moons. We'll position ourselves inside this and shut down main power. Without a warp signature to detect we should just look like a magnetic disturbance caused by the solar wind." Kaye answered.

"I take it you'll be out of the blast zone when you trigger the core?" Copeland said.

"I've been assured that we'll be out of the primary blast cone and we'll be able to raise our shields on impulse power alone. We'll be just fine, more than a match for whatever's left of the *Nightfall*." Kaye reassured him.

"My shift is over." T'Lan said when the time display on the bridge indicated the end of a watch shift and Cole nodded.

"Good night then. I'll be with you in another four hours," he replied as T'Lan got to her feet. At the same time several other officers were being replaced at their stations by alternates but Cole was allotted to the first half of the night shift for this particular rotation. At the same time as many of the officers on duty were getting ready to leave the bridge Sodyne entered it and Cole looked at her, "Aren't you finished for the night commander? Remember what I said about being too tired to work properly." Cole commented.

"Yes captain. I just wanted to double check my station before turning in," she replied and she walked towards the science station where two of her subordinates were handing over duty from one to another.

Just as Nayal was also about to end her shift though her console alerted her to a sudden sensor contact and she stopped.

"Captain I'm picking up a massive subspace burst," she announced.

"Source?" Cole asked.

"Bearing one-six-four mark three-eight captain. Distance twelve point seven light years. That corresponds to a system surrounding a K-type star," Nayal answered.

"Captain that system is one flagged as a potential Slaver site by Professor Denning," Sodyne added when she quickly checked it against the list she maintained of such systems.

"I take it that it's not the system that the professor is currently studying," Cole commented.

"No captain," Sodyne replied, "and the last we saw of the *Eternal* had them going in another direction."

"I don't suppose that the system is thought to be inhabited is it?" Cole said but Sodyne shook her head.

"Not capable of triggering a subspace pulse that powerful captain. Long range scans do indicate that one of the planets is class-M but there's nothing to suggest intelligent life with anything other than the most basic of technology," she told him.

"What was the strength of the pulse?" T'Lan said.

"If it was maintained then it would be putting out more energy than our warp cores are capable of captain." Nayal said.

"It could be the Ferengi captain." Martin suggested.

"Or some other scavenger group that we should know about." Cole said, "Lieutenant Commander Ghroc steer one-six-four mark three-eight and engage at maximum warp." he ordered.

"Aye captain." Ghroc said as he dropped the *Nightfall* out of warp so that he could make the alteration to the ship's course, "Laying in one-six-four mark three-eight. Maximum warp."

"At that speed it will take us just over twenty-four hours to reach the system. Maintaining it longer will risk damage to the warp drive." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Then we'll just have to reduce our speed while Commander Davis and his people cycle through the cores and make sure they're still up to spec. So since we're obviously well over a day away from our destination everyone not on duty can go and get some sleep and I'll see you in the morning." he responded.

Returning to her quarters once her shift was over Sodyne did not go to bed immediately, nor did she accept the invitation from Nayal and Hamill to join them in the officers' lounge for after work drinks. Instead she spent her evening doing what she often did and reviewing the information that had been gathered on the Slavers, searching for any snippet that had been overlooked but could lead to a massive revelation.

This particular evening she found herself distracted though, her thoughts drifting towards the system that still lay more than a day away from the *Nightfall*. The sudden release of a powerful energy pulse suggested the presence of Slaver technology that was not only intact but at least partially functional and this represented a huge opportunity. Given that she was unable to concentrate on her studies Sodyne decided to go to bed instead and she shut down her computer and began to get ready.

She had changed, got into bed and just turned out the lights in her quarters when all of a sudden something occurred to her. Quickly she turned the lights back on and reached for the combadge that she had left beside her bed.

"Sodyne to Cole." she said when she turned it on.

"Yes commander?" Cole's voice responded.

"Captain have there been any more of those subspace pulses?" Sodyne asked.

"No, not since that one Nayal picked up at the end of her shift." Cole answered.

"There's something I need to check. I'm on my way to the bridge." Sodyne said and then she tapped her combadge again, shutting it off as she got out of bed again.

When Sodyne arrived at the bridge she rushed straight to the science station.

"Lieutenant you're relieved." she said to the officer sat there and she took her place as soon as she got out of her seat.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne what exactly are you doing?" Cole asked as he and several other officers on the bridge looked towards her.

"I'm pulling the log file of the subspace pulse we detected captain." she replied, "Then I'm going to compare it to another sensor log I've been studying."

"Which log is that commander?" Cole said.

"The scans we took of the raider ships captain. I'm sure that the energy pattern of that subspace pulse resembled the pattern of the warp field of one of the raiding vessels." Sodyne told him and then she smiled.

"Yes! Here it is. The warp field of the *USS Infinite* had exactly the same frequency and phase variance as the subspace pulse. Captain that pulse didn't come from any Slaver technology."

"Sodyne the *Infinite* is an old Sydney-class transport. The energy pulse we saw was bigger than what we can produce." Cole pointed out.

"Yes captain but the pulse lasted for less than a second. Even an old warp core like the type used in a Sydney-class transport could produce that sort of power if you weren't worried about ever using it again. We're not dealing with scavengers here, we're dealing with the same group that destroyed the ruins in the Outer Orim system. I think they wanted us to detect that pulse and come running to investigate. They're probably going to be waiting for us when we get there." Sodyne said.

"It's a trap." Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain." she said and Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to Lieutenant Commander Davis." he said.

"Davis here captain." Davis responded.

"Commander I know it's getting late but I'd like to see you in my ready room as soon as possible." Cole said.

"Yes captain. I'm on my way." Davis replied.

"Thank you commander." Cole said before he tapped his combadge twice in succession, ending the call to Davis and opening a new channel, "Cole to Martin." he said.

"Martin here captain."

"Commander please join Sodyne, Davis and myself in my ready room. There's an urgent matter to discuss." Cole told him.

"Yes captain." Martin replied and Cole shut off the channel again.

"Commander Sodyne, with me." he said and the pair of them went into his ready room, "Leyla do you want to make use of my replicator before we have this meeting?" he asked, pointing to the device set into the wall of his ready room and Sodyne frowned.

"Why captain?" she asked.

"I just thought that maybe you'd not want to be wearing just a nightdress that doesn't even reach your knees." Cole replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is quite correct captain." Davis said as he studied the comparison that Sodyne had run on the two sets of sensor readings, "Both these waveforms come from the same warp core. Of course after having this much power put through it I wouldn't want to have to rely on it ever again. No amount of overhauling is going to undo the damage that will have been done to it."

"So they're sacrificing a warp core just to draw us to a particular system? They must have something special waiting for us." Martin commented and then he looked at Cole and added, "Do you still intend to go there captain?"

"We're still on course, yes." Cole told him, "I want opinions on the best way to approach it though."

"On red alert with our fighter squadron already outside?" Davis suggested and Martin smiled.

"That would be my recommendation captain." he agreed, "Unless these people have something much more powerful than we've seen then I think we can handle them. Especially since they've just effectively taken out one of their own ships with this little flare of theirs."

"Captain there is also the issue of the system itself. We can't let them destroy another Slaver world." Sodyne pointed out, now wearing her full uniform as she sat beside Martin and Davis.

