

Star Trek: The Breen War: "Alea lacta Est"
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Star Trek: The Breen War

PROLOGUE

"Most days Constitution City is my home and the single place I can find refuge from all things that haunt my life. Earth used to serve that purpose, but I can no more look upon that world with wanting eyes than I can expect its forgiveness."

"My soul has been damaged with the knowledge the Breen have raped my people's home planet and scarred it in such a way that I fear the recovery will last well beyond my life. I have trouble imagining the reasons for such actions and believe that if I try hard enough, I might fathom some motive for such a mistake."

"But in the end, I conclude that it was my mistake, and one in which I will pay any price, and bear any burden to correct." --Exert from the personal log of Admiral Jason Bailer.

Constitution City Observation Deck

In a massive open lounge that seemed as close to space as a person could get without feeling the pull of vacuum, Admiral Jason Bailer watched the last few ships of his fleet move into position.

He could imagine the anxiety pulsing through the crews of those ships because he felt it himself. He had long ago given up fighting on the front lines, for the more ulcer-ridden career of casting entire fleets into the fray. It still felt strange, juggling lives like toys to be played with; when he knew they were so much more. He couldn't spend all his time here soul searching through the rights and wrongs of a thousand decisions, because in the end the responsibility would still be his.

Admiral Bailer made his way to Command & Control, a dedicated hub of monitoring stations from which he could direct entire fleet operations.

While the station's Operations Center was several levels up and had its own crew that saw to the everyday operations, C&C was his to control. Massive viewscreens that stretched the height of entire walls displayed fleet statistics and overall ship positions. Other smaller monitors displayed countless other data, and as crews went about their business, he almost held up interrupting the flow of what seemed a carefully choreographed action.

There was little time to waste however.

"Open a channel and begin recording," he said.

A young lieutenant from answered from one of the dozen communications stations. "Channel open Admiral."

He stepped into the sensor platform imbedded within the floor and ceiling, allowing for the transmission of both audio and visual announcements.

Bailer stood before them all, the fleet waiting outside as well as the crew working in C&C, a confident leader. His shoulders broad and level carried his newly pressed uniform, as a perfect soldier should. He clasped his arms behind his back, clenched his square jaw, and narrowed his gaze to deliver the short message that had taken him the better part of an hour to write.

"To all ships, this is Admiral Bailer. Time is tight so I will be brief. Everyone wearing this uniform knows it's our duty to push the unknown. We explore the frontier and uphold the values and morals of the Federation, but today we are tasked with a duty far greater than either of those. No one joins Starfleet looking for the struggle of sustained conflict, but when the threats come knocking it's our duty to answer back. Today we're going to answer back, and by day's end the Breen will wish they had never stepped foot off their homeworld."

He paused for only a second to lower his head, before continuing.

Then looking forward again he continued. "We have difficult days ahead and the road to recovery will be a long one, but it begins at Earth. So for those we have already lost, we fight in their name and it begins now. Bailer out."

Looking up to the main viewer as the *Dauntless* began to pull away from the fleet, Bailer could only wish he was going with them. He knew that was impossible though and settled back into his chair to wait for the chaos to begin.

"Signal the fleet they are clear to depart," he said.

"Aye sir," the same lieutenant from earlier answered.

USS *Dauntless* Bridge

Admiral Martin stood in front of his console, as the viewscreen snapped back to an image of the fleet. Taking the reins, it was his turn now to address the fleet.

"Contact Captain Falco," Martin said, "and give him the go ahead order. Signal the rest of the fleet to move out on our lead."

"Aye sir," Captain Horace acknowledged from the center seat.

In tune with his crew, Captain Hoarce only needed to nod to his comm officer. "This is the *Dauntless* to the *Swiftsure*. You are clear to depart; engage when able. All other ships are to follow our lead."

The uniquely accented Caitian voice, laden with an ever-strong current of valor replied over the bridge speakers. "Understood. *Swiftsure* out."

The comm officer nodded a silent acknowledgement that the remaining ships had signaled they were ready.

"Helm," Captain Hoarce said continuing, "set your course for Earth. Make your speed warp one and execute when ready."

"Lets make this right," he said to no one in particular.

Pulling away from Constitution City, the *Dauntless* began the build up that would carry her to Earth. The massive ship disported subspace, stretching its smooth lines to cross the threshold, and leapt into warp. Moving in a carefully choreographed formation, the remaining ships followed suit and within a minute, the fleet was on its way...

Chapter One

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

In a hardened bunker, the control teams watched as the first of the *Avocet* class dropships burst through the holographic camouflage. Their emergency descents brought them into the massive corridor that led to the base's inner workings, and out of the weapons fire of the perusing Breen forces.

The defense towers continued to unleash their rain of fire upon the Breen vessels. Several Breen fighters attempted to dodge the fire and maneuver their way in to make kamikaze runs against the towers, but were pushed back before they even got close. The occasional disruptor blast or torpedo did manage to make it through, but those did little harm. So it was no surprise when the Breen called in their heavier guns.

From Earth orbit, green disruptor blasts cut through the atmosphere and impacted the towers. Each weapons emplacement had its own defensive shield generator, but they could not hope to hold out against the combined assault of the Breen forces in orbit.

As the *Avocets* made their way into the base, the support craft peeled off and headed back into the fight. Whole squadrons of *Golden Eagles*, *Kestrels*, and *Osprey's* sprayed weapons fire through the air. For the moment they were managing to stand toe to toe with the Breen, but they were still taking losses.

Standing by the end of her *Avocet*, Maro watched through the closing blast doors as a squadron of Breen fighters overwhelmed a pair of *Golden Eagle* craft. Her antennae slouched forward as she watched the destruction.

"Harper..." the words were barely a whisper, but weighed more than she could dare ever say. Harper was human and breaking the mating bonds of a group was beyond mere taboo on Andor, but that didn't mean the feelings went away. Life was funny that way.

A little ways off, Commander Mikey Bailer was getting reports and issuing orders when he realized his pilot had drifted off.

"Find the base Commander," Mikey said to an ensign he didn't know.

He stopped giving orders long enough to notice that Maro was fixated on the battle waging outside. She was a pilot, not a ground pounder, and Mikey knew that it was difficult to watch others fight while you were safe.

"Maro," he said stepping beside her.

"I had," she paused trying to find the word, "someone up there sir."

Commander Bailer looked down at the padd he had been given detailing the battle that still waged on. Some of the Federation's finest fought to hold back the Breen air support, and many of them had already died doing just that. Looking back to those soldiers he had brought here to defend the Control Center, he was sure many more would follow.

"We'll all lose a lot of *someone's* before this is over," he said not knowing who or how close her someone had been. He imagined that neither really mattered in the end. The loss still hurt just as much. "We can't stop now though."

Her antennae suddenly stood up, and her mood instantly changed. As if insulted she spat back, "Who said anything about stopping sir."

