

Star Trek: The Breen War

Prologue

"We entered the Black Cluster, expecting battle. What we got was hell. But, truthfully, it was only a glimpse of what was to come..."-- Excerpt from Captain Jacob Harkness' memoirs

Rendezvous Point USS *Swiftsure*

"Take us out of warp," said Falco.

"Aye sir," replied the helm officer. "Dropping to impulse velocities. We are now sublight."

"Signal from the *Alabama*," said H'kut.

"On screen."

Marz'ief smiled as Harkness' face appeared on the screen. The smile quickly faded as he noticed the human's scowl.

"You're late," said Jacob.

"Sorry old friend," said Falco. "We were...diverted."

"We're two days behind schedule thanks to your 'diversion.'"

"I'm sorry. It couldn't be avoided."

Harkness raised an eyebrow. "You're the senior officer on this little venture. Now that you're here, you have command. Which also means that I can't berate you as you so justly deserve."

"*Thank* you Jacob." Falco turned to H'kut. "General message to all ships: Final briefing on the *Swiftsure* at thirteen-hundred hours. End Message."

"Message sent sir."

"I'll see you then Jacob. *Swiftsure* out."

Black Cluster Breen Flagship

Thotha Jugartha looked over the readouts on the PADD in front of her. The power curves were high, but not exceptionally so. The cloak wasn't perfect--yet--but they would fix that sooner or later. Overall, it was a quite satisfactory test. The Federation might have intercepted it in an actual operation, but now they had *proof* that the thing worked.

"Signal the fleet," she said. "Head for second test site, warp six."

Slightly more than forty Breen ships, and a vessel far larger than the rest, twisted space and left the dying star far behind.

Chapter One

USS *Swiftsure* *Osprey* Cockpit

"Buzzards on your six!"

"Oh-Five, taking heavy damage!"

"Here I come!" Ensign Maro sent her *Osprey* into a dive, gold fire spitting out of the twin cannons in the bow.

"Blue, you've got two Buzzards on your tail!" shouted Chief Imaden, the squadron commander.

"Where the hell they'd come from?" Maro asked, looking at her sensor readouts. "Shit." She launched herself into a barrel roll that sent her fighter spinning; she felt herself going faint from the high gee-forces. She came out of the roll to find herself facing the fighters. She squeezed the firing trigger, blasting one to pieces, and phaser fire from another *Osprey* destroyed the other. "Piece of cake," she said to herself. "Thanks One. I owe you chief"

"Don't mention it Blue. Goonies, form up! We're almost through the fighter lines! Head for the objective."

Maro pulled into position on the extreme edge of the formation. She kept her eye on the sensor plots; what she saw made her heart leap. "One, we've got two bogies incoming, breaking off to pursue."

"Negative Blue, keep in formation!"

Maro twisted her fighter to port. "I can take them Chief."

"Negative! Get back in formation Ensign! That's an order!"

Maro dispatched one of the fighters, and got a lock on another. But just as she did, a Breen frigate decloaked directly in front of her.

"Oh shit..."

One of the disruptors fired. She saw a brilliant, blinding light, then black.

"Damn," she said.

Outside Holodeck

Wallace smirked as he watched the Grey Goons--and who had come up with that name for the squadron?--file out of the holodeck.

Maro was the first to walk out. Ian waved at her, and she glared back. "You were in command of the op force, weren't you?" she asked, trudging over to him.

Wallace adopted a look of pure innocence.

"I should have known..." The distraught Andorian walked off with the rest of the pilots to debriefing.

Wallace caught Chief Petty Officer Imaden, the squadron's acting commander, when she walked out. "How was she?" he asked.

"She's a good pilot," said Imaden.

"I know that. How was she in the *sim* though?"

Imaden considered for a moment. "Honestly, if it weren't for the fact that she's the best pilot that this ship has to offer, I'd turn her down. She's not comfortable taking orders from me, and is either too timid or too daring."

"She knew what she was getting into when she volunteered."

"She may have known. I'm not so sure she understood."

"Ah."

"She'll do though," admitted Imaden. "It'll just take a few more sims. And time."

"Well, I have to be off, captain's holding a briefing with the rest of the task force. If you have any real problems, feel free to talk to me."

"Oh, I will. "

Observation Lounge

Falco looked up as the last two captains walked into the *Swiftsure's* observation lounge; it was the captains of the Romulan Warhawks, Commanders Toranak and Vehlak of the *Norexan* and *Tiviure* respectively. They took the remaining seats at the end of the table.

"Welcome aboard the *Swiftsure*," said Falco. The two Romulans nodded in return. "Now that we're all here, let's get down to business." He nodded at Harkness.

"The *Alabama* has conducted several long-range scans of the system that we believe the depot to be in about three days ago," said Harkness. "We have confirmation on around forty ships, ranging in size from frigates to three of those never-sufficiently-damned dreadnaughts. We also detected an extremely large mass, mostly metallic. While we didn't get a chance to run a material scan, just the sheer size of the object seems to be pretty conclusive proof that the intel on this op was correct."

"So they outnumber us two-to-one," said Toranak. "These odds are steep."

"Yes," said Falco. "So we'll send in fighters first. During the Battle for Earth, *Ospreys*, *Peregrines*, and *Golden Eagles* all proved extremely effective against the smaller Breen frigates, destroyers, and even battlecruisers, though they punch through the shields of anything larger, at least, not in any reasonable amount of time. And we have, on hand, one-forty-four *Kestrels*, sixty *Ospreys*, and thirty-six *Golden Eagles*, plus thirty-two *Scorpions* from the *Norexan* and the *Tiviure*. Unfortunately, I don't know the capabilities of the *Scorpion*." Falco glanced at Toranak and Vehlak.