"Nayal's research suggested a force of six vessels, including two heavy cruisers, any of which may or may not have been restored to full combat capability. They obviously have a good idea of our capability so they must have a plan to match it. I was hoping that one of you might have some idea as to what. Obviously my history as a tactical officer gives me some insight but I'd welcome fresh opinions." Cole said.

"They're using the Infinite as bait to get us into the system so I suppose they could also use it to get us into a particular position where they can ambush us." Martin suggested.

"A sudden rush from over a planetary horizon or from behind a convenient moon in the hope they can overwhelm our defences before we can react you mean?" Cole said and Martin nodded.

"Yes captain. Of course with our fighters to screen us we can defend against that before they even have the chance to spring their trap. The fighters can sweep ahead of us to clear any potential hiding places." he said.

"What about mines captain?" Sodyne asked, "Once we arrive in the system these raiders must know that we'll head for wherever the most obvious Slaver remains are located. They could mine the space in orbit above them."

"That's a good point captain. Mines would be harder to detect." Martin pointed out, "I'd recommend running our lidar system to watch for them."

In addition to the usual array of subspace sensors the ships of the *Nightfall* program were fitted with two laser emitting turrets that could be used as an alternate means of detection. Originally the idea had also been to allow them to increase their power output to the point where they could function as a point defence system against incoming torpedo weapons but that feature had never been successfully tested and they remained as just a secondary detection system.

"That could work. Mines may have something inside them that produces even a slight vibration that our lidar would pick up on in audio detection mode." Sodyne added.

"We could also just use brute force to clear a path and launch a spread of low yield quantum torpedoes set for a wide area blast zone." Cole said.

"That would work, yes captain." Martin said.

"Surely that's too obvious?" Davis said.

"We're dealing with raiders with limited resources. They'll try their best with what they have." Martin responded.

"In that case what about the Infinite itself?" Davis asked, "They've already written off the warp core as a useful drive component but it could still make a very large bomb."

"You mean leave it orbit right where we want to go and then overload the core when we pull alongside to investigate?" Cole asked and Davis nodded.

"Probably as soon as we drop our shields to beam an away team aboard." he added, "Then 'boom'." and he mimed an explosion with his hands, "The superheated shrapnel could easily get to us before we could get our shields back up."

"And even if we weren't destroyed outright then we'd be damaged enough that we'd be vulnerable to a follow up attack." Martin said.

"Lieutenant Commander Martin I want an assault force prepared to go in one of our assault shuttles." Cole said, "If the enemy expects us to get close enough to so obvious a trap then we won't oblige them. We and our fighters will flood the area with as much electronic interference as possible to jam any remote detonation signal and send our boarding party aboard from a much safer distance. Davis we'll need an engineering team as well to make the vessel safe while the *Nightfall* remains at a range of a million kilometres with our

shields raised and surrounded by our fighters. We're not going to be quite the unsuspecting target that the enemy think we'll be."

The *Nightfall's* final approach to the system was at the reduced speed of warp eight. This allowed the squadron of twelve fighters that the cruiser carried to be flying in formation with it while the assault shuttle that was loaded with a platoon of Starfleet ground combat specialists and a team of engineers remained in the large hangar, ready to be launched as soon as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp. The assault shuttle itself lacked a warp drive so it could not have been launched with the fighters while the *Nightfall* was still in interstellar space or it would have been left far behind.

This approach was perfectly orderly and the *Nightfall's* command crew waited patiently at their posts until all of a sudden Sodyne's console sounded an alert.

"What's that?" Martin asked when he heard the sound.

"Yes, please enlighten us commander." Cole added as he looked over his shoulder.

"Captain it's the stasis box we have down in the physics lab. It's glowing." Sodyne replied.

"Distance to target system?" T'Lan said.

"One light year now commander." Ghroc responded.

"Then somewhere in that system is another stasis box." T'Lan said, looking at Cole.

"That complicates matters somewhat." Cole said, "Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, am I correct in saying that there is no known way of destroying an active stasis box?"

"Yes captain. Once the stasis field is active the box effectively ceases to be part of the spacetime continuum of our universe. Even antimatter won't react with one." Sodyne said.

"Which means that even if the raiders destroy this site as well the stasis box will remain intact and they'll be able to take it." Nayal said.

"We cannot allow a stasis box to fall into the hands of criminals." T'Lan said.

"No we can't, which means that we need to find it quickly. Maybe these raiders don't know about it yet." Cole replied, "We know that the box is somewhere in the system ahead of us but can anyone tell me how we narrow that down to say a few square metres instead of trillions of cubic kilometres?"

"Professor Denning's team used separate sensor energy emitters and detectors to detect the stasis box we have aboard captain. The position of it and the other two were revealed by shadows where the energy could not penetrate them." Sodyne said.

"And how do we deploy a system like that?" Cole asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis ought to be able to recreate the equipment required but deploying it would be complicated. Professor Denning had already carried out several weeks worth of excavation." T'Lan told him.

"Weeks that we may not have." Cole said.

"Captain we could use our phasers to burrow a shaft say ten thousand metres down into whatever planet the box is located on and fire a class three probe down it." Martin suggested, "Once it reaches the bottom of the shaft it could emit neutrino bursts at regular intervals and between us and our fighters we can figure out where there's something dense enough to block them."

"I like it." Sodyne said.

"It is quite logical." T'Lan added.

"Well I'm not going to argue with two experienced scientists and my tactical officer." Cole said as he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering. Commander Davies are you there?"

"Right here captain." Davies responded.

"Commander I need a class three probe configured to emit pulses of neutrino energy upon landing. How long will that take?" Cole said.

"Repeated omni directional pulses?" Davies replied.

"That's right. As many as possible. We'll be using it to search for a high density object that is invisible to our sensors." Cole told him.

"So there's a stasis box in the system." Davies commented, "I'll have your probe ready in an hour captain. Is that good enough?"

"That will be quite sufficient commander. Bridge out." Cole said before he closed the channel, "Nayal, Sodyne, please see what you can do about determining roughly where in the system that stasis box is located." he added.

"Long range scans indicate the presence of a planetary body at a point one light year away from us when the stasis box first reacted captain." Sodyne said, "It appears to be class-M, though only just."

"I see it." Nayal added, "I'm picking up a warp signature from it. It's faint but definitely there."

"Does the warp signature match that of the *USS Infinite*?" T'Lan asked.

"Perfectly commander." Nayal replied.

"The ship must be in orbit just as Lieutenant Commander Davies predicted." Cole added, "Helm that planet is our destination. Hold at two million kilometres."

"Aye captain, locking in destination." Ghroc replied.

The *Nightfall* and its fighter squadron continued at warp, approaching the star system from slightly off the orbital plane so that they could get closer to the target planet while still remaining at warp speed until they reached the distance specified by Cole. At this point they dropped out of warp in unison and held position while Naya scanned the planet.

"What can you tell me Naya?" Cole asked.

"Not much more captain." Naya replied, "I'm reading two moons plus an orbiting debris field that looks like it may have been a third at some point in the distant past."

"Do you have a lock on the *Infinite* lieutenant?" T'Lan said.

"No but I'm picking up the warp signature from the planet's surface." Naya answered.

"Helm take us in closer. Half impulse." Cole ordered.

