

Star Trek: The Breen War

PROLOGUE

"Say not, 'I have found the truth,' but rather, 'I have found a truth.' " --Kahlil Gibran

USS *Hermes* On Patrol

Commander Tyrone Bogen leaned over the science officer's console. "How many ships inbound?"

"Sixteen," she replied, shrugging. "No specifics except for rough size. Six ships, either frigates or destroyers, one that's probably a carrier, and the rest battlecruisers or battleships." The Betazoid stared intently at her readouts. "There's something strange about that carrier though..." Her voice trailed off. When nothing further was forthcoming, Bogen nodded.

"Thank you Celeste." He turned to the ops officer. "Sound Red Alert and set a course back to Starbase 518. Upload our tactical data as soon as possible."

Even before the klaxons finished their wails, Captain Neil Beauvais walked out of the turbolift. "What's going on Tyrone?" he snapped.

"Sensors indicate at least sixteen Breen ships inbound and on a direct course for Starbase 518."

"Four by four...huh. Appropriate." Beauvais looked at the screen, its tactical display glowing an angry red. "Overkill, don't you think? 518 isn't exactly the best-defended starbase around."

Bogen grimaced. "No sir. 521's drawn off most of our resources. According to Command, we're too far behind the front to be in danger. I wish that someone had told the Breen."

"Watch your tone, Commander."

"Aye sir. Sorry sir."

"We've alerted Captain Slitha," assumed Beauvais. "Not much more we can do except be there to help the defense."

"Sir, we're an *Oberth*. What help will...*can* we be?"

The answer was quiet and inevitable.

"A target."

Starbase 518 Operations

Since the spectacular start of their new offensive campaign at Malthab, the Breen had so far limited themselves to attacking poorly defended starbases. Fleet Captain Slitha, turning a reptilian eye toward the tactical information display, tried to reassure himself. It was a sign that they'd overextended themselves in the wake of the destruction of the Second Fleet; Colther's handiwork.

It was a cold comfort.

Starbase 518 had never been a large base; it mostly served as a convenient staging point for shipments to the colonies in the region, and as a nexus for local trade. As such, its forces had been drawn down significantly, to help reinforce the Core, or to feed the needs of the greedy Fourth Fleet centered around 521.

Much like Starbase 462 or 473. Now it was his turn.

Very cold comfort.

The Breen were chipping away at the Federation's periphery. No fleet could be strong everywhere, and the Breen were attacking the weak spots. They weren't causing much damage, not yet. But like sappers digging mines, they could bring down walls. Targets of opportunity or not, the Breen would sooner or later destroy the Federation's logistical train.

The Gorn watched as the *Perseus* arrived and slid into formation. The wall of ships was arranged to provide the maximum fire coverage on the smallest point. He wished that he had something more powerful than the *Catskills*, a mere *Steamrunner*, to place in the center.

Slitha keyed the channel open. "Captain Rathjens, you are in command."

"Aye sir," replied Rathjens. "All ships, fire on my order."

The expect chorus of assents came, all cool and professional. Before the attack was over, they'd all be dead, all eight of them, and their ships and crew with them. They knew that as well as he did. But he also knew that they'd do their best to send an honor guard to hell before them.

Slitha watched as...fifteen?...ships dropped out of warp? Why fifteen, and not all of them? And why leave behind the carrier?

"Open a channel to the Breen task force."

"Aye sir." His OPS officer tapped the necessary buttons. "Channel open."

"This is Fleet Captain Slitha to Commander, Breen task force. You are in violation of Federation space and are ordered to withdraw immediately. Failure to comply will be considered an act of hostility." Empty words, formula words. But they had to be said. After waiting the obligatory moments, he signaled the officer to close the channel. Not even a guarantee that the Breen were laughing, dammit.

"This is Captain Rathjens to all ships; fire!"

Orange beams lanced out and splashed harmlessly against enemy shields--or so it seemed to the naked eye; scans told a different story. A salvo of torpedoes immolated themselves against their targets. The Starfleet ships were hopelessly outclassed. One single light cruiser as their heaviest unit; the Breen had several *battleships*.

"This is the Catskills. We're venting plasma from our port nacelle."

"Perseus here, Catskills. Maneuvering to assist. Dammit, someone cover the flagship!"

"Negative. Maintain formation."

"Three frigates behind the line. Hyperion, handle them! Everyone else, focus fire on those battlecruisers. Try to punch through their shields."

"Sir, Shiva here. Launching shuttles to serve as a div--"

A *Miranda* broke out of formation, trailing fire as it broke apart. Slitha winced.

"Try and implement ASAP."

"Tarren, this is Rathjens. The Catskills is in warp core breach. You have comm--"

And then the *Catskills*, their largest ship, exploded quite spectacularly, taking a damaged *Constellation* with it. The fireball threw into stark relief a large shape moving inexorably towards the base.

One by one, the remaining defenders soon followed, bright bursts of clean light, the beautiful deaths of hundreds. Slitha watched the battleship casually fire a

quick burst of disruptors at the *Perseus* as it positioned itself against the base. The small ship disappeared.

Only then did the last Breen ship dropped out of warp. Slitha swore. That was no carrier! An 'artillery' ship, bristling with the same heavy disruptor armament as a dreadnought; she'd make short work of the base itself, now that the defensive fleet had been cleared away. The only question: would they capture him, or send him to his ancestors?

And then Slitha swore for a second time. Those weren't disruptors that it was firing...he had one brief moment for disbelief. *Plasma torpedoes? Those things have plasma torpedoes now?*

And then there was no more time for thinking...bright...burning pain...and then it was over. *Hello mother.*

Chapter One

Starbase 521 Fleet Command

Marz'ief Falco leaned back in disgust at the report on his console. 462, 473, and now 518? Three bases gone in a month...

This offensive campaign was worrying. How long until they attacked somewhere truly important? He was...most certainly...not concerned about it just because one of his best friends was a prisoner of war. *Uh-huh...* Maybe Jacob had fixed that by now. Yeah, and maybe he'd grow wings and fly.

He called up a starmap on one of his screens and stared at it, tracing the arc with his finger. Three did not a pattern make, alas. Yet, if one was willing to extrapolate...he continued the arc, which intersected nicely with Starbase 369. He drafted a proposal to divert a few more ships and forwarded it to Admiral Zareka for approval, along with the report, marked '*priority*' and his own synopsis. There, nothing more to be done about that.

I wonder how Jacob's doing now? Thankfully, Zareka hadn't removed him from his acting post in Fleet Ops, despite Harkness's renegade actions. He'd followed orders dutifully and dispatched a couple of ships after the *Typhon*, the *Arkantos*, and the *Thunderchild*...and as soon as he got off shift, drank a bottle of brandy to their luck. By his calculations, they should be back later that night. Assuming they'd be back at all.

Why was he finding it so hard to focus on his work?

I need a break...

He called up another report and tried to concentrate. The letters were dancing on the screen, rearranging themselves. How did some newly-declassified report about improved Breen cloaks become '*The Commander is waiting*'? Marz blinked, rubbed his eyes, and blinked again. This time, the screen stared innocently back at him, denying the easily deniable.

I really need a break.

He stretched and cast his eyes up to the ceiling. A second later, the meaning made its way into his brain and they came rushing back down.

'New Breen cloaks?' What has Martin been up to?

The Federation depended on its ability to scan through the relatively primitive cloaking technology used by the Breen in their war effort so far. With that

advantage nullified... He opened a channel to all the ships in the defensive task force, ordering a quarter of them to go on full red alert status, effective immediately, and to patrol the most likely approach vectors. He also initiated a rotating roster to relieve them in twelve-hour intervals to avoid undue wear and tear on equipment and crew. He read through the text of the orders again and reconsidered. To patrol the *least* likely approach vectors. Only then did he hit 'send.'

