

Star Trek: The Breen War

Prologue

"Be courteous to all, but intimate with few, and let those few be well tried before you give them your confidence. True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation." -- George Washington

Starbase 521 Sickbay

Jacob Harkness looked through the glass into the surgical chamber as best he could, trying to get a glimpse of Mar'zief as he was prepped for surgery. The sterile field obscured his view. Damn. He was about to enter the surgical chamber physically just to see what was happening when Dr. Brown walked out.

"Ah, Captain," said Brown as he walked out of the room. "The ca--e--Captain Falco is almost ready for surgery."

"Good," said Harkness. "Can I see him?"

"No, I think that would be a bad idea," said Brown. "We've got him on local anesthesia, and seeing someone that he knows might interfere with the surgery."

Harkness rolled his eyes. "Can you at least tell me what you're planning to do with him?"

"It's simple really...well, on paper at least. We're building a little device to reconnect his nerves, similar in practice to reconnecting the old electric wires."

"And in practice?"

"There's a lot of little nerves in there, all of which have to be reattached manually. You don't exactly want to reconnect a nerve wrong, unless you want him to twitch his arm when he wants to go for a walk."

Harkness rolled his eyes. "How long do you think that this will take?"

"Anywhere from five hours to five days, depending on how much trouble the scanners give me. Anyways, at least here at 521, there's competent doctors, so I can get some sleep no matter what."

Jacob decided to refrain from punching the doctor that was nominally his. However amusing it might be at that moment, it would come back to haunt him

later, he was sure. "Just get started whenever you're ready, doctor. I'm sure that you'll do fine," he chose to say instead."

"Of course sir. Now, if you'll please? We have work to do in here."

Harkness sighed, reminding himself that he needed to keep the doctor in good spirits. "Tell me if his condition changes," he said.

"Of course, of course," replied the doctor in an off-handed fashion. He walked back into the surgical chamber, muttering under his breath.

Harkness turned around and walked out the sickbay. He slowly trudged back to his quarters on the station, and sat down on his bed. He'd betrayed his crew, Marz's crew...Marz himself. Marz could have figured out a way to get out of the situation at Cardassia, could have found a way to save the crew of the saucer section...save his own ship. Jacob had just fucked up and thrown it all away, just like he had fighting that Behemoth with his own ship. Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, or something like that. The Breen having plasma torpedoes was a bit of a surprise, but something he should have anticipated.

The verdict had come in last night. Starfleet was going to decommission the saucer, though they felt that the secondary hull was repairable. Maybe not a complete loss, but it might as well be...

He stood up and walked over to the replicator. "Whiskey, one shot." And the shot class materialized, with a golden liquid inside. He picked it up, considered it for a moment, then put it back on the replicator pad and pressed the dematerialize button. He walked over to the window that his prerogative as captain and breathed out, obscuring the view.

It wasn't every day that a captain lost two ships in the space of a month. No matter the circumstances, Starfleet would be fools to put him back in space. He was destined to be a desk jockey for the rest of his career.

Harkness walked away from the window and over to his desk, picking up one of the PADDs that were scattered on it. He blanked the document that was on it, saving it into memory, then picked up the stylus and started writing, *I, Captain Jacob Harkness, of sound mind and body, do request permission to tender my resignation.* He then blanked it again and set the PADD to one side.

Harkness walked back to the window; perhaps he could gain solace from the stars?

"Well, Marz, that's four down."

Starbase 417
USS *Hamlet* NCC-42058
22 Years Earlier

Lieutenant Jacob Harkness walked through the bridge to the hatch of what would be his new home for the next few years. The *Hamlet*, one of the *Centaurs*. And he would be the Operations Officer, the person in charge of making sure that the various ship functions worked smoothly and efficiently with one another.

The hitch was that, unlike the *Iroquois*, Harkness' last posting, she was going to be on the lines, at least according to the grapevine. Either she'd be one of the ships escorting the *Frogfoot* transports to and from various important targets, or she'd be patrolling Cardassian space, keeping an eye on what the Spoonheads were up to.

A Non-com checked his ID and waved him aboard. Harkness nodded distantly at the Petty Officer, then grabbed his luggage and walked aboard the ship, taking in a breath of air.

The *Hamlet* was definitely an older ship than the *Cheyenne* class *Iroquois*. That much could be determined from by the smell of the processed air alone; it had a much crisper, less natural scent to it. The corridors were also much thinner, built in a time when space was at a premium aboard starships.

Jacob turned back to the PO standing watch over the gangway. "Excuse me," he said, "who's the ranking officer aboard and where can I find him?"

"Lieutenant Commander Mar'zief Falco, the tactical officer, is currently the ranking officer on board," replied the non-com. He smirked. "In fact, I think that he's probably in the crewman's mess."

"Thank you Petty Officer," Harkness said, groaning inwardly. *One of those officers*. He hauled out his PADD with the map of the ship on it and tried to find the crewman's mess on it. On the other side of the ship...and of course it was a serious breach of protocol to head anywhere else upon arrival aboard ship before reporting in to the ranking officer.

Harkness hoisted his duffel onto his shoulder and picked up the handle to his chest, letting it roll behind him as he made his way through the maze that was his new home. After managing to get lost a couple of times, he finally found the crewman's mess. Ignoring the--many--stares as he walked into the mess with his luggage. Making a beeline for the one officer's uniform he saw, a Caitian with a yellow uniform and Lieutenant Commander's pips. "Commander Falco?" he asked.

The Caitian eyed him, lingering at the duffel on Harkness' shoulder and the chest trailing behind. Harkness blushed. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage Lieutenant," said the Caitian. But though his words were proper, his tone wasn't, and his lips drew back in what he obviously thought was a grin. Harkness--barely--stopped himself from shuddering at the very sharp fore-teeth that this grin revealed.

"Lieutenant Jacob Harkness, reporting for duty," Jacob said, finally.

"Welcome aboard Lieutenant; I'll be sure to mark this in the ship's logs as soon as I finish my meal here," said the Caitian as he gestured at a half-eaten...something sandwich. Falco glanced back at Jacob's luggage. "You forget where your quarters are Lieutenant?" he asked, still 'grinning.'

Harkness hoisted his suddenly slipping duffel again. "I was taught at the Academy to report to the ranking officer aboard before doing anything else," he replied, ignoring the sniggers from the noncoms and enlisted aboard.

Falco leaned forward. "Let me let you in on a secret," he said quietly. "Starfleet doesn't mind so much if you drop your bags off before officially reporting aboard." He then leaned back, clearly enjoying Harkness' discomfort.

Harkness beat a retreat to his own quarters and finally dropped the duffel onto his bed. He had the feeling that this would be a long deployment...

Chapter One

USS *Hamlet* Main Bridge

Captain Matthew Corgan walked onto his bridge. "Status update?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Commander Demas, his Denobulan XO. "Not a peep from the Cardassians," she added.

Harkness heard Falco angrily mumble something under his breath. "What was that Commander?" asked Corgan.

Falco looked a little embarrassed. "I--er...nothing sir." Harkness, with his back to the scene, smiled a little at the Caitian's discomfort.