The *Nightfall* and its fighter squadron moved towards the planet with the fighters flying in a widely spread defensive formation that extended the overall region of sensor coverage around the closest of the two moons and further over the planetary horizon.

"Captain I'm picking up what looks like a small craft on the surface located right on top of an area showing signs of metallic deposits that could be the remains of a structure." Naya said.

"Is it the *Infinite*?" Cole asked.

"No captain, too small. It looks like a Federation shuttlecraft. I am still picking up the *Infinite*'s warp signature but I can't find the infinite itself." Naya replied.

"If they have turned that ship into a booby trap then keeping it hidden from us is a pretty good idea." Ghroc pointed out.

"Yes, I just wish I knew how they were doing it." Cole commented.

"Captain I've isolated the *Infinite*'s warp signature and it's not on the surface, it's under it. About two hundred metres." Sodyne said and Cole smiled.

"Oh very clever." he said and he looked at T'Lan and added, "Remember that Borg cube?"

"What Borg cube?" Sodyne asked.

"We faced down a Borg cube that was threatening a Federation colony aboard the last *Nightfall*." Naya told her, "We used a buried warp core to blow it to pieces"

"The raiders want us to think that the subspace energy pulse came from a Slaver artefact. If we were to believe this then we would likely enter orbit and drop our shields to beam down an away team. At which point they would allow the warp core to lose containment." T'Lan said.

"And we get shredded just like that Borg cube, right?" Martin said.

"I suspect so. Plus they get to destroy another set of ruins at the same time." Cole said, "But we're not going to play their game. Mister Martin get me a phaser lock two kilometres beyond the extent of that structure."

"Phasers locked captain, set for narrow field surface strike."

"Fire phasers Lieutenant Commander." Cole ordered.

"What the hell are they doing?" the *Liberation*'s helmsman said as the frigate's bridge crew watched the *Nightfall* use its phasers to burrow a shaft almost identical to the one that they had dug for the warp core earlier.

"Firing their phasers to dig a hole." Kaye said, "The question is why though? Look at how far from the planet they're keeping. They aren't entering a standard orbit."

"Perhaps they're worried that there's some sort of Slaver weapon active down there and are waiting until they have more information." the navigator suggested before they saw the phaser beam cut off, "Captain I think they just fired a torpedo." he added when his sensors picked up the brief energy pulse of a torpedo launch. However, with most of the *Liberation*'s systems shut down to keep the ship hidden in the debris field it was impossible to tell for certain.

"No, not a torpedo. A probe, they're going to gather more data." Kaye said.

"Shouldn't we try and shoot it down?" the navigator asked.

"We don't have time. By the time our weapons are back online the probe will be in position. Besides what will it tell them? It will just confirm that the energy signature they are picking up is underground in the middle of a set of Slaver tunnels." Kaye said, "It may be taking a while longer but the *Nightfall* will fall into our trap sooner or later."

"Captain the probe has touched down safely." Nayal announced when the probe reported a successful landing at the bottom of the ten thousand metre shaft, "Beginning neutrino emissions now."

"Instruct all fighters to spread out. We need the widest possible area of coverage." T'Lan said.

"Picking up neutrino emissions now captain." Sodyne said, "No signs of any shadows though."

"Give it time lieutenant commander, let our fighters get into better positions." Cole responded.

"Fighters moving into position now captain. Sensor feed telemetry incoming." Nayal announced and Sodyne looked at her console to see indications that the *Nightfall* was receiving live sensor feeds from the fighters. She expanded each of these so that she could see them all in addition to the *Nightfall*'s own sensors, despite this meaning that all of the windows were required to be fairly small. She did not need to see the feeds in great detail though and the array of small windows was enough to show that the neutrinos were being detected equally by all the craft involved.

Or least that was until a dot appeared on one of the feeds and Nayal looked up,

"Captain I've got Queen of Diamonds calling." she said, using the pilot's call sign instead of her name and rank.

"Let's hear it lieutenant." Cole said.

"Nightfall are you seeing this?" Queen of Diamond's voice said.

"There's a shadow on her feed captain." Sodyne added, "Bearing three-two-two mark six-four from the probe."

Since stasis boxes came in a variety of sizes from those small enough for an ordinary humanoid to carry up to at least the size of a room the size of the *Nightfall*'s bridge the size of the shadow could not be used to determine the exact position of the box. The closer to the surface it was, the bigger it would be.

"So now we know where the box is how do we get to it?" Ghroc asked, "If we move close enough to beam down we'll expose ourselves to the trap and a shuttle would be vulnerable to attack."

"Captain I'm willing to take the risk in a shuttle." Sodyne said, "We know that an active stasis box can't be moved with a transporter anyway."

"Yes commander, I'm sure you are." Cole replied, "Fortunately there is another way to get down to the surface without quite so much risk. It will just be a little cramped, that's all."

"You're kidding, right captain?" Martin commented but Cole shook his head.

"No, I really don't see any other way." he said, "We'll use the insertion pods."

The insertion pods that Cole was referring to were designed to be launched from the *Nightfall*'s torpedo launchers but instead of warheads or sensor equipment they were designed to carry a single passenger. Designed to be as stealthy as possible, the intention was to provide a means to deploy troops to the surface of a planet without having to place the *Nightfall* itself in danger by coming into transporter range and lowering its shields or using a smaller landing craft that could more easily be intercepted. Each pod contained enough room for an armoured soldier with their weapons and equipment but they were not made for comfort.

"So which lucky volunteers get to go?" Nayal asked.

"Captain I have to go." Sodyne said immediately and Cole smiled.

"I never doubted that you'd volunteer lieutenant commander." he said, "Commander Martin how soon can you have pods for myself and our eager science officer prepared?"

"You are going?" T'Lan asked.

"A command officer has to go and I'm trained in their use." Cole answered.

"Logical." T'Lan added.

"What about a ground combat fire team captain? If you run into trouble down there you may need back up." Martin said.

"Thank you for your concern lieutenant commander but I want to keep the number of people I risk to an absolute minimum and I doubt very much that there is anyone down there to threaten us. This is supposed to be a trap after all and it doesn't seem likely that any of the raiders would stay down there just to get blown up. On the off chance that some of them are that fanatical though both Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and I will be well armed. Very well armed."

"What will be your plan when you reach the surface?" T'Lan asked.

"First we locate the stasis box and if possible move it to somewhere easy for us to pick up from. Then and only then will we risk sending down one of our auxiliary craft to collect it and us. A runabout with a four fighter escort I think. Enough to protect the runabout but not so much that the raiders will want to trigger their booby trap I hope. We'll maintain communications silence unless absolutely necessary." Cole said.

"You don't think that they'll want to stop us getting the stasis box captain?" Ghroc asked.

"Oh I'm sure that would but if they detonate that warp core then they lose the weapon they planned to use against us. T'Lan while Sodyne and I are down there you'll be in command of the *Nightfall*. Keep searching for the raiders and if you find them feel free to engage. Under no circumstances bring the *Nightfall* within transporter range of the planet, that's what the raiders will want and I'm not handing them a victory."

"And if you and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne require emergency extraction?" T'Lan said.

"If that happens then we'll just have to hope that it looks safe enough to send the runabout and that we can hold out long enough for it to reach us T'Lan." Cole answered.