The two Romulans exchanged a glance, then Vehlak turned to face Falco. "They are slightly inferior to your *Kestrels*," he admitted. Toranak winced, almost imperceptibly. "The *Scorpion* attack flyer is designed to be a skirmisher, sniping at enemies, instead of confronting them directly," added Vehlak.

"Ah," said Falco. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "We'll send in the *Ospreys* first, to soak up any fighters that might be there. The *Scorpions* will provide them with assistance; I'll leave it up to you to figure out the best way to do so. I'm simply not familiar enough with their abilities to make the most efficient use of them."

Toranak nodded his head, looking somewhat grim. "Understood Captain," he said.

Falco smiled. "Thank you. As I was saying, the *Ospreys* will go in first. Then the *Eagles* and the *Kestrels*. The *Eagles* will try to target the smaller warships, in order to create a hole in the Breen lines, and the *Kestrels* will of course defend them from enemy fighters. And as soon as that hole is punched through, we'll send the capital ships down the gauntlet, led by the *Swiftsure*." He looked around the gathered officer. "And we won't stop until that depot is destroyed."

"Are there any questions?" No one raised their hand up. "We leave in one hour. Dismissed."

USS *Alabama* Bridge

Harris, the *Alabama's* Ops Officer, turned around. "Sir," she said, "the *Swiftsure's* signaling that it's time to move out."

"Understood," said Harkness. "Set course three-oh-eight mark niner-six, warp eight. Engage!"

"Aye sir," said the helm officer. "We are now at warp."

"ETA?"

"We are approximately two days from our objective."

Harkness snorted. "Good, you can wake me when we get there. I'll be in my quarters. Dalren, you have the bridge."

"Aye aye sir," said Harkness' XO. "I have the bridge."

USS *Swiftsure* Holodeck

Chief Imaden Oyana watched her squadron walk out of the holodeck, trudging along, faces down. All of the fighters in the task-force had participated in a fleet-wide simulation. And had failed miserably; the Goonies had been decimated to a man.

Maro stormed out of the holodeck and down the hall to the debriefing. Imaden shook her head, then followed the rest of the squadron. This promised to be...interesting.

IRS *Norexan*

"Welcome aboard the *Norexan*," said Toranak to Vehlak as the other Romulan walked off the transporter pad. "It is good to see you again. Thank you for accepting my invitation, it is an honor."

Vehlak smiled. "The quality of your table has been held in high reputation by those who you have invited over. How could I refuse?"

"It's hardly my fault that my steward happens to be an excellent chef."

"Indeed," replied Vehlak as the two left the transporter room. "Something tells me that you didn't just invite me over to sample your selection of gourmet."

"No," admitted Toranak as they turned down the corridor.

"You're not comfortable with my giving those Starfleeters information about our capabilities?"

"They are allies of convenience; when this war is over, it could be our borders that are in contest."

"At this moment, we are allies, and when we tried to withdraw beyond the Neutral zone after the last war, it destroyed our government. We can't afford to break ties with the Federation." Toranak looked skeptical. "And to be honest," continued Vehlak, "I must admit that I'm sympathetic to them. Earth, the center of their government and the homeworld of the most prominent species, has been attacked, and rather brutally. How would you feel if the Breen had attacked Romulus, and destroyed many of our key cities?"

"It would never happen to us."

"It very nearly did, just last year. And the truth remains, they are allies, and we also have an obligation to prevent as many losses of our own troops as we can. Withholding key information about the strengths of our fighters seems to be counterproductive to that goal.

"Habits of thought last long. And enemies last longer. We've been enemies of the Federation for nearly two-and-a-half centuries. We've been allies for less than six years."

"I know. Just don't let it cloud your thought in the battle."

USS Alabama

"We are approaching the target system," said the helm officer.

"Red Alert," ordered Harkness. "Run a sensor sweep Mr. Harris."

"Aye sir," she replied, tapping few buttons. "That's odd..." she muttered under her breath after a few short seconds.

"What is it Lieutenant?"

"The primary isn't fitting its classification from our previous scans. Our last scouting run indicated that it was a red giant, with a good five, six thousand years left on the main sequence. Now it's a white dwarf."

"Faulty scan?" asked Harkness. "Stars don't just explode on their own..."

Harris shrugged. "Probably. And it's not like we ran all that intensive a scan on the star itself."

"Oh well, it seems like the star's done our work for us. Hail the *Swift*."

"Sir," interjected Commander Dalren, "they were beyond the destruction radius when we scouted here, remember?"

"Oh. Right." *Idiot*, he thought to himself. "Then where the hell are they?"

"I'm not detecting any sign of them," said Harris.

"Not even a debris field?"

"Wait a second...I'm detecting some indications of plasma decay. Consistent with a Breen military warp drive. At a guess, they left at warp six."

"Hail the *Swiftsure*. This is something that Falco should know about."

USS *Swiftsure*

"--and we have a vector, but only a rough one," finished Harkness.

"Thanks for the heads up Jacob," said Mar'zief. "How many stars could they have reached by now, given the info that we have?"

"Too many. They could have gotten to any one of over a hundred, judging by the decay rate."

"Damn. Mr. Kati, raise the task force."

