

# Star Trek: Third Cutter Squadron **Talarian Incursion**

By Brydon Sinclair

## **Cyclops – The Coming Storm**

The direct hit to the *Cyclops*' impulse engines made the cutter sluggish, every evasive sequence Ensign Inzi Tham tried felt lumbering and heavy, ineffective against the continuous barrage of torpedoes, phaser beams and disruptor blasts. She'd been onboard the Griffin-Class ship for two years, ever since she'd graduated from the Academy and the cutter had been assigned to the Third Squadron, and in that time she'd faced off against a number of smugglers and pirates and raiders, all battles that the *Cyclops* held the advantage. But now they were facing off against an entire battalion of Talarian warships, cruisers and frigates.

Her sensor panel cried out a proximity alert and her blue hands danced over flight control, trying desperately to squeeze a little more out of the wounded ship. Despite her best efforts the torpedo ploughed through their already weakened aft shields and tore into the scorched hull. The deck jerked and shuddered. Tham focused on her duties and not on the damage that'd been inflicted or the lives lost.

"Damage report!" Captain Jadus Yix called from his seat behind her.

"Hull breach, deck seven. We've lost the starboard power conduit, plasma fires reported throughout the deck," Lieutenant Commander Keats replied from Ops.

Hearing the Ops Mangers report, Tham glanced at her status display and felt the knots in her stomach tighten at the flashing red readout. "Warp drive has been compromised. We couldn't do more than a warp one jump."

"Keep that as an option, Inzi," her fellow Bolian told her from the Captain's chair.

"Aye," she called over her shoulder, remaining focused on her panel.

“Captain,” Commander Lelani spoke up from where she now stood at Tactical, whilst Lieutenant Gomez lay dead on the deck beside her, “Our phasers are having minimal effect on their shields and we’re down to our last six photons.”

Tham’s keen hearing allowed her to hear the XO’s statement through the din of the klaxons and various alerts that bleated. Starfleet history had been a favourite subject of hers at the Academy, especially wars and major conflicts, so she was well versed in details of the Talarian Border War. The Talarian Republic were a strange power in the Quadrant, they had always lagged behind others when it came to weaponry, if it wasn’t for their sheer numbers (during the Border War they had outnumber the Starfleet task force ten to one) then they wouldn’t be much of a threat to anyone. But now they had warship-grade shielding and weaponry that matched that of Starfleet.

“The jamming field?” Yix asked Keats.

“Everything I try keeps bouncing back.”

“If we can’t raise the alarm, then the Squadron doesn’t stand a chance.”

“We could try what that Nausicaan raider pulled on us at Drae’on,” Keats suggested.

“It had us,” Yix admitted. “Rig an antimatter pod and standby on communications, we may only have a few seconds.”

“I’ll be ready with a burst transmission, sir.”

“Commander, keep a torpedo in reserve, but keep throwing everything we have at them.”

“You got it,” the Napean promptly replied.

“Inzi, I need you to drop us back a little—let them get in closer—then be ready with a full blast from the impulse engines.”

“I’ll give you all she’s got, Captain,” she told him, though couldn’t help but think, *I don’t exactly know how with one engine out and the other fluctuating.*

There was a brief time of frantic work; Keats readying one of their antimatter pods, as Tham slowed the ship down, allowing the Talarians to close in around them, and Lelani kept their phasers firing. The *Cyclops* bucked and shook, numerous systems screaming in distress and needing attention, but nothing could be done for any of them. Tham was only twenty-three, she had hoped for a long fulfilling career and a happy life, but even she knew a last stand when she saw one. The faces of Yix, Lelani and Keats only confirmed what she knew, none of them expected to see tomorrow—they would fight tooth and claw to do so, but ultimately they all knew that they were only fighting for one purpose, to warn every other ship in the region about what was coming.

Though she was terrified at the prospect of dying, Tham knew that if they could do just that one task then at least it wouldn't be for nothing. Blinking back a tear, she entered evasive pattern alpha into the navcomp and the ship staggered into a tight roll.

"Pod prepped. Burst transmission ready," announced Lieutenant Commander Keats.

