

Star Trek: The Breen War

PROLOGUE

“Every intelligent person in the world felt that disaster was impending and knew no way of averting it” -- HG Wells

USS *Swiftsure* Recreation Lounge

Commander Ian Wallace staggered into the lounge like a man suffering from premature rigor mortis. His knees were stiff as boards and his arms hurt like hell. But that's the punishment for spending seven hours in sickbay, pacing back and forth waiting for even the slightest news on the Captain's condition. Seven hours he should have been sleeping.

But none of that mattered. Not anymore.

In his entire Starfleet career, Ian Wallace had never faced anything like this. Ever. He'd though he had already seen so much in this war. All the death and destruction wrought by the Breen. But all of it paled in comparison to the injury to one man. His mentor, no, his friend was in sickbay right now, facing a life of misery and pain unendurable. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Nothing he had trained for prepared him for this.

Ian Wallace walked into the lounge not as a Starfleet officer, but merely a man. A man without purpose in duty or life. What was he going to do should the worst happen? What would the reaction be? Did anyone care enough in this war for one man anymore?

Wallace slowly moved to a table at the far end of the lounge, as far away from any living contact he could manage. Why he hadn't simply gone back to his quarters to rest would be a question that would elude him for the rest of his life. But he was in the lounge, and in the lounge he stayed. He looked out the large windows at the panorama of stars speeding around the *Swiftsure* at an incredible rate. They were well on their way to Malthab Four, where they were to rendezvous with the fleet for an operation he was not yet privy to. Only the captain knew what was really going on.

Well... not THE captain. In Falco's absence from the center seat, Captain Harkness was unceremoniously thrown onto the *Swiftsure* only hours after the destruction of his beloved *Alabama*. Wallace respected the man's authority, but he would never really acknowledge Jacob like he would Mar'zief Falco. It just didn't feel right at all answering to the man. But duty required he did, so he had no choice.

Unfortunately, Wallace was too far lost in his reverie to notice that his formerly empty table was slowly beginning to fill with people. It wasn't until a particularly large and clumsy ensign rocked the table (almost knocked it over, really) before Ian looked back from the stars to the gathering behind him.

"Dammit, James, why'd you disturb the commander?" shrieked a nervous sounding crewman. The tall ensign looked sheepish and particularly frightened as Wallace's eyes drifted upward to gain a full view of him.

The ensign, one James Case, was a man who could easily contend with a Naussican should the need for physical violence erupt. Not burly, but not overly thin, Case was perhaps the most physically capable human on the ship... though he probably still couldn't take a Vulcan in fair combat.

Joining Case were three other crewmen, an enlisted Bolian woman, a human lieutenant, and another ensign who looked to be Case's exact opposite physically. The motley foursome sat down across from Wallace, ignoring his brusque manner in a similar fashion. They even went so far as to order some drinks from the nearby replicator.

It wasn't long before the group got comfortable enough to reveal nothing other than a plain deck of terran cards, exactly like the ones Wallace would use when he and the senior staff would play in their off times...

"Alright, boys," the female Bolian said as she passed out a single card to each player, "The game is standard Alpha Centauri Poker. King's wild rule."

"Aw crap," whined the other ensign, "We'd be better off playing Fizzbin."

The group chuckled as they each received their five cards. Wallace was now intently watching the game. He wasn't too familiar with poker, but he was far from a dunce at it. He understood the general rules and regulations, and had even played a few games in his time. It was just that he preferred other games to poker, that's all.

It took several games before the small quad of crewmen realized that Wallace was watching them with an unblinking stare.

"You... want to join us, commander?" Ensign Case asked quietly.

Wallace sat still for a moment. He knew that he wasn't due to be on the bridge for at least an hour. But Falco was still in sickbay. And he desperately needed some sleep lest he fall over in exhaustion.

"I'm in."

The players nervously chuckled as Wallace was dealt his hand. He held his cards casually, carefully hiding each of them from the other players. Fortunately, his exhausted state allowed him to put on a rather flawless poker face, even though his eyebrows sometimes drooped over his field of vision every few seconds.

The players went round several times, each of them making calculated moves in removing and taking new cards. Wallace's hand was a wild collection of numbered cards that he knew didn't have any real value in poker. When it came to him, he simply discarded his three lowest numbers for three new cards.

The lieutenant smiled a wide grin and turned to everyone at the table.

"Let's make this more interesting. Everyone bet some of their allotted holodeck time to the pot. Winner takes all."

Wallace smiled inwardly at that. This kid had a good attitude. Eventually, even the nervous ensign Case put in some time, filling the pot to seventeen undisturbed hours in the *Swiftsure's* main holodeck. And for someone with Wallace's busy schedule, that meant an entire week of free time when not on duty. For the first time in many hours, Ian Wallace felt invigorated and elated. And if he knew these cards as well as he thought he did, he had a fighting chance!

"Show 'em," called the Bolian dealer after a moment.

Everyone lay their cards on the table at once, with different hands of all kind. Case immediately threw his hands up in despair, and the dealer emitted a moan of anguish. The lieutenant and ensign looked on shocked and awed, their eyes locked... on Wallace's hand.

"What? Is this good?" Ian looked genuinely confused, a rare thing for superior officers to do among juniors. Had they been smart, they would have recorded this moment to show to the rest of the junior staff, but they were all too fixed on the collection of cards.

"Sir... according to Alpha Centauri rules, you just won." Case said softly.

Ian had to look twice at his hand. To him, they just looked like random numbers.

"I don't get it."

The lieutenant cleared his throat and slid his body over to Wallace and rearranged the cards to appear in numerical order from largest to smallest. They were all in sequence from ten down to six.

“You’ve got a quadrant run, sir. It sure beats the hell out of all our hands. ”

Ian had to consciously smash his instinct to jump up and whoop for joy at the revelation, but he immediately felt a pang of guilt as he thought about it. Captain Falco was still suffering in sickbay while he was here playing games.

But maybe that’s what he would have wanted you to do, Ian thought to himself.

Fortunately, to the outside world, Wallace’s face remained cool and impassive in the face of his victory. The dealer and ensign left the table in defeat, going straight back to the replicator to fill their drinks. Wallace only sat as still as he had done when he arrived at the table.

“So, what are you going to do with all that holodeck time, sir?” Case eventually asked.

Wallace looked on, completely ignoring the Ensign’s question. At least for a short time. His eyes locked on a tiny speck off in the distance.

“What...?” he whispered quietly, “Is that?”

“Sir?” the ensign asked, straining to see what the commander was seeing.

Commander Wallace turned to the gathered crewmen and without sparing a glance back stood from his chair and bolted out the lounge’s door.

“Now what was that all about?” Case asked, gathering the cards into his large hands.

“Beats me. Maybe he forgot his shift-“

Case’s counterpart was cut by the now familiar sound of the *Swiftsure’s* red alert klaxon. The unfamiliar voice of Captain Harkness overtook every audio output device only a moment later.

“All hands, this is Captain Harkness. Red alert. All hands to your duty stations.”

CHAPTER ONE

USS *Swiftsure* En route to Malthab IV

The Bridge it was quiet. Not completely silent, mind you, just quiet with growing anticipation. The calm before the storm, so to speak.

Jacob Harkness sat alone in a ready room meant for someone else. Falco's personal touches were still in place. The slightly lower aligned desk was his greatest bit of discomfort, but he knew better than to replace it. This wasn't HIS desk from the *Alabama*. His desk was nothing more than a few scattered atoms by now, if he knew Starfleet's decommissioning schedule. First, a crack team of dedicated officers would scour the ship in one last, desperate attempt to find survivors before simply clearing out any remains that were left from the battle. Then the ship would be stripped of any surviving conduits, torpedoes, or sensor equipment. And then it would be simply sent through a starbase and molecularly deconstructed for various other materials.

His ship was worth nothing more to Starfleet than replacement parts.

That one thought ran through his mind more than any other. When did Starfleet start caring more for its ships than the people? When did the weapons specifications and warp core outputs overshadow the people that actually ran them? What about the God-damned PEOPLE!?

Jacob Harkness smashed his fist onto Falco's desk with his entire weight and frustration. Unfortunately, he didn't notice the hairline fracture it left on the clear surface.

Harkness couldn't help but to close his eyes for a few minutes afterward. It had been only eight days since that battle. That moment he sent nearly eighty good men and women to an early grave in space. All so he could keep a battle continuing. A battle where, besides his crew's noble sacrifice, nearly a thousand other brave Starfleet and Romulan soldiers laid down their lives in a nearly hopeless struggle to bring down that... abomination. That THING the Breen built.

