

# STAR TREK

## NIGHTFALL

### THE SLAYER CRISIS

SOMETHINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



## THE SNARE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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

## **THE SNARE**

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

There are more parties in the Meltara sector interested in the ancient Slavers and the artefacts they left behind than just Professor Denning's team and the crew of the *Nightfall* and not all are motivated by academic interest. A failed ambush of the *Nightfall* alerts the crew to the presence of a group of violent raiders who pose a threat to anyone who has managed to recover a stasis box.

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:  
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Stardate 68988.1 *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A in the Meltara Sector.

Leyla Sodyne, the *USS Nightfall's* chef science officer was awoken by an alarm and a quick look at her clock informed her that it was just before four in the morning by ship time. The alarm was not the one set on her clock that was intended to wake her in time for the start of her shift, instead it came from her computer and Sodyne got out of bed to investigate. She already had a good idea of what had caused the alarm and she moved quickly to confirm this, grinning when she saw the image on the screen. Then she ran to where her robe hung beside her bed and put it on over her pyjamas before pausing just long enough to press her combadge to her chest and then rushing from her quarters to investigate in person.

The *Nightfall's* corridors were almost totally deserted at this time and Sodyne was able to reach the Starfleet heavy cruiser's science section rapidly. Although designed to focus on tactical operations, even more so than most Akira-class starships, the *Nightfall* still possessed a significant suite of science labs and in one of these there was a featureless crystalline box about two metres in length. This box was a product of the ancient Slaver Empire, a civilisation that had become extinct a billion years earlier at the end of a conflict that had seen almost every sentient life form in the Milky-way galaxy wiped out. However, although the Slavers themselves were long gone they had left behind them a number of artefacts such as this stasis box. Once closed time effectively ceased to exist inside the box and anything placed within one would be perfectly preserved until it was opened again. How the boxes functioned or where they derived their apparently unlimited reserves of power from remained unknown and they were highly sought after and valuable, not for their own value but also for whatever they might contain. While no-one had yet succeeded in reverse engineering a stasis box there had been numerous technological leaps made thanks to more easily understood devices contained within them.

Ordinarily a stasis box appeared inert but some quirk of the technology involved in generating an active stasis field meant that if two or more of them came within about a light year of one another would glow and that was exactly what this particular box was doing now. Sodyne had configured the science lab's internal sensors to detect the particular wavelength of light given off by the stasis box when it came close to another and that was what had triggered the alarm that had woken her.

"Sodyne to bridge." she said, tapping her combadge.

"This is Lieutenant Oswald, go ahead commander." the voice of the officer in charge of the *Nightfall's* night shift responded.

"Lieutenant I want us to come to a dead stop immediately." Sodyne to him.

"A dead stop commander? The captain's orders were that we were to make for the rendezvous with professor Denning's team as quickly as possible." Oswald said.

"I know that lieutenant. Now bring us to a dead stop and tell the senior officers I want to see them down here in the main physics lab in fifteen minutes. I'll explain everything to the captain then." Sodyne said as she headed for a nearby wall mounted console and used this to access the *Nightfall's* external sensor arrays.

"Yes commander." Oswald replied before the channel went dead.

The only reliable way to detect a Slaver stasis box at a distance with just a single ship was by the effect it had on another box so using the *Nightfall's* sensors alone to detect the other nearby box was out of question. However, they could be used to narrow down the range of possible locations. The stars of the Meltara Sector were not particularly densely packed and so Sodyne was not surprised to see that the *Nightfall's* sensors could detect only a single system within one light year of the ship. Directing the starship's sensors at this system Sodyne then began to build up a picture of the planetary bodies it contained and their exact positions at that moment. The figure of one light year for the reaction triggered between multiple active stasis fields was not an exact one but it was close enough that Sodyne was able to narrow down which of the planets, moons or asteroids within the system were most likely to be the source of the other stasis field. It was of course possible that the second stasis box would be drifting in free space but it was far more likely that it was within the star system and if it was adrift in the space of the system it would still be within the region Sodyne was now scanning and visible when the *Nightfall* arrived.

The scan took less than ten minutes and as soon as she had the results Sodyne exited the lab to wait for the other officers to arrive. She did not have to wait long for this and just a few minutes later Captain Cole and his Vulcan wife, Commander T'Lan who was also the *Nightfall's* first officer. Although they had been woken from their bed both officers had had time to put their red collared command division uniforms on.

"Lieutenant commander I trust that there is a good reason why you had us woken up in the middle of the night." Cole said.

"Yes captain." Sodyne replied.

"Logic would indicate that you have summoned us down here because of the stasis box kept in this laboratory. Is this correct?" T'Lan asked, looking at the entrance to the physics lab behind Sodyne.

"Stasis box?" a woman's voice said from behind T'Lan as the *Nightfall's* medical officer Doctor Hamill arrived, "I don't want anything to do with that thing."

"I doubt that Commander Sodyne will be expecting you to get into the box." Cole commented.

"No of course not." Sodyne added.

"Good." Hamill said, remembering how she had lost all sense of time while trapped in a stasis box for just a few hours.

"Perhaps you should tell us why you have summoned us here lieutenant commander." T'Lan suggested.

"I'd rather wait until everyone's here if you don't mind commander." Sodyne responded.

"As you wish." T'Lan said.

There were still four other officers yet to arrive but they appeared in the space of just a few minutes starting with Ghroc, the *Nightfall's* Bolian helmsman and second officer. Then came security chief Lieutenant Commander Martin and chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Davis. The last to arrive and the only one not in uniform was Lieutenant Nayal, the *Nightfall's* Romulan operations officer. She had not bothered to put her uniform on and instead still wore the onesie covered in cartoon ducks she slept in and often wore while off duty. Like Sodyne who had attached her combadge to her robe, Nayal had attached her combadge to this.

"Okay so what's the idea of waking me up at this time?" Nayal said.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has something to show us." T'Lan told her.

"At least it's not a midnight violin concert." Ghroc commented and Hamill elbowed him in the side.

"Come on in, you'll see why I brought you here." Sodyne replied and she opened the door to the laboratory she was stood in front of.

As soon as the officers entered the physics laboratory they saw the pale light being given off by the Slaver stasis box inside.

"When did this start?" Davis asked as soon as he saw it and the *Nightfall's* officers moved closer. Only Hamill remained away from the box, staying just inside the doorway as it slid shut.

"Just over a quarter of an hour ago. I set the sensors in here to detect if the box starts to glow and alert me." Sodyne said.

"Denning has another box." Nayal pointed out.

"Yes, I took that into account. The alert won't trigger if we come close enough to the professor's transport to cause a reaction in the stasis box." Sodyne told her.

"Then somewhere within a light year there's another one." Martin said.

"That is why you ordered the ship stopped." T'Lan added.

"Yes, I wanted to run a scan of the area. Unsurprisingly there's only one star system close enough for another stasis box to be in." Sodyne replied.

"You have run a scan of the system?" T'Lan said and Sodyne nodded before walking over to the console she had accessed the *Nightfall's* sensors through.

"Yes, this is the system, it's in our catalogue as Remnir Major. Long range observations had indicated that the fourth planet in the system is Class-M but no survey has ever been conducted to confirm this." she said.

"Is it inhabited?" Cole said, "I'd rather not be trying to avoid violating the Prime Directive by stealing something that the natives consider an important religious artefact."

"If there are people there who worship a stasis box then they're probably all freaking out about it suddenly starting to glow." Davis said.

"Unless they have more than one in which case they'd be permanently glowing." Ghroc added.

"All I can say for certain is that there are no energy emissions that would indicate even a reasonably technologically developed society being present on the planet." Sodyne said, "If there are people there then they can't be at a stage beyond early industrial development."

"Do you think the stasis box is on the fourth planet?" Martin asked.

"It could be." Sodyne answered, "But there's a significant zone where the stasis box could be and the orbital patterns of the planets also allow for it to be on one of the fourth planet's three moons or one of the eight moons orbiting the sixth planet, a gas giant. There are also two asteroid fields between the planets' orbits that could contain the box. All the other planets in the system are too close to us or too far away. Fortunately both planets are on the same side of the star right now rather than on opposite sides of the system."

"That's still a heck of a lot of ground to cover." Ghroc said.

"Our fighter squadron will need to be used to establish a detection net." T'Lan said and Cole nodded in agreement.

"How would that work?" Hamill asked.

"Our sensors can't detect a stasis box but we can exploit the fact that they exhibit properties similar to objects with near infinite density. Right T'Lan?" Cole said, smiling at his wife.

“Correct. Much like a tachyon detection net can pick up the presence of a cloaked vessel passing through a tachyon beam a stasis box can be detected from the shadow it will create in conventional subspace sensor sweeps.” she explained.

Cole then tapped his combadge.

“Cole to bridge.” he said.

“Lieutenant Oswald here captain.” the duty officer responded.

“Lieutenant Oswald I want a course laid in for the Remnir Major system at warp seven. Engage when ready.” Cole told him.

“Aye captain, warp seven. Our ETA at Remnir Major will be about twenty-five hours from now.” Oswald said.

“Very good. Cole out.” Cole said before shutting off his combadge.

“Twenty-five hours will give us sufficient time to prepare a search pattern.” T'Lan said.

“What happens if we find this stasis box?” Hamill asked nervously from beside the door.

“We open it of course doctor.” Cole replied with a smile and she winced.

“Oh I was afraid you'd say that.” she said.

In a small chamber a Slaver stasis box sat on a counter. This was not as large as the one aboard the *Nightfall*, being less than half a metre along each side but nonetheless it was a priceless object and just like the larger example aboard the Starfleet vessel it glowed brightly while a pair of figures looked at it.

“Go and tell the others.” one of them said to the second, “More prey approaches. We must be ready.”



During the time that it took the *USS Nightfall* to reach the Remnir Major system the crew had ample time to prepare to begin their search for the stasis box they knew to be present as soon as they arrived. Because a stasis box could contain potentially deadly lifeforms or technology, one example opened had held a live explosive device, the responsibility in the Federation for opening them fell to Starfleet and the crew were well trained in what they may have to deal with. The box would not be brought aboard the *Nightfall* before it was opened just in case it held a weapon that would threaten the ship, but also it could not be opened out in space just in case it contained a life form that would be killed by exposure to vacuum. Therefore, a portable shelter had been prepared that could be erected on any planetary body and pressurised. The team that opened the box would still wear spacesuits though to ensure that they were protected from any toxic chemicals or biological agents it may contain that would be released as soon as the lid was opened. However, before any of this could be done the box still needed to be found.

"Lieutenant Noyal are there any obvious places that the stasis box could be hidden?" Cole asked as soon as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp close to the sixth planet of the system.

"Negative captain." Noyal responded, "I'm not detecting any artificial structures or signs of other craft."

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne, is the stasis box in our physics laboratory still reacting to the proximity of another?" T'Lan asked, looking towards the bridge's science station.

"Yes commander, it's still glowing brightly." Sodyne replied with a smile as she double checked the video feed from the laboratory she had left permanently open through the heads up display of the headset she like the other bridge officers wore while they worked, continually reviewing the readings from the *Nightfall's* sensors just in case Noyal missed any small detail.

"Tactical what's our status?" Cole added.

"Still running at condition green captain." Martin told him, "There are no indications that we're being targeted in any way."

"Very good." Cole said, nodding, "But I want us taken to yellow alert as soon as we locate the stasis box. You know how tricky those things can be."

"Oh yes captain. Just because I don't share Doctor Hamill's fear of them doesn't mean I'm going to underestimate the risk from one. Or from anyone who may be willing to go to extreme lengths to get their hands on one." Martin replied.

"Lieutenant Noyal has already said that there are no other ships in the system." T'Lan pointed out.

"That we can see commander." Martin responded, "There could be ships hiding in the shadow of any planet or moon or they could be cloaked."

"Your point is well taken Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan said.

"Noyal what about our fighters?" Cole said.

"The hangar reports that all pilots are aboard and the squadron is ready to deploy on your order captain." Noyal answered.

"Then I see no reason to delay. Order the launch lieutenant." Cole ordered.

"Yes captain." Noyal said before she reached for the intercom, "Hangar this is the bridge. Scramble. Scramble. Scramble."

Like most Akira-class heavy cruisers the *USS Nightfall* carried a squadron of twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters and these now sped from the forward launch door of the starship's massive hangar bay in pairs side by side into space.

"*Nightfall* this is Jackal," the leader of the fighter squadron's pilots transmitted using his call sign rather his name and rank, "launch confirmed. All fighters are in formation and awaiting orders."

"Copy that jackal. Standby." Noyal responded.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne have you plotted a search pattern?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. We should move off the orbital plane, the *Nightfall* going one way and our fighters the other. Then while we position ourselves above the northern pole of the sixth planet our fighters can sweep the subsystem with their active sensors." Sodyne explained.

"While we just look for the hole in the return. Very neat." Martin commented.

"Helm lay in a course. One quarter impulse power." Cole said.

"Yes captain, moving into position now." Ghroc said and he pulled back on the *Nightfall's* manual flight controls to bring the starship's nose up.

At the same time as the *Nightfall* was ascending to take up a position above the sixth planet of the Remnir Major system the squadron of Peregrine-class attack fighters moved beneath the plane in which the planet and its subsystem of eight moons orbited. As they descended the tiny vessels spread out and began to scan the area with their active sensors.

The fighter pilots themselves paid little attention to the results of these scans other than to watch for any natural hazards they may face. The real intention of these scans was to emit subspace pulses that would be detectable by the *Nightfall* positioned above them, even through the mass of the various moons and even the gas giant itself. Because the time distorting field of a Slaver stasis box prevented anything from passing through it the subspace pulses directed towards it by such a sensor sweep would have their passage blocked and this would create a hole in the pattern of energy that eventually reached the *Nightfall* where this would be detected and targeted for closer investigation.

"Receiving sensor telemetry now captain." Nayal announced as the first of the subspace energy pulses started to reach the *Nightfall*.

"Analysing." Sodyne said before she sighed, "Nothing yet captain." she added.

"Be patient commander. You said it yourself, the stasis box could be anywhere within the subsystem around the sixth planet or even on the fourth or one of the asteroid fields." Cole said.

"You didn't honestly think we'd see it on the first sweep did you?" Ghroc commented.

"I hoped we would." Sodyne replied.

"There was no logic to that hope lieutenant commander." T'Lan added while Sodyne continued to analyse the data that the *Nightfall* was receiving from the sensor scans. However, as the scans progressed there was no change to what was being received, although the strength of the subspace energy pulses being emitted by the fighters' active sensors was being greatly reduced by having to pass through hundreds of kilometres of rock some of the energy was always able to reach the *Nightfall* and there was no sign of the shadow that Sodyne was looking for that would indicate the presence of an active Slaver stasis box.

This changed though when the sensor scan of one of the eight moons was complete and on its way to reach another one of the *Nightfall's* fighters passed beneath the gas giant itself without the pilot bothering to shut off his active sensors, seeing no point since they would need to be reactivated so soon after anyway. This resulted in the fighter's sensors directing several pulses of subspace energy through the atmosphere of the planet itself. Being far less dense than any of the moons orbiting it meant that the strength of the signal that reached the *Nightfall* could be expected to be much stronger. However, among the higher levels of energy there was a small hole where none of the subspace energy was able to reach the Starfleet vessel.

"Captain I think we've got it!" Sodyne exclaimed when she saw this, "The box isn't on one of the moons, it's inside the atmosphere of the gas giant itself."

"Put it on the main screen." Cole said and Sodyne brought up an image of the sensor data on the large viewscreen at the front of the *Nightfall's* bridge. This showed a representation of the gas giant, with its relatively solid core surrounded by an atmosphere tens of thousands of kilometres thick. However, cutting through this representation there was a thin black line where all the energy of the sensor sweep had been blocked by something incredibly dense.

"Yellow alert captain?" Martin asked.

"Yes commander, I think so." Cole replied, "Sodyne what do we have here?"

"The actual hole measures forty-eight point three centimetres squared captain." Sodyne said.

"The stasis box? That's not as large as ours." Martin said and Nayal smiled.

"I'm sure that Doctor Hamill will be relieved that it's too small for anyone to put her inside it." she said.

"You know it's partly your fault she feels the way she does about those things." Martin said.

"All I did was set up a holodeck program that removed her safely from the one she was trapped inside."

Nayal responded.

"You programmed a simulation of aliens that claimed she had been inside the box for a million years and was the only human being left alive in the universe." Cole reminded Nayal.

"Yes and it was a great joke." Nayal replied and Cole held his head in his hand for a moment.

"Look, are we certain that this is the stasis box we're looking for? Is there anything else that this could be?" he said.

"Neutronium will block even subspace sensor scans." Martin said.

"Neutronium itself is rare enough to warrant further investigation." T'Lan pointed out, "Plus there is the added question of how that shadow can maintain its current position when it should naturally fall to a level where its density matches that of the planet."

"Do our scans show anything other than that hole Commander Sodyne?" Cole asked.

"No captain. The fighters' sensors are set for penetration rather than resolution." Sodyne answered.

"What about a probe?" Ghroc suggested.

"A class-three probe will be able to handle the atmospheric pressure it is likely to encounter." T'Lan said in agreement.

"Very well. Commander Martin please target a class three probe along that vector." Cole said.

"Probe set captain." Martin replied.

"Launch probe." Cole told him and Martin immediately did as he was ordered.

The probe shot from one of the *Nightfall's* many torpedo launchers and arced towards the gas giant below. As soon as the two metre long device penetrated the atmosphere of the gas giant it began to send back detailed

information regarding the chemical makeup of the planet while it homed in on the shadow in the readings already possessed by the *Nightfall*.

