

STAR TREK: SWIFTFIRE



Season 01: Episode 04

Over the Horizon

By Jay L.R.

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Please direct any questions or comments to me, the author, at jaylar_swf@hotmail.com

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Those who lose dreaming are lost.

Deep within the Guyra IV moon base Admiral Victor Harvey held one of the most important meetings of the Dominion War so far. Around a large circular table sat the available commanders of Starfleet's Fifth Fleet and the Klingon's Third Battlegroup, 13 Starfleet officers and 5 Klingons in total. The officers ranged from Captains in charge of Tactical Wings to the General in charge of the Klingon fleet.

In the centre of the table was a holographic display of the Federation border with Cardassia. "The 4th, 13th and 24th have fallen back. The 2nd and the 6th are just holding. Only the 7th is having success and is still in her original position from the start of the war."

"We should attack!" shouted General G'tor, the Klingon flag officer in charge of the Klingon fleet. "We must take the fight into Cardassian space."

"I agree with the General. We need to attack the Dominion in their space," agreed Rear Admiral Jennifer Douglas, the commander of the 59th Tactical Wing.

"Attack when we can't seem to hold what we have? That would be a mistake," argued a Starfleet captain.

"It would put pressure back on the Dominion and off our lines," said another Klingon.

"Holding enemy territory when we can't secure our own is impossible. Even if we were to hold onto Cardassian space the rest of our fleets are retreating so fast that we would be isolated in a week. No supplies and no hope of survival," interjected a Starfleet captain.

"The problem is the front, as it stands at the moment," said Vice Admiral Cameron Brand, the commander of the 268th Tactical Wing. "We have fallen back so quickly that we're hastily taking positions that aren't strategically or tactically sound. The 2nd fleet is a perfect example. After they were pushed back from their original position they took position in a system that had a nebula close by that meant sensors and communications didn't work in it or near it. They patrolled it but the Dominion took out the patrols, which sent word but because of the nebula, transmissions failed to reach the commanders of the 2nd Fleet. The Dominion came from the front and the 2nd engaged only to have the hidden ships in the nebula go around and trap them. If the 16th hadn't been close by we would have lost the entire 2nd fleet. Now if Command had let them fall back a few more light years they could have set up a better line of defence."

“We can’t just hand territory to the Dominion!” yelled a Klingon.

The room erupted into a shouting match as the officers who wanted Starfleet to take a much more aggressive posture and those who thought Starfleet should play more defensively started to tear strips off each other.

It took Admiral Harvey a few minutes to calm the room down.

“Now that I’ve got your attention, I can see advantages in both arguments but I also see the pitfalls. Starfleet Command isn’t going to just throw an entire fleet into Cardassian space. At the moment we need them to secure the front. Command has dozens of ships working individually or in small groups in Cardassian space fighting in their backyard. What is worrying is the fact the Dominion seems to know where our ships are when they attack. They suspect that the Dominion may have a powerful subspace array close to the front and that is what most of our incursion ships are looking for. But we do need to hit the Dominion hard. So I have proposed a plan to Command, which they have agreed to. We are going to lure the Dominion fleet here and then we show them that this is our space and that if they want it they are going to pay a high price.”

* * * *

A wave crashed, pushing water up the beach until it flowed over Jonathan’s bare feet. The cool ocean water swept the sand from around and under his feet as the sea continued up the beach and then as it retreated back down.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Jonathan?”

“Yes of course I am, Isabella.”

“You don’t look like you are.”

Jonathan looked up from his feet at Isabella O’Meara. They had been walking along the edge of the sea talking; well Isabella was doing most of the talking. She must have finally noticed the Jonathan hadn’t been listening.

“I just feel a bit uncomfortable out of uniform.”

Jonathan gestured to what he was wearing. He had a light blue shirt that had a diagonal dark blue stripe and with sleeves that came to his elbows. Plus he had light blue shorts that came to his knees. It was typical recreational wear of most male humans when they were at the beach.

“I think you look great. Plus isn’t it nice not to be in thousands of layers? I feel better.”

Isabella wore a white sleeveless top with a white light wrap around skirt. She tugged at her top to show how loose and light it was.

“It is nice to feel free of the uniform every now and again. Plus the crew seems to be enjoying it.”

Jonathan looked around. The crew of his ship and Isabella’s ship were both here on the beach taking a well-earned break. The two crews were getting on and they mingled like they were old friends. Some were in the water, others were playing beach volleyball, a lot were sunbathing, others chatted to one and other and some like Jonathan and Isabella were taking strolls on the edge of the water.

“They really needed this. They needed something to make them forget about the war for a few hours.”

As Jonathan looked around one of the females caught his eye and waved. Jonathan waved back.

“I still can’t get over your Doctor!” said Isabella as she waved back to Doctor Carol Murphy.

“Hey, I look younger too!” complained Jonathan.

“But she looks 20 to 30 years younger. I wish I could look as young. Hey, isn’t that your First Officer?”

Jonathan looked to where Isabella was pointing. She was pointing to the volleyball game. Commander Susan Core, his First Officer, was involved with what looked like a very heated argument with a player from the other team. Even from the distance they were away Jonathan could still make out a string of curses as Susan finally gave up. She angrily threw the ball to the other team. She turned and walked away, Jonathan thought she was going to leave but she got to the edge of the courts and took off her wrap around and placed it in the sand. This left Susan in a dark purple two piece. Any other Captain would have been shocked that their First officer would be seen in so little but Jonathan knew that Susan was the type of person who wasn’t shy and liked the attention she got. The other team served the ball and Susan expertly popped it up into the air, one of her female teammates then jumped up and spiked the ball over winning them back the serve. Susan and her teammate gave each other high fives. She was competitive but still a good team player.

“That is. Susan is definitely an *individual* but she is a fantastic first officer.”

Jonathan felt a cool wet hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Wing Commander Maxine Benton, the commander of the *Swiftfire*'s tactical fighter squadrons, and by the look of her she had just come out of the water.

“I thought it was you, Captain. You look very different out of uniform. Not that I imagine you out of uniform,” said Maxine embarrassed.

Isabella snickered. “Well, I have to go, Jonathan. There is a towel with my name on it and I'm going to lie down and enjoy the sun. It was nice to walk and talk with you.”

Jonathan and Isabella exchanged goodbyes and Isabella departed, leaving Jonathan and Maxine.

“Was that the Captain of the *Sparrow*, Captain?” asked Maxine.

“We're off duty, Jonathan will do. And yes it was.”

“Okay Jonathan. Have you been in the water yet?”

“No.”

“It is lovely. The temperature is just right.”

Jonathan nodded and then an uncomfortable silence surrounded them. After awhile Maxine spoke.

“Well...ummm. I better be...” Maxine squirmed.

“Dinner?” jumped in Jonathan.

“Pardon?” said a confused Maxine.

“Would you like to have dinner?” repeated Jonathan, trying to put confidence into his voice.

“Just the two of us?”

“If that is alright with you?”

“Yes, of course.” A smile swept across Maxine's face. “When?”

“Tonight. I hear that the Planetary Starbase has a fantastic Andorian restaurant. You do eat meat?”

“Yes. That sounds like a great idea. It's a date.”

With that Maxine turned and walked off with a bit more of a spring in her steps than before. Out of nowhere came the sound of clapping and Jonathan turned to see Susan standing not far away clapping her hands.

“Well done, Jonathan. That was the smoothest pick up I have ever seen. The way you slipped the offer to dinner right into the conversation,” joked Susan.

Jonathan took a bow of honour. “Thank you, Susan. I pride myself on my picking up ability. Shouldn’t you be somewhere else causing havoc?”

“Yes, but I need to rest and admire my work. But you need to get more involved. Come and join the Volleyball game.”

“I don’t know. I’m not very good.”

“Don’t even try! I know you won the Hawaii classic at the Academy.”

“I’d argue that our win was more luck than skill but a bit of fun can’t hurt or at least it shouldn’t. I’ll play on one condition; I get to be on your team. I saw you rip that guy on the other team to shreds and I have no wish to experience that.”

“It’s a deal. Come on; let’s go shatter some young egos!”

“How do you feel today, Lt. Commander?”

“Better,” answered Pavlo as he sat up in his medical bed.

A young female Starfleet Counsellor walked around and checked various instruments situated in the room.

“Are you sleeping better now?” she asked.

Pavlo ran a hand over his head as he spoke. “No, instead of waking because my arm wasn’t there, now I am waking because it is back and I just need to check it isn’t a dream.”

The Counsellor pulled out a tricorder and ran a scan of Pavlo.

“Are you feeling any pain?”

“No, but I’m still having problems with movement in my hand.”

“The Doctors told me that there is nothing to worry about, it is typical for new limbs to not function properly until all nerve endings are totally repaired. But don’t worry, losing a limb isn’t a disadvantage it use to be decades ago. Your new arm will function just as well if not better. In fact from what I know your new arm is more powerful than your old one. You just need a few more days to recover. Do you have any nightmares?”

Pavlo closed his eyes for a second before he spoke.

“Yes, I relive the events that lead up to me losing my arm. I know it is going to happen yet I can’t change anything. No matter what I try, I still lose my arm.”

The Councillor nodded as she noted this down on a padd.

“Well, that is all I need for now, Lt. Commander. I have more patients to see.” Pavlo nodded and the Counsellor turned and left

As the Counsellor left she ran into Lt. Commander Nikki Whitechapel.

“Excuse me, Lieutenant. But can you tell me where Lieutenant Commander Celcho is?” asked Nikki.

“He’s in that room,” said the Counsellor pointing to the room she just left.

“Oh, are you treating him?”

“I’m just doing a psych evaluation.”

“Can I ask how he is?”

“Of course. Physically he is fine. The new limb is still integrating with his body and everything is going fine. He seems to be dealing with it fine. He is suffering some trauma, which is to be expected. He is having nightmares and is not sleeping well. But other than that he is going very well.”

“That is very good to hear. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“It was a pleasure,” said the Counsellor. She then walked off to complete her rounds. Nikki walked to the door to Pavlo’s room and pressed the chime.

The door slid open and Nikki entered the room. Pavlo was sitting up in his medical bed. He smiled at Nikki.

“Lt. Commander Whitechapel, it is good to see you. I can finally thank you for saving my life.”

“I was just doing my duty, Lt. Commander. I know you would do the same for me.”

Nikki lifted up a box she was carrying. “I brought you a get well gift. It’s nothing special just a box of Andorian sweets. I didn’t know what to get and the shopkeeper said these are good. Just be careful it has a surprisingly high alcohol count.”

Nikki handed over the box and Pavlo gratefully accepted.

“Excellent. I don’t know how people survived before they made this combination of alcohol with sweets. So what have you and the crew been up too? I don’t get much news here.”

Nikki took a seat next to the bed.

“Nothing much really. We’ve only been on two patrols since you were transferred here. We were given a few days rest two days ago. Today the Captain organised for us to go to the beach with the crew of another starship.”

“I thought I smelt the sea,” interrupted Pavlo.

“Yes, I basically came from there. It was very nice. The ocean was beautiful plus Commander Core managed to get several events going to keep people entertained.”

“Was the Captain there?”

“Yes, and yes he did look like he wanted to be elsewhere. But he lightened up after the Commander dragged him into a volleyball game. We’ve slowly chipping away the rest of his armour. Did you know that he’s got something with the Wing Commander?”

“Maxine?” said Pavlo surprised. “No, I didn’t. What’s going on between them?”

“Not sure. But rumour is that they are dating.”

“That is very interesting. The captain has struck me as “married to the job” type of officer. Plus I thought Maxine would be into the more outgoing type.”

“That’s what I thought, but obviously there is more to both of them.”

Pavlo shrugged. He should have known that a person like the Captain would be full of surprises.

“So what war news do you have? They don’t let me have any of the war reports. They prefer that I don’t think about it.”

“I agree with them.”

“It’s that bad is it? Then I’m glad I don’t know.”

“So when do you get out of here and back to duty?”

“A few more days if everything goes as predicted. I’ll be glad to get out of here, if I don’t tinker with a ships system by the end of this week I’ll go insane.”

Nikki laughed at Pavlo. The two started to talk about everything and anything. Nikki and Pavlo talked for nearly another hour before they said their farewells.

* * * *

The restaurant was packed when Maxine arrived. Most of the patrons were Starfleet officers but there were the odd civilian around. The restaurant was situated in a high tower located in the confines of the Guyra IV Planetary Starbase. Maxine checked her outfit. Her clothing was not too formal or too casual. She wore a long black skirt and a dark blue strapless top. She adjusted the top and then went up to the maître d'.

“I’m here to meet Jonathan Masters, has he arrived?”

The maître d' checked a small PADD device in his hand. "Miss Benton," the Andorian said. "Come this way, the sir has already been seated."

The Andorian lead Maxine through the crowd until they came to a small table for two. Jonathan was already there. As Jonathan saw her he stood up. Jonathan was in a light creamy coloured open suit. He moved around to Maxine's seat as she came up to the table. They exchanged greetings as he pulled out her chair and pushed it in as Maxine sat. Jonathan took his seat.

"A waiter will come and serve you but if you are ready I'll take your drink orders," said the maître d'.

Jonathan looked over to Maxine. "If it is okay with you I took the liberty to go through the wine list and choose one."

"That's fine."

Jonathan nodded and handed a small PADD to the maître d'. The Andorian smiled and commented on what a good choice Jonathan had made. The maître d' then excused himself and disappeared to go check on the other patrons.

Maxine took a look around. The table was located on a patio that over looked a water garden. Further away were large windows that gave a view out into the Starbase and surrounding areas.