"Aye sir."

"This is Captain Falco. We've found signs that the Breen have left the system; we'll be splitting up to find them, search patterns will be distributed within an hour. If you find the Breen convoy, alert the rest of the task force and keep an eye on them. Don't play the hero. Falco out."

Jacob looked grim. "Well old friend, we both have things to attend to. Harkness out."

"See you around old friend," whispered Falco under his breath.

"Sir," asked Wallace, "If I may speak freely?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are we chasing after these ships? The star did our job for us, one way or the other."

"Do you think they would have just left those supplies on the station?" Ian at least had the grace to look sheepish. "Depot or no, those supplies will still be able to help the Breen. We've got to find that convoy and destroy it. Mr. H'kut, come help me determine the search patterns. Ian, you have the bridge."

"Aye sir, I have the bridge."

And as the bridge crew prepared to search for their enemy, they ignored what was likely one of the most important questions of all.

Why had the Breen put a base around a star about to explode?

Chapter Two

USS *Swiftsure* Maro's quarters

Maro sat down on her bed just as the door chime beeped. With an exaggerated sigh, she said, "Come in."

Much to her surprise, it was Commander Wallace who walked in. She stood at attention. "Sir?"

"At ease ensign," he said. "I'm not here to berate you, I just want a friendly chat."

The young Andorian sagged back onto her bed. Ian gestured at the other bed in the room, and she shrugged. He sat back and crossed his legs. "Where's your bunkmates?" he asked.

"They went to get something to eat from the mess. I thought I'd get some extra practice in on some sims, with the computer."

"Ah." He shrugged, as if shaking off some thought. "Imaden had a talk with me," he continued. "She said that she couldn't find any fault with your piloting skills. So what *is* your problem?"

"I don't *know*. Well...maybe that's not true."

"Oh?"

"I'm not used to flying in a squadron like that, I suppose. I'm not used to *having* to work with other people to pull off the mission. Either I'm flying solo, like during that mess on Earth..." She paused, bowing her head. "Or else I'm following at the orders of someone else," she continued, "and they're the one's who has to figure out how to work with the people."

"You weren't flying solo during the approach during Earth."

She looked up. "But I *was* flying under someone else's orders."

"Ah. Of course. And now you're the only person in your fighter, trying to figure out how to best serve your squadron as well as the mission. That's your problem."

"Yeah. Sounds stupid now."

Wallace smiled. "Not at all lass. You have to adjust to a completely new way of thinking, tactically, and in the space of a few weeks, never an easy task. The

rest of your squadron has been training to think like that for their entire careers. They're bound to be better at it than you." He paused, considering his words. "If you'll pardon my asking, but why did you volunteer?"

Maro gave a ghost of her usual smile. "They needed a pilot, after Jameson...well, you know. I figured that I'd try to help out. And after the initial weirdness of taking orders from a non-com, well, it didn't seem all that different from duty on the bridge."

Ian smiled as he stood up, preparing to leave. "Here's my recommendation Jara, think of the squadron as a ship, and its pilots as your shipmates. Follow Imaden's orders like you would any superior officer's. That's all I can think of to say."

Maro smiled again. "Thanks anyways Commander. I appreciate it."

Breen Flagship

Thotha Jugartha turned around as her aide, Lethlan, walked in. "Yes?" she asked in their strange language.

"We have received a message from the Homeworld," he said.

"We receive many messages from the Homeworld. That's the whole point of a Command Flagship or Base."

"I thought that you should hear this one specifically, High Admiral."

"Go on..." she said with exaggerated patience.

"Starfleet has destroyed all three of the supply depots in the Black Cluster," he said. Jugartha closed her eyes--if they could really be called that. "There were few survivors."

"Get out."

"Yes, High Commander." Lethlan turned around and left.

She raised one of her fellow Thothis as soon the door closed. "Why didn't you tell me about this disaster?" she snarled.

"You are referring to the destruction of the Depots along the border?" he asked.

"You can't *keep* information like that from me," she said. "That violates everything that the Thotha are. Also, if Starfleet Intelligence was good enough to find the depots, how do we know that they didn't find us?"

"I find it hard to believe that they could, Jugartha. Besides, we didn't want to take the risk of contacting you specifically, which is why we sent it with the rest of the data dump. We knew you'd find out, sooner or later."

"This was important enough to break a little security for Namateth. With those depots gone, the war effort will be set back tremendously." She leaned closer to the screen. "We may not even be ready in time."

Namateth smiled, or at least performed the Breen equivalent. "The rest of the Thothas are devising plans to slow down the Starfleeters. If anything comes to fruition, we'll send it to you in the next dump. Trust us Jugartha, Starfleet will never reach Kantaetha. Namateth out."

Jugartha snarled as the link closed, then composed herself. Anger was never wise, not when there was planning to be done.

USS *Alabama* Bridge

Harris shook her head at something or other, mumbling under her breath. "What is it Lieutenant?" asked Dalren.

"What? Oh, I was looking at the data on their little warp trail. Yeah, it's scattered all to hell, but the scattering pattern is too neat."

"How so?" asked the Tellarite.

"Remember those scatter plots that we'd have to study in math classes, where you had to find the average line to determine the trend? That's what this is reminding me of. No nova could produce that kind of scatter pattern." She tapped a few more buttons. "That's odd...sir, I just ran another scan on their little warp trail. Call me crazy, but they left *after* the star exploded."

Dalren squinted his eyes shut, then opened them again. "Come again?"