The war hadn't been raging for two months, and Harkness was already feeling like someone who's been on the frontlines for decades. He guessed it was just the stress of recent days. That had to be it. Fortunately, he did have the one consolation in knowing that the majority of the (relatively) uninjured survivors of the *Alabama* were now aboard the *Swiftsure* with him.

Not as if that made any damn difference, though.

Unfortunately, Harkness's reverie did not last long at all. Just as he slipped into that one darkest moment, he was forced out by the incessant chirp of his commbadge and the unmistakable voice of his new XO.

"Captain," Commander Wallace's disembodied voice filtered in, "We've reached the target... You'd better get up here."

Harkness sighed and began to stand from under the too-short table, smashing his knees into the hard glass surface. Gritting in pain, he used the adrenaline to stand and nearly hop out of the ready room and into the busy bridge. He hid the slight limp caused by the pain by walking at an exaggeratedly slow pace.

The first thing he noticed was that Wallace had the center chair. The rest of the bridge crew were all manning their stations with the dedication and discipline he so admired and respected of Falco. He ran one hell of a tight ship when it came down to it.

"Have our hails been answered?" He asked, slowly making his way to the chair he had to man.

"Not a single one, Captain." Wallace was slow in getting the picture, his eyes focused on the object spinning in the viewscreen. Harkness had to clear his throat several times to get the commander's attention. Wallace blushed before relinquishing the seat and heading to his own assigned location.

Harkness took his chair after a long moment of looking at it. He kidded himself in thinking that maybe some of Marz's hair was sticking through the fabric, and that may give him some connection to the real captain of this ship. But no dice on that. Like everyone else, the sanitation team and Falco's own personal hygiene were above such things.

"Sir, we're receiving a distress call, audio only!" the ops officer suddenly shouted. "It's coming from the target!"

Harkness looked dead straight at the spinning object. A burned hulk of a Starfleet ship, Defiant-class, was slowly filling up the entire screen.

"Put it on."

"This is the USS *Cobra* to all ships. We're...vily damaged and require imme...ssitance. I repeat, this is the USS...heavily damaged and require..." The message faded into static before starting over again.

"Sir the message just repeats over and over. It must be an automated beacon," said... H'Kut, turning the volume of the distress call down to a level that would

permit normal conversation.

"Very well," Harkness stood up to issue his first official command on the *Swiftsure*, "Prepare survey and repair teams. Beam them down the instant they report to transporter room three."

"Aye," Wallace confirmed before leaving the bridge to complete the order.

"Helm, put us in a standard orbit of the target and prepare to extend our shields around theirs. Weapons, keep your eyes peeled. We don't need any surprises out here."

The bridge crew quietly accepted their orders before setting out on their duties.

"I'll be in my ready room pending any updates. I want to spend as little time there as possible. We can't afford to be late." Harkness ordered before walking back towards the ready room.

The *Swiftsure* gracefully made a steep turn around the *Cobra*, turning her impressive port side to the comparatively diminutive vessel.

In contrast to the gleaming beauty of the *Sovereign's* hull, the *Defiant's* hull was scorched from weapons fire, blackened and horribly bruised. But from the looks of it, she had given much more than she had received. The remains of four Breen frigates were in the immediate vicinity, slowly floating away into the black void of space.

"Report," said Harkness, once again sitting in the center chair. Wallace was down in Transporter Room three, waiting to beam over with the first of the repair teams, and had just signaled the bridge.

"Sensors indicate 38 lifesigns aboard. The ship's warp drive and shields are offline. Her impulse engines are damaged, but still operational. Their communications systems are down. The distress beacon is just about the only functioning technology. Judging from those wrecked Breen frigates in the area, it appears as if the *Cobra* was ambushed while on patrol," replied H'Kut, studying his console.

"Bridge to Wallace. You and the repair teams may beam over to the *Cobra*," said Harkness, studying the Defiant class vessel on the view screen.

USS Cobra Bridge

The *Cobra's* bridge was a mess beyond disaster. Consoles were thrown around like a demented child's tantrum, smashed through bulkheads and even other consoles. Ruptured conduits spewed smoke and sparks in all directions, making it nearly impossible to see more than two feet ahead. The already strained life support systems made an eerie creaking noise as the team materialized, adding to the charged atmosphere.

"Alright, let's get this under control," the head of the repair team, Lieutenant Baxter, commanded to his team. Wallace stepped out of their way and, after clicking his wrist-mounted light on, began to search for survivors. Of course, the medical teams assigned to this duty would be shortly arriving, but he felt as if he had no higher duty.

Unfortunately, the walls of the bridge were almost a complete uniform black from the constant charring of ruptured power conduits and ventilators. His light had a hard enough time penetrating the smoke, but the color of the cramped room was too much. He moved to click it off.

But he stopped when he heard the unmistakable groan of a human in pain. The sound came from a pile of charred rubble that had once been the center seat, so Wallace had to nearly jump over two piles nearly up to his waist to get to the source of the groan.

"I got a wounded man here!" he shouted to the oblivious repair team, prompting them to halt their chores and help him.

Within moments, the debris was cleared and the tattered remains of a Starfleet uniform began to take shape. Wallace paid no heed to the man's rank or his position at first. He just needed to revive him.

"Wallace to sickbay, beam over an emergency water container and a first aid kit."

"Aye, sir." Came the quiet reply moments later. And not a second after that, Wallace's requested items appeared next to him. The commander spared no time in popping the lid off of the water container and feeding it to the lips of the unconscious officer.

The water awoke the man a few seconds later, slowly gaining the necessary strength to sit up on his own and take the water into his hands, downing it in several short gulps. Wallace took the time to notice the rank of the man, lieutenant commander.

"Commander, I'm Ian Wallace of the USS *Swiftsure*. Are you in charge here?" he

asked.

The crewman finished the water and lazily tossed it aside before replying.

"Yes sir. The Bridge crew was killed during the battle. I was the highest ranking officer onboard. Are you able to send more help? Are there any others? We've been hit so bad..." The Lieutenant Commander quickly said while trying to salute. Unfortunately, his arm appeared to be broken, and his cry of agony when it popped upon the attempt confirmed it.

"Don't worry, Commander. You'll be safe soon enough." Wallace said while opening the medical kit, "And you are?"

"Lieutenant Commander Evesham, Chief Engineer. Well... I was chief engineer. I'm not sure there's an engineering any more, now."

"We've got more repair teams beaming aboard as we speak, commander. Unfortunately, we won't be able to stay for long; we're due to meet up with the fleet at Malthab IV. We'll be able to help for another hour at the most." Wallace looked about the Bridge. The bodies of the former Bridge crew had been taken away, leaving the Bridge clear for repairs. "How long ago were you attacked?"

"Twelve hours. We were on patrol when four frigates jumped us from the gas giant where they had been hiding in the atmosphere. I'm not sure why, but our sensors were unable to penetrate far enough inside the atmosphere to detect them."

"Well, Evesham. You can give me more details while we get this ship back to relative health. Right now, we need to get this Bridge back in working order," said Wallace, injecting the junior officer with a mild painkiller. Just enough to get him on his feet. "Can you stand?"

Evesham looked pained at first, and clutching his injured arm, he slowly got to his feet. For the first time, he noticed the burning ruin his bridge had become.

"Oh, God."

Wallace watched as Evesham's eyes began to blur with tears, but he didn't move to stop them.

After several minutes of quiet reflection, Evesham slowly turned to Wallace. "Pardon me sir, but what type of ship is the *Swiftsure*?"

"She's a *Sovereign*. Don't worry, Evesham, you're in safe hands." He made sure to leave out the 'For now' part of the sentence.

"I hope so."

* * *

An hour later, the numerous repair teams had finally managed to get one of the warp nacelles back online and the other in good condition. Much of the internal damage had been repaired, but no one was kidding themselves. She would still need a week in drydock to be fully repaired, but it was looking more and more like she was destined for the scrap yards with each passing moment.

Wallace had managed to join another medical team in rounding up the rest of the thirty-odd survivors. It was slow going, and he feared that they were draining the *Swiftsure's* medical supplies much too quickly, but he did not give up for a second. Unfortunately, as he was just kneeling down next to an already dead ensign, his comm Badge beeped.

"*Swiftsure* to Commander Wallace," Harkness's voice suddenly blared. In the near silence of the *Cobra*, even the faintest comm. message was ear-splittingly loud.

Slowly standing up, popping his stressed knees, Wallace tapped his comm badge. "Yes sir?"