"This table is fantastic! This place is packed, how did you get such a good table at such short notice?" asked Maxine.

"By chance the owner's niece serves on the *Swiftfire*. He arranged this table as a gift to her commanding officer. I must say you look wonderful, Maxine," commented Jonathan. Maxine felt a jolt as she stared into his eyes. She had never seen this before. All the defences Jonathan put up had gone and what she saw in his eyes, what she sensed from him, his general aura, she liked a lot.

"You don't look half bad yourself, Jonathan. That little excursion to the beach was a great idea. The crew really enjoyed it."

"It was fun. Though the credit goes to Captain O'Meara, she came up with the idea."

"You still deserve some credit."

"Okay, okay. I give in. I'll take some of the credit. Anyway, what do you want to talk about?" asked Jonathan.

"Anything. But let's start with you. Tell me a bit about yourself."

“My life story. Well, the best place to begin is the start. I was born on Earth, in Canberra on the Australian continent. I had a very happy childhood. But all I could do was think about exploring the stars. It dominated my life and as soon as I could I join Starfleet. I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t get into Starfleet.”

“It was the same with me. But my parents who were both shuttle pilots in Starfleet heavily influenced me.”

“Did you live on a starship?”

“No. My parents were both based on Betazed.”

“Are your parents still in Starfleet?”

“No. My parents went into the tourism business. They run a small shuttle business that takes people on tours of the planets of the Betazed system. What do your parents do?”

“Both Starfleet officers, though my mum has retired.”

“What about your father? Where is he stationed?”

“I don’t really know. We have a...complex relationship. We don’t really talk much anymore”

“Oh, if you don’t mind me asking, but why not?”

Jonathan looked uncomfortable as he thought about whether to reply or not. Then a voice came from behind them.

“Because he is a stubborn, impatient man who thinks he needs no one and is always correct.”

Jonathan and Maxine turned their heads and saw a four star Starfleet Admiral standing next to the table.

“Hello, Jonathan. It has been a long time,” said the Admiral.

Jonathan looked up at the Admiral, his eyes turned cold and hard.

“Hello, father.”

Maxine looked surprised. It was an amazing coincidence that they were just talking about Jonathan’s father and then he appeared.

“You’re Jonathan’s father?” asked Maxine.

“Yes, Admiral Dalton Masters at your service.” He did a little bow. “I’m sorry but my son has not introduced me to you yet.”

“This is Wing Commander Maxine Benton.”

The Admiral took Maxine's hand and gently kissed it.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I would say that my son has told me about you but we don't chat much."

"This isn't the time or place, *father*." Jonathan's tone was very hostile.

"Sorry. You are correct. I have to go anyway. I'll talk to you on the way back to your ship."

"We're in the middle of dinner. It might be some time before we return."

Suddenly someone shouted out for attention. Jonathan, Maxine and Jonathan's father turned. The maître d' was standing in the middle of the room and was calling for everyone's attention. As soon as the sound died down he spoke.

"I'm sorry to announce that for many of us the evening is over. The commander of Starfleet forces in the area has contacted me telling that all Starfleet officers are to return to their vessels."

A general groan erupted as the Starfleet officers started to gather their things and get up to leave.

"My shuttle is not far. I'll take you to your ship."

Jonathan stood up and walked around his father and pulled Maxine's chair out as she stood up.

"As ordered, Admiral," said Jonathan.

"It isn't an order. I just want to do you a favour."

Jonathan nodded. "Whatever."

The Admiral led the way out. They made their way to a nearby landing pad where there was a Type 9 shuttle. The Admiral went up to it and opened its door. Soon the three were heading up into orbit.

"So how are things, Jonathan?" asked the Admiral.

"Fine. What brings you to this sector? I thought you were still on the Romulan Neutral zone."

"That's old news, son. I moved to the Hemta Shipyards two years ago where I oversaw the construction of my new command."

"So Command finally gave in and gave you a *Galaxy* class starship," said Jonathan in a way that sounded more serious than a joke.

"No."

"Then what did you receive?"

“There,” said the Admiral as he pointed out into space to a familiar looking ship was ahead of them. “The USS *Ambassador* (NX- 78613).”

As they got closer they got a better look. The ship looked like an *Ambassador* class vessel but it was much more streamlined and looked larger. It somewhat appeared as if the *Sovereign* and *Ambassador* had a love child.

“They rebuilt the *Ambassador*?” asked Maxine.

“No, it’s a total new ship built from the ground up. Well, not really. It was constructed in a zero-G facility in space so it wasn’t build from the ground up, but you get my drift. It has Type XII phaser arrays, quantum torpedoes, ablative armour, regenerative shields and other goodies. It has a maximum warp faster than the *Galaxy* and in many respects it is a superior vessel. It is based on the *Ambassador* design and that is why we have been referring to it as the *Ambassador-B* class. We’re still not sure what to call it.”

“What is that over there?” asked Maxine as she pointed just aft of the *Ambassador*. “It looks like an *Excelsior* class, but not one that I’ve seen before.”

The ship had the basic shape of the *Excelsior*, but it looked far more advanced. It had nacelles that reassembled the ones on the *Sovereign* and many other differences from the original ship. One of the major changes was that the cut away of the *Excelsior*’s engineering hull now was filled and at the rear of this was what looked like Shuttlebay doors.

“That is the NX-78612 *Excelsior*. Both ships are straight out of the yards. Both are prototypes. We also don’t have a name for this class either, so we’re calling it the *Excelsior-B* class.”

“So are you planning to refit the current *Excelsiors* and *Ambassadors*?” asked Maxine.

“Not necessarily. These designs are able to stand on their own, which is why we built both from the scratch rather than refitting two older vessels. The hope is that they will replace the older ship not just extend their service life.”

“Why are they here?” asked Jonathan.

“We’re here to test them out in the operation.”

“Operation?” asked Jonathan.

“You don’t know? Well, this is classified but you’ll get briefed very soon anyway. We plan to lure the Dominion fleet here and destroy it.”

“It’s about time we gave the Dominion a taste of their own medicine,” said Maxine.

“How are we going to do that?” asked Jonathan.

“We have let it slip that Guyra IV is working on a biological agent to kill the Jem’Hadar.”

“What?” said Jonathan in surprise. “Guyra IV is working on an agent to kill the Jem’Hadar?”

“Yes, but it is one of several facilities. It gives the Dominion a target they cannot ignore.”

“How close are they to completing an agent?” asked Maxine.

“Not as close as we hope, but the Dominion don’t know that. They think we are very close.”

They approached the *Swiftfire*.

“It’s a beautiful ship,” said Admiral Masters.

“Yeah.”

“Good crew?”

“Of course.”

Maxine didn’t need to be half Betazoid to sense the tension between them. Jonathan seemed very uncomfortable about talking about his ship to his father.

The shuttle lined up with the *Swiftfire* and landed on the flight deck. Jonathan was at the exit even before the ship had landed. The Admiral stood up and turned. The door was already opening.

“I could arrange a tour of the *Ambas...*”

“No, I’m busy. I have to get ready for the operation.”

With that Jonathan stepped off the shuttle and headed off.

“The offers always open,” shouted the Admiral as Jonathan disappeared out of sight.

The Admiral’s shoulders sagged in defeat. He looked down and sighed. Then he remembered that Maxine was still on the shuttle. He lifted his head and smiled apologetically at Maxine.

“I’m sorry about messing up your date.”

“It’s okay. The alert would have done it anyway.”

“I can tell that you want to ask what the matter between me and my son is.”

“Yes. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want.”

The Admiral motioned for Maxine to take a seat and he sat opposite her.

“It goes back a very long time. My wife and I had Jonathan we were both very involved with our careers. He stayed on Earth with his mother since worked at the Academy while I travelled with my career. He resents me for the time we didn’t spend together. He felt that he

wasn't important to me. Then there's the fact he has lived his life in my shadow, he felt that the fact I am a prominent Admiral in Starfleet that it has had an effect on the way he was treated. I don't deny it happened but I never told anyone to make things easier for him or turn a blind eye to things he did or didn't do. He has made an effort to make sure the knowledge of his lineage is not well known. I hoped that time would have healed it but it has not." The Admiral stopped as the shuttle's computer chirped. He looked at the console. "Anyway, it was a pleasure meeting you but I must return to my ship."

"It was nice meeting you too. And thank you for telling me what you told me."

The Admiral smiled. Maxine exited the shuttle. She waved as the shuttle left.

"Was that Admiral Masters?" asked Susan as she walked up to Maxine.

"Yes. He brought us back from the planet."

"Damn, I wanted to say hello."

"Wait, you know that he is Jonathan's father?" asked Maxine. "I thought Jonathan didn't tell anyone."

"He didn't tell me. I met the Admiral separately. By the way you look fabulous! How was your date?"

"Short. But I saw the side of him that he doesn't let people know. The side I felt he had the very first time I met him."

"If I didn't know any better I would say you were in love," jibbed Susan.

"I know. But I can't get over the way Jonathan treats his father. He is so cold towards him."

"Jonathan cares for his father, don't doubt that for one second. But he wants his own identity. He wants to be known as Jonathan, not the son of Admiral Masters. One day he wants it to be the other way around, Dalton, the father of Jonathan Masters."

"Sounds like he wants his father to be proud of him. But he doesn't want to acknowledge it when it comes."

"Now you step into the confusion that is Jonathan's life."

"I have heard some disturbing news from several sources."

"So have I."

"Is it true?"

“From my intelligence missions I have found that a large section of the Starbase is sealed and there is enough natural material here and there are enough shipments into the Starbase for a biological facility.”

“Do you know if they are close to creating an agent that will kill the Jem’Hadar?”

“I hear they are close. They have set up formidable defences around the facility, it would be impossible for me to keep my form if I was to try and enter. But I got my hands on a security recording that showed a testing of the agent. It had around a 33% success rate.”

“We must not let them complete it. Without reinforcements from the Gamma Quadrant they could seriously hamper our efforts. We must destroy the facility.”

“It will not be easy. The solids have two large fleets basing out of the planet’s moon. It would take a major offensive to destroy this facility.”

“What of your plans to destroy the Federation and Klingons fleet?”

“I had managed to acquire some trilitium to destroy the star in this system but they have increased security over the last week, more ships arrive every day. Travel in system is restricted with ships on patrol close to the star. They don’t want to risk what nearly happened at Bajor to happen here.”

“The solids must have completed it or they wouldn’t increase security. I will send a fleet. Do what you can to interrupt them but in 17 hours our fleet will arrive, do not be on the planet then. There are only so many Founders on this side of the wormhole.”

* * * *

The Admiral’s aide, a Lieutenant, entered Admiral Harvey’s office. The Admiral sat behind his desk with a datapadd in his hand.

“Admiral we have an ETA”

“How long?”

“17 hours.”

The Admiral put down his datapadd and stood up.

“That narrows it down,” commented the Admiral as he walked to a wall unit. “It will take time for them to organise. We should be able to figure out what forces will attack.”

The Admiral started to work it out on the screen.

“It is already done, sir. There are six strike fleets that can arrive here in the time period. But the analysts doubt that more than three will actually be used, since anymore would seriously weaken their front lines.”

“So we are looking at around 800 ships?” asked the Admiral grimacing. It was frightening that the Dominion could afford to reassign so many ships and still not be significantly weakened along its lines.

“Yes, sir. We’ll only be able to muster 371 ships, 235 from our fleet, the rest from General G’tor’s command. The rest of our ships will be on patrol, keeping the front secure.”

“That’s it, the operation is a go,” said the Admiral.

“Yes, sir. We have completed all tests and the moonbase at this moment is ready. The Dominion is going to receive a nasty surprise when they arrive.”

Several hours later the *Swiftfire* was receiving their orders from Admiral Harvey, orders that wouldn’t go down well with their Captain.

“Under Admiral Masters?” asked Captain Masters.

“Yes, Captain. Is there a problem?”

“What happened to Admiral Brand?”

“Brand has been temporarily reassigned to command one of the other tactical wings. Is there a problem I should know about?” asked Harvey.

“No. No. Where do we go?”

“The rest of the 268th are to head to Guyra III and meet with the Ambassador. Admiral Masters will brief you fully.”

“As ordered, Admiral Harvey. We are heading out now.”

The Admiral nodded and the transmission ended.

Jonathan stood up as soon as the transmission had ended.

“Helm, full impulse to Guyra III. I’ll be in my Ready Room.”

Jonathan quickly exited the Bridge for the privacy of his Ready Room.

Lieutenant Terri Letac lent closer to Nikki whose Tactical station was next to her Science station and whispered, “Did I hear Admiral Harvey correctly? He did say Admiral Masters?”

“Yes you did, Lieutenant,” said Commander Susan Core with more volume than was needed and getting everyone’s attention.

“As in related to the Captain?” asked Terri.

“Admiral Dalton Masters, father of the now Captain Jonathan Masters,” came Karak’s voice from his Helm station at the front of the Bridge. “The Admiral was previously in charge of the First Fleet guarding Earth, and then he was moved to the 7th fleet during the Cardassian War. He earned several commendations during the conflict and was tipped to become a Fleet Admiral in 2362, which was seen as the final step before he would become the commander in chief.”

“Tipped?” asked Ensign Frank Cole who was seated next to him in the other Helm station on the Bridge.

“His ideas were too militaristic for the council at the time and they favoured a different officer.”

“What do you mean by that, Karak?” asked Nikki.