"Either everything we know about warp trails is completely wrong, or they left after the primary blew up." She looked back at her superior officer. "Honestly, I'd put real money on the second one."

"Which means that the scattering..."

"...almost *has* to be artificial."

"See if you can't create your little trend line, Lieutenant. I think that the captain would be *most* interested in the results."

Observation Lounge

Jacob sat at one end of the small table, nursing a cup of coffee. Dalren felt a surge of guilt at having removed his captain from his much-needed sleep, but this was important. He glanced over at Harris and gave a small smile. She acknowledged with a nod, then drew a deep breath.

"I'm sorry for waking you up, sir," she started, "but Commander Dalren and I believe that we may have found the Breen convoy's destination." She tapped some buttons on the small console in front of her chair. "We found a pattern in the warp trail scatter, one that allowed us to determine, with some certainty if our assumptions are correct, that this star is their destination." As she spoke, a green line grew the origin system, and intersected neatly with another star, this one a red dwarf, likely with several billion years left on the main sequence. "Don't ask me why they'd choose that system," she continued, "but I'd say that it's at least a ninety-percent chance that's their destination."

"Back up," said Harkness. "How in all the blazes did you figure this out? The nova scattered that warp trail all over the sector."

"Actually, it didn't sir," said Dalren. "They left *after* the star exploded." At that, their captain jerked up, fully alert.

"That means that the scattering was artificial!"

Harris smiled, pleased that her captain had caught on. "And no matter how 'random,' there had to be a discernable pattern," she added.

"Hail the *Swiftsure*," ordered Harkness.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Shuttlebay

Maro walked up to her fighter, one of the new *Ospreys*, lean and bristling with weaponry. She was certainly the fastest craft she'd ever flown--at least at impulse. At least she was finally getting a chance to fly one for real.

"You ready for this Ensign?"

Maro shrugged. "If I'm not, then we're all screwed." She sighed. "This is the real thing."

"Yeah. Listen, if it means anything to you, I never felt all that comfortable being your CO either."

Maro smiled. "I got used to it. Let's kick some Breen ass."

"That is the general idea, yes. All right goonies," she shouted, "stop lounging around like my dead grandfather! We've got Breen to kill!"

Bridge

"ETA?" asked Falco.

"Twenty minutes," replied the helmsman.

"Mr. Kati," said Wallace, "run a sweep."

"Aye sir," said H'kut. Falco nodded, and then tapped a button on his chair.

"This is Captain Falco to all ships. Remember, take out the warships first. We can always overrun the freighters later, no matter how far away they've gotten. Falco out."

Just as he turned off the link, he heard H'kut swear. "What is it Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Sir, I'm reading forty ships, and one structure, some three kilometers long," he said, sounding like he didn't believe himself.

"What? That's impossible!" said Wallace. "There's no way they could've moved the depot, but they couldn't have built a new one so quickly."

"It's not a supply depot," said H'kut. As he said that, an image appeared on the screen; a huge ship that dwarfed the dreadnaughts standing escort over it. Dominated by what appeared to be some kind of launcher, it seemed to bristle with heavy weapons. *Some kind of super-carrier?* Falco couldn't tell just from looking, but it didn't look pleasant, whatever it was.

"Sir..." said someone. Wallace.

"We've got to take it out," said Falco. "I don't know what that...Behemoth is, but if it's got that kind of escort, it *has* to be important to them." He pressed the button on his chair.

"This is Falco again, and there's been a change of plans..."

Breen Flagship

There were times that Jugartha hated being right. This was one of them. If even one of the incoming Starfleeters escaped...the consequences would be unthinkable.

"Order the fleet to intercept them," she said. "But tell the prototype not to engage them unless the situation merits it. Is that understood?"

More than forty ships peeled away from the monstrosity they guarded, pulled away to destroy the interlopers. Jugartha considered another tactic...but no, the time was not right yet. Too much would be revealed, that should remain hidden.

"As soon as you reach weapons range," she said, "engage the enemy."

USS *Swiftsure* Main Shuttlebay

"Prep for blind drop," said Lieutenant Commander Edmonds, the *Swiftsure's* flight commander. "I repeat, prep for blind drop."

Maro reached up to cut power to everything except life support and the maneuvering thrusters. She'd never done this maneuver before, not even in sims, but she hoped that she'd be able to keep station with her squadron nevertheless. Easier said than done.

Then the door opened, and some twenty-four fighters sped out from the shuttlebay, along with another twelve from Shuttlebay Two. The *Swiftsure's* thirty-six joined with the rest of the task group's fighters, and they all maneuvered to get in position. Far, far too late for doubts.

Main Bridge

Falco smiled; the Breen had done exactly as he'd hoped. Their fleet was moving away from that...thing, and was maneuvering to intercept their little task force.

"Sir," said Wallace, "what happens if the bombers can't punch through its shields? They have a hard time getting through even a battleship's..."

"Then I just condemned over three hundred people to their deaths," replied the Caitian. "Let's hope they find a way. We'll try and keep the escort busy."

"Ah," said Wallace.

"Send the order," said Falco. "It's time."

Osprey Cockpit

"Birds, flap your wings," said Edmonds, and the *Swift*'s entire complement powered up. The *Ospreys* were mixed in with the Breen fleet, to take down any bombers that tried to attack the task force, but the *Golden Eagles* and *Kestrels* were nearly alone, on that monster's flank. And then she smiled as she saw the tell-tale distortion of a decloaking ship. No, not so alone as all that.