"Last torpedo loaded, trajectory co-ordinated with Ops," Lelani added.

Tham took a breath before stating, "Impulse drive ready."

"Jettison pod," Yix order calmly.

On her sensor screen, Tham saw a small circle appear behind them, quickly moving towards the large cluster of orange triangles that represented the Talarians. If the hostile ships saw the pod they gave no indication, none moved away from it, they just kept up the chase of the *Cyclops*.

After a few seconds, Yix barked, "Now!"

The second the torpedo was fired, Tham hit the impulse power control. The weakened sublight engines strained to get to two-thirds and no matter what she tried they couldn't give any more.

Behind the cutter, it took only the blink of an eye for the lone photon torpedo to reach the antimatter pod. The effect was instantaneous. The explosion was blinding in the seconds it existed before the vacuum of space snuffed it out, whilst the shockwave it produced slammed into the closely packed ships and disrupted the thoron field they were sending out.

In the brief window they had Keats sent out their warning as well as a copy of their sensor logs, so that the rest of the Squadron and any regular Fleet ships nearby would know what was coming.

“Signal sent,” the Ops Manager reported his tone one of relief.

After the brief moment of respite all the proximity sensors called out at once. Tham glanced at hers to see the Talarians regrouping and coming straight for them, behind a volley of torpedoes.

“Hold on!” Lelani called out.

The impact was like an asteroid smacking into the back of the cutter, sending them spinning for a moment, before the stabilisers kicked in and steadied the ship. Lights blew out on the Bridge, as consoles exploded and crackled. Tham had been thrown from her seat but clambered back to her post.

She looked at the damage to flight control. “Impulse drive off-line, navigation disabled, RCS thrusters at twenty percent.”

“Aft shields have collapsed, phasers are out in the saucer section,” Lelani added.

Tham expected to hear Keats adding additional information from Ops. She glanced back to see him slumped across his console, unquenched flames engulfing his torso. Without needing to be asked, Tham accessed the internal sensors and saw just how badly the latest barrage had been.

“Hull breaches on multiple decks, we’ve lost main power, auxiliary holding at eighty percent, EPS taps and ODN relays have blown across the ship.”

“Talarians closing, weapons hot and they’ve all targeted us,” the First Officer stated, her voice hollow.

Yix rose from his chair and approached the Conn, his eyes fixed onto the viewscreen which showed the quickly approaching hostile ships, their triangular bodied bristling with weapons ports, whilst the tips of each wing ended with a torpedo launcher. He stopped right behind Tham.

After a moment he placed a fatherly hand on her shoulder. “Ensign Tham, set a collision course with the lead ship. Prepare for warp jump.”

She looked up at him. His eyes remained forward, jaw set. Two years ago, Jadus Yix had taken a risk and accepted a rookie as his Conn Officer and in that time she had done everything she could to live up to the trust and faith he'd put in her, he was a man she held in the highest respect, so she wasn't about to let him down now.

Looking back at her console, she nodded. "Aye sir. Course set."

On the viewscreen the lead ship opened fire with her phasers, just as Yix began to say, "En—"

He never finished.

One moment his hand was on her shoulder and the next it wasn't, and a powerful blast of wind—stronger than any of the typhoons she'd gone through on Bolarus—was trying to blow her towards the ceiling. Somehow, she couldn't say how, but she managed to hold on to her console. She glanced up and in place of the utilitarian ceiling panels, supports and conduits, there were glittering stars, glowing brightly against the inky black of space, whilst debris and bodies floated away from the *Cyclops*.

Her grip was slipping. Looking back at her board, she saw that the cutter was still pointed towards the approaching ships, what left of her warp drive powered and ready. All it needed was the one command to make it happen.

As the wind weakened it got harder for her to breathe and her vision became blurry. Before she succumbed to black maw of space above her, Inzi Tham reached out and brushed her finger on the warp activation button.

The *U.S.S. Cyclops* leapt to warp one for just point-four-sixths of a second, but she tore into three Talarian ships, destroying them outright, whilst the resulting explosions and debris took out another and crippled four other frigates.