"Are you sure you don't want a medical officer with you captain?" Hamill asked as she ran a last minute scan of both Cole and Sodyne while they were in one of the *Nightfall's* forward torpedo bays while the two insertion pods were undergoing final checks overseen by Davies.

"Well if you're that eager doctor-" Cole began, smiling at her.

"Oh no." she exclaimed and Cole's smile widened. Then she glanced at one of the pods for a moment before turning back towards Cole, "I mean if you order me to-" she began.

"Don't worry doctor." Cole interrupted, "I know you don't like extremely tight spaces after your experience with a stasis box. I wouldn't think of asking you to ride in one of these and it would hardly be fair to impose on one of your subordinates just because of your concerns. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and I will be just fine on our own I think. Don't you agree commander?" he added and he looked at Sodyne standing beside him.

"Entirely captain." she said.

"Thank you both." Hamill responded as she closed her tricorder, "Well you're fit and cleared to go." she then told them.

"The pods are ready as well captain." Davies said as he approached Cole and Sodyne.

"Good then all that leaves is our weapons." Cole replied just as Martin entered the torpedo bay with a crewman pushing an antigrav sled on which were laid out a number of weapons in addition to the phasers that both Cole and Sodyne already wore as sidearms. Sodyne had her phaser holstered in a conventional style on her waist but Cole's was mounted lower down his leg, leaving his waist clear.

"All as you requested captain. Anyone who gets in your way is going to regret it." Martin announced.

There were two rifles laid out on the sled, one of them a standard Starfleet phaser rifle while the other was less conventional for a weapon of the late twenty-fourth century. Ballistic assault rifles tended to be abandoned by space faring species in favour of plasma pulse or particle weapons that were less affected by wind or gravity and had much greater damage potential and ammunition capacity. However, it was known that the Borg were unable to adapt their shielding to physical impacts and so Starfleet had developed a modern ballistic assault rifle that fired six millimetre ammunition to deal with them. In order to keep the flexibility of a directed energy weapon most such rifles issued aboard the *Nightfall* were fitted with a secondary phaser module mounted beneath the main barrel. However, since both Cole and Sodyne were carrying hand phasers Cole had instead opted to take one of the rifles that was fitted out as a squad support weapon and instead of the phaser module this particular weapon was fitted with an under barrel grenade launcher. Additional ammunition for the ballistic rifle, total of twelve spare thirty-round magazines was in pouches on a belt that Cole fitted around his waist and demonstrating why he wore his phaser in a lower position while there was a bandolier of extra grenades he slung across his chest.

"I think we're ready?" Cole said, looking at Sodyne, "Can you think of anything else we might need?"

"Nothing captain." Sodyne replied.

"Spare uniforms?" Hamill said impulsively, "After all the last away mission you two went alone you both ended up-"

"It's not too late for me to order a third pod prepared doctor." Cole interrupted.

"Sorry captain." Hamill responded.

"That's better." Cole said and he looked at Sodyne and added, "Okay then commander, I think we should get into our rides."

Cole and Sodyne were helped into the tiny insertion pods, placing their rifles in clamps set beside the padded acceleration couches before they strapped themselves into place as well. Then the covers of the pods were lowered into place and sealed. For a moment the two officers were plunged into total darkness before the internal displays activated and produced a dim illumination. These displays were set up to show the occupant basic information such as speed, heading and the distance to their destination as well as basic environmental data for both inside and outside the pod but there were no manual controls. They would fly along a preprogrammed trajectory, modified only if the onboard computer detected a hazard but the person inside was purely a passenger, not a pilot.

"All systems green." Cole said into the pod's communication system.

"Same here." Sodyne added from inside her own pod.

"Okay let's get them loaded into the launcher." Martin told the others present in the torpedo bay and then he smiled.

"What is it?" Davis asked when he noticed this.

"I was just wondering how many Starfleet personnel over the years have thought about shooting their captain out of a torpedo tube." Martin replied and the two men laughed.

"Oh great, when I make jokes I get into trouble." Hamill commented, though she too smiled.

"What is the status of the insertion pods Lieutenant Commander Martin?" T'Lan asked when Martin returned to the bridge.

"Loaded and ready to launch commander." he told her.

"Very good. Please take your station and stand by to launch them." T'Lan told him and he nodded.

"Yes commander." he said. Taking his seat at the tactical station, Martin checked the latest sensor data to make sure that the target co-ordinates were suitable for the deployment of the two insertion pods and that their landing would not trigger any sort of reaction that could harm the occupants. Once he had made sure that a landing at this point would be safe for Cole and Sodyne he double checked that the co-ordinates were locked into the torpedo targeting system, "System locked and ready commander." he announced.

"Very good lieutenant commander. You may fire at will." T'Lan replied.

"Captain I think they just launched another probe." the *Liberation's* navigator said when the frigate's sensors detected an energy pulse from the *Nightfall*. With the limitations imposed on the ship's sensors by the debris field it was hiding in he was unable to tell that there had in fact been two pulses in rapid succession.

"Why just probes? What are they waiting for?" another bridge crewman asked.

"Maybe they're worried that the subspace pulse was some sort of weapon. I doubt that the Slavers were as squeamish about deploying subspace weapons as we are." Kaye suggested, "Just keep watching the *Nightfall*. Sooner or later they're going to have to move in closer to the planet to send down an away team and when they do we'll have them."

Inside their insertion pods both Cole and Sodyne were fed a live stream of data that told them what their progress towards their target was. In addition to this though they both felt their pods start to shudder when they entered the upper limits of the planet's atmosphere. Despite the temperature generated on the outside of the pod though, the insulated shielding that contributed towards the pods' stealth characteristics ensured that neither of them felt any increase in temperature inside.

Once they reached the planet's stratosphere the turbulence subsided and the pods' travel became much smoother. This period of smooth flight continued until the pods came within two kilometres of the surface, at which point their breaking engines fired to rapidly slow them down. The pods could be configured to burst open at a preprogrammed point, leaving the occupant to finish their descent via parachute but on this occasion they had been set take Cole and Sodyne all the way to the surface and even with the inertial dampening increased to maximum at the point of impact both officers felt themselves shaken violently, only their padded couches and safety harnesses preventing them from being severely injured by the force of the impact.

As soon as his pod came to a stop Cole immediately pulled the release handle for the cover, undid his harness and climbed out of the pod with his rifle in his hands. Bringing his weapon up to his shoulder he surveyed the rather bleak surroundings that he found himself in to make sure that there really was no-one waiting to ambush them. Once he was satisfied that the area was secure he looked towards Sodyne's pod and saw that it remained sealed and he tapped his combadge.

"Sodyne. Are you okay?" he said into it.

"What? Err, fine. I think." Sodyne responded and Cole rushed over to the pod. There was an emergency release handle on the outside and he pulled this to release the cover. Then he pushed the cover aside to reveal a somewhat dazed but apparently uninjured Sodyne still lying inside the pod.

"Leyla! Get up!" Cole yelled and Sodyne looked at him.

"We're down?" she said and Cole nodded.

"Yes lieutenant commander. We're on the surface. Now release your harness, grab your rifle and get out here. We've got a job to do." he told her.

Sodyne did as Cole had told her, releasing her harness and taking hold of her phaser rifle before climbing out of the pod and standing in front of him.

"And you've done this before?" she said.