"Go on, Mr. Falco, tell us what you said," replied the captain.

"All I, er, said was that it's not like we're going to meet any Spoon--Cardassians out here," said Falco.

"I see," said Corgan. "Did it occur to you that Starfleet might or might not have information or intelligence that we aren't aware of, *Lieutenant* Commander?"

"No sir, it did not."

"But despite not having all of the information, you passed a judgment on Starfleet's orders, feeling that it was scut work unworthy of your skills."

"Not mine alone. We should all be on the front, fighting the Spoonheads, not way out here in the boondocks!"

Corgan smiled. "That's what I thought, Commander. I suggest that from now on, you should keep in mind that all duties need to be done, and not everyone can be out on the front. The war won't be won with combat alone."

"Yes sir."

"Good." Corgan turned away from the Ops station. "Helm, bring us to bearing one-two-five mark eight-three, and accelerate to warp eight-point-five."

"Aye sir," said the helm officer. "We are on course."

"Good. I'll be in my office. Oh, and Mr. Harkness, make sure that you keep a close eye on the plasma decay scanners."

Jacob turned around. "Aye aye sir," he said, very crisply. But despite the fact that he was addressing his captain, his eyes were on Falco.

The captain eyed him strangely, and Jacob faced his station again sheepishly. He heard the doors to the turbolift close, but the sound didn't register. He'd noticed what his captain couldn't.

Falco was glaring at him from across the bridge, with malice in his eyes.

Starbase 521 Harkness' Quarters

Harkness heard his chime ring. "Come in," he said, getting out of the bed that he was lounging around in. It was Commander Wallace.

"Hello sir," said Ian.

"How is he?" asked Jacob.

"They're maybe a third of the way through the surgery."

"Thank you. Is something wrong Commander?"

Ian walked over to the window, staring out into the space beyond. "I just wonder if I'll see the...if I'll see Captain Falco again."

"From what I was given to understand, the chance of mortality was pretty low."

"That's not what I meant, sir." Ian turned around and handed Jacob a PADD. "I've been ordered to take temporary command of the *Thor*. She's a *Defiant*. I'm taking Evesham along with me..."

"I think that you'll do fine, Commander."

"It's just that these 'temporary command' things usually end up being the final test before promoting someone to Captain. I don't think I'm ready yet; hell, I was only promoted to *commander* less than two months ago."

"You commanded the *Swiftsure* both times that Marz was...indisposed, and did an amazing job commanding the primary hull over Cardassia."

Wallace shrugged. "Well, what's done is done. It's been a pleasure serving with you, Captain."

"And you too, 'Captain.'"

Wallace gave Jacob a strange look. "Aye, you're the captain's friend all right."

Harkness gave Wallace a smile, which faded away as soon as the Commander left the room. He fell back into his bed, crossing his hands under his head. As he lay there, he slowly felt blackness overtake him.

USS *Hamlet* Main Bridge

Harkness was gazing intently at his readouts when someone tapped him on his shoulder. His relief. *My shift's already over?* He thanked the woman and got up, heading for the turbolift, only to see Falco heading for it too.

Briefly, Harkness considered if he had anything to say to the relief Ops Officer, but annoyingly, nothing came to mind. He followed Falco into the turbolift, and stood passively as the doors closed. "Deck six," he said.

"Harkness. You enjoyed that little episode on the bridge, didn't you?" asked Falco, with a great deal of bitterness in his voice.

Jacob schooled his face into passivity. "I don't know what you're talking about," he replied. Falco snorted.

"You really are a bad liar, you know that?"

Harkness shrugged. "I honestly don't care what you think," he said. The turbolift stopped, and the doors opened. "See you around Commander." The doors closed behind him.

So, Lieutenant Prig thinks he's better than me... Falco smiled to himself as the turbolift started up again. He knew just how to get back at the stuck-up lieutenant. "Computer, change destination. Deck Eight."

Harkness' Quarter

Jacob put down the book that he was reading--*The Effects of Transwarp Theory on Six-Dimensional Calculus*--and yawned. He glanced over at the chronometer: oh-three-fifteen hours. He would be going on shift in less than five hours! He locked the book onto the page that he was reading, and then turned the PADD off. He stood up, popped a couple of dental hygiene pills, and then walked over to his little bathroomette. He spit out the leftovers of the pills into the sink, and then stripped off his uniform. He yawned again as he walked into the shower.

Not two minutes later, he screamed.

Main Bridge

Someone gasped as Harkness walked off the turbolift with bags under his eyes, and then everyone turned to face him. He cringed, and then glared at Falco, who returned the look with pure, abject innocence. Yep, he was the bastard who did this.

"Lieutenant," said Corgan, "you *are* aware that you're blue?"

"Yes sir," Harkness said through his teeth. "Someone put some kind of dye in my shower last night. It won't come off."

"I see..." Corgan looked over at Falco, who'd dropped all pretenses of innocence, and was grinning in his own awkward fashion. "Falco, Harkness, my office, *now*."

Corgan's Office

Corgan glared at the two young officers. "Sit," he said. "Both of you. Good. Now then, what *is* your problem?"

"It was just a harmless practical joke," said Falco, though he faced the floor.

"'Practical jokes' are rarely funny and even more rarely harmless." Corgan glared at Falco. "I don't care *how* good you are at that station Lieutenant Commander. You pull another stunt like that again, and you'll sit in that brig until I can foist you off at some starbase somewhere. If you're lucky."

"But all I did was turn him blue!"

"And if you get off without any kind of warning, what would you do next? I can't take the risk of your sense of humor getting the better of you, Falco. There're less than three hundred people on this ship; we all have to get along with as little friction as possible. We're over a light-century behind enemy lines. If we get into any kind of trouble, no one's going to come rescue us. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir," said both of them.

"Good. Falco, you're dismissed. Harkness, stay here."

Harkness looked at his captain as the Caitian walked out of the office. "Sir?" he asked as soon as the doors closed.

"What *is* it between you two? Ops and Tactical have to work very closely if we're ever in a battle, and you both know it."

Harkness shrugged. "Permission to speak freely?"

"Granted, of course."

"I don't know, he just rubs me wrong." He shrugged again. "He's too loose, for an officer, too willing to bend rules. In my opinion at least."

"He's flexible, and he's a damn fine tactician."

"I know that, but is he a good officer?"

"His crews look up to him, almost more than any officer of his grade that I've seen in a long time. He gives an order and they jump to it, and his subordinate officers do too. He also understand the importance of drilling his crews, and he does it mercilessly."

"And what's your opinion of him?"

Corgan looked intently at Harkness. "Honestly, he's worth a lot more on this mission than you are. That's not meant to be an insult to you mind, because you're very good at what you do. But he excels at what he does."

The captain looked back at his desk. "I just hope that it'll be enough," he added under his breath. Dismissed, Mr. Harkness."

Corridor

Falco had apparently been loitering outside the office door. "What did you two talk about?" he asked.

"That's between the captain and me," said Jacob. "Shouldn't you be at your post?"

Falco snarled. "You're a sanctimonious little pedant, you know that? All bound up in your rules and regulations."