"All right Goonies," said Imaden, "you know what to do. Engage the enemy!"

Bridge

"All ships," said Falco, "open fire."

Chapter Three

Breen Flagship

Jugartha hissed in frustration, and in respect for whoever was in command over there. A splendid example of out-maneuvering, that. Alone, those fighters might no have achieved much, but with those two *Norexan* class Warhawks there, the odds did not seem so much in her favor.

Her flagship rocked as phasers gouged its shields. "All ships, fall back to the prototype!" she ordered as her ship rocked again. "I repeat, fall back!"

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

"They're falling back," said H'kut.

"Oh no you don't," said Falco, smiling evilly. "Tractor beams! Get as many ships as you can!"

Half of the Breen fleet suddenly found itself unable to move, and the unhindered sections, suddenly far more dispersed than they had been before, were pulling ahead. The carefully laid out formation was gone. Chaos reined, a perfect situation for the fighters.

"Target the ships pulling ahead," ordered Falco. "Fire all weapons."

Osprey Cockpit

Maro dodged a disruptor bolt from a Breen Interceptor trying to defend its far slower charges. She twisted her fighter around and squeezed off a couple of pulse phasers, which sliced through its weaker shields. A follow up burst destroyed it.

She glanced at her display for the presumably nearby bomber, only to see a flurry of red dots leaving the field. Heading straight for that Behemoth.

"Angry Birds," said Maro on the flight-wide channel, "we have Buzzards going after Big Birds and Little Birdies, I repeat Buzzards going after Big Birds and Little Birdies."

"Copy Angry Bird Alpha-two," acknowledged Edmonds. "Angry Birds Alpha and Beta, tail the Buzzards, I repeat tail Buzzards."

"Copy that," said Imaden and the commanding officer of the second *Osprey* squadron.

"Goonies, form up and fire as you bear," said Imaden on the squadron channel. "We're going in hot and heavy, Claw formation."

Maro swerved up, getting in position forward and slightly above to the right of Imaden. She gulped; this was *not* her favorite formation...

Maro watched as the squadron surrounded the enemy squadron. Angling the nose of her fighter down, she fired.

Breen Flagship

"Target their tractor beams!" ordered Jugartha. "Tell the prototype's crew that it is free to fire at will. Target those Warhawks!"

USS *Alabama*

The ship jerked with another hit. The *Alabama* had accounted for one clean kill already, and two assists, but the damage was beginning to take its toll.

"Starboard power couplings offline," reported Sheal, the Andorian Chief Engineer. "Secondaries active, but I can't tell you for how long."

"Tractor beam is intermittent," said Jackson, the tactical officer. "I won't be able to keep it locked onto our frigate for much longer. And it's drawing power from our starboard shields now."

"We'll only need a few more minutes with it on," said Harkness. "Helm, hard to starboard! Mr. Jackson, target that frigate with the turret. Fire."

The *Alabama* lobbed torpedo after quantum torpedo at the frigate they had snared; it couldn't withstand that kind of pounding for very long, and exploded violently.

"Tractor beam off," said Jackson, anticipating his captain's next order. "Shields returning to full power."

Harkness breathed a sigh of relief. Only to draw it back in again as that Behemoth opened fire. Despite the pounding it was taking from the bombers and the *Norexans*, its shields were holding quite spectacularly. And then a green bolt, easily the size and power of the largest mounts on the Dreadnaughts, emerged from the Behemoth and flew straight at one of the Warhawks. The

Norexan staggered as it took the brunt of that blow. Harkness watched as that monstrosity powered up its disruptor for another shot at the disabled Warhawk.

"Helm, prep for a microjump. Put us between the behemoth and the *Norexan*," he ordered.

"Aye sir..." said the helmsman.

"Are you out of your mind?" shouted Dalren. "That thing will--"

"--most likely destroy us, yes I know. But a Warhawk is far more valuable in this battle than we are. Helm, execute, *now!*"

The *Alabama* leapt into warp and out again, nearly imperceptibly. But in that imperceptible moment, they had bridged the gulf. Suddenly, the world heaved.

Osprey Cockpit

Another Breen fighter went up in flames as the two Osprey squadrons on their tail passed through their formations again. That was when the Breen chose to scatter; they obviously had realized that staying in formation was decimating them.

"Goonies, break and attack!" ordered Imaden.

Maro banked starboard and opened fire on an interceptor. It weaved to port, narrowly avoiding the pulse phaser bolts. Maro swore and made a hard turn to follow it. She squeezed off another two bursts from her cannons, to no avail; she just could not line it up in her sights.

Suddenly, a flurry of green bolts sped by her window. Glancing at her screen, she saw that another fighter had pulled up behind her. *Where the hell did he come from?* She cut power to the impulse engines, trying to slow down and get behind him before the Buzzard could react, but he was too far behind for that trick to work. She tried a few evasive moves, but then her fighter shook; he'd landed a direct hit, with a disruptor, thank every Little God...

A warning light flashed on her console; he'd tagged her with a torpedo lock! Desperately weaving out of the way, she tried to shake it, but the light remained stubbornly on. Suddenly, orange glare flashed in her cockpit; the Breen had been pasted.

One of those Romulan *Scorpions* was floating nearby. "I thought you could use some assistance," he said.

"Thanks," she replied.

"You're welcome. Come, we aren't doing either the battle any use over here."

"Roger that. Blue out." She shut the com link and flew back to where the rest of the wings were skirmishing with the Breen fighters.