## Silverfin – On The Sidelines

*“At 0817 this morning, a communications relay picked up a priority one communiqué from the Cyclops. Whilst on a routine security sweep in close proximity to the Galen System they encountered a Talarian fleet, on a direct course for Galen three. All contact was lost with the Cyclops following this transmission. We must surmise that the ship was lost and that the Talarians are going on the offensive once again,”* Rear Admiral T’Rona, Commander of the Third Cutter Squadron, stated over the conference comlink—every other cutter CO under her command was hearing the breaking news together.

Susanna Leijten, of the Albacore-Class *U.S.S. Silverfin*, felt a cold shiver run down her spine. It had been twenty years since the Talarian Border Wars, since then things between the Republic and the Federation had been quiet. There were momentary periods of tension between the two, but since the peace agreement no shots had been fired. Now, they were not only invading, but they had destroyed a Border Service cutter.

*“How long until they strike?”* Captain Yolix of the *Bonito* asked.

*“They will reach our outlying colonies within fifteen minutes.”*

*“My god,”* gasped Captain Lowe of the *T’Vor*.

*“I have spoken with Starfleet. Due to the scale of this strike force, the Third Squadron alone cannot repel them, so elements of the Sixth Fleet—under the command of Vice Admiral Bruce Coburn—are being dispatched. They will not arrive for at least four hours. In the meantime, we are to do all we can to protect evacuation operations and gather as much data on the Talarian forces as possible—”*

*“We’re not going to fight back?”* Harrison Richards interrupted. The *Peregrine’s* CO had once served onboard the *Silverfin*, though before Leijten joined the ship in 2370, however, before he’d left he’d scratched his name into the underside of the Conn console, as a way of making his own personal mark on the ship.

*“Combat should be avoided if at all possible; with the loss of the Cyclops we have been weakened. If you are in a tactical engagement, utilise delaying tactics and withdraw. I know that the Border Service does not run away, but*

*until reinforcements arrive we are in a very compromised position and losing another cutter will only worsen the situation."*

*"Understood Admiral,"* Richards agreed, though a little reluctantly.

*"Thank you for your understanding, Captain,"* said T'Rona, a hint of appreciation in her voice. She was a fifty-four year Border Service veteran, so she knew exactly what they were all going through, the only difference was that she didn't show it. *"Captain Verj, I would recommend that the Obion returns to Freedom. Your services may be called upon to tow damaged ships in for repairs once we retaliate."*

*"We're currently assisting a freighter with engine problems,"* the Tellarite woman reported, *"but once we're done we'll return to the station."*

*"Good. Commander Ilahn, the H'krii will get as close to the Galen System as possible and monitor from there. Maintain radio silence and run passive scans so as to ensure minimal profile."*

*"Consider it done."*

*"The remaining cutters will pair up; the Bonito and the Cam Rahn Bay, the Peregrine and the T'Vor. Monitor and report back, assist where needed. Once the fleet arrives, you will all be assigned to different tactical wings so as to spread out our expertise and knowledge of the region. Until then, use that expertise to ensure your survival."*

*"Captain Leijten, please stay on the link, I will leave the rest of you to attend to your assignments,"* T'Rona finished up.

It didn't take long for the six other Commanding Officers to sign off and see to their assigned duties. Leijten was eager to get to work as well, they had a lot that needed to be done and she wanted to ensure they were ready.

*"Captain, what is the most recent estimate?"*

*"The report I had on my desk this morning said that everything would be done in two weeks, assuming that all the parts were available. I'm just about to go and speak with Lieutenant th'Shaan and see if we can get that timetable sped up."*

*"Understood. Keep me apprised. T'Rona out."*

As soon as the Border Service delta appeared, Leijten was on her feet and heading for the exit of her ready room. Given the nature of the situation she would need to address the ship and let everyone know what was going on, but before that she needed to speak with Elak th'Shaan, her Chief Engineer. The *Silverfin* was docked at Star Station Freedom, undergoing an extensive diagnostic, overhaul and refit of several key systems—some of which they'd been putting off for three months due to their workload. It was all work that needed to be done to ensure the ship remained fighting fit, but having just docked the day before it had come at a very bad time.