"I don't like you Commander," said Harkness. "And I doubt that I ever will. But for the sake of the ship and the mission, I'm willing to call a truce. I don't laugh at your screw-ups, you don't dye me blue. Is that acceptable?"

Falco snorted. "Just stay out of my way Lieutenant."

Harkness made a little bow with his head. "As you wish, *Commander*."

They turned around and walked back to the bridge, one deck above them. *Just how am I supposed to work with him?* Harkness thought to himself. *He won't meet me halfway. I stretched out my olive branch. Well, that won't happen again.*

Starbase 521 Sickbay

Harkness walked in to the sickbay, to see Dr. Brown stripping off his surgical gloves as he walked out of the sterile field. "How is he?" Harkness asked. "Any progress?"

Brown smiled, a little sanctimoniously Harkness thought. "He's fine. We had a little trouble about halfway through, but all of the sensory nerves have been reconnected. We're going to start on the really tricky part, the motor nerves. We're going to put him under for this part."

"You said that you were more than halfway through," said Harkness, "but you haven't even started on the motor nerves yet?"

"There's a lot more sensory nerves in a Caitian's nerve trunks," said Brown, "than there are motor nerves I mean. It's part of what gives them those phenomenal reflexes." He turned back to the surgical chamber. "I wonder if that's why they evolved both nerve trunks; it seems such an odd duplication of effort, and easily prone to damage like that, but it might help free up the bandwidth so that they can react faster...now that's an interesting idea, and one I'd like to look into more."

Harkness looked at the doctor's aghast; here was his best friend, half-paralyzed, and Brown was talking about him like a...a...lab rat!

He managed to school his face back into passivity before the doctor turned around, though just barely. He made his excuses and beat a hasty retreat.

And he hadn't even gotten a chance to see Marz...

USS *Hamlet* Bridge

Finally the last of the blue dye had been washed off, though it had taken the better part of a week and a great deal of scrubbing on Harkness's to finally rid himself of the last blue tint in his skin.

Captain Corgan walked onto the bridge. He surveyed his domain, and his eyes settled onto Harkness. "You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?"

Harkness stood up and nodded. "Yes sir. I was wondering if I might speak to you in private?"

"Of course," said Corgan. "If you'll follow me into the observation lounge?"

Harkness followed the captain, but as he did, he saw Falco's eyes trail the two of them before they finally settled onto Harkness, obviously a query, and not a kind one at that. Jacob returned the gaze with equanimity before looking back at the captain, and then the bridge had been left behind.

"All right, what is it Lieutenant?"

Harkness pulled out his PADD and handed it to the captain.

Corgan looked it over. "A transfer request?"

"Yes sir."

"Denied."

"Sir?" Oh no...

"This is because of Falco, isn't it?"

Harkness looked down at his feet. "Yes sir. He hasn't done anything that would be an obvious contradiction of your warning sir...but he's very popular aboard ship."

"Jacob, I sympathize, I really do, but did you stop and think about what you would be doing? You can't run away from your problems, and there'll be other officers who'll give you trouble. You won't be able to run away from all of them, or even most of them. So you need to learn how to deal with them, and as soon as possible too."

"Ah."

"And anyway, you're not a half-bad officer in of yourself. While Falco seems to convince his phaser crews that he can walk on water, your people look up to you as well. Just...don't go blow your career because of one bad experience."

"Yes sir," said Harkness.

"Dismissed Mr. Harkness."

"Thank you sir..."

Harkness left the lounge behind him and sat back down at his station. Somehow, he knew that Falco was pleased at Harkness's disappointment. Oh well, screw him.

Dutifully, Harkness pulled up the plasma monitors that he'd been told to pay close attention to a week ago. He glanced over the results of the last scan. Nothing...except... That was odd... He decided to run a deeper scan, and pored over the data that he got back. Definitely a warp trail, but very faint and scattered.

Wait, no, not a warp trail. The plasma decay rates indicated too many vectors and speeds. No, that wasn't just *one* warp trail. It was *six*, and all in the past two days... No wonder the computer didn't bring them to his attention, though, they were all far too weak. But the sheer number was ominous, very ominous.

He told the computer to track the vectors, and waited a heartbeat for its response. All of them ultimately led to a single star.

"Commander Demas!" said Harkness. "Look at this."

The Denobulan walked over to his station. After a few moments perusing his data, she whistled. "Good work Lieutenant. Captain to the bridge," she said, slapping her badge.

"Corgan here."

"We've found them sir."

"Understood. I'll be right there. Corgan out."

"Who?" asked Falco. "Who've we found?"

Demas looked grim. "You'll find out soon enough."

Chapter Two

USS *Hamlet* Observation Lounge

Corgan walked into the Observation Lounge and glanced over the assembled officers. "It's time you all knew why we came in so deep behind enemy lines," he said at last.

He walked over to his seat and sat down, knowing that he had a captive audience. "Starfleet Intelligence had picked up rumors of a base in the area, which they were using to collect data and launch raids against us. I was told that we were to collect as much data from it as we could."

"But why keep us in the dark?" asked Falco.

Corgan shrugged. "Orders. They didn't want to take the chance of the Cardassians finding out what our mission was, just in case there was a spy aboard." Corgan did not look happy saying that, Harkness observed.

"Our job," added Demas, "is to sneak into the system and identify any weaknesses that we can, get ship counts, identify sensor net weaknesses, the works. But we're going to have to do that as silently as we can. No active sensors, no engine emissions of any sort."

"We'd be a sitting duck," said Harkness.

"Yes," replied Demas.

"It'll take my crews about two hours after leaving warp to get the warp coils cool," said Lieutenant Commander Allan Minns, the Chief Engineer.

"And the impulse engines?" asked Corgan as the rest of the senior officers goggled.

"You want to go in on just thrusters?" asked Minns incredulously.

"Basically, yes. They won't ever expect it. And impulse coils give off emissions that can be detected nearly as readily as a warp drive."

Minns accepted this odd order with a nod to the side. "Umm...half an hour I would think," he said.

Corgan smiled. "Good. We'll be there in about five hours. As soon as we arrive, we'll plot a course to try and take us near wherever they've established this base of theirs. Keep on your toes people. Dismissed."

Bridge

"All right," said Minns's voice, "warp coils are down. If *I'm* not picking up any emissions off of them, the Spoonheads won't either."

Corgan rolled his eyes. "And the impulse engines?"

"As cold as ice."

"Good. Helm, take us in."

Ionized hydrogen puffed out of the *Hamlet's* thrusters, diverting the already-speeding starship so that it would pass within a stone's throw of the third planet in the system. None of the Cardassians would--hopefully--see her as anything more than a highly metallic asteroid. Hopefully.

Harkness felt leery as the *Hamlet* passed through the sensor perimeter. If even one extra joule of energy was leaking past the hull, the game was up. Unless they wanted to send themselves back in time, it would take the better part of half an hour to charge up the cool warp nacelles. It wouldn't matter how much faster the *Hamlet* was at impulse; the Cardassians could just keep warping to keep up with her. Half an hour of that would destroy her, with the kind of numbers that the Spoonheads could muster...

