

# Star Trek: The Breen War

## Prologue

"...With the end of the Dominion War, the major powers of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants began the long and difficult task of rebuilding. Many hoped that the end of the war would result in a new era of peace and alliance. Relations between the three Allied powers - the United Federation of Planets, the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire - remained strong even after the guns fell silent.

Political and military strategists within Starfleet believed that such a destructive conflict would never again occur, that such loss of life on a galactic scale could never again be possible, within the lifetime of the Federation.

It is ironic indeed that, on the day that Federation President Ja'alt announced that the peoples of the Alpha Quadrant would never again suffer the horrors of war, in distant parts of the quadrant, seemingly unconnected events would show the galaxy that the events of the Dominion War were merely overture and prologue..."-- extract from "Conflict and Confrontation: Chapter IX: Eye of the Storm", Tycho City Press, Stardate 62381.

### **Breen Homeworld Stardate 57156.9**

It was an odd language, the grammar and structure so unlike the other tongues across the galaxy the universal translator could not deconstruct it in real time. As a result of the half second lag peoples not fluent in Breen were forced to read a text translation when attempting to comprehend the reclusive species.

The title on the door, roughly translated, read "Admiral." Behind it was an expansive office, out of the blistering winter wind that never ceased in the 'temperate' zone of the Breen home world. Although temperate was a relative term, there was a small region along the equatorial zone of the planet warm enough to support human life, but the Breen found the bitter cold of the frozen poles much more comfortable. Behind the desk in the center of the room was a site rarely seen by off-worlders, a Breen unburdened by the environmental suit his race was forced to wear to endure the hardships of space travel.

The Admiral looked over the map of the quadrant. His ships were in position. The plan was perfect. They would never see it coming. He press a control that opened up comm. channel to his fleet. Had a universal translator been present, a half second after the message was uttered, it would have displayed a single word. "Attack."

**USS *Beholder* NCC - 9826**  
**Patrolling Breen Treaty Zone**

The small *Oberth* class starship slipped through the vastness of space. Stars reflected off her hull as she patrolled in the space between systems, her powerful sensors probing, keeping an eye on the restive people on the other side of this artificial barrier. People who had already fought against the Federation in the largest war the quadrant had seen, and were clearly feeling expansive.

Captain Margaret Fuchsia walked onto her bridge. *Her* bridge. Those two words juxtaposed still felt odd. Margaret supposed that sooner or later she'd get used to it. She hoped that it would be later rather than sooner though. She smiled somewhat at the familiar thought.

"Anything new, Sharkie?" she asked her XO, who stood up to greet her. Commander Robèrt Caillard had obtained that rather unfortunate epithet once it became clear just how obsessed he was with card games. Any card game. The higher the stakes the better.

He grimaced. "Not one thing, mon capitaine," he said, his French accent adding a pleasing sound to his otherwise unpleasing words. "It is as if The Powers That Be are conspiring against us and are *trying* to make this as boring as possible. There was not even a single scouting run."

Margaret grinned at the playful mourning in Robèrt's voice. "Frankly, Sharkie, I can live with boring. We're too small to deal with interesting."

Sharkie perked up. "This is true." Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "Ah yes, Chief O'Donnel reported odd tachyon readings around...three hours ago. We investigated of course, but by the time we were at the location where we'd detected them, they were gone. I *logged* it as an anomalous reading."

The slight emphasis on "logged" indicated what he thought about that. Given who they were dealing with, it would be best to be cautious. "Nothing we can do about that," she said. "Let's just hope it doesn't turn around and bite us on the ass." Sharkie smiled in agreement.

"Sirs!" said O'Donnel from the science station. "I'm reading tachyon distortions to aft."

Margaret and Sharkie walked over to the station, looking at a detailed view of the emissions. "Merde," whispered Caillard. He looked up, resignation on his thin face. "Definitely a cloaking device mon capitaine."

"And on an intercept course for us," added Chief O'Donnel.

Margaret sighed in disbelief. "Red Alert," she said, for the first time ever as captain. *So this is how it will end.*

"Shields up!" said Ensign Gr'ress, the Caitian tactical officer. "Weapons operational."

"Our only chance is to hit them as soon as possible after they decloak," said Robért to Margaret as they sat down.

Margaret nodded understanding; the shields of almost any ship were down while decloaking, but they could still be targeted, and thus vulnerable. "Can you do that Ensign?"

"I...I think so," respond Gr'ress.

"Good. Target their weapons as soon as you can get a phaser lock."

"Aye sir."

The minutes until weapons range counted down, then seconds. The bridge crew collectively held their breaths as the "tachyon" emissions slowly flew closer and closer to the *Beholder*. The *Oberths* had almost nothing in the way of firepower; a Runabout could quite likely defeat one. The Breen frigate, while weak for a warship, was more than likely going to destroy them. Margaret understood that, just as she understood that even if the crew got to the escape pods, they would stand no chance against a ship, any ship.

"Sir, they're decloaking," said O'Donnel.

"Fire!"

Orange beams shot out from under the saucer rim, trailed by a four photon torpedoes. The phasers managed to hit two of the disruptor cannons on the frigate, while the torpedoes sped on for the main launcher on the front of the ship. A small explosion engulfed the forward end of the ship.

O'Donnell shook his head. "Their torpedo launcher's offline, but there's no significant damage to their disruptors. Their shields are up now."

*Damn*, thought Fuchsia. *I should have targeted their shields generator...* "Keep firing Gr'ress. Helm, try to maneuver us behind them. They don't have any weapons to aft."

"Neither do we," commented Sharkie.

"Sir, they're firing!" shouted O'Donnell.

Several green disruptors bolts emerged from the extremities of the ship, in salvos of three. The first salvo hit, and blue fire spread around the *Beholder* as the shields failed. The next two hit the hull directly.

"Hull integrity at...too low captain!" shouted Sharkie.

"Keep firing!"

"The weapons are offline," said Gr'ress. The ship shook violently. "Correction, weapons *gone*."

"We've lost impulse drive!" shouted the helm officer.

Margaret closed her eyes in pain. She knew what had to be done, but she didn't want to. Her first ship, lost. Damn. "Tell them we surrender," she said, tearing the words out of her mouth. Those words were soul-destroying.

"Sir?" asked Robért.

"Do it."

"We can't," said the com officer. "Transceiver's gone."

"Oh." Her soul-rending decision, all for nothing. It was like the universe was playing a massive practical joke on her. It wasn't funny.

Sparks started flying as the EPS grid blew. O'Donnell was the first to die on the bridge, then Gr'ress. Then Sharkie, decapitated by a flying piece of shrapnel. Then blackness.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Theta Cygni Shipyards Three weeks later**

*"Begin Captain's Log, USS Swiftsure, Captain Mar'zief Falco commanding.  
Stardate 57218.4.*

*I am finally transferring to the Swiftsure, which is a most...odd experience. I've spent the past six years on board the Sutherland, but she is moving on to a new captain and crew.*

*The Swiftsure has just finished an eight-month refit, upgrading her warp drive and weapons. She has some serious teeth now, a fact that reassures me greatly.*

*This came out sounding weaker than I intended. Ah well, so it's a bit boring for whoever has to review this log. Tough.*

A small shuttle flew out of the large office complex that administered the shipyard and the surrounding drydocks. The shipyard was simply a large collection of drydocks of various size and shape collected into roughly the same area. It wasn't pretty, but it was efficient. The shuttle turned and headed to one of these monstrous scaffolds of metal.

A small starship in one of the smaller docks came into view, displaying the sleek lines of a refit *Nova* class Starship. The letters "USS *Alabama*" were stenciled clearly across the hull. A small quantum torpedo turret was barely visible under the hull.

"Mar'zief," said one of the occupants of the shuttle, pointing at the ship. "You've got your ship; I've got mine," said Captain Jacob Harkness, smiling. He was tall, for a human, with the slight Missouran drawl that refused to leave anyone from the region. "Check her out," he continued. "Isn't she beautiful?"

The other occupant smiled in an awkward fashion, as if the muscles on his face refused to align just right. However, there was no confusing its sincerity. Mar'zief Falco was short, even for a Caitian, not even reaching the shoulder of his friend. His Caitian fur was a deep black, with hints of silver highlighting it. Despite the smile, however, pain seemed to echo in his eyes, a lurking sadness.

The Caitian eyed his friend and decided that an honest opinion would be...out of place right now. "Of course she is Jacob," said Mar'zief, smiling. Sort of.

Jacob eyed Mar'zief askance. "You don't sound very enthusiastic," he chided.

Falco shrugged. "She's too small for my tastes," he said matter-of-factly. Something which visibly annoyed Jacob. *Score.*

"You're just saying that to get on my nerves."

Falco feigned a look of innocence. "Who, me? I'm, shocked, *shocked*, that you would accuse me of that Jacob Harkness."

"Sure you are." The two friends looked at each other in mock seriousness, and then both grinned. Suddenly, something caught Mar'zief's eye.

"Look," said Mar'zief, pointing out the window. "Now *that's* a starship."

"That" was a large vessel, dwarfing the *Alabama* and reducing the shuttle that the two were flying in to Lilliputian scale. Sleek and beautiful, the *Swiftsure* displayed all of the graceful lines of a *Sovereign* class ship.

"My God Marz...She's a beauty," said Jacob in rapture. "Congratulations."

"Thanks old friend," said Mar'zief, staring at his new ship in delight. "We could have used her at Cardassia back in '75."

"Yeah well..." Harkness trailed off. "I doubt we'll see action like that again in my lifetime."

"We'll see..."

### **USS *Pelican* Bridge**

An ungainly *Frogfoot* class transport leapt out of warp and immediately headed for the collection of shipyards and drydocks that made up the Theta Cygni fleet yard.

"Hail Yard Control," said the captain, "and inform them that we're here."

"Aye sir," said the communication officer. "We have clearance to begin beaming our passengers onboard their ships."

"Understood." The captain hit the stud on his small but efficient command chair. "This is Captain Tivkan to all passengers, please listen for your transport assignments. *Swiftsure* officers, please report to Transporter Room 21...*Swiftsure* enlisted, please report to..."

### **Officer's Quarters**

Lieutenant Commander Ian Wallace sat up in his bed and looked over at KentarTokhis, who looked up from the poem that she was writing.

"Well, that sounds like us. You said you were looking forward to being chief engineer?" he asked grinning. "Here's your chance."

She returned his smile. "I greatly look forward to seeing the *Swiftsure*. I am also looking forward to working on board her. I hear that she's the most advanced ship in the fleet."

"C'mon," he said, lifting up his duffel, "we've got to report to the transporter room." Kentar smiled as she heard *I can't wait to check out those phasers* muttered under his breath. All tactical officers were the same it appeared.

