

Star Trek: The Breen War

Prologue

"Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." --John 8:5-7

Halдар Deep in the Mines

From out of the darkness, Commander Ian Wallace heard the frightened pleas of a man about die. He'd heard them far too often now; they were the prelude to a random, and brutal, execution. But what stopped him dead this time, was that he recognised the voice, and as he turned his eyes confirmed what his ears had suspected: Lieutenant Commander Evesham was being dragged away from his work by two Breen guards.

Oh God, thought Wallace. They know.

The previous night Evesham, along with Maro and Howard, had come to him full of ideas of escape. Surely it couldn't be coincidental that this morning the *Thor's* chief engineer was struggling with two guards, begging them for mercy. Normally the Breen only killed off the weak or lame, but Evesham was still strong and fit—it was the only reasonable explanation.

Wallace made to move in Evesham's direction, determined to intervene on his behalf, but yet more screams; shriller, alien cries, stopped him in his tracks.

"Maro," he whispered under his breath. "No."

They must have been seen returning to their beds. Somewhere off in the distance, Wallace could vaguely make out more cries for help, and though he couldn't distinguish, it had to be Howard.

It was only then that Wallace realised that two Breen guards were also coming for him, weapons raised.

"Captain?" said the young ensign working next to him. The look in her eyes told him that she was willing to fight, that she would not let them take her captain easily.

"No. Keep everyone together. And stay alive; that's an order."

They had him.

CHAPTER ONE

Starbase 521 Holding Cells

"You're a traitor and a coward."

Captain Jordana Klyce looked up from where she sat at the back of her cell. She'd had plenty of time to think about what she was, and what she'd done, since her return in disgrace. But though a few days ago she would have readily agreed with Captain Harkness, now she was beginning to suspect otherwise.

"I did what I had to do."

"You abandoned over two hundred of your fellow officers!"

"And I saved two hundred more. What sense was there in inviting the same fate on my crew? Maybe my actions weren't the most heroic, but they were necessary. This is war, Captain, and in war, you pick your battles. There was nothing I could've done to save the crews of the *Thor* or the *Laurel*. And, in fact, had we tried, we might have triggered a firefight from which there would have been no survivors. The Breen wouldn't have gotten their prisoners, sure, but none of us would have made it out of that star system alive."

"So I suppose that makes you the hero," Harkness mocked. "Wait, let me just go fetch the admiral, you'll be out of here in no time flat."

Klyce jumped to her feet.

"Why don't we talk about *your* record, Captain? Just how many ships have you lost in this war? How many men and women have died under your command?"

Harkness stared back, dumfounded, unable to either articulate or actualise his outrage.

Seeing his hesitation, Klyce took a step forward, coming as close to Harkness as she could get.

"You need me, Captain. I know the admiral had rejected your plans for a rescue mission, and I know that you're considering taking matters into your own hands. The crew of the *Arkantos* is still loyal to me. Get me out of here, and we'll go get those people out of that prison camp."

"You didn't have the stomach for a fight at Starbase 462, what makes you so sure you'll have what it takes to at Haldar--," Harkness silently berated himself for letting that slip.

"Careless talk, Captain," Klyce smiled. "The difference is that at Haldar, I'll be fighting on my terms. We'll be the ones with the element of surprise."

Without a doubt, Captain Klyce was the most insufferable, despicable Starfleet officer that Harkness had ever come across. But she was right on one point: if he really was going to go after Wallace against orders, then he'd probably need her. She was only being held for questioning and so was technically still in command of the *Arkantos*, with all her command codes and authorisation intact. And Harkness knew that she'd received several visits from her first officer. Inexplicably, it seemed that her crew was indeed still loyal to Klyce. It would be difficult then, to take the *Arkantos* on this mission without her. But could he really work with this woman?

"No," said Harkness. "You're going to sit back down, and wait patiently for your court martial. I'll be sure to attend."

"You arrogant fool. Your pride will condemn those officers to their deaths!"

"If they die, then it'll be your cowardice that condemned them, nothing else."

Harkness walked away, his guts in a knot, knowing that he'd be back, but also knowing that it would be on *his* terms, not hers.

Starbase 521 War Room

On the huge display at the head of the room, Admiral Zareka watched the battle unfolding around Durab 9. The star system was nothing more than a few lifeless rocks orbiting an old brown dwarf, but its logistical value had risen dramatically over the past few weeks as the front lines shifted. To this end, the admiral had ordered in a small Starfleet task force to secure the area and set up a series of listening posts, and to make preparations for a manned station. But the Breen were already there. It'd been just one frigate, but it'd surprised the task force and inflicted heavy damage to a Zakdorn science vessel before it succumbed. Unfortunately though, it'd also sent word back to the Breen fleet that Starfleet had moved into the system. And so the two sides had been funnelling reinforcements into the area for the past twenty-four hours, each trying to gain the upper hand. But neither side could drive the other away, and neither wanted to give in.

"The *Ent'Mar* and the *Alentdar* have dropped out of warp and are approaching the coordinates," reported Commander Solan, Admiral Zareka's adjutant.

"Very well. Admiral Telous?"

Her Romulan counterpart nodded to his own second-in-command, and the order was sent for the ships to engage the enemy. They all watched as the fighters began to stream from their docking bays. Not the familiar Federation ones, but Scorpion class Romulan attack craft, the Star Command's most prized military asset. It was even the norm for the Praetor himself to have an entire wing assigned to protect him or her during any interstellar travel, and in all the engagements that the Romulan fighters had been deployed so far, they'd made a significant difference.

The cloud of fighters swarmed over the Breen ships. Many of the small Romulan craft were destroyed, but not enough to shield the Breen vessels from taking considerable damage, and then as the fighters came round for a second pass, the Federation starships, now bolstered by the presence of the two Warbirds, pressed home their advantage.

"It appears the tide is turning in our favour," commented Commander Solan.

Admiral Telous seemed less than impressed, though. "Appearances can be deceptive," he said. "The Breen won't give up so easily. Without further reinforcements, it'll be impossible to hold onto the tactical advantage we've gained here."

"I will consult Admiral Bailer," said Zareka. "It may be possible to requisition more ships to hold the Durab system. I thank you, Admiral Telous; your arrival in this sector has been most fortuitous." She held the gaze of the Romulan admiral for just a moment, and silently conveyed her suspicion. Telous's story of having arrived simply as part of a much larger tour of the Romulan forces on the front line didn't hold up to scrutiny. Zareka was well aware that agents of the Tal Shiar had infiltrated Starbase 521, and that they'd passed on some information to Telous, something important enough for him to pay them a visit in person. But as of yet she didn't have any idea just what it was.

Telous grunted ambiguously, and then with one last look up at the battle raging light-years away, he marched out of the war room.

IRS *Galora* Romulan Warbird

"Admiral, we've just received word that the Breen have retreated from Durab Nine, but Starfleet has sent us telemetry from one of their listening posts which seems to indicate that they are assembling a larger force to attempt to retake the system."

Telous glared at the speaker, Centurion Ilientis, as if it was his fault that this situation had arisen.

"Send word to the *Ent'Mar* and *Alentdar* that they are to hold. And order the *Rantis* to join them as soon as their mission is completed."

"But Sir," cut in Commander Jolis. "What about the Haldar problem?"

Telous shook his head.

"There is nothing we can do about that now."

"But if Starfleet--"

"That's enough! War is a game of risk, Commander, and our friends on Haldar will just have to fend for themselves for the time being. Set a course for Onar IV. There's nothing more we can do."

Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 5

Just when he thought it was all over, the floor was gone and Wallace was falling, sliding downwards. He landed awkwardly and fell into a heap as the icy blue water washed over him. His lungs were burning, and Wallace gasped for air as he lay shivered on the wet metal floor.

He couldn't say it had been much of a privation to have been dragged away from his work in the mines, and as a bonus, he hadn't (at least so far) been killed. Rather, he'd been injected with something that had near enough knocked him out and transported out of the mining station. He couldn't be sure how long it had been since he'd been taken, but he was fairly certain he was still on the same planet as the rest of his crew, or if not that, then at least in the same system.

They'd stripped him, scanned him, and then put him in the device that had just spat him out. It was like some time of stasis tube, but it wasn't used to put him into suspended animation. It'd filled with icy, sweet tasting water, and he was fairly certain he'd been extensively scanned and maybe even bombard with some kind of radiation. They'd also pumped him full of drugs, but what worried him was that these hadn't been any kind of sedative. Quite the opposite; they made him feel better. And as he lay there, freezing and humiliated, Commander Wallace actually felt as healthier than he'd he'd been since coming to this hell-planet.

On his hands and knees, Wallace managed to look up. The room was bright and cold, like a sparse winter's morning in his native Scotland.

"Evesham," gasped Wallace as he spotted the man just across the room from him. The man was beginning to stir, having just been ejected from his own tube. Maybe because of the sedative he'd been given initially, but Wallace hadn't even realised that the others that the Breen had come for in the mines had been transported with him.

"Captain," came the voice of Lieutenant Howard. "Are you all right?"

Scanning the room, Wallace spotted Lieutenant Maro sat hunched at the exit point of her own tube, protecting her modesty. They were all here, then.

"What happened?" asked Maro.

"I think we were disinfected, for want of a better word," said Howard. "I think we just went through the Breen equivalent of a full medical."

"Why?" asked Evesham. But before anyone could venture a guess at their captors' motives the doors at the end of the room slid open and several Breen guards marched in.

Wallace got unsteadily to his feet and put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Despite the rejuvenating effects of the treatment they'd received, none of them were in any state to resist. It was difficult enough to stand, let alone do anything else.

But it seemed that the Breen no more intended to start a fight than the prisoners were. They merely indicated with their weapons that the four of them should make their way into the next room.

Wallace complied, and signalled to his three crewmembers that they should do the same. Gingerly, the four Starfleet officers rose up to their feet.

USS *Thunderchild* Starbase 521

As Captain Harkness materialized, he was still rubbing his neck from the hypospray. The atmosphere on the *Thunderchild* was more tailored to the requirements of Benzites than humans, due to the requirements of her soon-to-be departed captain, and the majority of her crew, and so he needed to visit the station's doctor before he'd beamed aboard. But still breathing was not comfortable. He was told that with regular treatment that the human respiratory system could acclimatize, but the trade-off was that they then had to go through the same thing where they beamed back to what Harkness would call 'normal' atmospheric conditions.