That one down, he called up the next report. He knew that he really didn't need to slog through all of the raw data himself; that's why he had data and tactical analysts. But he preferred reading all of the reports firsthand, instead of just the synopses. The devil, as the humans say, is in the details. Or, as his own people preferred: the prey is in the underbrush.

Keep this up, and you won't even see the underbrush.

Falco sighed and looked over at one of his aides. "I'm calling it a day Lieutenant," he said. "Ops is yours."

Falco's Quarters

Half-asleep despite the sonic shower, it took Marz a few moments to notice his terminal beeping. He was half-tempted to refuse the call, but found himself answering anyway. The nearly healed features of Kentar Tokhis appeared on the display. Falco leaned back and rubbed his neck. "Yes, Commander Bailer?"

"Sir?" asked Tokhis, confused.

"Uh..." Marz shut his eyes briefly, shaking his phantasms out. "Sorry Mr. Tokhis. Bad dream. What can I do for you?"

She smiled her unique smile. "I thought you might like to be here when we bring the *Swiftsure's* secondary hull fusion reactors back online."

Marz's ears perked up. "Oh? I didn't know that the repairs were so far ahead of schedule. How long until she's fully operational?"

"The secondary hull is ready to be launched now, if they would replace our torpedoes--you do remember that they redistributed our load to other ships?"

Falco ignored the criticism of Starfleet policy. "Yes, of course. While I haven't been following repairs as closely as I'd like, I have had a general outline of them. Go on, Commander."

"There is not much left to add. We cannot launch without a primary hull."

"Or a crew for that matter." *I wish that Jacob would get back...with Ian.*

"Of course," she said, in a way that made it clear she considered the engines more important.

He nodded sharply, catching himself drifting off again. "I'll be over there shortly. Expect me in about 15 or so minutes. Falco out." He pressed another button. "Falco to Flight Ops."

"Lieutenant Commander Jarcken here. What can I do for you captain?"

"I need a shuttle to the *Swiftsure* in five minutes," he said, struggling to get back into his uniform. "Preferably with a pilot."

"Ensign Yanakov is up on the roster right now sir?"

"It doesn't matter.

Shuttlepod *Jarat* En Route to USS *Swiftsure*

The toy ship in the view port grew, and Falco was content to sit back and watch it in silence.

"She is a beauty, isn't she?" asked Yanakov in a thick Russian accent, interrupting Falco's ruminations.

"Pardon?"

The pilot smiled at Falco; the captain hid a smile at the ensign's sheepishness. "The *Swiftsure*. I'd love to fly a ship like that."

"She's quite a ship. But, by all reports, flying a starship is very different from a shuttle pod."

"Yes sir, I know. I served on the *Columbia* a few years back."

"Must've been a shock, going from being a shuttle pilot on a *Galaxy* to one on a starbase."

"Oh no sir! I was not a shuttle pilot. I was the conn officer."

"Ah." *What is a former conn officer on a Galaxy doing as a minor shuttle pilot for a starbase, however important?* Before he could figure out how to frame the question to avoid giving further offense, the pilot fielded one of his own.

"How long have you commanded the *Swiftsure*, sir?"

"I took command of her around three months ago, right before Earth. But I got put on the sick list about a month after." He smiled grimly. "I was injured pretty badly during an operation a couple of months back, and when the docs put me back together, I found that the *Swiftsure* was in pretty bad shape." He regarded the young man. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your first name."

"Stanis sir. Ensign Stanis Yanakov. Then you were not responsible for the damage to her?"

"No. A friend of mine was in command then." He decided to shift the conversation away from Harkness and the questions that would come from that discussion. "She's quite a ship, Stanis. I wish you best of luck in your dreams." Yanakov began the landing sequence. A series of thrusters fired in quick bursts, aligning the shuttle's hull with the drydock's axis.

His approach into Shuttlebay Two so flawless that Falco had to look at the console to confirm that they'd actually landed. As he exited, Yanakov left the shuttle behind him, keeping pace. Falco didn't remember inviting him along, but it wasn't like it would matter.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Engineering

"And that...should...do it!" said Jack McBain as he made one last connection. "Tactical systems are fully integrated into the warp core again, sir."

"Thank you Lieutenant," replied Falco. "Mr. Tokhis, you can bring up the warp core now"

"Yes sir," replied the Tri-nar. "Chief Innis, initialize constrictor polarization and energize the dilithium. Ensign Benji, activate coolant flow."

The warp core came to life, pulsing red and blue, and the conduits on either side began to glow a wan green. There was nothing in the core yet, of course, but it was wise to activate it before the anti-matter started flowing.

"Crewman Takahni," Kentar continued, "Begin deuterium flow."

And suddenly, through one half of the warp core's vacuum, a thin filament of deuterium traveled at near light-speed, becoming progressively thinner--and faster--as it traveled down the core from the top of the secondary hull.

"Deuterium flow within tolerances," said Takahni as he watched his readouts.

"Begin anti-matter flow."

Another filament, this time coming up from the bottom of the ship, sped toward the center of the core, traveling, like its opposite on the other side of the core, at a significant fraction of the speed of light. And then, contact! The view port into the intermix chamber flared into sudden brightness as the precisely controlled streams of matter and anti-matter merged in mutual annihilation, producing the super-heated plasma that would race to the warp nacelles and bring them online. Several systems tapped this violent source of energy, providing a significant boost in power to phasers, shields, and other a multitude of other high-energy systems needed for a starship to function.

"Power flow nominal," said Benji. "All specs within tolerances."

"Bring us to full standby."

And the wan green glow of the coolant too flared as it bled off the excess heat of the warp core, a reaction that would ultimately aid in powering the plasma-hungry warp nacelles.

"All flows within tolerances sir."

Lieutenant McBain glanced up from his own readouts, detailing the shield and weapon consumption. "Tactical systems are green across the board," he said. "521 does good work."

Kentar looked in pride at the warp core, the centerpiece of the starship, its beating heart. Though her reptilian features usually hid such expressions, Falco could have sworn that she was smiling. Falco smiled too; he could almost feel the *Swiftsure* come to life as gravity, life support, turbolifts...everything was finally brought to full power. The *Swiftsure*, half-maimed as she was, was now a viable fighting force again. Unlike the nearby *Kennedy*, lacking a functional secondary hull, the *Swiftsure* could still travel at interstellar speeds and fight at near-full effectiveness.

Even Yanakov, who had followed Falco all the way from the shuttle bay, was awestruck. He too could feel the ship rearing up, ready for the fight. But even the young pilot was not exempt from Kentar's need for hands to tune the warp core and make any minor repairs that had so far escaped her attention. Only

Falco remained so immune, and as he watched the busy work crews, he realized how utterly useless he was here.

"Mr. Tokhis, you can take it from here," he said. "I'll be on the bridge if anyone needs me."

"Yes sir," said the clearly distracted chief engineer.

Falco turned around and walked to the nearest turbolift, leaving behind the bustling engine room, where people were doing real work. He realized that he hadn't visited this room, the center of the ship, since he'd been injured some two months prior, for one reason or another. It was time to visit again.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

The turbolift shaft ended at the separation plane, a safety measure to prevent the lifts from flying off into damaged or non-existent shafts. The corridors and staircases twisted and came to unexpected dead ends, walls that hadn't been there before; the yard's attempt to maintain atmospheric integrity without the benefit of force field power. Falco backtracked more times than he could count before finally walking onto the blasted bridge. The aft bulkhead had been utterly annihilated by an exploding EPS conduit, which, thankfully, hadn't breached the hull; instead, it had sent burning plasma over the rest of the bridge. Thankfully, there were no signs of the bodies of dead crew.

The darkened room was as quiet as a tomb, no crew and the numerous consoles deactivated, silent, dark. Marz walked to the center seat. He ran his hands down the side.

"Sir, we've got a Breen Carrier on an intercept course! What with all these other ships, they'll finish us!" reported Iltkhan.