The two walked into the transporter room, to face a decidedly annoyed--and young--Commander. He raised one eyebrow as he looked them over. "We've been waiting on you," he said, a touch of irony in his voice.

"Sorry sir," said Wallace, eying the younger man.

"*Lieutenant* Commander Wallace, correct?" asked the commander, stressing the "lieutenant" ever so slightly.

"Aye, that's me."

"Commander Michael Bailer. I'll trust that you will be on time on the *Swiftsure*."

"Of course sir," replied Wallace, stepping onto the transporter pad.

"Good." Mikey looked over to the transporter operator. "Chief, please beam us to the *Swiftsure*."

Blue lights swirled as the transporter activated. One instant, they were on board the *Pelican*, the next, they were fifteen thousand kilometers away, on board the *Swiftsure*.

### **USS *Swiftsure* NCC - 75089 Kentar's quarters**

Kentar laid her duffel on the unmade bed in her assigned quarters and smiled. This was larger than her quarters on the *Fenris*; much larger.

She opened her duffel; on top was a picture of her and Robért, grinning wildly (quite a sight to see, given her generally lizard-like features), the shuttle that had won them the record for style-flight behind them. Her totem, a protection against

an unknown world. It was a reminder that no matter how lonely the universe got, Robért was usually a call or letter away. And that he always had time for her.

She smiled and laid the picture on her desk.

**Alpha Centauri**  
**USS *Dauntless* NCC - 71879**

A large *Galaxy* class starship came into the system, a leviathan, a graceful collection of tritanium, duranium, and other exotic materials, come together into the largest ship ever built by Starfleet. There were straight edges disrupting the flow of the ship, but she managed to project a presence that no other ship had ever had, and likely never would again.

The *Dauntless* had seen her fair share of action during the War, but she was now assigned to Core World defense. Specifically, this was the flagship of the Tactical Director of the Sol System defenses themselves. As such, it was most odd to find her more than four light-years outside of Sol.

The main shuttlebay opened, a vast, cavernous expanse, and a shuttle flew out of the massive door, heading for the truly gigantic "station" of Constitution City.

With more than a million inhabitants, this "station" was an ever-expanding collection of docks, massive habitation areas, and shuttlebays. There was a tremendous amount of shuttle and starship activity; this was a major center of trade.

The shuttle from the *Dauntless* made a beeline for one of the giant station's many shuttlebays and landed on one of the marked landing pads. No starship bay was this, with only one shuttle or so leaving at once. This was a bustling port, with constant comings and goings, of everything ranging from small type-15 shuttlepods to gargantuan cargo shuttles that almost classified as starships. There were several "roads" between the various pads, with long personnel conveyer trains, deuterium tankers, cargo lifters, security skimmers...the variety was amazing, incredible. A never-ending whirl of energy and activity.

A door opened in the back of the shuttle, and out walked a slightly older man, in his early fifties, Admiral Nikolai Martin, essentially *the* man in charge of the defense of Earth. His hair was turning white, but not due to age. Several fine lines dotted his face. He preferred to think of them as signs of character. It felt more comfortable to think that.

A large personnel conveyer sped up and stopped beside his shuttle; clearly Martin was expected to embark, and so he did. As soon as the conveyer left, a large tanker, about the size of an outdated tractor-trailer from the twentieth



century, pulled up and refueled the shuttle. This was just one small microcosm of the hive of activity that is one of Constitution City's shuttlebays. There was never a dull moment for the workers.

The conveyer stopped beside one of the mag-lev concourses. The passengers walked out onto the concourse, waiting for the--delayed--train. Martin, as befitting his seniority, walked off last and looked around.

"Ah, Nikolai!" shouted a voice from behind the crowd. Nikolai looked around and snapped to attention as he saw the Commander in Chief of Starfleet walk right toward him.

"Admiral Bailer," said Martin.

"No need for you to be so formal," said Admiral Jason Bailer, Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet. "I expect that kind of thing from captains and commanders. Not from you."

Martin relaxed, smiling. "Hello Jason."

"That's better. It's good to see you again Nikolai. How long has it been?"

Martin made a show of trying to remember. "Let's see...when Ja'alt sent you and a few of the other council members off to this hunk of metal...two years?" Nikolai looked right at his old friend. "In other words, far too long."

Jason shrugged. "I've been busy."

Nikolai snorted, though he didn't follow it up. "Well, knowing you, I don't think that you ordered me here just to catch up on old times. What is it Jason?"

Bailer looked around and then shook his head no. "Not here, come with me to my office."

"Of course..." said Martin, a puzzled look on his face.

"So how's Peter?" asked Jason as they walked onto the mag-lev and sat down.

Nikolai immediately brightened up. "Oh, he's great. His soccer team just won the state soccer championship, with a *tellarite* on the other team too! And he's doing great in school too, getting flying colors in almost every class!" He looked around and leaned toward Bailer. "He actually has a calendar up, counting down the days until he can join Starfleet Academy."

Bailer smiled back, though with a slightly wistful hint on his face.

Nikolai leaned back and asked, "So, how's Mikey? I hear that he's up for exec duty now. Pretty impressive."

Bailer's smile immediately disappeared.

"That bad huh?"

Bailer looked at his hands. "I don't know why he isn't happy. He should be happy! Youngest human exec in Starfleet history! And he's with Falco no less! He *should* be happy!"

"I imagine that the fact that you missed his graduation--both of them--doesn't help much..." said Nikolai gently.

Jason winced.

"Tell him that you're proud of him Jason..."

"Dammit Nick, I tried. I caught him here on Constitution City a few days ago, right before he left for the *Swiftsure*. He just blew me off."

"Look at it from his point of view. He has to wonder whether or not his posting was you making up for missing his graduation. He can't be sure one way or the other."

"Oh." Jason looked downward. "It's not, he deserved it, every...I was busy?"

"I'm the head of Tactical Operations in Sol. Yet I made it to Peter's big game. And to his play. And...my point is, you have to *make* the time Jason."

"But..."

"Not buts. That's always been your problem. You've always put work ahead of your family. Tell him you're proud of him Jason, tell him before it's too late."

A sign above the door on the mag-lev flashed.

"Well," said Bailer, "That's not important right now. If you'll come with me...?"

Nikolai rolled his eyes and walked off of the mag-lev.

### **Bailer's Office**

Bailer's office was black, completely dark. "Lights," said Admiral Bailer.

"Well, now that we're hear, can you tell me what's up?" asked Martin.

Bailer made shushed him with his hand while reaching into his desk for something. He pulled out something that looked like a purple dagger. Bailer pushed a button and swept it around his room.

"Good, we're clean," he said. Bailer looked at Martin. "I'm sure that you've heard rumors that there's a secret-police-like group in the Federation in the Federation, taking orders from Starfleet Command?"

"Yes..." said Martin slowly. "But I never really believed them."

"Believe them, they're real. At least partially. They're true in that this group exists. They aren't true in that they don't take orders from Starfleet Command."

"I should know," continued Bailer.

"You mean that Section 31's real? I thought--"

"Whatever you thought is irrelevant, Nikolai," interrupted Bailer. "They're on the move."

### **Transporter Room**

Two security guards stood at the egress from the Transporter Room, checking IDs. The next batch beamed over, but this one was different. One of the guards tapped his partner, pointing at a man with reddish skin and white hair that belied his youthful looks, but who was however wearing thin Bajoran robes.

"Look Li, dressed like a Bajoran, but never saw anyone like *that* before..."

The odd-looking man walked over to the guards and handed over his ID. "Ah, Fonon Jo'Uva, our bartender," said the other guard, Li.

"Yeah, that's right," said Jo'Uva, looking somewhat pre-occupied.

"Clear," said Li. "You can go through."

"Thanks."

Fonon walked out of the transporter room and into a turbolift car, where, as luck should have it, he managed to get a car to himself.

"Destination?" asked the Computer.

"What?" asked Fonon, startled. "Oh...uh...deck 6."

As the turbolift started up, Fonon pulled out a small long-range communicator. "This is Jo'Uva. Am on Board. Will communicate as planned. Out."

Fonon put the communicator back into his robe and turned around, waiting for the turbolift ride to end.

### **Mess Hall**

Like always, the verbal assault shocked Falco as he walked into the Crewman's mess hall. People talking at the tops of their lungs, trays and glasses clinking, the near-constant hum of the heavy-duty replicators, they always beat in on him, though it wasn't *quite* as bad as on board the *Sutherland*. Thank the Hunter...

Falco scanned the crowd, ignoring the occasional crewman snapping to attention as their representative next to God (in whatever form you believed Him, Her, or Other) walked in. In a far corner, he saw what who he was looking for, sitting at a table by himself. No crewmen would voluntarily associate themselves with an officer. Falco snorted and walked over.

"Hello Commander," said Falco, startling the poor Scotsman, who up to that point had been enjoying some unidentifiable sandwich. "Thought that I'd find you here," he continued, grinning. After a fashion.

"Captain! What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be hard at work?" Ian asked suspiciously.

"I was about to ask *you* the same question," retorted Falco, pretending to be stern.

Ian couldn't help it anymore, and he broke down laughing. Falco grinned again while he sat down at the table. Wallace picked up the sandwich that he'd been eating and took a defiant bit out of it.

"It's good to see you again Ian," he said. "I'm glad you decided to take this post; an officer of your abilities could have had the pick of the fleet. Even *Picard* would take you."

"I'll take you at your word for that," said Wallace, smiling. "But this is where I want to be. And besides, Picard's too stuffy for me."

"So how are things? We haven't had much chance to talk since you came on board..."

"You've been busy; we all have," said Ian, shrugging. "The divorce papers finally went through." He grimaced. "We finalized the arrangements a couple of weeks after you left the *Sutherland*." He looked up from his sandwich. "We keep in touch."

"Sorry..."

"Ach, it's been coming for a while. Since the war... I guess after that she's never really been comfortable with me in Starfleet, never having time for Chloe. I guess that we just...drifted apart."

Falco looked at him with a glint in his eye. "I prefer Caitian mating rituals," he said.

A small smile appeared on Ian's face as he eyed Mar'zief. "You would." Falco shrugged unapologetically.

"Captain Falco," said the voice of the comm officer on duty over Falco's comm badge.

Mar'zief slapped his badge. "Falco here."

"You have a message from Admiral Walker."

Falco nodded, though his face was screwed up in confusion. "Understood. Tell him I'll take it in my quarters. Falco out."

Falco got up to leave. "By the way, you'll be spending a month in the brig if you ever call her '*Swifty*'," he said, looking at Wallace over his shoulder.