As soon as this was reached the probe suddenly dived down to follow the path of the shadow, taking it deeper into the gas giant's atmosphere. The probe continued along this path until its sensors detected a solid object in its path and it came to a sudden halt before beginning to conduct a more detailed scan.

"Captain the probe has found something." Nayal reported, "It looks like a spacecraft of some kind."

"No spacecraft from the Slaver-era has ever been discovered." T'Lan said.

"Do we have a visual of the ship you can put on the main screen lieutenant?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain, I'm putting it on the screen now." Nayal replied as she replaced the diagram of the planet with the visual feed from the probe.

The density of the atmosphere at this point created numerous dense clouds of gas that obscured the probe's visual feed and this needed to be supplemented with other forms of scanning such as thermal imaging, mass measurement and active subspace detection. Combined these were still enough to build up a picture of the vessel within the gas giant though and this showed it to be of modular construction with a row of hexagonal modules along its core with with more of them pointing out from each side.

"That's a Suliban ship." Martin said.

"An old one at that." Cole added, "You don't see many of them around any more."

"Captain the source of the shadow in our sensor readings is definitely within that ship." Sodyne said.

"Are there any life readings aboard?" Cole said.

"None that I can detect captain but the atmosphere and the ship's structure are both disrupting our scans. There are pockets of the interior that I can't get into." Nayal replied.

"How deep within the atmosphere is it?" T'Lan asked.

"About two thousand metres." Nayal answered.

"She must still have power to be there." Ghroc commented.

"Confirmed, thrusters are operational." Sodyne said.

"According to Starfleet records that class of ship is two hundred years old. It looks like your comment about its age was right captain." Nayal said as she checked the sensor scan against the profiles of known Suliban starships. The green skinned humanoids had had dealings with humans since before the founding of the Federation and over this time Starfleet had been able to build up a great deal of intelligence on the species before they settled their differences with humanity and joined the Federation.

"It seems unlikely that this ship has been here all that time. It appears structurally intact and its fuel reserves would have run out by now." T'Lan said.

"Obviously someone must have a taste for antiques." Martin said.

"Well I'm not risking sending an away team aboard that ship when it's down there." Cole said, "Lieutenant Commander Martin can you get a lock on it with a tractor beam?"

"I think so captain. We'll have to position ourselves directly above the freighter's location but two thousand metres shouldn't be a problem given these readings of atmospheric density." Martin said.

"Very well then. Commander Ghroc move us into position to tractor the freighter out of the atmosphere. Lieutenant Nayal tell our fighters to return to the *Nightfall* and T'Lan prepare your away team." Cole said.

"It's a Starfleet vessel!" one of the pair of figures watching the sensor feed said as they both saw the *USS Nightfall* moving into position.

"Yes." the other replied, "A fine prize indeed."

"A fine prize? That's a Starfleet heavy cruiser." the first said.

"Yes but it is a cruiser that has no more idea of our presence than any of our other prey. The ship, its contents and any of its crew that survive will be ours. Just think about the reward when we return with that in tow. You know the rules, we get our first choice of plunder and crew as slaves. Plus one percent of what's sold."

"I know." the first observer said, "But I also know what might happen if we fail."

Hamill was alone in sickbay playing her violin when she heard her combadge chime and she put the instrument down to respond.

"Sickbay. Hamill here." she said.

"Doctor Hamill it is Commander T'Lan. We have located the stasis box aboard a freighter. Please report to transporter room two immediately." T'Lan said and Hamill sighed before she answered.

"Okay I'm on my way." she said.

When Hamill reached the transporter room she found that she was the last of the away team to arrive. T'Lan and Sodyne had come straight from the bridge and they had been joined by Davis who would assist with the technical examination of the stasis box. The away team was completed by a pair of security guards who would provide protection if it was needed although all of the team members including Doctor Hamill carried phasers holstered at their waists.



"How soon do we go?" Hamill asked, "I'd like to get this over with."

"The freighter we are boarding needs to be tractored into a suitable position before the captain will permit us to beam across to it." T'Lan told her.

"Do we know if there's anyone aboard?" Hamill added.

"Nayal didn't pick up any life readings but who knows what could be inside that box?" Sodyne said.

"Hopefully you'll just have to stand back and watch while we open it doctor." Davis added.

"Oh I'll stand back. Well back." Hamill said.

"Your fear of being placed inside the stasis box is unfounded and illogical Doctor Hamill. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne has confirmed that it is too small to hold an adult human being." T'Lan told her.

"If they're in one piece maybe but what if that person had their arms and legs broken first? You could spend an eternity inside with broken limbs that never heal." Hamill suggested.

"It's forty-five centimetres on the outside Sally. Never mind breaking limbs, someone would have to put you through a blender." Sodyne replied.

"Now you're going to get her worried about whether someone would put her in head first or feet first." Davis commented and Hamill's eyes widened as she considered this.

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"In position now captain, directly above the freighter." Ghroc announced when the *Nightfall* reached its destination.

"Nayal are we still receiving telemetry from the probe?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. The freighter hasn't moved since we detected it." Nayal replied.

"Excellent. Lieutenant Commander Martin, lock tractor beam on target." Cole ordered.

"Aye captain, tractor beam is locked. I can engage when ready." Martin said.

"Engage tractor beam commander." Cole said and Martin activated one of the *Nightfall's* tractor beam emitters, projecting a highly focused gravitational field towards the freighter and enveloping the vessel in it.

"Tractor beam engaged captain. The target is still intact." Martin said when he confirmed that the centuries old vessel had not been damaged by the tractor beam, "Bringing her up."

Martins was able to pull the Suliban vessel up through the atmosphere of the gas giant steadily until it appeared through the clouds beneath the *Nightfall* and the crew finally got a clear look at it.

"Captain the ship looks like it's been modified." Nayal said when she saw what looked like extra equipment modules added to the freighter's upper hull.

"Can you tell what those are?" Cole said as he studied the image on the bridge's main viewscreen.

"No captain, there's power running through them and they're giving off a magnetic field." Nayal responded.

"What's the range to the freighter now?" Cole asked.

"Eight hundred kilometres captain." Martin answered, "The freighter's now two hundred kilometres outside the planet's atmosphere."

"Okay that's far enough. Hold it there and let's get our team aboard." Cole said.

The two observers watched as the Suliban freighter rose up from the clouds of the gas giant.

"Now?" one said.

"No, not yet. The Federation vessel's shields are still up. Wait until they decide to go aboard, then they'll drop their shields and they'll be vulnerable." the other replied before the freighter came to a halt.

"Their shields are dropping." the first observer said suddenly.

"Now!" the second snapped.

The *Nightfall's* shields were lowered to enable the away team to be beamed over to the freighter but as soon as this was done and before the starship's transporters could be engaged two things happened at once.

Firstly the equipment modules added to the freighter's dorsal hull surface exploded upwards as prepared directional antimatter charges were triggered, sending molten shrapnel into the underside of the *Nightfall*. At the same time two tractor beam emitters mounted at the prow and stern of the freighter came on line, locking onto the *Nightfall* and making sure that the two ships would remain tethered together even if the Starfleet vessel disengaged its own tractor beam.

With its shields down the *Nightfall* was vulnerable to the shrapnel that otherwise would have simply been deflected away. Instead the shrapnel tore into the hull in multiple spots and creating numerous breaches through which atmosphere began to escape before emergency containment fields could be put in place to seal them.

"Get our shields up!" Cole ordered.

"Shields inoperative captain." Martin responded as his efforts to raise the *Nightfall's* shields once more failed.

"The ventral emitters have been taken out." Nayal added.

"We're caught in a tractor beam as well captain. Helm needs additional power and we can't engage warp drive." Ghroc said.

"Red alert. Commander Martin divert power to weapons. This is an ambush and the people who set it can't be far away." Cole said and Martin nodded.

"Phasers powered captain. Quantum torpedo launchers loaded and ready." Martin replied.

"Captain I'm picking up energy readings from multiple directions. Ranges fifteen to seventy-thousand kilometres" Nayal said when the *Nightfall's* sensors suddenly began to inform her of activity close by.

"How the hell could they get that close without being seen?" Ghroc said.

"Still no visual contact. Captain I think they're cloaked." Nayal said.

"Then how are they showing up on sensors?" Cole asked.

"I think the cloaking devices are older patterns. They worked as long as the ships stayed still and ran silent. Now they're moving we can see them." Nayal suggested.

"Captain if they're cloaked then their shields are down." Martin pointed out.

"Open fire." Cole ordered and martin smiled as he reached for the *Nightfall's* weapon controls.

Martin locked onto the energy readings that the *Nightfall's* sensors had detected and prepared to fire a spread of quantum torpedoes, however before he could launch the weapons the readings fluctuated as the cloaked vessels revealed themselves and opened fire. Like the freighter, the ships now attacking the *Nightfall* were all outdated Suliban models armed with obsolete particle weapons that would have been useless against the Akira-class cruiser's shields if it had been possible to raise them. With the shields down though the Starfleet vessel was vulnerable.

"Do we still have weapons?" Cole said.

"Torpedo guidance is off line." Martin replied.

"What about phasers?" Cole added.

"Manual targeting only captain." Martin told him.

"Then use your best judgement Mister Martin. Fire at will." Cole said.

"T'Lan to bridge, what is happening?" T'Lan's voice said over the intercom.

"We're under attack T'Lan, I need you and Sodyne back up here as quickly as possible. Davis and Hamill should get back to their stations as well. Our shields are off line and if there aren't already casualties then there soon will be." Cole told her.

"You heard the captain." T'Lan told the other members of her away team.

"You two with me." Davis said to the two security guards that had been assigned to the away team and as they all exited the transporter room they followed the *Nightfall's* chief engineer towards main engineering. This required them to take a turbolift but when they reached the nearest shaft the display beside it indicated that it was out of order.

"We'll take the Jefferies tube." Davis said, pointing across the corridor to a Jefferies tube access point but as he moved towards it there was a green glow further along the corridor when a transporter was used to beam a group of four armed humanoid figures in spacesuits aboard.

"Get back!" one of the guards snapped at Davis and the man drew his phaser as he stepped in front of the engineer. The intruder saw this though and an energy blast struck the security guard before he could make use of his own weapon.

Davis and the second security guard threw themselves to the sides of the corridor and drew the phasers they were carrying before returning fire on the four space-suited figures, cutting down the closest pair of them instantly. The other two began firing rapidly towards Davis and the security guard while falling back along the corridor until they vanished and Davis tapped his combadge.

"Davis to bridge, intruder alert. We've been boarded." he said.

"Yes commander, we detected the phaser fire. How many are there?" Cole responded.

"Just two now but ensign Rodríguez is dead." Davis said.

"Okay security are on their way. You need to get to engineering. We need those shields back up as quickly as possible." Cole told him.

"That was phaser fire." Sodyne said when she and T'Lan heard the sound of firing just as they reached a turbolift to take them to the bridge and the door slid open.

"Yes and not all of it Starfleet weaponry. We are obviously being boarded."

"The stasis box. They must have come for that." Sodyne said and instead of getting into the turbolift she turned and ran back down the corridor in the direction of the physics lab.

T'Lan did not attempt to stop Sodyne from leaving, instead she got into the turbolift and turned around.

"Bridge." she said and the turbolift began to move, reaching the bridge in just a few seconds where the doors slid open again and she exited to find phasers from the bridge's weapons locker being distributed to the command crew.

"Where's Sodyne?" Cole asked when he noticed that his wife was alone.

"We heard firing and deduced that we are being boarded. She believes, logically in my opinion, that the stasis box may be their target. She has gone to protect it." T'Lan explained as she took her seat.

"That's a good point. Martin, get a unit of men to the physics lab right away." Cole said.

"Yes captain." Martin responded.

"What is our situation?" T'Lan said.

"We're surrounded by Suliban ships that are firing on us." Nayal said simply.

"They were cloaked and running silent. We can't run, our shields are down and our weapons are compromised, phasers only and just manual targeting." Cole added.

"And our fighters aren't ready to launch again so soon." Martin said.

Looking at the tactical display on the main viewscreen T'Lan could see that there were eight ships attacking the *Nightfall*, not including the freighter to which the heavy cruiser was still tethered by tractor beams emanating from it. These ranged in size from compact cell ships that required only a single pilot to the larger stealth cruisers. All of these ships were obsolete when compared to the *Nightfall* and the Starfleet vessel could have destroyed all eight with minimal effort had its attackers not taken great pains to cripple it.

"Captain I'm picking up more transporter signatures around the ship. Those intruders are getting reinforcements." Nayal said before she looked up suddenly and added, "Including in your ready room." "Martin, T'Lan, with me." Cole said and the three officers darted across the bridge to the door that led to the captain's ready room.

Cole opened the door and Martin leapt through first just as another group of four figures in spacesuits had materialised in the room. With his weapon in his hand Martin had the initiative over the intruders and he promptly fired his phaser at one of them, striking the figure before they had a chance to attack. The other three figures then turned towards Martin while he dived for cover but Cole and T'Lan opened fire from the doorway, cutting all three down before any of them could get a single shot off.

"Hopefully that's the only team they'll send here." Cole said, returning his phaser to its holster. Then he looked at Martin and added, "Now how about we show them why trying to board this ship is such a bad idea?"

For more than a century following the founding of the Federation Starfleet had maintained a dedicated marine corps but this had been disbanded during the large-scale demilitarisation of Starfleet following the signing of the first Khitomer Accords with the Klingons. Since then Federation member planets had been expected to provide entirely for their own surface defence while Starfleet's ground combat specialists had been a much smaller and more lightly equipped force intended for little more than peacekeeping duties and heavily supported from the air and space to make up for their own lack of heavy weapons. The general weakness of this strategy had been proven in later conflicts with both the Klingons and the Dominion and now Starfleet was attempting to rectify this by creating a well equipped force in readiness once more. The *Nightfall* program was a key part of this plan and the ship carried two full companies of ground combat troops as standard, all of whom were now rushing to arm themselves in the face of being boarded. As each squad donned the body armour they were issued with and armed themselves with phaser rifles they began to move through the corridors of the ship, hunting down the intruders who had beamed aboard.

The boarding action against the *Nightfall* was not limited to transporting troops aboard though. An active stasis box could not be moved using a transporter and so the only way to move it from one ship to another was to carry it. With this in mind one of the mid sized cell ships moved in close to the *Nightfall*, its approach covered by the four one-man attack craft until it was able to clamp itself to the starship's unshielded hull and here the occupants began to burn their way aboard. Like the other boarding parties the members of this one were all humanoid and wore spacesuits that concealed their identities but it was obvious that two members of this group were from a different species to the others, both of them being significantly larger and having provision for flexible tails built into their suits. Their size was matched by corresponding superior physical strength and they made use of this by wielding bulkier energy weapons powered from large power cells mounted on their backs that even a strong human would have had trouble wielding.

The cell ship had attached itself to one of the *Nightfall's* two secondary hulls and when the occupants of the craft broke through they found themselves in a room filled with unfamiliar machinery. Unknown to them this machinery formed part of the *Nightfall's* unconventional armament, a pair of mass accelerator cannons that ran almost the entire length of the ship.

Ignoring this machinery the boarding party from the cell ship exited the room and turned towards the *Nightfall's* primary hull. The initial reaction of the *Nightfall's* command crew was to establish forcefields to impede the movement of this boarding party but this was not a permanent solution as the boarders were heavily armed and used their heavy weapons to disable these. However, this not only slowed down their advance it also alerted the *Nightfall's* crew to their exact location and a platoon of ground combat troops converged on them, setting up ready to spring an ambush where the secondary hull met the saucer shaped primary hull at the front of the cruiser.

"Drop your weapons!" the platoon commander called out from behind a barrier that his men had erected rather than simply having them gun down the boarding party without warning. However, even when they realised that they had walked into a trap the figures in spacesuits did not give up and both of the larger members opened fire together, spraying the room with powerful energy blasts that forced the platoon commander to duck behind it.

At the same time the rest of the platoon returned fire with their rifles and three of the boarding party, including one of the larger figures fell immediately. This caused the other large figure to turn its weapon towards the other soldiers, spraying energy blasts as widely as possible to try and keep the Starfleet troops pinned down. The large figure could only point his weapon in one direction at once though and as he turned to face in one direction he was hit by a phaser beam from behind and the power cell for the weapon promptly exploded. The blast set the figure on fire and it flailed about in a panic despite the spacesuit it wore providing complete protection from the flames and as it panicked it was hit again in the chest and collapsed beside the other large corpse.

Sodyne was relieved to see that the Slaver stasis box was exactly where she had left it when she reached the physics laboratory and she immediately set to work establishing a defensive position that she could use to make sure that it stayed safe. Ironically the most effective way of protecting the stasis box that she could think of was to use the box itself for cover. While active the stasis field protected even the box itself from any external threat and this made it the perfect barrier to use for cover. As long as the box remained closed then no energy blast or solid projectile could even scratch it. With this in mind Sodyne dragged the box from the work bench it rested on and positioned it close by before taking cover behind it and pointing her phaser towards the doorway she had sealed behind her.

It did not take long for one of the boarding parties to reach the physics laboratory and Sodyne braced herself when she heard the banging on the outside of the door as they attempted to break in. This was followed by a flash as they simply opted to blast their way into the laboratory and the door flew inwards. Sodyne ducked behind the stasis box when this happened only to reappear a moment later just as the first of the four strong boarding party was entering the room and she opened fire. The phaser beam burned right through the space-suited figure, enveloping it in red light before vaporising it entirely and the other three members of the group suddenly jumped back out of her line of fire.