"Welcome aboard," said Captain Zing moving forward to greet him. "You said you had something you need to discuss with me."

Captain Milena Zing's reputation was seemed well-deserved judging from first impressions. She didn't stand for any nonsense, and was always keen to come straight to the point. But it wasn't her reputed impatience that Harkness was interested in. Zing was one of the most skilled military commanders in Starfleet, and there was already talk in certain places that once Picard finally consented to be moved upwards, that the Federation's flagship could do much worse than her.

"Perhaps we could talk in private," suggested Harkness as he clasped Zing's hand. Her grip was strong and confident.

All it took was the slightest nod of her head, and the *Thunderchild's* transporter chief, another Benzite who looked identical to his or her captain, beamed the two captains directly into Zing's ready room.

"Now then, what can I do for you, Captain?" asked Zing. She didn't sit down, and nor did Harkness, even though the strange atmosphere of his counterpart's ship was making him feel queasy.

"I have a problem on Haldar."

"So I hear."

"I read your reports from the Ular inclusions. You intimated that Commander Yin should be given permanent command of the *Thunderchild* once you officially take over the *Typhon*. I'd have to agree."

Zing pieced Harkness with knowing eyes. She was no fool, she could see exactly where this conversation was going.

"You are going to ask me to go to Haldar with you in a reckless attempt to rescue the crews of the *Thor* and the *Laurel*, against the orders of Admiral Zareka, and as a bribe you offer to take my most skilled and experienced officer? She has been assigned to the *Typhon*. Why would I want to lose her?"

Harkness felt not frustration, but hopelessness well up in him. If this was a game of poker, then Zing was holding all the cards. She was the one with the ship, and she was the one with the skill and influence. He was nothing more than a desk operative now.

"What do you want?"

Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 3

The Breen had generously provided them with clothes in the form of four nondescript red boiler suits. They were then led through the brightly-lit corridors, up two levels, and locked in a room at the centre of which was a large table, with nine chairs arranged around it.

With nothing else to do, the four of them sat down and waited.

"What are they doing?" asked Evesham.

Wallace looked at the engineer, seeing the fear and confusion in his face. Ever since they'd been seized in the mines, they'd been waiting to die. But instead of being executed, things had only gotten stranger. It was almost worse than death. At least they could've understood that.

"I don't know," admitted Wallace. "I haven't read anything on the Breen that would explain their actions. If the Breen take prisoners at all, then they are normally worked to death. I thought that would be our fate. I never expected anything like this."

Everyone jumped as the doors opened. As Wallace turned to see what was going on, he was surprised to see four more prisoners being marched in. But these weren't from the *Thor*, but the *Laurel*.

The three women and one man dressed in blue boiler suits trotted apprehensively into the room, and then with the Breen left outside, the doors were closed behind them.

Wallace got to his feet.

"I'm Commander Ian Wallace," he said. "I commanded the *Thor*. This is Lieutenant Commander Evesham, my chief engineer, Lieutenant Maro, my helmsman, and Lieutenant Howard, my science officer."

The tallest member of the group, a black woman with a very formal demeanour, approached him and said,

"Lieutenant Commander Appiah. I was the first officer aboard the *Laurel*. This is Lieutenant Commander Ghosh, our chief engineer, Ensign Kasyanov, our operations officer, and Ensign Perez, our helmsman."

"I was sorry to hear about Captain Kerzhakov," said Wallace. Word had reached him in the mines about the crew of the *Laurel*, which had made up most of Beta Shift. But they hadn't fared as well in the battle, and had lost their captain, as well as many of their crew.

"Thank you, Commander. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"No. I assume you went through the same decontamination process as us though?" Appiah nodded as her and her crew took their seats. "I doubt it's a coincidence that they've rounded up the four most senior officers from each ship."

"Do you think they plan to question us?"

"Yes," replied Wallace. "But I don't understand why they've waited so long, and why they went to all this trouble to put us through decon. I expected to be strapped down and have them bore into my mind with some kind of mind scanner."

Wallace looked around the assembled faces, and saw that his words had probably been misjudged. He'd made some of the younger officers even more scared than they'd been before, and they hadn't exactly been relaxed then.

"One seat left," said Evesham, changing the subject. "Who do you think that's for?"

"There was a man with us," said Appiah. "A captain. He beamed aboard the *Laurel* just as our lines were broken. He was with us during transport, but I never saw him in the mines."

"Who was he?" asked Wallace.

"I don't know. I didn't recognise him. I don't think he was in command of any of the ships that fought in the battle, or part of the command staff of the

Starbase, and in the confusion of being taken prisoner, I didn't think to introduce myself."

Wallace hadn't been aware of any captain aboard Starbase 462 that wasn't either part of the staff, or captain of a ship. Of course, that didn't mean that Appiah was wrong, but maybe that Wallace either hadn't noticed, or the man had other business there.

All they could do was wait to discover their fate.

Chapter Two

Starbase 521 Holding Cells

"You're a traitor and a coward."

Captain Klyce looked at the two unconscious security guards, and then at Harkness as he deactivated the force field of her holding cell.

"And here you are: ever the loyal servant of the Federation. Had a change of heart did you?"

Without warning, Harkness had Klyce pinned to the wall of her cell.

"Let's get one thing straight, Captain, so far as I'm concerned you should hang for what you've done, and by God, if those people are dead because of your craven self-preservation, then I'll make sure you pay!"

"Captain Harkness," came the voice of Commander Yin. "I have to insist that you step away from Captain Klyce."

Harkness didn't need to look to know that Yin had a phaser pointed at him. Yin was loyal to Zing, and Zing wanted Klyce brought back 'unharm'd.' He let Klyce go, and as the female captain gasped for air, Harkness turned back to Yin. He was about to say something, when a sharp pain against his face set Harkness staggering sideways.

"You touch me again, Captain," spat Klyce, "and I'll--"

"That's enough! Both of you!" snapped Yin. Harkness was ready to retaliate, but the commander had stepped between them. She was small, her slight Asian build making her probably half the size of Harkness, but she had a phaser loosely aimed at him, ready to stun him, if need be. "You might not have noticed," Yin continued, "but we're on the same side here. Which means all the more considering that we're about to risk our careers by defying the orders of our superiors. If we can't get along then we'll either end up dead, or in separate cells, and we'll fail everyone trapped on Haldar."

The two of them relaxed, though just a little.

"I need to get back to the *Arkantos*," said Klyce walking away.

"Oh no, you don't," said Harkness following her, closely followed by Commander Yin. "You'll be on the *Typhon*."

"The hell I will!"

"He's right," said Yin. "Captain Zing wants you as her XO during this mission."

Klyce looked at the small Asian commander. She knew of Captain Zing, of course; knew that she only had the best of the best aboard her ship, and that she was one of the most well-respected captains in Starfleet. But what did Zing want with her?

"Then who will command the *Arkantos*?" as she said it though, she knew the answer, and it made her blood run cold.

Despite the angry-looking bruise forming on his cheek, Harkness was smiling.

Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 3

They had been talking for some time. The crew of the *Laurel* were all younger and less-experienced than Wallace's people. The *Laurel* was little more than a glorified science vessel, and the battle at Starbase 462 had been its first major engagement. But despite how ill-equipped their ship had been, it had survived, and the same could be said of its crew. Wallace respected that.

Finally the doors opened, and the ninth prisoner was ushered in. He was an exceptionally tall human, of what appeared to be Middle Eastern origin. The new arrival was dressed in a black boiler suite, but what caught all their attention was that the man's head and eyes were all heavily bandaged. It seemed that Wallace's fear might prove correct, and his guts clenched with dread at what might be to come.

As the man collapsed, Wallace jumped up and hurried over to him, followed by Commander Appiah and their two crews.

"Are you okay?" Wallace asked as he helped the man up to his knees.

"Actually, no."

"Here, let me help you."

Together, they managed to help the new arrival into one of the chairs, where he sat rested forward against the table. Eventually, he said,

"Would you mind telling me who you are? And where we're been taken? The Breen were less than chatty after they blinded me."

As the man tried to catch his breath and compose himself, Wallace introduced everyone and did his best to explain what was going on, as far as he could understand anyway.

"Interesting. My name is Captain Shemesh. I was aboard the station when the Breen attacked."

"What did they do to you?" asked Maro.

Shemesh tapped the side of his head where he'd been bandaged.

"I have a metal plate in my head, and I think the Breen were worried that it might be a part of some kind of cybernetic device that Starfleet could use to track us. So they decided to have a look and during the process accidentally blinded me. That's why I was kept separate from the rest of you. I assume that you were put to work somewhere? But I was useless in that capacity. I think it was only my rank that saved me. A Starfleet captain can come in handy if you happen to be at war with the Federation."

"Captain," said Wallace, "I'm sorry, I don't recognise your name. Do you command a ship?"

"Ha! No. Never have, and never will. I like to keep my feet on solid ground. It was just bad luck that I was on the station when it was attacked."

"Then, what was your assignment?"

"Adjutant to Admiral T'Lara. I was meant to be on my way to Vulcan when the Breen attacked."

There conversation was then interrupted by the whine of replicators, and suddenly the table was covered in food. And not the vile algae that they'd been fed in the mines, but fresh fruit and cooked meat.

No one moved.

"What the hell are they playing at?" asked Evesham.

"Seems they want to fatten us up," said Wallace as a chill went through him.

"But why?"

"Have we just strayed into some grim Breen fairytale?" joked Howard.

Shemesh smiled as he began to eat.

"Isn't it obvious? They're going to torture us. And there's nothing worse than a prisoner dying five minutes into the interrogation. They want us as fit and as healthy as possible, before they begin."

At that, the eight other Starfleet officers all lost their appetites.

"Eat, that's an order," said Shemesh. "We're all about to go through an ordeal, and it's our duty to survive. Plus, if you think what the Breen do to cooperative prisoners is bad, then imagine what they do to the ones that cause trouble."

USS *Arkantos* Starbase 521

Harkness couldn't sleep. The waiting was driving him to distraction, but they were stuck at Starbase 521 until six-hundred hours. He'd scheduled eight hours of manoeuvres for the *Thunderchild*, *Typhon* and *Arkantos* then, which would provide the perfect opportunity to slip away. But if they tried to make a break for it before that time, even if the starbase didn't stop them, there would be a good chance of them being intercepted before they left Federation space.