"Inbound ETA?" asked Mikey.

"Two minutes, forty-three seconds," reported Maro tonelessly.

"And no chance that the fleet can take it out in time," said Falco. "Helm, see if you can't shake them."

He walked over to the ops console where Jas Iltkhan had died during the furious battle over Earth.

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

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

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

Ikthan lay on the floor. The Coridian was dead.

He closed his eyes wearily. His ghosts refused to leave him.

Falco opened his eyes again at the sound of the turbolift door opening. No one else would come up here...would they?

"Hello Marz," said Mikey

For a moment, Falco was disoriented. Disembodied ghosts of dead friends rarely spoke to him.

Commander Michael Bailer walked out from behind the Caitian. He sat down and faced the dead viewscreen, never turning to face his former captain. "It's good to see you again."

Falco chose to stand behind him. "What's going on?"

"That's for you to decide." Falco couldn't see his mouth moving at all.

Marz shook his head. "You're just a delayed reaction from my injury or my surgery, or both, combined with my stresses over Jacob and Ian. There's no way you could be here." No rot...

The apparition's face seemed to smile; it was hard to see from behind, aside from a subtle twitch of the cheek. "Maybe. Or maybe the Hunter rescinded its hold on me."

Falco snorted. "Now I know you're not real. Mikey was an atheist. By his beliefs, he should no longer exist."

"Or maybe I'm just couching my presence in terms you might understand?"

Falco shrugged. "You aren't going to convince me that you're actually the ghost of Mikey."

"I don't have to convince you captain. I just have to pass on my warning."

"Which is?"

Mikey finally turned to face Falco, a gesture that caused the Caitian to quail in fear. His eyes were merely black depths, specked with bright stars. A *hitcham*, a Hunter-marked...his smile was completely gone. "A great sacrifice will be called for at your moment of greatest triumph. It is required, or you will fail."

And then he was gone. He had never been there.

The turbolift door closed.

He still felt those black depths burning into his mind...no, it couldn't be real. Denobulans experienced similar...sensations, he remembered from half-forgotten cultural studies classes at the Academy. The eyes though... Something dredged up from his subconscious, some half-remembered story about those avatars of the Hunter, sent back to deliver messages.

Marz shook his head. "Okay...I really need a break. Two weeks on Risa should do the trick... I must have looked rather ridiculous, talking to an invisible friend..." He laughed. The small chortles sounded...hollow. They died away quickly.

It was scientifically impossible. And yet...spiritually? Very possible. But he'd never been a *devout* follower of the Hunter. Mostly, he'd just invoked its name when swearing.

"McBain to Captain Falco!" Marz jerked and looked for the source, then realized it came from his combadge.

Harfanti **Bridge**

Thot Asarat ran both hands over the console proudly. This ship would turn the tide. The limited action she'd seen had proven the concept to even the most doubting of critics. An 'artillery ship' equipped with plasma torpedoes was an elegantly simple proposal on paper, but to put it into practice had required far more effort than her designers had anticipated.

And yet, she'd proven herself. This Bombardment Cruiser, usually equipped with disruptors, had destroyed three starbases so far, and a fourth was quickly coming up. And this next victim was no glorified trade depot, but rather the center of the Federation's war effort. No more important target existed outside of the Core.

His officers and commanders had balked at his decision to stay cloaked clear until they encountered the Federation ships, and he had sympathized. The morale of the enemy was the weapon of the Breen. Carefully building it up so that it would hurt all the more when it came crashing down, or rubbing their noses

in the sheer inevitability of their defeat, it mattered not. Fear and hope were the weapons of the Breen, their playthings, and any Breen commander was loathe to throw them away.

But this target was too large, too powerful for games such as that. Though such tactics had worked perfectly on their other targets, the assault Starbase 521 called for stealth and speed. Sadly.

He turned to his com officer. "Play the Elegy."

And so the haunting tones of the Blue Elegy echoed through the halls of every ship as they decloaked, right on top of the ready patrols.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

"Falco here."

"Sir, the Breen are attacking," said McBain. "They've hit the ready ships."

"Hunter... How many?"

"Over sixty sir, including a ship that looks suspiciously *not* like a carrier. Wait...oh God..."

So much for targets of opportunity. They've upgraded now...

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, the *Mjolnir*, it's spinning out of control. They've lost all power!"

So that was it. An energy dampener. Falco closed his eyes. *Why* hadn't the report mentioned that? The *cloaks* it mentioned, but not this new weapon? And the *Swiftsure*, so recently brought back online after her near-crippling over Cardassia, would be destroyed. Two *Sovereigns*, the most advanced ships in the fleet, equally destroyed in this travesty. There were less than thirty in all of Starfleet...

"Anything else Lieutenant?"

"The Breen have launched fighters. Umm...the Romulans are making up the core of the defense; they keep cloaking and sneaking up behind the Breen ships; the *Galora's* serving as the flagship now."

"That's Telous's ship. Thank the Hunter for the Romulans."

"But the artillery ship's holding off any ships that try to make an attack run. Its plasma torpedoes are too effective at short-range."

Falco's eyes widened. "Lieutenant, take Ensign Yanakov and Kentar and rendezvous with me at the battle bridge, ASAP. I have an idea."

"Sir?"

"I'll explain when we get there. Falco out."

And so the *Swiftsure* would fly again.

Chapter Two

USS *Dauntless* Martin's Office

Admiral Jason Bailer sipped champagne and continued to watch his friend and fellow admiral rant and rave at him.

"Why are you so willing to protect him?" asked Admiral Martin. "He killed your son just as surely as if he was the Breen that pulled the trigger."

Bailer winced. "Mikey knew the risks when he joined Starfleet. It was his own insistence on leading the ground forces himself that killed him." Bailer took in a breath. "The fact is, Fonon's our only lead into this plan of theirs, and he's been cooperative so far."

"It just seems too much to believe. I mean, they've been fighting on our side since--we need to force the truth out of him. Even the Tal'Shiar--"

"Admiral Martin, Admiral Bailer," interrupted Koloudi's voice, "Starbase 521 is under attack! Repeat, 521 is under attack!"

Bailer looked at Martin in alarm. "That's the Fourth Fleet's base. 521 is *instrumental* to the war effort. We can't afford to lose those yards!"

"Status report Gook."

"Not good. The Breen are using energy dampeners, the kind we encountered a while defending the *Kennedy*. Apparently the Romulans are serving as the core of the defenders."

Bailer's eyes widened. Martin just closed his. "Set a course for 521. Maximum warp."

"Aye sir. We'll be there in just under an hour. Koloudi out."

"Romulans," Bailer intoned. "Good God..."

USS *Swiftsure* Battle Bridge

"You want us to *what?*" said McBain.

"You heard me."

"Sir, we don't even begin to have a skeleton crew, just the repair teams, you, and myself. We have tactical, command, and engineering...but we don't have a helmsman, unless you expect the wondrous shuttle pilot here fly her." Yanakov winced.

"That's exactly what I expect," said Falco. "Unless you want to fly her, Jack."

"Uhh..." McBain groped for the right answer. It didn't take him long to find it. "No sir."

Falco grinned, giving no thought to the fact that he'd been ready to fall asleep not half an hour before; adrenaline had taken control of him now. "Good. It's settled. Take your stations people. Our first priority is getting clearance to undock and separate what's left of the saucer. Then get me the ship count."

It didn't take long to raise the yard. As expected, they refused. Falco rolled his eyes, and hailed Admiral Zareka directly.

"Yes Captain Falco?" the Vulcan woman asked shortly, clearly annoyed, in that odd Vulcan way, at being pulled from strategic briefings.

"Requesting clearance to undock the secondary hull of the *Swiftsure*."

Zareka quirked an eyebrow. "You do realize that you have no torpedoes?"

"I'm fully aware of our current status, Admiral," Falco said just as shortly, holding the tail of his annoyance in check with some effort.