She crossed the Bridge quickly, giving Lieutenant Commander Ling-Na a slight nod as she headed straight to the turbolift and disappeared below decks. Leijten couldn't help but feel anxious about the invasion. The Dominion War was only fourteen months behind them, tensions in the former Cardassian Union were high, nothing had been heard from the Breen since the end of the war which made many worried, the alliance between the Federation, Klingons and Romulans was tentative at best—and they needed to work together so as to rebuild the Alpha Quadrant and ensure some manner of stability. The last thing then needed was another conflict—the state of the Third Squadron was not uncommon, every fleet, task force and squadron in Starfleet was undermanned for the amount of work it needed to do.

Luckily the turbolift made it from the Bridge to deck seven without any stops. Stepping out, it was only a few meters to the Engine Room which was bustling with activity. In the middle of the two-level high room the warp core stood, but instead of the numerous blue rings pulsing with energy, it was dark and quiet, whilst the two conduits which fed the nacelles that ran across the deck had been raised up and had at least three technicians going over each one in painstaking detail. The amount of diagnostic and analysis equipment in the room had quadrupled as they got to work, firstly on the entire warp assembly (injectors, core, conduits and coils), before moving out to the environmental systems, structural integrity generators, phaser pre-fire chambers, shield grid and computer central processor.

On the upper level she spotted the two blue men she needed to speak with, huddled together looking over an assortment of PADDs, whilst junior officers and technicians peppered them with questions and queries. She climbed the ladder and when at the top her XO, Commander Amarin, was the first to notice her.



"Captain?" the towering Benzenite asked, his scowl masked by the goggles and breather mask he needed to wear in standard M-Class environments.

The rest all turned and looked at her, the rookies among them visibly stiffened in posture.

Fixing them with a look she politely asked, "Can you leave us for a moment?"

Obediently they scarpered, leaving just the three senior officers on the balcony. She obviously had Amarin and th'Shaan's full attention, as once they were alone neither of them prompted her or badgered her with questions.

Looking at both of them seriously, she cut to the chase. "The Talarians have invaded. They've already destroyed the *Cyclops* and will be at our outlying colonies any minute now. We *have* to get out there, ASAP."

Amarin and th'Shaan shared a look, before turning back to her. "I was just about to comm you, Captain," th'Shaan began and by the tone of his voice, she knew she wouldn't like what was coming. "The station's maintenance teams have just completed a level one structural diagnostic of the warp coils in both nacelles. They've discovered that fifteen percent of them are suffering from micro-fractures, due to their age and the constant abuse they've taken over the years."

"What does this mean for dry-dock time?"

"Another week," Amarin added, "at best."

"Damn," she hissed.

"I'll have all my people on double or triple shifts and call in as many techs as Freedom can spare for now," th'Shaan quickly assured her. "But it's a lot of delicate work that has to be done right or the new coils won't last a light-year."

Neither man padded their estimates or hyped up what needed to be done (th'Shaan had learned from Amarin who'd been his predecessor), so she knew that the work that needed to be done was vital and that it would take time to do right. She also knew that the best way to get results was to leave them to focus on the work and not badger them.

"What else do you need?"

“The new tech here and ready when we are and as many man-hours as possible,” th’Shaan told her.

She gave the Andorian a nod. “I’ll speak to Quartermaster Gornak and Commander Weir right now and make sure that you’ll have what you need. Anything else that will get us out there faster then comm me.”

“Of course,” stated Amarin with a slight nod.

The two men headed for the ladders and slid down to the lower level, a new purpose and urgency to their movements. Leijten had faith in the two of them to get the *Silverfin* put back together and ready for launch as soon as the laws of physics permitted. She left the engine room through the deck six exit and made her way to the turbolift once again. She had one more duty to attend to, before seeing to the work she needed to.

The drive section was bustling with activity, as the assortment of the ships engineers and the stations techs worked on the overhaul. They were professional, but not in any particular rush. Somehow scuttlebutt about the invasion hadn’t spread yet—more often than not, they heard about events by way of gossip and hearsay before any official announcement was ever made.