“He wanted a large increase in ship production, more research into weapons and upgrading all ships with more weaponry. He theorised that in the future the Klingon Empire would become more unstable, that the Romulans would make themselves known and start to have a hand in Galactic events and that Starfleet was in no way prepared to face any unknown threats.”

“How did you know all that, Lieutenant?” asked Susan.

“I served with one of his supporters. Who was like most humans, was very emotional about the Admiral’s cause.”

“The Captain’s father was totally right,” interrupted Frank. “The Romulan Star Empire did reappear with ships that appeared to be far superior to the largest Federation ships. The Klingon Empire went into civil war and we weren’t prepared for the Borg. If he had become Fleet Admiral things might have been a lot different.”

“But not necessarily better. Our build up could have started a war with the Romulans or even the Klingons,” argued Terri. “His point got across anyway.”

“At the cost of 11,000 lives at Wolf 359,” said Frank.

“That is slightly unfair. Captain Picard had been assimilated and he knew our tactics and responses. It is unlikely we would have won that battle with 200 ships.”

“I see your point,” agreed Frank. “Was it just me or was the Captain less than happy with the posting?”

Susan felt a bit uncomfortable with what she was about to say. It was the Captain's personal life not anyone else's. But she trusted the Bridge crew to keep it to themselves.

"The Captain and his father's relationship isn't always a happy one."

The crew went quiet. They all felt a bit uncomfortable with knowing this and all secretly wished they hadn't enquired.

"So does anyone know why we are marshalling at Guyra III?" asked Nikki breaking the silence.

Everyone looked around but no one seemed to have an answer.

"Well, we'll soon find out, won't we?"

Jonathan sat up on his bed in his ready room and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He didn't know when putting beds in Ready Rooms started but he was glad that someone at Command decided that it would be a good idea. The Captain's Ready Room on the *Swiftfire* was large, at least larger than the ones he had seen on the other ships he had served on. It was located off the bridge and could be accessed through a door on the left side of the bridge and then a short corridor to the room. It ran along the side of the bridge and towards the bow. The bed was located close to the door of the room and he glanced to the far side, where there were two windows that looked out to the port bow of the ship. Below the windows was his desk and workstation. At that end of the room was also his private bathroom. This 'office' was possibly one of the best perks of the job.

He got up and made his way to his desk. Just before he reached it there was a beep as the ship's internal communication system came online.

"Captain, Admiral Masters is hailing us."

"Put it through to my Ready room."

Jonathan sat down at his desk and a picture of Admiral Masters appeared on his desk's computer screen.

"Hello, Captain. I hope you're well."

"Can the niceties, sir. I find it *convenient* that you find yourself in command of the tactical wing I'm in."

"I don't..."

Jonathan slammed his hand down. "Don't deny it! Your rank might be the same as Admiral Harvey's but you have a lot more pull than he does!"

“Fine,” said the Admiral calmly, which was totally opposite to Jonathan’s angry tone.

“I did get to choose which wing would be assisting me in the defence of Guyra III; however it was Victor’s idea to reassign Brand to another wing. Better that his fighters and yours be assigned to battle the main Dominion fleet given their numerical advantage.”

“You could have gotten any wing but you had to take this one. You had to take me out of the main action.”

“You will be part of this operation, a smaller part but just as important. We have the lives of over 100,000 colonists in our care.” Admiral Masters looked uncomfortable. *“I pushed for the Admiral to evacuate the colony but he felt it would signal to the Dominion we knew they were on their way. I have a bad feeling about this operation.”*

“Finally the truth! You are trying to protect me. I’m only going to tell you this once. I don’t need your protection.”

“My instincts tell me that this isn’t going to go well, that you will be needed here.”

Jonathan threw his head back in disbelief and scoffed at his father’s statement.

The Admiral was undeterred. *“You have to trust your instincts, son. That can mean the difference between a good Captain and a great one.”*

“I’ve heard this a thousand times before.”

“I know. But I’m going to keep telling you until you take it seriously. I feel that you will be a great man in the future, far greater than me, a man that will be remembered, a man who will shape the future. That time is coming and you have to be ready to face it, in whatever form it takes.”

The Changeling disguised as Ensign Muir closed the panel that gave access to the Antimatter containment field of the starship he was on. When the ship went to fire on a Dominion or Cardassian ship it would drop the field and the ship would destroy itself. He picked up his engineering kit and headed out of Engineering. He had less than an hour left to sabotage whatever he could. So far he had sabotaged more than a dozen ships. As he left Engineering he looked over to the Security officer standing guard who gave him a strange look. The Changeling quickly looked away and picked up his pace.

“Ensign Muir,” yelled someone behind him.

The Changeling froze and turned around slowly. The officer who was in charge of his Engineering team was jogging to catch him.

“Ensign, you are relieved.”

“But I still have three more ships to check,” stated the Changeling.

“There is no need. The ships are leaving.”

“All of them?”

“Every single one. The Dominion is on its way and the fleet is preparing to greet them. The Dominion is walking straight into a trap.”

The Changeling struggled to hide his shock. The Dominion was going to be ambushed. He had to get to somewhere private and warn them.

“Thank you, sir. I will return to the station.”

“You did a good job, Ensign.”

The Changeling nodded and smiled. He then turned and quickly rushed to get off the ship and warn the Dominion. As soon as he was off the ship it didn't take long for him to find a quiet area where he could communicate to the Dominion. He pulled out the device that would make sure the transmission was impossible to detect and placed it on a console, integrated it to the console. He quickly sent out the transmission. But instead of getting a reply half a dozen armed Starfleet officers beamed in around him. They all levelled their Phasers at him.

“I think you should come with us, Ensign,” said the commanding officer of the Starfleet officers.

“May I ask what this is all about?” asked the Changing innocently.

“We have some questions for you. I think you shouldn't touch that device on the console, Research and Development will be interested in it.”

“What device? Oh that one. I was just examining it myself. I am an engineer. I think I have the right to know what you are going to be questioning me about.”

“All in good time.” The officer tapped his combadge. “We have the suspect. You can beam us to the Brig.”

* * * *

The Changeling materialised in a small room. In the room was a table where a Starfleet officer sat. Behind him were two security guards and another officer. No doubt they were from Starfleet Intelligence. The officer who was seated told him to take a seat.

“What is this all about?” asked the Changeling. “What have I done wrong?”

“Now, now, don’t act innocent. We know you are a spy with the Dominion.”

“What proof do you have?”

“Apart from the Dominion device you were found using? Well, the sabotage attempts on a dozen ships and your communications with a Founder.”

The Changeling couldn’t hide his surprise. The transmission was supposed to be totally untraceable.

“You thought it was untraceable? Well, normally it would be but this station doesn’t just use Starfleet sensors. Whoever made this has better scanners. It picked up your very first communication to the Founder. We knew you were here from the very beginning. But if you want irrefutable evidence?”

The officer behind him pulled out a phaser and fired it at the Changeling. The phaser was set to wide dispersal and hit a large area of the Changeling; the Changeling winced in pain and started to return to his normal form. The officer stopped firing when the Changeling returned to the golden liquid form that was the Changeling’s natural form. The Changeling returned to his Ensign Muir form.

“I see I have been found out,” said the Changeling. “But you’ll never get any information out of me. The Jem’Hadar will be here soon and they will rescue me and kill you all.”

“You still don’t understand, do you? You helped us. You helped lure the Dominion here, we wanted them to come. Thanks to you the Federation will get their first large scale fleet victory.”

The Changeling’s smile faded.

“This is but a minor setback,” spat out the Changeling. “The Dominion cannot be stopped. By holding me you will receive the most excruciating deaths!”

The Changeling started to yell and threaten everyone in the room.

The officer sitting at the table turned to the other officer.

“Beam him to the special cell we have prepared for him.”

The Changeling heard this and lashed out. His arm stretched out like a whip. But it only got halfway across the table when it hit a force field. The Changeling looked over at the Starfleet officers with pure hatred.

“For a God you are pretty inept,” said the Starfleet officer as he stood up. “Energise.”

The Changeling yelled and lashed out as the transporter beam dematerialised him.

“The Dominion fleet is exiting warp on the edges of the system,” reported a commander in the Guyra Moonbase’s Command Centre.

Admiral Harvey stood next to a display table that had a hologram of the Guyra system, a large number of red dots appeared on the edge of the system.

“Analysis?” asked the Admiral.

“735 ships, three-quarters, 550 are Jem’Hadar vessels with 185 Cardassian vessels. Confirmed Jem’Hadar vessels as from the Thirteenth Division, communications between the ships seem to indicate that they are split into three strike fleets of roughly equal size. Cardassian fleet has been identified as the Eighth Shodar, Twenty-Third Order. Gul Deerjal is the fleet commander. We’ve detected a *Hutet* class dreadnought in the fleet that was not included in the most up-to-date Intel files on the Order; suspect that it is the Cardassian command vessel. The *Keldon* class heavy warship, *Turath’ir*, her usual command ship is also present and has been assigned also as a priority target.

“The enemy blocks all easy paths out of the system. Two groups are heading in system. The smaller group is heading for Guyra III, the larger group of 582 ships are heading for the ships orbiting Guyra IV. We have ships launching from the base and heading to join the fleet. The *Excelsior* is reporting that the 3rd and its Klingon contingent are ready and waiting for the order. 24 minutes until they reach the fleet.”

“Excellent, this is just like we planned. Signal the fleet that the plan is still go, remind them to keep to the game plan.”

Admiral Robert DeSoto gripped the armrest of his captain’s chair.

“Report!” yelled the Admiral.

“The ridge that supported the forward hull has collapsed. We have sunk more into the crater,” reported the Flight controller.

“Are we stable now?”

“I’ve got minimal thrusters now propping us up.”

“Okay. Just try and keep the energy emissions low. We don’t want to give away our position.”

Admiral DeSoto looked out of the viewscreen out into the darkness. He could barely make out any of the moon's surface. The *Excelsior* was a state of the art ship, a completely different ship from the *Hood* he had spent so many years in command of. The ship was sitting in a crater on the far side of the Guyra IV moon. The *Excelsior* was in charge the 3rd Tactical Wing and a similar number of Klingon warships, like the *Excelsior*, sitting on the moon. The group was hiding from the Dominion force, waiting for them to reach the right position before they got up and moved to the rear of the Dominion fleet and trap them between them, the rest of the fleet, the planet and the moonbase. He wasn't exactly sure what would happen then but Admiral Harvey said he had a surprise for the Dominion. DeSoto couldn't wait to see what it was.

"Admiral, Admiral Harvey has given us the permission to go."

"Helm, get us off this moon. Keep a low altitude until we reach the other side and then proceed to the coordinates that the Admiral has sent."

The *Excelsior* rose from the moon surface, collapsing large sections of the crater it was sitting in. The rest of the ships with the *Excelsior* followed suit. The *Excelsior* surged forward; DeSoto flinched as the ship headed over the horizon and into the light. The Dominion Fleet was over the planet and heading for the main Starfleet/Klingon fleet, which was positioned forward of where the Planetary Starbase was. DeSoto led his group of over sixty vessels to a position behind the Dominion fleet.

The Dominion fleet slowed to a stop as the ships from DeSoto's group got into position behind the fleet. The large Dominion fleet was comprised of the small Attack Ships and Hideki class vessel to the large *Galor* and Battle cruisers. The fleet moved to a position where it was just out of the weapons range of the Federation and Klingon ships. On one of the Battle cruisers the Vorta Sadok'toran in charge of the attack hailed the commander of the Federation and Klingon forces. Admiral Harvey answered the hail.

"Ah, Admiral Victor Harvey, how pleasant to talk to you. I have studied your career and you are a fine officer. It was a pity you abandoned sector 432 when you did, if you had stayed just two more hours we would have met then."

The Admiral didn't look impressed with the Vorta's attitude.

"Yes, it is a pity, Pulnon. Why did you hail me? Are you ready to discuss the terms of your surrender?"

Pulnon laughed. “Why Admiral your file didn’t mention you had a fine sense of humour. But I must ask you why you would think that we would surrender? You may surround my fleet but my group outnumbers you and you are blocked from escape. I think you should be the one surrendering,” said the over confident Vorta.

“I don’t think that is going to happen. You’ll save a lot of lives if you surrender.”

“So will you, Admiral. They can always breed more Jem’Hadar and they can release a new clone of me. Can they do that for you Admiral?”

The Admiral didn’t try and hide his contempt for the Vorta.

Smug little twerp, thought the Admiral.

“I didn’t think so,” continued the Vorta. *“I’ll give you two minutes to surrender this system and your fleet.”*

* * * *

As the Vorta’s communication to the Admiral ended the Guyra IV moonbase’s Command Centre erupted into activity.

“How long will it take for the system to power up to maximum?” asked Admiral Harvey.

“Four minutes, Admiral.”

“You’ve got two minutes. Transfer as much energy as you can to the system.”

“Do you want me to deploy the weapons, sir?”

“No, keep them in their bays until the last possible moment. How many can be bring to bear on the Dominion force?”

“28 of the weapons can target them, but because of the range I think only 6 will be of any use,” reported the Tactical Officer.

“You think?”

“Yes, sir,” said the now uncomfortable Tactical Officer. “All this is in theory. We need to actually fire them to see what their range is. This is all based on what we know about the firing system and the energy decay rate.”

“I understand.”

The Admiral paced around nervously before forcing himself to sit.

“You shouldn’t worry, Admiral,” said his second in command. “By all accounts you should be very optimistic. We have been exploring this moon for over 70 years. 50 years ago we found the first traces of a weapon system that the previous owners had left on the moon. It took forty years to map then entire weapons system on this moon, but it took an hour to bring it back online.”