"Logic dictates that you would be of little use in a battle such as this."

"Admiral, I know what I'm doing, and so do my people. The *Swiftsure*'s phasers, reinforced with the aft impulse engines and the warp core, are very nearly as powerful as a photon torpedo. My chief engineer is even now replicating torpedo casings." Well...almost true. He was going to as soon as she had brought the impulse engines online... "Also, I have a plan to deal with that Artillery ship. Logically, we should be out there." He paused. "If we're to die, Admiral, we should die fighting. Not tethered like bait in a hunting trap."

Zareka visibly hesitated, then inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement of his points. "Your reputation speaks for itself captain. However, if you fail--"

"If I fail, you can do whatever the hell you like with me. What's left of me. Until then, Falco out."

The screen blanked. Hard on the heels, miraculously, the yard's clearance registered. Hah.

"Mr. Yanakov, take us out. Mr. Tokhis, prepare for saucer separation."

"Aye sir." Their crisp responses sounded simultaneously.

The *Swiftsure* flew gracefully out of the dock. She still bore wounds, but she carried herself proudly, as well she should. She was a *Sovereign*; she only had to bare her teeth, and any enemy would quail in fear.

And now it was time to bare those teeth.

"Initiate saucer separation."

Dozens of docking clamps disengaged from their sockets as thrusters fired, revealing two phaser arrays and the battle bridge structure at the top of the secondary hull. Thrusters on the saucer fired remotely, bringing it to a standstill relative to the dock.

"Mr. Yanakov, one quarter impulse. Rendezvous with the fleet. McBain, tractor beam."

"Aye sir," replied McBain, as the blue beam quickly thrust out and grabbed the saucer.

Falco settled into the center seat and examined his plan again, looking for flaws. *It has to work* he thought. "Mr. Yanakov, take us in." *The sacrifice is offered.*

IRS Galora

Admiral Telous watched the *Swiftsure's* secondary hull fly out, dragging her saucer section behind. He couldn't fault Falco for trying to flee, but he felt a twinge of disappointment anyway. His attention was distracted by his operations officer. After barking out the necessary orders, he once again turned his attention to the *Swiftsure*. His eyes narrowed as the *Swiftsure* set course. Whatever Falco was doing, it wasn't retreat. They seemed to be setting a direct course for the battle... Wait, not the battle, but for that damnable 'artillery ship!'

His involuntary exclamation of surprise drew attention; one by one, the Romulan bridge crew became aware of the Starfleet ship moving in what appeared to be a kamikaze run. "What do they think they're doing?" Centurion Ilientis finally asked for everyone.

"Attacking," said Telous. "Signal all ships to form up on the *Swiftsure!*"

USS *Swiftsure* Battle Bridge

The sight of the remainder of the active defenders forming up on his flanks was an unexpected, though welcome, surprise. Falco smiled. It decreased the chances of a Breen warship pouncing on them before he got into range.

Another Romulan ship broke out of formation, losing power. A nearby *Defiant* exploded--a direct hit from a plasma torpedo. Almost immediately after, a Romulan Bird of Prey suffered the same fate. The artillery ship was taking its toll on them. But it hadn't identified the main threat yet. The *Swiftsure* looked too damaged.

But now they were close enough to finally detect the holes in the artillery ship's shields that Falco'd theorized *had* to exist, right in front of the plasma torpedo generators. Logic dictated their presence, a necessary evil to let the highly energetic torpedoes through.

"They've locked onto us!" said McBain. "Power spike!"

"Wait for it," said Falco, watching those plasma torpedoes energize. "On my mark. And...now!"

Just as the torpedoes began their run for the *Swiftsure*, McBain swung the *Swiftsure's* wrecked primary hull directly in their path. The torpedoes ripped through what was left of the hull and tore it apart. Explosions roiled over the surface, wreaking ruin and destruction over the once graceful shape.

So that's what it was like for Jacob... No time to mourn. "Fire!"

Heavy phasers, the most powerful ever made by the Federation, lanced through the explosion, blasting through one of the shield holes, reaking similar if smaller scale havoc on their target. One of the plasma torpedo launchers was gone. One down, one to go, that one still aimed at the *Swiftsure*. And firing.

"Get us out of here!"

"Aye sir," said Yanakov, and the ship suddenly dived into a series of twists and turns that Falco wouldn't have believed were possible...and still didn't. Weak disruptor fire spattered harmlessly against the *Swiftsure's* shields as she twisted in her gyrations. The glowing ball of a plasma torpedo emerged from the enemy ship.

Marz watched in horror as the torpedo closed in on them. Even with Yanakov's maneuvers, escape was futile.

That was when he noticed the Breen destroyer directly ahead. Yanakov seemed to be heading in its general direction...no, he was flying *straight at it!* And then at the last second, the *Swiftsure* pulled hard up and flew over the destroyer.

The torpedo following them ignored their maneuver, targeting the destroyer and immolating against its shields. And then its hull. The torpedo tore through armored tritanium and duranium like a buzz saw through a paper bag, and emerged out the other side, weakened but not fully spent. No fancy maneuvers could save them now.

Falco closed his eyes as the ship rocked, tossed like a toy in the wind by the plasma torpedo. The deck plating shifted and groaned under the feet of the small crew, but there was no fire, no burning instant of pain.

"He actually did it," said McBain in disbelief. "He actually managed to get that thing spent enough that it wouldn't kill us." He glanced over at the Russian helmsman, newfound respect in his eyes. "Good job Ensign!"

"Thank you sir," replied Yanakov absently. "It was nothing."

"Damage report," ordered Falco.

Kentar looked up. "Aft shields are still holding. Aside from minor disruptions to the EPS grid, there is no significant internal damage."

"We're still in this fight," Falco assured them. "McBain, target the nearest Breen ship and open fire!"

IRS *Galora*

"Losses?" asked Telous.

"Heavy sir," said Commander Jolis. "We lost eight of our remaining ships in the *Swiftsure's* assault."

Telous snorted in disgust. "Too heavy?" he echoed. "Too heavy when we took out nearly half of the enemy's firepower?" Of course he wasn't happy to lose so many ships, and the crews that served aboard them, but loss divided by failure equaled infinity. This was preferable.

"It is if we can't replicate that trick, sir," said Jolis. "Our capital ships aren't having any luck getting close to that cruiser, and our Scorpions can't penetrate its hull. We're out of options."

"No!" Telous gazed at the tactical viewscreen. "We're not out of options yet," he continued more calmly. "We'll think of something."

His eyes defocused and he gazed off into space. "We're still alive."

USS *Typhon* Command and Control

"ETA?" asked Harkness.

"Twenty-eight minutes, sir," replied the Lieutenant Commander Ziyi, who was steering from ops, annoyance tinting her words. Harkness didn't care.

Captain Zing's injuries, received during the recent jailbreak had required that Harkness assume command of the *Typhon*, thereby allowing a much-relieved Captain Klyce to resume command of the *Arkantos*. For another twenty-eight minutes, at least. Zareka probably wasn't very happy with her wayward captains.

And then word of this attack had reached them, and now the *Typhon* was streaking through space at her maximum warp, the *Arkantos* and the *Thunderchild* close behind. Racing against the inevitable, trying to get to the base in time to save it from destruction.

Given the reports coming in, it was probably all futile anyway. They would just throw themselves away, adding their numbers to this horrible carnage, this mockery of a battle.

Still they raced death itself, ready to throw themselves on the pyre. This brought a sense of pride to Harkness, that despite the damage taken, this crew would so willingly fly to a battle that they couldn't win. Harkness's reasons were selfish; he had friends left behind...*Marz*. But nobody with him had argued with his decision to push their ships nearly to the breaking point...no, they'd taken those orders as matter-of-fact. As if it was *inevitable* that those orders would come. And that willingness to attack an unstoppable foe...made Jacob feel very small.

"ETA?" Harkness asked again.