Harkness pushed his worries to the back of his mind. If they had timed everything right, the *Hamlet* would be through the sensor network in between sensor passes on the nearest station, she was going fast enough. Of course, they couldn't afford to decelerate after, which meant precious little time for the passive sensors to do their duty when they actually passed the planet. Harkness would have to be ready as soon as the planet came into sensor range.

They had timed it right, and the *Hamlet* was through. Harkness let out a breath that he hadn't even know that he'd be holding. Challenge number one, done. Since they were out of scanner range of the station, he pointed one of his passive arrays at it; no harm knowing any weaknesses of the arrays.

Snapshot taken, he quickly diverted computer power back to the task at hand. He glanced at the chronometer located on his console. Five minutes to range. Four...three...two...one...Harkness quickly snapped the passive sensors onto the third planet of the system. Environmental data, topographical elevations of the area around the base itself, the arrangement of various orbital defenses, the locations of planet-side theater shield generators, and, finally, ship counts.

Harkness glanced over the data, and gulped. That was a hell of a lot of ships...

And then they were out of range, and with no chance of going back for more information. But they'd gotten what they'd come for; the trick now was getting back.

Observation Lounge

"Your report, Lieutenant?" asked Corgan.

"My crews and I've spent the last four hours processing the data that we obtained during the pass," said Harkness. "To be concise, this base is going to be one hell of a tough nut to crack."

"We found no less than thirty defensive satellites, all of them armed with three disruptors and a torpedo launcher. Those disruptors are heavier than even an *Ambassador's* phasers, just for comparison." He heard Falco whistle, and he let the information sink in before continuing.

"The satellites would be a difficult enough problem to surmount, but the Cardassians have at least sixty ships collected here."

"Good God almighty..." said Corgan. "What kinds?"

Harkness shrugged. "It was difficult to tell. We picked up maybe twenty *Hidekis*, thirty *Bakrus* cruisers, and ten of what had to be those new *Galors* that we've heard rumors about. This is no defensive fleet."

Corgan nodded. "Clearly." He let out a deep breath, and then let it out. "We'll need to get back to 417 with this intelligence, Starfleet needs to know everything we know about this base. As soon as we're clear of the perimeter, we're going to make all available speed for Federation-held territory."

The rest of the staff nodded their heads; yes, they'd do what they needed to do.

Corgan looked back at Harkness. "Do you have any idea when they might be deploying?"

"Umm..." Harkness glanced at his notes. "We didn't see any freighters at the base, so not anytime soon, at least not en masse. No way of getting torpedo reloads, resupplying, any of that kind of stuff on the front." He glanced back down at his notes again. "In fact...the base itself isn't all that fortified, at least not as much as the ship counts would indicate it should be. It has theater shields, but nothing on a planetary scale."

Falco looked up. "A raiding base! They're not planning a major attack, not here at least. They're planning to deploy piecemeal, hit our supply lines, our outposts."

Corgan looked grim. "Well, either way, we have to get back to Federation territory. We have to destroy this base."

"I won't let anything stop us from getting back."

Starbase 521 Harkness's Quarters

"Captain Harkness?" asked Doctor Brown's voice of his com badge.

Jacob sighed and laid his book, *Slipstream Theory*, to the side and slapped his badge. "Harkness here," he said.

"I just wanted to give you a status update on Captain Falco. The device is implanted. We're just going to wait until he wakes up, and then we're going to make sure that the implant is functioning."

"Good, thank you doctor. Is there anything else?"

"No sir. Brown out."

Harkness looked back at the book, and then got up off his bed and walked over to the window. He gazed out, looking at the infinity of space.

"He'll be fine," he said to no one in particular.

USS *Hamlet* Bridge

The *Hamlet* slowly crept out of the system, this time on a completely different course. Harkness could only pray that they'd slip by the sensor net again.

Again, it seemed as though they'd timed it just right. The *Hamlet* sneaked by the perimeter and was well on its way to a gas giant, which would mask their attempt to recharge the warp drive and leave the system. Or so they all hoped.

Harkness kept a close eye on his scopes; he knew that it was up to him to alert the captain to any new developments on their arduous journey across the system. If he was slack for a moment, and in that moment the Cardassians chose to attack...

Finally, yawning, he walked off the bridge when his relief came duty and took over Ops for him. He spent a fitful night, wondering every time that he woke up if he'd never wake again, if the Spoonheads would attack and destroy the *Hamlet* in his sleep.

Finally, the next morning came, and he staggered onto the bridge, after having made sure that he'd had plenty of coffee to drink. He kept a close eye on the sensors for his entire shift, but there was no sign of pursuit. Finally, by the end of his shift, they reached the gas giant. Harkness kept an even closer eye on the space around them, but not a single Cardassian graced his scopes with its presence.

"Sir," said Minns, after about half an hour, "the warp drive is operational."

"Good," said Corgan. "Helm, set a course for 417, warp five."

The *Hamlet* leapt into warp and quickly left the system behind.

Harkness's relief came onto the bridge and Jacob went back below, sleeping far more soundly than he had the night before.

Harkness came back onto the bridge the next day, fully refreshed. He sat down, looking over his scopes as he did so, and then he groaned. "That's not fair..."

"What is it Lieutenant?" asked Demas.

"We have five *Galor* class cruisers on our tails, sir."

Demas swore. "Red alert!"

Corgan ran onto the bridge not two minutes after. "Status report?" he asked.

"There are five of those new *Galors* chasing us down."

"Damn..." He looked around. "We'll charge them head-on. We can't outrun them, not at warp, but we've got better maneuverability, we'll keep throwing course changes on them. But we can't afford to lose our warp drive. Helm, bring us about, 180 to starboard."

"Aye sir, 180 to starboard."

"Updating course projections," said Harkness. "We'll be in weapons range in eight minutes. Uploading projections to tactical."

"I've got it," said Falco, who sounded strangely happy. The eager tactician, in his element. "Sir, we don't begin to have the weapons to take on all five of them. Hell, I'm not sure we could take on one in a stand-up battle."

Okay, so maybe the bloodthirsty cat has some brain after all...

"Which is why it's not going to be a stand-up battle Mr. Falco," said Corgan. "Open fire on my mark."

"Aye sir."

"ETA to weapons range?"

"Six minutes," said Harkness. He kept a close eye on those ships, looking for any possible weaknesses. None seemed to leap out at him, blast it. "Five minutes."

"Hit the lead two with photon torpedoes. Rake the rest of them with phasers. Aim for their warp nacelles," said Corgan.

"Aye sir," said Falco, who, from the sound of his voice, had clearly been a step ahead of his captain.

"Four minutes."

"Lieutenant, could you please tell me *when* we hit weapons range and not give us a countdown?"

"Sorry sir," said Harkness. The next two minutes passed in silence, until the ship rocked. "What the hell?" asked Harkness.

"Don't worry," said Falco. "They've got about fifty thousand clicks on us."

"That's supposed to reassure me?"

"Quiet!" snapped Demas.

Suddenly a light went off on Harkness's console. "Weapons range!"

"Fire!"

Twin torpedoes raced out from the weapons pod under the saucer, slamming into two of the *Galors'* shields. Another volley left the tubes, and then phasers reached out, attempting to rake their targets.