"Our time's up Commander. We need to be going."

"Sir, the *Cobra* still doesn't have shields or warp drive. She'll be a sitting duck for any Breen ship that happens across her," protested Wallace.

"I'm well aware of that, but our orders were specific. The *Swiftsure* has to leave now."

"Then a pair of repair teams and me stay and help them. We'll be able to get the shields and warp drive up much quicker than if we leave them." Wallace looked over at Evesham. The engineer was working at a console, dogged as ever, even though his arm was stuck in a clear cast. As he watched, it flickered once or twice before coming back online.

"I'm afraid not. We'll need you at tactical." Harkness's voice had a touch of urgency in it.

"Then may I suggest we take her with us, sir? Malthab four isn't too far away, and we'll make it even at low warp," Wallace tried. If anything, they would be able to gut the ship and use it to restock the ship when they reached the rendezvous.

Harkness was silent for several seconds before replying.

"Very well, Commander. We'll leave you three teams. I expect to see you back in your place before long though. *Swiftsure* out."

Wallace turned back to the last console that needed repairing on the Bridge, weathering the harsh rattle that came from the *Swiftsure* locking her tractor beam on the smaller vessel.

"Ok, Evesham, I think you better get to Engineering. We'll need shields back before warp drive. I'll finish up here with Kiska and Benson."

"Aye sir," said Evesham as he moved to the turbolift.

CHAPTER TWO

USS *Swiftsure* En route to Malthab IV

Harkness was edgy. He already didn't like the idea of dragging a ship along at low warp, even such a small ship like the *Cobra* pulled by the mighty *Swiftsure*. If a single calculation was wrong... If a single component malfunctioned...

No. He had to push it from his mind. Ian was a good officer working on a ship that could even possibly turn the tide, should they get it in working order in... how many hours?

"Helm, ETA at Malthab system?"

The Andorian slowly turned from the helm, her eyes not hiding the suspicion of the new captain. Nevertheless, she answered, "47 minutes, sir."

Harkness smiled and waved his hand vaguely forward, giving Maro permission to return to her duties. The captain began to recline the slightest bit in his new chair. The one perk of this new ship, the only perk he allowed himself to indulge, was that this center seat was much more comfortable than his beloved *Alabama*. But it didn't have the same charm. Or his custom-installed cup holder, a simple practical joke that became one of the signatures of his bridge. Harkness could not help smiling at the memory...

Until a sudden beeping from the comms station attracted everyone's attention. The officer stationed there pressed his hand to his ear, and the earpiece.

"Captain, it's the *Cobra*. They're experiencing a major engine failure!"

Harkness leapt up.

"Helm, drop out of warp and alter course, 180 mark 0! Disengage tractor beam!"

"Aye, sir!"

The *Swiftsure* dropped out of warp. Impulse engines flaring, and RCS thrusters at full power, she swung about, dropping the smaller ship without much ceremony.

"Ian!" Harkness shouted. But only silence greeted his' message. "Commander Wallace, respond!"

USS *Cobra* Open Space

"Kiska, what the hell just happened?" asked Wallace, sitting in the ripped and scorched command chair. Several members of the repair teams had graciously volunteered to take over most of the *Cobra's* command functions in their time away from starbase. So for several hours now, Ian Wallace was in command of a ship of his own... even if it was being dragged along like a sack of potatoes by another vessel.

"I don't have a clue!" A rattling vibration was slowly overtaking everything, slowly degrading the freshly repaired conduits and bulkheads. Sparks flew from the empty Science station and smoke was once again filling the lungs of everyone on the bridge.

"Bridge to Engineering. What's going on?"

"Drive plasma's pouring from the rent in our port nacelle." Evesham said through the damaged comm, "The warp coils are buckling!"

Wallace blanched at the news. It was just a freak accident. But such a deadly one...

"Ian!" came Harkness's static-filled voice. "Commander Wallace!"

Wallace stood as he tapped his badge. He knew his own return signals would be read loud and clear by the *Swiftsure* and was prepared for the noisy feedback any incoming signals would incur. They just didn't have the time to fix everything.

"We're in bad shape, sir," he said, "Warp drive's just fallen apart."

Wallace grimaced at saying that. It was hard enough admitting that. How hard was it for Harkness just a few days ago?

"Very well, *Cobra*," Harkness's interfered voice said, "Prepare to be beamed aboard. We'll leave her here and overload the warp core."

There was a silence.

"Understood, Commander?"

Wallace stood there. This was a ship they had every opportunity to bring back from the brink. A bit of rebirth in a galaxy full of death. But here they were, ready to let it die like so many other ships. And they were so close to having it done...

"Sir, I'm going to have to not comply with your order."

Wallace stood, as the ship rattled from another plasma leak.

“Commander, is this a joke? We don’t have the time.”

“Captain, the situation is dire but hardly irrevocable. Just leave us here and we’ll rejoin you at Malthab.”

“No dice, Wallace. We need to go. Prepare the away teams to beam up as soon as possible.”

Wallace looked to the charred floor for what seemed like hours.

“Sir, at least let me salvage the phaser couplings and torpedoes. We may need them.”

Harkness's voice did not return for a long moment.

“Very well. But make it quick.”

Ian looked around at his temporary crew for a minute before looking at the barely functioning viewscreen, where the larger *Sovereign* class vessel hung directly in front of them, dominating them.

“All hands... cease all repair work and prepare to salvage all phaser couplings and weapons stores.”

“Sir?” Evesham’s voice asked.

“Direct orders from Captain Harkness.”

Evesham’s voice rung low and hard. Wallace had no idea what he must have been feeling. If anything, he guessed, it was a bit of unconscious closure for the loss of his *Alabama*. If he could show that it wasn’t just his ships that were left to such undignified fates, then maybe the universe wasn’t so unfair after all.

But that was a big crock, and he knew it.

“I’ll get right on it, then.” Evesham eventually said.

USS *Swiftsure* Open Space

“Sir,” said H’kut, immediately startling Harkness, “We’re receiving sketchy reports from some deep space sensor buoys.”

"From?" he asked, not taking his eyes from the viewscreen, where the miniscule *Cobra* hung dead in space.

"That's odd... they're from buoys one-beta-alpha and six-zeta-theta."

"Those are our sensor arrays set closest to the Cardassian border, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir. They're reporting sporadic Breen contact at varying intervals. They don't look like anything more than scout patrols."

Harkness shrugged it off his shoulders as best he could. Sure, more Breen movements near Cardassia were bad, but he had more pressing concerns. Wallace was dragging his feet like a stubborn kid with the *Cobra*, forcing them to further delay their arrival at Malthab. With any luck, they'd get there as soon as the fleet was moving out, narrowly avoiding the berating he would get from whatever admiral they were putting in charge of this thing.

But if his luck was in any way reflective of the world around him lately, that said fortune would be very bad indeed.

USS *Cobra*

Wallace had specifically asked for one of the repair teams to clean out one of the *Cobra's* crew quarters for him to use as an office of sorts. Mostly so he could coordinate all of their efforts to bring the ship back to life from the brink. But he also used it for another purpose, a ready room of sorts for meeting with his "staff". Which now only consisted of Evesham and Wallace himself.

"But thanks to Captain Harkness," the Commander began more to himself than anyone, "We're not going to be able to finish any repairs."

"And why the hell not?" Lieutenant Rogers, leader of the third repair team and de facto weapons officer, asked, "We were so close to getting her repaired enough to send back to Starbase 521."

"I know that. But Harkness's orders are clear."

"For what? Where are they going that's so damn urgent?"

Wallace's eyes fell to his feet, down to the shredded carpet of the room.

"I don't know. But orders are orders."

Evesham's dark eyes welled with tears as Wallace continued.

“Everyone else has already been beamed aboard the *Swiftsure*. All we have to do is overload the warp core and get out of here.”

“It’s just not fair...” Evesham whispered to himself. “We were so close. All we needed to do was to realign the port plasma injectors...”

Wallace couldn’t help but smile as the gears began to move in his head.

“Is that all? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It would only have taken an hour or so at the longest.” Evesham completed.

“Get working on it. I’ll be on the bridge making one last calculation.”

“Sir?”

“Go as fast a possible. I’ll stall Harkness as long as possible. Trust me, we’re not letting this ship go so easily.”

USS *Swiftsure* Open Space near Malthab IV

Malthab Four was a dark planet. Broken, twisted landscapes covered her entire surface, covered with thick, volcanic clouds that stretched for thousands of miles. A single volcano, nearly fifty miles high, constantly spewed deep yellow magma onto the world’s surface, creating entire continents within the span of weeks.