Ian grinned, and then turned back to his sandwich. "Didn't think '*Swifty*' was that bad," he muttered to himself, still smiling.

### **Captain's Quarters**

Falco hit the "accept" key on his terminal, seeing Admiral Forrest, and aging man of African descent, appear on his screen.

"Admiral," said Mar'zief, nodding.

"Captain," said Forrest, nodding in turn. "Congratulations on your new command," he continued, a wistful note in his voice. "I hear that she's a beauty."

"Well, to some anyway," said Falco, trying to grin.

The Admiral looked visibly taken aback for a few moments until comprehension

dawned on his face. "Ah, a joke. I wish that I was in the mood for them."

Worry etched lines on Falco's face. "What's wrong?"

### **Observation Lounge**

Wallace rushed into the lounge only to find the rest of the senior officers already gathered. Whoops. Ah well, it wasn't his fault that he'd been enjoying the--real--shower when Falco had summoned all senior officers to the lounge. He slipped into an empty seat beside Dr. Brown. Ah, Commander Prick was sitting straight, like a rod was straight up his arse. Of course...

"I'm sorry to call you all from your pressing duties," said Falco, "but I am under orders to tell you this as soon as possible. I.E., right now." He got out of his chair walked over to the screen on the left wall and activated it. A map a map of the northwest quadrant of the Federation appeared on it, as well as large chunk much of the Cardassian Union. A tiny sliver of the Ferengi Alliance was also on the far east of the map. But that wasn't the focus. The focus was instead on a decent-sized portion of the map, marked only with a symbol. Twin blades marked the top and bottom, surrounded on either side by curved spikes.

The symbol of the Breen...

"The Breen Confederacy," said Mar'zief. "So far we've had little contact with them since First Contact back in the mid-twenty-third century. They remain a near total mystery to us. A situation that seems to suit them quite well. Apart from their brief alliance with the Dominion in the War, they've taken little notice of what goes on outside of their borders. But this has changed."

Wallace looked over the other officers. Mikey looked attentive of course. The very model of a modern...commander. Brown looked simply like he thought he had better things to be doing. Wallace didn't think that *he'd* last long under Falco. Kentar...now, she was hard to read. Then again, how do you tell what a six-foot lizard is thinking? The others varied between Mikey's attentiveness and Wallace's apparent boredom with the proceedings. Not that Wallace *was* bored, but he had an image to live up to.

"In the past month, we've lost three ships along the Breen border. The *Finch* and the *Beholder*, both *Oberths* specially equipped to detect cloaked vessels, not that it saved them in this case. We also lost an *Akira*, the *Dragon*. The black boxes confirmed it. The Breen."

Strange that suddenly everyone, Wallace and Brown included, had their full attention riveted on Falco. Kentar's eyes widened in shock.

Mikey looked at Falco. "Sir, it's only been four years since the end of the War. Does Intelligence really believe that they've already rebuilt their fleet? We dealt them a pretty hefty blow."

Falco looked right at Mikey. "Frankly Commander, Starfleet Intelligence doesn't know what to believe. Except that in the space of a week, we lost three ships to them." Falco turned around and faced the screen. "Our job is to patrol the frontier, watch their activities, and to raise the flag in the area. Let them know that whatever else happens, the Federation isn't prepared to let them pull off any kind of operation that could cause us any harm. We launch in twelve hours."

Kentar spoke up finally. "Sir, that's...impossible." Wallace snorted; you never said *anything* was impossible to Falco. Especially not in a potential crisis. "We were supposed to have another week--" she tried to continue.

"Commander," Falco interrupted, "Our job is to *make* it possible. Expedite what you can. What you can't, deal with when we're underway."

"No one wants to get out there as much as I, but I don't know if we can unless I at least have more engineering personnel."

"No, I'm afraid not. What we have is what we get."

Kentar sat back, dismayed.

"By when do we have to be at the Treaty Zone?" asked Jas Ikthan, the Coridian Ops Officer, obviously assuming that the time for questions had arrived.

Falco bared his teeth, not even a faux grin this one. Wallace recognized that look. He'd seen it often enough during the Taurot campaign a couple of years back. Well, at least he wasn't slapping the Lieutenant down. "Our orders are to make all possible speed. We'll be traveling at warp factor nine-point-nine."

Commander Bailer raised his hand. An amazing breach of discipline for the commander. "Sir, is it possible that diverting Starfleet attention to the border is exactly what the Breen want?"

Falco eyed Bailer strangely. "Starfleet Intelligence has considered that possibility and rejected it. I would not presume to argue against that decision."

He surveyed them all again. "Your specific orders will be detailed on your terminals. Consider the ship at yellow alert. Dismissed."

## Chapter Two

### **USS *Swiftsure* Commander Bailer's Quarters**

Mikey Bailer walked into his bare quarters and sat down, leaning back in his chair and looking languidly around for a moment in the manner the weary always did. He look around his quarters; they were fairly generic, a spartan affair, with little to distinguish it from thousands of others. He stretched, weary from the demands put on him; he hadn't even gotten a chance to *nap* yet, dammit. It had been twenty-five hours since he had last slept.

Mikey got up and picked up his duffel. The contents were unusually utilitarian, with only the odd picture or trophy was scattered here or there, but no brilliant painting or treasured childhood memento. It was as internally empty as its occupant sometimes was. He stretched and groaned, and took off his uniform jacket, slinging it haphazardly over another standard-issue piece of furniture. "The man thinks I'm an idiot," he said.

He got up and walked over to his to his perfectly made bed. He sat down, messing up it's tight fit. "Bad enough that my so-called father pulled strings to get me promoted, but why the hell did he stick me with a man who thinks that I'm some kind of idiot, blinded by Starfleet regulations?"

Mikey picked up a small, framed picture and walked back over to the sparse desk. It was a picture of then-Captain Jason Bailer, holding his young son, looking back with unreadable eyes. Mikey put it down. It seemed oddly...prominent on the desk. Mikey barely restrained a sneer.

"This is *your* fault. I'd be perfectly happy to be a Lieutenant Commander right now, but you kept pushing, pushing. The Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet couldn't feel guilty, now could he? I wouldn't mind you ignoring me, but God save me from your guilt!"

Mikey snorted. "I doubt that he's even thinking about me right now, or about anything except Starfleet. It's always Starfleet, Starfleet, Starfleet with him..."

### **Theta Cygni Shipyards USS *Alabama* NCC - 73602 Two Days Later**

It was time. All ships that were within a week of readiness under normal conditions were being launched, and several leaves had been cancelled. Such a well-coordinated series of attacks by the Breen during peacetime was unprecedented and worrying. Very worrying.



"Mr. Harris," said Jacob Harkness, "signal Yard Control to release tractor moorings."

"Aye sir," said Lieutenant Harris, the *Alabama's* communications officer. "Tractor moorings released."

Harkness looked over to his tactical officer. "Mr. Jackson, are there any workbees in the way?"

"Negative sir," said Lieutenant Commander Greg Jackson. "There are no workbees in drydock."

A light started flashing on Harris' console. The comm officer pushed a button, then looked up. "Control informs us that we are clear to depart."

"Good," said Jacob, smiling. "Helm, take us out, one-quarter impulse."

"We have cleared drydock sir," said Jackson.

Harkness looked into the viewscreen, set directly ahead. Out into the vast emptiness of space. A space that now seemed far emptier, given what he now knew.. "Helm, set a course for Earth, warp six."

"Course set, sir."

"See you around Mar'zief," Harkness said under his breath. He then turned to his helmsman and said, "Engage."

The *Alabama* leapt into warp, leaving the system far behind within minutes.

### **USS *Swiftsure* Jeffries Tube**

A man, crouching, was tinkering with EPS conduits, tapping buttons while muttering to himself. He'd been lucky to get past the various Starfleet Officers, despite his training. Legally, he had no business in this Jeffries Tube.

The man pulled something out of his robes and placed it in between the various conduits, making connections where appropriate. He then turned around and crawled out of the tube.

### **Main Bridge**

Falco walked onto the bridge and sat down in his chair surveying the...his crew. They seemed attentive to their tasks. Good.

"Falco to engineering, what's system status?" he asked.

"Engineering here sir," said Kentar. "We have a green light on all systems. Impulse and warp power at your command." She paused, and then continued, "EPS taps and plasma conduits are at one hundred percent."

"Thank you Commander, Falco out." He swung around to look at Wallace. "Tactical status?"

Wallace nodded professionally and didn't even bother to look at his console. "Hull and structural integrity at full. Navigational deflector online and ramping up. Weapons systems A-OK. Shields on cold standby. All tactical systems are ready sir."

Bailer looked at Falco. "Sir, all decks report ready. Science and Medical both Condition One."

"Understood. Ops, clear our departure with Yard Control."

"Sir, Yard Control has given us clearance to leave," said Ikthan.

"Well then, let's get underway," said Falco. Normally he'd be grinning like a loon; he had when the *Sutherland* and the *Relentless*. Not now. "Ops, bring Structural Integrity and Inertial Damper fields up. Navigational Deflector to full."

"Aye sir," said Ikthan.

"Falco to engineering, full power to impulse engines. Helm, clear all moorings."

"All moorings clear captain," said Ensign Jara Maro, the Alpha Shift Conn Officer. "Exit bearing free of all traffic."

"Mr. Maro, assuming that you're sufficiently acquainted with the helm, take us out, ahead one quarter impulse."

"Aye sir, ahead one quarter impulse," replied Maro. "We have cleared drydock."

Falco looked grave. "Ensign, as soon as we are cleared for warp, set a course for sector 528, warp five."

"Sir," said Mikey, "may I remind the captain that that course will take us straight through the Demilitarized Zone?"

"Duly noted Commander," said Falco, with the air of someone continuing a previous argument that he had thought settled. "However, that is our ordered course. Proceed Ensign."

"Aye sir," said Maro.

"I'll be in my quarters if anyone needs me." Falco got up and walked onto the turbolift.

### **Kentar's Quarters**

Kentar sat on her bed, staring at the picture of Robért. She gnashed her teeth lightly, her species' equivalent of crying. Sharkie had always had a talent for making her...well, smile was the wrong word; Tri-nars shared Caitian difficulties in approximating the human expression...but he always made her feel good even when she was at her most down.

And now he was gone.

What a strange thought. No more cheerful grins, or the foppish and exaggerated accent. No more losing to him at poker and blackjack. No more shoulder to lean on in this lonely universe.

Gone.

No. Impossible.

*Possible* whispered a voice in the back of her head.

*Maybe he was taken prisoner?* she shot back at herself.

*You know the answer* was the reply. *You just can't accept it.*

Suddenly, the ship rocked violently, and she heard a loud boom. The lights flickered and went out.