Stepping out onto the bridge Harkness was surprised to see Commander Barez hovering over the tactical station. He was probably suffering the same insomnia as him, being the only member of the *Arkantos*'s crew to know what was really going on. For a moment Harkness considered talking to the Bajoran, he was, after all, his new first officer, but instead he simply nodded in his direction, and made his way to what was now *his* ready room. Maybe it was that Zing had a penchant for irony that she would contrive to have Harkness commanding the very ship that he held responsible for the disaster at Starbase 462, or maybe she just had a cruel sense of humour. Harkness couldn't quite work Zing out, but for now it didn't matter; all that mattered was that they were going to Haldar, and they were going to undo the damage that Klyce had done.

As he entered the captain's private office, Harkness was hit by the traces of Klyce that were still present. He could sense her, and see her in the various personal effects scattered about. An abstract painting hung behind her desk, and other charcoal drawings were scattered about. Harkness wondered if they were the captain's own work. He was no art critic, but he suspected that they were quite good. He hoped she hadn't done them.

Harkness stood in front of Klyce's desk. He couldn't move. To make himself comfortable here would be wrong somehow. Did he really have that much respect for Klyce's privacy? Or was it something else?

He was nervous. Haldar would be the first time he'd be back in the thick of things since what had happened on the *Swiftsure*, and then, he'd hardly covered himself in glory. The thought of losing yet another ship, yet another crew, wasn't something that he'd easily cope with. He couldn't fail at Haldar. He couldn't let himself become what Klyce was. No matter what this mission did to his career, languishing as it was in the doldrums, Haldar would be his redemption.

Haldar Hijenkis Base 4 Sub-Level 3

Wallace couldn't sleep. He was clean, refreshed, and well fed, but he couldn't stop thinking about the rest of his crew still suffering down in the mines. Had there been any executions today? What did they think had happened to him? He had a responsibility to them and it hurt that there was nothing he could do.

He didn't even know where he was in relation to the mining camp; for all he knew it could be on the other side of the planet, or even further away than that.

After their meal, the crews had been allowed to 'socialise' for a few more hours, and then had been moved into cells. Despite being locked up again, the conditions were much improved than in the mines. His new home was clean and warm, and there wasn't the near-constant sound of members of his crew sniffling through the night, the occasional scream as someone woke from a nightmare.

"Are you awake?" came Captain Shemesh's voice.

They'd been separated into twos, the pairs determined by rank, and thus Wallace and Shemesh had been placed together. Wallace didn't trust the blinded captain. He didn't believe his story and suspected that Commander Appiah didn't either. It was entirely possible that Shemesh was a traitor.

"Yes."

"How long had you served as captain of the *Thor*?"

Wallace hesitated, but that information was of no importance, so even if the man was a Breen agent, or if the Breen was monitoring their cells, then it didn't matter.

"Not long. A few weeks."

"It must hurt. To think of your crew down in the darkness while you're up here, in the light."

"Yeah, it hurts like hell. You know, when you serve on a ship, after a while you realise that you would die for your crewmates. But when I took command I felt that instantly. I sat in that centre chair and thought: *I would do anything for these people; I would give my life for them.*" For a moment, Wallace thought of the USS *Arkantos*, and how her captain had warped out of the battle, leaving them behind. He was bitter of course, but he wouldn't have wished what had befallen his crew on anyone's. The captain of the *Arkantos* did what she did for her crew, and Wallace could empathise with that, no matter what the consequences had been. "I never got that chance though," Wallace continued. "And look at me now: here in the lap of luxury and they're down there, suffering, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. There's nothing."

Wallace sat up in his bunk, suddenly furious with himself. He should have fought the Breen guards. He should have never allowed himself to be brought here. Better to be dead than betray his crew.

From across the way, Shemesh sat up on his bed. In the dim glow of their cell he was a ghostly figure, almost faceless due to the bandages.

"You shouldn't be too hard on yourself. I'm sure your crew understands. And besides, as comfortable as you are now, it's very likely that you, not to mention everyone else that was taken, are going to suffer in the end. I wouldn't necessarily think that you got the better part of the deal."

"Is that suppose to make me feel better?"

"Does it?"

Wallace thought about it for a moment, and then said, "Yeah, it does actually."

Shemesh sat back against the wall, bringing up his legs and crossing them under him. He didn't comment on what Wallace had just said.

"What?" demanded the Scotsman.

"I think the way you feel is endemic throughout Starfleet. These wars have taken a terrible toll on the men and women that serve the Federation. We're becoming like Klingons; valuing life less and less, and looking for a glorious death."

"I don't want to die!" spat Wallace. "I just--, I just want my crew to know that I haven't abandoned them."

"You can do that by living. Your men won't give a damn whether you're sleeping in silk sheets and surrounded by concubines so long as you, when you get your chance, do whatever you can to free them. They won't think any less of you just because you ate a good meal tonight."

Wallace jumped to his feet and started pacing his cell. There might have been some truth in what Shemesh said, but he didn't like the way the man was able to get under his skin.

"What about you?" asked Wallace.

"What about me?"

"You said you've never served on a starship. I find that hard to believe. You've been in Starfleet, for what? Forty years? You haven't been making Admiral T'Lara's tea all that time."

"I've had postings on a number of different worlds and colonies. There is plenty of work out there for someone who happens to prefer good honest mud, rather than deck plating, under his feet."

"I'm sure," said Wallace. "But this is war and Starfleet has a shortage of experienced commanders. We can construct a ship in less than eight months but a captain takes decades to mould. I find it hard to believe that the admiral thinks you're more useful as her errand-boy, than on the bridge of a ship. Just what is it that you do for her? And why were you at Starbase 462? It's hardly on the way to Vulcan. Unless, of course, you were coming from the Breen Confederacy."

Shemesh let out a small laugh and shook his head.

"You're starting to sound paranoid, Commander."

The Breen were moving about outside their cell, and then they heard a human voice, one of the crew of the *Laurel*. She was being led away.

"What's going on?" asked Shemesh.

"They're taking someone. Ensign Kasyanov." Wallace started to bang on his cell door and shout but the Breen ignored him, and all too soon they were gone. "What the hell are they playing at?" he asked turning back to Shemesh.

"Working their way up."

USS *Arkantos* Starbase 521

"What is it?" asked Harkness as he let Barez into his ready room. Despite how ill at ease he'd felt in Klyce's office, he'd fallen asleep there, and had been dozing then Commander Barez had woken him.

"We have a problem. The admiral has cancelled our exercises. She says that she needs all ships to remain docked for the time being."

"Damnit!"

Harkness moved behind Klyce's desk and hailed the *Typhon*. Captain Zing appeared on the computer screen looking every bit as disgruntled as he felt.

"Captain Harkness, it seems that the admiral is aware of our plans."

"Have they discovered the hologram?"

"No. The holographic Klyce is fully operational, and the guards you and Yin took out have suffered no ill-effects from our tampering with their memories. You did good work, but it appears that Admiral Zareka is suspicious nonetheless."

"I thought she trusted you. No matter what she thought of me she was supposed to believe that you would never disobey a direct order, and that you and Yin would keep me in check if I got any funny ideas while away from the starbase."

"Apparently, the admiral doesn't trust me anymore than you."

Harkness dropped into the chair behind Klyce's desk.

"We don't have time for this."

"If we attempt to leave without clearance, they'll try and stop us, and your crew will think twice before allowing you to defy an admiral. Even with Barez behind you, you'll likely have a mutiny on your hands."

Zing was right. Her own crew, now spread across the *Typhon* and the *Thunderchild*, under Yin, would follow her through the very gates of hell, he was sure, but the crew of the *Arkantos* didn't know him from Adam, and many probably also knew that he'd been influential in removing their previous CO.

"And, Captain," Zing continued, "I may be good, but I doubt that I can take on all the forces the Breen have at Haldar and rescue the prisoners with only two ships. I need the *Arkantos*. I need you."

For a moment Harkness was startled by that admission. He hadn't considered himself to be of much value to anyone or anything since he'd lost the *Alabama*. He thought back to that time for a moment. For so long, whenever he'd thought of that ship, all he could recall were the final moments of battle in which she succumbed. But before then, it had all been quite different. He'd had the trust of his crew, and the confidence to lead from the front. But since then he'd become a shadow of his former self; he'd stopped believing that people followed him because they wanted to, but merely because of his rank.

"Is Captain Klyce there?" he asked Zing suddenly.

"Yes. What do you have in mind, Captain?"

"Tell her to standby. I'm going to move this conversation to the bridge."

Zing opened her mouth to object, but Harkness cut the transmission and jumped to his feet. To hell with reputation and rank, this was *his* mission, and it would survive or fail because of him alone. He'd no doubt that Zing could probably scheme her way out of this situation, and that by the end of the day they would be on their way to Haldar. But there was no time to waste; he'd to take a chance.

A moment later Harkness strode out onto the bridge, followed by Barez.

"Hail the *Typhon*," said Harkness. "And feed the communication throughout the ship."

Now on the command platform with Harkness, Barez looked scandalised at the order, but the ops officer complied without complaint, and Zing reappeared, this time on the view-screen, looking worried.

"All hands, this is Captain Harkness. As you have probably been informed, our early morning expedition has been cancelled. But as relieved as some of you may be at not having to spend a day going through endless tactical seniors and evaluations, I'm afraid that I have something else in mind. When this vessel retreated from Starbase 462, two ships were left behind, the *Thor* and the *Laurel*. And as I'm sure you all know, Captain Klyce has been called to answer for her actions. But whereas Admiral Zareka is prepared to leave

those two crews in the hands of the Breen, and see your commander court-marshalled, I am not. Commander Yin and I liberated your incarcerated captain from the holding cells on Starbase 521 yesterday afternoon." At this, Harkness signalled to Zing to show them Klyce, which she did very reluctantly, obviously not liking this situation one bit, "and along with Captain Zing of the *Typhon*, and Commander Yin who has been in temporary command of the *Thunderchild*, we hatched a plan to rescue the survivors of the defeat at 462. I have to confess that our initial plan meant deceiving all of you. We were to fabricate orders while out on manoeuvres, and go into battle with this crew believing that it was a legitimated Starfleet operation. That's no longer possible, but more than that, it was a mistake. I was wrong. And so now I am asking each and every one of you to come with me to Haldar, to risk not only your lives, but also your careers, for all the men and women that got left behind. I'm asking you to try and forge something good out of something awful, to believe that no matter how illogical: the lives of those people are worth the resources expended to liberate them. That they are worth everything we can give. Because Starfleet doesn't abandon its own, and the Federation stands for more than just defending its borders. Basic decency says we cannot stand by and let our fellows suffer. I'm asking you to draw a line in the sand, to send a message to the people running this war that we'll not accept victory at the expense of what we are fighting for; that when they made the 'strategic' decision to abandon the lives of over two hundred of your comrades, they went too far, and that we, the soldiers on the ground, won't let that stand. To tell them that this is not for the uniform, this is not for Starfleet, but this for the very ideals that the Federation was founded upon."