The muzzle of a weapon appeared around the frame of the ruined doorway and Sodyne ducked again before it was fired, sending a volley of energy blasts towards her. Just as she had planned though the stasis box in front of her absorbed all of this fire without any damage to the box. Rolling to one side Sodyne was able to fire around the stasis box but she lacked a clear line of fire to any of her opponents and the beam just passed through the doorway to strike the wall on the far side of the corridor. Sodyne then retreated behind the stasis box again as the figures outside the door intensified their fire into the laboratory and all around her she saw equipment being smashed by the blasts.

This barrage of fire continued until Sodyne heard the familiar sound of Starfleet phasers coming from the corridor before being followed by a period of silence.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne." a voice called out and Sodyne peered over the stasis box with her phaser in her hand just in time to see the shape of a Starfleet ground combat specialist in full body armour appear with his phaser rifle held to his shoulder, "Friendly." he added when he saw her weapon and he lowered his own before Sodyne did the same, "Are you okay? Are you injured?"

"No I'm fine." Sodyne said as she got up from behind the stasis box and looked down at it only to find that despite the repeated hits it had taken from energy weapons at close range there was not even so much as a scorch mark on the still glowing surface.



"The assault is failing." one of the observers said to the other as the reports coming in from the boarding parties painted a picture of resistance far greater than would normally be expected from a Starfleet vessel of this size and class.

"We've lost two vessels as well." the second observer replied.

"At this rate we'll lose everything." the first added, "We must retreat."

"Send the word. All boarding parties are to withdraw from the target and return to our ships. Then we'll cloak and go to warp. Instruct the freighter maintain a hold on the Starfleet ship until we've cloaked and then it should withdraw as well." the second said.

"Captain I'm picking up more transporter signatures." Nayal said.

"More reinforcements?" Ghroc commented.

"Internal sensors indicate that the transporter signatures are outbound." T'Lan said as she studied the sensor readings for herself.

"Confirmed captain. Security and ground forces are reporting that the enemy are pulling out." Martin added.

"What's the status of the physics lab? Do they have the stasis box?" Cole asked.

"Negative captain. Lieutenant Reilly reports that his platoon have secured the physics lab. The lab itself is badly damaged but the stasis box and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne are just fine." Martin said.

"Captain the enemy ships are cloaking again." Nayal said.

"Track them. Lieutenant Commander Martin continue to engage them with phasers." Cole ordered.

"The enemy ships are going to warp. Their cloaking devices will prevent us from tracking them at long range." T'Lan said.

"Damn it!" Cole hissed, "What about the freighter?"

"We're still caught in the tractor beam captain." Ghroc said.

"Then we'll send a team over to deactivate it and take control of the stasis box." Cole said, "T'Lan expand your team to include a platoon of troops and take an assault shuttle over there."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied before the *Nightfall* shuddered slightly.

"What was that?" Cole said.

"The tractor beam has released us captain." Ghroc told him.

"The freighter is moving off." Nayal added.

"Can we lock our tractor beam onto it?" Cole said, looking over his shoulder towards Martin.

"Negative captain. Target lock is still offline. I could manually target our phasers to-" the tactical officer responded.

"No commander." Cole interrupted, "Without automatic targeting it would be too easy to destroy the ship instead of disable it and we'd risk losing the stasis box into the gas giant. We'll let them go and see if we can figure out where they're heading to. There are still two wrecked ships out there and with any luck there'll be enough of their navigation systems left for Lieutenant Commander Davis to pull some data from. Plus if any of the intruders were left behind then I want them interrogating. This attack was well planned and resourced. Whoever carried it out needs to be stopped before they strike again."

Although the mysterious boarding parties had been massively outmatched as soon as the *Nightfall's* crew had been able to fully mobilise to defend their vessel there had still been casualties and these were taken to sickbay where Hamill and her staff treated them. Hamill herself was treating security guard who had suffered burns from a glancing disruptor hit when Cole entered to speak with her.

"Doctor may I have a word?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm about done here." she responded before handing the dermal regenerator she had been using to her assistant, "Dress his wound and then he can go." she told the assistant.

Cole and Hamill then made their way into Hamill's office where they sat down.

"So what can I do for you captain?" Hamill asked.

"I'd like to know about the intruders." Cole told her.

"Well I'm afraid that I can't help you with that captain. I haven't seen any of them." Hamill replied and Cole frowned.

"Haven't any of their wounded been brought to you?" he said and Hamill shook her head.

"No, I just assumed that any prisoners were taken to the brig." she said.

"No, no-one was taken to the brig and if no-one was brought here either then that means that they must have taken all their injured with them." Cole said, "We do have a number of bodies though. Lieutenant Commander Martin is having them all moved to cargo hold five. I'd like you to take a look at them."

"Of course captain. Just give me a moment to grab my medical kit." Hamill replied and she got up to fetch a case marked with a caduceus, the two intertwined snakes that were the symbol of medicine before they both left sickbay.

As Cole had said the bodies of the intruders who had been killed before the survivors withdrew to the Suliban ships had been moved to one of the *Nightfall's* cargo bays were they had been lined up, the equipment they had been carrying laid out beside them along with a note of where the body had been recovered. Martin had been supervising this process himself and he greeted Cole and Hamill when they entered the large room. All of the bodies had been left in their spacesuits and helmets so as of yet their species remained unknown. The injuries that they had suffered had all been inflicted by phasers so wounds had been cauterised and there were no blood stains on the outside of the suits that would give any hints to what species the wearers were either.

"You're certain they're all dead?" Hamill asked as she took a tricorder from her medical kit and opened it.

"As sure as anyone can be without cracking the suits open. I gave the order for them to be left sealed just in case the person inside was alive but needed a different atmosphere to us. They may have attacked us in Suliban ships but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are Suliban inside those suits." Martin explained before he looked towards the two much larger bodies and added, "And those two definitely don't look like they're Suliban. I know there was a group of them that played around with genetic engineering a couple of hundred years ago but to make that sort of change seems ridiculous."

"Keeping the suits on was the right call." Hamill said while she scanned the rows of bodies, searching for any signs of biological activity that would indicate they were still alive despite all of them being motionless. There were numerous species in the galaxy that could enter a near death state that was difficult to tell from actual death and Hamill took care to watch for any of these. However, none of the readings she took indicated that the wearers of the spacesuits were anything other than the corpses that they appeared to be and so she walked up to the closest of them and crouched down beside it, "I'm going to remove the helmet." she said as she looked down into the darkened visor that concealed the face of whoever was inside.

Feeling around the rim of the helmet where it joined the spacesuit's collar she found the pair of clasps that kept it in place and she released these at the same time. Turning the helmet slightly to one side Hamill was then able to lift off to reveal the face of the man underneath and both Cole and Martin moved closer to see this for themselves.

"Romulan." Cole said when he saw the distinctively pointed ears and sloping eyebrows of the man inside the spacesuit.

"Could be Vulcan." Martin pointed out but Hamill shook her head.

"No, I think the captain's right. This man is Romulan." she said.

"How can you tell?" Martin asked and Hamill turned the dead man's head slightly.

"There are the remains of marking down each side of his face." she said.

"He was in mourning for someone." Cole said, "Nayal had similar marks when I first met her and then again after Bradley Hamilton was killed."

"The helmsman of the original *Nightfall*?" Martin commented and Cole nodded.

"That's right." he said, "You don't see too many Romulans this far from the Free State though. I wonder what brought them out here or why they'd be using Suliban ships instead of their own."

"They aren't all Romulan captain." Hamill said and Cole and Martin looked at her to see that she had moved on to the next corpse and removed its helmet to reveal a face that was all too human, "I think we just have the usual mixed bag of criminal outcasts using whatever equipment they could get hold of."

"I suppose that explains the big guys. So who are they?" Martin said.

"Let's find out." Hamill replied, getting up and walking along the rows of bodies until she came to the two much larger ones with tails and she crouched beside the first before releasing the helmet. Removing the helmet exposed a feline head with hairless ears and a heavily scarred face that caused Martin to wince.

"Oh great that's just what we need." he said, "Kzinti."

"There can't be too many of them." Cole responded and Hamill looked around at him.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because if there were then they'd have come aboard with this lot." Martin said, "Kzinti warriors don't like being held back from a fight. They'd rip you apart if you tried."

"So we have a collection of renegades with some obsolete ships who just so happen to have a Slaver stasis box as well. They must have a base of operations somewhere so the question is where is it?"

The cloud of dust was dense enough that it blotted out the light of even nearby stars and left the space station in almost total darkness, the only illumination coming from the station itself and the ships docked there. Like the ships used for the attack on the *Nightfall* the space station was Suliban in origin, a helix left over from the activities of the group known more than two centuries earlier as The Cabal. Suliban vessels were not the only craft docked with the helix now though, there were half a dozen ships from other species as well, including two civilian Federation vessels.

"The station is hailing us." one of the observers said and he activated the main viewscreen to show an image being transmitted from the station.

"Our sensors show you are two ships short and those you still have are damaged. What happened?" the elderly Bajoran who appeared on the screen said to the two observers and they stepped forwards to stand where the bridge camera could pick them up, revealing them to be a pair of slender human women. Both of them possessed tanned skin and the similarity in their appearance went beyond the identical form fitting clothing they wore to their facial features, suggesting that they were closely related to one another.

"The stasis box lured in another ship." one of them said.

"Ah, you have another. Maybe I was wrong to think you were not up to the job of commanding a squadron. Bring what you have to me and we'll see what's inside." the Bajoran said before the viewscreen returned to showing the exterior of the helix and the two women looked at one another nervously.

"Why didn't you tell him we didn't have the box?" the first of them said.

"You saw what happened. Aran didn't give me the chance. We'll just have to hope he's in a good mood when we get to his chamber." the other said.



## 5.

When their ship docked with the helix the two women were met by a large green-skinned Orion who looked down at them while he spoke.

"Mister Kar is waiting for you. Follow me." he said before turning around and walking away, expecting the women to follow him.

"This is a good sign. He only sent one." one of the women whispered to the other as they followed the Orion, "If he was angry he'd have sent at least four to drag us to his chamber."

"He still doesn't know we don't have anything for him." the other woman pointed out before the Orion halted outside a door guarded by a pair of Klingons and a Ktarian.

"I have Lyra and Lyssa to see Mister Kar." the Orion announced and the Ktarian stepped forwards and smiled.

"Raise your hands ladies. I must be sure you are not smuggling any weapons." he said and the two women both raised their hands, one of them snorting.

"As if these outfits could conceal anything." she said as the Ktarian walked behind her before placing his hands on her sides.

"I did not get to my position without being thorough." he said.

"Thoroughly depraved Oskal." the woman replied as his hands began to move.

"Let's just say I enjoy the perks of my job Lyra." he said and he tightened his grip for a moment, squeezing her flesh. After giving the pretence of physically searching the two women Oskal unhooked a PADD from his belt and used it to open the door to Kar Aran's quarters and pointed inside, "After you ladies." he said.

As Lyra and Lyssa passed through the doorway Oskal and the two Klingons followed them before they all halted a short distance inside. Kar Aran's quarters were filled with reminders of the crimes he and his subordinates had committed, from stolen objects he had chosen to keep to items that he had taken from people he had killed. This included body parts and along one wall were a row of transparent cases in which the heads of Cardassians floated in preserving fluid. Just one corner of the room had been kept clear of these keepsakes and instead here there was a transparent cylinder that stretched from the floor to the ceiling and had a door that currently stood open to allow access to the inside.

"Ah Lyra, Lyssa, there you are." Kar said as he entered the room from an adjoining one, each step he took accompanied by the sound of the powered leg braces that he used to walk, "Now where is my newest stasis box? I don't see it with you."

The two women looked at one another nervously for a moment.

"The crew of the Starfleet ship provided more resistance than we expected." Lyra said.

"We disabled their shields as planned and beamed aboard boarding parties but they reported a much higher level of security than normal." Lyssa added.

"Protecting the box no doubt. Starfleet knows how valuable they and their contents are." Kar commented,

"But I need to be certain." he added and he walked up to Lyssa and stared right into her face, "You will tell me the truth won't you Lyssa?" he asked.

"Of course Mister Kar." she replied and he smiled.

"Good. But I need to make certain you have adequate incentive." he said before he looked at Lyra and added, "Put that one in the booth."

"No!" Lyssa cried out as the two Klingons grabbed hold of the startled Lyra and began dragging her towards the transparent cylinder, "You don't need to do this. I'll tell you everything."

"Of course you will Lyssa and this way you'll tell me quickly." Kar responded as Lyra was forced into the cylinder and the Klingons slammed the door shut while Oskal took up a position beside a small console that stood close by.

"The agoniser is ready Mister Kar." he said and Kar nodded.

"Begin." he said and Oskal pressed a button on the console that activated the agoniser booth, filling it with light. The moment he did this Lyra shrieked in pain and collapsed against the side of the booth until the light vanished as the booth shut down again.

"Please no! Let her out." Lyssa pleaded but Kar had other ideas.

"Set the booth for five second pulses at ten second intervals." he said and Oskal worked the controls before the agoniser booth lit up again and Lyra let out another scream as the pain raced through her body, "Now tell me exactly what happened Lyssa. Why do you not have the stasis box from aboard that ship?"

"It was like we told you, the box was too well defended. The survivors of the boarding parties said that there were hundreds of Starfleet security officers aboard and they were better equipped than normal. Most had body armour that could stop disruptor fire up to about levels six or seven." Lyssa said.

"And the two cell ships that you lost?" Kar said.

"We disabled the Starfleet vessel's torpedoes but it still had its phasers. The crew must have been firing them manually. Now let Lyra out. Please, I'm begging you." Lyssa said, looking at Lyra as she continued to scream as the agoniser booth stimulated every nerve in her body.

"Do you remember what you and your sister were doing when I found you Lyssa?" Kar asked but instead of giving her the chance to respond he continued, "You were selling your bodies on the streets, then drugging the people who paid you for your services and robbing them. I was most impressed by the way you often made sure you had the means to re-enter the residences of your victims so you could return later on and rob them again as soon as they had replaced what you had already taken. But then you got too ambitious and you robbed a member of the Orion Syndicate and they sent me to kill you. I was planning to leave the syndicate anyway and you were a welcome addition to my group but now I think we've come to the same situation again. You are both excellent thieves but giving you command of a squadron was pushing things too far. Now that needs to be rectified."

"Whatever you say, I'll do anything you ask. Just let my sister out of that thing." Lyssa responded.

"Oh no Lyssa, you see I need leverage to make certain that you come back with my stasis box. I'll give you a cell ship with the best cloaking device we have. I want you to return to that Starfleet ship, find the stasis box and bring it back to me. In the meantime your sister will stay right where she is."

"But it'll take days to get to the Starfleet ship and back again." Lyssa protested.

"Yes I'm sure it will. Perhaps you should get going now. I doubt your sister will appreciate you delaying like this." Kar replied and he smiled.

The *Nightfall's* senior officers gathered in the starship's briefing room to discuss their situation and Cole looked along the table.

"Okay so where are we at?" he asked.

"I've run a check on the ships that attacked us captain. None of them appear in Starfleet records so they must be ones that were never encountered previously." Nayal said.

"What about an examination of the physical wreckage?" T'Lan added and she looked at Davis and the engineer sighed.

"There's not much left of the cell ships Commander Martin shot down. Remember that they were considered pretty durable two hundred years ago, nowadays they aren't even as durable as one of our shuttle pods. Our phasers blasted them to pieces. A few bits and pieces have survived but so far my engineers haven't found anything that would store navigation or sensor data that we could use to track their flight path back to a base of any kind." Davis said, "On a more positive note about half of the hull breaches have been fully repaired and our shields and weapon targeting systems are functional again so at least we can defend ourselves if they come back."

"Captain I'd like to recommend keeping our shields up just in case. I know it'll consume a lot of power but if they've got any more of those cell ships just drifting out there waiting it will mean that they can't get the drop on us again." Martin suggested and Cole nodded.

"Agreed. I think holding at yellow alert should suffice. Nayal I want a pair of our fighters on permanent standby for immediate launch. They may scatter if they see us coming but our fighters should be able to keep up with them well enough to maintain a lock while they're running their drives." he said.

"Are we definitely going after them captain?" Hamill asked.

"I don't see that we have any choice doctor. We know that they have a stasis box and they could use that to locate others, including the one that Professor Denning and his team have. We may have held off their fleet but his transport couldn't even stand up to a single cell ship." Cole answered.

"It is possible that this group has more than one stasis box. Their attack was well planned and efficiently carried out. Logic suggests that this was not the first time they have attempted such an attack." T'Lan pointed out.

"Wait, does this mean that there'll be even more of those things aboard?" Hamill asked.

"Captain if they have more than one stasis box then that's all the more reason to find their base. Who knows what could be inside any of them. They may also be able to lead us to other Slaver sites." Sodyne said, ignoring Hamill's comment.

"Right now we don't have any idea of where that might be though." Ghroc said.

"But we do have a means to find them." T'Lan said.

"We do?" Nayal asked.

"The stasis box in our physics lab." Sodyne said with a smile.

"Precisely. At this moment the box appears inert once more but if we follow the vector along which the enemy craft departed the Remnir Major system then it should begin to glow once we get within a light year of them." T'Lan said.

"Wait, won't their box glow as well? That'll warn them that we're coming." Hamill said.

"Not if they do have more than one box close together." Sodyne said, "All of their boxes will already be glowing if they're less than a light year apart."