The *Golden Eagles* were obviously preparing for another bombing run, backed up by the remaining *Kestrels*. It was obvious that flying into that disruptor fire would be suicide. Maro knew that the Behemoth had to have at least a few holes in its shields for those fighters, she banked at the launch bays. If she'd guessed wrong, then she'd soon be a thin smear of molecules. But if she was right, then she could slip under those old-fashioned bubble-shields and destroy at least a few of the disruptor emplacements

She held her breath as she approached the shield perimeter. She ignored Imaden's orders for her to pull out; she knew that she had to do this. Suddenly, she was clear of the perimeter; she let out her breath. She'd guessed right.

She pitched her nose up and sped along the hull of the Behemoth, squeezing micro-torpedoes at the various light disruptors, when suddenly a great green bolt fled the Behemoth, flying straight at the *Norexan*. The port wings were ripped off, and it was obvious from the flickering lights that the rest of the ship was badly damaged.

"Gods..." said Maro, gulping. "That disruptor could destroy the task force, with two shots a ship. At most."

The shields around her starting flickering blue fire; the bombers had released their torpedoes. Maro flew through the resulting hole, rejoining her squadron.

"Blue, we're going to have a long talk after this is over," said Imaden.

"Roger Chief," said Maro. But she was distracted; the Behemoth was preparing to fire again. Suddenly, a *Nova* class starship appeared out of nowhere, between the *Norexan* and the Behemoth. Maro blinked and watched as the green bolt emerged from the Behemoth's beak. Time seemed to slow as it sped toward the *Nova*, but it was still over quickly. The hit tore off the after half of the secondary hull and the warp nacelles, sending the *Nova* careening out of the way; plasma spewed from conduits that still tried to feed the warp nacelles, which were now so many molecules and atoms.

Maro's first thought was Falco. *If that damage is as bad as it looks, he's going to kill himself in grief.*

There was only one *Nova* in the entire task force.

USS *Alabama*

Harkness came to in a bridge illuminated only by emergency lighting. He groaned and rolled around, to come face to face with the unblinking face of Commander Dalren. The rest of the Tellarite's body was nowhere to be seen.

He stood up and surveyed the bridge. A burnt lump of meat that was most likely Harris...Greg Jackson, slumped on his console, perhaps a slight breath perceptible, though it was hard to tell. It seemed that he was the only other living thing in this hellhole that had once been the bridge of the *Alabama*. If he was even alive.

Harkness felt a burning on his face as tear after tear rolled down his cheeks.

USS *Swiftsure*

Falco's heart was in his throat as he saw the *Alabama* jump into warp; he knew what his friend was about to do. He saw the bolt emerge from that...thing and slam into the small *Nova*. The *Alabama* survived, but just barely. Suddenly, the *Norexan* began to accelerate, heading straight for the gargantuan ship.

"What the hell does Toranak think he's doing?" asked Wallace. "He doesn't have any weapons to speak of!"

Falco merely closed his eyes and breathed a prayer to the Hunter for those who were about to die.

IRS *Norexan*

Toranak looked around his shattered bridge. His ship had been smashed by that behemoth, and his entire crew would have died in the follow-up shot from its monstrous turrets, except a Federation ship had intervened and saved his life.

That was strange. The hated Starfleeters, sacrificing themselves to save *Romulans*? That would have been unthinkable nearly a decade ago. Now, it was simply a matter of course.

He knew his ship would be dead soon; his shields were gone, and his hull, even if it had been full integrity, could never withstand a hit from such a weapon. And he couldn't even go down fighting; his weapons were gone.

Then, he smiled. He could die fighting after all.

"Helm," he ordered, "Ramming speed!"

USS *Swiftsure*

Everyone in that system, Breen, Starfleet, or Romulan, watched as the *Norexan* smashed into the Behemoth. The Warhawk's head smashed together, like an accordian, until the neck snapped. Then the fury of that artificial singularity at the core of the ship was unleashed, its containment gone. It tore a giant hole in the shields of the Behemoth before it evaporated, though not even its fury could destroy this juggernaut. But such a hole could well be enough.

"All ships," ordered Falco, "Drop tractor beams and maneuver to fire through that hole!"

Torpedo after torpedo blasted through the hole, and phasers lanced in, gouging holes and pits and rents into the Behemoth's armor. And it held, for a great long time, it held. But no ship could withstand such fury forever, and then it exploded, a great fireball against the vastness of space.

Breen Flagship

Jugartha closed her 'eyes' as the prototype was destroyed. Such a disgrace was disaster. Not so much to her; her position on the Council was still secure, though not it would be less so now. It was a disaster for the Breen in general. So many hopes had been riding on this program, so many hopes and dreams, and so many ambitions.

"Destroy them," she heard herself order. "Destroy the Starfleeters and their Romulan pets!"

USS *Swiftsure*

"All ships, fall back!" ordered Falco. "Pick up the fighters, then fall back!"

The fighters began to maneuver, trying to land in their various motherships, a dangerous action under such conditions. But Falco would be damned if he'd leave anybody behind.

Suddenly, a light started flashing on H'kut's console. "Sir, I'm reading survivors on the *Alabama*," he said.

Falco's head snapped up, a look of shock on his face, followed then by a look of joy. Then he composed himself and looked at the helm. "Set a course for the *Alabama*," he ordered. "Prepare to beam her survivors directly to sickbay!"