The Admiral nodded. He knew the history of this facility and had been briefed fully by the old commander when he first moved the fleet here. There were many amazing stories about this place, but one that was most interesting was the moon’s weapons system, which he was surprised to know the moon had. The system was a complex one and that because there had been many cave-ins since the original owners left it was hard for the Engineers to map the moon’s systems and power relays, it didn’t help that Tricorders had difficulties penetrating the moon. But from the damage to the base from large meteor strikes it was not hard to believe that the weapons system was to destroy any incoming asteroids, which had seemed to plague this system over 1,000 years ago. Several weeks ago they had found the main power junction for the entire weapon system, which led them to the systems control room. In a testament to the construction of the control systems built by the original owners it only took an hour for the entire weapons system to be back online despite been inactive since 1500 BCE. The next question was what to do? Despite been 8,000 years old the weapon system was comparable to modern day weapons employed by the Ferengi, it was a type of Plasma weapon, thought the Plasma balls it fired were much larger than the ones used on Ferengi Starships, or at least that is what the Researchers had thought. A lot of what was going to happen was all theory, even up to the point on whether they would actually fire! But the Admiral had confidence that the system would work, but if it didn’t there was a backup plan. There were several Phaser and Photon torpedo emplacements on the surface, the Dominion fleet was at the edge of Photon Torpedo range but it would be enough to get their attention and force them to move closer to the moon and attack it. If not he would play his final card and move the moon to them.

“Admiral, the Vorta is hailing you.”

“Tactical, how long until the system is ready?”

“I need another minute, Admiral,” reported the Tactical officer.

“Okay. I should be able to stall them for a minute, hell he’s a Vorta I could get him talking and he would never shut up. On screen.”

An overly smug looking Vorta appeared on the viewscreen.

“Well, Admiral your time is up. I don’t see your ships standing down.”

“That is because I want assurances,” countered the Admiral. “I’m making a decision on behalf of thousands of beings. I want to make sure they get the best possible deal.”

“You are in no position to negotiation,” retorted the Vorta in a less than pleasant manner. *“But to demonstrate that the Dominion is not the evil, bloodthirsty empire you think we are I can guarantee that you and your men will be treated well and moved to a secure facility in Cardassian space away from the dangerous frontlines,”* said the Vorta in a totally opposite tone to his previous statement. *“Of course you will be required to answer a few questions and any help you can give the Founders to stop this horrific war that is taking the lives of both our fine soldiers will be appreciated.”*

The Admiral managed a mock smile. “I’m sure it would.”

The Admiral looked over to the Tactical officer who gave him a thumbs up.

“I will start to give out the orders to my ships to stand-down.”

“Excellent. You have saved many lives today; history will smile fondly on you, Admiral.”

The Admiral signalled for the transmission to be cut.

“I hate Vortas. The sooner we run them out of the Alpha Quadrant the better. Tactical, target the front and rear Dominion cruisers. It should confuse them.”

“Targets are locked, Admiral.”

“Fire.”

Various places on the moon’s surface split open and out of the darkness raised large turrets that would not have been out of place on Earth warships of the 20th century. Several of the larger turrets rotated and the barrels shifted until they pointed towards the Dominion Fleet. Huge spherical balls of Plasma energy burst out of the barrels of these weapons with such power the ground around the weapons shook, the minor moonquakes were of enough power to cause several crater walls to collapse. These balls energy flew through space with only one mission: death.

The Vorta in charge of the joint Dominion fleet turned his head as he surveyed the Federation and Klingon ships ahead of them. There were 339 ships ahead and behind them. An impressive fleet if only half of the ships that the Cardassians said were based in the region. Plus there were two ships in system that the Cardassians had no records of. From

there registries the Jem'Hadar had informed him they were prototype starships. It was disturbing that the Cardassians did not know about these ships or that they were in this system, though the Cardassians Intelligence gathering methods weren't that impressive, in fact there wasn't much to be impressed with in the Cardassians. Their main importance to the Dominion came from the fact that the wormhole was blocked. Without the steady lines of supply to their main support base in the Gamma Quadrant the Dominion forces in the Alpha Quadrant were vulnerable. However, once the wormhole was open again for travel the Dominion would assert itself fully into the quadrant and the Cardassians would be put in their place.

But no matter, once the Federation were gone the rest of the Alpha and Beta Quadrant powers would fall quickly and the Cardassians would be put into their place in mere servants, not equals. But if they didn't know about these two new ships and that Federation had been ready and had plans to trap his fleet between two Federation/Klingon attack groups, the planet and its moon, what else did they fail to find out? The notion that the Cardassians had failed to find something that could destroy him made the Vorta worry. But he soon saw the foolishness in fearing beings that were not under the merciful gaze of the Founders.

"Have the Federation and Klingon ships shut down their weapon systems yet?" he asked the Jem'Hadar First.

The head Jem'Hadar, or first, moved and checked the sensor station.

"They have not."

"I did not think the Admiral would just surrender. He is probably buying time for the rest of his forces to get here. Tell the forward ships to target the Federation and Klingon vessels and destroy them."

The Jem'Hadar nodded and started to order the Jem'Hadar on the communication system to signal the fleet when out of the Vorta's field of view several large balls of golden energy appeared and slammed into the large Dominion Battle cruisers at the front of the fleet. The Vorta watched as one ball of energy hit the upper port shield of a Battle cruiser causing it to dance with light as it tried to dissipate the energy, but it was of no use. The shields failed and the ball of energy hit the ship's hull, vaporising it but it didn't stop there. It continued to melt through the hull until it was just about right the way through when the Battle cruiser exploded, destroying two Attack Ships that were in close formation to the ship.

"Vorta, we have come under attack," reported the First.

“I can see that!”

“They have also hit the rear ships.”

Pulnon turn around and saw a dying explosion and a lot of debris.

“Where are we under attack from? Who attacks us?” said the Vorta in panic.

“It appears to be coming from the orbiting moon.”

The Vorta look up until he had the moon in view and he saw balls of light getting bigger and bigger.

“The moon is armed? Cardassian Intelligence did not mention this! What type of weapons are they using? No Federation weapon can carve through our ships like that!”

“It appears to be some sort of advanced Plasma based weapon.”

“That is impossible!” shouted the Vorta. “For a Plasma burst fired from that distance to contain enough energy to do that to a Battle cruiser it would need to be the size of a space station! The weapon to fire it would need huge. We would notice a weapon like that on that moon. We would be able to see it from here!”

“I do not disagree with your statement, Vorta. But that is what our sensors tell us.”

The Vorta could not hide his anger. He looked back out at his fleet. The Jem’Hadar were still in position and getting slaughtered. He knew that the Jem’Hadar would stay where they were until he told them otherwise. As for the Cardassians, most of their ships had broken formation, the smaller ships kept in motion in hope that they would not be anywhere near the next blast while the larger ships had moved so that a Jem’Hadar ship stood between them and the moon.

“First, signal all ships and tell them to converge on the moon orbiting Guyra IV. Tell all ships blockading the system to also join in the attack.”

“That will allow the Starfleet and Klingons ships to escape,” argued the First.

“Do as I order! We cannot take this system if the Federation have such a powerful platform to attack from. We must destroy it!” decreed Pulnon. He turned back to look at the moon but found his view completely obscured by a ball of light.

“Take that you arrogant Vorta!” cheered the Admiral as he watched Pulnon’s flagship disintegrate as it was annihilated by a plasma blast. Harvey felt extra joy seeing the Jem’Hadar ships explode. They were from the Jem’Hadar Thirteenth Division, which had

driven the Fifth from Sector 432 and had hounded them since. Pulnon's death would not hamper the Dominion for long as one of his subordinates would quickly take charge. However, it still felt good to turn the tables and tear the enemy apart.

"Sir, I've noticed something," reported the Tactical officer. "The Plasma fire is not disbursing."

"What do you mean?" asked the Admiral.

"Well, the major reason that most races don't use Plasma energy weapons on their starships is that once it fires, the Plasma quickly disburses, making it a purely short range weapon, which at short range has the ability to destroy most ships in one or two shots. When facing a hostile ship armed with Plasma weapons the best thing to do is stay at long range so that the enemy ship's fire has little effect. But this system somehow manages to keep the Plasma charge from disbursing at all, until it hits where it acts a lot like a torpedo and explodes."

"Do these weapons have any bad points?" asked Admiral, talking to himself more then to anyone else.

"Yes, their firing rate is nowhere near that of phasers or the latest torpedo launchers. They would also be of limited effectiveness against the smaller and faster enemy ships. Whoever created these weapons obviously intended them to destroy large and fairly slow targets."

"Since they don't dissipate then we should fire all the weapons, even the small ones would be able to hit the Dominion fleet."

"I already tried and it doesn't work. The Plasma energy managed to overwhelm its containment, but it does have a much greater range then we first thought but not that great." Admiral Harvey watched as another wave of fire hit the Dominion Fleet, destroying more ships. The Dominion Fleet suddenly started to move. The small Attack Ships and *Hideki* class ships quickly turned to face the moon and charged at full impulse. The larger Dominion ships turned and accelerated towards the moon, though at a slower rate than the smaller ships.

"The Dominion Fleet is heading towards us," the tactical officer checked the sensors.

"Even the ships at the edge of the system are coming in."

"What about the ships heading for Guyra III?"

"They are still heading for the planet. Strange."

"Tell Admiral DeSoto and General G'tor to close in on the fleet and engage. Tell Admiral Masters to stay at Guyra III and protect it, I don't want the Dominion to slaughter civilians because we failed to protect them."

* * * *

“Here they come, Captain. I have 24 Dominion ships. 9 Battle cruisers, 4 Strike Cruisers and the rest are Attack ships,” reported Lt. Commander Whitechapel. Captain Masters shifted in his captain’s chair. The 268th numbered 32 starships, the same number as at the start of the conflict. They had not suffered any losses yet but he doubted that would hold. They only had a small numerical advantage in this battle against the enemy. Not all of the ships would make it out of the battle intact.

“Captain, your...” Terri was about to say “*your father*” but quickly moved to fix the mistake. “I mean, Admiral Masters is hailing us. Shall I put it on the main screen?” The Captain nodded, not giving any indication that he noticed the Lieutenant’s mistake. Admiral Masters appeared on the main viewscreen; behind him you could clearly make out the bridge of a starship.

“Captain, the Dominion is moving in on the moonbase around Guyra IV. Admiral Harvey wants us to stay and protect the Guyra III. I’m splitting my group into two, a rear and forward group. I am going to command the rear ships; I want you to command the forward ships.”

Jonathan was surprised. “I’m not even in command of one of the wings,” he said.

“You are now. I prefer not to link my command into a specific wing. You have command of Brand’s wing, your current wing.”

Tactical wings were made of several smaller wings, which of course had a lead vessel. This meant that the tactical wing commander could just pass his orders to the lead vessel and have them organise their group. The 268th was made up of five wings, two cruiser wings, a *Miranda* wing, a frigate and destroyer wing.

The commander of the tactical wing had a choice whether or not to include their ship in a specific wing, it was more common for them to then to not. The *Swiftfire* was part of cruiser wing 6 (in relation to the Fifth Fleet, it was cruiser wing 1 in the tactical wing), with the *Warwick* as their lead vessel. He had assumed that his father would just take command of his wing as well.

“I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“Once again, it wasn’t my idea. Brand suggested that you take command if I didn’t. However, if it makes you feel uncomfortable I can give the command to another captain.”

Jonathan did want to be in command, even if it was for a short time. It would be an opportunity to show what he could do. On the other hand it did feel like he was getting a hand out from his father, which was something he always wanted to avoid. He had to make a decision quickly.

“Okay,” he replied monotone.

Admiral Masters obviously had expected a more excited response and seemed to be off balance for a few seconds.

“Your task is to engage and keep the large cruisers out there, take out as many of the smaller ships as you can but don’t worry if any get past you, that’s what my rear group is for. It is just about impossible for a static group to stop ships like the Attack ship from penetrating.”

“I will do my best, Admiral.”

Jonathan’s cold response continued to throw the Admiral off.

“I know you will. If you need any help, just hail me.”

The group broke up as the *Ambassador* led a dozen ships, part of the other cruiser wing and the frigate wing, closer to the planet. Jonathan reviewed the ships he had been left in command of. He placed his larger force, his cruiser wing, in the centre and had to two other wings flank him.

“Lieutenant Letac, send these formation orders to the other ships. Inform me when they are all in position. Helm, move us into position also.”

The wait for the Dominion to reach weapons range was not a long one but the anxiety felt by everyone on the ship seemed to make it last longer.

“The Dominion fleet is in range, Captain. The Battle cruisers are shielding the Attack Ships so it is hard for us to get a clear shot.”

“Ignore the Attack Ships. Target the fourth and fifth Battle cruisers. Signal the rest of the ships to open fire.”

The Starfleet ships opened fire on the incoming Dominion Ships. The Dominion immediately replied in kind and the two sides started to exchange fire.

The *Swiftfire* rocked as it received fire from one of the Battle cruisers.

“Signal the *T’hanu* and the *Frontier* and have them make hit and run attacks on the Dominion ships from the left flank. Signal the *Phar Lap* and *Long* to hit the right.”

Lieutenant Letac nodded and sent the orders to the four ships, two *Miranda* class starships broke formation and looped around to the right while the *Mediterranean* class *T’hanu* and the *Challenger* class, *Frontier* went to the left.

“Order all ships to move forward in formation,” ordered Jonathan.