"Twenty-seven minutes," Ziyi replied with heavy annoyance.

Wallace leaned over, tapping Harkness on the shoulder. Wounded, he was officially on the sick roster, but he'd insisted on being present on the command deck during the approach--much to the Doctor Zhu's frustration.

"Yes Commander?" asked Harkness.

"Just a suggestion," said Wallace, his voice at a volume only heard by the intended ear, "but perhaps you should stop asking every minute?"

Harkness winced. "Am I really doing that?"

Wallace nodded, his lips quirked in an almost-smile. "Ziyi's about ready to commit insubordination."

Harkness looked back at Ops, noting the hard, stiff set of the young officer's back and shoulders. "I suppose I have at that," he admitted. "But it's taking so long," he added plaintively.

"And you're just making it longer," replied Wallace, leaning back in his own chair, luxuriating shamelessly in its comfort. Looking at the black marks along the exposed parts of Wallace's body, Harkness didn't begrudge him that luxury one bit.

"Sir," said Ziyi, providing a welcome distraction. "I just received a new report from the battle. They managed to disable one of the artillery ship's plasma torpedo launchers!"

"What?!" Wallace jerked upright, freezing in agony at the thoughtless action before continuing. "How'd they manage to get close enough?"

"They used the *Swiftsure's* saucer in some way to get them close enough to fire phasers through holes in the Breen's shields."

Harkness and Wallace exchanged a glance. "Of *course* they'd have shield holes over the plasma torpedoes!" said Wallace; it was obvious now that it was pointed out to him.

"Large enough to punch through with a bomber?" asked Harkness. "It's not like 521 has any to test that with..."

Wallace grinned evilly. "What say we find out?"

IRS Galora

Admiral Telous winced as another ship fell out of formation. They were holding, but it couldn't last. The Breen were wearing them down, and it was only a matter of time before...

"Sir," said Centurion Illientis, "message from the Typhon."

"What is it?" asked Telous as the *Galora* shook from a direct hit. "Have they sent a list of the Haldar survivors yet?"

"It reads 'We have a plan. Hold on for another twenty minutes.'"

Telous looked at the tactical map. If the battle continued like it had been since the recent assault on the artillery ship, it wouldn't *last* for twenty more minutes. There was only one answer.

"All ships," he said, "form up on the *Galora*! Prepare for a massive strike."

"All ships signal ready sir," said Illientis.

"Now!"

Chapter Three

Phasers lanced through the long night, and green disruptor beams and bolts responded in kind. Titanic fleet crashed onto titanic fleet, and ships spun away, savagely mauled or disabled by new Breen weaponry. Federation and Romulan starships frantically rotated their shields, desperately attempting to find some countermeasure against this weapon that couldn't be countered.

Fleet crashed onto fleet, merging into an indistinct brawl; Breen holding the Starfleeters that seemed intent on destroying their sword in the sky, Starfleeter truly intent only on wreaking destruction and death on Breen Furies. And then, as one, the two fleets broke off from one another, to lick their wounds.

One damaged Breen frigate broke out of formation. And then it disappeared from the universe, reappearing in another spot entirely. One calculated to cause the most damage to the tattered Allied defenders' morale.

Inside the Galora.

IRS Galora

"Warp coil going critical!"

"Whose?"

"Both!"

"How...?"

"Does it truly matter? We need to abandon ship!"

USS Swiftsure Battle Bridge

The shockwave of the double explosion rocked the *Swiftsure*, threatening the integrity of the recently repaired secondary hull. A number of nearby escape pods were not so lucky as their strongest defender fell to the Breen, taking them with her.

"So much for the Galora," said Yanakov.

"How did this...?" Kentar trailed off.

"Had to be a phase cloak," said McBain. "But how did they get their hands on that kind of technology? Their cloaks are at least three generations from the point where they could even consider it."

"Survivors?" Falco asked. If he pretended hard enough, he could almost ignore the hollow note in his own voice.

"One escape pod got far enough away in time," replied McBain.

"Open a channel, all ships."

"Channel open," said Yanakov.

"This is Captain Falco to all ships. I'm assuming command of the task force." *What's left of it.* "Falco out." He turned to McBain. "Set view screen to fleet tactical mode."

The screen shifted views; lines played across it in a complicated, advanced show of lights. Only someone with a truly advanced grasp of tactical knowledge could make any sense of this interplay of lights and circles; only someone with the ability to multi-task and compartmentalize information to the greatest degree could use it.

Someone like Captain Marz'ief Falco.

He analyzed the play of lines and icons for a few more seconds, and then sagged into his chair in relief. *Telous' ploy worked.* The Breen were falling back, disappearing as they retreated. Temporarily, but enough to buy some time.

"ETA *Typhon*?" he asked.

"Thirteen minutes, sir," replied Yanakov.

Less than eight minutes? That furious skirmish had felt like hours.

"This is Falco to all ships, we've got a brief breather, make the most of it. Get what repairs that you can out of the way, but stay on your toes. Falco out."

No. It was futile; no matter how long the Breen stayed on the retreat, it wouldn't be long enough. The enemy would need no more than five minutes to gather their strength anew. While they wouldn't have finished with 521 before the *Typhon* arrived, the carrier wouldn't begin to stem this tide.

Unless...

The Romulans had very good cloaks too

Yes...use some of the remaining Romulan ships to harass the retreating Breen; they could keep them on the defensive for ten minutes longer than otherwise. Though it *would* dip dangerously into their reserve. Nevertheless...

"This is Captain Falco to the..."

USS *Dauntless*
Main Bridge

"...sides have broken off sir," said S'pon.

"So they've gotten some breathing room; good," commented Koloudi. "ETA?"

"About eighteen minutes," replied the helmsman.

"Sir," said S'pon, "I'm receiving a message from the *Typhon*."

"The *Typhon*?" asked Bailer incredulously. "What the hell is Harkness up to now?"

"I don't know sir," said S'pon, "but they're reporting that they have a plan to destroy the artillery ship."

"Do they now," said Martin. "Did they provide *any* information on this 'plan' of theirs."

"No sir."

"Of course not."

"I think I know what they have in mind," said Bailer, obviously in deep thought. "Order them to disable it only, do *not* destroy it. Also, tell Colonel Faris to start preparing her troops for boarding operations. Even if they wipe the memory banks, capturing this ship and figuring out where they plan to attack next could have a catastrophic effect on the Breen morale."

"It's time we turned their own weapons back on them."

Harfanti
Bridge

Asarat looked at his fleet displays. He shouldn't have ordered them to fall back, but the sudden and unexpected assault of the enemy had caused his fleet

commanders to panic and spread disorder throughout the task force. They had fallen prey to one of their most favored weapons.

But the damage had been done, and he'd managed to fill the worst of his holes. Now it was time to strike before the scattered Federation reinforcements could arrive. No more minor feints and raids with his few remaining fighters. Now it was time to finish this.

"Move to assault position and prepare to decloak!"

USS *Swiftsure* Battle Bridge

"Sir, the remaining decloaked ships have stopped falling back," said McBain. "They're reforming...they've just fully engaged the Romulans!"

"Tell the Romulans to fall back," ordered Falco. "The Breen are moving in!"

"Breen ships inside our formation!"

"Maximum impulse, don't let them catch us standing still! ETA *Typhon* arrival?"

"They'll be in weapons range in four minutes."

We just need to hold out for four more minutes... "Fire all weapons!"

And so the twisting melee began again.

"This is the Shenandoah, requesting assistance!"

"Shran, move to assist the Shenandoah. Griffin, cover grid 2A."

Suddenly, an *Akira* flew over the *Swiftsure*, destroying a frigate on its way in.

"This is the Mjolnir; we just restored power!"

"Mjolnir, cover the Griffin!" ordered Falco.