When Harkness finished his speech, he was breathless. His blood was pumping so hard he felt like he could take Haldar with just a shuttle and a hand-phaser, but his bravado notwithstanding, he knew he needed this ship and this crew, and so nervously, he looked about, trying to gauge their responses.

For a moment no one spoke, or hardly even moved. Zing watched impassively from the view-screen, with Klyce at her shoulder. The human woman looked almost impressed, and after a moment, stepped forward.

"This is Captain Klyce," she said. "All departments report in on the *Arkantos*. We'll going to Haldar. Harkness is right."

Chapter Three

USS *Arkantos* En Route to Haldar

"You're a traitor and a coward."

"You should have included that in your speech, it would have gone down great, I'm sure."

"Your crew are not responsible for your crimes, and it would be a travesty if their misguided loyalty to you prevented them from doing something good here."

"You really are a very small, petty man, aren't you, Harkness."

For a moment it looked like the two captain's were about to come to blows again, but that was impossible now. They were on different ships, each only seeing only a holographic projection of the other.

Their flight from Starbase 521 had not been difficult. The base had tried to put a tractor beam on them, but Harkness had used his position to make sure that they suddenly suffered a glitch in its targeting scanners. The problem would be identified and fixed in moments, but it was long enough for the *Arkantos* to make it into warp without being stopped. Now all three ships were seeping towards Haldar and it had seemed the only problem they were facing was a lack of personnel. Seventeen crewmembers had jumped ship from the *Arkantos* after Harkness's speech, and though that wouldn't have normally have been too much of a blow on such a short mission, both the *Typhon* and the *Thunderchild* were also short-handed. The *Typhon* had arrived at the Starbase with only a skeletal crew of mainly engineers. She was meant to receive her new captain and transfers from the *Thunderchild*. There were also several dozen fresh recruits from the academy on their way to Starbase 521, along with about the same amount of non-commissioned crewmen, and a couple of dozen more experienced officers. But they had left before these reinforcements arrived; the *Typhon* was about eighty men short, out of a normal crew complement of three hundred and fifteen, the *Thunderchild* one hundred and fifty, out of five hundred and thirty-five, and the *Arkantos*, after taking into account loses from the battle at Starbase 462 that hadn't so far been replaced, about two-dozen, out of one hundred and fifty. It was certainly a problem, though now they also had something else to worry about.

Captain Zing, who had been ignoring her bickering colleagues, turned back to the holograms representing them. Holographic communication was a technique that the rigors of war had allowed them to develop, and which saved them much time and effect when coordinating military operations.

"We don't have time for your personal feuding," scolded the Benzite. "The *Appalachia* and the *Nova* have been ordered to intercept us, and they'll do so in less than four hours."

"I don't suppose you know either of the captains," asked Harkness.

"No. I was hoping they would dispatch the *Enterprise*, but it seems Admiral Zareka is not to be underestimated."

"We could avoid them by arcing our approach to Haldar," suggested Yin. "It would take us away from the approaching ships and put the Aloria Nebula between us, which they would have to pass through it at low warp."

Harkness shook his head.

"That would put more than five hours on our journey. We don't have the time to waste."

"I don't see that we have any other options," said Zing. "Are you willing to give the order to open fire on a Federation starship. I highly doubt that your crew's new-found loyalty to you would stretch to that."

As frustrated as Harkness was at the idea of delaying their arrival at Haldar, he knew that Zing was right. He couldn't get into a position where he would be facing Starfleet vessels in combat. He nodded his assent, and then with the orders dispatched to their various helmsmen, the assembled commanders went about planning their approach to Haldar.

Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 3

As the dawn came, their cell doors unlocked and the remaining Starfleet officers emerged to find Ensign Kasyanov sitting slumped on one of the chairs in what they'd come to call the communal area. She was only semi-conscious though, and seemed to be mumbling in broken Russian. Covered in sweat and looking even paler than usual, it was quickly apparent that her boiler suit had been ripped up one of the arms, and across her midriff, the flesh underneath looking strangely swollen and blacked, though not burnt--it looked like a blood infection of some sort.

"Ensign," said Wallace hurrying over, but afraid to touch her. "Ensign Kasyanov, are you all right?"

Kasyanov gave Wallace a look akin to a slap in the face, and then closed her eyes again, and continued mumbling. From time to time, she became coherent enough for the translators pinned to their makeshift uniforms to make sense of what she was saying. It appeared to be her name, Starfleet service number, rank, and planet of origin.

"What did they do to her?" asked Maro.

"They cut her," Appiah intoned, and as Wallace looked between the two crewmates, he saw that Kasyanov now staring at Appiah, projecting her

thoughts into the mind of the Betazoid. "They cut her, and then they healed her."

"I don't understand."

"Have you any idea what damage a dermal regenerator can do," said Howard, his voice hollow, "if used in the wrong way? They cut her deeply, all down her arm and into her side, and then they ran it over the wounds. It healed the skin, but not the flesh. She has severe blood poisoning by the looks of it. Her flesh is rotting under her skin. It looks like they somehow accelerated the process, but it could still take weeks for her to die, and the *pain*, my God - it must be excruciating. I can't even imagine."

"What did they ask her?" Wallace asked Appiah.

Appiah focused on her ops officer for a moment, and then said,

"Nothing important. Starfleet protocol. Rules of engagement. Federation policy. The Prime Directive."

"It may not seem important," put in Shemesh, who had been loitering in the background, "but no matter how inconsequential the information might appear, it could be the final piece in some scheme of the Breen's. The final spur to commit to an operation against the Federation."

"What did she tell them?"

Without warning, Kasyanov launched herself at Wallace, grabbing him by the throat.

"*I told them nothing!*" she yelled, and then spat in his face, before collapsing unconscious.

Wallace caught her as she fell, and gently lowered her to the floor before wiping his face and getting to his feet. They were all thinking the same as him: about Ensign Perez, who they'd heard being taken not long before their cell doors were opened. He was probably going through the same ordeal at that very moment. And Howard. If the Breen were really working their way up through the ranks, then he was next.

USS *Typhon* En Route to Haldar

"Harkness would be appalled," said Klyce as she took the glass off of Zing and settled down with her in the officer's mess. Zing had told her that the drink would steady her, as her system attempted to acclimatise to the special atmospheric conditions aboard the *Typhon*, and also, ease her nerves.

"Appalled?"

"I'm a traitor and a coward. He doesn't, and neither do I, for that matter, understand why you insisted I come along on this mission."

Sitting forward, Captain Zing studied her for a moment. Klyce couldn't imagine what she was looking at or looking for, but ever since she had come aboard she had felt Zing's eyes on her. It was like she was the student, constantly under the scrutiny of her teacher. But as intrusive as such constant examination was, Klyce fell into the roll almost gladly. It was almost a relief to go back to the role of first officer, one that she had always excelled in.

"I have taken an interest in you," said Zing after a moment. "Let me be blunt, Captain. Your career was over when you arrived back at Starbase 521. You'd have been lucky to be demoted and shuffled out to some far off outpost, out of harm's way. And maybe you'd have settled for that. But that's not what I have planned for you. No matter your failures in this war so far, I'm going to see to it that you remain a part of it. Maybe you will think of it as me not letting you off the hook, but that is not the reason. I've fought so many battles, and been victorious so many times that it no longer satisfies me. I have come to realise that the admiralty is losing their way in this war, and sooner or later I will be put in a position that not even I can get out of. So I've decided to take an interest in my fellow captains. You and Harkness are both down and out just now, but with a solid victory behind you at Haldar, and with my influence to insulate you from the consequences of our little insurrection, I plan for you both to come out of this on the up."

"So this is all about power for you. You're willing to trade in your good name and all the favours you've no doubt accrued over the years for a greater standing in the field. To transfer the debts owned to you by admirals and politicians to captains, to me and Harkness."

"And the commanders and officers of the two crews we're going to rescue. War is more than a mere series of battles and campaigns, Captain: war is a struggle for power, both with the enemy, but with your own people; people who might put you on the road to ruin."

As Zing sat back and swallowed her drink, Klyce considered that. What they had done in disobeying orders to come on this mission was disloyal, there was no doubt about that, but Zing's motives left her even more uneasy. Rather than questioning one woman's decision not to commit to a single operation, she was challenging the entire ethos behind the way the war was being conducted, and that was a very dangerous thing indeed.

Klyce put her glass to her lips, and swallowed the vile liquid.

Halдар
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 3

Fearful entropy was taking over. Even though there was no need, people were speaking in whispers, if at all. They were drifting into corners, wanting to be alone, preparing themselves for the worst.

Wallace would not leave Kasyanov's side. After she'd collapsed he'd moved her out of the communal area and laid her back down on the bed she'd been snatched from a few hours before. The pain was too unbearable for her to find any real rest though, and slipping in and out of consciousness, Kasyanov went from the fretful mumblings of fitful slumber, to frightful bouts of screaming and shouting. Wallace suspected that this was mostly rage on her part, which was Kasyanov's way of dealing with adversity. He hadn't realised before, but Appiah had told him that the ensign was actually Captain Kerzhakov's niece, which must have made this all the worse for her.

Was this to be the fate of them all? He tried to imagine what it must be like, both the initial torture, and then this agonising limbo they were to be left in. He wouldn't have too long to wait to find out, and Wallace was as scared as the rest of his crew.