A voice came over the comm. "This is Commander Bailer to all hands. Damage Control teams report to stations, I repeat Damage Control teams report to stations. This is not a drill!" said the firm and unfrightened voice of Mikey Bailer.

Kentar shot up out of her chair and ran out of her room.

### **Ten-Forward**

Fonon looked around in horror at the ruin that had overtaken Ten-Forward. A replicator had exploded unexpectedly, spreading fire and shrapnel throughout the room. Most of the fires had been quickly put out, but sparks still intermittently shot out from the damaged replicator.

"By the Prophets..." he said. He saw a young woman lying facedown near one of the windows. He ran over to her, and, turning her over, saw extensive burns covering her face. Nearby was a former conduit that was still sparking.

"Fonon Jo'Uva to transporter room," said the half-Bajoran, "I need an emergency transport to sickbay. I repeat, I need an emergency transport for two to sickbay!"

"Understood Mr. Jo'Uva. Standby."

Fonon felt a static tingle as the blue glow spread over him, and suddenly his molecules and those of the crewman that he was holding were whisked six decks away to sickbay.

## Bridge

Wallace and Falco walked onto the darkened bridge of the *Swiftsure*. "Report," he ordered.

Mikey stood up and walked over to the captain. "We have shock damage to approximately twenty percent of the main power grid, and a slight weakening of all relevant bulkheads. Structural integrity is also weakened on decks eight through twelve." Mikey leaned over to whisper to Falco. "We've lost life support in several non-essential areas. We're working on repairs."

Falco nodded and sat down in his chair. "Falco to Engineering," he said.

"Kentar here."

"What's your status?"

"Warp drive and impulse engines damaged sir. Maximum speed is currently warp eight, tops, and we are reading some power fluctuations in the impulse engines. But we're confident that we can repair them," she reported.

"Good," said Falco. "In your opinion, can we resume our course?"

"I'd say so sir, as long as we don't have to bring up the aft impulse engines for any reason."

"Good. Falco out. Mr. Maro, resume previous course. Warp..."

"Sir?" asked Jara.

"Warp six. We don't want Mr. Tokhis stressing over her engines while she's got other things to deal with. Resume previous course, warp six."

"Warp six aye sir."

The ship's hummed as it leapt into warp. Falco strained to listen to the hum, to see if anything was wrong, but he hadn't been on the Swiftsure long enough to know. On the Sutherland, any problems would have been instantly apparent to his ear. But this wasn't the Sutherland, was it?

### **Sickbay**

Doctor Brown, a short, pudgy man, stood over a woman with severe burns on her face, the same woman that Fonon had found in Ten-Forward. Fonon himself hovered a couple of meters away, concern in his face as he looked at her.

Brown looked at one of his nurses. "Five CCs of tricordrazine, stat."

"Yes Doctor," said the nurse as he ran off.

"Doctor," said Fonon, getting Brown's attention.

"Yes Mr....?" said the doctor.

"Fonon. Fonon Jo'Uva. How is she?" asked Fonon.

"Crewman Alia should be fine in a day or two. I've repaired the cerebral injuries." Fonon breathed a sigh of relief. "However, she was lucky that you were there. She likely wouldn't have made it."

"Oh." Fonon looked at the female crewman one last time. "I...I have to go." Doctor Brown looked down, clearly indicating that he didn't care one way or the other

Fonon walked to his quarters, which were dark and cold, the way he liked them. He held up his arm and walked around the room. "Not like this. I didn't mean for it to go like this..."

### **Sector 223**

"Now," said Thot Har, commander of the Breen fleet. At least, that's what anyone with a Universal Translator would have heard.

Five Breen frigates broke off from the advancing fleet. A flotilla of almost randomly shaped ships, ugly and deadly at the same time. Not that anyone could see the ugliness; the ships were cloaked. However, they dropped their cloaking fields, shimmering into sight, flying relentlessly. Their crews knew that they were flying to their deaths. But they didn't mind.

It had begun.

### **USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge**

A light started flashing on the Ops console, flashing red. To Falco's knowing eyes, that indicated one thing, and one thing only.

A Priority One distress call.

"What is it Mr. Ikthan?" Falco asked of the Ops Officer, a hint of worry in his voice.

Ikthan didn't respond at first, shock apparent on his face.

"Mr. Ikthan, answer the question," said Commander Bailer.

"I'm sorry sirs," said the Coridian. "We have an urgent message from Deep Space Nine. A group of five Breen frigates are advancing on their position."

"What?" said Wallace. "That's not an attack. That's...suicide."

"Yes," said Falco, drawing it out. Something about this bothered him, though he couldn't be sure what.

The crew looked at each other in shock. This was...impossible. Wasn't it? Surely no sane person would commit such a brazen violation of such an important treaty. Would they?

"What the hell do they think they're doing?" asked Ian for all of them. "An attack like this is...is suicide! DS9 isn't some weak *Oberth*, it has more weapons than any other station in the Federation! What in God's name do they think they can do with five frigates?"

"I don't know," said Mar'zief, "and that's what worries me. Helm, set a course for Bajor, warp eight."

"Warp eight, aye sir," said Maro, clearly still in shock.

"Commander Bailer, Commander Wallace, if you would please come with me to my ready room?"

"Of course sir," said Mikey, while Wallace said, "Aye sir."

"Thank you," said Falco. He stood up out of his seat, and said, "Lieutenant Ikthan, you have the bridge."

"Aye sir," she said. "I have the bridge."

"Sir," started Ian as soon as they were in Falco's ready room, "this is beyond insane. DS9 would beat the crap out of them!"

"I have to agree sir," said Mikey. "The Breen *have* to know that every ship within a hundred light-years is on a heading for DS9 right now."

Falco shook his head. "Something about this doesn't feel right," he said. "The Breen are not above throwing ships away to achieve an objective, but only if it suits their purposes. They aren't stupid."

"We know that much," said Wallace dryly. "Hell, they proved that five years ago when they attacked Earth."

"But that force was destroyed within five minutes of decloaking," said Mikey, playing Devil's Advocate.

"They knew that," replied Wallace. "They accepted those losses in exchange for the morale and material damage. It 'suited their purposes.'"

"The question is, what purpose is served by sending five frigates against what is quite possibly the best defended station under Federation jurisdiction?" asked Falco.

"Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way?" suggested Mikey. "Maybe it's a renegade raiding force with no ties to their government?"

"No," said Falco. "It's too convenient. What with the attacks on the *Beholder* and the *Finch*. These are all too coordinated."

Mikey held up his hands in surrender. "For what it's worth, I agree with you sir."

"My gut feeling," continued Falco, "is that this is a feint. An attempt to draw our forces out of position for some kind of raid." A faint look of triumph appeared in

Mikey's eyes. *That was his initial idea, wasn't it?* thought Falco. To Bailer's credit, the look quickly disappeared from his eyes, and a calculating look appeared instead.

"But sir, that would be an act of war!" said Ian.

"They've already committed one," said Falco wryly. "Why not two? Or more?"

A look of horror appeared on Mikey's face. "Computer, have there been any Starfleet ship movements from the core worlds in response to the Breen frigates?"

"Confirmed."

Falco and Wallace exchanged a look of horror of their own.

"Computer, if possible, list all ship movements found in the last search."

"The Second Fleet is proceeding to the Bajor system from Earth in case of further raids. Ships include the *USS Titan*, *USS Archer*, *USS--*"

"That'll be enough computer," said Falco. "Falco to bridge, set a course for Sector 001, current maximum warp."

"Sir?" asked Maro. "The Breen are still en route to Bajor."

"Do it ensign."

"Aye sir. Sector 001, warp eight."

"Engage."

The *Swiftsure* turned around, graceful as a bird in flight, and sped up to the incredible velocities of warp eight.

Falco just hoped that it would be enough.

## **Sector 016 Titan Monitor Station**

CPO Steve Johnson leaned back in his chair and yawned. He spun his chair around a few times, getting a good look at the spartan control room. Two consoles, with a bank of readouts, a door, and a set of emergency oxygen masks. The rest simply tritanium walls. Not even a speck of paint adorned those utilitarian walls. It was an utterly boring room, on an utterly boring station, in an



utterly boring sector, watching utterly boring convoys carrying utterly boring cargo.

"Tired?" asked Ensign Hawkins, the CO of the station, as he walked in.

"Bored really," said Johnson.

"Long shift?"

"You know it. There's only so many convoys you can watch before your brain turns to goo."

Hawkins snorted as he sat down at his own station and keyed up the shift logs. "What's this? Five deuterium tankers, a convoy of dilithium miners, and a couple of Saber frigates. This is really worth the attention of one of the most powerful sensor arrays this side of Altair."

"Eh, Command's antsy. All those Breen attacks on the border lately. They want us to be able to see anything, cloaked or not. I would've thought that last year's fiasco on Romulus would have taught them the stupidity of that."

"Eh, you know Command. I'd be surprised if they've even gotten the paperwork yet."

"Yeah," said Johnson. "I guess I was expecting a bit too much." The two men shared a knowing smile.

"Hey!" said Hawkins in response to something he saw in the logs. "You didn't tell me you saw a class-5 comet!"

"That provided around ten minutes of amusement." Suddenly, an alarm went off on Johnson's panel. "What the hell?" he said.

"What is it Johnson?" asked Hawkins.

"Two hundred signatures inbound. Cloaked."

"Probe 'em."

Johnson tapped on a few keys. "Oh my God" The blood drained from the man's face in an instant. "There are two hundred Breen ships in there!"

"Where are they headed?" asked Hawkins, suddenly standing over Johnson's shoulder.

"Sector 001."

Hawkins ran back to his console and pressed a button that he'd hoped never to press in his career. The Priority One Distress signal. It would upload every scrap of telemetry to every Starbase within a thousand light-years.

"Sir," said Johnson, "ten ships breaking off. Heading right for us..."

"ETA?"

"Five minutes."

Hawkins started praying, continuously trying to refine his information as much as he could.

Five minutes later, ten Breen frigates decloaked and green fire tore the station into a million shimmering pieces.

## Chapter Three

### **USS *Dauntless* Main Bridge**

"What is it Ensign?" asked Admiral Martin as he walked onto the lush bridge of the *Dauntless*.

"Sir," said S'pon, the Vulcan Ops Officer, "We've just lost contact with the Titan Monitor Station."

"Are you sure it's not a glitch?" Though it probably wasn't.

"They reported a Breen fleet on its way to Earth right before they went off the air."

Damn.

"How many ships?" asked Martin, his tone slightly higher, shriller.

"Two Hundred."

Martin looked at Captain Horace, his flag captain. Horace nodded grimly.