"So if we change course a few times once the box starts glowing we can map the points where the reaction begins and ends. Use those to construct a spherical model that has them all on the surface and these raiders should be dead centre of that." Ghroc said.

"As long as they're stationary and have more than one box in the same place." Nayal said.

"Right now it's the best plan we have. How long until we can get under way?" Cole said.

"Do you want all the holes patching captain?" Davis asked and Cole nodded.

"Yes. I don't want a weak spot that can be exploited by a fluke hit or worse yet a hole big enough for one of those cell ships to just fly right through." he said.

"In that case it'll take another thirty-six to forty-eight hours." Davis said, "Maybe less if I can borrow some people from security and sciences."

"That shouldn't be a problem for me captain. Our ground troops can take over the security patrols easily." Martin said.

"And my department isn't doing much right now either." Sodyne added.

"Okay. Lieutenant Commanders Martin and Sodyne please provide Lieutenant Commander Davis with the duty schedules for your departments so he can see who's available to him. I don't want any more than a quarter of your departments being seconded though, just in case we need their expertise." Cole said, "Now unless anyone has anything else to add I think we can end this meeting here. We all have a lot of work to do."

"Warp four? Are you kidding me? We've got ships that can run much faster than that." Lyssa said when Oskal showed her the details of the cell ship she was supposed to fly back to the *Nightfall*.

"Yes but Mister Kar's orders were quite clear. You are to be issued the ship with the most effective cloaking device and that is this one. It's larger size means there is more room to transport the stasis box and its cloaking device has been upgraded with parts taken from that Romulan scout ship we captured two years ago. As long as you keep below warp four you should remain invisible to the Starfleet vessel's sensors."

"But it'll add three days onto my travel time and my sister will be stuck inside that agoniser booth the entire time." Lyssa said and Oskal smiled.

"There may be another way to get her out you know. Just tell Aran that you don't think you can do the job." he said but Lyssa frowned.

"Then I'll be the one in the booth." she said.

"For a few hours maybe, but if you and your sister are of no use to Aran then I'm sure I can convince him to give the pair of you to me. Keep me happy and you'll never need to worry about his temper again I can assure you." Oskal said and Lyssa glared at him.

"Oskal you perverted freak, I'm sure I speak for Lyra as well as myself when I say that a week in the agoniser booth would be preferable to having to share a bed with you for even a few minutes. Now unlock the controls to that ship so I can get this over with." she said.

"If that's the way you want it." Oskal replied, taking out a PADD and he tapped the screen with his finger to release the cell ship to Lyssa's control.

"And the phaser?" Lyssa added, holding out her hand and Oskal handed her a phaser that was obviously of Federation origin.

"It matches current Starfleet issue but it's a civilian model that is limited to stun and thermal effects only. Our engineers say it's more trouble than it's worth to replace the parts to remove the restriction." the Ktarian told her.

"It'll do. I only need to steal the stasis box, not carry out a massacre." Lyssa said before she turned away from Oskal.

Lyssa then climbed into the cell ship and made her way to the front of the vessel. Although larger than the smallest of cell ships this vessel could still be operated by a single individual and Lyssa closed the hatch from the main flight console. Using the cell ship's thrusters, Lyssa detached the craft from the helix and moved away in a direction that would take her back to the Remnir Major system where she had last encountered the *USS Nightfall*. Her speed was limited inside the dust cloud but as soon as she exited this into open space she accelerated, first engaging her impulse drive and then going to warp. At the same time as she accelerated Lyssa also activated the vessel's cloaking device and the craft vanished from all observation.

"Captain we're good to go." Davis said into the intercom when his console in engineering showed that the damage to the *Nightfall* had been fully repaired.

"Two hours ahead of schedule." T'Lan commented, "Very efficient."

"Captain I recommend limiting our speed to avoid overshooting." Sodyne added from the science station.

"Do we have a course laid in?" Cole asked and Ghroc nodded.

"Yes captain. Nayal's given me their exit vector and it's locked in." he said.

"Tactical?" Cole added.

"Shields are up, phasers are powered and all torpedo bays are loaded captain." Martin told him.

"Very well. Commander Ghroc prepare to engage at warp five." Cole said and then he glanced at Sodyne,

"Does that suit you Sodyne?"

"Yes captain. I'm monitoring the stasis box from here and I'll let you know if it reacts." she said.

"Excellent. Mister Ghroc, engage." Cole ordered.

"Aye captain." Ghroc responded as he turned the manual controls in his hands and the *Nightfall* rapidly accelerated to warp five, more than two hundred times the speed of light.

"Lieutenant Nayal are there any signs of activity anywhere around us?" Cole asked.

"Negative captain. If they did leave any cloaked ships around to keep an eye on us then they aren't following. We're all alone out here." Nayal answered.

"And are there any suggestions of where the raiders may be based ahead of us?" T'Lan added.

"No. The nearest star system along this heading is more than two hundred light years away." Nayal said.

"Then they must have turned off at some point. Hopefully they're still close enough that we'll pick them up from their stasis box." Cole said.

"We should consider how far you intend to follow this course if we fail to discover the raiders' base." T'Lan said.

"I think we can keep going for some distance yet. Professor Denning is expecting us within the next two weeks so we'll review things when we get to a point where we need to go to maximum warp to make that rendezvous." Cole said.



Lyssa's sensors detected the *Nightfall's* warp field a considerable distance away and she saw immediately that the Starfleet cruiser was heading straight for her. At first she was concerned that the *Nightfall* had already detected her but then she realised that the starship was just travelling along the same course that her squadron had withdrawn along.

"You're making it easy for me." she said to herself as she focused on the image of the *Nightfall* on her instruments but then she noticed the accompanying energy readings and mixed in with the *Nightfall's* warp field she saw the telltale electromagnetic signature of an active deflector shield, the strength of which was clearly strong enough to block the transporter system aboard Lyssa's cell ship. However, over the years Lyssa had learned ways of getting around this problem and she continued to fly towards the *Nightfall*. The Starfleet vessel continued to travel along the same heading as Lyssa's cell ship drew closer, indicating that the cloaking device fitted to it was as effective as hoped. If it hadn't then just one torpedo would have shattered the vessel faster than she could raise her shields. Taking full advantage of this Lyssa flew her cell ship as close to the *Nightfall* as she could manage without their warp fields merging before she turned sharply, flinging the cell ship around the much larger *Nightfall* and she felt herself being pulled to one side as the inertial dampening field proved unable to counter all of the excessive g-force to which she was exposed as the cell ship spun. This sharp manoeuvre allowed Lyssa to position the cell ship right behind the *Nightfall* where she was just about able to match its speed as well as its heading.

There were two ways of transporting through a deflector shield. The first of these was to isolate the frequency on which it was operating and use that to time the transport process to one of the inevitable low points in the cycle. However, this was so complex that it even made using transporters difficult when the only shield involved was aboard the ship doing the transporting and so this left Lyssa with just one option. She needed to disrupt the *Nightfall's* shields.

Lyssa knew that this was impossible without revealing her presence and that it would inevitably involve the sacrifice of the cell ship but with her sister's suffering acting to spur her on she was willing to take the risk. Pushing the warp drive of the cell ship past the danger level, Lyssa started to close the gap between her and the *Nightfall* to the point where the two ships' warp fields began to overlap.

"Captain I'm picking up a disruption to our warp field. We're losing speed. Warp four point five-eight. Five-seven." Ghroc said when he noticed the *Nightfall's* speed dropping slightly due to the imbalance in the ship's warp field.

"Confirmed. Our velocity is decreasing." T'Lan added, "The drop is slight but noticeable."

"Bridge to engineering, is there something wrong with one of the warp cores?" Cole said into the intercom.

"No captain. I've got one of them offline for a service but the other three are all running at one hundred percent. I could give you warp eight without any trouble." Davis said.

"Then can you explain why our speed is dropping when we are only doing warp five?" Cole said.

"One moment captain." Davis said as he started to check the instruments in engineering, "Captain I've confirmed the drop in speed but there's nothing wrong with our warp drive. The nanite hive confirms that the power is reaching our nacelles without any drop. The source of the disruption must be external."

"Sodyne report." Cole said.

"Nothing captain. No black holes. No stellar particle streams and no subspace disturbances. There's nothing out there that would be bleeding off our speed." Sodyne reported after studying the *Nightfall's* sensor readings.

"Captain we're down to warp four point five now." Ghroc said, "Do you want me to increase power and try to get it back to warp five?"

"If there is a fault that has somehow escaped detection then increasing the amount of power to our warp drive could cause an overload." T'Lan pointed out.

"Yes, it's too risky. Mister Ghroc maintain the current amount of power to the warp drive and let us know if we drop as far as warp four." Cole ordered, "Everyone else figure out what the hell is going on."

Lyssa smiled when she saw that the *Nightfall's* speed was dropping. This did not make the strain on her own warp drive any less though as the warp field surrounding her cell ship also suffered from the interaction with that of the Starfleet cruiser. This forced her to push more power into her own engines as she closed the gap further so that the forward edge of her warp field came into contact with the *Nightfall's* aft shield.

"Captain I'm picking up a disruption in our aft shield." Martin announced, "It looks like there's a ship trying to force its way through."

"There's nothing on sensors. She must be cloaked." Nayal added.

"Weapons, can we shoot her down?" Cole asked.

"Negative captain. The target is in a dead spot for phasers and way too close to risk a torpedo shot." Martin replied.

"Helm increase power to maximum then-" Cole began before Nayal interrupted.

"Explosion to stern." she said.

"Captain we're picking up speed again. Warp five." Ghroc said.

"The vessel attempting to pierce our shields must have exploded." T'Lan said.

"Confirmed captain. There's debris behind us. Sensor indicate the composition to be identical to the material used in the Suliban cell ships that attacked us at Remnir Major. I think the warp core breached. The warp core failure dropped the other ship out of warp and took it clear before the breach destroyed it." Sodyne said.

"Then we can be thankful for the laws of physics limited non-warp travel to the speed of light or we'd have been caught in that blast." Cole said, "Can you tell whether anyone got off the ship?"

"Captain if I didn't know that it had been a ship then I'd be telling you it was just a cloud of dust. An antimatter blast doesn't leave much behind. The ship could have been operating on remote." Sodyne replied.

"Judging by the scale of the disruption to our warp field and shields I would say that it was a shuttle of some kind. A cell ship rather than a cruiser or freighter." T'Lan said as she checked the system logs for herself.

"That means no more than a handful of crew aboard." Martin said.

"Commander I want security on standby." Cole said, "A cloaked cell ship can't fire its particle cannon so that only leaves a boarding action. The crew were probably hoping to get through our shields so they could beam aboard. Some of them may have been successful and if they were then they're bound to show themselves sooner or later."

Just three seconds later and Lyssa would have been killed when the cell ship's engines failed but she was able to pierce the *Nightfall's* shields and beam aboard undetected right before the warp core failed. Only vaguely familiar with the layout of an Akira-class starship she had used the cell ship's transporter to beam into the aft weapons pod with her phaser and a shoulder bag of tools and other useful equipment where it was unlikely that there would be any crew members. The reports from the boarding parties sent aboard earlier indicated that the stasis box was being kept in a laboratory in the cruiser's primary hull so this meant she would have to make her way along most of the length of the ship without being detected. More significantly though she needed a way to get off the *Nightfall* once she had the stasis box in her possession. Fortunately Akira-class starships were well known for their large hangar capacity and Lyssa expected that Starfleet would be able to provide her with a means of escape.

The weapons pod was mounted between the *Nightfall's* two secondary hulls, enabling it to be easily replaced if the ship was upgraded and Lyssa picked an exit at random to make her way from the pod to one of the boom-like secondary hulls and from there turned towards the front of the ship. She moved cautiously through the corridors of the ship and halted when she heard the sound of someone working in an alcove not far ahead. Grasping her phaser in her hand she crept closer and saw that there was one of the *Nightfall's* crew working there. Lyssa was pleased to see that it was a woman who appeared to be roughly the same size as her and she put her phaser away before reaching into the bag over her shoulder and taking out a hypospray instead. With this in her hand she crept right up behind the woman and jabbed the tip of the device to the back of her neck and injected the contents into her.

The sedative took effect quicker than the woman could attempt to call for help and she collapsed in a heap at Lyssa's feet. Taking a look around to make sure that the corridor was empty, Lyssa then grabbed hold of the woman and dragged her away from the alcove into a nearby storeroom where she stripped her of her uniform. This uniform was not quite Starfleet standard, the design and colouration was exactly as would be expected but in addition to this there was a detailed patch on one sleeve that showed the wearer to be a member of the *Nightfall's* crew. This meant that if Lyssa had tried to bring a disguise of her own she would have been spotted easily. Then after swapping this uniform for her own clothes Lyssa left the unconscious woman bound and gagged as she exited the storeroom, pinning a replica combadge to her chest as she did so. This last detail was important. The combadge could be used to track the wearer and Lyssa did not want the crew to be able to find her easily so instead she threw the real combadge back into the alcove where the female engineer had been working as she continued towards the *Nightfall's* primary hull.

"Davis to bridge." Davis' voice said over the intercom.

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

"Bridge I'm getting some interesting data from our nanite hive." Davis said, referring to the nanites that swarmed throughout the ship and provided an additional means of gathering data on and maintaining other systems, "They say that someone just beamed aboard."

"My consoles didn't pick up a transporter signature." Martin commented when he heard this.

"Neither did mine." Nayal added.

“The transport took place while we were at warp and would have originated very close to our nacelles. A low energy transport would have been masked by this.” T’Lan said, “However, our nanites are able to differentiate more easily between different sources of local energy emissions as their detection of Iconian gateway operation proved.”

“Commander Davis, where was the source of the transport signature?” Cole asked.

“In the weapons pod captain.” Davis said.

“I’m sending in a team now.” Martin said.

## 7.

Despite not knowing the exact layout of the *Nightfall*, Lyssa was still able to make her way along the secondary hull rapidly and she made it to the saucer section just in time to hear the sound of running feet. Quickly dashing around a corner in the opposite direction Lyssa looked back around it to see a team of security officers take up a position to block access to the secondary hull on this level before half of them headed into it.

"You'll have to move faster than that to catch me boys." Lyssa muttered to herself quietly before she turned around and headed off in search of the laboratory where she had been told the Slaver stasis box was being kept.

The problem Lyssa faced was that she knew nothing about the location of any of the science laboratories aboard even an ordinary Akira-class starship, let alone one of the ships of the *Nightfall* program. For anyone aboard a Starfleet vessel legitimately there were numerous computer access panels that could be used to call up a floor plan or ask for directions but Lyssa could not use any of these, nor could she simply stop another member of the crew and ask for directions. The solution to this problem seemed to be to make use of Starfleet's easily identifiable uniforms and simply follow the first person she saw wearing the blue collar of the science division, hoping that they would lead her to the right area of the ship where she could just read the purpose of each laboratory off the signs posted outside.

The first person that Lyssa saw in a science division uniform was a woman just as she was entering a turbolift and she called out to her.

"Hold that lift please!" she shouted and Doctor Hamill placed her hand in the door to prevent it closing.

"Hurry up, I was just about to give my destination." Hamill said as Lyssa entered the turbolift car and she removed her hand from the door to allow it to slid shut. However, when she had the chance to look at Lyssa properly she frowned, "Wait, who are you? I've not seen you around and if you were new then I'd have received your medical files with your picture." she said.

Before Hamill could attempt to raise the alarm Lyssa struck out with her fist, punching Hamill in the abdomen and causing her to double over in pain. Then she forced Hamill to the floor while reaching into her bag for a pair of plastic cable ties that had been looped together to form a set of improvised handcuffs and before Hamill could recover enough to try and fight back Lyssa bound her arms behind her back.

"Okay doc here's a question for you." Lyssa said as she lifted Hamill into a sitting position and pressed the muzzle of her phaser against the back of the doctor's neck, "I've heard that Starfleet phasers used to be lethal even on a stun setting when pressed right up against a target's spine or skull like this, something to do with destroying the body's ability to act automatically instead of just consciously. Now that problem is supposed to have been eliminated now but how long will you be paralysed for if I fire this thing now on maximum stun?"

"About eight months." Hamill gasped.

"Right, about eight months in which you can't do anything for yourself and that's assuming you don't draw the short straw and the wrong blood vessel in your brain goes pop and you never wake up. So are you going to do exactly what I say?" Lyssa said and Hamill nodded.

"Yes. I won't resist." she replied.

"Good." Lyssa said, "Now take us to the physics lab. What I want is there."

"Deck four." Hamill said as clearly as she was able and the turbolift began to move.

It did not take long for the turbolift to reach the deck on which the physics laboratory was located but by the time the door slid open again Lyssa had lifted Hamill to her feet and was standing right behind her so that the cable ties binding the doctor as well as the phaser pressed to her spine were both hidden from casual observation.

"Off you go doctor, nice and casual towards the lab." Lyssa said, guiding Hamill out of the turbolift.

Hamill did as she was told and began to walk towards the physics laboratory, her mind focused on the weapon currently pressing against her back and hoping that they would happen to pass a patrol of either some of the *Nightfall's* security guards or ground troops that might notice something was amiss and rescue her. Unfortunately at that time the *Nightfall's* forces were focused on sealing off and searching the secondary hulls for Lyssa, not realising that she had been able to slip away before a cordon could be established and they encountered no-one in the corridors in the short walk from the turbolift to the laboratory.

"This is it." Hamill said, coming to a halt outside the door to the laboratory and Lyssa jabbed the control panel beside the door. However, it remained closed.

"Why won't it open?" she asked.

