

Star Trek: The Breen War: “RIPOSTE”

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PROLOGUE

“A counter-strike. Quick, deadly, and satisfying the need for revenge. Great in theory. Real life...real life doesn't always turn out like a textbook, though.” –Except from the personal logs of Lt. Cmdr. Ian Wallace

USS *Swiftsure* Main Observation Lounge

“God damn environment suited-”

“Sir?” Falco interjected.

Colther jerked oddly, reminding Falco of a *toltik* bird ruffling its feathers. However, there probably weren't any toltik birds that were fleet Admirals. He was a squat, barrel-chested man, with steadily retreating dark gray hair and intelligent gray eyes that matched his hair impeccably. He turned away from the window to face Falco. For a moment, his steely gaze showed anger for the Caitan reigning in on his parade, but he quickly relented. “Of course. I think all of us have been feeling...disturbed...over the seizure of the Sol System, have we not?”

“Of course, sir,” Commander Mikey Bailer responded immediately. Falco shot him a glare of mild rebuke. Admirals usually liked to pass information down to captains and let it pass through the chain of command from there. Bailer and Wallace, his security chief, were only there at Falco's personal request.

“Let's get started. None of us have time to waste. My *Brisbane* will be leaving in an hour to join up with the *Steed* and her group.” Colther handed them each a padd. “The Sol system is currently occupied by Breen forces. After their initial purge of existing Starfleet defense assets, they have set ships in defensive and bombardment positions and are systematically destroying industrial and political resources.”

It was a polite way of saying they were blowing the hell out of Earth's home system.

“And you have a plan for dealing with this?” Mikey asked.

Falco dug a claw into the table lightly, annoyed.

“Not yet. But I do have a plan. Turn to document A-4.”

They did so, manipulating the pages of texts and maps using the simple LCARS interfaces.

Wallace restrained a low whistle.

“Impressed?” Colther asked with a smirk of mild amusement.

“Surprised. It’s daring, that’s for sure.”

“Let me clarify.” He tapped a series of keys on an LCARS pad etched into the *Swiftsure*’s inlaid wood briefing table. A large map of the Sol system sprang to life on the display on the far end of the room.

“This mission will be carried out by the *Swiftsure* alone.”

Falco tensed. *A mission pertaining to Sol...and alone at that.*

He tapped another key, zooming in. “There’s a gap in their defenses...between 0450 and 0623 hours, there is only one Breen frigate patrolling this gap between Pluto and Neptune. They’ve yet to erect sensor stations, and I doubt this occupation is long term enough to warrant them; if not, we’ll make sure it isn’t. In any case, once this ship is destroyed...” A dotted line showed the course of a *Sovereign*-class starship. An animated bout occurred, and the ship quickly went back to warp. “Conveniently, the ship can slip through. It’ll be detected, of course, but if that ship is destroyed in time, then this ship will gain a precious thirty seconds without being detected.”

“So?”

“Thirty seconds is a lifetime in enemy territory, Mr. Bailer.”

“What happens when the ship, which I presume will be the *Swiftsure*, reaches her destination?” Falco asked.

“Then the birds leave the nest.”

The *Sovereign* came to a stop high above Earth orbit. Breen ships closed around her and started to take potshots. Silver specks were immediately disgorged from the ship’s two shuttlebays. After less than thirty seconds, it began to reorient on a proper escape course, and frantically fired off Quantum torpedoes, dealing a minor bit of damage. Once the specks hit atmosphere, it immediately fled.

“*Golden Eagle* Tactical Bombers, *Kestrel* Defense Flyers, *Osprey* Strike Flyers and, most importantly, *Avocet* Dropships; they’ve managed to seize control of the planetary transport inhibitor sites.”

“And their goals?” Falco asked, though he already suspected the answer. Bailer looked expectant, though Wallace maintained a neutral demeanor. He was definitely concerned.

“The *Golden Eagles* and most of the *Ospreys* will be on orbital interdiction duty; tying up the Breen ships as long as they can. The *Kestrels* will escort our *Avocets* to the surface. Their mission there is simple: reactivate the planetary shield grid.”

Falco rocked back involuntarily, surprised. “The shield grid, sir? Wasn’t it destroyed?”

“Or reconnaissance probes suggest otherwise. While it overloaded, the generators themselves are too well buried--and hidden--for them to get at, at the moment. In fact, the easiest way to get to them is by ground and transporter. They can’t risk lifting the inhibitors’ effects, so they’ve likely been attacking them by the ground. Since Starfleet personnel have likely been clustering around them to get them online, it’s likely they could still be intact, and, better yet, waiting to be reactivated. Those dropships will carry down engineering and security personnel, along with caches of weapons and replacement parts, which the *Brisbane* and our tender, the *Assiduous* are transferring now.” He smiled. “They’re also stealing your shuttles and replacing them with the bombers, fighters, and dropships; excuse me, ‘tactical shuttles’ and ‘orbital insertion craft’,” he said, mockingly adding the politically correct terms. Starfleet was loathe to use military terms, though for convenience’s sake its officers did quite frequently.

“What about other ships and resources?”

“I can’t discuss that, though your team is to coordinate and obtain as many additional personnel on the surface as it can muster; you’ll need the help.”

“When do we leave?”

“Eight hours.”

Damn. That wasn’t much time.

“You’ll be receiving additional personnel, don’t worry. However, some senior and experienced officers will be required. Any questions?”

Wallace raised a hand.

“Commander?”

“Does the *Swiftsure* have to leave the system immediately? I mean, if we can stay and help-“

“Don’t try to be a hero, Commander. You’ll be swarmed. The fighters in orbit are ordered to delay the Breen as long as possible and head groundside. This is a battle we can’t win...yet.” He turned back to Falco. “Select your officers well, and wish them good luck for me. There’s more details in those padds. Good luck to you, too, Captain.”

“Thank you, sir. Bailer, Wallace, you’re dismissed for now,” said Falco. “I’d like to speak with the Admiral for a moment.” He waited for them to file out before continuing. “I have good people, we can do this.”

“It’s why you were chosen.” The Admiral gathered up his padds and coffee mug.

“I do have one point of contention.”

The Admiral set the items down and crossed his arms. “Yes?”

“I want to be on the lead dropship.”

“Preposterous!”

“Why?”

“You’re the captain of this vessel!”

“So? I think that qualifies me.”

“You’re overqualified. We can’t go throwing away captains!”

“Throwing away’?”

Colther lowered his voice, as if wary the other officers could hear through the soundproofed metal door. “Let’s make one thing clear, here, Falco. Assuming the *Swiftsure* gets in and out of the system as planned, you’ll take little to no casualties. For the insertion team, however, we’re expecting at least 30% casualties...quite frankly, this is a mission where many of the participants just plain won’t be coming back.”

He left the room, and Mar’zief suddenly felt cold, no matter how efficient the environmental heating unit was.

Consitution City Briefing Room #11

Admiral Jason Bailer poured himself a glass of the strong whiskey, brandishing the crystal decanter. "It's strong, but good." *But not strong enough to wash the taste of defeat out of my mouth...* Martin's blundering withdrawal from Sol was a heavy burden they carried with them always...or until certain pieces fell into place. Bailer wouldn't let Martin's pathetic failure cast a shadow on him for long...

Martin nodded, and Bailer motioned for him to continue as he poured a glass.

"This whole situation is one big, stinking pile of—" Martin sighed. "They've got Earth. They've got Sol. Two hundred years, two hundred, and no one's done that. The casualties we took when they smashed into the system, the casualties we're going to sustain when we take it back, they're—"

"Astronomical," Bailer sighed, leaning back in the ample leather chair. He gazed idly at the pinpricks outside. "This won't reflect well on my record," he said softly but angrily, mostly to himself.

Martin was aging, but he wasn't deaf. His first thought was to scream "Your record? Your goddam record?" He managed to restrain himself, drifting back into a sullen, bitter demeanor. "We lost the *Tellar*. Damn fine ship, *Galaxy*-class, knew the skipper quite well." He pounded a fist on the table ineffectually. "This is bad, this is very bad, and," the next words were doused in venom for his friend "and not just for your record."

Bailer, for once, didn't fire off a blazing retort. Instead, he coolly gazed at Martin and drummed his fingers on the polished oak table. "So what do we do about it? Besides this plan of Colther's."

"You sound dubious."

"Aren't you a little nervous? The *Swiftsure* is a *Sovereign*, with almost eight hundred well trained souls aboard, plus all the extra personnel for this op."

"Falco can get her out in one piece."

Bailer looked at him for a moment, as if gauging the veracity of that statement. "I suppose you're right. I cannot say I like it, and I want to make it *quite* clear I have backup plans in place. In the likely event that this effort fails, the main objective will be achieved."