"Helm, increase velocity to maximum warp," said the captain.

"Ops," ordered Martin, sitting to the left of Horace, "send a general warning to all Starfleet ships in range, tell them...tell them that Earth is under attack."

### **USS *Swiftsure* Bridge**

Wallace shared in the shock felt by the rest of the crew. It was one thing to believe that an attack on Earth was imminent. It was another thing entirely for it to be confirmed.

He tapped a few keys, putting quantum torpedoes at the top of the loading queue for the five main launchers. *Just to give the first few shots a little more oomph* he thought.

"Our ETA to Earth?" asked Falco.

"Thirty-five hours at present velocity," said Maro, grimacing, with good reason. That time would seem like an eternity to the people on the ship, waiting to help their friends and colleagues under fire back home. All ships were heading for

Earth, once again the Breen's target. Even the prototypes were coming out from Utopia Planetia to help in the defence. It wouldn't be enough. It *couldn't* be enough.

"Right," said Falco, slightly downcast. "Falco to Engineering.

"Kentar here."

"We need more speed. As soon as possible. Super cruise the warp drive if you have to."

Kentar started to say something, then paused. The captain was determined. In this instance, it would be best to agree with him. "Aye sir. The aft impulse engines are still damaged, but I'll do what I can."

"Good, Falco out."

Wallace looked back down at his console. His one hope was that Earth's planetary shields would hold out long enough for the Breen to be defeated. Otherwise they stood no chance.

### **Main Engineering**

"All right!" Kentar shouted at her scattered crew. "Get to work! We need maximum warp ASAP!"

### **Saturn Orbit USS *Alabama* Main Bridge**

"Jesus, but that's a lot of ships," said Jackson, looking at the tactical display.

"No veteran of the Dominion war, are you?" asked Commander Dalren, the *Alabama's* first officer, sounding confident. A slight quiver gave the lie to that.

Jackson shook his head. Dalren snorted. "Lots more ships in one of those fleets," said the XO.

"Frankly, I wouldn't mind it if we had a War-style fleet. Then we might stand a chance."

"Belay that talk Commander," said Harkness. "We still stand a chance. Our ships have a massive individual advantage over any Breen ship; what we lack in numbers, we make up in sheer ability," he continued, reassuring the crew. Or

was he reassuring himself? Impossible to answer...no, he just wouldn't like the answer.

"Sir," said Harris. "Sensor resolution is clear enough to start identifying ships."

"Well?"

"We're reading ninety-five frigates, fifty destroyers, forty battlecruisers, four carriers, six battleships and--that can't be right," said Harris.

"What is it Lieutenant?" asked Harkness.

"Sir, I'm reading two ships, each in excess of nine hundred meters."

"That's--" started Harkness, before realizing the futility of saying "That's impossible." "The Breen don't have anything that large!" he continued. Only slightly less futile upon further reflection.

"With all due respect sir, they do now."

**USS *Dauntless***  
**Main Bridge**

"Inform all units that I'm identifying those new ships as 'dreadnaughts' for future reference," said Martin.

"Aye sir," said S'pon.

*Damn* thought Martin to himself. *We have fifty-three ships here. And we aren't going to get another one for another ten hours.*

"ETA Breen fleet?" he asked S'pon.

"Two hours sir."

**USS *Swiftsure***  
**Main Bridge**

"ETA?" asked Falco for what seemed like the fiftieth time.

"Thirty-one hours," said Maro.

No new updates from Kentar in the past half-hour. No news from Earth about ship arrivals in the past *two* hours.

"Sir, we're receiving a message from the fleet," said Ikthan. "The Breen are warping in now."

"Put it on speakers," said Falco.

"This is Admiral Nikolai Martin to Breen Fleet," said Martin's disembodied voice. You are in violation of the Bajor Accords. Reverse your course *now*."

"Admiral Martin," said the heavily synthesized-sounding voice, "your fleet is trespassing on Breen-claimed territory. Withdraw now or face the consequences."

"No." Martin paused. "All ships, open fire!"

### **USS *Dauntless* Main Bridge**

"Remodulate shields!" shouted Captain Horace as the Breen Fleet began its assault. "Fire torpedoes, pattern Sierra-Eight."

Eight torpedoes sped out from the *Dauntless'* forward tube, vaporizing a Breen frigate unlucky enough to be unable to dodge in time. Several phaser beams lanced out and smashed through enemy shields one after another, invariably bring death on their targets. But not fast enough.

"Sirs," shouted S'pon, "the dreadnaughts are targeting the starbase!"

"*Zee-Magnees, Jupiter*, break attack pattern and bolster station defenses," ordered Martin. "Try and take out those dreadnaughts."

"We'll try," responded the staticy voice of the captain of the *Jupiter*. "But those shields are tough."

"Do the best you can. Martin out."

"Sir, main reactor on the base is unstable," said S'pon. "Field containment at...sixty-seven percent."

"Damn."

The *Dauntless* lurched, sending Koloudi, the *Dauntless'* XO, flying. "Corpsman to the bridge!" ordered Horace. "Target that battlecruiser squadron that's trying to break through our lines."

"*Intrepid*, *Proxima*, cover the *Majestic*."

"Helm," said Horace, "take us straight into that cruiser wing. Tell...*Charleston* and *Lakota* to cover us!"

The *Dauntless* spun around as two *Excelsiors* flew up beside her, firing phasers at any Breen ship who dared come to close; several frigates and destroyers exploded under the onslaught.

The *Dauntless* fired off her larger phaser arrays against the Battlecruisers in an attempt to bring down their shields and strike at their vulnerable hulls.

"Shen yu, Sierra-Ten!" Horace shouted at the tactical officer.

This time, ten torpedoes sped out of the *Dauntless*' forward tube. Combined with the near-constant phaser fire, the shields of the targeted battlecruiser failed, blue fire ringing the ship for an instant. Another five torpedoes destroyed it.

"Helm, bring us about! Yu, aft tube, Sierra-Eight!"

The *Dauntless* spun around and fired her after phasers at another battlecruiser, followed by another eight torpedoes. It too fell under the onslaught. The rest of the squadron scattered.

"Horace, take us against those dreadnaughts," said Martin. "The base needs all the help she can get, and there's nothing more we can do against those cruisers for now."

### **USS *Alabama* Bridge**

"Status Report!" shouted Harkness.

"Dorsal shields at fifty-four percent," said Harris. "Sir, we can't take much more of this!"

"We have to," said Harkness. "Bring us about, and target those destroyers. Fire all weapons!"

The small ship spun around, phasers and torpedoes emerging from her hull. Suddenly her small quantum torpedo turret, a recent introduction to the class, spat out torpedo after torpedo. While it couldn't possibly match the rate of fire of a *Sovereign* or a *Majestic*, those torpedoes were more than a match for the hapless destroyer. It exploded violently, no survivors.

Harkness sent up a small prayer for those just killed while ordering the crew to shift their targets. Not since the Dominion War had he seen death on this scale.

**USS *Swiftsure*  
Main Bridge**

"ETA?"

"Thirty hours sir."

Falco sighed. Five hours since the *Swiftsure* had begun her desperate flight for Earth, and Kentar *still* hadn't managed to eke out any more speed from her beleaguered nacelles.

Falco had shut off the speakers long ago. From everything he could see, they were merely wearing on the bridge crew's morale. Instead they received regular updates on the course of the battle. And it wasn't looking good. Already twelve Starfleet ships had died in the battle, in return for thirty-two of the Breen. The fleet just couldn't possibly keep up that loss rate. There were just too many Breen ships there.

Falco looked around at his weary crew, and he could feel fatigue pulling on his face; they'd been on alert for nearly six hours now. They couldn't keep this up any longer.

"Commander," Falco said to Mikey, "I want to cycle the shifts. Keep everyone who's supposed to be on shift now on duty, but make sure everyone else gets some sleep. And then after four hours, cycle them again."

"Aye sir," said Mikey. "And yourself?"

"I'll be staying up here. However, you can go as soon as the shifts are cycled."

Mikey looked away. "Um...thank you sir."

**USS *Dauntless*  
Bridge**

"Sir, the base is taking heavy damage," said S'pon. "It is not going to last much longer." He looked at his display. "The *Swiftsure*, *Atlas*, *Berkeley*, and *Hermes* are currently around thirty hours away."

Suddenly, the bridge rocked violently. "What the hell happened to the *Charleston* and the *Lakota*?" asked Horace urgently.



"*Charleston* has lost all power, and is spinning out of control. *Lakota*..." Koloudi paused. "She's gone sir."

"*Masada, Istanbul*, maneuver to cover the *Dauntless*," ordered Martin.

"This is the *Lexington*, we've taken heavy damage. We've lost all phaser power and torpedoes are gone."

"*Lexington*, pull out. You've done all you can. Head for Alpha Centauri."  
Ordered Martin.

"Flagship, this is *Bozeman*, we need support back here!"

"Sir, the base!" said S'pon.

The shields flickered as hit after hit pounded into them, and then they finally failed. It was a testament to the builders of the station that its shields had lasted as long as they had. But now the base was naked, vulnerable. It still struck out, massive phaser beams causing massive destruction whenever they hit. But the gargantuan disruptors from the dreadnaughts finally brought the death of the base.

Roiling flame started from the bottom of the spire, sending snake-like tendrils flying high up, wreaking massive damage. Close behind them, however, was the fireball, sending plate after plate of debris shooting away, massive plates larger than anything mounted on a starship. The fireball, immensely beautiful despite--or possibly it because of--the destruction, consumed the base. To Martin, it seemed as if time stood still as he watched the base, his home for the best several years, die right in front of his eyes.

Horace was the first to come out of shock. "Orders sir?" he asked.

Martin looked back at Horace; transports had evacuated all non-essential personnel from the base, but that had still left behind nearly two thousand officers and crew. All gone now, gone from existence.

"We've lost here," said Martin. "We have to retreat and regroup." He pressed the "All ships button on his console. "All ships, fall back. I repeat, all ships, fall back. Set a course for...Earth."

## Chapter Four

### **Earth** **USS *Dauntless***

A ship leapt out of warp. Then another. Then another. Ship's trickled out of warp as quickly as their warp drives, in various states of damage, would allow them to. Within five minutes, forty-two ships had emerged from warp. Forty-two out of the fifty-four that had started the battle at Saturn.

"What are the Breen doing?" Admiral Nikolai Martin asked S'pon urgently. "Are they chasing us?"

"Sensors are resolving now," said the dispassionate Vulcan ensign. "They appear to be heading for the Solar asteroid belt. Probability suggests that they are planning to attack the mining infrastructure."