"It's no coincidence that there are nine of us," said Shemesh from where he sat slumped in the corner of Kasyanov's cell.

"What?"

"Nine: four from the *Thor*, four from the *Laurel*, and one extra. Doubles and doubling. If the Breen can be said to have religion, it's mathematics. And four is a significant number for them. Probably because it's one doubled and doubled again."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Breen."

Wallace turned his head from the stricken ensign to the bandaged captain.

"What do you know about the Breen?"

"Have you ever heard a Breen symphony? Their music is astonishing. It's said that The Blue Elegy is played on all Breen ships when they go into battle. Have you heard it? It'll make you weep. It'll kill you."

"They're animals."

"Oh no. Not animals. They are just like you or me."

Before Wallace could open his mouth to respond, a sound caught his attention. The doors to the communal area were being opened.

As he came out of the cell, he saw the writhing form of Perez being thrown to the ground by two Breen guards. And then they went for Howard. Wallace rushed forward but one of the Breen saw him coming and felled the scot with a strike across the face. He should have seen it coming, should have ducked, but he'd not been thinking straight, and by the time he regained his senses the doors were closed again, and Howard was gone from them, his frightened cries echoing through the station, and growing fainter.

USS *Arkantos* Pulse 742 Star System

"It could be a sensor glitch," said Commander Barez.

Back in stellar cartography, surrounded by his holographic counterparts, Harkness shook his head. "No, they know we're coming. It was probably a long-rang patrol craft, and we probably grazed the edge of its long-range sensors."

"They won't know much though," said Zing. "All they'll have seen is three Federation warp signatures heading towards Haldar. That's scant intelligence to go on."

"Ours isn't much better," said Harkness. "All we know is that they know is between a dozen and two-dozen ships are defending a mining colony with considerable defences. I was hoping that we would be able to take better advantage of the element of surprise, but the Breen now have hours to prepare."

"It doesn't matter," the Benzite insisted. "They won't be able to summon reinforcements, and there is only so much the forces there can do to be ready for us. We must concentrate on our own attack plan."

Harkness looked away from Captain Zing and around at the other commanders of this operation. It did matter; he could see that in all their faces. It was a bitter blow, and for the first time since he'd stood on the bridge of the *Arkantos* and gave his rallying speech, he was seriously considering the prospect of failure.

"The way I see it," said Commander Yin, "the problem we face is a matter of milliseconds. It comes down to getting our first volley of fire in before the Breen."

"But their weapons generally have a longer range than ours," Commander Barez pointed out moving over to a console and pulling up information of various Breen ships designs.

"We can drop out of warp within range," put in a Lieutenant Ki, the temporary head of extra vehicular activity in the absence of Lieutenant Commander Althorp. "But the problem with that is switching from warp to impulse puts a massive drain on a ships systems. It takes a moment until a ship is actually able to open fire," he continued thinking out loud.

As his fellow officers were considering that, Harkness went cold. An idea had formed in his mind, and his thoughts were racing, desperately attempting to calculate if it was possible.

"Unless the *Thunderchild* is not at warp," he said, breathless.

Ki looked at him, not understanding, but Klyce understood immediately.

"We merge the warp fields of the *Arkantos* and the *Thunderchild*," Harkness continued. "The *Arkantos* could literally carry her into battle. The Breen would see just one capital ship coming, supported by fighters and shuttles. We could drop out of warp within weapons range, but instead of the delay between returning to sub-light speed and firing, the *Thunderchild* would come at them from out of nowhere, all guns blazing. They won't know what hit them."

"Is that possible?" asked Barez. "The only time such a thing has been attempted, so far as I know, it was involved the larger ship carrying the smaller, or at best ships of roughly equal size."

"The *Arkantos* is an *Intrepid* class," Zing told him, "and Intrepids are basically sensor arrays attached to some of the most powerful and reliable engines in the fleet. Look at the *Voyager*. She survived seven years in hostile space largely thanks to the reliability of her warp core. And the *Arkantos* has an updated version of that solid design. It could work."

"We'll have to re-route as much power as possible to our engines, as well as our deflector array. It will take more than a few moments before we can fight, but that's a small price to pay," said Harkness as everything started to come together in his mind.

Yin considered this for a moment, looking a touch uneasy at the prospect of her ship being thrown at the Breen fleet like a javelin.

"But the Breen are expecting three ships. The *Typhon* will be accounted for, bringing up the rear, but won't they find it strange that the other warp signature is missing?"

"You can configure your deflector array to emit a burst of tetryon particles just as our warp fields merge," Klyce told her. "The Breen will think that you've cloaked, that you're a Defiant."

Barez was working frantically at his console, bringing up tactical data on both ships and creating test simulations of the manoeuvre. Though the merger of warp fields was something that had been tried and tested for hundreds of years, nothing like this had ever been attempted in a combat situation, and there were many variables. For a start, it was dangerous enough warping into a star system, but with two masses within your warp field, and so close to a cluster of hostile vessels, it meant that their calculations would have to be precise. But Harkness was sure it would work. It had to; it was all or nothing now. There was no going back.

USS *Typhon* Command and Control

Klyce turned to Lieutenant Commander Ziyi.

"Deploy the fighters, and all support craft. Attack formation," Klyce hesitated a moment before she said it, feeling foolish, "Harkness-Klyce Alpha." Zing had come up with the name, despite the objections of the two humans. She seemed to take pleasure in mocking the animosity that existed between them.

"Aye, Sir," replied Ziyi.

The Command centre of the *Typhon* was unlike anything in Starfleet. From where she stood, at the back of room, she looked forward over a huge holographic map of the surrounding area, which now showed the *Typhon* hanging motionless in space, with the *Arkantos* and the *Thunderchild* just above her. From the underside of the *Typhon*, and fore and aft, fighters and shuttles streamed out, and then started to form up with the support craft from the other two vessels. Behind Klyce was a huge view-screen, which was as big as anything on any starbase. It was floor to ceiling, and the resolution was so detailed that it made Klyce feel queasy when she caught sight of it in her peripheral vision. It really did look as though if she stepped a few paces back, then she would topple out in space.

From her right, Commander Ziyi said, "Captain Zing reports that all craft are in position and ready."

Captain Klyce swallowed hard.

"Signal the *Thunderchild*. We're ready."

Haldar Hijenkis Base 4 Sub-Level 3

"Perez hasn't told them anything," Appiah told Wallace. "I'm sure of that."

It made Wallace proud. Both Kasyanov and Perez were mere ensigns, and had been tortured for what must have seemed like pretty harmless information, but both had held out.

"What about Howard?" asked Shemesh.

Wallace hesitated. He feared for Howard. He was from a different generation to Kasyanov and Perez, a different era. When he'd joined up the kind of interstellar conflict that had consumed the Federation in recent times must have seemed unimaginable. He was a scientist, and before he'd been assigned to the *Thor* he'd probably never faced real combat, and certainly nothing like what must be happening to him now. What's more, Howard had

been in Starfleet for a long time, and was an intelligent man. There was a hell of a lot that he could tell the Breen. Maybe he didn't know anything classified, maybe his knowledge of Starfleet's military capacities was lacking, but the Breen had been specifically targeted their questions to Kasyanov and Perez at what they expected the officers would or should know. They were no fools. They would milk Howard for all he knew if they broke him, and there was no telling how the Breen might use that information against them.

"I don't know," said Wallace at last. He was feeling the burden of Howard's questioning, and was starting to appreciate why Appiah had looked so haunted since Kasyanov, and then Perez, had been taken. Howard was his man. His responsibility.

"If he breaks," Shemesh went on, vocalising what Wallace had only dared to think, "there is no telling what damage it could do."

Wallace's head still throbbed from the blow he'd suffered when they'd dragged Howard away, and more and more he found himself looking over at Maro and Evesham. Often, he found them looking back at him.

"No one is going to tell them anything," said Wallace, his voice raising just a touch so the others could hear him.

"Can you be sure of that?" asked Shemesh.

Wallace didn't answer. His head was pounding and he couldn't think straight.

"Commander? Are you listening to me?"

At that, Wallace grabbed Shemesh and bungled him into one of the cells. He slid the door closed, separating them from the other officers, and turned back to the blinded captain, rage and desperation building within him.

"And what about *you*? What the hell did you tell them?"

"What?"

"You got off pretty lightly. Or do you still expect me to believe that story about the Breen accidentally blinding you while poking around in your head?"

"That's the truth."

"Like it's true that you just happened to be on Starbase 462 when the Breen attacked? A Starfleet captain who has never commanded a ship. Do you think I'm an idiot, Captain? Do you think I don't know who you really are and who you work for?"

"If you have all the answers, then why don't you enlighten me?"

"Starfleet Intelligence," Wallace spat the words out. "You're a damn SI agent and I think the Breen knew that. I think they were at Starbase 462 looking for you. And I think you told them everything they wanted to know, and now

they're going through the rest of us, conforming that what you said is true, and finalising the details for a major operation."

"You're not thinking straight, Commander. You're becoming paranoid."

"Am I? Or am I too close to the truth?"

"No! This--"

"YOU were supposed to protect us! You should have been watching. You should have warned us."

"About the attack on Starbase 462?"

"About the Breen! How the hell could you miss it? The Breen massing hundreds of ships, huge fleets ready to attack the Federation. And you missed it! You didn't see and they came and slaughtered us. Millions and millions of lives, entire cities levelled."

"What the do you want from me?"

"I want the truth!"

"The truth about what? You want me to confess to your delusions. You're losing it, Commander. You're playing right into their hands. You think the Breen are torturing your officers? They're after you. They're destroying your moral, your resolve. And you're letting them win. You're breaking!"

"Tell me the truth! *Tell me!*"

"What?"

"*Tell me!*"

"Tell you what, Wallace?"

"*WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO US!*"

"We were betrayed!"

There was a commotion outside the cell, and Shemesh pushed passed him, sliding the door back. The Breen were back, and with them they'd a frightened looking Howard. The man looked distraught, broken. But as far as Wallace could see, he was relatively unharmed.

USS *Arkantos*
Main Bridge

"We have the *Thunderchild*, they're powering down their warp engines," reported Commander Barez.

Harkness peered down at his tactical display as his ship rumbled around him, showing its discontent at the extra burden placed upon it. But it was only tremors. Everything was holding steady. Everything was going to plan.

"Are we in sensor range?"