"Enemy shields holding!" said Harkness. "Incoming torpedoes!"

The ship rocked again as no less than five torpedoes slammed into her shields. "Shields holding," said Harkness.

"Accelerate to warp eight!"

The ship rocked again, but it was clear to Harkness that they were quickly leaving the forward arc of those *Galors*.

"Fire aft torpedoes!"

"Aye sir," said Falco, staring intently at his screens. Two torpedoes sped away from the *Hamlet's* torpedo pod, trying to smash through the shields of the two Cardassians that he'd hit before.

And then Harkness saw it, a power spike similar to the forward disruptors, but coming out of the *aft* portion of the enemy cruisers. "Incoming disruptor--" The ship rocked again as the disruptors raked what was left of her shields. Oh no... "Shields failing!"

What the hell? They have aft torpedoes as well? "Incoming torpedo fire!"

"Evasive action!" ordered Corgan. "Hard to port!"

And then the whole world heaved as five torpedoes slammed into the nearly unprotected hull of the *Hamlet*. Harkness felt himself flying through the air. He heard Minns shouting something about the warp drive being gone, impulse engines gone, everything gone, and then the whole world went black.

Chapter Three

USS *Hamlet* Bridge

Jacob woke up in a world of black. Black and pain. So easy to simply drift off again. And so he did.

He woke again to a furry hand slapping him. His eyes seemed to open of his own accord. The concerned face of Falco dominated his very blurry vision.

"You're awake, good," said Falco. Harkness tried to sit up, but Falco put a restraining hand on his chest. "You've got a broken arm and two broken ribs at least, best not to move right now."

"So that's what hurts... Why are you trying to help me?"

Falco shrugged. "As near as I can tell, you and I are the ranking officers alive."

"Oh." His vision was starting clear up. He turned his head a bit to the left, staring back down the bridge. Behind his console, he saw hell. It seemed as if the entire bridge crew had flown as he had, and most had not been so lucky as he in how they fell. Those who hadn't been decapitated or dismembered by flying shrapnel at least. Falco followed Harkness's gaze to the body of the captain, or, at least, a body with a captain's rank insignia. His uniform was blood-soaked and seemed punctured in a thousand places. His right arm was missing, as was his head.

"I found his arm at least," said Falco. "Still no luck finding his head."

"How'd you survive?"

Falco smiled, awkwardly, a weak smile. But a smile nonetheless. "I'm like an Earther cat," he said. "I have nine lives." He gazed over the ruined bridge. "One down now."

"I never really did feel the need for humor before," said Harkness, getting up on his right hand despite his makeshift doctor's advice. "Now I kind of understand."

"What better refuge from horror than humor?"

"Quite." Harkness surveyed the bridge again. "Aside from the obvious, what's our situation, sir?"

"Sir?"

"Well, you're the captain now, aren't you? And unless Minns is alive, I'm your XO."

Falco looked as if he'd bitten into a lemon, or whatever equivalent on the Caitian homeworld. Though whether at the thought of his being in command of such horror, or Harkness being his XO, Jacob wasn't sure. "He's dead, I checked. I've checked every major department. Well...those that still exist at any rate. The entire front half of the saucer is gone. The torpedoes must have hit right there. I don't know, that whole part of my memory seems to be gone..."

"And everything else?" Harkness asked after a few moments.

"Oh, right." Falco shook off his reverie. "Right now all of Engineering--about eight techs--is under Ensign Duquette's weary watch. They've managed to restore limited life support, mostly the oxy scrubbers."

"Interesting that, considering that main life support was in the forward part of the hull, and aux was only supposed to last us a few days. That reminds me, how long have I been out?"

"They've managed to jerry rig something that they swear will last over a month, and are trying to get it to last even longer. And you've been out for about twelve hours."

"You sure I don't have a concussion or something?"

Falco shrugged. "Engineering tricorders are the only tricorders we have left."

"Right. Sickbay was in the forward hull. So what's the good news?"

Falco laughed. "That was the good news."

Jacob blanched. "Then what's the bad news?"

The Caitian was suddenly completely sober. "Our warp drive is down, and even if it wasn't, we're operating on batteries alone. It'll take us half a century to reach the nearest star on thrusters, and we have enough power to last us half a month."

Main Engineering

Harkness had found that, with a great deal of effort and a sling that Falco had rigged for him, he could walk without causing himself too much pain. Unfortunately, the turbolifts were down, and there was no way that he could climb up and down the ladders, not with his bum left arm.

Finally, his new captain had found a solution: an anti-grav belt. While it wouldn't support Harkness's full weight, it would allow him to swing from ladder rung to ladder rung in safety, if not painlessly.

He finally worked his way over to Main Engineering, where a suddenly elevated Colleen Duquette, slaved over her warp core, trying to get it working again.

"Any updates ensign?" he asked. She seemed to almost leap into the air, and then stood at attention.

"None *sir*," she said. Harkness smiled in humor, though it was a kind smile.

"At ease ensign. There's only ten officers and fifty crew left; I think we can let a few regulations relax."

"Yes sir," she said, clearly confused. Harkness, letting some violations of rules slide? "It's just that this is your first time down here," she continued.

"I had to get off the bridge," said Harkness. "Too many dead friends... What's your status ensign?"

"We're doing our best to assess the damage to the warp core, but without internal sensors, it's slow going. But it doesn't matter; we checked the dilithium articulation frame. The crystal's fractured, thanks to spikes in the EPS grid; we'll never even get up to standby on it. Well, not unless we want to finish the Cardies' job for them."

"Any way you can recrystallize it?"

"Not unless we can get the fusion reactors up and running again. And even then, there's no guarantee that we'll collect enough gamma rays to do the job."

"And that's assuming that the warp core's in good enough shape to run it."

"Exactly." She held up her tricorder. "Hopefully these'll be good enough to pick up any faults. If not, and we turn the thing on..." She put her fists facing each other and unfurled them, an obvious hand gesture.

POOF.

Auxiliary Life Support

Harkness hobbled into the aux life support chamber, and immediately gagged at the odor wafting through the warm room. Oxygenation bacteria cultures were *not* one of his favorite smells ever.

He found Falco working on one of the water reclamation vats. "Duquette told me I'd find you in here," said Jacob.

"Mr. Harkness," Falco said in way of greeting, not looking up from what he was doing. "Why are you here?" he asked bluntly.

"To give my report," said Harkness. "I just discussed the warp drive with Ensign Duquette. Apparently the energy feedbacks fractured the crystals. And there's no way of getting our hands on some gamma rays to recrystallize them."

Falco looked up finally. "Damn," he said, closing his eyes. "Hunter take them!" he shouted, and he pounded his fists onto the console.

"We're not going to survive for much longer, not on batteries."

"Tell me something I *don't* know," snarled Falco.

So much for Mr. Nice Falco... "You could at least act civilized to your own XO."

"Trust me, I am acting civilized right now," said Falco angrily. "If I wasn't, you'd be a smear on the wall."

Harkness snorted in derision. "What happened to the intelligent, caring officer on the bridge? The one who woke me up, made sure that I could get around the ship?"