"Let's go."

Some ensign stood waiting for Mikey. "Commander Bailer, this is..."

"Colonel Mohammed," he said cutting her off. He was a grizzly man, looking like he had spent the past week fighting for his life, as he emerged from the control room. His Starfleet uniform was caked in a mess that Bailer didn't even want to guess about. In some places it was torn to the flesh, and farther.

"We were beginning to think you Starfleet boys had forgotten about us."

"Sorry for the delay," Mikey said as the troops began to unload, "we were held up." In the seriousness of the situation, the Colonel missed the Commander's attempt at humor.

"We've got parts and engineers."

"We're grateful for the help, but it's going to take more than that I'm afraid," said the Colonel.

"What do you mean sir?" asked Mikey.

"The subspace array," he said "that links our control systems to the network of shield generators was destroyed."

"So even if we get the individual generators on-line there's no way to coordinate their operation from this location."

"That's correct," the Colonel answered.

“You don’t have a back up?” Mikey asked, though he was pretty sure that if there were a backup, they likely wouldn’t be having this conversation.

“The array was spread out across most of Singapore so that the failure of no one subspace antenna would compromise the system. But the Breen have been bombarding the city for days and now the entire network has collapsed.”

“Can’t you jerry-rig a transmitter from inside the base?” he asked trying to think of alternatives.

“This facility is shielded against every known form of subspace data transmission to prevent interference of the shield matrix; you couldn’t transmit the network link through here then even if we wanted to.”

Mikey stepped away for a moment, frustrated by yet another set back.

“Bottom line,” Mikey said walking back to Mohammed. “What will it take to get operations back online?”

“We need a transmitter outside the mountain,” the Colonel answered.

“Then we have our work cut out for us.”

“I assume you have a plan,” Mohammed said.

Mikey looked around the cavern, trying to figure out how he was going to carry out the mission. He looked at his watch. The first wave of the Starfleet task force would be arriving soon, and if the planetary shields weren’t up by the time they arrived, the mission would fail.

Then he saw something that gave him an idea. Maro was leaving her Avocet, and although the dropships couldn’t transmit through the mountain anymore then some jerry-rigged antennae could, the Avocet could leave the mountain.

“Colonel, Mikey said with renewed spirit, it might be time to improvise.”

Mikey’s combadge snapped on. “*Commander.*”

He hit his combadge to respond. “Report.”

McBain’s voice crackled over the comm link. “The Breen’re on the move sir. A see at least a division advancing on our position.”

“We don’t have much time,” he said looking back at Maro.

USS *Dauntless* Bridge

Admiral Martin sat patiently, legs crossed and hands clasped, awaiting word of the first group's arrival at their destination. The trip from Alpha Centuari was not a terribly long one, but they were keeping a schedule, deliberately moving at low warp to allow the forward force time to move into position.

The strike teams already fighting on Earth were to have the planetary shield restored by a preset time, and if all went well, the fleet would arrive there soon after. It was that simple, and yet could go so completely wrong.

He didn't entirely like a plan that hinged so much on the actions of so few, but he had stopped worrying about it hours ago. Over analyzing the mission served no greater purpose other than to waste time.

When the sound came he would know it...

A sensor alarm suddenly sounded, and Martin snapped his head in the direction of Ops, waiting for the report.

The cool and emotionless tone of the *Dauntless*' Operations officer responded. "The first group is approaching their target Admiral."

"Still no signal from Earth?" he asked. Without looking at a chronometer he knew they were already behind schedule. It was if he had been counting the seconds in his head.

"No sir," Lieutenant S'pon answered. "However long-range sensors are detecting weapons fire directed towards Earth."

"Damn."

The first wave could not divert to Earth and hope to survive the forces they would meet, nor could the fleet simply all attack at once. The original plan had to be followed through to the end, no matter the cost. And with the Breen firing on earth, the cost would be high.

"We have to assume the shield is still down," Captain Horace said.

The Captain stood as a go between Admiral Martin and the bridge crew. He wasn't sure he liked him just standing there, but it didn't seem right to tell him to sit down. He eyed the captain strangely

"I take full responsibility captain," he said knowing what he meant.

“Understood sir,” the captain said backing down only in voice. Anyone that looked at him could have seen his dislike of the situation, but he followed his orders.

From that point forward, the blood of those that died on earth was on his hands alone.

USS *Swiftsure* Approaching Mars Bridge

The *Swiftsure* was leading a strike against the Breen forces holding Mars and the remains of Utopia Planitia. The strike was an attempt to draw as many ships away from Earth as possible, for when the Breen realized Starfleet was on the move, they would surely turn their weapons on Earth.

They only had to hold out long enough to allow the forces on Earth to get the shield up, after that the Breen would not be at earth for long.

In the *Swiftsure*'s center seat, Captain Mar'zief Falco waited for the minutes to tick by. He hated waiting for that first opening shot of the battle. It frayed his nerves and without fail he

The bridge felt strange with so many of his bridge crew absent, fighting other battles. He hoped they were ok, but knew their fight was not an easy one. A fact made ever more present by the fact the shield was still down.

He imagined it was better not to dwell on such things as worrying never solved anything.

“Status,” he said, just to break the silence.

Not far from his captain's side Wallace sighed in response, not even needing to pull up the information.

“Shields and weapons online across the board,” Wallace reported. “All systems read green, as they did when you asked five minutes ago.”

Falco straightened a little in the chair, uneasy at being so caught up in some routine. “Of course,” he said pausing for a breath, “If they send reinforcements from Earth we could find ourselves outnumbered in a hurry, so lets make our opening volley count Wallace.”

“Understood sir,” said Wallace, trying to ease his captain's worries.

Falco watched as Wallace went through the motions of implementing his suggestions. Wallace had already come to the same conclusions and taken the necessary steps to carry out such a tactical maneuver.

Falco deduced he was either not feeling the anxiety, or was better at hiding it. He settled back into his chair trying to relax a bit. He couldn't think of any other encouraging words of wisdom and solace or final orders of preparedness to pass on to his crew. They would have to rely on their training, because now all that was left now was to wait as the last few minutes ticked by.

USS *Alabama* Bridge

The *Alabama* cruised just behind the lead, dwarfed by the massive shadow of the *Swiftsure*. Captain Jacob Harkness held the center seat patiently waiting for the word to go.

The helmsman turned from her station. "We'll enter the Sol system in just under two minutes captain."

"Hail the *Swiftsure*," he said. Living in the moment, his mind was focused on the task at hand and little else.

The view screen snapped on to show the bridge of the *Sovereign* class starship, centered on her captain. He looked on edge, not so much nervous as bothered by the wait for the fight to start. Harkness could relate.

"Once more unto the breach old friend," Harkness jested, hoping to break his friends mood.

"You were always one for the dramatic," Falco chided.

"I seem to recall you making your fare share of dramatic speeches when you first took command. Each one more over the top then the one before it."