The two formations started to close on each other; the Starfleet formation was spread out in a more defensive wall pattern while the Dominion formation was closely packed with the Battle cruisers shielding the smaller ships. Both sides hammered each other with energy weapon and torpedo fire. But the Battle cruisers were at a disadvantage, not only were they outnumbered but the four flanking ships meant they couldn’t concentrate their fire or shield power forward like the Starfleet ships could.

“Lt. Commander, prepare to fire three Quantum torpedoes from the port facing tubes.”

“There are no ships in their arcs, Captain.”

“You don’t have to target any ships just launch them when I say.”

Nikki nodded not fully understanding what the Captain had planned. Then she noticed that the Captain had not even looked up from the screen on his armrest since the battle began. Even now he was busy pressing buttons; it was like he wasn’t interested in the battle. From out of the Battle cruiser shield the four Strike Cruisers moved into view. Nikki wondered what they were doing. From their heading they were heading for gaps in the formation, including a gap between the *Swiftfire* and another ship, but they were too far out, they would be cut apart by the Starfleet ships. The sensible thing would have been to wait until the Battle cruisers hit the Starfleet formation.

“Are the torpedoes ready, Lt. Commander?” asked Jonathan.

“Y-yes, Captain,” said Nikki, embarrassed that she had been distracted from her duty.

The Captain turned to her.

“Excellent. Fire.”

Nikki fired the torpedoes and looked up to the viewscreen just in time to see the Strike Cruisers accelerate impossibly fast. The viewscreen suddenly changed to show the view to port where three blue streaks moved away from the *Swiftfire*. Then the ship to the *Swiftfire*’s port opened fire with its Phasers, Nikki was about to yell a warning when the blurry image of

a ship appeared and ran straight into two of the torpedoes, the third impacted on its side, though the view was obscured by the explosions from the torpedoes Nikki was sure that the Phaser blasts had hit the ship on the other side. The Strike Cruiser continued on its course for a few seconds before exploding.

“What the hell was that?” asked Susan.

“It was a Strike Cruiser. Damn things have “burst” impulse engines. They give the ship a sudden burst of speed so they can penetrate enemy lines,” explained the Captain.

“How do you know that?” asked Terri.

“The privilege of having the rank of Captain. Did any of the Strike Cruisers get through?” Terri quickly checked the sensors.

“One did. Its shields are down and it has hull breaches. An easy kill for the guys at the back.”

The ship rocked again as it received more fire from the Dominion ships.

“Ah, they haven’t forgotten about us. Order the two other wings to break formation and engage their flank fully. Let’s whittle down their numbers.”

Meanwhile at the Guyra IV moon the Dominion fleet had closed and were bombarding the moon, while fighting off the Starfleet and Klingon ships. High above the moon the Battle cruisers and *Galor* class cruisers poured fire down onto the moon, the moon returned in kind, photon torpedoes, phaser fire and plasma fire lanced up at the ships. Closer to the moon Strike Cruisers and *Norin* class ships dived down firing at the moon. Attack ships and *Hidekis* flew metres above the moon’s surface as they attacked the weapons on the surface. Birds of Prey followed the Dominion and Cardassian ships pouring disruptor fire at Dominion ships. Sending some crashing into the surface but most of their fire just chewed up the moon’s surface.

Deep in the moon the Changeling who had been captured looked nervously up at the ceiling as the room shook, a true testament of the amount of power been thrown at the surface.

“There is no need to worry, Shapeshifter. Your friends aren’t going to save you. The defences of this moon are destroying your ships faster than your ships are destroying the defences,” said one of the two guards

“You are fools if you think this cell will hold a Founder,” snarled the Changeling.

“We’ll see. I hope they decide to throw you into a black hole.” The guard turned to the other guard. “I’m going to get a drink, you want one?”

“Sure,” said the other guard who had his feet up and was reading a PADD.

The guard got to the door and turned around.

“Make sure you watch our guest.”

“Sure. I’ll even fluff his pillows before he goes to bed.”

The two guards laughed. The Changeling looked over to the guard who returned to his reading. With the other guard who kept an eye on him every minute gone this was the Founder’s best chance of escape.

A few minutes later the other guard returned.

“The replicators on this level are...” the guard froze as he saw the cell. It was empty.

“The Changeling, its escaped!” he yelled.

“WHAT?” The other guard yelled as he jumped to his feet. He grabbed his Phaser rifle and both guards carefully moved to the cell weapons’ raised.

They both lowered their weapons. “Totally empty, how the hell did it escape?”

“The mattress, it’s turned against the wall. It must have cut a hole in wall. Probably turned into some type of metal eating beetle and chewed his way out. Set your rifle to stun, if it jumps out at me I don’t want you to accidentally kill me. Lower the force field.”

The other guard nodded and moved to the controls on the wall next to the cell. The other guard raised his rifle and nodded. The force field flashed as it was shut down. The other guard quickly positioned himself behind the first guard as the first guard slowly entered the cell. He reached out with one hand to the mattress careful to keep his rifle trained on it. He quickly grabbed it and threw it back.

“Watch it!” yelled the other guard. “You hit me with the mattress. What do you see?”

“Nothing.” He heard a gurgle from the other guard. “Hey, don’t make noises at me! You lost him.”

The guard turned around to see the other guard raising his rifle at him.

“What are you doing?” asked the guard.

He was about to ask again when he saw the body of the other guard behind the other guard. It dawned on him and he quickly pulled his rifle up but it was too late, the Changeling fired his rifle, hitting the guard in the head.

The Changeling looked down at the dead guards.

“I told you that the cell would not hold me.”

The Changeling went to the nearest console and pulled up a report of the battle so far. Unfortunately for him the guards had been right. The Dominion fleet was been slaughtered. From the reports the Dominion fleet had destroyed all the Starfleet weapon platforms on the surface, but the alien weapons were harder to destroy. Few had been destroyed so far and at this rate the Dominion would run out of ships before the Federation ran out of surface guns. He needed to do something; it was his fault the Dominion fleet was in this predicament. If he didn't do something the Dominions single greatest loss in a thousand years would happen. Not only would this be a material defeat but a moral defeat. The Federation moral would increase when the news that nearly 800 Dominion ships had been destroyed in a single engagement. They would get more bold and confident, other races and empires in the Alpha and Beta Quadrant might decide to join the Federation once they see that the Dominion was not unstoppable. It could lead to the Dominion's first defeat in its history and if that happened...he didn't want to think of the repercussions it would have in the Gamma Quadrant. The Changeling brought up a view of the battle raging out in space. He ended up staring at the planet in the distance. Suddenly something came to him; he had a plan, one that would win the battle for the Dominion.

Jonathan gripped his armrest as the ship shook. The battle had progressed much like he thought it would. Once he had broken up the formation and the Starfleet ships started to make slashing attacks against the Battle cruisers and it didn't take long for the Battle cruisers to release the Attack ships, half went for the planet the rest moved to support their larger brethren. It was going well but it had not been without loss.

The *Swiftfire* and a Battle cruiser exchanged broadsides as they passed each other. The *Swiftfire* swung around to put the Battle cruiser in its forward torpedo arc. With four impulse engines and numerous thrusters the *Akira* was far faster and more manoeuvrable than the Dominion Battle cruiser. The *Swiftfire* was soon directly behind the Battle cruiser where it fired a several quick Phaser beams and several torpedoes. The Phaser beams hit the Battle cruiser's shields, quickly followed by the torpedoes. One torpedo penetrated and impacted on the back of the top left nacelle. The *Swiftfire* quickly veered to port as the Battle cruiser fired its impressive Phased Polaron beam complement, few hit the *Swiftfire*.

“Report,” asked the Captain.

“Shields at 84%. We haven’t lost any more ships since the *Long*. All of the Attack ships that headed to the planet have been dealt with. Only four Battle cruisers and two Attack ships remain.”

Jonathan looked at the viewscreen, which displayed the battle. The *Excelsior* class USS *Aldrin* fired at one of the remaining Battle cruisers with its Phasers. The Battle cruiser returned with a murderous amount of fire. The *Excelsior’s* shields gave way and several blasts hit the ship’s hull vaporising hull and crew alike. One blast hit the impulse engines at the back of the saucer section. The engine exploded, taking a large section out of the back of the saucer. The other impulse engine received shrapnel from the explosion, taking it offline. The *Malinche* moved so to shield its sibling from the Battle cruiser while the *Shokia* and the *Phar Lap* attacked from opposite sides. They battered the ship’s shield down and ripped the Battle cruiser’s hull apart with Phasers and torpedoes.

“Lieutenant Letac, where is the nearest Dominion ship?” asked the Captain.

“There is a Battle cruiser at Bearing 163, Mark 178.”

“Helm, get us on the heading. I think we need to add another Dominion ship to the tally.”

* * * *

The Changeling stepped over the dead bodies of the two security guards who had been stationed at the entrance to the propulsion control centre. He opened the doors and stepped into the room where half a dozen Engineers were monitoring the system. The head Engineer looked up from his console at the Changeling.

“Is everything alright? We heard a lot of noise.”

The Changeling turned and shut the door, locking it in the process.

“The situation looked bleak, but it is about to turn around,” said the Changeling as he faced the door.

The head Engineer looked to the officer next to him. Both shrugged.

“Ah, what exactly does that mean?”

The Changeling slowly turned to face the Engineers, his Phaser rifle raised.

“It means your presence is no longer required.”

The Changeling opened fire at the stunned Engineers. Soon he was the only one standing. The Changeling rushed over to the main operating console. Just as he thought the Engineers had been moving the moon so that the fighting had slowly moved away from the Planetary Starbase. The Changeling did some quick calculations and then started to reorientate the moon.

“Admiral! We’ve changed course!”

“What?” asked the stunned Admiral Harvey as he turned to face the officer.

“We’re going in the opposite direction, back towards the Starbase. I can’t raise the crew in the propulsion centre. I can’t even raise the guards outside the centre!”

“Something has happened. Transport a security team to the centre, now.”

The Admiral had a bad feeling about this. Losing contact with crew was normally a bad sign and during battle it was a very bad sign.

“I can’t beam them. There is a force field protecting the room.”

This was a very, very bad sign. Admiral Harvey couldn’t understand how this had happened? No Dominion or Cardassian troops had beamed into the facility. Who could have taken over that room?

“Lieutenant, send a security team to the Brig.”

The Admiral waited a nervous few minutes until he got a report back from the Security.

“Admiral, the two guards are dead. One shot and the other had his neck broken. We did a Phaser sweep of the whole room and the Changeling is not here,” reported a Security officer.

“That is because he is in the propulsion centre. Lieutenant, get a team to the Propulsion centre and see if they can get in. Can you shut off power to the room?”

“No, the room uses a separate power system, which is only controlled from the Propulsion room.”

“Damn! Increase Security to all control areas. What will the Changeling gain by altering our position? I don’t like this at all.”

20 minutes later and Starfleet Security still hadn’t managed to get to the Changeling.

“The Shapeshifter has managed to put force fields everywhere. My personnel can’t find a way through. I suggest we bring in some heavy weapons and blow our way in, Admiral,” suggested the Security officer.

“No. We can’t damage the systems in that room, most of it is beyond our ability to reverse engineer and we need those systems to correct our course. No, there has to be a less violent way in.”

The Security officer didn’t look too happy with the Admiral’s refusal of his plan.

“Fine. We will try again. Maybe there’s a junction that connects to the room that we don’t know about. Security out.”

The Admiral’s adjutant came up and whispered to the Admiral, “Sir, blasting our way through might be the best thing to do. There is no guarantee that Security will get in another way and not damage or destroy something in that room. The longer we leave...”

“We’ve stopped!” cried the officer who had been monitoring the moons orbit.

“Did Security manage to cut power to the system?” asked the Admiral.

“No, the propulsion system stopped us. For whatever reason the Changeling wanted us to stop here.”

“Where exactly is here?” asked the Admiral’s Adjutant.

“We’re still in the moons normal orbit. Location, we’re directly in line with the Planetary Starbase!”

“He must have moved us so the Dominion Fleet could make a run at the base.”

“That makes no sense,” said the Admiral. “The Dominion fleet always had the option of making an attack on the base.”

“Yes, but the Changeling must think that we won’t risk firing all our weapons on a fleet heading straight for the base in fear that if we miss we will help the Dominion will the base’s shields.”

“But the Plasma fire dissipates when it hits the planet’s atmosphere,” stated the Tactical officer.

“But the Changeling wouldn’t know that. I doubt he has had the time to notice that,” said the Adjutant.

“It seems like a rather desperate move,” said the Tactical officer.

“Because it is.”

The Admiral mulled the situation over.

“That would be a good plan if the Changeling only wanted to destroy the base but he has another mission,” said the Admiral. The officers who were listening just stared at the

Admiral. “To destroy this moonbase. While we have it the Dominion can’t take this system. So he has to do it, somehow.”

The Changeling checked the coordinates he had just inputted into the Propulsion system and then checked the power readings.

Foolish solids, he thought. *They never cut my connection to the main power grid. This system may have its own generator but it could never supply me with the power I need for this next move. They have contributed to my victory, the Dominion’s victory.*

The Changeling started the countdown and picked up his Phaser rifle. No one was going to be using this system in the foreseeable future.

In the Command Centre the room lights dimmed and console lights flickered. Admiral Harvey was about to ask what was going on when the entire room shook with enough force to dislodge people and consoles alike.