The fury of the planet matched the aching, boiling anger that festered in Harkness at the moment. Wallace had stalled his beam out from the *Cobra* for nearly forty minutes, claiming that the warp core was still too unstable to overload, and the ship’s former engineering chief was working on it.

They were nearly an hour and a half late for the rendezvous, and there was no sign of the fleet.

Harkness had already had a severe talking to with Wallace during the short trip to the Malthab system, done at high warp to save as much time as possible. Wallace did not apologize for his actions, and put up an admirable case for making sure the ship never fell into Breen hands, but it was all for nothing in Harkness’s eyes. It was a breach of the chain of command, and if he ever expected to ever command his own ship, he’d better learn to follow it.

But that was when Wallace cut back with the words that stung with more venom than any tiberian bat could muster: "Captain Falco would agree with me, not you. I didn't want to see another *Alabama* disaster."

Harkness ended the debriefing right then and there, dismissing Wallace back to the bridge. It took several minutes for him to even think straight enough to form a coherent thought. Was he really just out to get vengeance for the loss of his ship? Was he that despicable?

Unfortunately, those thoughts were cut short by Wallace's comm voice.

"Captain, we've made contact with the fleet... You'd better come up here."

Harkness refused to answer for a moment, wishing to get back to his thoughts. He didn't want to go to a bridge where most of his own officers didn't trust him and where an irate admiral was most likely waiting to chew him out something fierce. Though he wouldn't lose this command, he certainly wasn't going to get away with no punishment for his tardiness.

"Sir?" Wallace asked after a long moment.

"I'm coming." Harkness said tersely. If he was going to face his punishment, it was going to be on his own terms. So he waited.

Bridge

Harkness walked onto the bridge slowly, trying to keep as much dignity in his command that he could before it was stripped away. He refused to look at the viewscreen, where he obviously would have seen the irate fleet waiting for him alone.

"Mr. Wallace, hail the commander of the fleet. Tell them we apologize for our timing, but we ran across some... unavoidable delays." Harkness made sure to not sit in the center seat, just to show the admiral he wasn't comfortably in charge anymore, to show that he was willing to accept his fate.

"Uh... Captain..." Wallace said with an air of abject confusion.

After a moment, Wallace looked up.

And he fell back into his seat, stumbling back onto his hands and arms.

"What...?"

On the viewscreen was an impossible sight. Something he hoped to never see in his life.

"My God..."

Floating in the black of space sat hundreds of Starfleet and Klingon ships. Burning. Pieces of ships of all types and sizes, from the smallest fighters to the gigantic Klingon battle cruisers all floated and smashed into one another, some of them even impacting the *Swiftsure's* hull.

"Any sign of survivors?" Harkness's voice was hushed and slow.

"We're picking up scrambled distress signals... half a dozen at most, but there's a lot of interference..."

The comm. system whistled and whined like an ancient radio searching through a myriad of frequencies. Eventually, almost painfully slowly, a tiny voice began to cut through on the speakers.

"...repeat, this is IKV Gr'Ika MoH. Breen forces...uge numbers... ambush... no sign on sensors... we had no idea...irect course...ardassia Prime...no chance...combat...all dead"

The Klingon voice slowly dissolved into static. As the dumbstruck crew stared out at the devastation before them, a Klingon vessel off in the distance exploded in a brilliant fireball, sending even more debris and flotsam into the *Swiftsure's* shields.

Wallace couldn't help but hold his tongue down, for fear of losing his stomach contents into the open field of the bridge. Harkness couldn't look away. Only a few hundred meters ahead of them was another *Nova* class vessel, torn to shreds much like the *Alabama*. Her hull was open in nearly two dozen places, spilling out atmosphere and dozens of little objects he never wanted to identify.

"How could they have known?" someone said.

Harkness forced himself to turn from the ghastly display, tearing his eyes away with a force of will he didn't know he had. His palms were sweating and his heart was sinking ever faster. How wrong he had been. He sat in complete silence.

"Communications," Wallace said with a voice so hoarse that it seemed to come from another person altogether, "Coded message to Starfleet command, priority one..."

Wallace looked out at the wreckage one last time.

"We've been betrayed."

CHAPTER THREE

USS *Swiftsure* Open Space near Malthab IV

The majestic *Sovereign* vessel slipped through a region of space littered with the carbonized hulks of starships and the tiny particles too ghastly to identify. A great number of them hammered the *Swiftsure*'s shields, causing her to slightly rumble and shake at short intervals.

Commander Wallace sat alone in the center of the Bridge. Harkness had long ago taken to his ready room, giving explicit instructions to not be disturbed save in an extreme emergency. With the captain gone, only seven beings remained on station, turning the bridge into a soundless void. Nobody was really taking about what had happened. They just manned their stations with the silent apprehension born of flying through a massacre field.

"I'm picking up the remains of nearly one hundred ships, both Klingon and Federation," said H'Kut, his voice low.

The viewscreen flicked back and forth between every possible sensor angle as H'Kut's observations were confirmed. In every picture, destruction reigned and death's hand was vividly apparent. Wallace made special note of several large, open holes in the sides of some of the larger hulks. They were almost all a uniform red and black, no matter which one he looked at, giving the impression of great, open wounds on the sides of the starships.

"H'Kut, run a full scan on those larger impacts." The commander ordered.

The Bolian nodded his acknowledgement before getting to work. He tapped several long sequences, each one ending with short, curt beeps. As he worked, the bridge once again rumbled as she slid past more starship rubble.

"I'm detecting trace amounts of energy... but it's too far degraded to identify it."

"Do the blast patterns match anything we've seen before?" the crew was well aware of his apprehension of another one of those behemoths out there.

Fortunately, H'Kut's answer was a reassuring head nod.

"No, nothing we've seen before from the Breen."

As the screen flipped to an angle just below the port nacelle, a tiny Federation scout vessel erupted in a silent fireball. Wallace swore he could hear the anguished cries of the tiny crew as he witnessed it... *if there were any living crew left...*

"How can we win if this happens again?" Maro asked, her voice tinged with an almost panicked demeanor.

Wallace took a deep, cleansing breath. He was frustrated enough with the whole thing. Hell, they probably all were. But adding panic to fear and anger was only brewing a mess of trouble.

"Thinking like that will not help, Lieutenant" he tried to console, but it came out as a near snap. Wallace immediately recoiled, but did not utter an apology. He leaned forward a bit to relax his stressed shoulders.

"Sorry sir," replied the Andorian, turning to her duties with intensity.

As she did, the ship rocked slightly as a rather large piece of debris impacted the shields. The sounds on the bridge increased for a moment as nervous crew members whispered to one another. Though he couldn't hear it all, the obvious notions of being ambushed and destroyed without warning were the main topics at hand.

Wallace stood up to relieve the stress on his knees, slowly pacing back and forth. The loud pops and cracks they gave became a welcome respite from the silence, and the bridge gave a collective sigh of relief for it.

"Sir?" a nervous lieutenant, Stokes, asked from a science console.

"Yes?"

"Sir, we can't keep sustaining these losses. If this happens again..."

The viewscreen suddenly shifted to a horrible sight.

"Oh... no..." a disconnected voice whispered.

Directly in front of the *Swiftsure* sat a twisted, mangled jumble too small to be a shuttlecraft, yet too large for simple debris. Shaped vaguely like a ball, the object floated slowly across the great ship's bow, almost immediately over the bridge, barely missing her hull by mere meters.

"That's..." Maro began to whisper, but couldn't finish.

"Survivors." Wallace finished.

No amount of Starfleet training could prepare anyone for that sight. Nearly fifty bodies of varying sexes and species were clumped together, huddled in a variety of death poses. Curiously, they were still held together by an outstretched arm

each, as if their sticking together in death's face would somehow make it more bearable.

"They appear to have been blown out from their ship at high velocity. Possibly a torpedo strike."

As if that was any consolation.

For a macabre moment, the image stayed on the forward screen. Fortunately, the resolution was kept at a low enough level so nobody could see the faces of the small band. Though it was easy to guess the abject terror and agony they must have expressed in their last moments.

Very fortunately, the image lasted only three seconds more, and then switched to an equally grim, but far less gruesome sight of a wing of destroyed Klingon birds of prey.

As the bridge returned to its silent state, Wallace went back to the center chair, slowly sitting back down.

Unfortunately, the relative peace was shattered when every alarm the *Swiftsure* was equipped with sounded and rang with gusto.

"What's going on?"

"We're picking up a series of warp signals, headed straight toward us!"