"That was before I learned better. I assume your ready."

"Are you kidding," Harkness said. "I was born ready."

"Then lets see if we can't stir up some mischief."

"We'll follow your lead," Harkness said ready to close the channel.

"Isn't that how it always is," he said almost laughing. "Falco out."

The image of his friend winked out and was replaced by the all too familiar tactical display. He watched the fleet close in on the target, as the *Alabama* moved closer to the *Swiftsure*, closing in formation for the opening volley.

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

Twenty minutes later, Mikey's plan was beginning to come together. The Avocets that had carried the soldiers into the compound were now preparing to act as a barricade between the Breen ground forces and the open door. Just inside the door, was an Avocet with a hard line optical cable link to the control center that would transmit the data link to the Avocet Maro would be flying.

It was a crude means to an end, but it was perhaps there best shot.

"I've got all the optical cable they can spare," said an engineer carrying a bundle of the cable, "but I'm not sure it's going to be enough."

"Ask..."

"That's not enough," Mohammed said, running from the station. He was determined the plan would never work and was certain that such an attempt would waste both lives resources. They had all stopped listening.

Mikey didn't even look up to acknowledge his complaints. "Maro, get ready to move."

"Aye sir," she said. The Andorian had been getting ready for the last twenty minutes, but he just wanted to make sure everything was set.

"Good luck lass," McBain called out from under some piece of equipment.

"Thanks," she called back, climbing into the pilot's seat of the Avocet. The engineers were still going over most of the systems, trying to tweak the systems to give her every opportunity possible.

"Because we'll be transmitting such a large amount of data," one of them said stepping up beside her, "the range of your antennae is going to be severely limited."

"How limited?" she asked.

"Twenty thousand kilometers," He explained. "If you go outside that range, the link will be broken and the matrix will collapse. We'll have to start all over."

"How long do you need?"

"Thirty minutes. After the initial link is established, the transmitters we're setting up outside should be able to handle it."

"You'll get your thirty-minutes, she said. "Anyone not going had better get off."

"No heroics out there," Mikey said standing by the open hatch. He knew that if he were in her shoes, hurting the Breen as much as possible would be foremost on his mind. "You want payback for those friends you lost up there. Then you make sure there sacrifice of getting us here in one piece wasn't for nothing. You link up with your escorts and fly defensive only. Understood?"

"Perfectly sir." She closed the hatch and started the final flight checks.

"This is never going to work," Mohammed said running around the corridor. He had been complaining for the better part of an hour and it was beginning to get on Mikey's nerves. He figured Mohammed had seen the worst of it, and was so far gone that he couldn't imagine starfleet pulling out a win.

"It has to," someone said working from another station.

"This is all assuming you can hold the breach," he said, continuing to complain.

Finally having all he could take, Mikey intended to shut him up. "There's no assumption here," Mikey said grabbing him up against the wall. "We have to hold the breach or the mission fails. So either help us set up the transmitter or get back to the Control Center."

He didn't say anything else, turned sharply and left for the control center.

Mikey's plan was daring, if not ripe with the possibility of failure. Using the subspace transmitters of an Avocet as a network uplink, with a hard line back to the command center could very well solve their problems. That was assuming they could keep the Avocet from getting blown apart.

The Breen were still sending an impressive amount of resources their way, and Mikey was sure the fight was going to be fierce.

As Maro moved her Avocet into position, McBain stepped to Bailers side.

"Permission to speak freely sir?" asked the young lieutenant.

"Granted."

"You shouldn't be here sir," McBain said. "Our chances will be better if you go with Maro."

He looked over his shoulder to see who was nearby. "Our top priority should be to hold this base."

"I agree, and that can best be accomplished if you go with Maro. That shield has to be brought back online and while she's a hell of a pilot, she can't handle the engineering controls and the helm simultaneously. She'll need your skills sir."

Mikey was afraid she was going to need more than that, but realized that McBain was correct. Maro would need an extra set of hands.

"McBain, you're in command here till I return."

"I'll be here when you get back sir."

"Good luck," Mikey said shaking his hand.

"Aye, to us both."

Mikey relinquished his rifle, then left for the Avocet.

"Lieutenant," a noncom said holding up a pair of high-powered binoculars for him to look through.

"They're persistent aren't they?"

"Yes sir."

"What do you say we give them a proper welcome? Heat'em up."

As the line began to form up, McBain looked back Maro's *Avocet* still sitting in the corridor.

Chapter Two

USS *Dauntless* Bridge

On the bridge of the *Dauntless*, Admiral Martin had stopped pacing once the crew had begun following his stalking with a trance like observance. He had stayed a short time in his office, walked around the bridge, and through the observation lounge to see the fleet still trailing behind them. On any other day such a sight of Starfleet's combined strength, might have been cause for awe or even celebration, but at that moment it wasn't that simple.

Having looked out over the fleet, Martin knew that quite a few people were going to die today, and that was no reason to celebrate.

That was something that had bothered him about the war with Dominion. Starfleet had become too nonchalant in their fight against the Jem'Hadar and it carried over into the fight against their allies. There was a sense that because the Jem'Hadar were genetically engineered, it made them somehow less than sentient beings, and that made it ok to wipe them without any thought at taking so many lives.

It carried over to the Cardassians and the Breen and would resurface now because they had damaged the Federation like no one had before. So in that excuse, Starfleet would not stop till every Breen soldier had been forced back to their homeworld, and he feared it would not stop even then.

Martin hoped the Federation did not follow Starfleets lead, but knew such things were perhaps beyond anyone's control.

Martin jumped at the sound of the sensor alarm.

"Sir, we've got movement," the lieutenant reported from ops.

"Lets see it," he snapped.

The view screen switched from the tactical display of the sol system and moved to focus on the Breen vessels deployed across the outer boundaries of the system.

"It appears the Breen fleet is breaking formation," Koloudi said. "The bulk is holding at Earth, but a significant force is taking the bait."

"Numbers," Martin said wanting exact figures.

The officer at ops answered. "It's a sixty-forty split."

"It'll have to do," he said

"We should move now," said Koloudi.

"No. If we leave too soon it will tip our hand and the Breen could turn on Earth. We have to wait."

"Aye sir."

He continued to watch the tactical display, cringing, as another starfleet vessel was lost. Many more Breen ships were falling, but they were taking their toll on the Starfleet forces. They would have to hold out a little longer.

"Falco will hold them together," he said as an afterthought. *Or die trying.*

**Global Defense Shield Generator Control
Main Corridor
Avocet-1**

The Avocet's impulse engines thundered to life as Maro sped through the last of the preflight checks. She took the second to strap herself into the seat before a voice rang through the comm system.

"If you're going, it's got to be now," McBain's voice echoed through the cabin.

"I'm going," she said then clicked off the comm channel

She stopped for just a moment. Through the forward canopy she could see engineers and soldiers running to their assigned positions. She wondered how much safer it would be here in the corridor than up in the air. Maybe there wasn't much of a difference.