"Aye Sir, I'm detecting fifteen ships and numerous smaller craft."

They were outnumbered five to one then, but at least had the element of surprise back. Plus, it wasn't like they were planning on capturing this system. Ideally, they would be in and out in under an hour. All they'd do then was keep the Breen at bay long enough for Zing's team to extract the prisoners; all they had to do was stay alive.

"How long until we engage the Breen?"

"Thirty seconds."

The *Arkantos* was beginning to shake that little bit more forcefully, but they were holding steady at warp one. Harkness ran over the tactical displays once again. Three starships, two runabouts, two-dozen shuttles, and sixty fighters, all in attack formation were careering at warp one point five towards the Breen fleet blockading the way to Haldar. It was going to be one hell of a fight, but he'd faith in the people around him, and for the first time in a long time, he'd confidence in himself too.

"Ten seconds," reported Barez.

"All hands," called Harkness. "This is it."

Chapter Four

Haldar Hijenkis Base 4 Sub-Level 3

You're a traitor and a coward.

"I'm sorry captain." Howard fell to his knees, clutching at his commander's red boiler suit. "I couldn't... It was too hard. I failed you. I failed everyone."

Wallace looked down at his tearful officer, and then up at Maro.

"It's okay, Captain," she told him. "It's okay."

But the Breen hadn't come for the Andorian. Instead, they seized Wallace and Captain Shemesh. There was a brief scuffle and Wallace saw Evesham knocked to the ground, and a *Laurel* officer too, but he didn't know which one. Wallace himself was too stunned to offer any kind of resistance though, and as he was hauled out of the communal area, all he could do was stare back at Howard.

Haldar Star System

As the Starfleet ships punched out of warp, the darkness was split apart by light. Several of the Breen ships had been in the process of pulling back, anticipating a flanking manoeuvre by what they believed to be a cloaked Defiant class battleship, but what they got instead of an Akira class heavy cruiser thrust into their midst. Most of the Breen ships failed to get off a single shot before their lines broke. The *Thunderchild* unleashed its awesome firepower of the Breen flagship, tearing it apart, and also managed to inflict severe damage on a nearby destroyer. A millisecond later the Starfleet shuttles and fighters joined the fray, swarming all over the Breen capital ships as they fled from the *Thunderchild*. A frigate collided with a destroyer in the melee, and another ship succumbed to the overwhelming force of the smaller Starfleet vessels.

In the confusion, the *Arkantos* and the fleet of shuttlecraft, slipped through the Breen defences.

USS *Arkantos* Main Bridge

"Aft torpedoes," called Harkness. "Fire!"

A volley of photon torpedoes smashed into a Breen destroyer as they sped away from the main battle, causing explosions to tear into the ship.

"Direct hit," reported Barez. "Their shields are collapsing."

But they hadn't taken it out. The Breen ship still had power and weapons and would continue to fight. That wasn't Harkness's problem for the moment though; they couldn't get caught looking back, they'd to look ahead.

"Lieutenant, report."

"I'm detecting sophisticated satellite defence system in orbit, and what looks like a military and industrial complex in the southern hemisphere of the planet. It's heavily defended."

Harkness checked over the sensor readings himself. The Breen had a hell of a lot of firepower for something so basic as a prison camp and mining operating, both in the number of the ships deployed in this system, and their planetary defences.

"Hail the *Thunderchild* and the *Typhon*."

The *Typhon* had come out of warp just behind their main attack force, and now lurked at the edge of the fighting, providing support as best it could. Its firepower was limited, but it did give them an advantage. The Breen liked to jam communications between enemy ships, but the *Typhon* was powerful enough to break through almost any interference. It may not be the best ship to have in terms of weaponry, but its logistical value was immeasurable.

The holographic forms of Captain Klyce and Commander Yin appeared on the bridge of the *Arkantos*.

"Looks like it's going to have to be Plan B. Can you keep the Breen capital ships occupied?"

"I believe so," said Yin.

"We lost two *Ospreys* just before we dropped out of warp," Klyce told him. "But the Breen have so far been unable to mount any kind of coherent defence. We're lost only one *Kestrel* since the fighting started."

Harkness nodded and the two captains vanished from his bridge.

"As soon as we're in range, target the Breen satellites," Harkness ordered. "Prepare for orbital descent."

**Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 1**

Shemesh had said that the Breen must have been monitoring them, but Wallace had hardly heard him. All he could think about was Howard and the look in the man's eyes. He was a mere shell, a husk, and he'd betrayed the Federation, but most of all, he'd betrayed Wallace.

They were taken to a small room that looked like some kind of alien surgical theatre, and Wallace was forced down into a device that clamped round his arms and legs, his neck and waist, and also his head. He breathed hard and fast, watching the Breen as they worked. Every muscle was ready and tensed as the icy metal poked into him, making him uncomfortable. But that was the easy part. After what came next, he would never sleep easily again.

They were almost ready.

Osprey Squadron

Lieutenant Koulla pulled hard to port as Noguera buzzed past her.

"Julian! That's some potent your aftershave you're wearing! How about you don't get that close to me again!"

"Sorry. But you know I could never resist you."

Koulla came about and, joining up with the rest of her squad, prepared for another run on one of the Breen battlecruisers. It was putting up some tough resistance, and with the *Thunderchild* all tied up, and the *Typhon* too far away, Lieutenant Ki had ordered them to concentrate all of their firepower on what was now effective the Breen flagship.

All around the battle raged on. Breen fighters and their own *Kestrels* and *Golden Eagles* were locked in a struggle for dominance, while they and the mighty USS *Thunderchild* took care of the small matter of the Breen capital ships. But the Breen were beginning to find their feet. They were forming up again, working together, and that was very bad news indeed. They needed this battlecruiser out of the picture, and fast.

"Come on," Koulla said to herself as she closed in on her target. "Come on, come on. You can open fire all you want. You're too slow. Why not just give in to the inevitable?"

Arcs of Breen disruptor fire lanced out and they all took evasive manoeuvres, but kept going. Then at last they were in range and over a dozen ships strafed the Breen ship, their phasers ripping to the battlecruiser's shields. They were fluctuating, and several shots got through, but it wasn't enough, and the damage they inflicted was minor.

"*Why won't you just die?*" Koulla yelled in frustration.

USS Typhon Command and Control

Captain Klyce watched the battle unfold via the holographic map. The *Ospreys* were failing to make a big enough impact on the battlecruiser, and this was allowing the Breen to restore some sense of order to their fleet. They were turning the tide.

Commander Yin appeared in C&C, looking battered and exhausted.

"Captain, two squadrons of Breen fighters have disengaged from us. They're going after the *Arkantos*."

Klyce saw it. About a dozen or so Breen craft heading away from the main battle, and out of her simulation.

"Acknowledged."

As Yin disappeared Klyce turned to Ziyi.

"Get me Harkness."

A moment later Harkness appeared in place of Yin.

"Captain, you're about to have company."

USS *Arkantos* Main Bridge

"A dozen Breen fighters have disengaged from the main battle."

"Can't you stop them?" demanded Harkness.

The holographic image of Captain Klyce frowned.

"We have our hands full here, Captain. Our sucker-punch dazed the Breen, but they're sure as hell back up and fighting now."

The *Arkantos* jolted again as she was hit by another volley of disruptor fire from the orbital defence system. And as Klyce vanished Harkness had a decision to make. He'd hoped he'd be able to punch a large enough gap in the Breen defences to make their orbital descent relatively unmolested. But that wasn't possible now. Either they engaged the Breen fighters and delayed their descent, or they went down now, through the wall of fire from the orbital disruptors. But if they did that, then when they were past them, they would find themselves facing not only fire from the surface, but a swarm of fighters as well. And whereas an *Intrepid* could cope with such an attack in open space, as the fighter's weapons would make little impact on their shields, in the atmosphere of Haldar, under fire from the surface, they would be vulnerable.

"Signal the fleet," said Harkness after a moment. "We're going down."

Halдар
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 1

The Breen were asking him questions, questions about the strength of Starfleet, how many ships they had operational, how many more were close to being launched. Wallace recited the mantra of his name, number, rank, and planet of origin, but told them nothing. The Breen commander nodded to one of his underlings, and Wallace closed his eyes.

The clamps around his left arm first tightened, and then shifted position, forcing it outward and upward. Wallace squeezed his hand into a fist, and as the first serrated blade pushed into his skin, slicing open his flesh, he went rigid, straining every sinew, as if he could break free by mere force of will alone. But it wasn't possible. The only way the Breen would ever let him out of the device was if he cooperated, like Howard.

More blades sliced into his arm, both above and below the elbow, and his blood dribbled down, dripping onto the floor. The Breen knew human physiology though, and they avoided the major arteries, so there was little chance of him bleeding to death, or at least, not quickly. But they were carving him up nonetheless, slicing not just through skin, but flesh and muscle too. Once or twice he felt the strange sensation of a blade scraping against the bones in his arm.

Wallace couldn't keep from crying out. The pain was worse than anything he'd ever suffered, or even comprehended. And it had only just begun. His right arm was being forced into the same, prone position, and the device was tightening around his waist and chest too, readying their blades. Cold metal clamps pushed into his temples and neck. He'd no doubt they could slice his flesh right off his bones if they'd a mind too. And with an expertise that would ensure that he survived long enough to endure the entire, horrifying process.

The Breen were promising to stop if he told them what they wanted to know, while in the background, Wallace could hear the sound of fluid being pumped through a series of tubes. Those tubes, he knew, were attached to the device that he was bound to. Bloodied, and in agony, Wallace knew that there was yet something more to come; that the Breen weren't even started with him yet.

USS *Thunderchild*
Main Bridge

As her ship tipped forward, Commander Yin clung to one of her command consoles. The inertial dampers were hardly working anymore, but that was the least of her problems.

"Ventral and port shielding are down," called Lieutenant Commander Regula. "We're taken damage on decks seventeen, eighteen and nineteen!"

Yin let go of her console and stood up straight on the command platform. She felt queasy but she tried not to show that to her crew.

"Bring us about, and concentrate all out firepower on that battlecruiser. I'm so sick of seeing that damn thing on my view-screen!"

Osprey Squadron

Koulla was not having a good afternoon.