Wallace stared forward as the bridge crew quickly and efficiently went to full alert status. He only had to wait a second before Harkness was on the scene, bursting out of the ready room like a nest of frightened roaches.

"Report!" he simply ordered as he sat in the relinquished center seat.

"Multiple warp signatures, all headed this way." Wallace replied.

"Mr. Wallace, fire as soon as you have an adequate solution."

Harkness sat forward in the captain's chair as the crew got to work, staring out at the field before him. Oddly, the view from the electronically enhanced viewscreen was positively pleasant compared to the raw view from the ready room's window.

"Signatures entering the system... now." Ops reported.

"All hands, brace for weapon impacts."

Three tiny flashes of light appeared just at the edge of the system, slowly coalescing into distinct vessels.

...All Starfleet.

"They're ours!" said Wallace.

Compared to the silence from before, the sighs of relief and shouts of joy were deafening. The crew all smiled and clapped each other's backs. Even Harkness felt the relief. At least they wouldn't be fighting today.

"All hands," he said with no small amount of levity in his voice, "Stand down from battle stations."

Everyone on the bridge erupted into faint smiles and relieved glances at the viewscreen. Wallace himself allowed a half grin. No, it wasn't as if the entire fleet suddenly reassembled, but the sight of whole Starfleet ships in a cohesive group was a welcome sight indeed.

"Hail them." The captain confidently said.

"Too late," ops reported before pressing another button.

"USS *Alamo* to USS *Swiftsure*, better raise your shields, Falco. We're being followed!" Came the stuffy female voice of the *Alamo*'s captain, Cynthia Devries.

Without returning her hail or correcting the captain's information, Harkness simply leaned back in his chair and once again put the *Swiftsure* at red alert.

"Mr. Maro, intercept course."

"Aye."

Malthab IV

The stars above the tortured world were ripped apart and sewn together as a hearty wing of ten Breen vessels reverted to sub light speeds, all of them bearing down on the tiny group of three Starfleet vessels. The alien vessels were nothing but mere frigates and destroyers, literally nothing in a one-on-one skirmish between the assembled *Ambassador*, *Nova* and *Akira* class ships. But ten on three was a different matter.

They came in at full impulse, all weapons blazing. The larger *Ambassador* class, the *Thermopylae*, took the brunt of it all, turning her shields into a veritable light show of sparks.

The Federation vessels gave as good as they got, however. As the ten Breen vessels came back toward the trio of ships, five of them joined the endless field of debris littering the Malthab system.

The agile *Nova* class ship, *Hornburg*, leapt out from in between the other two Starfleet vessels, throwing photon torpedoes and striking with her phasers wildly. Only a scant few made any impact on the Breen's shields, but it was enough to distract them, turning their tight formation into a wild pattern of chaos.

It was a perfect opening for the majestic *Swiftsure* to fly into the middle of them, her powerful phaser banks decimating the weaker Breen's shields and her quantum torpedoes shredding the five hulls like tissue paper.

It was over in seconds.

USS Swiftsure Bridge

Harkness stared at a three-way split viewscreen between the captains of the other three vessels. *Alamo's* Devries, *Hornburg's* Talin and *Thermopylae's* Sonaii.

"We were on our way to the rendezvous when we spotted this group of Breen ships headed toward Cardassian space," Devries began, "But the *Thermopylae's* shuttle bays were fully loaded with special mines for use in the campaign."

"You mined their warp route." Wallace guessed.

"Indeed," the Vulcan captain of the *Thermopylae* agreed, "It was a satisfactory strategy."

"But these few were smart enough to stop a light year before the others, possibly to check for mines," Devries continued, "And they managed to follow us here."

There was a pause as Devries looked at a hidden monitor, her eyes welling with tears.

"My god... how could they have done this?"

"Believe me, Captain," Harkness said, standing before the large viewscreen, "I wish I knew. But right now, we have to plan our next move."

He began to pace as he ran off the information in his head.

“Obviously, Starfleet had no knowledge of this...incident until it happened, which implies an ambush of frightening efficiency.”

“Even the Klingon ships were caught off guard.” Wallace confirmed.

“Yes. So, that means the Breen are either employing a new sensor masking technology, or, based on our scans of the debris...”

“A new weapon.” Devries concluded. “Something so god-awful powerful that they tore through shields and armor alike.”

“Something like that would give the Breen a significant advantage over Starfleet in future engagements,” the Vulcan captain said, knowingly stating the obvious.

“And it’s safe to assume we’ll be seeing it in the near future.”

Harkness moved back to his chair and sat heavily upon it.

“It’s obvious Starfleet must be warned about this. But any time the bureaucracy spends in arguing it only adds to the time the Breen have to use the weapon on more unsuspecting targets.”

Devries studied her hidden monitor for a few moments before replying.

“We’ve been sending our sensor logs to Starfleet since we first engaged the Breen out of system, so they should know something soon.”

“The Klingons?” Wallace asked?

“That’s the tough one. They have to know about this ambush by now, and should be planning accordingly, but Klingon responses to such things are often less than...satisfactory by Starfleet standards.”

“I don’t know,” *Hornburg’s* captain finally spoke up, “Some people like the idea of seeing the Breen wiped off the map.”

“No... we can't consider that option,” Harkness calmly began. “The Breen are people, we can't forget that. Starfleet can't forget that.”

“Even if it means open war with the Klingons?”

“We all know it won’t lead to that, Captain. Our alliance wouldn’t allow it.”

Before the conversation went too far off topic, Wallace stood and cleared his throat.

“Captains, perhaps our next move is to continue on the mission the task force was meant to.”

Wallace was cut off by Devries’ rude laughter.

“Four ships to complete a mission of a hundred? You’ve got some ambition, Commander.”

“If you would let me finish, *sir*,” he added heavily, “I was going to suggest we continue the mission our individual ships would have completed.”

“Even if that mission was to fly straight into the center of Breen lines, now with no support from any other ships?”

“No... I hadn’t considered that.”

“Commander Wallace, not every ship is as powerful as the *Swiftsure*. We can’t all take on a dozen Breen cruisers alone and expect to survive.” Though her words were said with a tone of jest, her dead seriousness was apparent.

Harkness took Wallace’s place before anything else happened between the officers.

“Well, then. We seem to be at an impasse.”

Sensor Station Theta Cardassian Border

The lonely sensor station, a tiny little array of antennae and power generators, calmly monitored its tiny corner of the galaxy.

Built after the Dominion war, the gigantic arrays of stations were designed and built for the explicit purpose of monitoring the interior of Cardassian space, lest any Dominion surprises remained within their borders. So far in its career, nothing had been reported from this station save the average space debris and out-of-bounds private freighters.

Until its port power coupling was suddenly struck by a powerful disrupter blast, shredding the minute structure fully into halves.

Fortunately, the station was designed to withstand minor weapon impacts, just to record whatever it was intent on destroying it.

And the last image reported from the little array was an armada. An armada large enough that, despite the array's best efforts, it couldn't all be recorded in the last split second of the array's life.

USS *Swiftsure* Orbit of Malthab IV

The four ships remained in a still formation as her captains continually debated the next move of their little group and the new Breen weapon.

"What happens when they go after planets?" Harkness asked, "I don't think planetary shields can withstand much more than a few minutes with those things."

"Then we deal with that when it happens." Devries countered, "Since the Breen haven't attacked a single planet since Earth, I doubt that we'll have to worry about it."

Sonaii interjected with a short clearing of his throat. "The history of the Breen has shown them to be unpredictable. It is a distinct possibility that they are waiting for us to concentrate on their military to allow them to attack civilian targets more readily."

"True. They *do* seem to favor attacking morale more than anything else."

The captains sat quietly for a moment, lost in their dark thoughts. Again, all four bridges descended into silence as no one could think of a new argument or opinion to express.

It finally became so silent, that when H'Kut's console began to screech and flash warning lights, it seemed almost like a red alert klaxon.

"Sir...s, one of our listening posts on the Cardassian border has just been destroyed."

"Which one?" Harkness barked.

"Station Theta."

Wallace turned to face the Bolian. "That's the one closest to the Breen border."

"Yes," Harkness confirmed on his own monitor. His head flicked up and witnessed the other captains receiving the same information.

"Captains... I do believe we've found our objective."

But that wasn't the end of H'Kut's report.

"Sir, Starfleet has issued an official report that the Klingon Empire has ordered an entire fleet to Cardassia Prime."

Harkness eyebrows raised, along with the other captains. Something major was happening on Cardassia?

"ETA at maximum warp?"