"Damn." Martin rubbed his head. He pressed the all ship's button on his console. "All right, everyone, stand down to Yellow Alert. Carry out whatever repairs you can and recharge your shields. I'll try to arrange to beam torpedoes over to those who need them most."

"Lord knows we'll need them."

### **USS *Alabama***

"Drop the shields Greg," said Jacob Harkness. "They took a hefty beating in the last battle. They need to recharge."

"Aye sir," said Lieutenant Commander Greg Jackson. "Shields down."

"Sir," said Harris, "Starfleet Ops is standing by to begin beam torpedoes aboard."

Harkness blew out his breath in what was almost a sigh. "Good," he said. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Sheal here," responded the Andorian chief engineer.

"I want you to send teams to prep the torpedo bays for beam-in."

"Understood captain. Sheal out."

Harkness looked over to Dalren. "Have the casualty reports come in yet?"

The Argellian commander shook his head. "No sir."

"Right," said Harkness. "Now to wait. And hope for the best."

"Yes sir," said Dalren. "And that the everyone else gets here in time."

### **USS *Swiftsure* Bridge**

Mikey Bailer walked onto the bridge, stretching a little. He looked at the viewscreen; the stars were still streaking by with no apparent change in speed or situation. Great. Just perfect... Ha.

He walked over to his captain, who didn't look like he'd moved since last the young commander had seen him. However, though it was hard to detect, Mikey seemed to sense that his captain was tired, dangerously so.

"Morning, Commander," said Captain Mar'zief Falco, slurring his words ever so slightly. He gazed off somewhat. "It always seemed an odd custom to comment that morning had arrived. Though it *is* a hard habit to break."

"Sir," said Mikey, unsure of what else to say. Instead, he changed the subject. "Any significant change in status?"

"Yes," replied Falco. "The fleet's withdrawn to Earth; we lost Starbase 47. The Breen are now playing merry hell in the outer system."

"Understood sir." Mikey continued standing ramrod straight by his captain.

"Is there anything else Commander?"

"Yes sir. You ordered me to relieve you when at 0200 hours."

"I never ordered that," snapped the captain.

"I'm sorry sir if I got the wrong impression." Ah, the rest of the shift was coming on to relive their weary crewmates. Maybe that would bolster his somewhat untenable position.

"I'm glad you realize that it was the wrong impression Commander. I'm staying right here," said the captain, looking back at the viewscreen.

"Permission to speak freely sir?" asked Mikey, standing a little bit straighter.

"Granted, of course."

"Frankly sir, I think that it would be detrimental to ship operations if you stayed on duty in your present condition."

Falco eyed his new XO, and not without some firmness. "Commander, you're out of line."

"Forgive me sir. I was merely stating my opinion," said Mikey. He stood staring off into space, but there seemed to be a certain...stubbornness in his stance, that was apparent to Falco's eyes. A firmness that indicated his unwillingness to back down.

Falco decided to let out the yawn that he'd been keeping in for some time now. "Perhaps you're right commander. I am more than a little tired. A nap would be perfect right now."

"Of course sir," said Mikey. He watched his captain get out of the center seat and walk towards the turbolift. Thus he saw Falco look at him with consideration...and respect.

### **Fonon's Quarters**

Fonon looked out the window in his sparse and cold quarters, his breath clouding it every time he exhaled. He didn't like waiting, especially waiting alone. Alone with his thoughts...

He felt a slight shaking in his robes, his "master" obviously wanted his--overdue--status report. He pulled out the com device and activated it, holding it close to his mouth. "Fonon here," he said in a whisper.

"Good," said the woman on the other side of the link. A woman who had, in the entire time that Fonon had worked for her, never identified herself. "Status report?"

"I managed to damage the EPS grids like you ordered. Currently the Swiftsure is limited to warp eight. The engineering crews are attempting to bring the speed back up."

"Understood. See if you can't sabotage their efforts."

Fonon swallowed. His...employers didn't like it when their subordinates didn't accept orders. But given their current situation, he didn't see that he had much choice. "Ma'am, in light of the Breen attack, wouldn't it be better if I tried to enhance their chances of success?"

"No," said the woman. The link went dead.

Fonon looked out the window again. He supposed that he really should follow orders and try to sabotage the ship again. But he...he couldn't.

He knew, better than anyone, what the Breen could do.

### **Captain's Quarters**

Falco stripped off his uniform and put on his robe, the shabby, worn one that he liked. Nothing too fancy for him. He preferred comfort to ostentation.

"Lights," he called out, and as soon as the veil of darkness fell, he closed his eyes. All in all, that Commander Bailer...er, Mikey...would do well. Competent, strong-willed, if a little stiff. The stiffness was a bit of a problem, but Falco was sure that it was nothing that wouldn't fade away before too much longer-- assuming Ian didn't drive it out of him first. Maybe he should set Ian on it before his friend could get too...

Starships played across the screen of his eyelids, orange lances and green fire shooting across them...and through them. His mental eye saw faces obliterated forever. Lieutenant Ahmari, the forever smiling Arcadian, with no head. The body taunted him--he could have saved him, he survived, it was his fault. All this played across his mind in what seemed to be hours, and yet ten seconds.

Mar'zief woke bathed in a cold sweat, his fur clinging close to his chilled skin.

He had faced the Breen before. Could he do it again?

### **#4 Impulse Engine Access Conduit**

"Try to reroute the plasma flow coils," said Chief Engineer Kentar Tokhis to Ensign Benji, one of her Engineering tech officers. Very flatly. Benji looked up at her, then back down at his work. "That may increase the flow rate and possibly provide enough power to re-initialize fusion."

"I don't think so sir," said Benji, looking up from the display panel for the large reactor. "Unless I'm mistaken, the magnetic constrictors in the coils were burnt out in the explosion. If we try to run plasma through them now, it'd burn through the conduit."

"Yes, I see that now," said Kentar, looking at her tricorder. "Wait. Maybe we are just getting a false reading off of the damaged relays?" Suddenly she slammed her hands down on the piece of equipment she was scanning, breaking the tricorder in her hand. "*Shanathi!*" she shouted.

"Is something wrong sir?" asked Benji.

"N...no."

"Tell that to the tricorder. What's wrong?"

Kentar hissed (some kind of sigh?) and laid the ruined tricorder on the grating. "Robért Caillard...he was on the *Beholder*. First Officer. Recently promoted to Commander. Dead." She sucked in a breath of air. "He was..."

"Your boyfriend?" suggested Benji. Kentar shook her head no. "Lover?" Again, no. "Friend?" he asked, a slight frown on his face.

"That's it. He was my...my best...friend. We were inseparable at the academy. And now he's gone."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"I want...I want blood. Is that wrong? I want to be in that battle, helping kill those Breen. Instead, all those people are fighting and dying, and here I am sitting on my ass in a *shomar* cold conduit!"

"Oh." Benji looked back down at his tricorder. "Your idea sir...about the false reading, it would account for it..." said Benji. "That would mean that we'd have to replace the relays...but then we could get this thing working!"

Kentar looked up, hiding her gratitude. She slapped her com badge. "Kentar to Bridge," she said.

"Bailer here."

"Sir, we may have found a way to re-activate the aft impulse engines. We would have to replace...three EPS relays, but I believe that it could work."

### **Bridge**

"Understood Commander," said Mikey, considering. Three EPS relays would put a small bite into the ship's stores, at least until more could be replicated. Best to tell the captain first...

However, Mikey wasn't sure that was such a good idea. Captain Falco would be sure to approve, and it would be best to let him rest; it had been difficult enough to get him to go to sleep last time, and if he woke him up now, it would be impossible. In fact, Falco might be angry that such vital repairs were delayed,

thus increasing the potential time to reach Earth. Yes, best to give permission now.

"Go ahead Commander," said Mikey. "And do it post haste."

"Aye sir," said Kentar. "It won't take more than ten minutes."

"Good. Bailer out." With that, he turned to the helmsman on duty, a small man with weasel-like features. "As soon as Commander Tokhis reports that the repairs are done, you are under orders to super cruise the warp drive."

"Aye sir," said the helmsman.

Mikey leaned back. They were approximately fifteen hours from Earth at their present speed. Supercruising the impulse engines would cut at least five hours off their flight time. They might actually get there in time after all.

### **USS *Alabama***

A light started blinking on Greg Jackson's console; the shield indicator. "Shields are at full power," he reported.

"Good," said Captain Harkness. "Status on torp reload?" he asked.

"Almost done."

"Good. Status on the Breen Fleet, Mr. Harris?"

"They're still stooging around in the outer system," replied the Ops Officer. "We've already lost maybe half of the outer-system industry."

"We should be out there, harassing *them!*" Greg suddenly shouted. "The industry out there doesn't stand a chance without us!"

"We don't have a choice," said Harkness. "Frankly, we can't face that fleet head-on right now, not in our current condition. We *need* the defense grid behind us."

"It just doesn't feel right to me," replied Greg, "sitting here while civilians who couldn't evacuate in time are getting picked off like, like flies."

"Same here," admitted Harkness. "But we don't have a choice, especially not with those dreadnaughts. And sooner or later, the Breen will turn their eyes on us."

"Status change!" reported Harris. "The Breen are heading in-system!"

"Told you," quipped Harkness, with faux-levity. "Red Alert!"

### ***USS Dauntless***

Admiral Martin watched as the Breen moved closer and closer. "All units, form up," he said. "Lock weapons and fire on my order."

He received a chorus of assents, ranging from terror to bravado. But they all sounded willing and ready. That was good. But was it enough?

### ***USS Alabama***

Jackson looked at his displays. "They'll be here in ten minutes," he said, the terror in his well hidden. "A few of their lighter units are patrolling the outer system."

Harris looked down at his own screens. "Not enough to significantly affect the outcome of the battle," he said.

"Of course," replied Harkness. "No one ever accused the Breen of being stupid."

"One can hope..." Jackson looked up. "Here they are," he said helpfully.

"On screen!"

The screen flickered and settled onto the menacing image of Breen warships. Analyses and sensor data immediately flickered next to each individual shape, but Harkness ignored that. He watched as first a dozen ships popped into existence, then another few, then another.

### ***USS Dauntless***

"All units, FIRE!"

Phasers and photon torpedoes smashed into the leading edges of the ships as the Breen sensors still settled from the warp flight and plotted the fleet ahead of them. Several frigates quickly succumbed to the onslaught, and destroyers soon followed, literally before they could react. But then the Breen opened up in return and the tables suddenly shifted.



An *Oberth*, the *Greer*, who had miraculously survived the last skirmish, was the first to die in this clash. A *Defiant*, which had found itself facing a battlecruiser alone, without the rest of its squadron, soon followed.