Admiral DeSoto watched as three quantum torpedoes just launched from the *Excelsior* came to a fiery end when they connected with the bridge of a *Galor* class cruiser. The battle so far had been a stunning success. The Dominion fleet was down around 350 ships while Starfleet and Klingon losses had been light. The battle was now a set of skirmishes instead of a wide area battle. The bulk of the Dominion ships bombarded the moon’s surface, the rest fought at its flanks holding the Starfleet ships back, not that they wanted to move forward where a stray Plasma blast could take out any of the Starfleet and Klingon heavy ships. The small Attacks ships had taken to the surface where they duelled with the *Sabre*, *Defiant* and *Peregrine* class ships. The entire Cardassian contingent had fallen back to the far side of the moon, which had few Plasma weapons engaging them. DeSoto had led a group to harass the Cardassians to stop them from flanking the Starfleet and Klingon ships flanking the Dominion ships. So far the group had set up around a very large ship, far larger than anything Starfleet, the Klingons or even the Dominion had in the battle. It was a typical Cardassian design and had overly long “fins” at the front, like the *Galor*, though these didn’t house the warp nacelles they were below on a smaller set of “fins”. So far the ship had not come forward to engage the Starfleet-Klingon forces. The Cardassians seemed happy to let it sit back with its five-ship escort and watch.

The *Excelsior*’s Helmsman turned the ship around and headed in a course back towards the moon. He spotted one of the ship’s from his command in a bit of trouble.

“You see the *Galor* and *Norin* ships attacking the USS *Creed*. Move in and take them out.” As the ship dived at the ships DeSoto looked at the moon’s surface. Three *Hideki* class ships were desperately trying to lose the two Birds of Prey that were pursuing them, firing relentlessly. One of the *Hidekis* couldn’t avoid the Klingon disruptor fire and its shields flared before giving way. The disruptors chewed the rear of the ship apart sending it careening into the surface and then all hell broke loose.

The surface of the moon glowed red for a second before erupting, sending huge pieces of the moon out into space. The remaining two *Hidekis* and the Birds of Prey vanished in the explosion of fire and rock. Asteroids were hurled into the two fleets. The USS *Creed* exploded, as one asteroid ploughed through it like it was nothing. The *Galor* suffered the same fate but the *Norin* managed to avoid the rocks. But as it manoeuvred to escape it up suddenly thrown away from the moon and into an asteroid.

“FULL REVERSE!” yelled DeSoto. “BRING US ABOUT!”

The *Excelsior* started to head away and turned to avoid the asteroid storm. But it was painfully obvious that the ship would not out run it.

“ALL POWER TO SHIELDS! BRACE FOR...”

DeSoto was cut off but the roar of the shockwave that had hit the *Norin*, which was travelling much faster than the asteroids, had overtaken them. DeSoto was thrown around like a rag doll as the ship was sent end over end. Luckily for the *Excelsior*, the shockwave had either deflected the large asteroids away from her or had shattered them into smaller ones that now impacted the hull with the strength of a Photon torpedo. The shields tried in vain to hold out the onslaught but soon the small rock missiles were smashing into the hull, some dented the hull or just shatter but the majority penetrated the hull causing secondary explosions. As soon as it started it stopped. Admiral DeSoto forced himself onto his knees.

“Report!” he ordered in what sounded like a whisper.

The Bridge was full of smoke, sparks flashed in all directions from ruptured EPS units. He saw an officer lying next to him. He turned the officer over but from the unnatural angle of the officer’s head the Admiral knew that she was dead.

“Report!” DeSoto said again. He couldn’t figure out why he was whispering. He repeated his order again.

A figure appeared from the smoke, it was his first officer. The First officer's lips were moving but he couldn't hear a thing. He stared up at the officer. The Officer paused and spoke; again DeSoto could not hear him. The Officer knelt next to DeSoto and grabbed his shoulders and spoke again.

"Admiral, can you hear me?" the Admiral could barely hear him.

"What's the damage?"

"You're shouting. You probably have ruptured eardrums. Your ears aren't as sturdy as my Bolian ears. You look like you're in shock; we need to get you to sickbay."

DeSoto grabbed his First officer by his collar.

"How bad is it, damn it!"

The First officer looked away briefly.

"We're out of it. Engines, weapons, sensor, you name it, its offline. Life support is just holding. We have multiple hull breaches and we have reports of deaths all over the ship. Only 4 out of the nine officers on the Bridge are still alive. We are in a slow spin heading away from the moon and the battle; visually we can't see any Dominion of Cardassian ships following. The Dominion are probably still on the other side and the Cardassians probably were hit as hard as we were. We think we can get the thrusters to bring us to a stop. We're seeing if any of the shuttles are still operational, if so we're going to take one and head back to the battle and get some help."

"What about the rest of the ships in the group?"

The First officer shook his head.

"The ones that were any closer to the moon than us...well, it is most likely that they were destroyed. We can't contact or detect fifteen ships from our tactical wing. We don't know how many of those are destroyed but the ships closer to the moon...they didn't have a chance."

DeSoto looked shocked.

"How could something like this happen?"

"I don't know, sir. But I think we should worry about getting you to Sickbay before we worry about what happened back there."

* * * *

The Command Centre on the moonbase was a shambles. Bodies, equipment and parts of the wall and ceiling were strewn across the room. The Tactical officer was the first person to get back to their console.

“The Changeling has fired the main thrusters located on the far side of the moon. The thrusters are below the surface and need to be uncovered before firing. Not sure if didn’t do it because he didn’t know or if it was just to cause chaos.”

“That is if they could be uncovered. We always suspected that this moon was not natural to this planet. Geographical studies showed a significant change in tidal patterns around the time this base was built and we suspect this moon was taken from one of the outer bodies. That is why it has such a powerful thruster system, to break it out of orbit of a large body not to keep it in orbit. They must have moved it just so it could act as an outpost,” said the Adjutant as he got up off the ground. “Admiral, you had a bet with General G’tor about this didn’t you? Admiral?” The Adjutant looked around and saw the Admiral was still on the ground. He ran over and checked Admiral Harvey’s pulse, luckily he was still alive, and then ran a scan of the Admiral with a Tricorder.

“He’s just unconscious. I don’t think it would do any good to take him to Sickbay it will be full of patients with more serious injuries,” said the Adjutant.

“Sir, Security got into the Propulsion room and it was empty. The Changeling destroyed all the consoles. We can’t shut down the engines.”

“Where are we heading, Lieutenant?” asked the Adjutant.

The Tactical officer’s fingers danced over the console as she tried to find the answer. A look of absolute shock came to her face.

“We’re heading for Guyra IV!”

“That insane fool! He’s sent us on a crash course with a planet!” cried the Adjutant in shock. “Can you cut power to the engines?”

“Even if I could it wouldn’t stop us. We have too much momentum.”

“How long until we hit the atmosphere?”

A grim look came to the officer’s face. “Two minutes and thirty-two seconds.”

“Send out orders to evacuate the base. Send out a call and see if you can get more ships to aid the evacuation.”

The evacuation order went out across the entire base to the hundreds of personnel that were manning the base. Currently only a few ships remained inside the base and some of those were there because they were too damaged to fight, the adjutant knew that the ships that could leave would have a hard time to get everyone out before they had to leave. People were going to be left behind. He pushed that thought out of his mind as he picked up Admiral Harvey. The admiral's flagship had remained in the base and it was now the adjutant's mission to make sure that Harvey escaped and by extension him as well no matter how sick it made him feel.

He tapped his combadge. "*Tasman*, two to beam out."

As the seconds counted down the ships that could leave the base were forced to leave, all knowing that they were leaving behind friends and colleagues to perish. Several other ships had moved close to the moon to assist in beaming but the base's protection against transporters made things difficult. The Dominion ships did not take pity on them either and attacked the ships aiding the evacuation. With mere seconds left the last ship exited the moon and the moon stuck Guyra IV's upper atmosphere. Directly below an assortment of shuttles rushed to the air as they evacuated the Starbase, they were packed with as many people as they could hold.

The surface of the moon glowed as it burnt its way down towards the surface. Chunks of the moon broke apart under the force but it was never going to be enough. The moon completed its four minute journey in devastating and spectacular fashion.

The crew of the *Swiftfire* watched as the moon disappeared as Guyra IV eclipsed it. Then over the horizon came a wave of fire that lit up the dark side of the planet like a sun. The wave continued, vaporising plants, animals and water, leaving nothing in its wake.

"By the Prophets!" muttered Terri in a voice barely above a whisper. "An extinction level event. It's all gone."

The crew had just witnessed the tide of the battle turn. They had seen the explosion as the moon's engines ignited that had devastated the Starfleet and Klingon forces holding the Cardassians at bay. The moon's sudden shift had also caught ships close to it off guard and several crashed into the surface. The base's weapons went offline and once that had happened the Dominion's telling numbers came back into play as they took advantage of the

confused forces as they were split between aiding the evacuation of the moon and holding their ground. The Cardassians then outflanked one side of the fleet resulting in heavy casualties for the defenders. The position at Guyra IV was lost.

A large group of Dominion and Cardassian ships were now heading for Guyra III. The Starfleet ships guarding the planet could not expect any meaningful reinforcements from the rest of the fleet. With that the evacuation of Guyra III had begun. However, evacuating over 100,000 colonists would be a slow task. The *Swiftfire* and most of the ships had moved far from the planet. The plan was to engage the enemy ships and fight a delaying action to give the evacuation as much time as possible. Again, Captain Masters was in charge of the forward group.

“Captain, the ships have entered the maximum range of our torpedoes,” reported Nikki.

“Order all ships to open fire. Target the smaller ships, they are the fastest and if they get past use they will have an easy time with the evacuation ships.”

For the next forty minutes the *Swiftfire*'s forward group fought to stall the enemy advance on Guyra III, but a steady stream of reinforcements in the shape of light cruisers and smaller vessels was seriously hampering their efforts.

Jonathan gripped his armrest as the ship rocked. “Report!”

Lieutenant Letac pushed herself off her console. Blood stained it and from the pain in her nose she guessed that she had broken it when her face and the console had come into contact.

“The *Frontier* just bought it. She took one too many hits to her engineering hull and its warp core destabilised,” she reported. “Captain, Admiral Masters has sent use orders to fall back to his position. He also says that we are to follow the course he has sent us.”

The forward group had done their best to slow the enemy down but they were losing ships and if they stayed where they were they would all be destroyed.

“Well, we aren't slowing them down one bit. Fall back. Helm, follow that course the Admiral sent us. Order all ships to do the same. Whitechapel, keep those enemy ships off us.”

The *Swiftfire* fell back with the remaining eight ships of its forward group and joined with the rear guard ships. The forward group had taken a strange route back to Guyra III; it had

looped around instead of going the most direct route. Luckily the smaller Dominion and Cardassian ships had decided to stay with their larger brethren instead of harassing them all the way back. The evacuation was still ongoing and shuttles, transports and freighters were making their run from the planet. Fortunately the rest of the fleet had rallied somewhat and was holding the main enemy fleet at bay allowing for the civilians to escape.

The *Swiftfire* took position to the port of the *Ambassador*. Jonathan hailed the *Ambassador*. “*It’s good to see you got back in one piece, Captain,*” said Admiral Masters. “*Now you called to ask me why I sent you on the scenic route back here? Just keep your eyes forward and prepare to fire on my mark.*”

The Admiral cut the transmission before Jonathan could say anything. He looked over to Susan who just shrugged. Jonathan watched as the Dominion and Cardassian ships got closer.

“They have entered weapons’ range,” reported Nikki.

“Wait for the Admiral’s signal,” he ordered. While he didn’t get on well with his father he would still acknowledge the chain of command and he had to admit his father’s reputation was well deserved.

“They’ve locked weapons on us,” said Terri. “What’s the Admiral waiting for?”

Nobody answered Terri’s question because they were as in the dark as she was.

“They are powering up their weapons and are preparing to fire.”

“Put maximum shield power to the forward shields,” said Jonathan.

The Dominion ships opened fire. Their phased polaron beams didn’t travel far. The beams stopped only a few metres ahead of the ships and were replaced by explosions. As the explosion spread out it set off more explosions. Soon the Dominion fleet was hidden behind numerous explosions.

“The Admiral must have left a minefield of torpedoes there,” said Terri. “The weapons fire was enough to set them off. He have a message from the Admiral, *all ships open fire.*”

Jonathan signalled for Nikki to comply with the order. The *Swiftfire*’s torpedo launchers fired and were followed by the Phaser arrays firing into the distance. There were explosions as the rest of the fleet fired on the Dominion fleet.

“*All ships close and engage at close range,*” came Admiral Masters’ orders over the fleet comm. Channel.

The Starfleet ships engaged the Dominion and Cardassian ships at close range. The space around the ships was filled with beams of bluish, yellow and golden light, flashes of red and blue, and explosions. For a violent twelve minutes the Starfleet ships held the Dominion and Cardassian ships at bay.

“Captain, three Cardassian ships have...” Nikki ducked as a power unit overloaded behind her. “They have broken through.”

“On screen.”

The three Cardassian ships in question appeared on the viewscreen. Two *Norin* class light Cruisers and the over kilometre and a half long Cardassian ship were way towards the planet. The *Norins* were already accelerating away from the larger ship and were headed for the refugee ships.

“Ensign Cole, intercept those *Norin* class ships. We need to take them out or they’ll slaughter the colonists,” ordered Jonathan.

Fortunately the *Swiftfire* was closer to the refugee ships than the *Norins*, but the *Norin*’s speed meant that they would be only just out of firing range on the refugee ships by the time the *Swiftfire* could engage them.