"Oh, he's here. He just regrets his decision now."

"You know, it's a bad sign when you refer to yourself in the third person. You might be going crazy."

"You know what? I think that you're--" Suddenly, the doors opened, revealing Duquette standing in front of them in shock. Harkness and Falco quickly composed themselves, but the young ensign was quickly glancing between her two superior officers, some kind of shocked look on her face.

"What is it ensign?" asked Falco.

Duquette gulped. "We completed our survey of the warp core," she said, handing Falco a report. Harkness edged closer and tried to look over the Caitian's shoulder. "We'll never get the warp core working, even if we manage to

recrystallize the dilithium," she continued. "Half of the AM constrictors are completely burnt out. We'll never repair them all."

"Don't we have spares?" asked Falco.

"We did. In the forward hull. But even if we they weren't gone, we wouldn't be able to hit warp. There just wouldn't be enough field overlap to prevent gaps."

"And any gap would kill us," said Harkness.

Duquette nodded.

Harkness looked at Falco. "Hand me that," he said, gesturing at the PADD. He pored over the schematics for a few moments. There *had* to be some way to bypass this problem...

Matter doesn't need to be constricted like AM, with deuterium, it wouldn't matter if it hit the edges of the warp core...at least not that much.

Harkness hadn't realized that he'd said this aloud until Falco asked, "Pardon?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking, would it matter so much if the deuterium didn't have any constrictors?"

Duquette shook her head. "We'd lose a lot of the kinetic energy from the reaction, but that's just a pleasant side effect."

"Then couldn't we just divert the AM flow to the NM side of the core?"

Duquette shook her head no. "That would still require constrictor segments for the conduits," she said, clearly not liking the words coming out of her mouth. Then, her face brightened. "I'm an idiot..."

"Oh?" said Falco. "If you could enlighten us..."

"We could just transfer the constrictor segments from the NM input to the AM input. It wouldn't be pretty, and we'd have to accept a lower efficiency and AM flow rate, but I definitely think we could form a warp field with the result. Hell, with this arrangement, we'd probably form a more powerful field than our hull geometry would allow, what with all the damage and all."

"But we'd still need to recrystallize the dilithium," said Harkness. "And we can't do that without the reactors."

Duquette shrugged. "We have six reactors. Presumably at least *one* of them will be functional."

"We can hope," said Harkness. *Pray more like.*

"Colleen," said Falco, "assuming that all of this works, what would our maximum warp be?"

Duquette shrugged. "I can't tell you with any real precision; there's just too many factors. But there's no way we'll get over warp three. Not a chance"

"At that speed, it'd take *months* to get back to Federation space," said Harkness. "Life support won't last us that long."

Falco's eyes glinted at Harkness. "Then we'd best fix it. Ensign, take your engineering crews and get at least one of the reactors up first, and then start converting the warp core. Lieutenant Harkness, while she's doing that, I want you to get anyone with any kind of technical or biological experience, well anyone who Duquette isn't using for the engines, and take them to life support. See if you can't get a little more life out of her." He glanced back at Duquette. "Dismissed ensign."

Falco looked back at Harkness after the ensign walked out. "We have to stop doing this," he said.

"Doing what?" asked Harkness.

"You--" Falco began angrily. He took a deep breath, then continued more calmly, "We're the ranking officers on this ship. If we can't get along, we die, and we take them with us. All of your fancy ideas involving warp cores and fusion reactors, and...and...rubber *toitiks*, for all I know, won't save us, not if the crew thinks that we're so busy arguing, we aren't trying to get out of here."

"Fine words for you to say, you started it. Or have you forgotten that dye in my shower?"

"I started--" Falco closed his eyes. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Every minute we spend accusing each other hating the other more is one minute less that we're spending getting back--and is one less minute we're working on getting back to the Federation and telling them everything we know about that base that just blew us to hell."

Harkness opened his mouth and closed it again.

"You're a genius, Harkness," Falco continued. "That idea with the constrictithings was pretty damn good, at least from what I can see. We have a chance now. We can't throw it away."

"I'm not--I'll try," said Harkness. "Umm...permission to speak off the record...sir?"

"Granted."

"To be completely honest...I don't know why I don't like you, why I can't get along with you. Usually, I--I can. Maybe--"

Falco smiled wistfully. "I had a hand in that, I think. I treated you in a way that I shouldn't have. You were a newly-arrived officer, not some stowaway, and I mocked you in front of the crew. That was something I shouldn't have done, no matter how funny the scene." Suddenly, the wistful smile became a fully-fledged grin. "You have to admit though, it *was* funny."

Harkness was outraged at first, but then he looked back on the image, without the filters of his own anger and embarrassment...and he felt a smile tugging at the corners of his own mouth. "Yeah," he said. "I guess it was."

"Good," said Falco. "Now then, you have your orders Lieutenant, get to it!"

"Aye *sir!*"

Starbase 521 Harkness's Quarters

Harkness put the PADD down on his desk. Fleet Ops...it was official. He was now a bonefied desk jockey. Never to log another star hour, shuffling between one starbase or installation and another. No more boldly going, no more new civilizations...no more fighting.

And the most damning thing? The last one made him almost glad for the transfer.

Coward.

Coward? Or simply playing to my strengths?

You know the answer.

I'm no fighter. Not fit to be captain, no soldier I. Better to be a desk jockey than to fuck up the war any more.

Coward.

"Sickbay to Captain Harkness," said Dr. Brown.

Jacob slapped his badge. "Harkness here."

"Could you come down here please?"

"I'll be right there."

USS *Hamlet* Impulse One

"Come *on* you motherless son of a--hah!" said one of Duquette's techs as he pulled out a--very badly warped--conduit. Duquette raised an eyebrow, and the crewman looked embarrassed. "It had managed to wrap itself the support frame," he said.

"I see," said Duquette as he handed the warped conduit to her. "These EPS conduits are designed to take temps upwards of ten thousand Kelvins! And the thing looks like a piece of spaghetti. How the hell did this happen Schnitzer?"

The tech shrugged. "All I can tell you is, I think that reactor'll run if we can get a good replacement. Can we? Get a replacement, I mean."

Duquette shrugged. "We can pull one off the dead reactors. The Cap--Commander Falco's going to be happy, I can tell you that much."

Bridge

"Lieutenant Commander--Captain's Log, Stardate 35174.15. Ensign Duquette and her team have managed to bring one of the fusion reactors online and are currently gathering gamma rays in an attempt to recrystallize the dilithium. They have completed the retrofit of the warp core, and have transferred the constrictor segments from the deuterium input to the anti-matter input.

Also of note are Lieutenant Harkness and his teams. With partial main power restored, they managed to bring self-sustaining life support back up. Don't ask me how, but they did it. Though I have the sneaking suspicion that if any more of us had actually survived...I have the feeling that this thought will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Harkness surveyed the bridge while Falco was recording his log. They had finally found Corgan's...head, while they'd been cleaning up the bridge. At least the officers and crew on the bridge had been given a decent funeral. Not like everyone vaporized in the forward hull...

"Engineering to the Bridge," said Duquette.

"Falco here," replied Mar'zief.