"Yes, a few times. The first time can be a little overwhelming. Perhaps we should have put you through a simulation or two first." Cole replied.

"Actually I'm glad you didn't. I may not have agreed to come and I really want to be here." Sodyne said.

"Good. Then let's get moving commander. Tell me the way." Cole said and Sodyne took her tricorder from her belt and began to scan the area, focusing on the composition of the ground beneath them.

"I'm picking up voids in several areas captain, all of them within the boundaries of the subsurface structure."

Sodyne said as she began to walk in the direction of the stasis box that she had committed to memory.

"I take it that we're alone?" Cole asked as he followed her, keeping his rifle in his shoulder where he could bring it into use rapidly if it was needed.

"I'm picking up life readings all around but nothing more than about the size of a rat captain." Sodyne answered.

"Rats? One planet I visited had rats that had grown to almost a metre long." Cole commented.

"Not that big captain. Also they are spread out rather than concentrated so I don't think we need to worry about them rushing us in a swarm." Sodyne said.

"Then carry on lieutenant commander." Cole replied and Sodyne continued to lead him across the largely barren ground.

"Both pods definitely reached the ground commander." Nyal said.

"Intact?" Martin asked.

"I think so." Nyal replied.

"What about the enemy vessel lieutenant? Do you have any leads to its location?" T'Lan added.

"Sorry commander, nothing yet. With two moons, a planet and a cloud of asteroids to use there are a lot of hiding places available." Nyal said.

"Commander perhaps we should consider moving our fighters out further." Ghroc suggested, "It would reduce our defences but it would give us a better field of view."

"Lieutenant Nyal give the order to our fighter squadron to alter their formation. I want eight to take up a rotating box pattern around the *Nightfall* at a range of one thousand kilometres. The remaining four are to

form a detached flight that is to conduct a visual search of the planetary subsystem. Begin with a full orbit of the planet and then move out to the orbital objects." T'Lan ordered.

"Over here!" Sodyne exclaimed and she broke into a run.

"Sodyne wait!" Cole called out after her before he ran to catch up.

Sodyne led him towards a small mound when she quickly dropped to her knees.

"This is it." she said.

"What? The stasis box?" Cole asked.

"No, that is still about a hundred metres away ahead of us and potentially even more below. But there's a hole here that we can use to get into the remains of the structure." Sodyne said and when Cole stood behind her and looked over her shoulder he saw the hole she was talking about.

"That looks like a tight squeeze commander." he said, "There's definitely nothing waiting for us down there that might take offence to us crawling into its home is there?"

"No captain. I'm not picking up any native lifeforms inside." Sodyne said as she unslung her rifle and placed it on the ground before she took a palm beacon from her belt and shone it into the hole. This illuminated the interior of the hole and showed it to be walled only by dirt and that it was no wider inside than the entrance was. Without waiting for Cole to say anything Sodyne began to crawl into the hole, dragging herself head first into the narrow tunnel.

"Commander wait. That hole looks tight." Cole said.

"It's fine captain. I can fit."

"Maybe you can but I don't think I can."

"I think it widens out up ahead. Yes, I can see the end. I think there's a chamber." Sodyne said before she stopped moving while she waist deep in the hole.

"In or out commander. Keep going or back out." Cole said as he looked down at her legs still sticking out of the hole.

"I can't. I'm stuck." Sodyne replied.

"You're what?"

"Stuck captain. This tunnel bends slightly and I'm stuck. Can you pull me out?"

Cole sighed as he slung his rifle and positioned himself so that he was able to grab hold of Sodyne's legs, lifting them up.

"Okay commander, on the count of three." he said, "One." and then he suddenly pulled as hard as he could. Although Sodyne had found herself pinned inside the hole the application of force from outside was enough to break her free, crumbling some of the dirt that had trapped her and she came free of the hole, emerging covered in dust but otherwise unharmed.

"What happened to three?" she asked.

"I got impatient. Now how about we widen this hole?" Cole responded as he drew his phaser. At its highest settings even a hand phaser was capable of boring through hundreds of metres of rock but Cole knew that he was only dealing with dirt and so selected a much lower setting before pointing it towards the hole, "There's nothing in there I need to worry about the beam hitting is there?" he asked, looking at Sodyne before he used the phaser.

"No captain. It's just dirt." she responded and while Sodyne recovered her rifle Cole opened fire, using several short blasts to strip away the outer layers of the sides of the hole. This widened it to about a metre across, more than enough for the two officers to fit down along with all of their equipment.

"Okay now let's go and investigate that chamber." Cole said, holstering his phaser again.

Sodyne crawled into the hole again, this time just about able to remain on her hands and knees instead of flat on her stomach. Behind her Cole followed, it was more of a squeeze for him but he was still able to move along the tunnel without too much difficulty until after about ten metres they reached the other end. Here the tunnel reached what had once been a room within the ancient complex, as shown by the metal ceiling and walls but it was now partially filled with dirt that had obviously fallen in through the same hole the two Starfleet officers had used to gain access to it.

"Incredible. The structure looks largely intact." Sodyne said as she scanned the walls, "This is definitely the same material we've seen used by the Slavers before captain." she added.

"Then I'm sure that professor Denning will be interested to hear about it. For now though we need to find that stasis box. Are you picking anything up that could indicate its presence nearby?"

"No captain. We'll have to go further." Sodyne answered and both of them looked towards the only doorway leading from the room. This took the form of a narrow hexagon and although it was open it was partially blocked by more dirt that had fallen in through the hole.

Cole and Sodyne moved cautiously as they proceeded deeper into the complex. On the other side of the doorway there was a long hall that also had a shallow covering of dirt as far as the palm beacons would illuminate. Along the way they passed more hexagonal doorways but unlike the one they had come through these were all closed and Sodyne carried on down the corridor, studying her tricorder closely until she

suddenly came to a stop when the hallway shook.

"What was that?" Cole asked.

"A seismic tremor captain. Barely three on the Richter scale. Larger than the others but still nothing to worry about." Sodyne said and Cole stared at her.

"Others? Is there something you aren't telling me lieutenant commander?" he said.

"I've been picking up tremors since we landed. Most were less than one on the Richter scale but the last three have been stronger."

"And can you tell me what's causing these tremors?" Cole said.

"I think that the shaft bored by the raiders may have triggered some localised instability captain. There's no need to worry though, eventually the tremors will settle down and they can't get much bigger than they are now."

"That is very reassuring but what exactly would happen if there was a large mass of antimatter down here in a containment vessel that may not be one hundred percent stable?"

"Depending on how unstable the containment could fail and-" Sodyne began before she stopped and her eyes widened, "The warp core." she said.

"Exactly. The warp core. I think we should get a move on." Cole said.

"Commander we've got them!" Naya exclaimed when the sensor telemetry from the flight of fighters despatched to search for the enemy craft suddenly showed a metallic mass in the debris field that fit the profile of a starship perfectly.

"Let me see lieutenant." T'Lan said and she used the display in the headset she wore to show her the feed, "Will they be aware that we have found them?"

"No commander. They were detected by a passive scan and our fighters didn't change course or speed after detecting them. It looks like the same Freedom-class frigate that attacked the *Eternal*." Naya said.

"Should I move to intercept commander?" Ghroc asked and T'Lan was about to order him to do so when instead another idea struck her.