"Oh that's just great. Oh no, that's fine. Chase me. Damn buzzards. Two against one. That's how you guys like it isn't it? Typical Breen: no sense of privacy. Too damn cowardly to take me on one and one head on. Hey! Who said you could shoot at me! Ha! Missed! Look, I go this way, and I go that. You never know that I'll do next. Hey, where'd you go? There you are. I thought you'd lost interest. I was hurt. A girl likes to be chased, to feel she's wanted. Oh no. Oh! That was actually quite close! You're getting better. Hey wait, here we go. Come on. Got you! See that? I just took out one of your mates, and you couldn't stop me. Oh look, you two have a friend. And then there were three. Damn! I'm okay though. Just a graze. Where the hell is everybody? They've driven me too wide. And wouldn't you just know it, that hit took out my comm unit. I'm flying deaf. Still, at least I don't have to listen to Ki's crackpot orders. Ouch! *Would everyone please stop shooting at me for one second!* You know this is developing into a distracting tiresome scenario. Whoa! That scratched the paintwork. I should probably stop talking to myself and pay attention to my flying. Oh, here we go, a nice big juicy target. Bloody hell! The *Thunderchild!* Now that's what I call a ship. She looks a little the worse for wear though. Something we have in common. Looks like we both have the same idea. I'm never going to lose these damn Buzzards. They know a good thing when they see it. I love shooting at such big targets though; you can't miss. Damn, the *Thunderchild's* hit. Looks pretty bad. Oh God, they have a lock, and this bird's not as sprightly as she was. Looks like ramming it's speed then. Wow, look at that dial run down. Yeah, shoot at me all you like. You'll never crack this egg before she splats on the side of your flagship. And I'm going to have to love you and leave you. It's been a blast you guys. We should definitely do this again *SOMETIME!*"

USS Typhon Command and Control

"The *Thunderchild's* lost any semblance of shielding," Ziyi reported. "They're taking heavy damage."

Klyce had watched the attack on the Breen battlecruiser, willing it succeed, and it had, up to a point. They inflicted massive damage on the enemy flagship, and with the extra weight of an Osprey that had driven itself into the side of the Breen ship, the vessel began to list out of control. But while their attention had been focused elsewhere, several Breen destroyers and frigates had combined their firepower to deal the *Thunderchild* a heavy blow.

Scanning the holographic map of the conflict zone, Klyce realised that even with their makeshift flagship knocked out, the Breen still had the upper hand.

The *Thunderchild* was tough, but without support they wouldn't be able to get back on their feet enough to put up an effective defence, and almost all of their fighters were tied up with the smaller Breen ships. Only about a dozen Ospreys were rushing to the *Thunderchild's* aid, but they would not be able to stand up for long.

"Klyce to engineering. Ahead one third. Take us in, Commander."

"Ahead one third. Aye aye, Captain."

"Captain," said Ziyi, looking concerned. "We have only very minimum weapons. We won't be able to offer sufficient support. You should order a general retreat. We can pull back and regroup."

"We do that, and the Breen will go straight for the *Arkantos*. And we might not have the weapons, but in the words of Captain Sulu, we'll at least 'give them something else to shoot at.'"

"Aye Sir."

Klyce watched as the holo-map began to shift, the cluster of ships and fighters moving closer.

USS *Arkantos* Main Bridge

Just when they thought they'd weathered the storm, they were under fire yet again, this time from the surface. The *Arkantos*, and the fleet of shuttles, swooped down through the clouds only to find bolts of light green disruptor energy waiting for them. The ship juddered and rocked, but she held together. They were still a good distance from the complex and the Breen weapons weren't so powerful that they could reap such damage on a starship from so far away.

"Return fire," Harkness ordered. "I want their shielding down!"

The complex had two forms of shielding, though. Normal deflector shields to prevent against a conventional attack, but also a magnetic shield to prevent people from beaming in uninvited, or, of course, beaming anyone out.

"I'm detecting several dozen, over a hundred and fifty, maybe more, non-Breen life-signs at one of the main mining complexes, as well as nine more at what looks to be some kind of military base."

"Harkness to Zing, you see what I see?"

"I do. I am assigning my people accordingly. But we'll need air support. The Breen have a lot of firepower down there."

"Acknowledged, Harkness out."

"Sir, the Breen fighters are descending through the atmosphere. They're closing from astern."

**Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 1**

As the first drop of the toxin touched the bloody mess of his arm, Wallace screamed so hard he thought his chest would burst. It was like acid, and a mere drop was unbearable, but there were several needles loaded and ready to pump the vile liquid into his system.

"STOP! *Please! Just stop. I can't...I can't...*"

The Breen commander put a hand up telling his men to hold off.

Wallace breathed hard, trying to focus his mind, trying to dig something out of himself, something other than the pain. He thought of Alia and Chloe. The image of his daughter lingered in his mind. What would she think of her father now? Screaming for mercy. On the verge of telling the Breen everything they wanted to know.

There was a sound. A surging, terrible sound. Something heartbreaking. Something strange and beautiful. It filled the room, getting louder and louder. And then Wallace remembered what Shemesh had told him; that the Breen played *The Blue Elegy* on their ships whenever they went into battle. The lights dimmed for a second, and the Breen were rushing about that little bit more frantically than they had been before.

They were demanding he tell them everything, that they would go on and on if him refused, that they could make it last for days, even weeks.

Wallace stared straight at the Breen commander. He had some kind of strange insignia on his uniform that he'd never seen before.

"ONE! Two! *FOUR!* Eight! Sixt--"

The needles speared the flesh of his wounds, and pumped the acid-like toxin into his blood.

**USS *Typhon*
Command and Control**

The holographic imagery flickered as the *Typhon* took a heavy hit. But their shields were holding. The one thing this monster did have in its favour was damn strong shields. She was tough, even if she was relatively toothless.

Klyce braced herself against her station and turned back to the view-screen.

"Shut down the holographic matrix and reroute the power to the shields. Put the tactical information on the screen."

"Aye, Sir."

The holograms vanished and everyone readjusted themselves.

The *Thunderchild* was sticking close to them, and using the *Typhon* as cover, had managed to gain a little purchase with which to get back in the fight. They'd dropped their shields altogether and were focusing on keeping their weapons and warp engines online. The *Typhon* had quickly become the centre for the entire battle, with both enemy and friendly ships swarming over her. It would be no small scalp for the Breen to take out the Federation's only *Typhon* class ship, but so would deterring the Breen from heading back to the planet to stop the *Arkantos*.

USS *Arkantos* Main Bridge

Harkness picked himself up off the deck, and clambered back into his seat. The Breen fighters had definitely joined the battle, and combined with the Breen ground defences, they were taking a battering.

"Zing's forces have been deployed," Barez told him. "The shuttles are returning."

"What's the status of the Breen's shields?"

"We're hit them pretty hard, Sir. They're fluctuating, but someone down there is doing a hell of a job keeping it together."

"Bring us round for another pass. Take us closer. And tell the shuttle pilots to keep those damn fighters off our back."

On the view-screen Harkness could see one of the squads of Breen fighters breaking off from them to engage the Starfleet shuttlecraft. Then, his stomach lurched, as the *Arkantos* went into a swallow dive down towards the complex. He wasn't used to commanding a starship within the atmosphere of a planet, and they didn't have the extra power to divert to the inertial dampers. It was a unique experience, to say the least.

Below, the gleaming desert surface of the planet came back into view, and at the centre of the picture, the Breen colony where Wallace was being held.

Haldar Hijenkis Complex

Zing watched as the *Argos* speeded towards the Breen gun emplacements, followed by Lieutenant Chukwu's unit advancing in their wake. It was only a

feint though, designed to draw the Breen forces away from where the Starfleet officers were being held, and it was working.

"Move!" shouted Zing to her troops, and they dashed forward, taking cover wherever they could. The air bristled with both disruptor and phaser fire. But Zing was perfectly at home. Even having to rely on her respirator, even though the glare of this world's sun was far brighter than she would have liked, she was in her element.

"Lieutenant Commander Mbona to Captain Zing."

Zing slammed her back against the wall of one of the Breen buildings as her men returned fire on a squad of Breen troops that had spotted their advance.

"Go ahead, Commander."

"We've taken control of the mining complex and are ready to start evacuation of the prisoners."

"Acknowledged, Zing out."

The mining complex had had only scant defences, the Breen not placing much importance of a rag-tag bunch of Starfleet slave labour, but the job wasn't done yet. There were still nine people left, who were almost certainly senior officers. But extracting them was going to be no easy matter. It was going to be a hell of a task to get to them unless Harkness could disable the Breen shielding and inflict some decent damage on the Breen defences.

"MOVE!" yelled Zing again.

**Haldar
Hijenkis Base 4
Sub-Level 1**

"ONE HUNDRED . . . and twenty. . . EIGHT!"

The lights dimmed again, the music too, and several Breen hurried out of the room. The commander had left too, and they weren't even asking him questions anymore. Knives cut him all over, and the toxin was prickled painfully up and down his left arm, making it burn and ache at the same time.

There was a flash, and then two more, and suddenly he was being moved again. He was dropped onto the floor, the blades gone from his flesh. Covered in blood, and weak from the torment of the ordeal, Wallace could hardly make sense of what was happening. It felt like he'd been slapped.

"Shemesh?"

"I think the Breen forgot about me. I mean, what threat is one blind human when they are facing a full-scale Starfleet assault?"

"What happened?"

"They'd me all trussed up and under guard. Waiting my turn. But they got distracted," said Shemesh helping Wallace up. "Here."

Wallace took the Breen disruptor off Shemesh. He was so exhausted he could hardly hold it, could hardly stand, but supported by Shemesh they made their way out of the chamber.

"We have to get to the others," said Wallace.

"I know, but you'll have to be my eyes."

"This way."

As fast as they could, with Wallace giving directions and Shemesh just about carrying him, the two men made their way back down towards where the rest of them were being held. Fortunately, most of the Breen seemed to have rushed to the upper levels to fight off the attack, and so they met very little resistance along the way, only having to fire a few shots each, which, while difficult, Wallace managed. He wasn't about to go out shot to death in a corridor, not after all he'd been through. He could die later, once he'd got his men to safety.

USS *Typhon* Command and Control

They'd managed to tie up the Breen fleet for almost an hour, but now they were facing the very unpalatable reality that there was no way this battle was going to end other than with their destruction. It was over; they'd lost. At least, in a conventional sense. But they had done what they'd set out to do.