"As far as I can tell, the dilithium's been recrystallized. I *think* that we're ready to bring the warp core back online."

Falco smiled, a berserker's grin. "Do it ensign." Harkness looked away from his de facto captain and gulped. He tapped a few keys on his console, bringing up a repeater chart on the power curves from the warp core. At first they simply reported a flat line, and then, suddenly a spike. The constrictors were drawing power...the deuterium was now flooding into its input valves, to make sure that there was not detrimental impact from flowing it through without constrictors. No problem apparently...and then the antimatter started flowing.

If there was any fault in the warp core, now was when it would show up. With disastrous results. And then there was one large spike. The core was working. It was working!

"Good job people," said Falco.

Harkness seemed to rise from his seat and start clapping of his own accord. And then the tactical officer. And then the helmsman. Soon everyone was facing Falco, and applause thundered throughout the bridge. Jacob reached down and set the intercoms to pick up from the rest of the ship, and they could tell that everyone else was clapping and cheering too.

If Falco could have cried, he would have. He stood up. "Thank you," he said, immediately quelling the applause and cheering. "I--I can't tell you how much this means. But now is not the time for cheers. That should wait until we get home and tell Starfleet about that base. Helm, plot a course for Starbase 417. Best speed."

"Course plotted sir."

"Engage."

The badly damaged *Centaur* class starship leapt into warp, leaving behind the floating corpses of those who had been fortunate enough to be given a funeral, and those who had been pulled into the vacuum of space without being vaporized. The final resting place of more than two thirds of the crew of the crew of the starship *Hamlet*.

Only in nightmares were they again seen by a living soul.

Chapter Four

Starbase 521 Sickbay

"You wanted to see me, Doctor?" asked Harkness.

"Actually, Captain Falco did," replied Brown.

"Oh? How is he?"

Brown shrugged. "Still groggy from the meds. But he seems to be fine."

"Seems?"

"Best I can give you, sir."

"All right," said Harkness, finally. "Let me in to see him."

It was impossible to see Marz's skin through his thick coat of fur. However, despite this, he still looked sickly. Like...well...like he'd just been through a long and arduous surgery.

"How are you feeling old friend?" asked Harkness.

Falco smiled. "Very well thanks." He lifted up his left hand, opening and the closing the fingers. "Whatever his faults, the doc does good work."

Harkness smiled fleetingly. "Good," he said. "I--I was worried about you."

"I heard about the *Swiftsure*."

"Oh."

"It's hardly your fault Jacob," said Falco. "And at least half of her is still good."

"Not my fault? How the hell do you figure that?"

"By the fact that you were outnumbered and outgunned. And *no one* knew about those plasma torpedoes."

"I was the captain..."

"And you did a damn fine job at that. Listen to me Jacob, this was the Kobayashi Maru all over again, there was no way in hell you'd be getting out of that gauntlet

intact. Picard couldn't, Riker couldn't; hell, I wouldn't be surprised if *Kirk* could have managed to get out of there."

"But--"

"No buts Jacob. You are entirely too prone to beating yourself up. Stop that now. That's an order."

Jacob felt a smile tugging at his mouth. "You always did have a joke for every situation, you know."

"Took you long enough to realize that." Harkness stuck his tongue out at Falco, who looked back with equanimity.

"Mea culpa. Now then, Brown's making faces in the window, so I think it's time for me to leave you alone and let you rest."

Falco leaned back in the bed. "You know, I think that the doc may just be right about that." He smiled. "See you around old friend."

USS *Hamlet* Bridge

"--repeat, we have crossed over into Federation space," said Falco's voice over the intercom.

Jacob sat up groggily, pushing back his covers. He, at least, had been one of those lucky few whose quarters hadn't been vaporized eight months ago. He knew that he wouldn't go back to sleep. He didn't want to face Corgan again. Or Demas, or Minns, or anyone else. Eight months since they'd died, and they still plagued his dreams...

And he hadn't even seen them die.

He considered reaching for one of his books, then glanced at the chrono display. *Shit, I overslept!* All thoughts of reading left his mind as he dashed for his uniform. He shimmied into the uniform--*why does it have to be a jumpsuit?*--and ran for the mess hall, to see if he couldn't pick up a mug of coffee to drive the glue out of his brain. And, just his luck, the entire ration for the day had been used up...

He finally worked his way onto the bridge and relieved the Ops officer on duty. Well, warrant officer. Well...acting warrant officer. Too few officers left to waste on duties like that.

"Glad you could join us Lieutenant," said Falco. From the sound of his voice, Jacob could tell he was grinning. "Tell me, Mr. Harkness, when did two-pointed com badges become standard?"

Jacob glanced down at his chest and groaned; in his haste, he'd applied the badge on upside down. He took it off and flipped it back up again as the bridge laughed around him.

"Well, at least I don't have to spend an hour vacuuming my uniform every evening after I take it off," he retorted.

"You're just envious of my natural good looks."

"Well then," piped in the petty officer manning the engineering console, "he's really in trouble with the ladies."

"Rank insubordination! Mr. XO, I think that some discipline may be in order."

"I've heard some interesting things about terrestrial naval ships from the late eighteenth century. Something about flogging..." He grinned evilly as the bridge crew gasped in horror.

"Make sure you give me a detailed report, Number One. It may well be the only way to keep this crew in line..."

It felt odd, Jacob reflected as he went about his job, trading banter with his de facto captain and crew. Humor didn't quite come naturally to him, not yet, but Falco was right. It did do something wondrous for morale.

"Helm," said Falco, suddenly serious, "ETA to 417?"

"Seven hours, sir," replied the crewman.

Falco nodded. "Good. We're almost home people."

Starbase 417

A *Centaur* leapt out of warp some hundred kilometers from Starbase 417 and immediately set a course for the base.

"Message to Starbase Control. Begin 'Starbase 417, this is USS *Hamlet*, requesting permission to dock.' End Message."

"Message sent sir," said Jacob. A light started flashing on his console. "They're hailing us sir."

"On speakers."

"*Hamlet*, did you say? Where've you been, we put you down as lost--my God, what happened to you?"

"If you're referring to those little dents and nicks on our primary hull," said Falco, "the Cardies hit us. Listen, we've got fifty aboard, and life support--like everything else aboard ship--is jerry-rigged. Can we dock?"

"As soon as we verify your id. The Spoonheads have been raiding us hard lately, so you can never be too careful."

Falco and Harkness shared a glance. "No, you can't. Understood. We'll be here when you've verified us."

They waited a few minutes, and then the speakers crackled back to life. "This is Admiral Thias, CO 417. I'd like to speak to Captain Corgan."

Falco closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Captain Corgan died when the Cardassians hit us, about eight months ago. So did around three quarters of the crew, give or take. This is Lieutenant Commander Mar'zief Falco, acting CO."

"God... It pains me to hear that."

"Understood sir. However, we have the data that we were sent out to collect."

"You do? We haven't been able to get any ships that deep into Cardassian space since the *Hamlet* left; we've been unable to get a confirmed locus for that base that we think the raids are being launched from."

"We have a confirmed locus sir."

"Thank you. These raids...well, it hasn't been pleasant. If you'd please dock and transfer any and all data you have over to me."