"Because the door has been security sealed. Everyone knows you're after the stasis box so the captain ordered increased security." Hamill said.



"Then you open it." Lyssa ordered, "You're a doctor and from the look of those lieutenant commander's pips on your collar you're the chief medical officer for this ship. You can get into any room if it's a medical emergency." and she pressed the muzzle of her phaser harder against Hamill's back, "Now open it." "Computer open physics lab door. Emergency medical authorisation Hamill delta four-two." Hamill said and when the door slid open Lyssa shoved her through it, getting out of the corridor as quickly as she could.

"Captain we have a problem in the physics lab." Sodyne said when the feed from the lab that she was continually monitoring through her headset showed Lyssa and Hamill enter the room and it was obvious that Hamill was being held hostage by the other woman.

"What sort of problem?" Cole asked.

"This sort." Sodyne said and she put the feed on the main view screen.

"Damn, that's the doctor." Ghroc said.

"T'Lan, you have the conn." Cole said as he leapt to his feet, "Martin, Sodyne, with me." he added as Martin tossed him a phaser from the weapons locker.

"Incredible." Lyssa said as she looked at the stasis box, "I can never get over how ancient these things are yet they always look brand new." then she looked around the room until she saw a set of portable antigravs that she could use to move the box. Quickly retrieving these from the wall mounted rack they were stored on Lyssa fixed them to the four corners of the stasis box and then looked around towards the door where Hamill stood watching her nervously.

"Okay doc I can't push this box and keep an eye on you at the same time so you're going to have to get in the box." she said and Hamill's eyes widened in fear.

"No please." she said, "You could just stun me and leave me here, I can't go in the box."

"I don't care about what you think you can or cannot do. You're going in the box." Lyssa said and she strode across the room to the doorway and grabbed hold of Hamill by the arm before beginning to drag her across the room.

"No! No please! You can't!" Hamill screamed as she struggled to get free but with her arms bound she was defenceless against the other woman.

"Just get in the damned box!" Lyssa yelled as they reached the stasis box and she attempted to open it with one hand while still keeping hold of the struggling Hamill with the other and the two women both collapsed in a heap on the floor, "Calm down," Lyssa said as she drew her phaser again and pointed it into Hamill's face, "Stop struggling or I'll shoot you and lift you into the box myself."

"No!" Hamill cried out as she tried in vain to wriggle free and Lyssa was on the verge of carrying out her threat to shoot the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer when all of a sudden the door to the physics laboratory slid open.

"Starfleet security! Drop the weapon and release your hostage!" Martin yelled out as he, Cole and Sodyne all pointed phasers towards Lyssa.

Surprised by the sudden and unexpected arrival of the three armed Starfleet officers Lyssa looked at them and then instinctively began to raise her own weapon towards them. With no way of knowing how the phaser was set Cole instantly decided that he had no choice but to use force himself and he fired his phaser without calling out another warning.

The bright red beam cross the physics lab instantly and hit Lyssa in the chest, causing her to collapse unconscious on the floor, the phaser sliding from her grip.

"Sally, are you hurt?" Cole said, holstering his phaser as he rushed to her side while Martin headed for the unconscious Lyssa and Sodyne dashed to the stasis box.

"It doesn't look like the box is damaged." Sodyne said and Hamill glared at her for a moment.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking captain. Could you untie me though?" she said, looking at Cole again and he nodded.

"You located the intruder?" T'Lan said when Cole and Sodyne returned to the bridge.

"Yes, a woman disguised in one of our uniforms complete with patch. She must have stolen it when she came aboard." Cole replied as he took his seat at the centre of the bridge.

"That makes sense captain. Security reported finding one of our crew stunned in a storeroom close to the weapons pod. They're taking her to sickbay now." Nayal told him.

"How is the doctor?" Ghroc added, glancing over his shoulder.

"Shaken but she'll recover. She was going to head back to her shift but I sent her to her quarters to recover." Cole answered, "Martin has taken the woman who took her hostage to the brig. As soon as she comes round I'm going to go and see what she has to say for herself."

"That woman better watch out that the doctor doesn't put a gypsy curse on her." Nayal commented and Ghroc winced.

"Don't even mention that." he said, "I don't think I'll ever forget that one she put on me."

"I'm sure that Doctor Hamill has better things to do than invoke the dark arts on people." Cole said, knowing that the supposed 'curse' placed upon Ghroc after he had made several disparaging remarks about her musical ability was in fact the result of manipulation of the *Nightfall's* nanite hive by T'Lan, a secret the pair of them had kept from the rest of the crew.

"In the meantime are we to continue on this heading?" T'Lan asked.

"I don't see why not. Knowing where the raiders' base is could strengthen my hand when I question that woman." Cole answered before the intercom sounded.

"Martin to bridge. Is Captain Cole there yet?"

"Cole here commander, what can I do for you?" Cole responded.

"Captain I think you should come down to security. There's something here you should see." Martin said and Cole and T'Lan exchanged glances.

"Can't you just tell me?" Cole said.

"It's easier if you see for yourself captain." Martin said and Cole nodded.

"Very well, I'm on my way." he said, "T'Lan the conn is yours again."

After exiting the bridge again Cole had the turbolift take him to the *Nightfall's* security section where he found Martin going through the items that had been found in the bag Lyssa had been carrying. Most of these appeared to be tools of one sort or another but there was also a small pouch that was positioned next to a row of what looked like more personal items.

"Ah captain, thank you for coming." Martin said when he saw Cole enter the room.

"No problem commander. Now what was it you wanted to show me?" Cole asked in reply.

"Take a look at this captain." Martin said and he picked up a ring from the row of personal items before handing it to Cole.

"A ring?" Cole said, frowning while he looked at it closely. Then he noticed what looked like writing on the inside, "Wait is this inscribed?" he asked and Martin nodded.

"It's an Orion Syndicate inscription captain. It refers to loyalty to the syndicate and to their witness." Martin said.

"Their witness? The person who recommended them for membership?" Cole commented, remembering the term from the many briefings he had had during his years as a security officer himself.

"That's right." Martin said.

"So she's Orion Syndicate? Damn I hate to think of what they could do with Slaver technology." Cole said.

"Actually I don't think that's her ring captain, it's too large." Martin said and Cole slipped the ring onto his middle finger, finding that it fit well before easily removing it again.

"So if it's not hers then where did she get it?" he said.

"Perhaps she stole it. Certainly no fence would touch that. Not one that wanted to go on living anyway, the syndicate isn't known for being lenient with people who steal from them or help those who do. Ironic really given the value of the goods the Orion Syndicate steals each year." Martin said.

"They don't like competition." Cole said, "So you think that this is something she stole?"

"Yes captain and it marks her out as an effective thief. I don't know whether I'd call her brave or reckless to have stolen from the Orion Syndicate but she must be good if she's still alive while walking around with that thing. Few people get to be that good without cropping up on someone's sensors though." Martin said.

"You think she had a criminal record?" Cole said.

"I'd put money on it if we still used it captain." Martin said, nodding his head before one of his security staff came into the room.

"Captain, commander, the prisoner is awake." he said.

**B.**

When Lyssa opened her eyes she found herself in an unfamiliar room and she sat up suddenly. It was then that she realised that the stolen Starfleet uniform she had been wearing had been replaced by a set of nondescript overalls and all her belongings had gone. After that it took only a few moments to notice the glowing forcefield emitters around the edge of one wall of the room she was in and she immediately knew that she was in a cell.

"Hey! I want a lawyer!" she shouted through the forcefield at the security guards on duty outside but neither of them responded. Instead one of them left the room only to return shortly after with Cole and Martin. Lyssa remembered both men as having been in the physics laboratory and from the markings that she could see on their collars it was clear that they were senior officers aboard the *Nightfall*, "Give me a lawyer." she said, folding her arms as looked at Cole and Martin.

"Do we have any lawyers aboard right now Lieutenant Commander Martin?" Cole said.

"Only a few barrack room ones among the enlisted personnel captain." Martin answered.

"In that case young lady you are out of luck and considering the seriousness of the charges against you it is in your best interests to co-operate." Cole said.

"Or what? You'll torture me? Starfleet officers don't torture people." Lyssa said.

"No, no they don't but the *Nightfall* is a very special ship. The second ship of its name that I've served on and my first command. You see our crew isn't just made up of Starfleet fleet personnel, we have a few more specialist crewmembers as well. On the previous *Nightfall* that included an entire company of Andorian Imperial Guard and their willingness to bend the rules as such that I once had to order one of them not to try beating information out of a prisoner. I think my standards must have slipped over the years though because on the first *Nightfall*'s final mission I willingly stood back while a Romulan officer held a knife to the throat of a helpless woman to get her to talk and I'm not sorry about it. Now the woman you took hostage is this ship's chief medical officer." Cole said and Lyssa snorted.

"Am I supposed to suddenly be remorseful about grabbing a medical officer and start telling you everything I know? If that's what you think then you're pretty naive captain." she said.

"No, that's not what I mean at all." Cole said, "But you need to realise that Doctor Hamill is quite possibly the sweetest and most innocent person you could ever hope to meet and everyone aboard this ship knows it. When you attacked her you attacked everyone on this ship and they're all keen to see you and your group brought to justice. That includes the same Romulan officer who I served with on the previous *Nightfall*."

"If you're trying to scare me captain, you're-" Lyssa began before Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to bridge. I need Sublieutenant Nayal down here in security as soon as possible. Cole out." he said before tapping the combadge again without giving anyone on the bridge the chance to respond.

"Sublieutenant? Did the captain just use your old Romulan rank?" Ghroc asked, looking towards Nayal and the Romulan woman smiled back at him.

"Oh yes I think he did and I think I know exactly what he wants. Permission to be excused Commander T'Lan?" she said.

"Granted Sublieutenant Nayal." T'Lan responded and Nayal got up from the operations console and left the bridge.

Rather than go directly to the security section though Nayal returned to her quarters and as soon as she entered them she began to remove her clothes, stripping down to her underwear as she walked up to a closet and opened it to reveal the Romulan military uniform she still kept as a reminder of her service prior to becoming a Federation citizen. Then after putting this uniform on she went over to a secure closet and unlocked it so that she could take out the Romulan issue disruptor pistol she kept in there and she inserted this into her uniform's holster. With her change of clothes complete Nayal left her quarters and made her way to security, attracting several confused looks from other crewmembers at her appearance along the way. As soon as the door to security opened Nayal made sure to adopt a formal pose.

"Sublieutenant Nayal to see Captain Cole." she told the security officer on duty behind the main desk and he smiled at her.

"In there sublieutenant." he said, nodding towards the open doorway to the brig.

"Thank you." Nayal responded as she turned towards the brig and calmly walked through the doorway, "You requested my presence captain?" she said to Cole when she saw him standing outside the cell that held Lyssa.

"Yes, thank you sublieutenant." Cole replied and he looked at Lyssa again, "Allow me to introduce Sublieutenant Nayal of the *Tal Shiar*. I'm sure I don't need to tell you what the *Tal Shiar* does and on this ship Nayal has the diplomatic immunity to be able to carry out her duties without any of the unpleasantness or

paperwork that would result if I or any of my crew were to do it. Now a lot of the crew have more than just slight reservations about having Nayal here but you know who went out of her way to make friends with her? Doctor Hamill, because as I said she is just that sort of person. Now I'm sure that the sublieutenant would like to discover exactly what motivated you to assault her friend."

"Are you left or right handed?" Nayal said, stepping forwards and looking at Lyssa through the forcefield.

"What?" Lyssa responded, confused by the question.

"She was holding the phaser in her right hand when we found her about to shoot Doctor Hamill." Martin said and Nayal looked towards him.

"Then I shall direct my efforts towards her left side, just in case she is required to apply her signature to a confession or any other official documents." Nayal said.

"Will you need a knife like with Jenna West?" Cole asked.

"In this case I think a spoon may be of greater use captain. It makes removing an eyeball easier than attempting to use a knife for the task. I think a week of enhanced interrogation should with a spoon should leave her in a state where her will to resist is gone. Of course if you could replicate a spork then that would-" Nayal answered in a deadpan voice and with a straight face before Lyssa interrupted her.

"You wouldn't dare. Any lawyer would eat you alive in court." she said.

"We are a long way from your Federation courts and Captain Cole is entitled to extradite you to the Romulan Free State if I request it." Nayal said.

"Or you can just answer our questions and spend the next thirty years or more of your life in a Federation rehabilitation colony." Martin said.

"I don't have thirty years to wait." Lyssa said, "My sister needs help now so here's the deal, I'll answer all your questions if it means saving her."

"How about we start with your name?" Cole asked, "We can check Federation records to see if anyone matching your appearance or genetic profile has ever been arrested before so telling us will just speed things up."

"Do we have a deal?" Lyssa said.

"You don't get to dictate any terms." Martin replied sternly.

"I intend to locate your base and destroy it. It's as simple as that, now what is your name?" Cole said and Lyssa hesitated.

"Lyssa." she said.

"Lyssa what?" Martin added.

"Just Lyssa."

"Okay Lyssa, tell me about your organisation. Are you working for the Orion Syndicate?" Cole said and he held up the ring that Martin had found in her bag.

"No." Lyssa said, snorting, "My sister and I stole that from some guy but then when our fence saw the engraving on the inside he refused to touch it and told us never to come back. The next thing we knew there was an assassin from the Orion Syndicate called Kar Aran after us. He'd been ordered to kill us but instead he recruited us, you see he'd been planning to break away from the syndicate and branch out on his own."

"Risky. The Orion Syndicate has a long reach." Nayal commented.

"Well he'd found somewhere that he didn't think they could find him." Lyssa replied, "You see he found a list of Suliban helixes that the syndicate gathered when it dealt with the group called the Cabal two hundred years ago. Evidently everyone else in the syndicate had forgotten all about this so Aran checked the list against historical records and discovered that one of them had never been listed as being destroyed or decommissioned. He checked it out and decided that it would make a good hiding place. As a bonus it still had almost a full complement of cell ships attached to the core but the real prize was inside the vault."

"A Slaver stasis box?" Cole said and Lyssa nodded.

"It was empty but the box itself was worth a fortune. Enough to keep the helix running for years but Aran had other ideas. He knew that if you put two or more close together they glow and he knew that a lot of ships came to this sector to hunt for Slaver ruins so he used it as bait to lure any who had found another box to where he could ambush them and take their box along with anything that had been inside it."

"How many does he have?" Martin asked.

"Right now he's got four, but he's had a total of eight. The others he sold, along with most of what was in them." Lyssa said and Nayal smiled.

"If he's got four stasis boxes close together then he won't see us coming. They'll be glowing already." she pointed out, "And I'm sure that Lieutenant Commander Sodyne will be excited to take a look at them. She's obsessed."

"We need to find this helix first." Martin commented.

"Where is it?" Cole said, staring at Lyssa and she smiled back at him.

"You want the boxes, right? So you'll be boarding the helix instead of just blowing it out of the stars?" she said.

"That's the plan. I don't know if a stasis box can be destroyed but I'm not about to risk having to tell my science officer why we found out the hard way." Cole told her.

"Then I'll guide you to the vault where they're kept but you have to agree to rescue my sister as well. Aran's got her in an agoniser booth." Lyssa said.

"Where the hell did he get one of those things? They were even outlawed in the Romulan Star Empire." Nayal said.

"Didn't you hear me when I told you that Aran worked for the Orion Syndicate? There are certain high ranking members of the syndicate who like to use them on suspected police informants. Aran uses it on anyone who annoys him enough. It could just as easily have been me in there and Lyra in here." Lyssa told her captors.

"Tell me where the helix is." Cole said.

"Do we have a deal?" Lyssa asked, "No deal, no location."

"Yes we have a deal." Cole replied.

"The helix is hidden in a dust cloud about eight light years from where I boarded your ship." Lyssa said and Cole looked at his officers.

"Let's go and check this out." he said. Then when all three of them were in the corridor outside the security section he paused and added, "Oh and Nayal?"

"Yes captain?" she said.

"Get out of that uniform before returning to duty, okay?" he said.

With the information gained from Lyssa in hand, Cole gathered his senior officers in the briefing room again to discuss their next move. Although Cole was happy for Hamill to remain off duty following her ordeal she also joined the meeting.

"The prisoner has confirmed some of what we guessed, the group that attacked us are using a stasis box to lure in ships that contain other examples of the devices so that they can steal them. Apparently they are a splinter group from the Orion Syndicate." Cole said, "We've been given the name Kar Aran and I believe that Lieutenant Commander Martin has run that name through the Federation database."

"Yes captain." Martin responded and he picked up a PADD from the table in front of him, "Kar Aran is believed to be sixty-eight years old and was born on Bajor under the Cardassia occupation. Our first reports of him are as a member of one of the resistance cells targeting the occupation forces but it seems that he left his home world with the intention of getting help for his fellow Bajorans instead of staying put. That's when we start to get more information about him from Federation law enforcement offices as well as Starfleet Intelligence. He was suspected in a number of illegal weapons dealing operations as well as thefts of weapons and dual purpose technologies that he shipped back to Bajor. It's probably during this time that he made contact with the Orion Syndicate and when the occupation of Bajor ended he didn't go back despite the general amnesty the new government was offering to anyone accused of any crimes in relation to the resistance. Instead he stayed with the Orion Syndicate as a hit man and he's listed as a suspect in a number of murders on almost a dozen planets."

"We also know that it's no coincidence that all of the ships these raiders used against us were of Suliban origin. According to the prisoner the leader of their group was able to locate an abandoned Suliban helix located at the heart of a dust cloud. That is where they got their ships. It is also where they found the first stasis box and where they are based." Cole added.