"It's a good op, I checked it over. Minimal danger to the ship and crew...well, minimal danger for wartime conditions."

“Minimal can quickly turn to maximal in wartime.” *Mikey...*

Martin swirled his glass and the fiery brew contained therein. He downed it in a single gulp. “It’s a decent plan, carried out by a good crew. Let’s hope the other pieces fall in place.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Minimal turns into maximal.”

CHAPTER ONE

Alpha Centauri Constitution City Shuttlebay Five

Commander Michael Bailer, who had the dubious honor of being the youngest human First Officer in Starfleet, walked off of the passenger conveyer, and watched it zoom away, carrying its load to other sections of the shuttlebay, one of many on the large habitat orbiting Alpha Centauri. He wasn't happy to have had to 'leave' here, for several reasons. Not the least of which was the need to be out there, killing Breen.

"Quite a crowd," he murmured to himself, looking around. The bay was bustling with stern-faced officers and worried civilians trying to live out their normal routines. They were, however, inevitably tainted by the situation that Starfleet and the Federation had found itself in. He started walking toward the Type-6 shuttle that would take him to the *Swiftsure*. The sooner that he was off this station and in the comfortable confines of the *Swifty*, the better. He did *not* want to see--

"Mikey!" shouted a voice behind the Commander. He winced and turned around, seeing his father puffing up behind him. In contrast to Mikey's youthful appearance, Admiral Jason Bailer looked quite elderly, with silver streaking his hair. Most of that, of course, was not due to age, but stress. Positions like his weighed heavily on people. Mikey held no sympathy, no remorse for past arguments. All he cared about was that the Commander in Chief of Starfleet, who just so happened to be his father, was standing right in front of him.

"Admiral," he greeted stiffly. "I'm surprised that your duties allowed you to come here right now."

"Mikey..." tried the Admiral. "I'm...I'm sorry I couldn't see you. I was busy."

"That's quite alright, sir," said Mikey robotically, glancing around nervously. "I understood that you were busy and as such did not go out of my way to disturb you."

Bailer grabbed his arm in a way that was fairly innocuous, but a strong gesture to his son. "Mikey, dammit--"

Mikey casually brushed him aside. "Excuse me sir; I need to get onto my shuttle." With that, he performed an about-face and was off.

Admiral Bailer watched his son walk out of his life, again. This kind of confrontation was getting too damned common for his tastes. He schooled his

face into a mask of dispassion, turned around in an ironically similar motion, and walked back to the mag-lev concourse, trying to think about any work that he had to do. By the time that he walked back into his office, he almost had convinced himself that he didn't care.

USS *Swiftsure* Captain's Ready Room

"Mikey..."

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked, sitting casually down on the couch. "If you're willing to risk your life and go, why can't I?"

Falco was a good enough judge of character to know something besides the mission was bothering Mikey, but he let that issue lie dormant for the moment. He sighed and nodded assent. "I don't like putting you in a situation of such grave risk—nor do I like putting any of my officers in that situation. You do understand that, yes?"

"I do," he said. Falco was worried by the excitement in his voice. He was young. *Too young for the responsibility that rested on him?*

"Have you refined the plans at all?"

"Minor tweaks. No doubt they had the best at Command--or what's left of it—devising this plan. And why mess with a good thing?"

Yes, like his crew, which was becoming more unified and close knit. Casualties were inevitable, but Falco was loathe to see so many good crew go out on a potentially disastrous excursion. "Of course. What officers will you be taking?"

"Lieutenants Pelt and Nolin from Engineering, Maro from Helm, and McBain from Tactical and Security. Admiral Colther assigned a few others, but as per his instructions, I'm nominally in charge, being your representative." He sighed, and accepted a mug of tea from the captain. "Captain, I can handle this."

"I know you can," the other replied, voicing none of the concern he felt. He mustered a smile. "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Thank you, sir."

Falco nodded gravely.

"Good luck."

Falco had barely taken a sip of his tea after Mikey left when Kentar entered the room in a series of brief, jerky strides.

"I wish to go on the away mission," she announced promptly after a hasty salute.

Falco merely arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Why not?"

"What skills of yours are applicable to this mission?" Logic was so disarming. Falco felt delightfully Vulcan.

"If anyone can bring those shields up, it's—"

"The technicians whose specialty it is to maintain them. What's this really about?"

"That's irrelevant."

"Perhaps. What's not irrelevant is the gap this would leave in the *Swiftsure's* crew." Falco successfully resisted the urge to say *Swifty*, the popular nickname. "I'm already losing some senior staff, including my XO. How can I afford to let my Chief Engineer go?" *Maybe permanently*, he considered grimly. He had made enough concessions today.

"But..." the engineer's passion was nothing in the face of simply cost analysis and logic. *Sharkie...*

"I'm sorry. I know you may have personal reasons, but so do many of the crew. Everyone has a tie to Earth. But they can't break their ties to the ship, not just yet."

"Yes, sir," she said gloomily, bottling her frustration.

"Dismissed," he said gently. Tea and heart were cold.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Armory

The hard set of his jaw and tightness of his shoulders told Wallace all he needed to know about McBain's mental state. The young lieutenant was tense, but ready.

He'd make his superior proud.

“All set, Jack?”

“Righto, sir.”

Wallace nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. “What’s in the works?”

“All the dropships are fully armed and carrying their standard complement of weapons; full to the gills with Types I and II phasers, rifles of standard and compression varieties, photon grenades, RPPG launchers, and isomagnetic disintegrators.”

Wallace nodded and smiled. “And you?”

“Type I tucked in my belt and boot, sir, Type-II at the hip, compression rifle, and three grenades in my pack, plus a few extra power clips.”

“Compression?” Wallace replied dubiously. He’d never been overly fond of the type. Their extra punch came at the price of increased power consumption and bulkiness. He preferred the sleek versions of the standard rifle.

“Mobility isn’t going to be key here; the dropships can ferry us around. I need to be able to take them out quick and fast; an assault weapon.”

“Fair enough.” Wallace couldn’t fault his reasoning, but he didn’t have to agree with it.

McBain sighed and closed the weapons locker gently. Most of the foam inserts holding equipment in place were empty. “To tell ya the truth, sir, I’m more than a little nervous.” He activated the locking sequence on the locker and they left the room together.

“The first big mission’s always like that. You’ll do fine.”

“I know, I’ve been in combat before, but...never so far away from a starship. There’s a sense of security I’m not feeling in knowing that, if I need help, the *Swiftsure* isn’t going to sweep to my rescue. That familiar lifeline, the solidarity...it’s not there.”

“You’ll do fine,” Wallace repeated as they stepped in the turbolift. “Just try to keep focused.”

“Ach, easier said than done!”

Wallace smiled grimly as the car hummed to a stop. The doors slid aside with their usual mechanical precision. “What in blazes?”

The main shuttlebay was absolutely crawling with activity as the strange Starfleet vehicles were checked out by technicians and loaded to the brims with equipment.

McBain strode forward, but stopped as a man rushed by with a hovercart. “This is nuts!” His sentence was punctuated by the harsh scream of engines as a pair of *Osprey* Tactical Flyers passed through the crackling magnetic field and into the bay. The sleek craft touched down gently on landing circles, waved in by traffic coordinators. An incoming trio of smaller *Kestrel* defense shuttles only added to the confusion, as they hovered in the middle of the air as if suspended by strings, waiting for space to clear.

Most common to the bay, however, rather than the relatively large, lumbering *Golden Eagles* and dart-like fighters, were the *Avocet*-class dropships. The craft, two dozen meters in length, were arrayed in neat rows, surrounded by personnel, scattered stacks of equipment, and personnel buzzing like bees. They had a sharpened, distantly *Defiant*-like nose with a strong Runabout influence, along with a double series of ‘shoulders’, a new twist on the distinguished feature of the former. The first set contained four mini pulse phasers, with the second containing micro torpedo launchers. Even as they watched, several racks of micro photon and quantum torpedoes were being wheeled over to be loaded.

The main body was a rounded box to which were attached the second series of shoulders and stubby, rounded wings, each in turn mounting some odd, long cylinders. The craft narrowed at the back to a hatch, above which was a helicopter like tail which housed fuel and cargo. At the very end of the tail were two fins with ECM and sensor antennae and nodes.

“I remember them from the war,” Wallace recalled, calmly walking over to the nearest craft. He patted its nose affectionately. “Except they weren’t this fierce. The ‘shoulders’ were empty, except for a pair of micro torp launchers.”

A pair of antennae poked out from under the craft, and Lieutenant Jara Maro slid by them on a hover trolley. “She doubles as a close-in ground support craft.”