And so the *Swiftsure* began her mad quest, flying through the thickest part of the remaining Breen fleet as the Starfleet ships started to warp out. Phasers flailed out, and torpedoes smashed into Breen ships, trying to force the Breen to keep their distance.

Suddenly, the Breen started firing back. Disruptor after disruptor pounded on the *Swiftsure*, but the shields held.

"Aligning shield nutation with the *Alabama*," said Wallace.

"Sickbay reports that they have them," said H'kut.

"Let's get out of here," said Falco.

Main Shuttlebay

Maro managed to--barely--avoid the enemy fire and flew into the shuttlebay, no mean feat. She breathed a sigh of relief as she glided to the docking berth. She'd made it. Unlike so many others.

The ship rocked and jerked as hit after hit pounded into the beleaguered shields. She just hoped that they would get out soon.

Main Bridge

"Set course for Starbase 521," said Falco, "warp--"

And then the bridge heaved. Enough hits had landed to start to tear a hole in the shield directly behind the bridge, and a freak shot from one of the dreadnaughts managed to take advantage of that brief window of opportunity. And the resultant surge turned the aft MSD on the bridge to that much flying shrapnel.

Falco felt *something* land in his neck, and then he felt nothing at all.

"No!" shouted Wallace as Mar'zief slumped forward. Then let out a breath that he hadn't known that he was holding; his captain was still breathing. Ian slapped his badge. "Corpsmen to the bridge!" he ordered over the comm. "We have wounded here, three casualties."

"Understood," said Dr. Brown over the com. "I'll send some up straightaway."

Wallace looked around the bridge; they were all looking at him for orders. "Let's leave them a parting gift," he snarled, slipping back into his seat. "As soon as I fire the aft torpedoes, go to maximum warp."

"Aye sir," said the helmsman."

"Firing...now!"

Breen Flagship

Jugartha 'smiled' as a hit finally scored on that *Sovereign*. Those ships had amazingly tough shields, but the atmosphere trailing off was the surest sign that at least some compartment had been breached. Even if her capabilities hadn't been impaired any.

"I'm reading a power spike in their aft hull!" shouted one of the sensor operators. Jugartha snarled at the screen. Twenty-four photon torpedoes sped out of their lower aft tubes, followed by another nine from those 'pulse-fire' tubes that intelligence had warned her about. And then that *Sovereign* had the audacity to leap into warp as her weapons rained destruction on what was left of the Breen fleet.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

Wallace watched as the corpsmen took away Mar'zief. He was fighting hard to keep back the tears; it would not have suited an XO to cry on the bridge, especially when his captain was...indisposed.

The corpsmen scanned Falco and the others and muttered to themselves as they placed transponder tags onto the wounded. One of them slapped his badge. "Five to beam to sickbay," he said.

Wallace sat down in the center seat. *Not again...* he thought. *Oh God, not again...*

Chapter Four

USS *Swiftsure* Sickbay

Falco opened his right eye, to find himself in sickbay. "Again..." he said, his voice sounding oddly slurred. He tried to open his other eye.

Nothing.

And that was when he realized. On the right side of his body, he could feel the slight movement of air, the chill of the sickbay.

On his left, he felt nothing.

He wiggled his right fingers, and then tried his left. He wasn't surprised when they didn't move.

"Ah, you're awake," said Dr. Brown as he approached--from the right, Falco noticed.

"Doctor, what's wrong with me?" Falco asked desperately.

Brown closed his eyes; he did *not* want to give this diagnosis.

"Doctor..."

"Sorry sir," said Brown finally. "You know how most lifeforms on Cait evolved what are essentially two spinal columns in their necks?"

"Yes..."

"That piece of shrapnel severed your left nerve column. Your autonomic functions are still working, because your species evolved so that both could carry on the basic life functions independently of the other, but your voluntary muscles and your senses on the left side of your body can't function without it."

"Is there any way to fix it?" asked Falco.

"I've got some ideas," responded Brown, "but I want to confer with doctors on your homeworld first. Surely this type of injury has occurred before on your world."

"I'm sure." Falco paused. "Where's Ian?" he asked.

Maro's Quarters

Maro's door chimed; "Come in," she said. Imaden walked into the room.

"Thank you sir," said the chief petty officer to Maro; the Andorian grimaced. Imaden looked around. "Where's your bunkmates?"

Maro chuckled to herself. "On duty."

"Ah," said Imaden. She drew a deep breath. "You're a good pilot," the older woman continued. "I hate to lose you."

Maro shrugged, a human gesture she'd picked up. "Now that we're here at starbase, we can pick up a lot of pilots who are a hell of a lot better than me."

Imaden smiled in rueful agreement. "It *will* be nice to transfer command over to someone else. But I stand by what I said; they're better trained than you, yes, but you're a natural. You'd go far in Fighter Ops. What you did against those weapon mounts during the bombing run..."

"I just don't feel comfortable in something that small, not in combat."

"I'm just asking you to consider your options."

Maro sighed. "Chief, I was glad to fill in after Jameson died. But whatever you think, I just don't feel that I'm cut out to be a fighter ace."

Imaden looked a little sad, but nodded in understanding. "Well, I won't push you Ensign. So, you're taking the *Swiftly's* helm again?"

"Of course."

"Good luck."

"Thanks, and you too."

As Imaden left, Maro sat down on her bed and wondered if she'd just thrown her career away.

Sickbay

Wallace followed Brown into sickbay as soon as he'd contacted Captain Harkness and told him that Falco was awake.