As soon as they were in range Jonathan ordered Nikki to fire the *Swiftfire*’s weapons. The *Norins* immediately started evasive manoeuvres when the *Swiftfire* was in range. Despite the manoeuvres the Phaser and torpedo onslaught destroyed one *Norin*. The remaining *Norin* closed on the refugee ships and opened fire. The refugee ships were easy targets. Though all were shielded none had the state of the art shields like the shields of Starfleet’s combat ships and the few that were armed had few weapons. The *Norin* targeted the large, slow transports. By the time the *Swiftfire* had destroyed the *Norin* well over a thousand colonists had been killed.

“Captain, we are getting a request for assistance from Admiral Masters. Audio only,” reported Terri.

“Play it.”

“*This is Admiral Masters of the Ambassador. I need help near Guyra III. I can’t stop the massive Cardassian Dreadnought bearing down on the planet.*”

“Put the *Ambassador* on screen.”

The viewscreen showed the massive Cardassian Dreadnought heading for the planet.

The *Ambassador* came in from the starboard side all Phasers firing. The Cardassian ship returned fire at the *Ambassador*. Both ships' shields took the onslaught.

"Are any other ships going in to assist the *Ambassador*?" asked Susan.

Terri checked the ship's sensors.

"No. All ships are currently engaged. We're the only free Starfleet ship nearby."

"Okay. Helm, full impulse to the *Ambassador*."

* * * *

The Bridge crew watched as the *Ambassador* and the Cardassian ship duelled. The Cardassian ship just flew straight towards the planet. The *Ambassador* flew around the ship attacking it, trying to destroy it or at least get it to change course. Despite the size difference the *Ambassador* was the one to breach the others shields first. The *Ambassador* struck several points on the Cardassian ship's hull. But the ship was also very well armoured. The *Swiftfire* closed and opened fire at long range. Admiral Masters hailed the *Swiftfire* to convey his appreciation.

"Thank you, *Swiftfire*. I didn't think anyone was going to come and help us. We haven't had any luck stopping it. I want you to hit this area here as you pass the ship. Can you do that?"

"Of course we can do it."

"Just like I thought. Fire at it now."

As the transmission ended Jonathan gave out the orders. As the *Swiftfire* made its pass of the Cardassian ship it opened up with several of its torpedo tubes and its Phaser arrays. The *Swiftfire* passed over the highest part of the ship, which Jonathan presumed was the Bridge. The *Swiftfire* hit the top shield of the Cardassian ship with a few torpedoes and as many Phaser beams as it could. As it cleared the Cardassian ship the *Ambassador* came roaring in. It hit the same shield area as the *Swiftfire* had. The already weakened shields gave way and the *Ambassador* hit the area where Jonathan thought the Bridge was. As the *Ambassador* pulled away it fired three torpedoes from its rear tube that engulfed the presumed Bridge area in fire. Once the explosion had gone all that was left was a blackened hole in the ship. But the vessel did not miss a beat, either that had not been the Bridge or they had a good crew in the secondary bridge.

The Cardassian ship arrived in orbit of Guyra III and immediately opened fire.

Destructive energy from its Spiral Wave Disruptors rained down on the planet. From space you could see parts of the colony disappear in flashes of light.

Admiral Masters again hailed the *Swiftfire*.

"It failed. That must not have been the main Bridge. I should have known it was too obvious. Keep attacking the ship, I'm going to take the Ambassador and put it in their firing line. Our regenerative shields will take their bombardment for a while. Hopefully for long enough for the rest of the colonists to escape or for you to destroy it."

"We will do our best, Admiral," said Jonathan.

"I've come to expect nothing less from you, Jonathan. Good luck."

"You too."

The Admiral smiled, it seemed that the ice in their relationship was slowly being chipped away.

Admiral Masters' smile didn't leave his face after the transmission ended. Dalton knew his son cared but it was nice for him to show it. He watched the viewscreen as the ship moved to shield the colony below from the Cardassian ship.

His Tactical officer spoke, "Sir, I've noticed something unusual."

"Well, don't keep it to yourself, Lt. Commander."

"The ship hasn't fired from its two primary weapons banks."

Dalton looked at the ship. It was one of the new *Hutet* class dreadnoughts built by the Cardassians; in fact it was the *Hutet* itself. It was a huge ship, similar in size to the *D'deridex* class warbird. Like the *Galor* the ship this Cardassian vessel had a large primary weapon bank at the front of the ship, right in the middle. Plus it had a second bank situated slightly below the first one.

If you were in front of the *Galor* it would always use its weapon bank but this ship had not. Maybe it was just a deflector, not a weapons bank.

"Are you sure it's a weapons bank?"

"Positive, it is of similar design to the *Galors*. It has to be a weapon, yet it wasn't fired. It has only fired its other weapon banks, which it is doing now. The ship is launching another barrage."

The crew braced as the Cardassian ship fired and its weapons fire hit the ship's shields. Despite the powerful barrage the *Ambassador's* advanced shields easily held. The barrage stopped as the Cardassian ship waited for its weapons to recharge.

"Admiral, it is powering its main weapon banks. Whoa, this is a very high power reading, much more than its spiral wave disruptors. I doubt this is an ordinary disruptor bank."

The Admiral was going to ask what this all meant when he saw the ship fire from its top primary weapons bank. A thick yellow beam lanced out and hit the *Ambassador's* shields. The ship shook in a way Dalton had never felt before.

"Report!" he yelled over the sound of an exploding power unit.

"It struck the top rear part of the shield. The entire shield system is overloading!"

"What?" said the Admiral. It hadn't been ten seconds yet the shields were already close to failing.

Suddenly the second primary weapons bank fired striking the front of the shields. There was a large explosion and the lights flicked as the power distribution system was interrupted. Dalton watched as the beams continued and hit the hull of his ship. They sliced through the vessel; it was like the hull was not there. The beams passed right through and continued to the planet below. The beams disappeared as the Cardassian ship stop firing.

"Report!"

"We have major hull breaches at the front of the saucer section and the rear engineering hull. The beams passed right through!"

"Did the beams hit the colony?" asked the Admiral.

The officer checked.

"Oh my god! Admiral!"

The officer put the planet on the screen. The continent below was on fire. A firestorm was spreading across the continent. The storm was not limited to the ground it reached out kilometres into the sky and it destroyed several of the fleeing shuttles, which were below ten kilometres high.

"There were still 5,000 colonists still on the ground," said one of the officers. "I read no lifesigns on that continent. There all dead."

Admiral Masters could just stare. There was nothing he could have done. His ship, despite its advanced defences had proved useless to this weapon. There was nothing he could do for

the 5,000 men, women and children who had been executed; their only crime was that they were Federation citizens.

The Admiral was shocked out of his staring by his ship rocking under weapons fire.

The Cardassian ship was again firing on them.

“Shields?”

“Offline. Hull is holding.”

“Return fire.”

“I can’t the weapons are offline.”

“Get us out of here. Full impulse.”

The *Ambassador* started to move away but the Cardassians would not be denied. They continued to fire on the *Ambassador*, causing more damage. In one of their assaults the *Dreadnought* hit the *Ambassador*’s impulse engines, destroying them.

“Admiral, engines are gone!” said an officer in panic.

“Thrusters.”

“Not enough to gets us into a stable orbit. We are starting to lose altitude. We’re going down.”

“Evacuate the ship, now.”

“The escape pod system is fried and access to the shuttle bay was destroyed when the Cardassian ship sliced through our rear hull. Transporters are also gone. We’re trapped.”

“Order all crew to move up from the lower decks. Those decks will take the brunt of the impact. Tell them to brace for a hard landing. Helm, see if you can steer us to crash into a lake or the ocean. That might give us a chance of surviving. This is a long shot, people. If I were you I would make peace with whomever and whatever you believe in.”

“Sir, the *Swiftfire* is closing on us. I think they are going to try and lock a tractor beam on us.”

“If they do they will either be pulled down with us or stuck in the atmosphere of this planet with that Cardassian dreadnought above us. Either way they will die,” said the Admiral. “Too many Federation citizens have died today; I will not be responsible for the death of another 500.”

* * * *

Jonathan watched as the Cardassian ship's weapons sliced through the *Ambassador*. Jonathan was about to say something when he saw the weapon strike the planet. It had a devastating effect. A huge firestorm wiped out the entire colony. Jonathan saw several escaping ships fail to make it clear of the storm.

"How many?" he asked.

"5,331 colonists were still on the planet waiting to take off. You can add over a hundred more from the destroyed ships in flight."

Jonathan shook his head. They had saved around 93,000 colonists but even losing one was painful. They were defenceless and innocent but that didn't matter to the Dominion. Susan got Jonathan's attention back to the battle. "Captain, the *Ambassador*!"

Jonathan looked at the ship. It was in flames. The ship had two huge holes straight through at, which several fires burnt from. There were also dozens of smaller breaches of the hull that leaked atmosphere and fuelled the flames. The Cardassian ship fired at the *Ambassador*, clearly targeting its engines.

"Lieutenant Letac, I need you to find a weak spot in that ship, quickly. We have to get it before the Dreadnought destroys the *Ambassador*."

Terri quickly ran a detailed sensor scan of the ship. Terri was rewarded with a quick answer. "I've found one! At the rear of the ship just ahead of the tail, it looks like some sort of docking facility or bay. The armour is thin and the doors are made of a totally different material from the rest of the ship, a well-placed Quantum torpedo will penetrate and do massive damage."

"Do it."

Nikki loaded the torpedo into one of the forward launchers and fired it, just as they saw the *Ambassador's* impulse engines explode. The Quantum torpedo hit and exploded creating a far larger secondary explosion that engulfed the side of the vessel. A huge wall of flame poured out of the side of the ship as the atmosphere leaked unabated out of the ship. The Cardassian vessel broke off its attack.

"The *Ambassador*, how is it?" asked Jonathan.

"It is losing altitude. Its transporters and offline, their shuttle bay is gone and it looks like the escape pod system has been damaged. They're trapped," said Terri.

"Beam them up."

“I can’t. The Transporters can’t lock on.”

“Tractor beam, lock a tractor beam on them,” said Jonathan in a state of near panic.

Nikki brought the tractor beam and locked it on the *Ambassador*.

“Tractor beam locked. I’m latching on now.”

The blue coloured tractor beam locked on the *Ambassador* and it slowed slightly. Suddenly the tractor beam started to flicker before it disappeared.

“LOCK ON! LOCK ON!” yelled Jonathan.

Nikki tried but couldn’t do it.

“I can’t, sir.”

Jonathan watched as the *Ambassador* started to pick up speed as it fell into the atmosphere. The ship continued to fall and as it did the various fires that burned in and around it got much fiercer as they receive a new, more plentiful source of oxygen.

Jonathan watched as the ship disappeared into the high cloud and smoke cover of the planet.

Jonathan fell back into his chair mumbling, “Oh my god, no!”

The *Swiftfire* rocked as it came under fire.

“The Cardassian dreadnought has return, Captain,” reported Terri.

Jonathan just sat they still repeating “oh my god”.

The ship rocked again.

“Orders, sir?” said Terri.

Susan looked over to Jonathan. He was gone. He was consumed by grief and had no idea what was going on. She had to do something.

“Get us out of the atmosphere, Frank. Karak, send out a distress call for assistance and tell them the Admiral’s ship has crashed. Nikki, keep the shields up and running.”

All three crewmembers replied, “Yes, sir” and got on to their jobs.

Ensign Cole soon had the *Swiftfire* on a course out of the planet’s atmosphere. The Cardassian Dreadnought continued to fire on the *Swiftfire* and despite Nikki’s efforts, it looked like it would hammer down the ships shields.

“One more hit and the shields are gone,” reported Nikki. “I can’t keep them up any longer.”

“Commander, we are getting orders to make a hard turn to Bearing 34, Mark 290.”

“Do it.”

The ship dived down as it altered course. Susan gripped her armrest as she watched the stars twirl in the viewscreen, of course there was no need to do this as the Inertial Dampeners made sure that the crew didn't feel these course changes, it was a instinctive reaction based on what the eyes saw not what the body felt.

Four ships dropped out of warp where the *Swiftfire* had been. A *Defiant* and two *Sabres* screamed past the *Swiftfire* at full impulse. They opened fire on the Cardassian Dreadnought whose weapons were still trained on the *Swiftfire*. The Starfleet ships scored several direct hits before the Cardassian ship returned fire. Most of the Cardassian's weapon fire missed the wildly manoeuvring ships and the ones that did hit had no effect. The small Starfleet ships quickly passed the Cardassian ship and split up, each attacking from a different side. The already damaged Cardassian ship tried to hammer these ships away but they were too fast and fresh. The Cardassian ship turned and immediately went to warp.

"*Swiftfire, are you still with us?*" asked one of ships Captain's over the fleet tactical channel.

Susan recognised the voice, it was Captain O'Meara. One of the *Sabres* was the *Sparrow*. "We're still here, thanks to you. What's the situation?" said Susan.

"*Rear Admiral Douglas has ordered the retreat. The 59th is covering the retreat where we can.*"

"What happened to Harvey?" asked Susan fearing the worse.

"*He's alive but injured.*"

That was good news, and then something dawned on Susan. Their normal commander, Brand, was a Vice Admiral and outranked Douglas, so shouldn't he be organising the fleet.

"What about Vice Admiral Brand?"

There was a pause. "*He's dead. The Warwick has hammered trying to evacuate people from the moonbase before it went down.*"

Susan felt sorrow for their commander. She didn't know him well, but he was a colleague.

"Damn, we're part of the 268th. He was our commander."