“That’ll be handy.”

“Yeah, she should work well with the *Kestrels* in terms of holding off enemy troops. She’s definitely tougher than a *Danube*; she still won’t take sustained fire from capital ships, but a few disruptor blasts definitely won’t be enough to kill her.”

“Sounds promising. Gotten in any flight time?”

The antennae drooped slightly as she stood up and wiped her hands on a rag. “No, unfortunately. They just arrived recently; we don’t carry them under normal

circumstances, as you know. I've been looking around her innards, studying the flight manuals, and logging some time in a holographic simulator. I can't say I'm at ease taking her into enemy fire, but I know I can do it."

Wallace nodded and looked off to the time display mounted high up on the left wall. "It's 0200, I need to be on the bridge. Good luck, both of you." He gave them a solemn nod and was off.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Shuttlebay

Mikey took a quick survey of the shuttlebay, then performed one on himself. Phasers, comm. badge, backup comm. badge, a few photon grenades, some rations in his pack, and a small toolkit. He took a deep breath and entered the dropship.

It was overflowing with Starfleet personnel burdened by gear and crammed into the small crash seats. Thankfully, the ceiling was of reasonable height and he didn't have to duck his head in the cramped surroundings. He made his way to the cockpit and took a seat at the only empty console, one of the secondary weapons stations.

"Lieutenant?" he asked Maro as he strapped in.

"Engines at peak efficiency, all systems report ready."

McBain entered the room, relieving a young ensign at the main tactical console. He tinkered with the controls and twisted in his seat to talk to Bailer.

"Passengers and cargo are fully loaded and secure. We're good to go."

Maro poised a finger over the main anti-grav control. Mikey shook his head. "We have to wait for the signal, Lieutenant." He fidgeted in his seat anxiously, trying to call upon Starfleet training to calm his nerves. *You're not alone, you're not alone. You have dozens and dozens of trained Starfleet personnel with you, and you'll be on a friendly world. Everything will be okay...*

The comm. beeped. Startled, Maro almost tapped the controls, before she realized it was an ordinary position. "It's for you, sir."

Bailer keyed it. "Commander Bailer."

"Sir, this is *Avocet A-5*. We had a glitch and had to dump our computer memory. We reloaded all system data, but we lost the mission profile."

He sighed. Only certain officers were authorized to carry the mission data, as a precaution for secrecy. "I'm coming, A-5. And make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Aye, sir."

He squeezed through the passenger compartment and slapped the door release. The hatch slowly lowered, its hydraulic hiss muffling his cursing.

He hurried around the side of the craft and halted near the nose, thinking to go left. Barely visible in the cockpit, Maro and McBain were pointing right. He grumbled and went right, trying to ignore the screech of the engines.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

Falco looked around the bridge, suppressing his apprehension. *They know their duty, now it's time for you to do yours.* He tugged the hem of his uniform and settled into the command chair, interlacing his fingers in an almost casual pose. "Helm, heading 00456.02."

"Locked in."

"Mr. Wallace, please signal all hands, Red Alert."

He busied himself with tapping keys. A moment later, Falco heard the Scotsman over the comm. "All hands preparing for Red Alert. Weapons systems charged and fully functional."

"Operations?"

"All systems functioning within normal parameters." That was a welcome change from their shakedown cruise.

"Helm?"

"Course is laid in, escape route plotted."

"Engage, Warp nine point nine."

"Aye, engaging at warp nine point nine."

The engines charged for a single moment that flickered like lightning, the nacelles themselves almost crackling with expelled blue energy. Then, in a

second that seemed to stretch like the ship's image, the massive spacecraft shot off into the night.

"ETA four minutes, captain."

The Sol system was essentially blockaded, with Federation reinforcements effectively stopping new Breen vessels from entering the system. Those already there, however, still had a stranglehold on the territory. The economic, political, and moral blow was devastating. It was Falco's hope that this mission would lead to the situation being remedied. It was a step in the right direction.

But a very tenuous step. The fact that only one ship, the *Swiftsure*, was entering the system meant that Command—what was left of it—wasn't willing to stake too much on it, and was instead waiting for one big push. The mission was, after all, only a quick riposte, meant to shore up Earth's defenses in preparation for a massive Federation counterattack.

Hopefully.

Falco quietly glanced around the room. The now familiar tightness was in their faces again. The tightness that comes of the uncertain fate of your family. The tightness that comes from the seizure of your homeland. The tightness that comes knowing that you can't go back. He pitied them, and for the first time felt isolated from his crew. The humans shared a bond they did not with the 'aliens' on board, that of a shared homeland, ancestral or current, that was troubled. As much as it frayed their nerves and tugged longingly at their hearts, it drew them together in a passionate, and, at times, enraged camaraderie. It was something he couldn't share, and the Caitan was left aloof.

He looked at Wallace. He was hunched over his console slightly, contented conversation with McBain forgotten, the weight having settled back on his shoulders. The human sighed and gently tapped his fist on his console in repressed anger

No matter, he thought. *It will end soon*. The Breen would be pushed back, a heavy round of negotiations would ensue, and everything would be just like it was before.

Or, at least, that's what he kept telling himself.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Shuttlebay

"Roger that K3, let the big birds fly the coop first and follow. The rest of the flock forms the wings, stay in tight and don't forget the tail feathers." To an unknowing

listener, the pilot's lingo would be completely unintelligible. Between them, however, it was a nervous reaffirmation of the mission orders.

"Stay cool, Stony," Dexter replied calmly. Ensign Roch Lemaire smiled thinly and checked the instrument panel of his *Kestrel* Defense Flyer, an angled, highly functional LCARS panel. His weapons, a fairly potent combination of small phasers and micro torpedoes, were on standby, with a fully complement of torps aboard. The powerful impulse engines were finely tuned and ready to rocket him to maximum velocity in six seconds flat, and the life support and shielding systems would pretty much ensure he survived. Luck would do the rest.

He anxiously looked at the large dome placed in the center ceiling of the shuttlebay, where every single pilot could see it. Concurrently with a comm. transmission, it would ignite green, telling them it was go time. Then the choreographed dance of death would begin.

He breathed slowly and looked out the canopy. The light was still white.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

The *Swiftsure* snapped out of warp, though the crew felt none of the crushing deceleration, the solidifying stars the only indicator of their speed.

Falco tensed. He was thankful his claws, which he struggled to keep sheathed, didn't leave indents in the fine wood inserts of his command chair. "Identify targets!" he snapped. This part had to be executed flawlessly.

Flawlessly.

"Got it!" the young Tellarite manning Science and Wallace exclaimed simultaneously. Wallace's demeanor instantly cooled as his hands danced across the console. "Locking!" A red box centered on a silver speck nearby.

"Full Impulse," Falco commanded. *Precise timing...*

The Breen ship, which sauntered around Neptune with a casual arrogance, seemed stunned by the appearance of the glistening Starfleet ship. It took nearly ten seconds for it to realize what was happening. By that time, the *Swiftsure's* powerful primary and special secondary Impulse engines had helped it close the distance like a jungle cat bounding towards its prey.

The first Quantum torpedo shot forth. Falco concentrated on its fiery blue corona, willing it true. Destroying this ship was critical.

The torpedo passed through a space in the wild, asymmetrical hull. A wave passed through the bridge crew, like a gasp of astonishment never given breath. "Son of a!" Wallace began, but bit his lip and continued firing.

The Breen ship accelerated sharply away from Neptune, trying to position itself for a clean broadcast.

The next torpedo hit home, disgorging blue flame over the ship's bubble shield. Phaser blasts joined in, pushing away the gaseous fire and clawing at the shields. They quickly fell.

"Power spike in port quarter- comm. array becoming active!"

A bright orange light erupted, silencing the Science officer. "That's a kill," she confirmed. "Sensors report scattered debris, no communications detected."

Wallace practically slumped over, terribly relieved. Falco felt the same way, but there was no time to dwell on their near failure. "Engage warp drive." He silently urged, *and be careful*.

The Sun stared at him menacingly, ready to swallow the *Swiftsure* whole.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Shuttlebay

The shuttlebay was windowless. An isolated dome full of vessels within vessels like the multi-layered toy eggs he had played with as a child.

Mikey practically slammed the isolinear chip into its slot. He tapped the transmit button and leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

"Thanks, sir," the pilot said sheepishly. "The port Impulse engine was frozen, and we found a huge patch control code missing. We had to reset all the onboard systems."

"Understandable," he said darkly. It was hard not to grumble, but he didn't want to ostracize his troops. He smiled inwardly. *His* troops.