"It would take us seven hours. We'd arrive about half an hour before them." The Bolian tapped at his console, making sure the information was up to date.

"Set a course and engage." Harkness ordered, confidently sitting back in his chair.

In orbit of the broken world, the four starships all leapt into warp speed one after another, leaving the broken remains of the fleets behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

USS *Swiftsure* Bridge

Seven hours later, the bridge was electric with the growing anticipation of arriving on Cardassia.

The *Alamo* and *Hornburg* were in a tight formation with the *Swiftsure*, keeping their sensor profiles as small as possible. The *Thermopylae* kept a two light year distance behind, both to cover the rear of the formation, but to turn to warn Starfleet should the situation prove a disaster.

H'Kut tapped his console as the countdown reached zero.

"Entering Cardassian system, sir." He reported.

Harkness sat upright in his chair at the announcement, fully aware and alert. Beside him, Wallace finished several last minute adjustments to his weapons console, putting it into synch with the official station several meters away.

"Do a full sensor scan, mister H'Kut." The captain ordered.

"Aye, sir."

On the screen, the space around Cardassia Prime was revealed.

"Oh no..."

The entire planet was under assault from a massive Breen fleet well over one hundred strong. The wreckage of newly destroyed ships still burned their atmospheres out and warp core plasma exploded. The surface was pockmarked with craters and burning circles well over three kilometers in diameter.

For a brief moment, the memory of the flames of Earth suddenly filled Harkness's mind.

"Not again..."

Unfortunately, the final terms for the end of the Dominion war included the near disassembly of the Cardassian fleet. Only tiny forces of home defense ships were permitted to be in their service at any time, lest the Federation cut off all relief supplies to the beleaguered world. This was a decision he now immediately regretted.

On the screen, a lone *Galor* class vessel remained in working order, desperately firing all of its weapons at any Breen ship that came too near. Unfortunately, the poor vessel was already leaking atmosphere through several rents and breaches in her hull.

Sixteen Breen ships broke from the main formation to assault the lone ship, firing dozens upon dozens of disrupter blasts into its hull. In the end, the last Cardassian defender lasted only ten seconds before joining her sisters in death.

"The attack fleet is approximately one hundred and fifty in strength," said H'kut. "Fifty frigates, and a hundred destroyers and battlecruisers." He tapped a few more buttons. "It looks like they took out the Starfleet occupation force first, sir," he said. "And then they started firing on the Cardassians."

"What are they planning?" mused Harkness. "That isn't nearly the strength of a bombardment fleet, but it's way too strong for a regular battle group. And why Cardassia?" And then it hit him. They want allies."

"Sir?" asked Wallace.

"We've hit them hard, harder than they expected, so they went to someone that they felt would be a natural enemy of the Federation."

"So why didn't the Cardassians join them?"

Harkness shrugged. "God knows they don't care about treaties. My guess is, they don't a repeat of the last time Starfleet launched an assault on Cardassia."

Wallace stood to get a better view of the battle. From behind the world, a modest fleet of more Cardassian ships arrived, immediately engaging the Breen with a vengeance.

"Looks like the reserve Cardassian Home Fleet has arrived."

"How many?"

"Just forty." Wallace's heart sank as he read the report. They'd be surely destroyed like the previous fleet.

Harkness watched the viewscreen as the battle began, as the carnage happened anew.

Slowly, however, his gaze shifted to the wreckage of a *Galor*-class ship drifting through the Breen fleet, watching it as it drifted precisely through their ranks.

"*Swiftsure* to *Thermopylae*." He said, tapping his commbadge, "Captain Sonaii, how are your cargo transporter systems?"

"Fully functional, Captain Harkness." The Vulcan replied after a second, "But I fail to see the pertinence of that information."

"Stand by." He said before turning to the very confused Wallace.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

"Whatever do you mean, commander?" he asked innocently. "We're just going to hit the Breen where it hurts."

Captain Sonaii sent an impatient cough to clarify his still open comm line.

"*Swiftsure*, if you are implying I beam the remaining mines onto the Breen vessels, I suggest you rethink the strategy. My ship cannot withstand the weapons fire"

Harkness smiled, grimly.

"You won't have to, Captain, trust me. We've got 25 minutes before the Klingon fleet arrives. We have to hold out for that long, by any means necessary. On my mark, set your transporters to transport a single mine to each coordinate our computer sends. Follow us when the range gets too long."

Sonaii looked confused, but did not speak out.

"Understood, Captain Harkness."

"Excellent. *Swiftsure* out."

Harkness turned to the helm.

"Lieutenant Maro, set a course that takes us as close to as many wrecks as you can. Be ready with evasive manoeuvres. When we start to move, this whole area is going to turn into a shooting gallery... and we're the targets."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Wallace, ready all weapons to fire. Engineering, prepare to put everything you've got into the engines."

Harkness waited one last second, watching the Cardassians fall before the unstoppable wall of the Breen lines.

"Helm... engage!"

The *Swiftsure* and the *Thermopylae* leapt forward, out of the protection of deep space.

Into the gauntlet, they went.

As soon as they got into range, Breen pulse weapons began to stream out at them, torpedoes and energy-dampeners adding to the fray. The *Swiftsure's* strong shields took the impacts, not slowing down for a second.

"Sir," communications reported, "The Cardassian fleet is hailing us, thanking Starfleet for its timely assistance."

"Give them a simple affirmative H'kut."

"Aye."

The *Thermopylae* took a direct hit to the engineering hull from a stray frigate, but continued on, ignoring the gases that streamed from the breach.

The *Swiftsure* was immediately on the enemy ship, turning it into wreckage within seconds. Then they were in the center of the gauntlet.

Using the signals from the *Swiftsure's* targeting computer, the *Thermopylae's* cargo transporters beamed her quantum limpet mines onto the broken hulls of Cardassian and Breen vessels. The enemy ships, intent as they were on their pursuit of the Starfleet vessels, missed the signatures, and were torn apart by the detonations and resultant shockwave.

The great *Sovereign* and *Ambassador* altered their course, heading for another target. Both of their shields flashed with constant hits.

"Shields under fire, but they're holding!" Wallace called out as another torpedo blast impacted the shields, sending sparks flying out of several consoles. Coolant quickly began to spew from ruptured conduits as they took too much damage.

"Maintain course!" Harkness said over the noise, his demeanor determined.

Sparks flew from Wallace's console, forcing him to recoil. Unfortunately, some ultra-hot particles did impact his arms and face, instantly cooking tiny sections of his skin. It took all of his will to ignore the searing pain they caused.

"The *Thermopylae* has taken heavy damage," said H'kut. "She's pulling out for emergency repairs." Ops reported as the viewscreen showed the blackened hull of the *Ambassador* class vessel pull away from the altercation.

"Status of the Klingon fleet?"

"Klingons will be arrive in... ten minutes."

The bridge rocked nearly completely over from another massive impact.

"Shields are starting to buckle!" Wallace turned from his flickering console.

"Break off from the Breen fleet!" Harkness yelled, "Bring us about and fire at the nearest cruiser," he tapped at his own chair console, checking the damage reports of the *Swiftsure*. They didn't look good.

The large ship quickly pulled around and fired a burst of torpedoes at the cruisers following them.

A smaller vessel broke apart as the *Swiftsure* leapt over it, all weapons blazing. Several following ships were also shredded by the explosion, temporarily leaving them alone in the fight.

"Status of the *Alamo* and *Hornburg*?" Wallace asked.

"Oh shit," muttered Maro quietly.

In the distance, the *Alamo*, flanked by six Cardassian warships, overran a Breen wing that had split from the main group. Unfortunately, their weapons weren't strong enough to demolish them completely, and the alien vessels fired back. Fired back with a terrifying red flash.

"My... god..."

All seven friendly ships were engulfed by the red fire, slamming through their shields and into their hulls. They were nothing but wreckage within seconds.

"Were those...?" Harkness began.

"Plasma torpedoes." H'Kut confirmed.

The viewscreen highlighted an odd looking ship among the Breen vessel. Something none of them had seen before.

"They fire too fast. We'd have no defense if we took that thing on." Wallace said, his voice warbling.

"And the Klingons are still eight minutes away... There's got to be something we can do... Something to draw their fire from one target to another..."

Suddenly Wallace and Harkness turned to look at each and spoke as one.

"Saucer separation!"

Both men stared at each other for a second in pure shock at their identical train of thought, but were shaken out of it after another savage torpedo blast.

"Captain, you take the engineering hull, you'd have better protection and more weapons. We'll provide covering fire and a temporary distraction as you fire torpedoes," said Wallace excitedly.