"There's nothing that would please us more, believe me sir."

Airlock

"My God!" said Admiral Thias as he surveyed the broken saucer of the *Hamlet*. "How'd you manage to get back here under power?"

"Spitwads and sweat," replied Falco. "Not to mention a lot of luck."

"I'm amazed that you managed to even form a warp field."

"We had a very good replacement chief engineer," Harkness piped in.

"Yeah," added Falco. "And someday she might forgive us too."

"I can bet... Now then, about the intel."

"Sir," said Harkness, "shouldn't we doubt the accuracy of the intel? I mean, it *is* eight months out of date."

Thias shook his head. "It'll still come in handy," he said. "If only to provide background data and locations of their main sensor arrays." He looked over the two young officers. "Thank you, *Commander* Falco and Lieutenant *Commander* Harkness. The Fleet's in your debt."

"Sir?" asked Falco.

Thias smiled. "I happen to have a ship which is in need of a good XO and an Ops Officer. And anyone who can bring home that thing," he said, gesturing at the wreck of the *Hamlet*, "will make a very good XO. And no arguments, either. Your promotions will be official as soon as I can file the paperwork."

"Thank you sir," said Harkness. "I--I don't know what to say."

"Then say 'thank you.'"

"Thank you sir," said Falco.

"Your welcome. Don't let me down."

"No sir!"

Starbase 417 Falco's Quarters

Mar'zief looked over the quarters that he'd been assigned temporarily. Still so alien after eight months in the austere-ness of the quarters that he'd appropriated for himself after his old ones had been vaporized. The Hunter knew that there had still been plenty of empty quarters, even with nearly half the saucer missing...

He walked over to the mirror on the bureaus. Three solid pips decorated his neck. That was even more alien than the quarters, for those were temporary. The pips were permanent.

His door chimed. "Come in," he said. Harkness walked in. "Mr. Harkness," he said, smiling. "Come in."

"You hear what ship that Thias is transferring us too?" asked Harkness

"Honestly, no," replied Falco

"She's the *Atlantia*, an *Ambassador*. She's going to be leading the attack on the base."

"An *Ambassador*. Rarefied heights for such as us. You know, I've never served on a ship as large as her."

"I've served on a *Cheyenne* before the *Hamlet*. I know exactly what you mean." He gave Falco a mischievous look. "You'll have the time of your life, I bet."

"Of course. I've never had a chance to play with those new burst-fire tubes. Should be a lot of fun."

"Well, I've got to finish packing," said Harkness. "See you around Commander."

Falco smiled. "Call me Marz. I insist."

"All right," said Jacob, smiling. "See you around Marz."

"And you too Jacob. It's been an honor."

Starbase 521 Sickbay

Falco opened his eyes and stretched--both arms. He looked around the sterile sickbay from the vantage point of the bed he'd be lying on.

Doctor Brown quickly ran over to Falco's biobed. "How are you feeling sir?" he asked.

"Refreshed, actually," replied Falco.

Brown smiled. "Good, good. Now that you've slept, I'd like to make one last test of your nervous connections." He pulled out a scanner of some sort and started running it down Falco's body.

"Doc, can I ask you a question?" Falco asked as Brown was running the scanner down his body.

"Uh, sure."

"When you described this chip you stuck in my head, you sounded none to sure of it."

"Well, you can't expect your usual precision, but it's better than nothing," said Brown, focusing on his scanner's display.

"And how long can expected this to work?"

Brown looked up. "I--At least ten years, maybe. I don't know. It's a biochip, so it could start degrading...tomorrow if your body rejects it. But it shouldn't do that, I don't think. But in ten years, I think that it'll have easily noticeable results." He returned to his scanning. "By the way, I should caution you, try to avoid any serious damage to your neck for a year or so; give it time to settle into its new matrix."

"Thanks."

Brown switched his scanner off. "Your never connections have active ion flow in them. I'd say that for now, you're free to go. I recommend, however, coming in daily for scans. Um, and if you have any problems, come to the sickbay as soon as you can."

"Thanks Doctor," said Falco, sitting up. "I'll be sure to stop by if anything happens."

"Good."

Starbase 521 Fleet Command

Leaning over a fleet distribution readout, Harkness watched the all-too scattered Starfleet forces patrolling the border. The Breen continued to send out frigates on hit-and-run exercises, but none of the larger ships had been seen since the decimation of Cardassia Prime...

One of his aides passed him a PADD.

"I see the Thor made it safely back to 462," said Harkness as he looked it over.

"Yes, sir. They ran into a few frigates during change-over with the *Arkantos*, but she took care of them fairly easily."

"Good. Send Captain Wallace my compliments."

"Yes, sir."

Harkness sighed. They'd lost two more deep-range colonies near the Black Cluster. Even with Klingon reinforcements, they were still spread too thin after the Dominion War. And with the recent fleet losses...

Harkness closed his eyes, and shook his head. It was too much to even contemplate...

"Troubled thoughts, old friend?"

Harkness looked up, to see Falco standing at the entrance to Fleet Command, arms folded, smiling.

"They let you out?"

"The Doctor says I shouldn't suffer any severe after effects."

"That's good," said Harkness. "I'm glad."

"So am I," replied Falco, smiling mischievously. He looked over the Fleet Operations room. "This doesn't suit you," he said. "You never were meant to be a desk jockey."

Jacob shrugged. "Starfleet puts me where it feels I fit in best."

"As you humans put it so eloquently, bull."

"I wrecked your ship."

Marz rolled his eyes. "Jacob..."

Harkness turned away from his friend and looked back at his console. "I *am* glad to see you. I could use a hand with the redeployment of the Fourth Fleet. There's several key systems around here demanding defense, and there aren't enough ships to meet their demands."

Falco sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

**Demilitarized Zone
Undisclosed location**

Her aide walked into her office. Well, walked was the wrong word; stormed was more like it. He tossed a PADD onto her desk. "Look at this," he growled.

"Okay..." She picked up the PADD and looked it over, her eyes widening as she read it. "What? That's impossible!"

"To be frank, it is possible."

She closed her eyes. "I did this. I warned them about that fleet."

"You had no way of knowing that they'd have plasma torpedoes."

"What I don't understand is where the hell they got them from. None of the known Breen allies have them!"

The aide shrugged. "Maybe they developed the technology independently." She snorted in derision. "Or something, I don't know. We have to deal with the fact that the Breen have access to a powerful technology, and one that we don't have any control over."

"Get out."

"Ma'am?"

"You heard me. Get out."

"Yes ma'am."

She got out of her chair and started pacing as her aide walked out of the room. She knew that she would have to contact the council, and soon, so they could figure out some way to stem the tide of this disaster. A Breen victory...

There was one bright spot: the sheer lack of reports on her desk about the Breen having access to plasma torpedoes. The fact that they'd managed to keep such unprecedented tight security against her agents seemed to point to a very small project. Seemed.

Try as she might, though, she could see no possible way out of this quandary. All that she could see were wheels within wheels, all flying in different directions. What had once been a plan under control no longer was. And it was *her* fault.

She just hoped that the Federation would possibly survive her failure.