A chime sounded. He popped out the isolinear chip and firmly tucked it into a pocket in his away uniform.

Then a second chime sounded. A ten second countdown clock began.

And Mikey was on the wrong dropship. He scurried to the hatch, but it was sealed.

“Open it, that’s an order!”

“Time is a commodity we don’t have. You can’t get to your *Avocet* without holding things up, and our timing has to be perfect!” he gulped, adding, “With all due respect, sir.”

Mikey sighed and returned to the cockpit. The engineers and security members in the passenger compartment stared. He ignored them and reached for the comm. “Assault Leader is now in dropship A-5, repeat ground team command transferred to A-5.”

There was a hectic chorus of acknowledgements over the comm.

He had forgotten about the countdown clock, and the flash of green from the dome startled him. At once, ships rose up as if plucked by invisible giants. A squadron of *Ospreys* emerged first, then a thin line of *Kestrels*. *Avocet* after *Avocet* flew from the bay, followed by numerous knots of *Kestrels* and scattered wingpairs of *Ospreys*, each shooting through the containment field in excess of the recommended velocities. The curled in a silver and white line, centering on the world spinning below.

Earth.

Golden Eagle bombers joined them from the secondary shuttlebay, joining their brothers and cousins.

Mikey felt exposed, almost naked. The *Avocet* was tough in terms of a small craft, but terribly vulnerable in comparison to a capital ship. The dozens of Breen warships orbiting Earth made him doubt he would escape with his life.

Of course he would.

He was Starfleet.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

Falco silently wished the fleeing shuttles good luck before focusing back on the task at hand: getting out of the system in one piece.

But first, they had to make on hell of a distraction.

“Helm, attack pattern *Falco’s Talon...*,” he glanced at the sensor display. “Three.” He took pleasure in clever naming. “Engage.”

The *Swiftsure* dove sharply, carving the sky above Earth and catching two approaching destroyers off guard; they suddenly found themselves on a completely incorrect attack vector, with the *Swiftsure* coming about and chewing up the distance between them. Before they could begin to fire off torpedoes, piercing orange flame erupted from the Starfleet ship, slashing at their shields. Beam after beam converged on the leftmost ship as it struggled to gain a targeting lock. It was quickly extinguished as the *Swiftsure* wrenched hard to port and fired a salvo from her aft torpedo tubes.

Not even bothering to engage the remainder of the pair, she continued on her course, back toward the dropships, and unleashed a string of quantum torpedoes at nearby cruiser. They exploded violently, added by a series of precisely aimed phaser blasts to further sow confusion amongst the crew. It returned fire erratically, but the *Swiftsure* was already looping around on a preprogrammed course to engage the first ship.

He remained seated tensely. His approach with Wallace was fairly 'hands-off'. Unlike most Tactical officers, he didn't really need or want specific details: just give him a target, or line one up, and he'll finish it off. Helm was a different story. Maro was as good as they came, though she, at times, lacked a bit of professionalism. The young man seated there now made up for his weaknesses with sheer exuberance and enthusiasm, but the maneuvers entailing his attack pattern required more than mere 'spunk'.

"Hard to starboard, pitch fifty degrees."

They pitched up slightly, simultaneously turning sharply. Perfectly perpendicular to both Breen ships, now, it fired phasers wildly, stinging them time and time again. Both disintegrated under the sustained fire.

"Disengage attack pattern."

The helmsman erased the preprogrammed courses he had been modifying as the situation demanded, while Wallace stepped back from his console and wiggled his fingers, tense from frantic maneuvers.

The officer at Science perked up, the moment of relaxation gone. "Seventeen Breen vessels inbound."

The dropships were just hitting atmosphere, while the *Ospreys* and *Golden Eagles* were waiting in their attack patterns.

"Bring us to grid 558." That would put them in the middle of the friendly craft.

"Reloading torpedoes, phasers and shields optimal."

Falco nodded, and looked around the bridge. Somehow, the sight of the Breen ships didn't fill him with fear...

CHAPTER TWO

Kestrel 7 **Earth Orbit**

“Keep it tight, Stony.”

“I copy,” Lemaire said anxiously, tweaking his controls. The crystal clear canopy allowed him to see his herd; a group of four dropships, their rounded noses beginning to light with orange flame. The *Kestrels* were flying in standard box defense formation, staggered in terms of altitude and entry vectors so if all four fired forward they wouldn’t hit each other.

The wind whistled outside, while the inside of the craft rumbled with the reassuring thrum of the engines and the buffeting of the atmosphere. Flame washed over the canopy in a brilliant display as he hit the atmosphere in earnest. It was suddenly joined by majestic green fire.

Green fire?

“Poutains!” he cursed, knowing what it was.

Breen warships in orbit.

“Chickens, spread apart, little birdies on guard!” the flight leader ordered. The ships spread apart, but the steep angle of descent and forces of gravity and inertia working against the craft meant that any more complex maneuvers would tear them to shreds. For this window of thirty seconds, they were vulnerable, forced to fly in mostly straight lines.

One of the *Avocets* disappeared, swatted from existence by a huge green line. Debris and fire rocketed away from it, banging off his canopy, while the explosion and thunderclap of the disruptor rattled his small craft.

“Merde, merde, merde!”

All he could do was watch.

Golden Eagle 1 **Earth Orbit**

“They’re hitting on the chickens, Commander.”

Commander Jack Harper was a small but burly Brit, tougher than the duranium alloy hull of his *Golden Eagle* bomber, or so it was said. He responded with his

typical lilt, though it was broken by a smile as the *Swiftsure* flew majestically overhead, a silver tiger. “The nest is here, but she’ll be outbound soon, lads. Don’t forget to drop your eggs *in unison*. Big Bird Leader out.”

His secondary gunner, a Bolian male, piped up. “Commander, we’re entering range for the big eggs.” The two full-sized Quantum torpedoes tucked under the wings slowed them down a little, but packed a huge wallop.

“Jolly good, where’s my tea and crumpets?” Jeffries, his primary gunner, mocked good-naturedly.

“They’ll be plenty waiting for us once we get back to the *Swiftly*,” Harper replied to the young woman with a grin, angling the Starfleet craft up ‘higher’. A trio of *Golden Eagles* fell into formation with him, with a thin line of *Ospreys* heading up the attack. The Breen ships loomed ever larger. Suddenly, they began disgorging green fire.

“Disruptors hot and active!” Cuis reported excitedly. Harper cursed inwardly. The *Avocets* and *Kestrels* were sitting ducks. The range information on his display was changed constantly as his bomber obediently gobbled up the distance. Just a little closer...

“Big Birds five through nine, drop those eggs, target three!” He suited action to words by designating the target and giving Cuis a nod. The *Golden Eagle* was kicked twice as the Quantum torpedoes dropped off their mounting struts and shot off, trailed by six more projectiles. The nearest Breen frigate died in a spectacular flurry of explosions.

“Well done, Cuis.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The precise targeting sensors mounted in the nose painted targets on his sensor display. Fifteen Breen ships within range; no, fourteen, he corrected himself, as the *Swiftsure* decapitated a cruiser. The computer beeped an angry-sounding chime.

“Fifty three more vessels inbound!” Jeffries exclaimed with disbelief.

Lieutenant Commander Wallace’s voice spoke over the comm. Harper could hear a Red Alert alarm and the barking of orders in the background. “Big birds and angry birds, this is nest. Slash hard to port and head groundside. Repeat, slash-port and head groundside, follow original assignments.” The small Starfleet attack craft would slice through the Breen fleet, doing as much damage as possible, and head into the atmosphere, joining up with the dropship groups to provide protection and fire support.

“Five through nine, confirm receipt of command message.”

He got four acknowledgements.

“Big bird six, do you copy?”

“She’s gone, sir.”

He scowled angrily and tossed his craft to the left. A string of *Ospreys* hurtled forward, harpooning the Breen vessels with small streaks of orange. The comparatively lumbering *Golden Eagles* followed.

“Jeffries.”

“On it, sir.”

Harper angled the nose up slightly to bear on the nearest frigate.

“Locked. Firing.”

Golden-orange micro torpedoes shot forward in great strings from the ship and her comrades, pummeling the much larger vessel. Their small phaser fire joined in the effort. Disruptor fire claimed two, but the torpedoes eventually found their mark, cleaving the metal skin. The ship exploded seconds later, with the Federation ships flitting by like a small swarm of bees. Fire and death was everywhere, with the massive *Swiftsure* steadily pulling away, leaving her children to their fate.

Harper gazed at Earth and set a course for home.

Dropship A-5 Earth’s Atmosphere

“Chicken Six, Chicken Six, report in.”

“Chicken Six here, we’ve broken through atmosphere, heading for Holland with Seven and Twelve.”