"This has to work," she said quietly. "It's going to work."

She suddenly twitched when she realized someone was behind her.

"If you've come to see me off sir," she said turning back to the helm console, "I don't have the time."

"I'm coming with you," he said moving to the copilot's seat and beginning to bring up an engineering display.

"Sir..."

“You’re going to have your hands full keeping this bird in one piece and someone needs to be at the engineering controls to monitor the subspace transmitter.”

“Sir I don’t...”

“We don’t have time to argue,” he said ending the debate. “Now lets get on with it.”

“Aye sir,” she said.

“This is Avocet-1 standing by for departure,” Mikey said over the comm.

“We’re opening the doors in thirty seconds,” someone responded. “Standby.”

“I’m glad you’re here sir,” she finally said.

Mikey wasn’t so sure he could agree.

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

When the doors opened, the Breen ground forces began firing wildly into the corridor. The weapons fire created a strange distortion as it passed through the holographic camouflage that made it difficult to see through. When McBain finally became irritated with the thing he ordered it switched off and the Control Center was finally completely exposed to the Breen forces.

That was after he watched the Avocet burst out of the base and into the sky however. It quickly paired up with half a dozen other ships and began a complex series of maneuvers around the city.

“Be safe,” he whispered as they headed out of sight and beyond his control. There was only one thing he had to focus on now; hold the corridor. And he was sure it would take all his efforts.

Once the Avocet was out of range of the ground forces the Breen turned their attention back to the Control Center. They were still out of weapons range but closing fast.

McBain wanted the first shot, but knew Starfleet didn’t fire first. Never start a fight, but always finish it, the saying went; so it was good thing the fight was already on. Standing by his men, weapon at the ready, he wasn’t about to wait.

“Fire!”

The line of Starfleet soldiers unleashed the full wrath of their weapons, which began dropping Breen soldiers faster than they could target one and fire. There were simply too many of them to miss.

Still more advanced towards the line.

Weapons fire flew in every direction, striking soldiers on both sides of the fight. When a man on the side of Starfleet fell, there were few to take his place so the others did what they could to pick up the slack. When a soldier on the side of the Breen fell, another fighter stepped forward as if there was some endless supply.

Behind and slightly above the Starfleet line were phaser cannon emplacements. Gunnery crews manned the heavy weapons, which fired widebeam blasts that cut entire swatches deep into the line of advancing Breen soldiers. Despite their losses, they still pressed forward.

USS *Swiftsure* Bridge

The bridge of the *Swiftsure* rocked as the ship continued to take weapons fire from multiple directions. Falco was certain the Breen were fighting harder now than they had when originally taking the planet. It was not their planet. It was not Falco's planet either, but it was a symbol of everything the Federation stood for—everything they would give their lives to protect, and that made it more than just some capital. It was for that very reason the Breen were fighting like madmen to destroy it, and why Starfleet would risk everything to get it back.

“Report.”

Ithacan responded from ops, “We’ve got a hull breach on deck twelve and a dozen micro fractures. Emergency forcefields are holding the breach but won’t last much longer.”

“Evacuate the affected areas and seal them off. Increase power to the Structural integrity field to hold the fractures in check.”

“Aye sir.”

“Wallace?”

“Shields and phasers are stressed, but holding. Auxiliary power is tied in. Torpedoes are running low and main power is fluctuating.”

“Save whatever quantum’s you have left,” Falco said, “we’ll need them later.”

“Aye,” said Wallace.

Falco turned back ahead in time to see a stunning display of fire and debris ripple across the forward shields.

A *Defiant* class ship whose name he couldn't make out sailed through the debris. To avoid the collision, the ship spun over the *Swiftsure's* forward hull in a maneuver that only an escort of that size could manage and broke away back towards the fight.

He made a mental note to thank her captain later, but as he watched the ship move off, three more frigates closed in on her.

“Wallace!”

“I see them,” he said.

Wallace moved with lightning fast reflexes, but try as he might, he was too late. The three destroyers closed in on the *Defiant*, concentrated their fire on the single target and overwhelmed the ships already weakened defenses. The hull cracked, tore apart, and let forth the destruction of an exploding warp core.

They were gone.

“Get them!” Falco nearly screamed. He had ever been one to let a debt go unpaid.

He didn't have to give any other orders. His helm officer closed the gap and Wallace picked them off. The first took several shots; weakened under the strain then exploded as did the second, but the third was not so easy.

With the *Swiftsure* bearing down on the remaining frigate, the ship pulled up and slowed to a near stop in the *Swiftsure's* path. From his tactical station, Wallace used every ounce of talent and resource available to dispatch the ship.

“Evasive!” It was too late.

The ship exploded only meters from the *Swiftsure's* bow.

The explosion sent the ship reeling off course, and the bridge crew to the deck. The damage was not bad, but the impact had been closer than Falco would have liked.

“Whose crazy idea was this?” Wallace yelled as another station blew. This time it was ops. The helmsman ducked for cover as the sparks fired, and Falco

thought it was his voice he heard through the destruction calling for a medical team.

“Hold your stations,” Falco said rushing to the side of his fallen officer. He needed everyone else doing their jobs.

Ithacan lay on the floor. The Coridian was dead.

USS *Alabama* Bridge

The *Alabama* was completing an attack run against a pair of frigates when the *Swiftsure* was hit.

“Captain, the *Swiftsure* has taken serious damage.”

“Get us within weapons range,” Harkness nearly yelled.

The helmsman responded. “I’m already on it.”

The *Swiftsure* had begun to drift, and as the Breen frigates closed in to finish her off, it seemed as if her fate was sure.

Harkness only smiled.

“We’re nearly there,” his tactical officer reported.

“Make them pay lieutenant.”

“Aye.”

The *Alabama* was not a warship like her larger Sovereign class cousin, but in the circumstance of the day, she had been refitted with sharper teeth. Her captain was more than able to put them to good use.

“Now!”

As the *Alabama* began to fire, the *Swiftsure* lurched forward under new steam. They had been playing dead.

The *Swiftsure* picked herself and together the two ships fought back the Breen forces, if only for a minute.

“Hail them,” Harkness ordered.

Avocet -1 Somewhere over Asia

Mikey had fooled himself into thinking he could handle the ride; he couldn't. To say Maro was an exceptional pilot was an understatement of the highest caliber, and one that he now regretted making. He thought he could handle it, compared to their first trip, but as his stomach churned and seemed to leap into his throat, he was surely mistaken.

The ride from the *Swiftsure* to Earth's surface had been nothing compared to this however. With the style and skill that she possessed, Maro was executing maneuvers that Mikey was sure should have caused them to fall from the sky. However such an accident never occurred.

It was apparent now though that the Breen had somehow figured out what they were up to and had switched their focus accordingly. The entire force of Breen air support was now focused on downing the one single Avocet.