Falco saw the icon of a Romulan Bird of Prey blink out of existence on the viewscreen. *"Mjolnir, strike my last. Cover the Shenandoah and the Shran instead. Everyone else, they've been luring us in closer, fall back!"*

Another icon emerged from the artillery ship; they had launched another plasma torpedo. It was bearing down on an *Akira* that was covering two its wounded brethren from marauding frigates.

"This is the *Mjolnir*. We've been hit, losing warp core containment. Abandoning ship!"

And then she tumbled out of formation, escape pods spilling from the flaming sepulcher. Some escaped its ultimate destruction. Some. And then a boxy starship flew in, flanked by an *Intrepid* and another *Akira*.

"This is Captain Harkness of the *Typhon*, reporting in. Preparing to launch fighters!"

***Osprey* cockpit**

"Bobcats, deploy!"

Maro gulped as her fighter left the warp field. The *Typhon* had taken heavy losses during the rescue, and she had experience in an *Osprey*; it had been only logical that she would fly one for this battle. It's not like the *Typhon* needed a helmsman, right?

Never mind that she still had nightmares from the last time...

"The word is *go*," said Lieutenant Ki, the *Typhon*'s acting Extravehicular Activities Commander. "Birds, flap your wings!"

"This is Falco." She gave a start as she heard her *official* captain over the all-ships channel. "All ships, cover the *Typhon*; leave the artillery ship to the fighters!"

And then she and the rest of the fighters leapt into the fray.

***Harfanti* Bridge**

"Three Federation starship have just jumped out of warp; an *Intrepid* and an *Akira*, and something I've never seen before."

"On screen!" ordered Thot Asarat. The sleek forms of two of Starfleet's most powerful medium cruisers appeared, as well as a boxy form that seemed more apt as a freighter than one of the curvy starships favored by the Federation.

But a freighter had no place in battle, did it?

"Six squadrons of small craft have just emerged from the central vessel's warp field! We have seventy-two fighters inbound!"

"Call back all destroyers! Tell them that they're for point-defense *only!*"

The destroyers moved into position, firing disruptors at the incoming fighters, trying to protect the *Harfanti*. But the fighter capacity of that...carrier proved too much for the remaining destroyers.

"Recall all remaining fighters and task them to defend the *Harfanti!*"

Osprey Cockpit

"Form up on me!" ordered Lieutenant Ferit, Bobcat's squadron CO. "It's our job to ride point for the Big Birds."

Which means an awful lot of us 'Angry Birds' are gonna die... thought Maro.

"Buzzards inbound! They're going after the Big Birds and the Little Birdies!"

"Bobcats, break and attack!"

Maro swerved starboard and destroyed an interceptor before it could acquire a target, then squeezed off another salvo of pulse phasers; an assist that time.

Two dozen--well, twenty-one now--*Ospreys* were buzzing around the battlefield, clearing a path for the *Golden Eagles* and the closer-in *Kestrel* defense flyers. Maro winced as another of her fellows exploded in a brilliant display of light and shards of glowing metal, and then, suddenly, they were *inside* the cruiser's shields, hovering over the wreckage of the ship's port plasma launcher. Six *Ospreys* had died trying to reach that objective.

"Attack designated targets!" ordered Ki.

"You heard him Bobcats," said Ferit. "There's only eight of us left, but they can't hit us now. Head for the shield generator!"

***Harfanti* Bridge**

That 'freighter' has to be the command center for those hellish fighters... "All ships, priority target is now the..." Asarat paused to look at his identifiers. "...*Typhon.*"

USS Typhon Command and Control

"All remaining Breen ships have focused their firepower on us," said Ziyi.

"Great," said Wallace. "Tell me something I *don't* know!"

"Sir, the artillery ship's just lost all power to its warp and impulse drive, and its shields are down!" said Althorp.

"And the last plasma torpedo launcher?" asked Harkness.

"GE-squadron two has reported that they've almost disabled it."

Golden Eagle Cockpit

"Only a couple more torpedoes should do it--" Suddenly green disruptor bolts sped by Lieutenant Jerri Giuffre's cockpit. "What the hell?"

"They must have come in when the shields went down!"

Giuffre's cockpit shook as the Breen pelted her. "We're losing power, shields--"

Another thermonuclear pyre lit the sky.

Osprey Cockpit

"GE-2's down!" said Ferit. "Bobcats, form on me; we'll take out that launcher!"

And so the eight remaining fighters in the Flying Bobcat squadron sped over twisted spires of metal and alloy reaching that one objective that *had* to be secured above all other before this mission could succeed.

Only to find it guarded by two squadrons of Breen interceptors. Maro thought that they seemed as shocked to see the Bobcats and the Bobcats were to see *them*.

"Now!"

Eight *Ospreys* fired as one, ripping great holes in the Buzzard's formation, but more interceptors flew in to cover the holes.

"I've got an idea," said Maro. "Cover me!"

Maro squeezed off another burst as she came in closer, racking up yet another kill, and then she went to full speed, twisting as she went, trying to fly through the new hole before it could be fully closed. She winced as she heard her shields bounce off the new Buzzard's. But the other interceptors were a *little* too busy to bother with her.

Except for the two that just appeared on her tail.

"Damn!"

Unless...

She pushed her fighter's engines to the limits, heading straight for the launcher. The two interceptors sped up to match her velocity, firing at her all the way. Trying to kill a pilot with obvious kamikaze tendencies...Maro smiled, and then pulled up at the last moment. The far less maneuverable interceptors didn't have that option, as they found to their short-lived horror.

That was one well-cooked launcher.

"This is Bobcat-twelve. Mission successful."

Harfanti **Bridge**

Asarat sighed through his breath slits; the mission was a complete failure. Vessels the size of anti-grav haulers back home had rendered the *Harfanti* impotent, and there were less than eight ships left in his tattered fleet! Not only had he given up his main weapon, but it had been turned back on him.

Now all that was left was to save what he could. He himself could not escape, that much was certain. But some of his ships might possibly be able too. While only eight of his vessels may have survived, there were only twelve left of the allied forces, not enough to chase his vessels and ensure their destruction, if they split up to retreat.

Then yet another ship joined the fray, a completely undamaged *Galaxy* class starship.

And so the destruction was complete. His commanders were utterly broken by that sight; they left of their own accord, without orders.

None would live to tell this tale...

Asarat pulled out his ceremonial dagger. Soon the great Void would swallow him, as it had swallowed his brother in the last war.

With a jerk, he pushed the dagger through his uniform.

**USS *Swiftsure*
Battle Bridge**

"*Dauntless*, it's good to see you again," said Falco.

"Likewise *Swiftsure*," replied Captain Koloudi. "We'd appreciate it if you'd order the *Typhon's* fighters to cover our dropships' on approach.

"Not transporters?"

"The Breen have scramblers up."

"Understood," said Falco. "And thank you."

"Not a problem. Admiral Martin has...instructed that as soon as we deploy our dropships, we're to assist you in the chase of the remaining Breen vessels. Koloudi out."

Chapter Four

Outside Avocet A-1

"Commence door breach maneuver," ordered Colonel Jenda Faris, the *Dauntless'* Marine CO, through her suit's comm.

"Aye sir," replied one of her squad leaders, who gestured at two corporals. The well-trained team blasted the Breen airlock open within seconds, despite the zero-g conditions.

"Fire in the hole!" said a private, throwing a light photon grenade into the breach. It exploded, causing Faris' polarizing viewer to go all but black. She fancied that she could hear screams caused by plasma wounds.

"Go!" she said. Bravo team took off for the engine room, and she turned and headed for where her suit's map said the bridge should be, Alpha team following close behind. Delta Team stayed behind to hold the marines' egress.

They quickly found themselves confronted by an emergency forcefield, obviously hoisted to slow Alpha Team's advance; Faris assumed that the Breen were doing the same to Bravo team. "Hack that forcefield," ordered Squad Two's sergeant. Another corporal, this one trained in hacking procedures, found a terminal and brought the field down.