Mikey spoke into the comm. “Copy, get that transmitter up.” The dropship had just hit atmosphere, along with a good percentage of the others, including McBain and Maro’s.

A console to his left chimed.

"New contacts, intercept course," the ensign started, pausing as the *Avocet* rocked sharply. "Upper atmosphere...small. Larger contacts in low orbit...fighters and carriers!"

"How many?" Mikey snapped.

"Two carriers in immediate vicinity...thirty four fighters and counting, they're breaking up in groups of seven."

"Seven incoming," he said a few moments later. "And another bunch."

"*Kestrels*, you are green on weapons, repeat green," Mikey said over the comm. "Fire at your discretion, but your primary task is to protect the dropships, repeat little birdies guard the chickens."

The *Kestrels* moved further ahead, but stayed relatively close to their wards. *Good.*

The Breen fighters closed, tearing through the upper atmosphere. Mikey glanced nervously outside the window, which was coated in flickering flame. The pilot kept a steady hand on the controls.

"Adjusting alignment," he said, tilting the nose ever so slightly. At this velocity and stage, harsh maneuvers could tear them apart.

The smaller *Kestrels* shot by the Breen fighters on a parallel course, nailing them with several torpedo and phaser blasts.

"Sir, we can activate the shields now."

"They won't be drained too much?" Bailer asked, concerned. They'd certainly need their shields later.

"No, sir, and they'd give us more freedom of movement." Her sentence was punctuated as a pair of Breen fighters, ugly conglomerations of parts and blocks, slid past a *Kestrel* and blew apart an unshielded *Avocet*.

Bailer quickly nodded to the young woman at Tactical. "Power to weapons systems." The dropship was meant for close air support, not for fighting airborne targets, but its weapons systems would do. Pulse phaser blasts ripped through the churning atmosphere, tearing through a Breen fighter unlucky enough to cross the dropship's path. It came apart, and debris clattered across the windscreen.

Their dropship rocked as fire splashed across its aft shields.

"I need fire support!" the pilot yelled. A mechanical scream reverberated through the craft as two *Kestrels* moved to intercept. The pilot wheeled the craft to one side in a gut-wrenching turn.

Mikey remained seated stoically, bracing himself on the console. This wasn't going to be a pleasant ride.

Dropship A-1 Earth's Atmosphere

"This is Chicken One, we've breached upper atmosphere!" McBain reported. Puffy clouds washed over the windscreen and were destroyed by the engine backwash.

McBain and Maro were reassured to hear Mikey's voice, though the sounds of battle in the background were unsettling. "Proceed to main objective!" he said excitedly. "How far can you comm.?"

"We can't rally the troops unless Burke's team can get that transmitter in Holland up. Then we could cut through their jamming. All we have now is the tight-beam tactical feed we're using."

"Try to gain some early ground," Commander Bailer resumed in a more pensive voice, "but don't try to do too much. Wait for our main force!"

"I copy. Chicken One out." McBain turned to Maro. "You heard him?"

She nodded, punching up information. "Course plotted."

The dropship broke through the clouds with the slightest of bumps, as a heavy mass of water vapor was broken by her hull.

"Arming weapons," McBain narrated. He knew they'd need them. The *Avocet* was well equipped, with four small micro torpedo launchers forward and a single one aft, multiple phaser strips for all-around coverage, and four armor-shredding pulse phaser cannons up front. She also carried two cylindrical MWP (Mobile Weapons Pods), one under each wing. For this mission, they were equipped with "Triple Ts", *Talon* Tactical Torpedoes. They were identical in size to the standard micro torpedo, but had a sharp, armor piercing head, with a limited guidance system and extra explosives. They were meant to pierce the skins of hardened ground targets and vehicles and detonate partially inside, though they were less effective against shielded items. Their different drive system—they used a solid chemical propellant—allowed them to be fired quickly, as they were mounted in multi-torpedo launchers instead of tubes.

The last of the clouds faded from view, revealing a blue canvas stretched across the sky. Far below, a giant mass of green carpeted the earth, decorated with snow-capped mountains and sporadic golden deserts.

Asia.

Shining dimly in the sunlight, a winding road curved across China, a glowing red box nearby. Maro pointed to the box, which the computer had projected onto the screen. "There's the Asian Continental Defense Shield Generator. Like the rest, it's overloaded but still operational."

"Breen forces?"

The Bolian at the Sensor console checked his instruments. "They haven't done much, besides orbital bombardment here and there. They are clustering around the five generators, though—they're starting to realize they're buried too deep to be affected by orbital weaponry."

McBain nodded with grim satisfaction. The generators themselves were well protected and defended, and though they had overloaded under the strain of protecting so much land against the Breen onslaught, they could still be repaired. They had to be, if Earth was to have a chance.

USS *Swiftsure* Sol System

"All dropships are in atmosphere!" the Science officer called. The *Swiftsure* was rocked by a series of disruptor blasts amidships. Wallace returned fire with the main phaser banks, damaging the offender. It backed off, licking its wounds.

Falco immediately began barking out orders again, not missing a beat. "Helm, bring us about, escape course, full Impulse! Status of other craft?"

"We have a small contingent of *Ospreys* and *Golden Eagles* harrying the enemy in orbit, but most have headed groundside and are reforming into groups. It looks like the dropships will be ready to proceed to their targets within five minutes."

"Good," Falco said, interlacing his fingers and feeling a bit of calm as the Breen ships were left behind. "Wallace?"

"Twenty-two of our fighters are gone, but we're still in decent shape. Shields are down to about half..." he frowned, looking at the display meter. Falco silently urged him; more craft were inbound all the time. "The port shield worries me, though," Wallace concluded. "I'm getting fluctuations. It could go down anytime."

“We’ll get it fixed at Starbase,” Falco dismissed, taking note of the readings on his armchair display.

“Yes sir. We could also use more torpedoes, I’m running rather low.” He smiled. They had given the Breen hell, but now it was time to leave.

“I think that’s the least Command can do for us. Helm?”

“All set, sir.”

“Mr. Wallace, a parting gift?”

A volley of quantum torpedoes burst from the aft launchers, destroying the pair of Breen frigates fast enough to keep up with them. The *Swiftsure* elongated and burst into warp, though the Breen didn’t follow. They had other concerns, now.

Kestrel 7 **Earth’s Atmosphere**

“Watch your back, watch your back! Arrgggggggggggggggh!” A flash of light illuminated Lemaire’s cockpit as an adjacent *Kestrel* died, followed quickly by the one he had been warning. The trailing dropship pounded one Breen fighter to dust, but the other fled. Lemaire popped off a pair of torpedoes, but the fighter was gone from view by this time, and he was unsure whether they hit. He turned his attention back to the sensor screen. This small grouping of *Avocets* was desperately low on escorts now, protected only by Lemaire.

A cold sweat broke out, dampening the collar of his uniform. He jerked the *Kestrel* hard to starboard, intercepting one of the Breen fighters that had done the damage. His hands pounced on the LCARS keys viciously, unleashing streams of destructive pulse phaser blasts. A ripple of grim pleasure shook him as his colleagues were avenged, and disintegrating composite metals rained down in the atmosphere...

His ship rocked hard with a sudden force that hurled him against his restraints. He instinctively sent the craft in a dive as he struggled to catch his constrained breath.

The complex controls in front of him flashed red in areas, multiple chimes going off. Power drain on Impulse Engine Two. Aft Shields down to eighteen percent...

“Need a little help there, Seven?”

A comparatively lumbering *Golden Eagle* bomber was suddenly alongside him. An explosion sounded dimly in the background.

“Thanks—“ he checked his sensor display. “Big Bird One.”

“No problem.” Another two bombers were present, with five *Ospreys* escorting them. All his fellow *Kestrels*—in this area, at least—were gone.

“Where are these chickens headed?”

“North American Defense Shield Generator in Winnipeg.” He swung his ship wide as a massive disruptor blast from orbit rocketed down. It dealt a glancing blow to one of the *Ospreys*, but the small craft managed to survive. A small plume of smoke erupted from its engine.

They continued on, cruising over the Atlantic, disruptor fire raining down all the while. It evaporated the salty brine, causing great geysers of water to rise up. The steam pushed his craft gently this way or that, once nearly into another disruptor blast. As they passed over the dense metropolises of eastern North America, however, it was harder to distinguish the small craft, and fire slackened lightly.

“Sorry, lad,” Harper announced after ten minutes had passed. Before Lemaire could say anything, the bomber captain’s contingent had peeled away. “We must be off to Asia. G’day.”

Dropship A-5 China

It came suddenly, a deadly green mockery of lightning.