"Their vessel appears to be largely powered down." she said.

"Running silent until they can trigger their trap so we won't spot them until after we're already dead in space probably." Martin commented.

"A logical suggestion lieutenant commander." T'Lan agreed, "However, I suspect that if we manoeuvre in any way that suggests we have located them then they will reactivate their primary systems and either flee or attack."

"So are we just going to leave them there?" Naya said.

"No lieutenant. Captain Cole's orders were clear. Once we located the raiders we were to engage them. They have already proven their hostility." T'Lan said.

"How do we do that with out letting them know that we've found them?" Martin said.

"I need to know the properties of that debris field." T'Lan said.

"About fifty percent silicon but with significant iron and nickel deposits." Naya told her.

"That's why there's so much electrical activity around them. They're highly conductive." Ghroc said.

"Indeed Lieutenant Commander Ghroc." T'Lan replied, "They are also unable to withstand high velocity physical impacts."

"The mass accelerators." Martin said and a smile spread across his face,

As well as the ballistic rifles carried aboard the *Nightfall*, the vessel was fitted with a pair of much larger scale mass accelerators than ran along the ship's secondary hulls. As with the rifles these were intended to be an anti-Borg weapon, being able to inflict serious damage to even the largest of their vessels. Their use in general space combat was limited though, with the projectiles being too slow to accurately engage a highly manoeuvrable starship and unable to penetrate the more conventional shields used by most space faring species. Against an unshielded vessel though they could be just as devastating as they could be to a Borg cube.

"Correct lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "They are too far away for an effective phaser strike to remove their cover before they can engage their systems and a torpedo will be detected too far in advance. On the other hand a projectile will shatter the asteroid they are hiding behind and still be able to hit them before they can react."

"Their ship is partially obscured by one of the larger pieces of debris commander. I'd recommend that Commander Ghroc aim about sixty metres off centre." Martin said.

"Lieutenant Naya can you give us a virtual target to track?" T'Lan asked and Naya nodded.

"Yes commander, feeding the data to the helm now." she said and through his headset Ghroc saw an image of the *Liberation* in its entirety along with the outline of the debris concealing it.

"That target is thirty degrees off our current axis commander. If we turn that far then the raiders are going to notice. They might figure out that we've seen them." he said. Unlike the *Nightfall*'s phasers that were mounted to cover as many different firing arcs as possible or the torpedoes that could be steered towards a

target hundreds of thousands of kilometres away, the twin mass accelerators were in fixed forward mountings and to adjust their target point required the ship itself to be turned to face it.

"Then we must make such manoeuvring appear to be normal. Adjust our facing to zero mark two-zero Lieutenant Commander Ghroc." T'Lan ordered.

"Yes commander." Ghroc responded and he turned the *Nightfall* as she had told him, lifting the nose by twenty degrees while maintaining their position.

"Excellent." T'Lan said, "Now wait five minutes and then bring us to three-three-zero mark minus two-zero."

"You want me to move around the clock face at five minute intervals?" Ghroc asked.

"Yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan answered, "Between each manoeuvre I want a full active sensor sweep of a cone spreading ten degrees off axis. I want a firing solution on the *Liberation* plotted for when we turn towards the raiders' vessel. You are fire to the mass accelerators as soon as it is in your line of fire. One round per gun fired simultaneously."

"Is there any particular point on the target you want me to aim for commander?" Ghroc asked.

"Yes lieutenant commander. Aim for their warp core. I want that vessel destroyed before it can trigger the trap they have laid." T'Lan told him.

Cole and Sodyne had been forced to crawl once again as their path towards the estimated location of the stasis box took them down a corridor that was largely filled with dirt and other debris that had got into the underground complex over the course of the billion years it had stood abandoned.

"Captain we need to get this door open." Sodyne said when they reached another of the hexagonal doorways although only the top third of it was visible.

"Maybe we can just force it." Cole said and setting down his rifle he pressed his hands against the door and attempted to pull the two halves apart. However, this had no effect, the surface still being too smooth for him to get a grip on it.

"Maybe our phasers can burn through." Sodyne suggested and Cole nodded as he reached for his sidearm.

"I'll see. Just a small hole I can get my hands into." he said.

Adjusting his phaser so that it would emit a beam that would heat up the target he fired it at an exposed part of the door where the two halves met. Then as he saw the beam successfully cut through the material of the door he adjusted the aim point until he had created a semi-circular hole large enough to get his hands into. Holstering his phaser he reached into the hole and tried pulling apart again.

This time Cole's grip was good enough that he was able to get the doors to shift and the moment that they started to come apart the dirt he and Sodyne were crouched on began to collapse.

"The space beyond must be clear." Sodyne said and Cole stopped pulling. Listening to the sound of the falling debris it became obvious that the dirt falling through the doorway was not simply landing on a clear floor on the other side, it was falling much further.

"I think we've found a turbolift shaft. Or whatever the Slavers here used to move between floors." Cole commented and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain, I think you're right." she said.

"We're going to have to do this carefully then." Cole added, "If we open these doors too quickly then we could trigger a mini landslide that will take us down with it. Let's see what happens if I just widen this gap another ten centimetres or so."

Cole then put his hands between the halves of the door and pushed on them again to widen the gap. This accelerated the rate at which the material beneath the two Starfleet officers was falling into the shaft on the other side of the door and Cole stopped again. He and Sodyne then moved back from the door, watching as what had been their floor continued to collapse at an accelerated rate. This continued until there was a noticeable hole around the door where the original hallway floor was visible in places.

"I think that's enough captain. We can finish opening the doors now." Sodyne said.

"Okay then, here goes." Cole said and with his rifle slung over his shoulder he slid down the slope of the debris remaining in the corridor. Standing right in front of the almost fully exposed doors he then pulled them further apart, creating a gap large enough for him to pass through.

As Sodyne came down the slope behind him, Cole shone his palm beacon through the gap between the doors into the shaft beyond and tried to see how deep down it went.

"Can you see the bottom captain?" Sodyne asked.

"No, it's just a void." he answered.

"The stasis box is located within ten metres of this shaft. I think that going down it is the key." Sodyne added and Cole nodded.

"In that case I'm going to try something different." he said and he turned off his palm beacon, returning it to the pouch on his waist. Then he reached for another pouch on the ammunition belt he was wearing. This contained a number of chemical light sticks and he took one and activated it before throwing it into the shaft.

Cole and Sodyne then peered into the darkness watching as the stick fell for a few seconds before coming to a sudden stop, its light still visible from where they stood.

"About thirty metres." Sodyne said.

"There are handholds on the side of the shaft." Cole said, "Presumably there for the same reason we put handholds in our turbolift shafts."

"Just in case a maintenance team needs to get inside?" Sodyne commented and Cole nodded.

"Exactly. We should be able to use them to get down the shaft. Follow me." he said and he edged between the doors, standing on the very edge of the shaft before he reached out for one of the handholds.

Even though they were a billion years old the handholds proved to still be able to support Cole's weight and he began to descend, with Sodyne following him. Every few metres they passed another sealed doorway but they continued down until they encountered a horizontal branch to the shaft.

"Captain wait." Sodyne said as she paused to shine her palm beacon along the branch.

"What is it commander?" Cole asked.

"There's a doorway about ten metres along this branch. Right about where the stasis box may be." Sodyne told him.