### **USS *Alabama***

The ship shook violently as a photon torpedo smashed into her already-battered shields. Another one rammed into her, but then a *Nebula* passed by and quickly destroyed the cruiser taking potshots at them.

Harkness looked at the tactical display that he'd put on the main viewer. The Breen were losing three ships for every Federation warship that they took out, but they could afford even that ruinous exchange rate. The situation was bad.

"Sweet Jesus!" someone shouted, and Harkness couldn't be sure who it was. But he could understand why. The "dreadnaughts" had just dropped out of warp. With a carrier riding point and six battlecruisers close in around them.

"All units," said Martin's disembodied voice, "focus your fire on the dreadnaughts and escorts. Do *not* let them break through the line."

## Chapter Five

### **USS *Dauntless***

The Federation cruisers absolutely *had* to destroy the formation flying through the battle-line now; conversely, the Breen fleet *had* to keep the Starfleet ships from reaching that formation. It was an...interesting problem for Martin.

"*Phoenix, Prometheus*, try to outflank the cruiser squadron at zero-two-zero mark niner-three, flagship bearing. *Callisto*, cover them."

"Phasers, now!" shouted Captain Horace as a Breen frigate tried to chase down a *Nova*, the *Alabama*. She provided its own tiny contribution to the slaughter.

"This is *Prometheus*, breaking off. Battleship and three battlecruisers with escorts on other side of formation. *Callisto* go--" the message devolved into static.

"Status *Prometheus*!" ordered Martin. S'pon shook his head, too busy to do respond in any other way.

"Damn!" Martin sighed. "*Majestic, Jupiter*, destroy that frigate squadron--"

### **USS *Alabama***

*Damn...that was close* thought Harkness. A few more shots from that frigate would have brought down the *Alabama's* shields. A frigate, which a great ship like the *Dauntless* could smash like it was so much cardboard, had nearly destroyed his own ship.

His ship had no place in this battle. It was too small, too weak. The ship shook violently; another disruptor hit.

"Section 18 open to space!" someone shouted. "Emergency forcefields in place and holding."

"Return fire!"

Phasers shot out at the marauding frigate, and a salvo of torpedoes finished it off.

*We got lucky* thought Harkness. *Very lucky.*

### **USS *Swiftsure***

## Main Bridge

Falco walked onto the bridge of the Swiftsure, seeming far better rested than he had when he had left a few hours before. A not inconsiderable benefit for a ship heading into serious action.

"ETA?" he asked the ensign sitting at the helm.

"One hour, three minutes."

Falco nodded. He then turned towards the young commander sitting in the center seat. "Commander, to bed with you."

"But sir..." replied Mikey.

Falco raised...well, it wasn't exactly an eyebrow, but he raised *something* over his eye. Mikey shut his mouth. "I'm not asking for a full-fledged eight hours of sleep, just a..." he smirked..."cat' nap. I assure you that you will be awoken half an hour out from the battle."

Mikey eyed his captain, suspecting--no, *knowing*--that the Caitian was enjoying this. But Mikey didn't care. Falco was right; he was flagging a little. As important as it was for a captain to be refreshed for battle, it was almost as important for the first officer to be. "Aye aye sir," was his only response. When Falco nodded, he turned toward the lift and down to his bed.

## USS *Dauntless*

"The dreadnaughts are opening fire on the planetary shield," said S'pon.

"We have to take out them out!" said Martin. "*Majestic, Jupiter, Tellar*, form up flagship. *Defiant* wing eight, ride point."

"We're taking those dreadnaughts down."

The *Dauntless*, flanked by three other gargantuan cruisers, broke ranks and tore after the two massive dreadnaughts. Two massive ships that made the Starfleet cruisers look like toys. Phasers wider than tree trunks reached out, smashing away anyone blocking their way. A truly impressive number of torpedoes added tremendously to the destruction. Frigates tried to outflank the large cruisers, but they didn't stand a chance. Not with the *Defiants* escorting them.

Suddenly, they were through the battlecruisers, though fighters were pelting their shields with micro-torpedoes.

"Sir, a large group of ships has departed from their fleet and is heading our way. ETA: five minutes," said S'pon.

"Right," said Martin. "We have five minutes to do this people. Target that dreadnaught on the left."

"Fire," said Horace.

An orange beam lanced out from the *Dauntless*, followed by a spread of torpedoes. The *Tellar* followed with another ten-torpedo spread, and the *Majestic* contributed to the density of firepower with a burst from her turret, while the *Jupiter* launched off a large twenty-one torpedo salvo.

No vessel could stand up to that amount of firepower bearing down on it, and the Dreadnaught was no exception. It was vaporized under the punishment. But the elation of the crews was short-lived; the Breen fleet had arrived in their part of space.

"We can't take out the other one yet," said Martin, slamming his fist down. "All ships, fall back to grid A8."

"Sir," said S'pon, "Spacedock's shields are down."

### **USS *Swiftsure***

Fonon Jo'Uva wandered through the jeffries tubes of the *Swiftsure*, trying to reach his destination without alerting the guards standing during the alert. *I've got to get out of here* he thought. *The crew's going to find out, I know it. And I have to get away from...them too.*

After half an hour of scrambling through the *Swiftsure's* guts, he finally reached where he was going. He scrambled out of the tube into the unused corridor; why would anyone use a corridor that only had the escape pods in it?

He started to push the buttons that would allow him to get at the guts of the pod security systems and let him escape uninhibited, but something stopped him. *I really should go*, he thought to himself, but he couldn't finish the sequence. He couldn't understand it; it was in his best interest to leave, and soon, or else he'd have trouble from both sides. He needed a head start.

An image of Crewman Alia danced in his head. Her face, still burned in his mind's eye, glared at him accusingly. He gave a look of disgust at the control panel, turned around, and crawled back into the jeffries tube. He had a message to write.

**Paris, France**  
**President's Office**

"Mr. President, we *must* get you to a safe place," said Admiral Leonard Anderson, the Chief of Starfleet Security.

President Ja'alt looked out his window to the night sky, as new stars burned ever so briefly: ships giving themselves over to the fury of a warp core breach.

"And where would that be, Admiral?" He asked without looking away. "If the Breen break through the Starfleet perimeter, nowhere on Earth will be safe."

Suddenly, a young Lieutenant ran into the room.

"Mr. President. We have word from Spacedock. The Breen has begun moving into orbit, and the complex is taking heavy damage. They're evacuating as fast as they can, but... we're running out of ships!"

Ja'alt bowed his head.

"Stand by for an Emergency Message. Prepare to patch me through to the general population."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Anderson's combadge beeped.

"Anderson."

"Admiral, long-range sensors have picked up the Swiftsure heading in at maximum warp!"

"ETA?"

"Forty-seven minutes. The Prokofiev battlegroup is enroute from Vulcan and should be here shortly after. The Seventh Fleet has received our message, and is also on its way."

"Good."

Anderson sighed.

"Let's hope there's a planet for them to come back to..."

"Mr. President, you are live," said an aide.

Ja'alt finally turned from the window. "Fellow citizens of the United Federation, we are in our darkest hour..."

Another star burned briefly in the night sky behind him.

### **Singapore Global Defense Shield Generator Control**

Sparks flew through the command center as the officers struggled to contain the damage that the Breen were wreaking throughout the shields, the last line of defense for Earth.

"Winnipeg is reporting heavy damage to North American Generator!" someone shouted.

"Feed them as much power as you can," responded their commander, a human with a scar over his left cheek, Colonel Khan Mohammed.

"We already are!" said the young crewman. "The feeds are seriously overloaded. We can't give them another watt of power, not with any margin of error."

"Who needs a margin of error?" asked Mohammed. "Give them every watt that the feeds can take!"

### **USS *Dauntless***

Martin looked over the Breen's protective formation around the single remaining dreadnaught. No way through. Not that he hadn't tried. But it seemed as if, except for cursory raids, and defending the dreadnaught of course, that the Breen were completely ignoring the fleet.

That terrified Martin.

He would not, *could* not give the Breen the hold over the Federation as a naked Earth would be. To do so would...would violate everything that he held dear. Would violate the sacred trust left in him by his commanding officers, by his people, by the people of Earth...by his family Goddammit, it would violate the trust that he would bring them through.

It would violate his trust in himself.

He barked out orders, heard orders and reports thrown about him, but all of it was peripheral as he focused on this singular problem, trying to find a way to cut this Gordian knot.

He only hoped that his sword would be sharp enough.

### **USS *Alabama***

The *Alabama* cut and weaved through the Breen...well, line was the wrong word. The Breen sphere, that was it. Two *Defiants* accompanied her, and they dealt damage, spreading phaser fire and death where they could. Which wasn't too many places, sad to say.

Harkness looked over his ship's situation again. Torpedoes were gone, shields were holding--somehow.

"Breen on our tail!" reported Harris.

"*Independence, Warhammer, 180 pitch.*"

The spritely little Nova, and her two uglier companions did a complete head-for-tail flip, opening fire with everything they had. The two frigates following them were shredded like so much paper.

Suddenly a cruiser appeared right in front of the trio. *Where the hell did he come from?* crossed with the realization that this was the end. No big brother *Dauntless* to help them *this time*.

The cruiser finished *Warhammer* casually, like swatting a fly, then started pounding on *Independence*. *Alabama's* turn would surely be next.

Harris looked up. "Another starship is incoming!"

### **USS *Swiftsure***

"Now," said Falco.

The *Swiftsure* slammed out of warp, speeding by the suddenly-distracted cruiser that was finding four million tons of duranium and tritanium speeding down on it.

The first phaser lanced out of the forward port ventral array, brilliant and intense, more intense than anything the Breen on that ship had seen before from a ship. The second came from the after ventral array, further adding to the massive disruptions cascading throughout its shield network. Then from the secondary-

hull array, then from the ventral pylon array. The cruisers shields failed under this onslaught. Then, from right above the aft shuttlebay, came a trio of torpedoes.

The cruiser vanished in a quick burst of flame.

"Message to the *Alabama*," said Falco. "Thought you could use a hand, old friend."

### **USS *Dauntless***

"All ships, rally around the *Swiftsure*! They've given us our hole! Let's drive it home on the bastards!"

### **USS *Swiftsure***

Falco saw the ships form up behind them. He smiled, knowing their purpose. He didn't mind--battering rams rarely did.

"Mr. Maro, take us in. Mr. Wallace, until we break through to that dreadnaught, fire at will."

Phasers reached out, smashing anything they touched, torpedoes following, blasting everything into stripped atoms. Fighters swarmed the Breen, great bombers blasting apart destroyers and frigates, nimble fighters defending them, and powerful interceptors seeking out Breen bombers.