"Squad three, hold this position. Everyone else, advance."

"Aye sir."

As they rounded the next bend, Faris cursed as she saw why the Breen had erected that forcefield: a group of their soldiers had their weapons out and were making their stand there. They were in heavy armor; no photon grenade would penetrate them unless on a setting that would destroy Alpha Team as well.

Despite the circumstances, Faris had to grin. Finally, she was on the front lines, instead of bouncing around with Section 31 traitors a hundred light-years from the action. And instead of risking the entire detachment for just one Breen, it was for a thousand.

She still hadn't forgiven Bailer or Martin for that.

But the situation remained. No way the Marines could take them on head-to-head, not with the current situation.

So time to change the situation.

"Breach that door over there," she ordered, pointing at the entrance to what had to be someone's quarters. A corporal, though confused, performed the maneuver within seconds, and the entire team trooped into the room behind her.

"Prepare for an explosive solution," Faris said, pointing at the wall to the left of her. The same one that faced the Breen soldiers as a matter of fact. She pulled out her phaser-two, setting it on level twelve. "Everyone else, rifles ready."

"Fire in the hole!" she shouted.

And suddenly the wall no longer existed; the phaser beam ensured *that* much. The confusion among the arrayed Breen troops, who were suddenly pelted by debris and shrapnel from their left flank. Plus the added confusion of rapid-fired pulse phaser rifles. And perhaps even a few flash-bang grenades.

"They're falling back!" said someone.

"To the bridge?"

"Looks like. Leapfrog maneuver."

"Not a retreat, but a delaying action," said Faris. "Of course they would...I guess we'll be facing fire the rest of the way. Let's go."

Harfanti **Corridors**

Personal forcefields flared as disruptor and pulse phaser hit soldier or marine. Faris took two direct hits on her own forcefield; she couldn't take too many more.

"This is Bravo Team," someone said over the marine-wide channel, the one that was also tied into the *Dauntless*. "We have secured the engine room."

"Good job Bravo team," replied Faris on the same channel. "We're almost to the bridge--" A forcefield suddenly sprung up before Alpha Team. "Damn."

"What's your status Alpha?"

"I'll have to get back to you."

And then green bolts flew *through* the field. An Alpha lifted his phaser rifle and tried to respond in kind, but his bolts were just absorbed by the localized particle streams.

"Great, it's one-way," commented someone.

"We don't have time for this," said Faris as she pulled out her phaser-2, setting it to sixteen. She aimed it at the field's generator and fired. To say that it destroyed the generator would be insufficient. To say that it destroyed much of the deck above would be more accurate, if still an understatement.

The forcefield, needless to say, ceased to exist.

Alpha Team hoisted their phaser rifles and started to return fire with bolts that, if not as powerful as a phaser beam, were certainly more effective against the personal forcefields of the Breen soldiers.

Those soldiers were the only obstacles between Alpha Team and the bridge of the *Harfanti*. Which now had blast shields covering the doors, dammit. Faris poked her head up and spotted a console. "Hack that terminal," she ordered. "Everyone else, lay cover fire. As soon as those blast shields are open, prepare for door breach maneuver."

Faris squeezed off another couple of bursts at a Breen soldier daring enough to poke its head up, and then the blast doors were open. Two more alphas jogged through the gullet to try and breach the door, which took several minutes this time, what with having to constantly dive for cover thanks to some very smart Breen over there. But the doors finally opened.

"Fire in the hole!" shouted a marine as she tossed a stun grenade into the bridge.

"Squad two, hold the entrance. Everyone else, move in and secure the bridge!"

Harfanti Bridge

As Faris walked onto the bridge, she saw that the stun grenade had been largely useless; everyone on the bridge was dead, a dagger of some sort sticking out of each officer and crewman's neck. Well, that was one way to ensure that no one would tell any tales.

It was like walking into a damned tomb.

She jumped when her feet hit something that moved; the body of someone with a That's insignia. She let out a breath she hadn't even known she'd been holding.

She wrenched her eyes from the body and looked at his terminal. Even she could recognize the program running on it; the little bastard was wiping the memory banks! One last act of defiance from the beyond.

She beckoned over Corporal Tanni, a computer tech. "Hack the terminal," she said. "Try to get any data off it that you can."

"Yes ma'am." Calm, cool professionalism. Yep, Tanni was as spooked as she was.

She opened the marine-wide channel. "This is Alpha Team," she said. Damn this...silence was unnatural. "Bridge secure. The Breen are running a memory wipe algorithm; we're attempting to hack their computers to try and save any data that we can."

"Understood Colonel," replied Koloudi. "Keep us informed."

"Sir," said Tanni.

"Yes Corporal?"

"I think you should see this."

Faris bent over the console and squinted; it was obvious that the algorithm had already done massive damage to this data. But it was equally obvious what this data was. Her respect for the dead Thot rose a notch.

"Transmit this to the *Dauntless* now Corporal! Flag it for Martin's and Bailer's eyes only. And do it five minutes ago!"

USS *Shran* On SAR operations

"There's another one," said Lieutenant Galmate. "Romulan. Hey, it's the one from the *Galora*!"

"Well, tractor it in..." said Lieutenant Commander Hirkaté, the Chief Medical Officer.

"Of course, of course. I'll land it over near the *Mjolnir's* escape pods."

Hirkaté watched as the escape pod floated into the shuttlebay and landed with all the grace of a falling brick. He cracked open the door, to discover a pod rated for ten with just one man in it.

"This one's wounded," he said. "Look's like he took a few too many breaths of plasma," said the doctor, waving his tricorder over the sole survivor of the *Galora*. He pulled a hypo full of tri-ox out and injected it. "That should help with his breathing some, until we can get him under a replicator."

The Romulan tried to say something, but only succeeded in coughing up green blood.

Hirkaté shushed him with a touch to his lips. "Don't even try to talk." He reached down and touched the Romulan's insignia. "Let's see what your name is, eh?" He flipped the insignia up. "Well, Centurion Illientis, you couldn't be in any better care."

Starbase 521 Briefing Room

Bailer, Martin, and Zareka watched as Captains Falco, Klyce, and Harkness walked into the briefing room. Falco sagged appreciatively into his chair; it was clear that his adrenaline high had worn off. Following them was a limping Wallace, who performed an appreciable double-take as he entered the room. He sat down next to Falco, and leaned over to talk to his former captain. Bailer could just see him mouth the words 'Good God, what did I do *now*?'

Following Wallace was Colonel Faris and, rather surprisingly to everyone except Bailer and Martin, Fonon Jo'Uva. The half-Bajoran was trailed by two security guards. Martin nodded at them and they left the room. Falco and Wallace seemed to stare at him intently, suspicion in their eyes. Ah yes, Fonon had been the *Swiftsure's* civilian bartender.

So everyone was here. Now it could begin.

"Thank you all for coming," said Bailer, ignoring a mutter from Wallace that seemed to be to the effect of 'like we had a choice.' "I will assure you that everyone in this room has a reason for being here, even if it isn't immediately apparent. So let's get down to it. Admiral Martin?"

"Admiral Bailer and I have heard some disturbing...rumors," said Martin. "On a recent operation against Section 31--yes Captain Harkness?"

"You mean to tell me that Section 31's *real*? I thought that they were just some kind of gossip," said Harkness.

"They're real, Captain," said Bailer. Wallace nodded emphatically. "And they're behind this war. Don't ask me why; I don't know yet. Admiral Martin has been tracking them down for some time now, but they've always been one step ahead of us. We tried to change that recently, and very nearly succeeded. However, that's neither here nor there at the moment."

"Understood sir. Sorry for interrupting, Admiral."

"Not a problem captain," replied Martin. "I had much the same reaction when I found out about them."

"So did I," added Klyce.

I think I'll have to discuss this with the chief of Starfleet Security thought Bailer.