"Maintaining a low profile and keeping out of the way of the syndicate?" Ghroc asked and Cole nodded.

"It seems that way, yes." he said.

"Did the prisoner mention how many stasis boxes they have or what other Slaver technology they found inside them?" Sodyne said.

"They have four boxes right now which means they won't be able to detect our approach from the way they interact with our own box. They have had others but the rest have been sold, along with many of the contents." Cole told her.

"We have to recover those boxes and anything they have left captain. I know a single quantum torpedo could destroy that helix in one shot but we can't risk destroying any Slaver artefacts that are aboard it." Sodyne responded.

"I've already reached an agreement with the prisoner that she will guide us to where the stasis boxes and the other Slaver technology is being kept." Cole responded.

"Captain I'm sure that our security people and ground troops can easily take that helix but do you have a plan for getting there?" Davis asked.

"The dust cloud may obscure our approach up to a certain point but once we enter the cloud we will not be able to hide our presence. Depending on the chemical makeup of the cloud our shields may also be compromised." T'Lan added.

"Doesn't a helix consist of hundreds of cell ships around a core? Even given the technological gap we'd be facing an overwhelming force." Ghroc said.

"Especially if our shields aren't working." Davis added.

"Yes. That's why we're going to have use a much smaller force to gain access to the helix." Cole said.

"A runabout?" T'Lan said.

"That's my plan, yes." Cole said and he got out of his seat to walk to the large display screen mounted on the wall of the briefing room. He activated this using a PADD to show a representation of a Suliban helix, "Our runabout will approach the helix openly with the prisoner and our assault force aboard." he began, adding a runabout to the diagram on the screen, "The prisoner will contact the helix to identify herself and tell them that she is returning after having stolen our stasis box. She will also add that she being pursued by our fighter squadron and needs assistance. This will be the cue for our attack fighter to enter the dust cloud as well." and Cole added a representation of the *Nightfall's* fighter squadron to the display.

"They'll scramble everything they've got." Martin said and Cole smiled and nodded.

"Exactly." he said, amending the display again to show cell ships detaching from the helix, "Our fighters will engage from a distance but then fall back before the enemy can return fire. Hopefully they'll want to destroy our fighters before they can report back to us so they'll try jamming their subspace communications and pursue them out of the cloud."

"Let me guess, that's where the *Nightfall* will be." Hamill said.

"Yes doctor, positioned half a light second from the edge of the cloud." Cole replied, "We'll engage the enemy cell ships as soon as they appear with our phasers. With luck the prisoner's message will have convinced them that they're only facing our fighter squadron and they won't be ready for a heavy cruiser lying in wait. Our fighters should be able to provide us with reasonable scans of the helix and as long as we can take out enough of their cell ships to even up the odds more we'll head into the cloud in force to assault the helix directly. Don't worry Commander Sodyne, we won't be aiming for anything that could destroy it outright, our attack will be a diversion from the real assault by the team aboard the runabout. As long as we can keep the enemy focused on us they won't be worrying about the runabout and when it docks with the helix our team will go aboard."

"Captain I should be with that team if there is the chance that Slaver technology could be aboard the helix." Sodyne said.

"I thought you'd say that commander. You can go along with the assault force. Commander Ghroc I'd like you to lead it." Cole said.

"Not Lieutenant Commander Martin?" T'Lan asked.

"No, I want Martin here aboard the *Nightfall* to deal with the cell ships. Piloting the runabout through the cloud and docking with the helix may require expert piloting though and Lieutenant Commander Ghroc is our best pilot."

"I can do it captain." Ghroc said.

"Good. Now once aboard the prisoner should be able to guide the assault team to the store of Slave stasis boxes and other technology. First though there is another objective that is part of the deal I've made with her." Cole said.

"Another objective?" Sodyne commented, "Captain what if it risks us not getting to the Slaver technology before the enemy can figure out what's happening and remove it?"

"The prisoner says that her sister is being held as a hostage and being tortured in an agoniser booth." Cole explained, "I doubt we'll be able to persuade the prisoner to abandon her."

"Captain if the prisoner's sister has been in an agoniser booth for a prolonged period then she may need medical attention. I should go as well." Hamill said.

"Doctor I can't ask you to-" Cole began.

"And I can't ask any of my staff to go if I won't captain." Hamill interrupted, "Believe me I don't owe that woman in the brig anything and if there are four stasis boxes aboard that helix then I'd rather stay as far away from it as I can but I'm a doctor, not a politician that only does what's safe for them."

"Very well doctor, you can go as well." Cole said.

"But you can't bring your violin." Ghroc commented.

"I wouldn't want to risk losing it anyway but if someone needs help I can't refuse." Hamill replied.

"Captain Cole was right about you. You really are sweet." Martin said and Hamill looked at him.

"You said I was sweet?" she said, looking at Cole.

"Yes doctor I did. I was attempting to impress on the prisoner the gravity of her offence."

"Sounds like T'Lan has competition." Davis said.

"No she does not." Cole replied.

"Your wife's read that list of T'Lan's fantasies, has she told you whether there's a section on having other women join them in bed?" Martin said.

"There is not." T'Lan said.

"I wonder if Captain Edwards and Commander Carr found it this annoying when we made comments about the state of their relationship?" Cole commented.

"Of course not." Noyal responded, "Remember we were an awesome crew who always took our jobs

seriously. Well apart from that time when T'Lan complained about the MACOs and Imperial Guard sending her underwear up a flagpole on Federation Day."

"I think everyone knows what we're doing here." Cole said, returning to the subject of the raid on the helix, "I want all departments ready in four hours, that's our zero hour. Now does anyone have any questions relevant to this operation?" and he paused to give his officers the chance to ask any questions they had. When none came he just nodded and added, "Dismissed."

## 3.

Hamill looked at herself in the bedroom mirror to check the fitting of the body armour she had put on over her uniform. Armour was rarely issued to officers aboard a Starfleet vessel and Hamill had received only the most basic of instruction in how to put it on when she was assigned to the *Nightfall*. This was the first time she had had to wear it properly and it did not feel right to her. While she was trying to determine whether she had put it on properly there was a chiming sound from the door to her quarters and she leant back to look from her bedroom into the lounge area of her quarters.

"Come in." she called out and the door slid open to let Martin enter, "Yes Jack, what can I do for you?" she asked as she exited her bedroom.

"I was just coming to check on you doctor." Martin responded, "Are you sure you'll be alright on this mission? Because I've already made sure that the platoon of troops going along with you includes a couple of trained field medics."

"Jack I'll be fine, honestly. I'll be carrying a phaser I like everyone else and if that woman puts a foot wrong I'm happy to let her sleep her mistake off with a stun blast. I just wish I could figure out what I'm doing wrong with this armour. It just doesn't feel right." Hamill said.

"Do you want me to take a look?" Martin suggested and Hamill nodded.

"If you could, yes please." she said and she held her arms out while Martin walked around her to inspect the fit of the armour.

"Is it digging into the base of your back?" he asked and Hamill nodded.

"Yes, is something wrong there?" she said, trying to look far enough over her shoulder to down the back of her armour.

"You have the waist strap twisted and hooked under the bottom of the back plate." Martin said and he started to reach around her waist, "May I?"

"Of course." Hamill said before Martin reached all the way around her to release the strap where it sealed in front of her before he corrected the fit and fastened it again, pulling the strap tight so that the armour plates in front and behind Hamill's torso fit snug against her.

"How's that? It's not pressing down too much on your chest is it? Some women complain of that if the plates aren't right." Martin said.

"No they're fine." Hamill replied and she darted back into her bedroom to fetch the armoured helmet that she had left on her bed, reappearing with it in her hands. However, when she put it on her head it promptly dropped down to cover her eyes, "Wait, this doesn't seem right." she said.

"No, I think the suspension pads need adjusting." Martin said as he lifted the helmet off her head and turned it over to expose the adjustable padding inside, "Come on, we'll sort it out on the way to the runabout."

Although the *Nightfall* carried a number of dedicated and well armed and protected assault shuttles for transporting the troops the starship carried into battle these were incapable of warp travel so one of the ship's similarly sized runabouts was being used for this mission. The drawback was that possessing a longer range meant that more of the craft's internal space had been given over to amenities that were not necessary on a craft meant only to carry a platoon sized assault force and even with the rear compartment swapped out for one that had the maximum amount of internal space possible it was still only possible to get a full platoon of armoured ground troops aboard by having them sit on the floor in almost every room.

"Welcome aboard doctor, your equipment has already been loaded so take a seat." Ghroc said from the pilot's seat when Hamill climbed into the cockpit to see that although there was a row of soldiers sitting on the floor along the back wall of the compartment two out of the four seats at the flight consoles were vacant. While Ghroc occupied the pilot's seat one of the secondary consoles was taken by Sodyne and like Hamill they both wore the same body armour as the ground troops.

"Excuse me." Hamill said as she picked her way past the troops sitting on the floor before she sat down at the other secondary control station, leaving the co-pilot's seat empty, "So when does the guest of honour arrive?" she asked, looking at the empty seat.

"They're bringing her down from security now. In fact here she is." Ghroc said when he saw Lyssa being led across the hangar by a pair of security guards, her hands cuffed in front of her, "As soon as she's aboard we'll get going."

Lyssa was escorted all the way to the runabout by the security guards before they released her from her handcuffs so she could climb aboard.

"Okay commander she's all yours." one of the guards said.

"Thanks ensign. Stand back while we prep for take off." Ghroc responded.

"So is that my seat?" Lyssa asked, pointing to the co-pilot's seat.



"Yes. When you make contact with the helix it'll look like you're flying the ship." Ghroc answered and Lyssa made her way to the chair and sat down. Then she turned to look at Hamill who was sat right behind her.

"Doctor I-" she began.

"Don't." Hamill interrupted, "I'm just here to do my job."

Meanwhile now that Lyssa was aboard the runabout Ghroc sealed the hatch and prepared to launch.

"Rhine to bridge." he said into the communication system.

"Bridge here Rhine. Go ahead." Nayal's voice responded.

"Bridge we're all set to launch. Personnel and equipment are loaded and all systems are in the green." Ghroc told her.

"Understood Rhine, you are cleared to launch. Good hunting." Nayal said.

"Thank you *Nightfall*, engaging thrusters." Ghroc said as he brought the runabout's engines on line and using just the ship's thrusters he lifted it off the hangar deck before accelerating towards the front of the hangar where the massive launch door stood open into space with just a forcefield to maintain the *Nightfall*'s internal atmosphere, "Rhine to *Nightfall*, launch successful." Ghroc transmitted, confirming to the cruiser's command crew that everything was as expected.

Engaging the runabout's impulse drive Ghroc moved the craft further away from the *Nightfall* before the cruiser's attached squadron of fighter began to follow it out into space. The size of the hangar door limited the attack fighters to launching in pairs side by side but the pilots were well trained the entire squadron was in space less than two minutes after the runabout had launched.

"Okay the fighters are in formation and our course to the helix is laid in." Ghroc announced to the other occupants of the runabout's cockpit, "Going to warp eight." and the moment he engaged the runabout's warp drive the stars outside blurred.

"Fighters are in pursuit." Sodyne said a few seconds later, "Matching our course and speed. Maintaining a distance of eight light minutes."

"Good, just as planned. That should give us enough time to drop to impulse and enter the dust cloud before they catch up with us." Ghroc said and he looked at Lyssa, "Do you think that will convince the other members of your gang?" he asked her.

"I should think so. They won't be expecting me to have betrayed them. Aran will think torturing my sister will be enough to keep me onside. In any case, even if they are suspicious they won't be able to ignore an entire squadron of Starfleet attack fighters bearing down on them. They'll have no choice but to launch their own ships against yours." Lyssa answered.

"How long until we get there commander?" the lieutenant commanding the infantry platoon asked from the back of the cockpit and Ghroc double checked his instruments.

"Thirty-six hours. Sit tight because it's going to be a long flight." Ghroc told him and the soldiers sat along the cockpit's back wall all smiled at one another.

"Hey chief what's in that case?" one of them said to a comrade who had an unmarked equipment case about three quarters of a metre long propped up beside him.

"What this?" the chief petty officer responded as he moved the case to his lap and the others in the cockpit all turned towards him, "I don't know. I didn't bring it aboard. One of the ground crew must have put it here."

"Well open it up chief, let's take a look." the lieutenant said and the chief petty officer released the case's seals to open it.

"Well would you look at that." he said, "Someone put a violin in here. Now what are we supposed to do with this? Lieutenant do you play?"

"Not a note chief. What about you?" the lieutenant said.

"Same here lieutenant. Mind you I've heard that the doctor is pretty handy with a bow.

"Really? I thought she was just into archery." the lieutenant said and he looked at Hamill, "So doc, how about you play us a tune to pass the time?"

"No." Ghroc said, "What did I say about violins?"

"You said I couldn't bring one." Hamill replied.

"And she didn't bring it." Sodyne added as the chief petty officer handed the violin and its accompanying bow to Hamill.

"Any requests?" Hamill asked, resting the violin against her chin.

"Silence?" Ghroc said.

"Mozart." one of the ground troops said.

"I heard Mozart." Hamill replied and as she drew the bow across the violin strings to test the tuning Ghroc winced.

"It's going to be a very long flight indeed." he muttered to himself as Hamill began to play.



The need for secrecy meant that Kar's gang did not maintain any sentry ships outside the dust cloud. The antiquated nature of their ships meant that even with their cloaking devices and running silent they could not guarantee to remain invisible so instead the gang relied on the density of the dust cloud itself to protect them. When the Rhine dropped out of warp in front of this cloud it looked to the runabout's occupants as if all of the stars ahead of them had simply disappeared, the vast wall of blackness extending as far as they could see in every direction.

"Sensors?" Ghroc asked, looking at Sodyne.

"Negative." she said, "No subspace signals or warp signatures and minimal heat readings. To our sensors that it just a large cloud of dust.

"Probably why the Cabal chose to put a helix out here." Ghroc said, "Okay let's go inside and take a look. Sodyne let me know the moment you pick anything up no matter how insignificant it may seem."

Ghroc flew the runabout into the dust cloud at full impulse and just as the craft was entering it Sodyne detected a series of rapid subspace energy pulses.

"The fighters are here." she said, "They just dropped out of warp."

"Right on schedule. They should follow us into the cloud at any moment." Ghroc said and then he glanced at Lyssa, "So is there any specific approach pattern I should follow?" he asked but she shook her head.

"No, just keep going. The helix is at the dead centre of the cloud." she said.

"I've got it." Sodyne announced, "Or at least I think I have. Energy signature dead ahead, just barely noticeable but it's there. The cloud is obviously shielding the helix even inside it. The surrounding temperature is increasing the deeper we go."

"They should spot us soon as well." Lyssa said, "When they do they'll challenge us."

Sure enough moments later the runabout's communication system activated.

"Attention unidentified craft you are approaching a restricted military zone. Identify yourself or you will be fired upon." a stern sounding voice said.

"Over to you I think." Ghroc told Lyssa and the woman leant forwards to activate the camera and transmitter in front of her.

"Don't shoot, it's Lyssa." she said excitedly, "I've got the stasis box but there's a full squadron of Federation attack fighters right on my tail. I need help."

"Copy that Lyssa, help is on the way." the voice responded before the channel went suddenly quiet and Lyssa leant back in her seat.

"Easy." she said, looking at Ghroc.

"I'm picking up multiple energy signatures ahead of us." Sodyne added, "They look like impulse engine flares."

"How many?" Ghroc asked.

"Dozens, maybe more than a hundred." Sodyne said before there was a sudden flash as a beam of red light passed by the runabout from behind.

"Whoa!" Lyssa exclaimed when she saw this.

"Don't worry, it's just our fighters making this look good." Ghroc said.

"Perhaps we should raise our shields?" Hamill suggested, "You know, just in case either one of our fighter pilots accidentally makes things look too good. Or if the raiders see through our disguise and decide to attack?"

"I've already tried doctor but unfortunately this dust cloud is preventing them from coming on line." Ghroc told her and Hamill's face fell.

"So if they attack we've no shields?" she said.

"Pretty much." Ghroc replied.

"They won't. Trust me." Lyssa added.

"Trust you? Not likely." Hamill commented.

There were more flashes as the Peregrine-class attack fighters behind the runabout fired again but as before these were aimed to go wide without looking that way to an outside observer.

"I'm getting proper readings on the cell ships now. At least sixty in the first wave and more behind them."

Sodyne said before the first of the cell ships suddenly appeared through the black clouds ahead of the runabout and fired a bright yellow blast of energy toward the fighters supposedly pursuing it. This struck the wing of the fighter but the damage the obsolete weapon did was minimal and as more cell ships of various sizes appeared after this first one the Starfleet attack fighters began to target them with phasers and torpedoes in a withering barrage that destroyed more than a dozen in just a few seconds.

However, the destruction of some of their number did not dissuade the pilots of the remaining cell ships from pressing their attack further and as even more of the antiquated craft appeared through the clouds they raced towards the Starfleet craft. Just as planned the fighters then broke off, turning sharply while still firing their weapons at any cell ships that presented themselves but the fighters' job was not to engage the cell ships directly yet and instead they began to withdraw towards the edge of the cloud at full speed. Unwilling to let the secret of their base's location reach Starfleet the pilots of the cell ships gave chase, intending to destroy the fighters before their pilots could send word of what they had seen in the dust cloud.

While the cell ships were engaging the supposedly fleeing fighters though, the runabout *Rhine* along with the platoon of heavily armed and armoured troops it carried continued to speed towards the centre of the cloud and it was not long before a huge object appeared ahead of it.