"Agreed, commander." Harkness began, standing up from his chair, "Computer, site to site transport to the battle bridge, Harkness, H'Kut. McBain, report to the Battle Bridge!"

The three figures quickly disappeared in the familiar shimmer of blue light. Wallace moved from his own seat to the center chair, as two crewmen took H'Kut's place at Ops. Wallace keyed off his tactical console and another crewman reported to the main tactical station.

The separation alarm sounded through the ship as crewmembers quickly removed themselves from the separation plane.

"Warning, saucer separation sequence engaged." The eerily calm computer of the Swiftsure reported. "All personnel evacuate to your designated stations."

"Harkness to Wallace." The captain's disembodied voice said, "We're ready for saucer separation. Is everything ready with you?"

Wallace tapped his comm. badge. "Yes sir. The ship is ready to separate."

On the Battle Bridge, Harkness turned to H'Kut. "Begin saucer separation."

"Beginning saucer separation," confirmed the Bolian.

In the midst of pitched battle, the sleek ship slowly pulled apart, saucer from hull and began to pull away from each other as each section took full control.

Breaking away to the right side, the sleek saucer banked sharply as a torpedo flashed past the edge of the shields. The deadly engineering hull continued speeding forward, her weapons blazing at the strange torpedo cruiser.

"Ok, Jara, bring us about and plot a course to bring us over the top of the engineering hull. Tactical, target the cruiser's shield emitters along that course and fire as soon as we come over the engineering hull." Wallace fired of the

orders quickly and was rewarded with seeing the Bridge crew begin performing them immediately.

The saucer increased its speed to full impulse and screamed over the engineering hull, which was still firing torpedoes at every nearby Breen vessel.

As the two halves of the vessel pushed toward the torpedo cruiser, several Breen ships immediately put themselves in the path of both ships. Where the saucer lashed with intense phaser strikes, the engineering hull launched torpedo after torpedo.

Within minutes, their path was cleared of enemies, leaving a nearly perfectly straight corridor to the dangerous cruiser. As they moved forward, the enemy cruiser launched its massive weapons at three attacking Cardassians, turning them into molten slag with but a single volley.

Battle Bridge

"Report!" called Harkness over the wailing alarms and klaxons as the torpedo launcher grew ever larger.

"Their forward shields are down to are taking heavy fire, but they're still holding. Another four salvos should bring down their shields, but I don't think we have time to fire that many torpedoes," replied H'Kut, scanning the readings on his console.

"Sir, the saucer section is turning towards the launcher and opening fire," replied the crewman at Tactical.

"Fire torpedoes and phasers at the target," ordered Harkness, a grim look on his face. As he did, the Breen torpedoes impacted the shields, causing even more damage to the ship.

The saucer maneuvered wildly around, avoiding much of the weapons fire aimed at it, while still managing to keep firing at the odd target, which was now slowly turning to bear on her.

Main Bridge

"Prepare two salvos of torpedoes. Lets help take those shields down," ordered Wallace, watching the view screen intently. The view of the battle had been replaced by a 3d tactical over view of the system, currently zoomed in on their area. The extensive maneuvering of the saucer section could clearly be seen as the engineering hull ploughed on, getting ever closer to the weapon ship.

"Torpedoes ready, sir."

Pausing for half a second, Wallace watched the swirling panorama of the battle around him. Surprisingly, the *Hornburg* was holding her own, supported by several Cardassian cruisers, they held off a bombardment wing lead by a nasty looking ship.

Only six minutes until the Klingons arrived...

"Fire!"

Battle Bridge

Ahead of him, Harkness saw the saucer roll a full 360 degrees to avoid a burst of weapons fire from a ship that put itself in front of the weapon ship.

"Tactical, quantum torpedoes."

"Aye, sir."

A shimmering wave of torpedoes slammed into the forward ship's shields. The forward sections overloaded, and a few torpedoes streaked through and struck the hull, detonating in huge fireballs that quickly extinguished in the vacuum of space.

The saucer had to break off to avoid the explosion, but not a moment before the weapon ship lashed out with a weak disruptor blast of its own. He knew they were just lining up their shot...

"Helm, full speed. Get us right on top of that ship!"

H'Kut turned.

"Sir?"

Harkness pointed.

"They're still using the old style 'bubble' shields. If we maneuver in close enough, we can fire on their hull directly."

"At that range, their weapons would tear us apart for sure."

"We've taken out most of their forward torpedo launchers and disruptors. We've got a better chance up close than anywhere else."

"And the saucer?"

Harkness watched as Maro pulled off a series of lightening-quick evasive maneuvers to avoid a Breen missile.

"She's on her own. Helm, engage!"

The engineering section leapt forward, aimed almost directly at the torpedo cruiser's bow.

Main Bridge

Wallace watched as his captain seemed to put the engineering hull on a collision course.

"Wallace to Harkness. What the hell are you doing?"

"Don't worry about us, Commander. It's not what you think..."

The engineering hull slipped through the weapon's shields and unleashed a full phaser barrage from her ventral banks, cutting deep into the hull. Unfortunately, the Breen's pulse blast also penetrated the Federation's shields, tearing open an entire section of deck.

Around them, the battle bridge sparked and shook. A small fire broke out near the aft consoles, and Harkness leapt out of his chair to extinguish it.

Harkness looked over, slightly shocked.

"Tactical, report!"

"Starboard shields failing! Deck 17 has taken heavy damage! Navigational array is down!"

Another jarring hit.

"Captain! This is Kentar! We're getting severe feedback on the warp core! I don't know how much longer we can hold out!" the voice over the comm. was full of static and interference, and quickly faded after another large blast.

Harkness gripped the secondary tactical console, as the ship took another hit, and another. Reeling from consecutive hits, the ship rolled to starboard, as the Breen ship began breaking up under the intense barrage of weapons fire so close to its hull.

"Breen ship is breaking up, Captain. Reading warp core overload imminent." H'Kut said. The crew erupted in shouts of joy.

"We did it!" McBain shouted in pure excitement. Harkness couldn't help but smile, either. They'd taken out the Breen, plasma torpedo or no plasma torpedo. And he hadn't lose his ship doing it.

This time at least.

"Get repair teams working and continue fire. Signal Commander Wallace with orders to initiate reintegration."

No one responded to him. Everyone's eyes were locked forward.

Suddenly, McBain called out.

"Captain!"

Harkness looked up. A Breen battlecruiser dogged the saucer, pouring shot after shot into her ventral shielding. Suddenly, the shields failed and a very familiar blast of red emerged from the ship's front.

"Sir?"

"It can't be..."

The plasma torpedo slammed into the saucer section's vulnerable hull, tearing through deck after deck, detonating deep within the ship. A huge area bulged out of the dorsal hull, finally blowing it out.

The forward section of the ship was a wreck, fire consuming oxygen in areas where forcefields had failed, debris and gases spewing into space, secondary explosions tearing through other parts of the saucer. Harkness couldn't see the bridge, but even it shouldn't have survived.

"No..."

Suddenly, beneath the engineering hull, the Breen weapon ship began to implode.

"Helm, get us out of here!"

The engineering hull spun upwards, as the helm officer set a course straight "up" and out of the battle.

Beneath them, the destroyed vessel reached critical, and its warp core exploded. The shockwave smashed into the half ship, sending her into a dangerous spiral.

"Stabilize us!" Harkness shouted as the structural integrity field groaned under the inertial strain of the spiral.

"Working on it," the helm officer replied, struggling almost as if he were tugging on an ancient sea vessel's rudder.

But slowly, like a spinning top, the hull section began to resume normal flight, but still weathering impact after impact. It was quiet stillness compared to the chaos of a few seconds earlier.

"Plot a course to the saucer. Prepare for evacuation procedures..."

"Sir!"

A Breen frigate had emerged from behind a wreck. Before Harkness could call out, a torpedo blast streaked out towards them, through the failed shields of the split ship. The weapon buried itself deep in the port nacelle pylon.

The impact tore Harkness off his feet, sending him crashing painfully to the floor. The Tactical console overloaded, blowing McBain back two meters, back into the master systems display. The material didn't shatter, but the thud McBain's now-unconscious body made was sickening.

Power conduits across the ship blew apart. In Engineering, Kentar was just beginning emergency repairs when the torpedo struck, sending everyone to the floor. The blaring klaxons did nothing to bring her consciousness back as an icy cold hand slowly slid over her body.