A fact made ever more real by the glancing weapons fire they continued to take. "Watch it!" he yelled as they narrowly dodged another volley of torpedoes.

"With all due respect sir," Maro said while trying to keep them alive, "stop helping!"

Perhaps that would be best Mikey thought.

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

There was an eerie silence that crept through the base. The Breen had backed off, and McBain feared it was not to recoup their losses. Whatever the reason, he was glad for the moment though.

They were having trouble getting the Avocet's subspace transmitter to interface with the shield control matrix. The matrix simply required too much bandwidth for the transmitter to handle.

One of the towers had fallen, and the remaining three were beginning to take serious damage and would fall in the next wave. Whether the shields were restored or not, they could not allow the Breen to capture the Control center. Because if the Breen succeeded where the Starfleet had failed, they would not see Earth liberated any time soon.

"The charge is set and primed," McBain said to the four officers who had volunteered to command the final post. The last point at which they could let the Breen advance before bringing down the corridor so that no one could come or go.

"If they get past this door, we've lost. That means it's up to the last man to blow the final charge. No hesitation, no waiting for reinforcements. Burn the wick and let her rip." McBain looked over them, and saw grim determination in their faces. Determination that hadn't been there before.

"Understood?"

"Yes sir," they all confirmed in unison.

He hoped he was not seeing them for the last time, but knew he couldn't dwell on that possibility.

McBain hit his combadge, "Status."

"The link is still good," someone from the control center answered.

"How long?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Here they come," Warren said from the front. They had already moved the line back several meters and were on the verge of crossing the point of no return. Once past that point, it was all or nothing.

"Sir, you better make it quick," he said to no one in particular.

"Lieutenant!" Warren yelled pointing down field.

Three Breen hover tanks lumbered over the terrain, lining up a shot on the open doors. They were massive beasts that mimicked the asymmetrical form of all Breen designs. His hope suddenly crashed, but was not lost.

From somewhere in the clouds, an unseen ally opened fire towards the approaching heavy armor.

The third tank bringing up the rear turned to fire on the approaching ship.

The other two lined up on the doors and fired.

USS Swiftsure Bridge

“On screen,” Falco ordered standing to answer the *Alabama's* hail.

The viewscreen snapped on to show the bridge of the *Alabama*, Captain Jacob Harkness seeming as calm as ever.

“One of these days,” Harkness said, “I’m going to ask you to save me for a change.”

“When that day comes, I’ll gladly repay the favor. What’s your status?”

“Shaken, but holding.”

“Thanks for the help.”

“You looked as though you needed it old friend. *Alabama* out.”

Falco went back to the center seat.

“Get Admiral Martin on the line.”

“Channel open,” some ensign replied. A good portion of the bridge crew now consisted of relief officers, taking the place of injured crew.

“Any time you want to show up admiral, would be fine by us.”

“Hold them off another minute, and we’ll be there.”

“I’m holding you to that estimate sir.”

Chapter Three

Avocet –1 Somewhere over Asia

It had been nearly ten minutes since either Maro or Mikey had seen another Starfleet craft. Their sensor displays showed that several Golden Eagles were still in the fight, but they were so occupied with their own survival, that they could offer no help.

The Breen however were far from finished, and it was taking everything Maro could muster to keep them in one piece.

“We’re coming up on thirty minutes,” Mikey said.

“Good,” Maro said, “‘cause our starboard impulse engines are down, I’m losing thruster control, and we coming up on the ground pretty fast.”

“Are we going to make it?” she asked.

“It’s going to be close,” Mikey, answered. “The uplink’s nearly online. I only need another three minutes.”

She didn’t answer.

Through the forward canopy, the ground rushed towards them with increased pace. The forest below them would slow the Avocet’s decent, but not by much.

Mikey yelled when he saw the green light signaling the data link was online.

“Maro!”

She still didn’t answer. When he turned to her, Maro’s hands were moving across the helm so fast and with such accuracy that it looked as if she had always known how to pilot the craft. Like perhaps the skill she had spent years perfecting was as easy for her as breathing for everyone else.

He had never seen such determination. It was amazing.

He didn’t dare interrupt, and when she yelled ‘*hold on,*’ Mikey did as instructed. Tightening the harness, he stole a last glance out the forward canopy. *At least it’s not the ocean.* Then everything went black.

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

Outside the Control Center, the Breen had begun their final thrust forward. As he moved to return fire, he could see his friends and comrades around him. Some returned fire, keeping pace with his own efforts, while others fell to weapons fire.

In an instant that seemed increasingly longer, he turned to look back to the four souls he had left as the last line of defense, and knew that the distance between them and the approaching death was drawing ever closer.

He saw the fear in their eyes, and saw the weight of decision he had placed on their shoulders and knew instantly that it was not their decision to make. He couldn't leave them there, and left his position to make it right. But something stopped him.

"Sir, we've lost contact with Commander Bailer."

"Understood."

He headed towards the last line of defense.

Inside the compound there was little more they could do than sit and wait. McBain had drafted everyone not needed to run the shields once they were restored, and put them to work holding back the Breen. But it seemed as if it might not be enough. The Breen were pushing harder now, and while the Starfleet ground forces were making them pay for every meter of advancement, they were still making headway.

"It's remarkable," Colonel Mohammed said as he watched with the other officers as Starfleet gave it there all in defense of the line.

"Colonel, the line is beginning to break. The Breen are going to push through."

Before he could answer, if he had even been able to muster a thought of some kind of action that might have saved them, a massive explosion suddenly rocked the entire compound.

"What was that?"

"They blew the corridor," the Colonel answered

"It's over."

"Not yet!" someone else yelled

A whole column of consoles suddenly came to life, reporting shield strengths and other various statistics.

“The uplink is online! We’re receiving data from all shield stations but three.”

“That’s more than enough to run the system. Start the calibration cycle. It’s our turn to save the day.”

“Aye sir.”

An ensign approached the Colonel, carrying a padd.

“Sir, we’ve lost contact with commander Bailer’s Avocet,” she said handing him the padd.

“Mark their last known position,” Mohammed said. “We’ll send someone as soon as it’s clear.”

“Aye sir.”

Mohammed hadn’t thought it could be done, but somehow they had managed to pull it off after all. He would make sure their sacrifice was not in vain. He could see from the sensor report that Breen forces were still coming the area, so he held out little hope they had survived the crash.

Outside the compound Starfleet reinforcements were beginning to arrive at the control center to help hold back the Breen. The fighting continued, as fierce as it had ever been, but progress was being made.

A loud thunder like sonic boom echoed through the sky and as the remaining Breen ships in orbit continued to fire upon the surface, the destruction was held back.

“Is that what I think it is?” someone asked.

“They did it!” someone yelled over the comm.

When an Avocet finally landed with an officer ranking higher than ensign, the soldiers perked up some.