"There you are. The helix." Lyssa said.

"We're on station now captain." Nayal said when the *Nightfall* came to a stop outside the dark cloud of dust.

"Can we get any readings from inside that thing?" Cole asked and he looked towards the science station where T'Lan now sat, making best use of the skills she had developed as a science officer before becoming the current *Nightfall's* first officer.

"Negative, the cloud is blocking our scans. We are unable to penetrate more than a few thousand metres into it. However, I can tell that the composition suggests that shields will not function inside the cloud." she said.

"Hold here then. Red alert." Cole ordered.

"Aye captain, red alert." Martin said from the tactical station behind him, "Shields up. Phasers powered and quantum torpedo launchers loaded."

"Picking up Starfleet transponder signals captain. It's our fighters." Nayal said before the *Nightfall's* attached fighter squadron came speeding out of the dust cloud.

"Jackal to *Nightfall*, enemy ships are on our tail. Numbers two hundred plus." the squadron leader transmitted as soon as he was able to establish contact.

"Two hundred? This could be rough." Nayal said.

"Depends on how many come out at once." Martin responded.

"Don't wait for my order Commander Martin, just fire as soon as you have targets." Cole said and Martin nodded.

"Yes sir." he said and when the first of the pursuing cell ships emerged from the cloud he was ready to fire.

A single blast from one of the *Nightfall's* phaser banks obliterated the tiny cell ship in a moment, followed soon after by three more in rapid succession.

The fragility of the cell ships due to their limited technology was exacerbated by being unable to activate what defences they had in time to try and fend off the *Nightfall's* attacks as they emerged from the cloud and they were being destroyed too quickly to be able to warn those that followed. However, as the number exiting the cloud at once increased it took longer for the *Nightfall* to be able to pick them all off and they were able to scatter and raise their shields before returning fire at the Starfleet cruiser. The blasts from their particle weapons were mere pinpricks against the *Nightfall's* modern deflector shields but as the number of Suliban cell ships increased so did the damage they could do in concert.

"Shields down to eighty percent captain." Nayal said as she watched the strength of the *Nightfall's* shields drop slowly but steadily. Eighty percent shield strength still meant that the raiders' weapons were unlikely to penetrate them but nevertheless it was an indication that the starship's defences were being eroded even as its weapons continued to take a toll on the cell ships.

"Nayal, what's the status of our fighters?" Cole asked.

"Holding position behind us captain. Keeping our lines of fire clear." Nayal responded.

"Well I think it's time we brought them in. Tell the squadron commander to break and engage."

"Yes sir." Nayal said with a smile before she signalled the fighter squadron leader, "*Nightfall* to Jackal. Orders from Captain Cole are to break and engage. You may fire at will." she told him.

The twelve strong fighter squadron broke into pairs as they charged around the *Nightfall* to engage the cell ships now swarming around the cruiser. In each pair one pilot selected a target while the second watched for any ships attempting counter attack while the first was focused elsewhere. This served to take some of the pressure off the *Nightfall* but the respite was only temporary as a group of four Suliban light cruisers emerged from the dust cloud.

"Captain we've got cruisers." Nayal reported when they appeared.

"On it." Martin said, quickly locking onto one of the cruisers and firing a quantum torpedo towards it. The cruiser was able to raise its shields quickly but these provided no protection against the powerful torpedo weapon that was designed to penetrate defences that were far more advanced and the cruiser exploded as it was struck head on.

The three remaining cruisers responded with volleys of torpedoes themselves and the *Nightfall* shook as the barrage struck its shields, weakening them enough that one of them was able to penetrate and strike the primary hull.

"Damage report!" Cole snapped.

"Hull breaches on decks seven and eight. Emergency forcefields in place." Nayal said.

"Captain we lost one of our shield emitters in that hit. Our forward shields are down to thirty percent." Martin added.

"Take out those cruisers." Cole ordered and Martin nodded.

"Aye captain. Firing quantum torpedoes, full spread." he said as he fired the *Nightfall's* weapons again.

The *USS Nightfall* was armed with the usual compliment of torpedo launchers for an Akira-class heavy cruiser, fifteen in total covering all arcs and Martin fired all of them in unison. Even with just a single torpedo fired from each launcher this still meant that there were five quantum torpedoes heading for each of the raiders' cruisers. The crews of these ships detected the launches and attempted to use their particle weapons to shoot down the incoming torpedoes. However, despite being considered cruisers when they were first launched more than two centuries earlier they lacked the armament of a modern vessel of this classification and two of the three ships were only partially successful in shooting down the incoming quantum torpedoes before they too were destroyed outright in a single hit. By a fluke the final cruiser survived as the torpedoes its weapons failed to shoot down were destroyed in the explosion of another one of the mid-sized starships. This respite did not last long though as a pair of the *Nightfall's* attack fighters charged towards it and launched volleys of their own photon torpedoes. These weapons lacked the sheer destructive power of the plasma warheads contained within a quantum torpedo but they were still potent weapons in their own right as well as more advanced than anything the raiders had at their disposal and the cruiser was left burning and adrift by the repeated hits the torpedoes scored.

These cruisers had been the only chance that the raiders had of defeating the *Nightfall* and its fighter squadron and without them the remaining cell ships, now numbering less than fifty turned and accelerated back into the dust cloud.

"They're retreating." Nayal said.

"Logical. They could not defeat us." T'Lan added.

"T'Lan if our shields won't work inside that cloud then what about the emergency containment fields we're using to contain those hull breaches?" Cole asked.

"They will also be ineffective. We will also have to seal out hangar since the force fields over its launch and recovery doors will not function inside the cloud." T'Lan told him and Cole activated the intercom.

"Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Davis here captain." the chief engineer responded.

"Mister Davis we're going into the cloud where our shields and forcefields will be useless. Your repair crews need to retreat from the damaged sections of the primary hull so we can seal them off." Cole said.

"Understood captain. I'll pull them out now. Engineering out." Davis said.

"Nayal as soon as those damage control teams are clear I want the damage sections sealed and decompressed." Cole said.

"Yes captain." the Romulan replied.

"Helm, as soon as we're ready take us into the cloud. Nayal our fighters are to stick with us and keep cell ships as far away as possible. Without shields we're vulnerable and I don't want any nasty surprises. Cole added.

Then with the cruiser's fighter squadron taking up positions around it, the *Nightfall* proceeded into the dust cloud as well.

Although it was significantly smaller than the largest of the current generation of Starfleet space stations the helix was still massive, constructed from thousands of modules that included even more cell ships that could be detached if necessary. The other starships that Kar's gang had seized were also visible docked to the helix but all of these appeared lifeless as the runabout approached it.

"Watch for a beacon. That will tell you where to dock." Lyssa said and a few moments later a bright strobe began to flash near the top of the structure.

"Is that it?" Ghroc asked and Lyssa nodded.

"Yes, there'll be a docking port right there that you can use." she said.

"Is there any sign of the *Nightfall* yet? If we dock too soon then the raiders will know what we're up to." Ghroc said, glancing towards Sodyne.

"Nothing yet but the dust cloud is interfering massively with our sensors." she replied before the runabout's sensors picked up something through the disruption of the dust cloud and before she could investigate further the first of the fleeing cell ships appeared.

"Cell ships closing from astern." she said before a phaser beam pierced the darkness as well.

"That wasn't a Suliban particle weapon." Lyssa said when she saw the bright red beam.

"Then it must be the *Nightfall*. Okay I'm taking us in." Ghroc said as he turned the Rhine towards the flashing strobe beacon.

Although the helix's docking ports had been designed centuries earlier they were still compatible with the runabout's hatch and Ghroc carefully guided the craft towards it. At the same time the commander of the infantry platoon carried aboard the runabout began to get to his feet and checked the fit of his helmet.

"Stand to!" he called out loud enough so that his voice could be heard in the corridor where more of his men were sitting.

"Stand to!" one of them repeated and all of the infantry stood up and readied their phaser rifles in time for the runabout to make contact with the helix's docking port with a 'clunk'.

"What's going on?" Kar demanded as he entered the helix's command centre and found raiders of various species working frantically. On the main viewscreen the *Nightfall* and its attached fighters had just come into view and were firing on the cell ships still active, picking them off easily. The helix itself relied on its compliment of smaller craft for protection and had no weapons of its own. The closest it could come to offering any fire support was for pilots to get to the ships still docked and fire while their weapons were attached to the helix.

"We're under attack." Oskal responded.

"Attack? How did they find us?" Kar said.

"It's that Starfleet cruiser that Lyssa and Lyra ambushed. Lyssa's back with the stasis box but the idiot girl has led Starfleet right to our doorstep. We've already lost more than a hundred cell ships and all four cruisers." Oskal explained.

"Then launch everything we have. That cruiser has to be stopped at all costs. Where's Lyssa now?" Kar asked.

"She's just docked. Why?" Oskal said.

"Because she's just cost us the perfect hideout. Send someone to detain her. Once this is over we're going to evacuate but before we leave I want her to watch me kill her sister. Then I'll leave her in the agoniser booth once we're gone to scream until she rots." Kar ordered.

A pair of large Klingon raiders strode along the corridor towards the docking port where the runabout had just docked. Their orders were simple, detain Lyssa unharmed and check to see what she had been able to acquire from the *Nightfall*. The two Klingons were armed with disruptors but they carried these holstered as they approached the docking port. However, when they entered the cluttered loading bay just inside the port they were surprised to see a force of Starfleet ground combat specialists rapidly disembarking from the runabout and they both reached for their disruptors.

"Contact!" one of the Starfleet troops yelled before he fired his phaser and hit one of the Klingons. The second was able to get his weapon out of his holster but before he could aim it at any of the Starfleet troops he too was hit by a phaser beam, "Clear." the first soldier said, dropping to his knees behind a cargo container to cover the approach to the docking port while the runabout's other occupants continued to disembark.

"Sodyne what are you reading?" Ghroc asked when he and the other fleet officers disembarked with Lyssa and the Betazoid science officer checked her tricorder.

"Multiple life signs of different species but I can't tell if they're heading towards us without making more scans of the layout of the helix." she said.

"Okay then I guess it's over to you. Which way to the stasis boxes?" Ghroc said, looking at Lyssa.

"Kar keeps them in a compartment connecting to his quarters. He doesn't trust anyone not to try and steal them." she replied.

"The drawback of working with criminals." Hamill commented.

"We need to rescue my sister first though. The agoniser booth is also next to Kar's quarters though. I heard he likes to be able to go and listen to his victims' screams." Lyssa told him.

"Then just point the way. Our troops will make sure no-one stops us." Ghroc said.

"I have located the *Rhine*." T'Lan said from the science station while the *Nightfall* continued to fire on cell ships as they made their attack runs on the Starfleet vessel.

"Let me see." Cole replied and he raised a hand to his headset so that he could see what T'Lan had found without needing to use the main viewscreen that was currently being used to show the tactical situation outside. The heads up display of his headset showed him the runabout *Rhine* docked with the helix, seemingly intact and Cole smiled, "It looks like they made it aboard at least. Nayal can you get a transporter lock on the boarding party?"

"Just about captain, but we'll have to stay within five thousand kilometres of the helix to maintain it. Anything more and the dust will block transport." she replied.

"Remember that we cannot use the transporter to move a stasis box." T'Lan pointed out and Cole nodded.

"Yes I'm aware of that. I just want to make sure that if it looks like our people are about to be overrun then we can get them out of there. The same goes for casualties, Nayal let the boarding party know that we can evacuate them directly or sickbay if necessary." Cole said

"What are your orders if the raiders try to board us back? With our shields down they'll be able to beam over." Martin asked.

"I suspect that their transporter technology is inferior to our own." T'Lan said, "If we remain at the extreme limit of our transporter range then they will be unable to beam directly from the helix, only their cell ships that are able to get closer."

"And I can shoot those down." Martin added.

"Just in case have our remaining ground troops put on standby. Also liaise with Commander Davis, if the nanite hive picks up anything that our internal sensors miss then I want to know about it quicker than the last time. In the mean time I want you to fire a few phaser shots at the helix but make sure to aim them away from where our people are. If the raiders think we're happy to destroy the station then they're less likely to think that we've a team aboard already."

"I suggest targeting the section about two thirds of the way from the top of the helix." T'Lan said, "I am detecting strong energy readings from there and I suspect that it is where the main fusion reactor is located. Targeting it would suggest we are trying to destroy the station but by limiting phaser power to sixty percent the beam will not be able to penetrate deeply enough to risk a catastrophic explosion."

"Targeting phasers now." Martin replied.

"Mister Kar I think we have a problem." Oskal said and Kar glared at him.

"Oh you do, do you? Would it have anything to do with that Starfleet cruiser and the attack fighters currently cutting their way through our ships?" Kar snapped back at him.

"Mister Kar it's the two men I sent to get Lyssa, they haven't checked in yet." Oskal told him.

"Raise them." Kar replied.

"I've tried. There's no response." Oskal said.

"Then send someone to find out what's going on. I want that little fool in front of me ready to answer for what she's done." Kar ordered before the helix shuddered, "What was that?" he exclaimed.

"We've been hit, a phaser strike to the reactor section." one of the command staff reported.

"A few more hits like that and we're done for." Oskal commented.

"Get a damage control team down there and make sure the reactor is stable." Kar said. Then he hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Oskal said.

"Is the Starfleet vessel still targeting us?" Kar asked.

"We're picking up scans but they're focusing their fire on the cell ships again." another of the command staff replied.

"I don't like it." Kar said, "That cruiser could blast us out of the stars in one shot of a photon torpedo. What are they waiting for?"

"Maybe they don't want to risk destroying the stasis box Lyssa stole from them." Oskal suggested.

"Lyssa, yes." Kar said, "Has anyone actually seen the stasis box she claims to have?" Kar said.

"No, she just told us that she'd got it." Oskal answered.

"Or maybe there's another reason why the men you sent to fetch her haven't reported in and a Starfleet cruiser is taking pains not to destroy us outright." Kar said, "Oskal, get some more guards up here. I'm going to find out what's going on for myself. I think Lyssa may have done more than just accidentally lead Starfleet here. I think she's working for them and against us."

Aboard the helix anyone other than Lyssa that was not in a Starfleet uniform could be considered a hostile target and the armoured ground troops fired at anyone they saw who was not. Their focus was on reaching Kar's quarters where Lyssa had assured them the Slaver technology that Kar still possessed could be found, along with her sister without attracting the attention of the helix's crew and so they called out no warnings before they opened fire to avoid these being overheard. However, when they reached a doorway the leader of the unit leading the advance came to an unexpected halt and raised his fist for the rest of the boarding party to do the same and his unit took cover to either side of it.

"Lieutenant, what's wrong?" Ghroc asked quietly as he moved forwards to join the unit leader and he looked through the doorway to see that they had reached a large storeroom that was filled with cargo containers.

"There are people in her commander." the lieutenant replied and Ghroc looked around the room. However, if there were any members of the helix's crew among the stacks of crates he could not see them and he beckoned for Sodyne to come forwards.

"Sodyne, the lieutenant says we're not alone her. Can you detect any life signs?" he whispered and Sodyne took out her tricorder to scan the room.

"I'm picking up seven life signs spread around the room." she responded.

"No way we can take out seven all at once commander." the infantry officer said and Ghroc nodded.

"Then we need to go around." he said before turning towards Lyssa, "Is there another way?" he asked her.

"Yes but it's much longer. We need to loop around past the main subspace communications antenna.

"Which way?" Ghroc asked and Lyssa pointed back the way they had come.

"About a hundred metres back on the left." she said.

"Let's get moving them. The *Nightfall* will be waiting for our signal." Ghroc said.

Just as he had expected Kar found the bodies of the two Klingons lying in the corridor outside the docking port where the Starfleet runabout was located. Walking up to the hatch with a phaser in his hands he attempted to open it. However, the hatch remained closed, the panel beside it indicating that it had been security sealed for Starfleet personnel only. Without a Starfleet officer wearing a combadge that the security system could verify the hatch would remain closed and Kar smiled, knowing that Lyssa could not have done this herself. Even if she had stolen a combadge while aboard the *Nightfall* it would not recognise her as its rightful owner and would refuse to grant her access to any secured area.

It was obvious to Kar that Lyssa had brought a Starfleet boarding party with her to the helix, most likely with the promise of leading them to the stasis boxes and the other Slaver technology. However, Kar also suspected that Lyssa's own priority would be her sister rather than the technology she had promised Starfleet and he took his communicator from his pocket and activated it.

"This is Kar, I want an enforcement team sent to my quarters to secure them until I can get there. Tell them to shoot to kill if anyone else tries to break in." he said.

"Captain the cell ships seem to be trying to hit our nacelles." Nayal said as she monitored the damage being inflicted by the particle beams being fired at the *Nightfall*. Thankfully the power of these was so low that they were unable to burn through the cruiser's hull rapidly and although there were dozens of scorch marks on the heavy cruiser's hull only a handful of these had actually inflicted any structural or system damage. On the other hand the cell ships were highly vulnerable to the weapons of the *Nightfall* and its fighters and the wreckage of several dozen littered the interior of the dust cloud. This debris posed no danger to the *Nightfall* even without its deflector shields operating and the five-hundred metre long Akira-class vessel was able to smash through it. On the other hand the smaller Peregrine-class attack fighters and Suliban cell ships had to take care not to collide with any of the debris that was large enough to inflict serious damage on their unshielded hulls.

"They may be hoping to cause a breach in the plasma containment." T'Lan said.