The two Breen fighters harrying the dropship abruptly dove aside to avoid being hit. The disruptor bolt tore through the tattered shields of the dropship and plowed through its tail and aft hatch. It tumbled into a spin, sinking even as it glided over beautiful rolling green hills. Plumes of dirt were kicked up by nearby explosions. The inertial compensator, damaged and overwhelmed, exploded, kicking up sparks in the middle of the cabin floor. The chaotic swirl of color that was the viewscreen slowed.

Mikey threw up as the craft continued its wild ‘flight’. Finally, the mess slowed, and the impact occurred.

His restraints ripped from the sheer inertia and strain of holding even his lean mass in place. The Commander slammed into the silver ceiling, back seeming to crack. He promptly fell back down as the ship tipped over, carving a great gouge

in the earth. It slid down the hill, rolling through a field of flowers and leaving wrecked soil behind that looked as it had been tilled by the fingers of a baby giant.

After nearly two excruciating minutes, it stopped.

The whine of Federation and Breen Impulse drives could be heard almost constantly overhead. Occasionally, through the large rupture overhead, he could see a silver arrow flit by. *At least everyone else is okay*, Mikey thought as he lay in agony.

One of the silver shapes was split by a massive green beam. It exploded violently.

Never mind...

Slowly, Mikey picked himself up. Miraculously, for that was the only term that could accurately describe it, nothing was broken, though his back was sore as hell.

The pilot stood up in the sideways cockpit. No one else did. A snapped neck and broken spinal cord had silenced the other two.

In the main body of the craft, the occupants had fared much better, secured as they were in their heavy shock couches. None had died, and most were dazed but determined to carry out the mission. They stood wearily at attention.

Mikey stepped out of the ruined craft, whose metal skin was hot to the touch. Several points on the hull were slowly smoldering while the sun beat down on them.

Small craft screeched overhead, heading for the shield generator complex.

Among those craft were a pair of Breen 'tanks' escorted by a fighter.

"Down, down, down!" he scolded, ushering his comrades behind the ruined hulk. He pressed his back to the scorched metal, which heated his uniform uncomfortably. Sweat from the temperature joined that of fear.

The nearest Breen tank hardly needed to declare its intentions. It spat a green disruptor bolt, which shot through the air and impaled the remnants of the *Avocet*. The durable hull behind him glowed red hot, while bits of debris tumbled over them. One more shot would kill them all. He turned to his left, and noted Gotyr adjusting his isomagnetic disintegrator fitfully. He finally threw it on the ground in disgust.

“Damaged in the crash.”

Mikey turned around. The fighter was in the lead now...

A torpedo slammed into its nose, ripping it apart. Debris and molten fire washed over the rest of the ship, disintegrating it as it flew. A silver, avian shape plowed through the fireball heedless of the danger. Through Mikey’s heat-stung eyes, the shape resolved: an *Avocet*, weapons blazing.

The two tanks raised their disruptor cannons to fire, but it was too late. The weapons pods tucked under each wing came to life, firing a lightning-fast sequence of photon rockets. The ‘dumb fire’ weapons smashed into their targets with abandon, igniting in balls of pumpkin-colored flame. Debris rained down on the beautiful grass, which was now charred and lifeless. The *Avocet* set down, backwash from its engines pitching around charcoal blades of foliage. The hatch slowly lowered.

“Need a lift?” McBain called.

Mikey smiled grimly and lead his team onward again.

Golden Eagle 1 **Asian Continental Defense Shield Generator**

Harper watched with a twisted delight as the micro quantum torpedoes hit their targets, detonating the Breen tanks.

“This is *Golden Eagle 1*,” he said, after getting a nod from his sensor operator. “Scopes are clean. Chickens, the coop is waiting. Little birds and angry birds, defensive postures.”

The Asian Continental Defense Shield Generator, or ACDSG for short, was a massive complex buried under a hill and layers of armor and small secondary shields, located in the picturesque area surrounding the Great Wall of China. From five hundred meters above it, Harper could see acrid tongues of flame rising from wrecked vehicles, along with wispy trails of smoke from the blasted defensive weaponry of the installation. Suddenly, a few scattered parts of the hill disappeared, revealing shielded blast doors. The shields abruptly died, and the doors creaked open.

A scattered assembly of Starfleet personnel rushed out, along with a few hopper. They began waving the dropships forward. One by one, they landed and disgorged their cargo and personnel, or flew into the base itself. Harper brought his craft into a small loop, noting a long procession of the metallic birds stretching off into the horizon...

“*Avocet* A-26, we’re hit—“

Avocet A-26 had disappeared off sensors.

“ACDSG Control, be advised, incoming Breen forces. Looks like—“

“Forty nine,” Jeffries sighed.

“Forty nine Breen fighters—hold, more incoming.”

“Roger, we’ve got them on sensors. *Kestrels* and *Ospreys*, form up and engage. *Golden Eagles*, fire support.”

Harper silently cursed the base commander. Despite the fact that they were bombers, the *Golden Eagles* weren’t all that ungainly; in fact, they were fairly agile, comparable to a Runabout. Nonetheless, they were constantly relegated to fire support and bombing roles, never to engage small enemy craft except out of defense. Harper took his ship down, propping it behind the wall itself. His sensors could easily penetrate the ancient stone.

The *Avocets* hurried forward, sandwiched between two lines of advancing fighters. Harper waited.

Kestrel 7

Upper North America, formerly province of Manitoba

“ACDSG force requests additional fire support. We have several dozen Breen craft incoming. Repeat, request additional fire support.”

Stony immediately tapped his comm. “Commander?” he asked expectantly.

CHAPTER THREE

Holland Near the Starfleet Planetary Communications Complex

“Burke!?” the voice was panicked, as the rubble was thrown aside. “Burke!?”

He stirred slowly, languidly tumbling back into consciousness. It felt like someone had hit him in the back with Mjolnir. A low groan escaped his parched lips.

“*Ziokus*, he’s alive!” A blue blur—a face, though he couldn’t make out the details—appear in front of him. “Lieutenant Commander Burke? Sir?”

“Don’t just sit there, Rolly, help him out.” He slowly got to his knees with the aid of the Bolian and a human female, who he judged to be Sanchez by her voice and the spicy perfume she wore. Plaster and rocks slid off the back of his uniform. His knees and strong arms wobbled, and he collapsed on his side, then rolled over onto his back in exhaustion.

“Commander?” Sanchez demanded, worried. “Where the hell is the medic!?”

The soft thudding of a medical field kit against flesh and the rasp of standard issue boots traveled down the cobblestone street. “Sorry, we’ve got lots of wounded.” A click and whirr was heard as the medic took out a tricorder. Burke lay, sprawled on the ground. His eyes fluttered open, then closed.

“He’ll live,” the medic pronounced almost immediately. “But he’s weak and in a lot of pain...damn, he’s lucky he didn’t puncture a lung or anything...but he’ll have a sore back for weeks, and there appears to be three ribs broken. Mild concussion, too.” The doctor retrieved a hypospray, explaining to the pair as he loaded it. “Combination stimulant and regenerative chemical. Should bring him fully conscious and work on that concussion pretty quick. Either of you got some water?”

The Bolian handed over a canteen. “You with me, Commander?” the medic asked. Burke nodded weakly. “Good.” The medic put the canteen to his lips and poured out a small quantity. Half of it dribbled over Burke’s numb lips, the rest managing to squeeze down his swollen throat.

“I’d like to take him to the closest available hospital-“

“Negative,” Sanchez cut him off. “Mission approved airs only. We have to get the transmitter, and more importantly the shields up.”

“So where the hell am I supposed to take my patient?”

“We took the ACDSG...they must have a triage station there.”

Some of the battered Starfleet troops were already filing into the neat row of nearby *Avocets*. They'd lost nearly half taking out the Breen forces, and most of the remainder would be staying behind to repair the transmitter.

“Come on,” Sanchez said, slipping her wiry arms under Burke's left shoulder. The doctor and Rolly quickly stepped into assist, hauling the mountainous man to his feet.

“Thanks,” Burke managed to rasp.

“Not yet...we've got a long drive to go.”

Asian Continental Defense Shield Generator Asia

The hill shook under the assault of Breen heavy weaponry. They had a precise lock on it through the cloud cover, and were pounding its auxiliary shields mercilessly.

The base was essentially a sprawling, hollowed-out hill, secured with massive support columns, structural integrity fields, and careful engineering. The centerpiece was the massive shield generator, a huge cylindrical central pillar that swelled in large spheres, the projector housings. Far below, from Mikey's vantage point, were a trio of warp cores, which supplied the enormous power necessary for the generators. Currently, only one was operational.