“Whose in charge here?” the Commander asked.

“Lieutenant McBain was in command,” an ensign answered. “However he is no longer in radio contact.”

“Make every effort to find him Lieutenant,” he said to a man standing to his left.

The Commander looked around at the soldiers left, and without thinking of what they had just been through, started barking orders.

USS *Swiftsure* Bridge

The *Swiftsure* pushed on, taking every opportunity to inflict as much death and destruction on the Breen as possible.

As the *Swiftsure* moved through the debris of another battlecruiser, and without a second thought headed towards the next opponent, Falco came to realize something strange was happening.

They were not fighting to simply beat the Breen and force them off Earth and out of the Sol system. They were fighting to hurt the Breen as much as they had hurt the Federation. He was sure history would remember the battle as something else, perhaps painting it in one of those victorious flukes that just seemed to fall into place.

He knew otherwise however, for in that moment the fight was nothing but savage revenge and he could feel the hate in air. He realized that hate might carry them through the battle but it was not something he wanted to see on any regular basis.

This was going to change them all.

The ship suddenly rocked more violently. They were beginning to take damage.

Issuing orders to multiple people, he had stopped bothering to wait for the crew's confirmation before moving on. There just wasn't time to waste.

"Follow those destroyers through the mess and try to get some of those cruisers off our backside."

Wallace didn't respond, immersed in the action of trying to keep them all alive. His hands floated over the controls with the same grace and precision of any trained musician Falco had ever seen.

"We've got a pack coming in," the replacement ops officer reported. "Four frigates on an intercept course."

"Concentrate weapons fire ahead and signal the *Alabama* to cover our port flank."

The *Swiftsure* changed course, firing wildly as she headed towards the Breen frigates. Another ship suddenly appeared in front of them, a starfleet cruiser that had been hit hard and was careening out of control. Falco could not make out the name of, but in the short time he had to react it didn't really matter.

"Helm!"

The helmsman didn't answer...

USS *Alabama* Bridge

The *Alabama* twisted and turned in maneuvers that her larger counterparts couldn't hope to match. It was her saving grace, as the big cruisers had the firepower to simply push their way through a jam, the smaller more nimble and lightly armed *Nova* class ship moved with deliberate intent.

Harkness moved his ship into position, hitting the targets that the *Swiftsure* missed or failed to destroy.

"If anything hits that ship I swear you're fired."

"I'll do my best," Jackson replied.

"Do better," Harkness countered.

The four frigates broke formation, in what seemed to be a move to head away from the *Swiftsure*, but quickly changed course moving back in to point blank range. The four ships converged on their target on all four sides, firing incessantly

What the Breen hadn't seen was the *Alabama* moving to break their ranks. Pushing through, the ship emerged right where Falco expected her to and unleashed a torrent of phaser and torpedo fire that cut down the remaining Breen ships.

For the most part the plan had worked, but not before the remaining frigate managed to fire one last, brutal barrage.

"The *Swiftsure* has taken severe damage sir," said Jackson.

"Dear God..." said Harkness.

USS Swiftsure Bridge

If he had not been able to draw a breath, Falco might have thought the Swiftsure's bridge had taken a direct hit. That was not the case however. It was only another close call he could add to the list of hundreds of other close calls he had managed to live through in his career in starfleet. Realizing however that his bridge had not been exposed to space didn't make it feel much better though.

The emergency lights began to flicker on, as the main systems shorted out from damage, and in the background, he could here a variety of other emergency systems beginning to switch on and take the place of their primary counterparts.

Falco picked himself up off the floor, cringed from the pain of his burnt skin and fur and turned to see the cause of the explosion that had knocked him over. What he saw hurt more then his own injuries.

"Medical team to the bridge," he said hitting his combadge. "Priority one!"

Moving to his Wallace's side, there was already an ensign with an open med-kit assessing his wounds. "Hold on Ian, the medics are on the way."

The explosion had thrown Wallace to the floor, had caught him square in the chest, but not before it blew through his hands.

"It looks worse then it is," the Scot mumbled through the pain.

Falco looked to where an ensign was holding a compress on the wound where Wallace's left hand should have been. He wasn't sure he bought his friends tough guy bravado, but knew he shouldn't say anything about it either.

"Where is the damn medical team?" he yelled.

A Jeffries tube hatch in the floor of the bridge suddenly flew open, and two medics crawled out. They were drenched with sweat, no doubt from the climb, and both wore splotches of blood across their uniforms. He didn't want to think about what they had been through.

"Turbo lifts are down sir," they explained

"Get on with it," he said, ignoring their excuse.

Falco wanted to stop, wanted to get his crew the help they needed but he couldn't sideline the strength of a sovereign class cruiser just because his feelings were hurt.

“Captain!” someone yelled. It was hard to make out anyone through the smoke. “The planetary defense shields are back online sir.”

“Keep going,” Wallace said as drifted back and forth between consciousnesses.

Falco left to let the medics do their job, because he had to do his. “We have to push on. Get this smoke cleared out of here and find us something to shoot with.

“Helm, get us back into the fight.”

Global Defense Shield Generator Control Singapore

A cheer rang through the assembled defenders. Those that were left were battered and beaten, stressed and worn, and they were alive. But they were hardly finished. In an instant, they then turned from soldiers to excavators, trying desperately to dig through the rubble of the collapsed main corridor to find those if any that had survived.

While the rubble was being cleared, the news good and bad was spreading like wild fire. The officers and engineers from inside the compound, once making their way through the emergency access points, rolled up their sleeves and began digging right along side the noncoms.

Working in teams, the strongest labored through the debris while the others scanned for survivors. Every so often a faint life sign would turn up and the lucky soul would be pulled from the rubble, but more often they were not so fortunate.

He was giving it his all with a team close to finding their ninth body, when he heard someone yell, “*Colonel Mohammed!*”

He turned back to see them dragging someone from under a pile of rocks and paneling. Medics were rushing towards them and out of some guilty sense to thank the man; he rushed towards them as well. When he reached them, his face lit up with realizing that the stubborn man just wouldn’t die.

“Lieutenant McBain,” Colonel Mohammed said, clasping his shoulder as the medics prepared to take him out on a stretcher. “I’m glad to see you in one piece. It’s quite a job you pulled off here.”

“I can’t take the credit sir,” he said in a crackling voice. He paused for a minute, looking at the other stretchers, some with injured personnel, and others covered by blankets.

“Any idea yet how many?” McBain asked, seeing there were more stretchers than he could count, without getting a headache

“No. But no matter the number,” the Colonel said, “It’s still too many.”

“Aye.” He could think of no other words to do them justice. Perhaps later when his mind had cleared and his thoughts wondered between why they had died while others lived he might find some choice words to honor their sacrifice. But for that moment the only company for the dead was silence.

“Any word on Commander Bailer and Lieutenant Maro?” McBain asked.

"Here sir," said Mikey, saluting lackadaisically.