"But our nacelles are shut down. There isn't a single particle of warp plasma running through them." Nayal commented.

"Indeed. However, the raiders' sensors may not be able to tell them this because of disruption from the cloud." T'Lan replied.

"Mind you putting some plasma in them could work for us." Cole said, "If we eject it at just the right time-"

"Then it'll act like a plasma torpedo." Martin interrupted and Cole smiled.

"Exactly commander." he said.

"The plan has merit. The cell ships are having to close to point blank range to attack our nacelles, it should be possible to take out several of them at once." T'Lan added before Cole activated the intercom.

"Cole to engineering. Commander Davis I have a job for you." he said.

"Go ahead captain." Davis responded.

"Commander I need the warp nacelles charging." Cole said.

"But captain we can't go to warp in the cloud and with our shields down the nacelles are vulnerable." Davis said.

"I understand that commander. In fact the enemy is targeting our nacelles. They're targeting them from point-blank range." Cole said.

"Ah, I think I understand captain. You want the emergency venting triggers on standby then?" Davis asked.

"Yes I do commander. Please transfer control of them to the bridge science station. I'm sure T'Lan has the necessary reactions to decide when to release the plasma." Cole said.

"Understood captain, transferring nacelle venting control now. Warp plasma conduits are open. Twenty seconds until full charge," Davis said.

"Thank you commander. Bridge out. Lieutenant Nayal tell our fighter pilots that I want the enemy craft driven towards the stern of the ship. If we can get enough of them following us then we may be able to get more than just a handful." Cole said.

The *Nightfall's* fighters reorganised themselves into a formation that covered the starship's forward and side arcs while leaving the aft one alone. The *Nightfall* itself began a series of sharp turns that both the attack fighters and cell ships were able to match but meant that the cell ships had too little time to attack before the cruiser moved away and they were forced to turn to follow it. The result of this was a large group of cell ships more than eighty in number gathered in close formation behind the *Nightfall* before Cole decided that the time had come to carry out his plan.

"Helm cut impulse drives to ten percent power. Fly straight and level." he ordered, "T'Lan, the decision is yours."

The sudden shift from moving and turning rapidly made the *Nightfall* appear vulnerable and the cell ships behind the Starfleet vessel surged forwards to strike. As anticipated these headed towards the starship's warp nacelles where they hoped to inflict the maximum possible damage. However, as they closed in T'Lan was carefully monitoring their approach and the moment they came within striking distance she triggered the emergency plasma venting system that she had been given total control over.

The super heated plasma lit up space around it even within the dust cloud but its effects were far greater than simply dazzling the pilots of the cell ships rushing towards the *Nightfall*. As the plasma spread out it enveloped the tiny cell ships and the intense heat shattered them, destroying the alloys that made up their hulls. Some of the pilots attempted to turn aside from this unexpected inferno that was trailing behind the *Nightfall* as it continued onwards but the plasma spread too rapidly and all but a handful of the cell ships were consumed before the last of the plasma was vented and cooled down to the point where it returned to a gaseous state and was lost among the dust of the cloud. The Starfleet craft were not done yet though and as the *Nightfall* was turning to engage the surviving cell ships its fighter squadron swooped down on the scattered and disorganised craft first, picking them all off before they could regroup.

"It worked captain. All enemy craft destroyed." Nayal reported when she had confirmed that there were no cell ships remaining.

"Your orders captain?" Martin asked.

"Target the helix Mister Martin, make it obvious that that's what we're doing but hold your fire for the time being. Nayal I want you to hail the raiders and tell them that they have half an hour to surrender or we will destroy their base. That should give Lieutenant Commander Ghroc long enough to find those stasis boxes." Cole replied.

"And what do we do if the raiders agree to surrender captain?" Nayal said.

"Accept their surrender I suppose." Cole answered, "I doubt it will come to that though. Kar Aran doesn't seem like the sort to give up no matter how stacked against him the odds may seem to be."

The lieutenant in command of the infantry platoon fell backwards when he was hit by the unexpected disruptor blast struck him as he rounded a corner and the two troopers behind him dragged him back into cover while a third provided covering fire around the corner.

"Let me see him." Hamill said, darting forwards to inspect the lieutenant's wound. She could see the smoking hole in his armoured chest plate but as she came closer she saw that it did not go all the way through, instead a palm sized area of the outer anti-ballistic layer had been vaporised down to the energy dispersing mesh at the core.

"I'm fine." he gasped, waving Hamill back "The vest took the hit."

"I'll say when you're fine. These vests are perfect." she responded as she reached for the fastenings of the armour.

"What have we got here?" Ghroc asked, moving forwards to stand behind the troopers now exchanging fire with the raiders around the corner.

"Looks like about half a dozen in cover with various energy weapons commander." one of the soldiers told him.

"Kar's quarters are right around that corner. He must have sent them to protect the stasis boxes." Lyssa said.

"And they've probably already called in our presence here. We need to move quickly." Ghroc said, "Crewman use grenades."



"Aye commander." the trooper replied with a smile and he pulled a grenade from his webbing before priming it and hurling it around the corner, "Fire in the hole!" he yelled as the grenade flew over the crates that the raiders had placed across the corridor to provide them with cover from the troopers' phasers.

The explosion of the grenade followed a few seconds later and some of the shrapnel flew past the corner ahead of the boarding party. However, after this there was just silence and the trooper who had thrown the grenade leant around the corner to check on the other side.

"Clear." he called out, waving the rest of the boarding party onwards.

The grenade had destroyed the improvised barrier the raiders were using for cover and large pieces of this were scattered about with several bodies among them. Unlike the Starfleet ground combat specialists the raiders wore no armour at all and had been helpless against the shrapnel hurled by the grenade that filled the corridor.

"There, that's the door to Kar's quarters." Lyssa called out and she pointed to a set of doors just beyond where the barrier had been.

The lead troopers rushed up to the door and positioned themselves around it before one of them reached out to use the control panel to open it. However, the panel had been damaged by the grenade blast and nothing happened.

"We'll have to force it." one of them said and he slung his phaser rifle over his shoulder.

Another of the troopers also slung his rifle and both men took tools from their belts that resembled small shovels but when they unfolded the blades they locked them in place at right angles to the grips. The men then swung these to the crack between the two halves of the door so that they were then able to drag them apart from one another.

The moment that the door was forced open the sound of a woman screaming flooded out into the corridor and Lyssa began to rush forwards.

"Lyra!" she cried out but Ghroc grabbed hold of her before she could make it to the door.

"Just wait." he told her.

"The room is clear commander but we need the doctor in here." the first trooper through the doorway called out and Hamill hurried to the doorway.

Inside the room she saw the trophies Kar had gathered during his years of raiding but her attention was immediately drawn to the agoniser booth at the other side of the room where Lyra writhed in pain inside it. Hamill ran over to the transparent cylinder and attempted to open it but she found that the mechanism was sealed.

"I can't open it." she said.

"Let me see." Sodyne responded as she entered the room and dashed to the control console. Here she saw controls to adjust the intensity and pattern of the pain to be inflicted and saw that the booth was in fact set to inflict continuous pain at what looked like a mid ranged level for its capability. The intensity appeared to be controlled with a slider and Sodyne pushed this down to the minimum level while she looked for the general power and locking controls, "I think I've got it." she said as she cut the power to the agoniser booth and then released the locking mechanism to the door.

Inside the cylinder Lyra collapsed as soon as the agoniser was shut off and Hamill pulled open the door to drag her out.

"Let me go to her!" Lyssa shouted before Ghroc let go of her and she ran to her sister's side while Hamill examined her.

"How bad is she?" Ghroc asked.

"Physically fine. Other than at the highest levels no permanent damage is inflicted on most humanoids." Hamill said as she used her tricorder to scan Lyra, "But her reaction to the constant pain has caused a chemical imbalance that I need to correct as well as severe psychological shock."

"But you can treat her, right?" Lyssa asked.

"Of course I can. Now let me work." Hamill replied.

"Commander Ghroc none of these objects are of Slaver origin." Sodyne said as she looked around at the various trophies in the room and Ghroc looked at Lyssa.

"Okay so where is the Slaver stuff you said was here?" he asked.

"It's not here at all." Lyssa replied, "It's all in a vault two levels down."

"What happened to Kar not trusting his crew enough to be separated from the stasis boxes and their contents?" Sodyne said.

"I lied. If you knew that the stasis boxes were somewhere else I didn't trust you to rescue my sister." Lyssa said, "Just go right and you'll come to an access shaft. It'll take you down the two levels to the vault, Be careful though, it's alarmed so everyone in the command centre will know when you open it."

"I need to stay here with her." Hamill said, looking up from Lyra at Ghroc, "You just go. I'll be fine."

"Alright everyone, you heard the doctor, let's go." Ghroc announced before he turned back towards the doorway.

The access shaft was exactly where Lyssa had said it would be and the boarding party descended the ladder inside it. The shaft extended further down than two levels but the boarding party exited the shaft here as Lyssa had instructed. Outside they found themselves in an empty hallway with a set of large armoured doors. There were no guards present but the ground combat troops spread out to cover the various entry points to the hallway as Ghroc and Sodyne approached the vault door.

"Can you get through this lock or do we need to blow the door?" Ghroc asked as Sodyne began to scan the locking mechanism of the vault.

"I doubt we've got anything that could take out this door but this lock is as old as this station." Sodyne replied as she tapped the controls of her tricorder, "Two hundred years ago it was a good one but since then we've advanced somewhat." and all of a sudden there was a rumbling as the doors began to open, "Incredible." Sodyne added, a smile spreading across her face as she looked into the vault and saw the light being given off by the Slaver stasis boxes the vault contained.

As Kar was almost at his quarters with another unit of enforcers his communicator sounded and he took it from his pocket.

"What?" he said.

"Mister Kar we've just got an alarm from the vault, someone's just opened it." Oskal told him and Kar frowned. He had gambled on Lyssa focusing on her sister rather than the contents of the vault and word from the enforcers that had been sent to his quarters seemed to confirm this. Obviously the Starfleet boarding team had already had time to move on though, the enforcers having failed to hold them off. Kar suspected that Lyra would not be in any state to be moved but the contents of the vault were far too valuable to ignore someone breaking in.

"Go to the vault." he told the heavily armed men with him, "Starfleet is there. I'm going to make sure my quarters are secure and then I'll join you."

As his men turned and headed for the vault Kar continued towards his quarters, pausing when he reached the corridor that was still littered with the bodies of the men that had been deployed to defend them.. The door to his quarters looked to have been forced open and from inside Kar could hear Lyssa's voice talking to her sister, reassuring her that everything would be okay now.

Smiling, Kar drew his phaser and moved slowly towards the doorway. As he got closer he heard another voice and guessed that there was someone else in the room with Lyssa and Lyra. All he could tell from the voice though was that it was another woman and it was only when he stepped into the doorway he saw Doctor Hamill. At first the body armour she wore made her look like a soldier but then Kar noticed the Starfleet science division uniform that she was wearing underneath it and the open medical kit beside her and he realised that she was a doctor.

"Welcome back Lyssa." he said and Hamill and Lyssa both turned towards the doorway in surprise, "Did you really think you'd get away with betraying me? Perhaps after you and your sister have spent a week or so in the booth each you'll be more compliant."

"Kar you bastard!" Lyssa snapped, leaping to her feet and starting to move towards Kar but he pointed his phaser at her.

"Oh no my girl, I wouldn't think of attacking me. I'll shoot you down before you can-" he began but while his attention was focused on Lyssa, Hamill was able to draw, aim and fire her own phaser at him. The beam struck Kar and a shocked expression appeared on his face for a moment as he realised what had just happened before he collapsed in a heap.

"Stay back." Hamill told Lyssa, getting up and walking towards Kar while keeping her weapon trained on him. Her phaser had been set on 'stun' and she could tell that he was still breathing but she still reached down to pick up the phaser that he had dropped to make sure not only that he wouldn't be able to recover the weapon if he regained consciousness but that Lyssa could not take it either. However, as she turned back around she had just enough time to see Lyssa standing right in front of her with a hypospray that she had taken from the medical kit while Hamill's back was turned before the other woman jabbed it into her leg where the armour she wore offered no protection.

"Sorry about that doctor," Lyssa said, reaching down to pick up both of the dropped phasers, "But look on the bright side. This is going to hurt Kar Aran far more than it will hurt you."

"We've got incoming." the infantry lieutenant rushed into the vault to tell Ghroc and Sodyne, the damage to his armour still visible and from outside the vault there was the sound of phaser fire.

"What do you think Sodyne?" Ghroc asked, looking at the science officer.

"I think we need to take all this stuff back to the runabout. It's priceless." she replied.

"Yes but is it safe to move?" Ghroc said.

"We can just load all these things into the stasis boxes. It doesn't matter how unstable they might be once they're sealed inside a stasis box they can be moved without any danger." Sodyne told him.

"Lieutenant give us a hand." Ghroc said and the three officer quickly began taking the various Slaver-era objects from the display cases they were kept in and moving them to the stasis boxes that the boarding party had already attached compact portable antigravs to so that they could be taken back to the waiting *Rhine*.

"That's it we're set." Sodyne said when the last of the objects had been loaded into a stasis box and the lid closed and Ghroc tapped his combadge.

"Doctor Hamill we're done here. Can you make it back to the runabout?" he said but there was no response, "Doctor Hamill can you hear me?" he added but again there was no reply.

"Something's wrong." Sodyne said and Ghroc nodded.

"We need to check on her." he said.

"You go. I'll make sure that these get to the runabout and I'll have it ready by the time you get there." Sodyne told him and the Bolian turned to the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant I need a squad of your men The rest are to accompany Lieutenant Commander Sodyne back to the runabout." he said.

Hamill woke to find herself lying on the floor of Kar's quarters and unable to move or speak. Her arms had been lifted over her head and she had been stretched out on the floor with her wrists and ankles bound with what looked like strips of fabric torn from bedsheets that had then been secured to walls on opposite sides of the room to keep her from moving while more of the fabric had been stuffed into her mouth to gag her. Kar's quarters were filled with the sound of screaming and turning her head towards the source she saw that Kar himself was now also conscious and standing inside the agoniser booth as it induced the most excruciating pain possible in every part of his body.

It was then that Hamill heard Ghroc's voice come from her combadge and she tried to respond but the fabric in her mouth prevented her from uttering a word. Instead she began to tug at her bonds, trying to wriggle free of them. However, she was still securely bound and gagged when Ghroc suddenly appeared in the doorway with a squad of ground combat troops behind him.

"Doctor!" he exclaimed when he saw Hamill lying helpless on the floor and he rushed to her side, drawing the knife he had on his belt so that he could cut her free, "Are you okay?" he asked and Hamill nodded.

"It was Lyssa, she took me by surprise." she replied as soon as she had been able to pull the fabric stuffing from her mouth.

"We need to get going. Sodyne's taken the stasis boxes back to the runabout." Ghroc told her.

"That makes twice my best friend has picked them over me." Hamill muttered before she looked towards the agoniser booth, "We need to get him out of there. That's Kar." she said as Ghroc helped her back to her feet and they made their way to the control panel. Having seen Sodyne work the controls earlier Hamill knew where the power shut off was and she quickly deactivated the agoniser booth, at which point Kar slumped to the bottom of it and promptly vomited.

"Get him out and cuff him. He's going with us." Ghroc told one of the troopers from the squad that had accompanied him.

Sodyne had already powered up the runabout when Ghroc and Hamill arrived with the squad of ground combat troops dragging Kar between them.

"Are we ready?" Ghroc asked as he sealed the hatch behind them and Sodyne nodded.

"As systems green." she replied.

"Then go. Full impulse back to the *Nightfall*." Ghroc ordered. Firing the runabout's impulse drive blasted the craft away from the helix, burning into the hull and decompressing the section around the docking port as it pulled away and Ghroc rushed to the co-pilot's seat and sat down before activating the communication system, "*Rhine to Nightfall*." he said.

"*Nightfall* here, go ahead commander." Nayal's voice responded.

"*Nightfall* we are clear of the helix. We have the stasis boxes and other Slaver items with us as well as Kar Aran in custody but Lyssa gave us the slip." Ghroc said.

"Never mind that for now commander." Cole's voice said, "For now we have what we need and these raiders won't be bothering anyone else for a long time."

"Decompression!" one of the helix's command crew called out, "The Starfleet runabout is escaping."

"Has there been any word from Mister Kar?" Oskal asked.

"None sir and Starfleet's ultimatum will expire soon. What do we do?" a nearby technician replied.

"Abandon ship." Oskal ordered, "We'll shut down the magnetic clamps and release all the cell modules. Even with its fighters that Starfleet cruiser can't follow us all and we'll regroup somewhere else."

"Captain look, the helix is breaking up." Martin said when he saw the modules that made up the helix all begin to start drifting away from the core.

"Confirmed." T'Lan added, "The magnetic clamps that maintain the structure of the helix have been deactivated. The raiders are fleeing."

"Do we go after them?" Nayal asked.

"There are more than a thousand modules, all of them moving in different directions." T'Lan pointed out.

"Let them go." Cole said, "Their leader is in custody, they have no base and we have the stasis boxes they'd collected so they won't be using them to lure in any more victims. Just make sure that those stolen ships don't go anywhere. Mister Martin if they look like they're powering up then fire at their engines. I think we can call this a win."

Among the more than a thousand helix modules that had now become miniature starships in their own right Lyssa sat at the controls of one, her sister slumped in the seat next to her, unconscious but alive. "Don't worry Lyra," Lyssa said, "I've got a plan to get us back on our feet and then we'll see about reclaiming what we lost today."