The Breen weren't the only ones to die in this assault. Many Starfleet ships died, in trying to break through this hole. The *Tellar* spun out of control, atmosphere streaming from its gaping holes, the ship slowly breaking apart.

### **USS *Dauntless***

"We have a clear firing solution on the remaining dreadnaught," said S'pon.

Martin looked over the situation--the local space was crowded with ships, but less so than it had been just a few seconds prior. They'd never get a better chance.

"All ships, fire on the dreadnaught."

The dreadnaught's time of immunity, time to fire on the blue planet below with impunity, over. Phasers reached out, smashing, destroying, burning. Torpedoes



screamed away from their motherships, exploding against shields straining to cope. And then, forty-one quantum torpedoes from the *Swiftsure* rammed into it.

The remaining dreadnaught exploded, sending fragments in all directions.

Everyone on the bridge cheered this time; even S'pon wasn't unaffected. At least, not until he looked at his console.

"There is a Breen carrier on a direct collision course of the *Swiftsure*. Impact in less than three minutes," he said, impassionately.

"All ships," Martin ordered, "move to intercept!" It was hopeless, the *Swiftsure* was too far ahead of the main fleet.

But he had to try.

## Chapter Six

"Inbound ETA?" asked Mikey.

"Two minutes, forty-three seconds," reported Maro tonelessly.

"And no chance that the fleet can take it out in time," said Falco. "Helm, see if you can't shake them."

"Sir," said Wallace, "I have an idea."

"Oh?" asked Mikey. Falco was silent.

"Yes, I do, but we'll need to get closer, close as we can. And I'll need someone to fire phasers, help keep the Breen off of us."

"Understood," said Falco. "Helm, bring us in closer. I'll handle the phasers."

Mikey watched the viewscreen as the carrier grew bigger. If Wallace didn't carry out his plan soon, they'd end up just like the Enterprise had a few months before. If they weren't destroyed, that is.

Phasers shot out, golden beams wreaking havoc amongst the Breen forces, but the torpedoes remained silent. Wallace was obviously waiting for something, but what?

Suddenly, the ship opened up, photon and quantum torpedoes speeding away. A hopeless display--it was far too late to actually bring their shields down with sheer firepower...except...they were passing right through the Breen shields!

From the looks of the rest of the bridge crew, they were as shocked as he was. Only Falco and Wallace didn't have surprise etched onto their faces.

A second salvo finished off the carrier, and the Swiftsure strained as she flew right through the plasma cloud. The shields couldn't hold all of that roiling fury off the hull. Ablative Armor boiled, hull plates flew off, and EPS conduits overloaded. But the ship still got off remarkably well. It hadn't been smashed after all.

Wallace looked around at the rest of the bridge crew. "I figured that they'd have small holes in their shields for the fighters," he said in way of explanation. "But we needed to be incredibly close for me to find them."

"Oh..." said Mikey. "And why couldn't you have told us this *before* you sent us on a collision course with them?"

"Ah...there wasn't enough time. If we'd waited too long, I'd never have pulled it off."

"Oh..."

### **USS *Alabama***

Jacob's heart had leapt into his throat when he saw the Swiftsure vanish into the "fireball." Marz had been his best friend since the Cardassian War. He couldn't be dead, it was impossible.

Harkness let out a breath that he hadn't even realized he was holding when the Swiftsure emerged relatively unscathed. Losing him, after all that they'd been through together...

*Never mind how many other people's best friends, husbands, wives, lovers, sons, daughters, etc. have died today...*

He looked around his crew and managed to bring up a feeling of bravado that he hadn't thought he had left in him. "All right people," he heard himself saying, "let's kick some Breen butt!"

### **USS *Dauntless***

The Breen weren't giving up on the planetary shield. They still had battleships and cruisers firing on it, trying to bring it down. While they didn't have the sheer power of the dreadnaughts' main disruptors, there *were* an awful lot of them.

"Planetary shields at 10%" said S'pon. "They'll be done in half an hour at the current rate of fire. They've already been pushed past the ozone layer."

"Damn," hissed Captain Horace, twirling the hair in his beard in a nervous gesture. "Admiral, we *have* to stop those Breen in the next half hour or we've lost."

Martin looked up from his console. "Yes. Now tell me something I *don't* know!" He looked back down; they just had to hold out another fifteen minutes, by then the Profokiev Battle Group would be there. There were sixty ships in the Battle Group, along with twenty-eight left here at Earth. There were less than fifty ships left in the Breen fleet. In fifteen minutes, the Breen would be smashed.

No other outcome was possible.

## **USS *Swiftsure*** **Main Engineering**

Kentar looked at the damage reports. Normally she hated them, for what they represented, but today she welcomed them. They were the surest sign that they were fighting the Breen. She avenged herself in the only way she could--making sure that the *Swiftsure* stayed alive to fight.

Sharkie's spilled blood was being repaid tonight. Starfleet was seeing to that.

She was seeing to that.

## **Bridge**

"Bring us about and fire phasers!" ordered Falco. The Breen cruiser trying to sneak up behind them was blasted for its troubles, shimmering debris all that was left of the ship.

"Sir," said Ikthan. "Spacedock."

The screen leaped towards the complex, which was literally breaking apart. The vast majority of the large chunks didn't enter orbit but literally fell into the atmosphere, burning brightly so that it wasn't just the kinetic energy hitting straight onto the shield, but also the plasma wave in front of the falling pieces of Spacedock.

"Casualties?" asked Falco hollowly.

"In excess of twenty-thousand..." replied Ikthan, just as hollowly.

"Hunter..."

Ikthan looked down at his console again. "Sir, Planetary shields are at three percent. They'll last less than ten minutes as they stand..."

## **USS *Dauntless***

"Goddamn the bastards to hell and beyond," whispered Martin. He turned his fleet-communications back on. "Everyone, we still have a chance, the shields will be down for less than five minutes by the time Profokiev gets here. Focus on the battleships and cruisers."

"Whatever you do, do *not* let up."

## **USS *Alabama***

The *Alabama* smashed another Breen frigate with her phasers; torpedoes were long gone and had been for some time. A destroyer flew up behind her, and a *Steamrunner* swatted that vessel aside with a torpedo salvo. He'd have to make sure to thank the captain of the...*Caribbean* someday.

A lucky hit from a battleship suddenly removed *that* obligation.

Despite Starfleet's heavy losses, the tide was turning. Harkness could see it happening, and the Breen seemed to know it too. They were fighting cautiously, seeking primarily to protect their battleships that were still trying to bring the shields down.

Another Breen frigate met its fate at the hands of the *Alabama*'s crew, when Harris suddenly cried out.

## **Global Defense Shield Generator Control**

"North America just failed," said someone; Mohammed wasn't sure who. Nor did he care. His crew had failed the task given to them. "Asia..." someone else moaned.

Oceania...Europe...Antarctica...South America...Africa. All failed in sequence. Earth's final redoubt...gone.

Mohammed closed his eyes. The end couldn't be too far now. With the shields went his contribution in the battle; he would have to trust to the ships in orbit now, trying their utmost not to die.

*Forgive me, Allah, if I do not have the utmost confidence in their chances.*

## **USS *Dauntless***

Admiral Nikolai Martin closed his eyes, then re-opened them. "All right people," he said. "We knew it was coming. We just have to hold out for less than five minutes."

## **USS *Swiftsure***

Mar'zief refused to yield any ground. If any Breen ship attempted to move into firing position, he blasted it, as did all the other ships in Starfleet. Many of them

physically moved between the Breen and Earth, trying to intercept any possible fire with their own ships.

He heard the reports of the first disruptor impacts, taking out any possible remaining defensive installations on the ground. They weren't using torpedoes yet, thank the Hunter. Disruptors were bad enough...torpedoes would be literally Hell on Earth.

Not in a century had anyone actually damaged Earth itself to this degree. The shields, built in the past eighty years, had prevented that.

But they only had to hold for five more minutes. That was it, all that was left till they could drive off these interlopers.

### **Breen Flagship**

Thot Har made a face that was the Breen equivalent of a smile. Everything was going perfectly according to plan. Several of his ships had been destroyed, and in any other operation, it would have been an unacceptable number. But every Breen ship destroyed raised the Earther's hopes ever so slightly more. And from great heights must come great falls.

He just had to wait until that group of ships warped in, and the trap would be set. Not long now. The humans and their alien pets *had* to be depending on that paltry little task force to pull them out of the fire.

It could hardly be more perfect if he'd planned that.

"Sir," said one of his underlings, "the Starfleet ships are entering local space."

"Good," said Thot Har. "Now it is time to meet our destiny." He pressed a button on his console. "Thot Har to all ships, now!"

### **USS *Dauntless***

"The Profokiev Battle Group has arrived," said S'pon. "They are maneuvering into position."

Martin heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God. All ships, fall back, join the Profokiev lines!"

"Sir..." said S'pon.

### **USS *Alabama***

"...two-hundred-fifty Breen ships just decloaked," said Harris. "There's at least five of those dreadnaughts in there."

Someone groaned. All of their efforts, for *nothing*. It had to be a cruel joke on the part of the universe. It *had* to be.

Harkness looked at the screen, and the formation didn't disappear.

### **USS *Swiftsure***

"We're receiving a message from the Breen fleet," said Ikthan. "Audio only."

"On speakers," said Falco.

"This is Thot Har of the Breen Confederacy," said the synthesized voice. "You will withdraw from this system in less than thirty of your minutes."

"And if we don't?" asked a voice, human this time. It took Falco a couple of seconds to recognize it as Admiral Martin's; all of the resolute strength that had held the fleet together was drained from it.

### **USS *Dauntless***

"Then we will eliminate every person, every beast, every *microbe* from the planet below us. A threat which I am sure you know we can carry out."

Martin closed his eyes. If it weren't for the fact that it was happening right in front of him, he would have denied that it was possible. Earth...

He opened his mouth to give the order that no one, not a single person had ever given before. "All ships, withdraw. I repeat, all ships, withdraw. We can't risk conflict now, not with Earth undefended."

He drew in another breath. "Set course for Alpha Centauri, best speed."

### **The Demilitarized Zone**

The woman listened to the reports and smiled. It had gone so perfectly.

She knew that sooner or later, someone would put together the minor and not-so-minor accidents that had delayed just enough ships. Mis-communications,

delays, even outright sabotage. But it would take them some time. Enough for it to be too late.

The Breen had hit harder than she'd expected, than she'd encouraged. That was worrisome. Possibly. Her smile turned into a grimace, she'd have to do something about that. But aside from that little surprise, everything was going exactly to plan.

She got up. It was time to start on the next phase of operations.

## To Be Continued