Main Bridge

Wallace slowly picked himself up from the floor of the shattered bridge. Fire was everywhere, even on the roof. It was a struggle to stand, much less to breathe in this...hell. He needed to call in repair teams, but his voice was caught in his painful throat. In fact, as he brought his hand up to his neck to assess the damage, it came back with a warm liquid he didn't have to think twice about identifying.

He staggered through the wreckage, stepping over shattered and broken consoles as best he could. His objective was a vaguely human shaped lump under the science console. He tried to walk over when he felt as if he had the strength, but merely found himself back on the floor, this time with sore knees.

Dammit, what part of his body didn't hurt? He couldn't talk, walk, and it was getting harder and harder to stay awake.

Why should he fight it? It was so easy to just let go...

Unfortunately, Wallace's eyes opened with a start, with a sharp pain in his neck.

"What...?"

Above Ian Wallace hovered an incredibly tall being, someone hidden by the harsh glare of the bridge.

"Easy, commander," a familiar voice said, "Your neck needs time to heal."

Wallace had to blink to clear his eyes enough to see his savior. It was burly Ensign Case, holding a modest medical kit in one hand and a repair kit in the other.

"Ensign...?"

"We've been hit bad, sir. I think it was enough to force the Breen to stop shooting, or else I think we'd be dead."

"Survivors?"

"Uh... the computer's out, but the best we can guess is... eighty to ninety."

Wallace almost passed out again. Ninety people out the four hundred that had remained on the saucer. What had happened? Was he so horrible a commander? It was so easy to let go... All he had to do was close his eyes...

"Commander, what will we do?" asked Case, bringing Wallace back to reality.

Though it hurt like hell, Wallace had to issue commands.

"Have all the crew head for the escape pods and prepare to eject them on my order."

"Aye." Case said, tapping his badge. "This is Ensign Case speaking for Commander Wallace. Abandon ship. Repeat, abandon ship."

All living eyes widened at Wallace's orders, but eventually they all turned away to help others not able to move to the pods. Within a minute they were all aboard their escape vehicles and away.

Case bodily picked Wallace up off the floor and onto his shoulders, taking him to

the last remaining escape pod. As they made their way into the pod, Wallace's eyes opened to scan the damage reports of the saucer. Much of the rear section was annihilated, and the forward sections were ablaze. The ship was nothing more than a burning hulk.

Unfortunately, the saucer rocked as two Breen frigates began to take potshots at their unshielded hull.

"Damn it." Case shouted as the hull rocked from under his feet. The large ensign was thrown back, but he held onto both Wallace and a nearby console with incredible force.

But as he held on, the console under his fingers gave way, toppling like a ton of bricks. The ensign literally threw his superior officer across the room to avoid the console as it smashed upon him. Fortunately, Wallace landed at the exact moment the heavy machine landed on the other man, so he was spared the worst sensory experience of the impact.

When Wallace gained enough of his senses to turn toward Case, he immediately turned away. The poor young man was stuck under the console's impressive weight, crushed in such a way that death came instantly. He tried to mourn, but was stopped by another savage rocking courtesy of the Breen.

The last attack caused something to shatter under the bridge's floor, sending even more gouts of smoke and fire into the already burning bridge. The viewscreen was now peppered with small Breen ships taking shots at the dead ship, obviously practicing their aim in the lull after combat.

The Cardassian fleet was gone. The *Alamo* and *Thermopylae* were destroyed, and the *Hornburg* was nowhere to be seen. The engineering hull was out there, drifting. Her lights were on, and her hull wasn't nearly as scorched as the saucer's, which was a very welcome sight.

But not for long. It seemed as if, the moment he laid eyes on it, the Breen noticed the engineering hull, too. Their weapons lashed out, battering the shield-less craft with a renewed gusto, possibly out of revenge for so many losses incurred by her.

"No..." was all Wallace could choke out as the secondary hull was ripped apart by Breen weapons.

Suddenly, Wallace was assaulted with a horrible sound, a screech of pure agony and suffering born only from a body on the verge of death. Ensign Case?

The noise continued, eventually clearing enough for Wallace to place it. It wasn't a pained cry, it was the static of a broken comm. system.

All around him, Klingon ships suddenly dropped from warp and smashed into the Breen fleet. They ripped a hole in the enemy as more and more ships dropped from warp.

Wallace tried to move to the communications console, but was stopped when his body convulsed in its mortal agony. Slowly, a familiar tingle began to cover his body. Closing his eyes, he relaxed very slightly as the Klingon transporter beam took hold of him and whisked him away.

Battle Bridge

The battle bridge rocked as the entire Breen fleet suddenly turned their fury on the battered secondary hull. Harkness closed his eyes as the pounding began, as he heard the awful squeal of rent hull plates.

"Sir we've lost all power to the engines, and life support is failing," shouted H'Kut, the only person on the battle Bridge who had managed to stay in his seat.

Trying to ignore a searing pain in his chest and hip, Harkness returned to his feet. There was only one course of action left.

"Set the warp core to overload in two minutes. Head for the escape pods." Slowly walking over to a pods hatch, Harkness opened it and motioned for crew members to get in, barely standing up as a torpedo blast impacted tens of meters away from the bridge.

"Captain, the Klingons are coming in! They're here!" Everyone's eyes turned from the pod to the viewscreen.

Dramatically revealing themselves from behind the saucer, nearly seventy Klingon vessels smashed through the Breen fleet, breaking their lines and sending a few of the more cowardly ships into warp. It was a sight enough to bring tears to Harkness's eyes.

Unfortunately, the damage was done. "There's not much time, we need to get out of here."

"But, sir, they're attacking the Breen around us. And they're succeeding!" H'Kut persisted.

"Do they have any tugs that can reach us in time?" asked Harkness, a touch of hope creeping into his heart. His heart was aching. His whole chest felt like it was on fire. The pain in his hip was barely noticeable compared to it.

"Yes sir! One's just changed course and is heading for us. Another is headed for the saucer."

Harkness shuffled from the escape pod and back to his seat, just to get a better view of the wonderful sight before. And growing steadily larger before them was the tug, intently racing forward.

"How is the saucer?" asked Harkness, his voice quiet. The pain in his chest was getting unbearable, but still he kept quiet. As he looked at the Bolian, he could see darkness creeping in from the edges of his eyes.

"I'm only reading eighty-eight life signs aboard her, Captain." H'Kut's voice dropped away before he could say more.

"The bridge...?"

H'Kut tapped a few more buttons before replying.

"Intact, but... burning. I don't know if anyone's alive."

Harkness covered his eyes. So many lives gone....

Slowly, his thoughts darkened. The Breen should pay for what they'd done. The Breen would pay! The Breen would pay! The Breen would pay! The Breen would pay!

That last thought repeated through his mind over and over as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Epilogue

Starbase 521 Sickbay

Harkness slowly opened his eyes. It took a minute before he realized he wasn't on the *Swiftsure* anymore. Turning his head, he slowly looked about and began to sit up. A stab of pain in his chest caused him to gasp in surprise, forcing him to breathe in air a bit faster. Hearing the noise, a doctor rushed to his side, carefully lying him down again.

"Take it easy, Captain. You've just undergone some major surgery to repair extensive internal injuries. I wouldn't try moving for a while if I were you."

"Where... am... I?" croaked Harkness, his mouth bone dry.

"Captain, you're on Starbase 521. You and the *Swiftsure's* primary hull was brought in from Cardassia Prime by four Klingon tugs three days ago."

"And the other ships?"

The doctor looked surprised, but then saddened.

"No survivors on any of them. Cardassia's only defense is a ragtag group of Klingons itching for a fight."

Harkness closed his eyes as his mind brought back the images from the battle.

"How is she? How is the *Swiftsure*?"

"Commander Wallace asked me to tell you that the *Swiftsure* was to be put into a long term drydock for heavy repairs. From what I've heard, she won't be going back out for quite some time Captain. You're lucky you made it back here. Klingon medical facilities aren't quite up to our standard." The Doctor turned as the Sickbay door swished open.

Wallace strode in, and seeing that Harkness was awake, walked up to his biobed. His thin smile failed to hide the pain in his eyes. He had just come from Ensign Case's funeral. The ensign had broken his sternum when the console fell on him; fortunately, the doctors reported his death was instant. Case was given a hero's funeral, with full honors and awards. It was only fitting for the man who had single handedly saved the saucer section survivors.

Unfortunately, something else lurked behind Wallace's eyes. It was the familiar look of the pain of a lost ship. Lost lives. The lives he had been responsible for.

Harkness looked up and saw the pain. He recognized it, for he felt it himself.

His fault.