"*I'm sorry, Commander Core. Can you handle yourselves from here? We have more ships to help.*"

"Yes, thank you again, Captain." She watched as the three ships headed off to assist other ships. "Karak, the *Ambassador*?"

The Vulcan checked his readings. "It is unlikely that it survived the crash landing."

That was exactly what she had thought. “I am unable to detect any lifesigns. There is much interference on the planet.”

“We’re in no shape to mount a rescue operation. Frank, plot a course to those coordinates and then go to Warp 8,” she ordered.

The *Swiftfire* soon went to warp and left the ill-fated Guyra system.

As soon as the ship jumped to warp Jonathan snapped out of his trance he had been in since Guyra III.

“What?” he said slightly confused. “WHAT? We’re leaving? But the *Ambassador* is still at Guyra III. Go back, Ensign Cole.”

“We’ve been ordered out of the system, Captain,” said Nikki.

Jonathan turned around like a flash. His eyes burnt with an intensity that Nikki had never seen before.

“How dare you!” snarled Jonathan. “How dare you! Get off my Bridge!”

“But...” said Nikki startled.

“YOU KILLED HIM! YOU KILLED THEM ALL!” yelled Jonathan. If a railing had not been between them Nikki had no doubt Jonathan would have leaped up and picked her up and thrown her out the nearest airlock. A fire burnt in his eyes, a fire fuelled on hatred. “I SAID GET OFF MY BRIDGE! NOW!”

Jonathan’s voice seemed to fill the Bridge up; it seemed to take all the air out of everyone’s lungs as they just watched in pure shock.

Jonathan pointed to the two Marines standing at the back of the Bridge.

“You two take the Lt. Commander off my Bridge.” Both Marines looked at each other, not knowing whether to follow Jonathan’s insane orders. Jonathan was about to yell again when Susan grabbed his shoulder. Jonathan’s head swung to face her.

“What?” he spat.

“Calm down, Jonathan. It’s no one’s fault. There was nothing we could do.”

“Nothing!” growled Jonathan. He turned to fully face Susan. “Don’t tell me ‘nothing’! Did you even try? Or did you just run away like a scared little animal? I can’t believe you let them let my father die! You knew him, you were a good friend. You’re a traitor!”

“I think you should leave, Jonathan,” said Susan calmly.

Jonathan seemed to rear up. He stared down at Susan as if he could drive her into the ground with just a look.

“Are you giving me orders, Commander?”

“No, I’m suggesting you go to your quarters. You are in no shape to command this ship.”

“I’ll tell you...”

“You can go now or I’ll get the Doctor to relieve you of your command.”

Jonathan looked at Susan as if she had just stabbed him in the back several times. He raised his hand as if he was going to hit her but he clenched his fist and then released.

Letting out a deep breath. “You all failed, you all killed them. I will never forget this.”

He promptly turned and marched to the turbolift. Both Marine guards gave him a wide berth as he past them. The door opened and Jonathan slammed his closed fist on the control panel, closing the door.

Everyone let out a collective sigh of relief.

Frank was the first to speak.

“Wow, the Captain has lost it!”

Susan’s head whipped around.

“Can it, Ensign Cole. Are you okay, Nikki?”

Nikki had fallen back into her seat, her head hung low.

“I failed him. He’s right it was my fault!”

From the sound of it Nikki was crying. Terri left her console and moved next to Nikki.

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Terri.

“She’s right, Nikki. Trapping a ship in atmosphere with a tractor beam is tricky, even if you had gotten the *Ambassador* there was no guarantee that it wouldn’t have dragged us to our death.”

“No, I meant it really wasn’t your fault. The tractor beam failed because the *Ambassador* overloaded the system.”

“What are you talking about, Terri?” asked Susan.

“As the Tractor beam locked on, the *Ambassador* altered its shield matrix that caused the tractor beam to break and destroy itself. The *Ambassador* broke the connection not us.”

“The *Ambassador* stopped us from saving them?” asked Frank.

“Given that its commanding officer is the Captain’s father then it is logical that this event took place,” said Karak.

“Of course!” exclaimed Susan. “Admiral Masters knew that we might be pulled down with them if we locked a tractor beam with them because of the *Ambassador’s* mass. Jonathan would have never disengaged the beam if we did get dragged down. If we did stop them from falling we would then have to drag them into orbit, which would have taken time and with that Dreadnought close it would have been suicide. The Admiral saved us from making a mistake.”

“And you saved us by retreating, Commander,” said Karak. “The Dreadnought did come back for us if we had tried to go down and rescue them we would have meant the same fate. No one is in the wrong here.”

Nikki still had tears flowing down her face. The Captain had really hurt her emotionally.

“Terri, take Nikki to her quarters,” ordered Susan.

Terri nodded and helped Susan up. Both soon exited the Bridge.

Once they left Frank asked, “How are we going to tell the Captain what we just found out? He won’t listen to me, I’m an Ensign. He won’t listen to Karak because he is a Vulcan and, no offence Karak, but Karak can be seen as uncaring and not able to understand emotions. You can’t go, Commander. He won’t listen to you because he blames you and he doesn’t really know the rest of the Bridge crew.”

Susan collapsed into the Captain’s chair.

“I don’t know, Ensign. I just don’t know.”

* * * *

It took three hours for the *Swiftfire* to reach the fleet staging grounds. When they arrived they found the remains of the Fifth fleet and Third Battlegroup. The fleets were shadows of their former selves. Every single ship showed signs of damage. Several ships, including the *Excelsior* had Tug ships moving them around.

Susan got Terri to give a report of the missing vessels.

“Over 200 ships are missing, not sure what percentage of these were destroyed or are still to get here. I’m not picking up the IKS *Che’tha*, General G’tor’s *Vor’cha* class flagship. Though Admiral Harvey’s *Andromeda* class flagship is here...we are being hailed.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know. The communication identification software is not working. Here we go, its Wing Commander Benton!”

“On screen,” said Susan cheerfully. “It’s good to hear from you, Maxine. I was worried that we might have lost you back at Guyra.”

Maxine smiled back at Susan.

“It’s good to see you too. I almost thought I wouldn’t make it. The battle around the moon was fierce,” described Maxine. *“Especially when its engines kicked in. It got really confusing. The last thing I heard about the Swiftfire was that you had gone into the planet’s atmosphere, I thought you had crashed.”*

“No, we made it out. But the *Ambassador* did crash on Guyra III.”

“Isn’t that Jonathan’s...?”

Susan nodded and Maxine stopped and looked down sorrowfully.

“I only met him once, but he was a nice man. It is a shame. How is the Captain?”

“Not good,” understated Susan. “When you land I want to speak to you straight away.”

The look on Maxine’s face told Susan that she understood that something serious had happened and she was needed to deal with it.

Jonathan sat in the dark staring out into space. The door chimed indicating someone wanted to come in.

“Go away,” whispered Jonathan.

The door chimed again.

“Go away,” repeated Jonathan, louder this time.

The door chimed again.

“GO AWAY!” yelled Jonathan.

There was silence and Jonathan thought he was alone. Then the door chimed again and again and again.

Jonathan stood up and went to the door ready to bite the head off whoever was there.

Jonathan hit the control to open the door.

“What?” he snapped as it opened. There in the bright hallway was Maxine. “Oh, I didn’t know it was you, Wing Commander. I’m not really up to talking right now.”

“But we need to talk, Jonathan. This is really important.”

Jonathan nodded and let Maxine in.

“Do you mind if we turn up the lights? I don’t want to trip over and break something.”

Jonathan agreed and turned the lights on.

Maxine looked around the room it was a mess. Datepadds, cushions, books and other things were all over the floor. A seat was tipped over, the glass table was broken and the Computer screen that use to be on his desk was now on the floor.

“Doing a bit of redecorating, Jonathan?”

“Sort of.”

Maxine turned and looked right into Jonathan’s eyes. He looked slightly embarrassed that Maxine had seen him like this but she could also see that the fury still burnt deep within.

“I heard about your father and I am sorry. He was a nice man. I also heard about what happened on the Bridge.”

“I have nothing to say about that.”

“You were a bit harsh on them,” said Maxine.

“A bit harsh! They are lucky I didn’t throw them out the nearest airlock,” the fire came back to Jonathan’s eyes. “You weren’t there, Wing Commander. You don’t know what happened. They failed and in that I failed.”

Maxine looked totally unfazed; she had been ready for his explosion.

“No, I wasn’t. But I don’t think you know what happened. Wait let me finish. You feel responsible for his death but you’re not. Have a look at this.”

She handed over a datapadd. Jonathan took it and examined it. He initially looked confused, then angry and finally dejected as he saw how mistaken he had been.

“I was wrong. I-I am so sorry.”

“There is more.”

Maxine pressed several buttons on the datapadd that brought up an image of Jonathan’s father.

“Your father managed to tie a communication beam with the shield matrix. When it disbursed our tractor beam it put a message in our computer. Lieutenant Letac found it when she was reviewing the incident.”

Jonathan hesitated before he played the message.

“I appreciate the effort, Jonathan. But I’m going to interfere in your life again, I won’t let you get yourself killed to try and save me from an impossible situation. Tell your mother I love her. Jonathan, I just want you to know, I’m proud of you. Good luck, Captain.”

The message ended leaving a blank screen. Tears started to run down his cheek. He let the PADD fall from his hand and sank to his knees. Maxine knelt next to Jonathan and put a finger under Jonathan’s chin and pulled his head up to face her.

“It was no one’s fault. Not yours, not the crews, no one. The Admiral made a decision to stop you from helping them; there was nothing Lt. Commander Whitechapel could have done. The Commander saved the ship by retreating, the Dreadnought had returned and if you had stayed you would have gone down like the *Ambassador*.”

Jonathan started to cry openly. Maxine pulled Jonathan to her and cradled him as he let out all the pent up feelings he had built up since the *Ambassador* went down. Jonathan’s tears quickly soaked Maxine’s shoulder. Within an hour both were asleep on the floor in each other’s arms.

* * * *

A day after the Battle of Guyra the system was an empty, dead place. The only two M Class planets had been devastated. Guyra III had a cloud of smoke covering a large portion of the planet as fires burnt unopposed, its main continent destroyed. Guyra IV was much worse. The impact of the moon on the planet had thrown large pieces of the planet and the moon back into space, including several headed for Guyra III and in the coming weeks would most probably hit. Many of the smaller rocks settled into orbit of Guyra IV. The impact had put Guyra IV into a nuclear winter. In the next few days the entire planet would die and as the orbiting rocks’ orbits decayed they would crash back into the planet, so it would not be the last nuclear winter the planet would have. Between the planets the dead hulks of ships and the bodies of the beings that had been sucked into space floated in testament of the battle that had taken place. With nothing left in the system the Dominion had no reason to stay.

Suddenly a small Federation runabout exited warp close to Guyra III.

“Admiral, we are in orbit of the third planet.”

A man in an Admiral’s uniform nodded. As he surveyed the readings coming into the runabout’s sensors. At final count sixty-four Starfleet and eighty-six Klingon vessels had met

their end in the system. A hundred and fifty ships lost with too few from those ships escaping. In comparison to the Dominion's losses that was almost minor. It was impression and altogether frightening that the Dominion had won the battle with the losses it suffered and that despite losing hundreds more vessels than they did that the strategic situation had changed little.

"Locate the *Ambassador's* crash site."

"Yes, Admiral. I have it. The ship crashed into a shallow water system and appears to be relatively intact."

"For a ship that crashed into a planet," commented the Admiral.

The Admiral had no illusions to the death and destruction that the *Ambassador* would have suffered. It was more than likely that the entire crew would be dead but he had to check. He turned to the two armed personnel behind him. "Are you ready to be transported to the bridge?"

Both officers nodded and stepped onto the transporter pads. The Admiral signalled the pilot to beam them down.

It wasn't even a minute before he received a report.

"Admiral, we are on the bridge and have located the Admiral. He is positive for life signs but his badly injured. He has several broken bones, internal bleeding and a collapsed lung."

"Get him stable for transport back up to the runabout."

"Sir, we have confirmed four other personnel at alive on the bridge. It is possible that there are more on the decks below."

The Admiral sighed. This was the part he feared. He knew if Admiral Masters had survived it would be likely others had survived also. There was only one problem; he wasn't here to save them. He only had the facilities to transport one severely injured person back to Federation territory and that person had to be the Admiral. This was the only rescue that would be coming to the Guyra system and anyone left behind would die.

"Shoot the others."

"Could you repeat that order, sir?"

"Put the ones on the bridge out of their misery. There will be no other rescue. There will be no other survivors."

"Understood, sir."

The Admiral was glad he could not hear the weapons fire as his men put down the other survivors on the bridge.

“Ready for transport, sir.”

“Beam them into the rear compartment,” he ordered. “Beam the device down.”

This was the final step of the “rescue”. The *Ambassador* was one of the most advanced ships in the Federation and it had been lost. But it wasn’t lost enough. By the fact there were survivors meant the Dominion had not yet come and stripped the ship of its components. It was possible that they might not come at all but the risk was too great they would. The same anti-matter bomb had been beamed onto the ship near the warp core. The explosion would rupture the warp core and destroy the ship. It would also kill any more survivors on the ship. This was the cost of war.

The Admiral went to the console and imputed the command to detonate the device. He watched out the viewport and saw the explosion. There was no doubt the ship had been destroyed and there were no other survivors. The mission was complete.

He sagged back in his chair and rested his head in his hands. The dirty work never got easier. “We’ve got what we came for. Plot a course back to Federation space, maximum warp.”