"Commander," said Brown, "I've got the Captain over here, in the more private

surgical chamber."

"How is he?" asked Wallace, following Brown to the surgical chamber.

"The paralysis is...severe. He is unable to feel anything in or move his left side, and I'm not sure how long it'll be before he's back in on his feet. He's asked to speak to you. Am I correct in understanding that Captain Harkness will be joining you?"

"Yes. He's coming from his quarters now."

"I'll give you ten minutes after he arrives in Sickbay. Then you'll both have to leave the captain. I've a lot of work to do."

"Of course, doctor. Can I go in?" Wallace looked through the glass wall that separated the surgical bay from the rest of sickbay. The glass was covered with the Starfleet emblem, a small degree of visual privacy.

"By all means. I'll be out here, tending the other cases if you need me. Just remember to keep to his right side."

Walking in, Wallace headed for the right side of the biobed. "How are you feeling, sir?" he asked.

"I've been better Ian." Falco turned his head slightly to look at his XO.

"So I gather. I really wish you'd stop ending up in here...I've got a report on the ship. Would you like me to give you the gist of it?" Wallace pulled a stool up to the biobed and sat on it.

"If you wouldn't mind," Falco replied dryly.

Wallace took a breath. "Kentar says that most of the damage will be repaired within a couple of days. We fared much better than most of the rest of the task force. Only a few hits got past our shields. You know about one of them..." Wallace trailed off.

"Go on."

"We're getting torpedo reloads as we speak. We lost fifteen people this time, mostly pilots. I wrote most of the letters to their families on the way back from the Black Cluster, but I haven't sent them off; I thought you would like to make some additions or changes to them." Wallace looked up from the PADD he was holding.

"Thanks Ian. I'll see if I can get the doctor to let me look at them before tonight.

The families deserve to be told quickly. Please continue."

"Nothing else to add really...ah, looks like Captain Harkness is here. I...I'll leave you two to talk. The PADD is beside your hand." Wallace stood up as Harkness entered the surgical bay. "Sir," he said to the other captain, nodding his head.

"Commander"

"I'll be leaving then."

"Until later, Commander." Harkness turned to look at Falco as Wallace left. "Well old friend, how are you?"

"As I said to Ian, I've been better."

"I've warned you about those consoles Marz."

Falco tried to smile, but it was even more awkward than usual.

"I'm sorry about the *Alabama*," said Mar'zief finally.

Harkness lowered his eyes. "It's my own damn fault."

"How many did you lose?"

Harkness sighed. "Three fifths dead, and half of the survivors wounded..." he closed his eyes, fighting back his tears.

"I heard that the *Swift*'ll be launching soon. Have you heard who's going be commanding her during my convalescence?"

Harkness smiled briefly. "Funny you should mention that..."

Main Bridge

Harkness stepped off the turbolift and onto his new bridge. He hoped that he was ready...

Harkness walked over to the command chair. "We have our orders people. Starfleet's decided that we should launch despite our damage. "Mr. Maro, take us out."

"Aye, sir," replied Maro. "Docking clamps released, all moorings clear. Proceeding ahead, one quarter impulse."

"Set a course for Malthab IV, near the DMZ. Maximum Warp."

Wallace leaned over from the first officer's chair. "Sir, what's at Malthab IV?" he asked, *sotto voce*.

"The invasion fleet," replied Harkness.

Breen Flagship

"Did she explain why she wished to meet with us?" asked Lethlan.

"No," replied Jugartha.

"Those Federation...I can't believe that Starfleet destroyed the prototype."

"You will not discuss that with *her* aboard the ship.

Lethlan hissed in embarrassment. "Of course, Thotha. I was in error."

The doors swooshed open, revealing the human woman, who had never identified herself, and a man that Jugartha had never seen before. The man was carrying a PADD under his arm.

"Thank you for meeting us on such short notice," said the woman.

"You have aided our efforts greatly," replied Jugartha. "It would behoove us to listen to anything that you might have to say."

The woman smiled. "Of course. Now for business." She gestured toward her companion. "If you would?"

The man walked forward. "These are technologies that our...operatives have stolen from Starfleet. Starfleet has no desire to use this technology, other than to develop countermeasures, and they haven't progressed very far even in that regard." He handed the PADD over to Lethlan, and the two Breen looked considered the schematics that they saw.

"Are these figures accurate?" asked Lethlan, not even looking up from the PADD.

"Yes."

Jugartha finally tore her gaze from the PADD. "As I'm sure you know, the war just took a sudden and unexpected turn," she said. "We lost...several depots near the front; it will take months for us to reorganize our logistical train. But with these technologies, we could easily cut those months off the war effort."

The woman smiled. "Why do you think we're offering this technology to you? Neither of us can afford a Starfleet victory." She turned around to leave. "By the way," she added, "keep your eyes near Cardassian space." The doors closed behind them.

The man turned toward his superior and co-conspirator. "Why did we just give them those plans?" he asked.

"Insurance," she responded.

"Against whom?"

"Both of them. If Starfleet wins too quickly, we lose. And if the Breen win, we lose. With what we just gave the Breen, we can keep a leash around the both of them."

"You do realize what'll happen if we get caught, don't you? If this marvelous plan of wheels within wheels fails?"

"We'll likely be consigned to Tantalus for the rest of our lives. If we live that long." She patted the man on his shoulder, and smiled. "We'd best not get caught."

"Don't worry," she continued. "History will judge us in the right."