“McBain!” Maro called out running to the young Lieutenant's side. The injured man nearly jumped from the stretcher to get up.

“Take it easy,” Mikey said reaching them a few seconds later.

“When they told me they had lost track of your Avocet...”

“It takes more than a few hundred Breen to get rid of us lieutenant,” Mikey said still reeling from the adrenalin. He felt good. Maybe better than he had since joining the *Swiftsure*. He was excited to see the friends he had helped lead through this crisis, and was glad to be standing among them.

“I’ll remember that sir,” McBain said slapping him on the shoulder.

Mikey lurched forward, from the force and McBain began to laugh harder.

Mikey was proud of them, partially for believing in him and following his lead, but mainly for getting the job done. The few Breen ships in orbit were still taking pot shots at the shield, but they were no longer any threat.

“Commander.” McBain shook his hand, holding his other arm up to it keep from falling.

“Think we’ll get any medals for this?” Maro asked.

“Are you kidding,” he said suddenly getting very serious.

McBain expression of delight suddenly sobered.

“When they read my after action report,” he said suddenly cracking another smile, “they’ll be handing out medals by the...”

The sound of disruptor fire cut through the air, and everyone hit the deck, almost everyone. Mikey lurched forward, a smoking wound scared his chest. He sunk to his knees, fell forward and was gone before he hit the ground.

USS *Dauntless* Bridge

With Earth's planetary defenses restored, Starfleet was beginning to press their advantage. It was only a matter of time now before the Breen were finished. Martin knew it; they knew it. But even in the face of certain defeat, they were still fighting. Their attack on earth, while devastating to moral and daring in its execution would ultimately fail and garner the Breen no real tactical advantage. They were now fighting simply to hurt Starfleet and the Federation, only to prove that such an act was possible.

"Admiral, Captain, the Breen formation is beginning to break!" shouted Shen Yu. The tactical officer held back no pleasure in reporting the news. The battle was turning and it was time to push their way home.

"I see it," Martin said looking at the tactical display. "Admiral Martin to the fleet. Form up. We're going through."

"Helm, show us the way," said Horace. "Tactical, clear us a path."

"Aye sir," the two officers said, replying in unison.

The *Dauntless* turned sharply, changing course to head for the line of Breen ships. They had one last chance to push through, and Martin and Horace were damn sure they were going to make it.

Not far off, the *Swiftsure* broke from its chase of a cluster of battlecruisers and headed for the rendezvous, firing at targets as they presented themselves. The *Alabama* followed suit, and as the three ships came into formation with the *Dauntless* on the lead, the fight began to turn.

Other ships joined their charge and together the fleet pushed forward with a new determination, hopeful again that their will alone could overcome any obstacles that lay before them, and that their fight would prove victorious.

Chapter Four

USS Swiftsure Main Shuttlebay

The solemn reverberation of the choreographed observance had come to pass in the years following of the Dominion war. It was strange to think that until then, there existed no protocol for an official Starfleet memorial service to honor those that had given their life in the Federation's defense. In the past, each command had been allowed to conduct a memorial service as they saw fit. While that practice still commonly occurred, it was decided that when the loss of life was so great that Starfleet was as a whole effected in some way, there was need for an official authority to act as director of the event.

The memorial service borrowed heavily from Earth military traditions in that because Starfleet and the Federation encompassed so many diverse cultures, no one ceremony could include every custom that might be required. So it was decided that any event that took place would honor first the service to Starfleet and the Federation, and second that of the life.

Once appropriately assembled, the spectacle began with a reading of the names and rank of the fallen. The sacrifices they had made and the deeds that would be done in their name; all spoken under the careful determination of barely hidden graceful vengeance.

It continued with the eulogy from friends and comrades, all dressed in dress uniform of course. Starfleet was nothing if not strict in its adherence to dress code. The whole thing was more pomp and circumstance than anything, a spectacle of carefully planned attempts at jumpstarting the healing process. As if death and life were such easy things to manipulate as an on/off switch.

The hollow echo of the honor guard thundered across the deck as the stone-faced warriors marched into position.

Captain Mar'zief Falco sat, following the proceedings with only passing attention. The bay was crowded, mainly with crew from the Swiftsure, but others were present as well. Officers and crew from other ships, the marines that had fought on the surface, and even members of the Federation Council on Alpha Centauri had chosen to attend.

Everyone there knew someone that had died, and all equally distraught.

To his left, Lieutenant Commander Kentar Tokhis sat nervously waiting for the proceedings to be over. She was somewhere else, pacing through her thoughts maybe and lost in her own mind. It was comfortable place to hide, if you were left alone. Mar'zief had no idea who she had lost.

He didn't care to ask.

To his right, Ian Wallace was present only by doctor supervision. The stone cold bravado that hid everything he might have been feeling His hands were still bandaged, the right one badly injured and the left severed at the wrist.

Newly promoted to full Lieutenant, Jack McBain spoke next. "Like most of us, I met commander Mikey Bailer shortly after..."

The words trailed off as his mind began to drift.

Several more marines had chosen to speak, most spoke of their fallen friends but several choose to speak of Mikey.

Then it was Mar'zief's turn. He stood up and slowly walked down the isle to the podium, in front of the crowd. "I will keep this brief, as brief as I can and still do justice to Commander Bailer."

"Admittedly, I had reservations when the Com--when Mikey--came aboard. The youngest first officer in Starfleet history, and the commander-in-chief's son. Who wouldn't feel reservations about him? And I also shared my tactical officer's that he was too much 'by the book.'"

"It is to my shame that I felt this way. Never before have I met a man more deserving of that rank. Never met a more capable, a more courageous officer. I...his death is a loss to me personally, and a loss to Starfleet in general. But I have never--ever--felt an officer that it has been a greater pride to work with, or be a friend to."

"Thank you."

Falco walked off the stage, away from the podium. The speech felt inadequate. But what speech wouldn't feel inadequate in the face of death? What speech could truly capture the feelings of loss, of the death of a man killed for no reason?

The Honor Guard, seven marines garbed in a military dress uniforms more elaborate than even Starfleet's, began their final set of maneuvers. Each carried a phaser rifle, took aim and fired through the force field of the shuttle bay doors. The blasts passed harmlessly out into space and eventually dispersed within the stars.

And then it was over. The people filed past the coffins whispering things that existed only between lost friends, then as slowly as they had drifted in, perhaps some faster, the shuttle bay was empty. As he understood it, there were several,

other ceremonies planned, most involving eating, speaking, and socializing with friends and comrades of the deceased.

He wasn't sure he understood the reasoning behind such things, but knew he had no intention of going to any of them. Death was too personal a thing to share with people he might see everyday. If there was any mourning to do, it was not an affair to celebrate and one handled in private. Or at least that was what he had been taught.