"You think we should investigate?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain, I do." she said.

"Then let's go." Cole said before he felt the shaft shake and he gripped the handholds tightly, "And let's make this quick. We may not have much longer before that warp core explodes and takes half this planet with it."

Sodyne crossed to the horizontal branch of the turbolift shaft and hurried towards the doorway she had seen with Cole close behind her. Like the doorway they had used to enter the shaft this one was closed but without the weight of tonnes of dirt and debris pressing on it Cole was able to simply pull it open and Sodyne darted through.

"Incredible." she said, using her palm beacon to illuminate the room she had just stepped into.

When Cole followed her he saw that the room was filled row after row of transparent flasks, each of which had a metallic section to form the base. Inside the flasks there was a murky fluid and Sodyne quickly opened her tricorder to scan one of them.

"What are we looking at Sodyne?" Cole said.

"Two things I think captain." Sodyne replied, "Firstly these containers appear to be a form of micro replicator."

"Are they still running after a billion years?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Yes captain. This is incredible. I think the power source is some sort of Casimir effect battery, turning the force of gravity around the flasks into the power needed to run the replicators." she said.

"Okay and what are they replicating?" Cole said.

"Plastic captain. In a liquid form to create a nutrient environment for some kind of bacteria." Sodyne told him.

"Are we in danger?" Cole asked but Sodyne shook her head.

"No captain. The bacteria appear to be feeding on the plastic material being created by the replicators. Then the waste material as well as the tissue of the dead bacteria is being broken down into the raw elements needed to create more of the plastic. Captain I think that this is some type of pollution control technology. The bacteria can be used to break down waste long chain polymers that would otherwise build up in an ecosystem. Once they have completed cleaning up any plastics poisoning it the bacteria will starve and die off." she explained.

"So the Slavers did develop something beneficial." Cole commented, "Though I suspect it was just to make the worlds they lived on more pleasant."

"Captain I'd like to bring one of these flasks with us. Both the bacteria and the power source require further study." Sodyne said.

"Okay we can take a couple with us but-" Cole began before he suddenly stopped talking.

"Captain what's wrong?" Sodyne asked.

"Turn off your palm beacon." Cole told her and she did as he said. However, instead of being plunged into total darkness in the chamber that ought to have had no remaining light sources the two officers were bathed in a pale green glow that came from around a dividing wall that split the room into two, "Our stasis box?" Cole added as he and Sodyne turned their palm beacons back on again.

Sodyne immediately rushed around the wall to see the stasis box they had come to find lying on a raised platform. Approximately two metres long, the box was about a third as wide and deep as this.

"This is it!" Sodyne exclaimed and she reached out to touch the box.

"Careful." Cole warned her, "This can only be opened under controlled conditions." then he tapped his combadge, "Cole to Nightfall, we have located the box." he said.

"Under... tain... currently tracking.... *Liberation*... mass accel..." T'Lan's distorted voice said.

"We may need to head back up to the surface to get a clear message through." Cole said.

"We should take some of the flasks." Sodyne suggested, "That way the recovery team can focus entirely on the stasis box."

"Okay then, let's grab one each and get out of here." Cole said and the pair of them walked back around the dividing wall to where the flasks were stored. Sodyne promptly walked up to one and studied how it was mounted to the wall. This appeared to be a simple clip that she was able to release without any effort but as soon as she did so there was another tremor, this one more powerful than any of the previous ones and both she and Cole were forced to brace themselves against the nearest solid surface. However, the flask she had just released was no longer firmly supported and it fell to the floor where there was a loud 'smash' as it broke into hundreds of pieces and the contents spilled out.

"What the hell?" Cole exclaimed.

"Don't worry captain, the bacteria is definitely harmless to us. We're in no danger." Sodyne reminded him,

"They consume only-"

"Only long chain polymers, right Leyla?" Cole interrupted and she frowned, confused by the somewhat informal way he had chosen to address her.

"Yes captain." she said.

"Long chain polymers like those that our replicators use when producing our uniforms?" Cole added and Sodyne's eyes widened as she realised the consequences of their being exposed to the bacteria.

"Oh no." she said.

"Oh no indeed. We are never going to live this down." Cole said and as he shone his palm beacon onto his sleeve he saw that a small hole had already appeared where he could see the bright red fabric of his under shirt. Then as he watched a hole started to appear in that as well, exposing the skin underneath. Sodyne opened up her tricorder again and ran it over herself before pointing it towards Cole and then looking at the results of the scan.

"We're both covered in the bacteria." she said before all of a sudden one leg of her uniform split about half way down her thigh and dropped to the floor, exposing her leg underneath.

"So I see." Cole said.

"Captain we may have a bigger problem." Sodyne then added.

"Bigger than both returning to the ship naked for the second time in a row?" Cole said and Sodyne nodded.

"Much bigger. About eighty to a hundred gigatonnes bigger." she said.

"The warp core's about to explode isn't it?" Cole asked and Sodyne nodded again.

"Yes captain. I'm picking up magnetic field fluctuations that must be coming from the warp core. I don't think we have more than about ten minutes before it fails." she said.

Baxter entered the *Liberation's* bridge to find its command staff all focused on the main view screen, watching the *Nightfall* closely.

"What are they waiting for?" the helmsman said, "Why don't they enter orbit?"

"I don't know." Kaye responded.

"Perhaps they've picked up the same readings we have." Baxter said and Kaye looked around at him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that while you've all been focused on that Starfleet ship I've been monitoring the core we planted down on the planet and I don't think it's going to last much longer." Baxter answered.

"What do you mean?" Kaye said.

"I mean that between us and Starfleet drilling holes we've set off a chain of seismic events that have weakened the core containment. Whether or not we trigger it I don't think that it will even last another quarter of an hour." Baxter said.

"Damn it!" Kaye exclaimed before the *Liberation's* navigator spoke.

"The *Nightfall* is turning again." he said.

"What does that mean?" Baxter said.

"The *Nightfall* has been making turns and then running scans for a while now. We don't why but they may be looking for something that the Slavers may have left in orbit." Kaye said.

"If they follow their pattern then this turn will leave them facing towards us." the navigator said.

"Aren't you worried about that?" Baxter said, looking at Kaye.

"Not really. If they move to engage us it will be obvious and we'll have plenty of time to react." he replied.

"On target. Firing." Ghroc said before he squeezed the trigger built into his manual flight controls. This fired a single projectile from each of the *Nightfall's* mass accelerators that sped towards the debris field where the *Liberation* was hiding.

Both projectiles struck the large piece of debris that the frigate was using for cover and it shattered into millions of pieces, many of which promptly bombarded the frigate. More significant though were the two duranium projectiles themselves. These were slowed by their impact but not stopped and they too slammed into the *Liberation* at incredible speed. Without its shields to protect it the frigate was defenceless against these impacts and the projectiles proceeded to smash their way through the vessel towards its engineering section. Neither of the projectiles actually struck the warp core itself but the damage they did as they passed through the engineering section was enough to cause the containment field surrounding it to fail and in an instant all of the antimatter contained within it was able to escape.

To the *Liberation's* crew this felt like a violent but short lived shaking as their vessel was buffeted by multiple impacts before in an instant they were consumed by a bright flash of light.