He covered his ears as the last *Avocet* screamed in. They couldn't open the shields now to admit the rest, lest the disruptor blasts pierce the tones of earth over their heads and punch a hole through the base's armor. They were, quite effectively, pinned down.

He, Maro, and McBain caught an elevator down to the very lowest deck, which housed the warp core. The base was essentially open, with offices, storage and cargo bays, and other facilities built into the mountain side, and the space around the monstrous generators clear, other than the ringed decks that encroached slightly upon its territory.

Captain Hughes was at the center of the frantic activity. Oozing gel packs were disdainfully tossed, circuitry sizzled and sparked, and welders crackled with electric blue energy.

“Captain Hughes?” Mikey called.

He turned from watching the progress of the warp core. He was a middle-aged but deceptively solidly built man, with a handlebar moustache and stern demeanor. He stared at Mikey with his arms crossed. “Yes?”

“Is there any possible way we can let those *Avocets* in? They’re sitting ducks!”

“We could expand the auxiliary shield generator bubble, but the core supplying it is barely functional as is. We do have several escape tunnels, one with shuttle capacity. Our techs are readying it now...it hasn’t been used for a while, we’ll not sure how sound it is.”

“Did you appraise the dropships of this?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“Most of them were too busy dodging disruptor bolts to listen. Now, you’ve got some more techs for me?”

“And replacement parts,” Mikey replied with a nod.

“Good.” Hughes barked admonishments as a clumsy ensign nearly dropped a power converter on the floor.

“Chaos,” McBain muttered. A cascade of sparks tumbled lazily from a blown EPS converter two young crewmen were in the process of repairing.

Maro looked at a nearby screen. “If you think it’s bad in here, take a look outside...”

Golden Eagle 1, near ACDSG
Asia, Earth

Harper cursed as a flaming *Avocet* slammed into the wall on the other side, pitching ancient stones every which way. Dozens tumbled over the wall, slamming onto the front canopy and rolling across the ship with a clatter. The *Golden Eagle* bucked as a particularly heavy piece fell onto her back before sliding off.

“This weather is bloody hell,” he cursed sarcastically. “What do we have, Miss Jeffries?”

A trio of *Avocets* flew by in close formation, trailed by sizzling disruptor blasts.

“Four Breen fighters, ETA twelve seconds.”

“Tell me at eight.”

“Eight seconds,” she said, briefly afterwards.

The *Golden Eagle* rose instantly, just over the edge of the wall. Four ungainly specks rocketed towards her, not really noticing the silver blob cowering behind the wall.

“Fire!”

Pulse phaser blasts scythed through the air, forcibly tearing apart two fighters and showering the other two with shrapnel. Harper sent the *Golden Eagle* lurching to the left just as Jeffries popped off two Quantum torpedoes, which promptly smashed the remainders to pieces. Harper wiped a bit of sweat off his brow before noticing two more brown specks. His hands twitched, nudging the nose into firing position. Four more micro Quantum torpedoes extinguished the new opposition.

Harper ducked the craft down as more *Avocets* flitted overhead, followed by a few *Kestrels*. Some battered *Ospreys* came last, with no Breen ships in pursuit.

The base’s doors yawned open invitingly.

Captain’s Ready Room USS *Swiftsure*

Falco set the damage report down on the polished wood table, committing the distilled version to memory. Next came the dreaded casualty report. However, thanks to the quick nature of their mission, it had been blessedly light. No fatalities. Falco sighed contentedly and leaned back in his chair before the chime rang.

“Come in.”

Wallace entered, brandishing yet another padd to add to Falco’s small mountain. “Tactical readiness reports and evaluations,” he said stiffly, setting the padd neatly on Falco’s desk.

The captain nodded absently. “Receptions?”

“No orders as of yet. Command says final assignments will be delivered within the next two hours, though.”

Falco nodded again, more thoughtfully this time.

“Any idea of what they’ll contain?”

“Important tidings, no doubt.” The captain was silent for a few long moments. “I’ll need some time to look over these.”

“Of course,” Wallace replied. He promptly left, leaving the captain alone with his thoughts and troubles.

Asian Continental Defense Shield Generator Asia

“We’ve got to get to Singapore,” Mikey confided after the last of the surviving *Avocets* had entered the base successfully.

“The generator’s not working at full capacity yet,” Maro pointed out.

“It will be,” McBain argued. “They’ve got plenty of personnel and parts now, all they need is time.”

Mikey nodded. “These repairs should be going on at most of the generators by now. But without the shield control center to monitor things, they’re almost useless as a united planetary defense system.”

“Which, I take it, is in Singapore?” Maro asked. They were all clustered around a cargo crate, sitting on makeshift benches—torpedo casings.

“Correct.”

“What about the backup?” McBain asked above the din. “Would it be easier to get to?”

“It’s in the Alps, and, from what data I’ve got, it’s been blown to hell.”

Maro frowned, antennae drooping. “So what are we going to do, sir?”

Mikey laid a padd on the table. “Well, despite our losses,” he said, wincing, “we are securing the objective here, and we’ve got the transmitter.”

“Right.”

“We need to get to Singapore. We’ll take sixteen *Avocets*—”

“Sixteen?” McBain repeated incredulously.

“We’ll be bound to lose some on the way, best to take extras,” Mikey replied before continuing. “And a healthy contingent of *Kestrels*. A few *Ospreys* if we encounter problems in the air, to supplement the little birdies...but we can’t spare too many.”

“What about *Golden Eagles*? I suggest we take at least a few, you never know when you’ll need a bit of fire support.”

“Good point.” He hammered out the unit assignments, then handed the padd to McBain. “Get me some troops and as many engineers as Hughes will let you steal. Maro, warm up *Avocet 1* and scrape together fifteen more and as many *Kestrels* as possible.”

“What about you?”

“I’ve got a phone call to make.”

Asian Continental Defense Shield Generator Asia

“Easy, there...”

Burke lurched off the bed, shakily coming to his feet. “I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said, moving his supportive arm away from the bed. “Just a little woozy.”

The medic rolled his eyes.

A muscular lieutenant entered the area. “I need anyone fit for security duty with me!”

Burke immediately moved to leave, but the medic stopped him. “I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

“Do I have long term damage?”

“No.”

“Am I fully conscious?”

“Yes,” the Doctor reluctantly admitted. After a few moments of silence he sighed and handed Burke a stimulant and stern gaze. “Don’t overdo it.”

Burke nodded in gratitude moved off without further comment, struggling to catch up to McBain on wobbly legs. "Where are we going?"

"Singapore."

"Singapore?"

"The control center for the shield network is there. If this plan is to succeed, it's gotta go back it up."

"What can we expect in terms of resistance?" Burke paused alongside McBain at a cargo crate. Both withdrew a load of phasers.

"Unknown, I'd expect that when they see our course, they'll send units to intercept, probably a few dozen fighters. Ground forces are a complete question mark. With the blanket jamming and every shuttle that takes off getting pummeled to oblivion, no one is able to communicate."

"Limited intel, friendly rendezvous, expect air and urban warfare?"

McBain nodded and handed a rifle to one of his people.

"Sounds like fun."

Kestrel 7

Winnipeg, North America, near the NACDSG

"We're good for now," the base's commander announced to the fighter group leader. "In fact, if anything, your little birdies are attracting more attention to us. Unless they burn down the whole city to get at us, we can hide out. Besides, I'm sure they could use a little help somewhere else." The commander shrugged noncommittally.

The next words were lost in the din as a *Kestrel* streaked over Lemaire's grounded fighter.

The fighter group leader returned a few moments later, speaking to both the pilots who had landed and through a communicator. "All right, you heard him, saddle up. They've got a big op ready in Asia, and I think it's time we joined in the festivities."

Dropship A-1 Asia

"I told you this was going to be a wild ride," Maro admonished.

"Yes, well..." the craft lurched again, hurling him against the seat restraints. A flash of green light receded from the cabin, though the dazzling spots in Mikey's eyes were slower to leave.

Grassy hills, farmland, and pleasant little villages melted into a green and beige blur as the dropship sped to its destination, along with a bee's nest of other small Starfleet ships. Many already showed scorch marks and dings from previous encounters, as did their occupants.

Mikey peeked through the door into the hold. A sea of mustard-colored shoulders were pressed against the wall, Starfleet security and engineering personnel. Silvery rifles and tricorders glinted in the dim cabin light.

Mikey turned back to the main viewport, which was now dominated by a massive but gracefully constructed city.

"Welcome to Singapore," McBain said dryly, as the characteristic screech-thrum of Breen fighter engines rang through the air.