"Hail the *Arkantos*."

After a few moments, the hazy image of Captain Harkness appeared on the massive view-screen.

"We're out of time, Captain."

"I need a few more minutes."

"A few more minutes and we'll be in bits," as if to illustrate her point, the *Typhon* jolted violently downwards and Harkness vanished for a moment, before coming back hazily.

"Pull back then," said Harkness. "Retreat to fall back position one."

"The Breen will come down on you with everything they're got!"

"You have your orders, Captain. Get the hell out of here. Don't worry, I'll join you as soon as I'm done. Harkness out."

Klyce hesitated. Harkness was vulnerable as it was, but with half the Breen defence fleet bearing down on him, he'd have a hell of a job getting out of this system alive. But what other choice did she have? There was no sense getting themselves all killed in a battle they couldn't possibly win.

She turned to Ziyi.

"Send word to the fleet, full retreat."

USS *Arkantos*
Main Bridge

"The *Thunderchild* and *Typhon* are withdrawing," reported Commander Barez. "But only at impulse. Several Breen ships are staying with them. The rest have set a course for Haldar."

"Harkness to Zing. We're running out of time, Captain. There's have a dozen Breen battleships speeding towards this planet."

"Acknowledged. We've been unable to penetrate the base where the officers are being held, but our sensors indicate that our friends are on the move. I believe there is a escape in progress."

"How long do you need?"

"As long as you can give me. Most of the other prisoners have been evacuated and should be with you soon. The same goes for most of my ground unites. If it comes down to it, you get the hell out of here."

"I won't leave you, Captain."

"You better not. Zing out."

"Sir, the shuttles with the prisoners are coming in."

"Prepare to beam the passengers aboard as soon as they're in range."

"Aye, Sir."

The *Arkantos* jolted again, and shuddered as several explosions blew debris across the bridge, one piece catching Harkness a glancing blow across his shoulder.

"Our ventral shields are collapsing! We're taking too much fire from the surface."

Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, and the blood that was staining his uniform, Harkness tried to focus on the situation. Zing's teams had only been able to inflict limited damage on the Breen gun emplacements, and they'd been focusing all their firepower on the colonies shielding.

"Spin us onto our back," ordered Harkness, "and for God's sake everyone try and hold onto their lunch!"

Halдар Hijenkis Base 4

As another Breen guard was taken out, Wallace let his weapon fall to ground. It was too much. When he'd signed up, no one told him he would end up fighting deep behind enemy lines, with one of his arms torn to shreds, and a malicious toxin pulsing through his bloodstream. Not to mention the numerous other wounds all across his body from where the Breen had begun to do to the rest of him what they'd done to his arm.

"I'm finished," he told Shemesh. "I can't go on."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm the one carrying you!"

"The toxin...I can hardly keep my head up."

"Well, you're just going to have to pull it together. I'm blind remember."

"One of the others can guide you."

"Don't be ridiculous. They're got their hands full with Kasyanov and Perez. Come on, it's not far now."

Stealing himself against the pain, Wallace kept his eyes open as their bedraggled group made their way through the base. They were pretty much lost, but were at least going upwards towards the surface.

"Wait, there's a display console here," said Wallace suddenly.

Shemesh stopped.

"Commander Appiah!"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Can you show me the screen?"

This was not the first time they'd done this. Commander Appiah would look at the Breen displays, and then project the images into Shemesh's mind. He would then translate them the best he could. His Breen wasn't great, and it was hardly ideal to receive the information second hand, but no one else could read Breen and Shemesh was blind, there was nothing else they could do.

"I think," said Shemesh, "that there may be a way out up ahead. It looks like some kind of hanger bay. There should be access out of the base there."

"You're sure?"

"Actually, no. But unless anyone has any better ideas, I say we stop wasting time."

As no one did, their beleaguered unit limped towards the hanger bay.

A few minutes later and Shemesh had them through the huge, reinforced doors, and into the hanger. Compared to the rest of the base, this place was strangely dark, but it was light enough for Wallace to be sure of what it contained.

"My God."

"What is it?" asked Shemesh.

"It doesn't matter now. Let's just get the hell out of here."

They quickly found an exit that seemed to act as access for the flight crew and engineers, and then for the first time in weeks, Wallace saw sunlight. Dazzling, white sunlight, almost blinding him.

"Tell me that's a good rumbling," said Shemesh.

Wallace looked up, and then for the second time in just a few moments, uttered the words: "My God."

From out of the glare of the alien sun, upside-down, an Intrepid class Federation starship was coming straight for them. Its phasers lanced out, smashing through the Breen defences and kicking up a huge amount of sand and dust into the air, debris that was then whipped away in the wake of the massive vessel as it pulled out of its dive, and sped away from them.

As the ship passed over, everyone took cover, some retreating back inside the hanger fearful of having the skin torn from their flesh by the mini dust storm. And then when it was gone, in the shadows of the fires it left behind, Wallace heard the calls of fellow Starfleet officers, and saw two runabouts closing in on their position. It was over. They were saved. They'd made it.

USS *Arkantos* Main Bridge

"Zing's team has secured the last of the prisoners."

Harkness sat back in his seat, praying that Wallace was among them. But it wasn't over yet. They still had to get off this planet and out of this system.

"Take us up, Lieutenant," Harkness ordered. "Let's get out of here."

Starfleet Runabout, D'Zan

Most of the prisoners had been evacuated on the other runabout, with Wallace, Shemesh, and the majority of the team that had rescued them filling the *D'Zan*. The little vessel was battered this way and that as they made their way up through the atmosphere. They were being fired at from the surface, a squad of Breen fighters, and some kind of orbital defence system. The only thing keep them alive was that the Benzite captain was keeping them as close to the *Intrepid* as possible. But despite the eternity that it took to pull free, they were almost away. Several of the other shuttlecraft, the ships that had evacuated his crew from the mines (which was the first question he'd asked the Benzite captain) had already jumped to warp, including the other runabout. The Breen, for all their last ditch efforts to stop them, were a spent force.

"Wallace," said Shemesh urgently, taking his attention away from their escape. "What did you see in the hanger bay?"

Wallace, sat slumped against the bulkhead in the back of the runabout, surrounded by his mostly Benzite rescue squad, looked up at Shemesh.

"You were right," he said.

"What did you see?"

"Romulan ships. Scorpions. They'd--"

USS *Arkantos* Main Bridge

"Zing's shuttle's been hit!"

USS *Arkantos* Transporter Room

"*NO!*" screamed Wallace as he rematerialised next to the bloodied, unconscious form of Captain Zing and a couple of others. "*Captain Shemesh!*"

"I'm sorry Sir, the runabout was torn apart. You four were the only bio-signs that I could get in time. I'm sorry."

The inertial dampers weren't working hardly at all, and Wallace felt the jolt as the ship jumped to warp. He staggered off the transporter pad and was halfway to the operator, when he realised that blood was pouring out of a wound in his neck. It was going everywhere. It was surreal.

Everything went black.

USS *Typhon* Pulse 724 Star System

Forty minutes later, Captain Harkness materialised aboard the *Typhon*, and was at once struck by the scale and beauty of the ship. This was Transporter Room Seven, seven of eight in fact. She was a magnificent vessel, a new breed tailored to the needs of her time, and Harkness could not help but be impressed.

Captain Klyce met him as he descended the platform.

"How is he?" asked Harkness without either pleasantries or preamble.

"The doctors say he lost a lot of blood, but his wounds, as extensive as they were, weren't critical. The Breen hadn't wanted to kill him, only hurt him. They'll be extension scaring to his arm, though the toxin he was injected with was designed to 'ferment' once the wounds had been sealed. There shouldn't be any problem flushing it out of his system. The other two weren't so lucky. They have already had to have their infected arms amputated, and it's touch and go as to whether they'll survive," Captain Klyce explained as they walked.

After their retreat from Haldar, and once he was sure that the Breen weren't following them, licking their wounds no doubt, Harkness had tried to see Wallace. The doctors on the *Arkantos* wouldn't let him near him though. In fact, they barred anyone but medical personnel and the most severely injured. But as Wallace had been deemed likely to survive, he'd been transferred to the *Typhon* once the two ships had rendezvoused. The *Typhon* didn't just have a sickbay, but a small hospital, which was where all but the most critically injured had been moved.

As the two captains made their way through the wards Harkness, looked over the people occupying the rows of beds. Some were those hurt in the battle. People with plasma burns and lacerations, but most were from the mines. These people looked they'd been worked half to death, and not treated very well in the process. But there was a buoyant mood among them, and several, those who weren't passed out from exhaustion, intercepted the two captains to shake their hands, and profess their most sincere gratitude.

"Captain," a young lieutenant hobbled towards them. "Lieutenant Koulla," she said by way of introduction. "Oh don't worry, just slight warping from the 'parachute'. You know how those 'Emergency Transporter Units' are. Makes you nostalgic for the time where we'd fly all suited up and eject out into open space. Though have you ever tried ejecting into a full-scale battle? It's no bed of roses I can tell you. But I digress. I just wanted to say that we're all very proud of what we've done here, and on behalf of my squad, I'd like to thank you. What you said was true, and no matter the consequences, you'll have all our support." The woman smiled, her expression stuck somewhere between embarrassment and satisfaction, and then shuffled away.

Harkness hadn't even thought of the consequences, but there was no avoiding them now. They would have to make contact with the Federation. He would prefer to have Zing with him when he did that though; for all the

commanders to be together, but though it looked like the Benzite would survive her injuries, they were extensive, and he wasn't sure that she would be up to it. Still, that was something that could wait, at least a little while.

Finally, Harkness made it through the melee to where Wallace was. He looked truly awful. Even though the doctors had done their best to clean him up, evidence of what they'd done to him was clear, and the man looked sallow and haunted.

"Am I glad to see you," said Wallace weakly.

"I thought you might appreciate a hand."

Wallace smiled, but seemed to be struggling to stay conscious, and Harkness seeing that the man really did need to get some sleep, put his hand on his shoulder and told him to rest.

"No. Harkness, there's something you need to know. Something we saw down there," Wallace hesitated a moment, as if he couldn't quite bring himself to say what he had to say. "We've been betrayed."