He didn't know if it was right, anymore then he knew how to feel at that particular moment. Things changed over time, and the influences that shape a life during childhood, can find little purpose as an adult. So if in life he turned to his friends and family to share in the good, then perhaps it was just as important to mourn with them in loss.

Falco moved for the first time, walking from his seat to the nearest coffin. He placed a hand on the casket, and felt the cool feel of the composite material. A torpedo casing. He found it ironic that Starfleet chose such an instrument of destruction to transport the dead. Certainly there was a more respectful way.

A small placard on each casing identified the person, with a simple name, rank, and posting within Starfleet. It also included a date and place of birth, and their eventual resting place. This one read Lieutenant Thomas Anderson.

Falco knew him, not very well, but had spoken with him a few times. He was the CO of the *Swiftsure's* Stellar Cartography team, an intelligent man, and as far as the Caitian could tell generally seemed to like his work. What a waste.

He moved between the caskets, reading each name until he found the one he was looking for. *Commander Mikey Bailer, USS Swiftsure. Earth 2350 - 2380. New Providence Colony*

It didn't seem fair, an entire life cut short only to be embalmed by a cheap metal placard. It didn't seem enough. Maybe in the future there would be some towering monument to those that had given their lives, but the thought of it now wasn't as comforting as people made it out to be.

He had not spoken to anyone about it since the word had arrived from the surface, and didn't plan on speaking to anyone about it now. At least not in any official capacity, nor did he have any plans to.

Except maybe with his father...

"Captain," said the commander-in-chief of Starfleet, catching Falco off guard. Falco was surprised by his presence, not having sensed in the slightest that anyone else was even within arms length.

It wasn't enough explaining to Admiral Bailer how the fight had gone, but explaining how he had managed to let his son die was close.

Not opposing, non-threatening, and as calm and collected as Falco had ever seen him. A mask to be sure—a wall of protection to hold back the parts of life that were too intense to experience all but from a distance. There was a security there and the feeling that everything might be all right even when everything was falling apart around you. So even if his calm was some sort of masquerade, who was he to call him on it.

“Admiral Bailer sir,” Falco said.

He gestured for the captain to sit back down. “You looked like you were somewhere else there for a minute.”

“I suppose I was,” he said.

“These things always stir up memories of the past. The good times we want to remember and carry with us, and the things we spend a lifetime trying to forget.”

“Sir,” he said with uncertainty, “allow me to offer my condolences on the loss of your son. I am truly sorry...”

“Don't be,” he said turning to head back towards the collection of folding chairs. “What's done is done. It's no more your fault than mine. He-he knew the risks when he joined Starfleet...he...all of us did.”

Falco followed him as they moved away from the room's center attraction, out of the way of what was going on even while it was the only thing between them.

“With all due respect sir, I think there is enough fault to spread between us.”

“Do you mind explaining that one captain?”

“I don't pretend to know first hand the relationship between a father and his son, but I do know that a man needs to feel as if his life is his own. He needs to know that the accomplishments that drive his fate are of his own doing, and not mere reflections of his fathers shadow.”

“Well as you said, you don't know the relationship between a father and son.”

“But I did know Mikey and it was obvious from the moment we met that something was holding him back. That ere of self-confidence that bleeds through a person who is living their own life was never there.”

"Well then it seems you have me pegged captain," he said sitting down. He motioned for Falco to do the same, and the captain took a seat. "What I fail to see how you fit into this."

"As captain of the *Swiftsure* I am responsible for those under my command. Mikey came to me and requested, pleaded rather to take on this mission."

"And you let him go?"

"He made a convincing argument."

"He was good at arguing, with me at least. Still, he was foolish for wanting to command such a mission."

"I think he wanted to stand out in the crowd. Distinguish himself from you, and prove that he had earned his position as first officer, even if the latter wasn't entirely accurate."

"I would never use undo command influence to effect the assignment of any Starfleet personnel. I never did. Ever. Captain." A slight furrow appeared in the admiral's brow.

Falco raised his hands in a conciliatory fashion. "Perhaps. But that isn't how Mikey saw it and even if he had believed you, he still needed to prove it to himself, and others." Falco let the last words trail off.

"I had nothing to do with his career, which is perhaps another problem altogether..." he paused letting the words trail off. For a second his guard was down.

"You should have told him so," Falco said with more contempt than he had planned.

"There are a great many things I should have done, but seeing as how that time is past, there isn't much I can do about it now."

"Then that is your burden to live with. Leave me with mine."

The stresses of one mans life is enough to carry; I don't need yours as well, Falco thought of saying. He knew it would do little good coming mainly from spite, so he held his tongue.

"How's the *Swiftsure* holding up?" Bailer asked, changing the subject.

"We took our fair share of damage during the fight. Those who know such things tell me we should be back in space within two weeks."

“And your crew?” he asked seeming generally concerned.

He straightened a bit at the question.

“I lost some thirty crewmen,” he said looking out at the flag draped coffins still perfectly aligned near the shuttlebay doors. “And fifteen officers.”

He shifted in his chair as a slow flow of mourners were beginning to drift in, mostly those that had not been able to make it to the service, or those that had not wanted to be there. He could understand their desire to stay away, he even felt it himself, but duty demanded his presence if for nothing else then the sake of morale.

They could come and go as long as they desired to do so, before the Honor Guard finally began the process of seeing each person made it to where they belonged.

That job he did not envy, but he could respect them for doing it. Each body would come under the care of two guards, whose sole purpose until the task was completed, was to see that the fallen made it to their final resting place. It was one thing to be responsible for writing the letter to the family, notifying them of the death, a task that had occupied most of Falco's day. It was quite another thing altogether to deliver the dead to their families.

“We'll manage somehow,” Falco added.

“Indeed.”

He began to leave but was caught by the sight of Earth through the open shuttlebay doors. It was enough to stop even the strongest willed person, perhaps easier for most humans.

“Don't let this place wear you down captain.”

“Sir.”

He was transfixed, staring through the Shuttlebay doors towards earth. When he finally answered, he was not the same man that Falco had spoken to only a moment ago.

“I see a darkness forming, and the acts we must commit to resist it. I see the horror spreading, and the loss of innocence it will breathe over those that see it. I see our lives ending, and the fight that will consume us.”

He paused for just a second, before adding, "The things we will do in the days ahead will tax us beyond our limits, but they must be done."

Bailer turned to Falco, with his full attention. "Rest well captain, for when I call upon you again, there will be no turning back."

He was gone without another word.

Falco turned away from the shuttlebay doors and the death that lay a few thousand kilometers beyond the edge of the force fields. He could not but help look at the tragedy that lie through the open shuttle bay doors and feel responsible. It was not his home, but it was important nonetheless. A paradise, maybe not, but it was the ideal that the Federation was built on and that was worth fighting for.

"Hunter help the Breen," he said to no one, now more determined than ever to avenge those that had fallen.

Falco gave one more glance to the blue marble floating beneath. No, it wasn't vengeance.

It was punishment.