"Full throttle, go eva-" A gut-wrenching turn tore the words from Mikey's mouth, as Maro cut power to an engine and send the ship into a plunging spiral, instantly losing several hundred feet. As it swung about on its original heading, having avoided nearly half a dozen disruptor bolts in the process. She jolted power into the deactivated engine and sent the craft rocketing towards the city once more. Overhead, one of the *Avocets* was overwhelmed and exploded, while two *Ospreys* extracted revenge.

Mikey's stomach soured. McBain nervously called up the navigation instructions, prompting a large red box to be projected on the windshield. "There's our objective. ETA to city, two minutes, ETA to objective is six."

Maro said nothing as she swerved the ship around a torpedo. An unavoidable impact to the other pitched the craft to port. McBain snapped off a shot with one of the phaser arrays, but it was only a glancing blow, and failed to down the offending Breen craft.

"One forty five," the Scotsman announced, as a burning *Kestrel* and Breen fighter tumbled across the sky in front of them in a mesmerizing dance.

Maro jerked the ship around a trio of torpedoes, then hopped over a badly damaged Breen fighter that tried to ram them. "*Fadzpa!*" she cursed in

frustration as more disruptor bolts impacted the shields. Another *Kestrel* streaked in front of them, pursuing a pair of Breen fighters and slashing at both with pulse phaser blasts. More Breen fighters were descending from orbit like a cloud of locusts, obviously interested in halting the Starfleet troops from gaining their objective.

“Damn.”

Golden Eagle 1 **Near Singapore**

Harper gritted his teeth as the *Golden Eagle's* slow loop failed to shake the Breen fighter. Impact after impact plagued the aft shields. “Bloody hell! Jeffries, give me some help, here!”

“Aft phasers are down, shields practically gone...”

A loud explosion and resultant shockwave buffeted the ship. “What in blazes?”

“*Kestrel Seven* to *Golden Eagle One*...just returning the favor.” The smaller craft sidled up to her larger, damaged sister. “Looks like a few got through the shields.”

“We’ll be fine,” Harper said with a bit of a growl. “You get sent here as reinforcements?”

“Along with thirteen other *Kestrels*, yes.”

“Good, we could use some backup.” His sentence was loudly punctuated as a micro photon torpedo smashed into a descending Breen fighter. Its fragments hammered the ship’s shields.

Harper sent the craft into a lazy roll, Jeffries firing all the while. He momentarily lost site of his smaller comrade, but found him a few seconds later, on a dizzying chase with a Breen fighter. “Stay close, *Kestrel Seven*. There’s way more incoming, you’ll get your targets.”

“I copy,” the pilot replied, after a last, spiteful potshot at the Breen ship. The Starfleet craft looped around as the swarm descended...

Dropship A-1 Asia

The cityscape was in view now, all glistening spires and towers. Their needle like points seemed ready to impale the descending clouds of Breen fighters. *I wish*, Mikey thought.

They were above the suburbs now, smaller homes with verdant green lawns and a plethora of pools and gardens. The screeching engines of the small craft vibrated windows and caused a ruckus as dogs and alien pets began sounding off in alarm. A few seconds later, Maro dodged them around the first skyscraper.

“Four minutes,” McBain noted, slashing at a Breen fighter with the aft phaser array. It had slowed to better maneuver in the cityscape and been caught off guard by the blast.

Mikey looked nervously at the tactical display, and ordered the *Golden Eagles* to head up front at full speed. They weren't much use for dogfighting, and he might need them later. The *Ospreys* were holding their own, while the *Kestrels* were causing quite a stir, destroying or delaying many of the Breen fighters. Unfortunately, this holding action took them away from the speeding *Avocets*, who were chased by ever increasing numbers of Breen fighters. He had already lost two dropships.

Four Breen fighters plunged down from the heavens, disruptor cannons blazing. The green blasts peppered the dorsal shields and caused the ship to shudder and buck. McBain fired back, causing one to overreact during evasive maneuvers and slam into a towering commercial plaza. The remaining trio levels out and settled on their tail. Maro darted to port, then starboard, deftly dodging a pair of torpedoes. They sailed by on jets of acrid smoke and detonated on a massive residential building's side. Girders, glass, and a few mangled bodies rained down like a sinister thundercloud, showering the *Avocet* and her pursuers. One of the Breen ships was pushed down by a falling girder, and, temporarily losing control, slammed into a massive billboard display showing scenes from Risa.

Maro's antennae were curled tight against her silky white hair as she narrowly missed the gored residential building. A silvery reflection of the ship flashed by on the structure's windows, before they were shattered by haphazard volleys of disruptor fire.

The Andorian glanced at sensors as a huge silvery spire loomed before them, rapidly growing, though it seemed as if it couldn't get any bigger. With visible effort, she pulled the ship into a vertical climb, millimeters from the glassy wall. One Breen fighter didn't make it and slammed into the building, exploding in a jet of flame. The other remarkably followed the maneuver, and began pouring

disruptor fire, churning holes in the building and taking down the *Avocet's* aft shields. Maro added to the danger, twisting left and right and shards of glass and disruptor fire flew everywhere. Mikey held on to his seat, certain his death was imminent, but suddenly, for a single, timeless moment, both ships were gliding vertically in clear air.

The Breen fighter was absolutely impaled by a pair of micro Quantum torpedoes as the *Avocet* rejoined with a *Golden Eagle* and scattered flock of *Kestrels*.

"Two and a half," McBain noted, taking the moment to inhale deeply and reallocate power to the shields.

They each dived shallowly, entering the mess of skyscrapers again, though at a mildly less ludicrous speed. Before long, though, Maro had fed power into the afterburners, and the glistening spires were flashing by once again at speeds that which no sane person would have traveled through them.

Four Breen fighters emerged suddenly from a side street, weapons blazing. *Kestrels* moved off to intercept, but two were cut down almost immediately.

"Two minutes at present speed," McBain noted, before discouraging pursuit with a series of semi-random phaser blasts.

Mikey checked the tactical screen. Eleven *Avocets* remaining.

More fighters were arriving in the general vicinity by the second. The war zone had drifted directly over the city. Fighters were tumbling down, smashing into buildings and empty streets. Maro managed to steer them clear of the chaotic mess, coming perilously close to their objective...

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

It was disguised under a park, with massive blast doors holographically camouflaged as a grassy park and guarded by four utterly typical skyscrapers. However, they each contained numerous defensive emplacements, not to mention auxiliary shield generators.

"*Avocets* incoming! Breen too!" the transmission was rushed and loud.

"Keep the holo-flage up, but open the blast doors!"

"I copy." Invisible under the lovely park, the first set of massive metal doors yawned open.

“Estimate Breen fighters in twenty five seconds,” another voice notified the main control center.

“This is GDSG Control, we copy. Towers One to four, activate emplacements. Destroy any and all Breen forces approaching.”

Dropship A-1 Singapore

Maro veered around a stampeding Breen fighter in a frantic maneuver. McBain gave it a broadside with the starboard phaser, driving a deep gash into its hull. A pair of isomagnetic disintegrator rounds finished it off, hammering its ugly wing and cockpit. They were at a low enough altitude now that it was safe to open up the personnel gun port windows, and the troops inside were frantically firing with everything from cricket phasers to RPPG launchers, which, Mikey reflected as a round slammed into a nearby fighter and detonated it, Mitchell was wielding with surprising accuracy.

The ‘park’ was in view now, surrounded by a set of four bland towers common throughout much of the city. However, their special equipment was quite uncommon.

Their *Avocet* sailed through the gap between the nearest towers, trailed by three fighters.

Suddenly, the towers reverted from their ordinary appearance to sleeker, gray structures, each with myriad sensors on top and a massive Starfleet insignia, along with rows of offices and equipment...

Eight panels on each tower extended outwards horizontally, revealing rotating phaser array and torpedo launcher emplacements almost identical to those on Deep Space Nine. They immediately began firing.

Maro dodged the ship hard to port as screeching phaser blasts skewered the trailing fighters. Fiery photon torpedoes hounded the craft or simply pummeled them into oblivion, while *Kestrels* pursued and the remaining two *Golden Eagles* warded overhead, waiting to deliver well-time torpedo strikes.

Disruptor bolts from the thinning cloud of Breen fighters flew every which way, deflecting harmlessly off the defense towers’ shields but destroying more Federation fighters. A pack of four managed to send an *Avocet* crashing down under their concentrated fire before she expired in the wrath of phaser energy.

Their *Avocet* hovered in midair over the ‘park’, poised to dive.

“You’re sure that’s camouflage, lass?” McBain asked with a gulp.

“Only one way to find out,” she replied, flashing a weary smile. The *Avocet* dove, disappearing from sight.

Objective secure.

To Be Continued...