"Captain if the *Nightfall* tries moving into transporter range then it will be caught in the blast wave. Even if they can get here in time to save us then I'm not even sure about whether they'll be able to get a lock on us down here." Sodyne said before she felt the top of her uniform slip and she placed an arm across her chest to try and hold it up. Meanwhile Cole used a nearby wall to steady himself as the heel of his boot disintegrated.

"What about the stasis box?" he said.

"What about it captain?" Sodyne asked.

"Well didn't you say that nothing can destroy an active stasis box? So it will survive the blast no matter how big, right?"

"Yes captain."

"And it looks about big enough to fit the pair of us in." Cole said and Sodyne smiled.

"Yes it does." she said, "Although it would mean opening it here and now instead of under more controlled conditions."

"I think we can take that risk, don't you?" Cole said.

"We should take one of these." Sodyne said and she unclipped another flask from the wall before both officers rushed back to the stasis box.

Cole placed his hands on the lid and hesitated as the bacteria ate through his rifle sling and the weapon fell to the floor.

"Perhaps you should do this. I'll cover you." he said, stepping back and picking up his rifle he pointed it towards the box as what remained of his and Sodyne's clothing crumbled.

"Did I ever mention how much I hate being naked?" Sodyne said and Cole nodded. Then she stood by the stasis box and paused, "On three." she said, "One." and then she opened the box.

"Not funny." Cole said when nothing happened and the pair of them both looked into the stasis box. Inside they saw a single cylindrical object that filled most of the interior. The only features on this were a number of apertures at one end but there was no indication of its function.

"We're going to have to leave this behind." Sodyne said.

"It's that or us commander." Cole said, setting his rifle down.

"Can I at least run a tricorder scan captain?" Sodyne asked and Cole nodded.

"You run the scan. I'm going to let the *Nightfall* know what we're planning." he said and then he picked up his combadge from where it had fallen after the part of his uniform it had been connected to was destroyed by the bacteria. Rather than just activating the combadge to send a signal to the *Nightfall* as he spoke he set the device to record what he said and repeat his message as long as it was able to, "This is Cole, Sodyne has detected that the warp core set as a trap is about to lose containment and there is no time for an extraction. The only chance we have of survival is to take shelter inside the stasis box. This will be tight but there is room inside for us both. Look for the box."

Cole then tapped the combadge again, ending the recording and starting the transmission loop.

"I'm done captain." Sodyne told him, closing her tricorder before putting it inside the box beside the Slaver device.

"Okay let's get that thing out so we can get in." Cole said and between them they lifted the cylinder from the box. This was heavy even for the pair of them together but they were still able to set it down on the floor. Sodyne then put the flask of bacteria into the open stasis box and was about to climb into it herself when a thought occurred to her.

"Captain what if we're carrying the bacteria on our skin? We'll spread it to the *Nightfall*." she said.

"How durable do you think it is?" Cole asked.

"Not very captain."

"Then we can use a phaser." Cole said and he picked up one of the hand phasers they had brought with them that now lay on the floor where it had fallen, "I'll set a twenty second timer for a wide angle maximum stun and put it at the end of the box. If I hold the lid open then when the phaser fires it will destroy the bacteria and knock us both out."

"Causing you to release the lid and closing the box." Sodyne said with a smile.

"Exactly." Cole said and he began to program the phaser while Sodyne climbed into the box.

When the phaser was programmed Cole climbed into the box and with one hand held the lid open while he placed the phaser by his feet. Then he lay back and looked at Sodyne. The interior of the box provided barely enough room for them both and they were pressed together face-to-face, "Here goes. About fifteen seconds left." he said and Sodyne smiled.

"Captain I'd just like to point out that this doesn't mean anything other than thank you for saving my life again." Sodyne said and she leant forwards to kiss Cole just as the phaser fired.

Cole and Sodyne were instantly rendered unconscious and the lid of the stasis box dropped shut, activating the stasis field and freezing both officers in time completely.

Seconds later the continent they were on exploded in the fire of antimatter annihilation.

The bridge crew of the *Nightfall* watched as a large area of the planet was consumed in a brilliant flash of light and millions of tonnes of debris were hurled into space.

"That could have been us." Nayal commented, the *Nightfall's* sensors showing her that the region of space that the starship would have occupied had it entered orbit to beam down an away team had been flooded by the debris as well as a significant amount of energy from the explosion.

"What about the stasis box lieutenant?" T'Lan asked the officer sat at the science station in Sodyne's absence.

"Our stasis box began to glow again just before the explosion commander." he responded.

"Then the captain's plan worked. They're still alive." Martin said.

"A logical deduction lieutenant commander. As soon as conditions become more suitable we will begin our search." T'Lan replied.

"Doctor Mitchell." Copeland said when the image of his co-conspirator appeared on the screen in his ready room.

"Captain Copeland, this is an unexpected call." she responded, "I hope it's not bad news."

"Unfortunately it is Sandra." Copeland said, "We've lost the *Liberation*, with all hands it appears."

"How?" Mitchell asked.

"Kaye was setting an ambush for the *Nightfall*. We took the warp core from the Infinite and used it to create an explosive device that would have ripped the ship apart. Unfortunately the *Nightfall* must have seen

through the trap though and they destroyed the *Liberation* and the when the warp core lost containment the *Nightfall* wasn't close enough to be caught in the blast." Copeland told her.

"So what do you plan to do now? Will you engage the *Nightfall* yourself?" Mitchell said but Copeland shook his head.

"No. The *Hurricane* is undermanned and is nowhere near her proper operational specification." he said,

"We're no match one on one for an Akira-class heavy cruiser. Plus after the loss of the *Liberation* I've got people wanting to leave. They signed on to destroy anything the Slavers left behind, not engage in hopeless battles. I'm bringing our ships back to Federation space."

"You're giving up?"

"No doctor, I'm preserving what resources we've got left. We'll fall back to where we can recruit more crew, refit our ships and figure out a way to deal with the *Nightfall* in safety." Copeland said.

When Cole opened his eyes he found himself still lying beside a woman who was looking back at him, but now it was T'Lan instead of Sodyne and he quickly realised that they were in bed together in their quarters.

"It worked then." he said.

"Yes Robert, your plan worked." T'Lan replied.

"So how long were Sodyne and I in that box for?" Cole asked.

"It took us approximately twenty-six hours to locate the stasis box and bring it aboard. You will be pleased to know that only I and Doctor Hamill were present when it was opened. You omitted to mention in your message that you were both naked." T'Lan said.

"Ah yes, there is an explanation for that."

"I know. We found Lieutenant Commander Sodyne's tricorder as well as the flask of bacteria. From the rapid way your clothing was destroyed the bacteria is far more effective at breaking down such materials than any similar pollution control method that we currently have. However, although Lieutenant Commander Davis is excited by the power source technology he is concerned that the bacteria could be a threat to any starship that it was released aboard. There are too many components made of materials that could be attacked."

"So where is the flask now?" Cole asked.

"Stored in an airlock that has been decompressed. If the flask breaks then the bacteria will not survive long enough to cause any damage." T'Lan told him.

"Okay, now for my final question. Have you just been lying here waiting for me to wake up?"

"I have. If you are going to spend your time lying naked beside a woman then logically it should be your wife." T'Lan said and Cole smiled before he pulled her closer and kissed her.