"As I was saying," continued Martin, "on a recent operation against Section 31, Admiral Bailer heard some disturbing rumors being discussed by somebody important to their plans. About the Romulans. So we asked Fonon, a former agent of Section 31 who was privy to many of their plans, what he knew about them." Martin nodded at the half-Bajoran. "Just so you're all aware, he was the agent assigned to disable the *Swiftsure* to prevent her from reaching the fight in time to prevent the Breen from reaching Earth. There were several such agents spread throughout the fleet, as we've so determined."

Bailer noticed the barely restrained anger coursing through his old friend as Martin said this. It was...curious...that Bailer felt so little of his own. Fonon was directly complicit in Mikey's death, just like that of Nikolai's family, but Bailer's anger wasn't because of that. No, he was only angry over the abstraction of Fonon's status as a former agent of Section 31. When had this happened?

Everyone waited a few moments for Fonon to speak up, but the half-Baj--Breen seemed to ignore them. Finally, Bailer asked gently, "What did we discuss about the Romulans the other day Jo'Uva?"

"Oh." Fonon sat up. "The Breen were in talks with the Tal'Shiar about supporting them in this war. They're just as worried about the Federation culture encroaching onto Romulus as the Breen are. They see it only as a matter of time before Romulus is indistinguishable from Earth. Along with the rest of the quadrant. But last I'd heard, the Tal'Shiar wasn't interested in open war."

"Sir," interposed Wallace, "if I may add to that?"

"That's why you were requested to come here Commander," said Bailer.

"I figured." Wallace paused, taking a deep breath. He let it out. "When Captain Harkness attacked the Haldar camp, a group of us managed to escape our Breen guards. Along the way, we stumbled into a hangar bay. It was filled with Romulan attack flyers. Scorpion class."

"Also," said Harkness, "the Breen definitely used Romulan plasma torpedoes at Cardassia, and presumably at Malthab IV as well."

"Not to mention here," Falco added dryly.

Bailer took a deep breath of his own. "I think that we have to believe that the Tal'Shiar has betrayed us," he said. "But while those of us in this room may know that with enough certainty, we don't as yet have any proof that would actually stand up, merely mutually corroborating rumors. Captains Harkness and Klyce, that's your job. I want you to find absolute proof of Romulan treachery so that we can confront them about it. Yes, Captain, I know that you violated Admiral Zareka's direct orders. Frankly, I don't care. Commander Wallace, you'll serve as Captain Harkness' XO on the *Typhon*. Captain Klyce, your orders are to assist the mission in any way possible, but you are outside the normal command structure." Klyce winced. "Is that understood?"

"But that's Zing's ship!" said Harkness.

"Not anymore," said Zareka. "We're promoting her."

"That brings us to the next item of discussion," said Bailer. "While the command staff of the 'artillery ship' was dead and the computers nearly wiped, Colonel Faris' techs managed to obtain important information. Colonel?"

She acknowledged Bailer with a nod. "Keeping in mind that the data was shot all to hell, my computer techs managed to retrieve some very disturbing intelligence." She paused, and looked at Admiral Martin, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "To wit, 521 was to be the artillery ship's last target until it was supposed to report to somewhere else. We don't know where; that part of the file was corrupted. But it's obvious that this was to be part of some large operation. There were bits and pieces about this ship here or another there being pulled off the frontline, but nothing concrete."

"Hunter's name..." said Falco. "So their plan was to cripple the war effort near the Black Cluster, and then launch some...something soon after?"

"I don't know," said Bailer. "And that worries me. If the Breen were planning something on the scale of the orders we found, I should have heard about it." Bailer took another deep breath. "Thankfully, they failed in their mission here. That may delay the timetable on whatever it is they're planning to pull next. But if they *are* preparing something big, then other ships must have received similar orders. And Captain Falco, this task falls on you."

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you. You'll be assigned a large marine detachment for boarding parties; try to capture intact any ship you can. Your chain-of-command will solely consist of myself and Admiral Zareka. You are hereby released from having to take the commands of *anyone* else."

"But I only have half a ship!"

Bailer smiled. "I'm sure you'll find a solution Captain. Dismissed."

Martin stayed behind. So did Bailer.

"Are you sure about this plan of yours?" Martin asked.

"Which one?" replied Bailer.

"Both of them. At least, the two you didn't tell the rest of them."

"I couldn't be more certain."

"I was afraid of that. Best of luck Jason. You'll need it."

Outside Briefing Room

Falco walked down the corridor, mumbling to himself. He'd never suspected the Commander-in-Chief of having a sense of humor before...

The prophecy had been fulfilled, the sacrifice offered and taken. It didn't *feel* like his greatest triumph, but perhaps the data accounted for it...he decided that it might be a good idea to burn some incense at his shrine at some point...

It just so happened that Falco walked past a view port that looked over the fleet yards. Included in the field-of-view was the *intact* saucer of the *Kennedy*. And then it hit him...oh Hunter did it hit him.

It violated half the traditions and possibly a few regs, but Marz didn't care. He slapped his combadge. "Captain Falco to Commander Garcia," he said.

USS *Kennedy* Main Bridge

Captain Marz'ief Falco walked onto the bridge of what would soon be his starship. Or at least, her saucer. He eyed the center seat, set at a height for someone far taller than he. The colors of the bridge were...wrong. He supposed that he'd get used to them sooner or later.

"Mr. Kerok," said Falco, "scan the drydock for workbees."

"Aye sir," replied the Tellarite Ops officer, who had been pulled from what was about to no longer be the *Kennedy*. "Drydock area clear."

"Good," replied Falco. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Tokhis here," replied his chief engineer. "Yes captain?"

"Bring the navigational deflector online, and then set the new primary hull registries."

"Aye sir," said Kentar. Kerok winced as the registry of the *Kennedy* faded away, to be replaced in the electro-responsive 'paint' by that of the *Swiftsure*.

USS *Swiftsure* Main Bridge

"Mr. Stot," Falco said to his new XO, formerly of the *Mjolnir*, "have you ever taken a ship out of drydock before?"

"Yes sir," replied the Vulcan.

"Feel free to do so Exec." Falco sat down in *his* chair. It felt wrong.

"Aye sir. Mr. Yanakov, clear tractor moorings, then set speed to ahead one-quarter impulse."

And so the *Swiftsure* flew once more.

USS *Typhon* Command and Control

Captain Jacob Harkness, Commander Ian Wallace, and Captain Jordana Klyce walked into the Command Center. Wallace took his position at tactical, while Klyce and Harkness stood by the holographic array in the middle.

"How are your fighters Mr. Althorp?" asked Harkness.

Jonathon Althorp, the *Typhon's* assigned EVAC, looked up. He'd finally been able to transfer aboard after the battle. "We're fully loaded sir. *Lieutenant* Maro finally arrived two hours ago sir."

Wallace smiled in memory of the intense round of Egyptian Rummy amongst the *Swiftly's* old hands. What was left of them at any rate. His smile faded.

"Good," said Harkness. "Mr. Ziyi, set a course for the--" he looked over at Klyce "--Carmoulselia system. Warp Factor Eight."

"Aye sir."

"Engage."

Starbase 521
Zareka's office

"Admiral," said the contact. "Excuse me, Admirals," she added when she saw the second-in-command of the FSA beside Bailer. Zareka nodded back at her. "What can I do for you?"

"We have a job for you," said Bailer. "You'll need the *Davies*. Information is being sent to you on an encrypted channel in a burst file."

The contact looked away from the terminal for a moment. "I've got it. Romulus...huh," she said.

"Bailer out."

"Is this wise Jason?" asked Zareka. "The Romulans are our allies at the moment. And I doubt that Section 31 will be fooled by your deception forever."

"Like I said, we *know* that the Romulans have betrayed us. We have found the truth. They're not our allies anymore."

Zareka's eyes merely narrowed. *Telous...* "I understand sir. It will be done."