She stepped off onto the Bridge, which was just as she’d left it; Ling-Na in the central seat, Lieutenant Commander Kolanis Daezan at Operations on her right as she entered, Lieutenant Harriet Llewellyn-Smyth down at the Conn, whilst Lieutenant Mulligan sat at the Engineering console monitoring the works. As she looked around, she noticed Daezan look over at her, his usually smooth brow was furled as he no doubt picked up on the strong emotions that radiated from her.

Leijten moved to the middle of the deck and Ling-Na was immediately on her feet, ready to surrender her command of the Bridge. Leijten made no move to take her seat but glanced over at Ops.

“Commander, address intercraft.”

“Aye sir,” he replied, dropping the ‘skipper’ he usually addressed her as.

As the boatswain’s whistle sounded, she took a deep breath. “All hands, this is the Captain. At just after oh-eight-hundred hours this morning, the *U.S.S. Cyclops* was destroyed by a wave of Talarian ships entering Federation

territory. By now, they will have reached several outer rim colonies. Effective immediately, the Squadron is at red alert. In a few hours, reinforcements from the Sixth Fleet will arrive and we will begin to bolster defences and co-ordinate our response to this act of blatant aggression.

“The *Silverfin* has a lot of work to get through before we can be ready to play our part, but I know that we can handle it and whatever else comes our way. Let’s get to it. Leijten out.”

For a moment there was stunned silence on the Bridge as all four officers looked at her. Before she could say anything however, Ling-Na was on the move towards Tactical.

En route she announced, “I’ll begin monitoring all transmissions and get on top of the weapons retrofit.”

On the other side of the deck, Daezan turned to Mulligan. “I can monitor things from here if you want to get below.”

The Assistant Chief Engineer nodded as she stood up. “Thank you Commander.”

Within a matter of moments the three remaining officers manning their station were busy with helping on the refit work, or monitoring the situation that was unfolding along the border. She knew that down below the rest of the crew would be getting to work as well.

Heading for her ready room, she had to hassle the Squadron’s maintenance officer and quartermaster to ensure that the *Silverfin* had access to what was needed.

## **Peregrine – No One Left Behind**

Below the cutter *Peregrine*, Zurdaan IV's turbulent atmosphere swirled and flashed. Harrison Richards stood behind the forward Conn and Ops consoles, watching the volatile storm spread further across the eastern hemisphere. As unlikely as it seemed, the storm-riddled planet was home to an important research lab and terraforming station, where some of the Federations best and brightest were trying to transform the planet into a calm and lush world similar to Zurdaan II. But now, with the Talarian incursion into the region, both planets were under threat of attack.

The *Peregrine* was partnered with the *U.S.S. Luckes*, an Olympic-Class medical ship, to see to the evacuation of the outpost, whilst a convoy of eight colony transports were orbiting Zurdaan II to see to the better established colony. It fell to the lone cutter to ensure their safety.

Twenty-eight hours since the first ship had been lost to the Talarians and they weren't fairing much better. In all, only twenty ships from the Sixth Fleet had arrived so far, so all they could do was stall the greater force of the Republic until more could arrive. But out of those twenty a further eight had been lost and the Talarians were claiming more space with every hour that passed. It wouldn't be long before they reached Zurdaan.

Richards clenched his fists until the knuckles went white. He wanted to be on the front, giving the Little Cousins the thrashing they deserved, but instead they'd been relegated to escort duty. As a rational human being, he knew that the civilian population needed to be seen too and that the convoy needed protection, but his gut reaction was to charge into battle.

"Sensors," he all but growled.

Lieutenant Tallulah Pryce winced at his tone, so far removed from his usual chipper manner. The Ops Manager shared a quick glance with Lieutenant Samyra beside her, then looked over her display before turning to him.

"My sweeps are still clear, sir."

It took a moment for the hint of trepidation in her voice to filter through to him. He blinked and looked down at her, unfolding his arms and trying to relax his shoulders. Forcing a weak smile he gave her a nod.

“Sorry Lu. Stay on it.”

“Aye Captain.”

Turning away from the viewscreen, he headed back towards his seat. He took note of the vacant freestanding console on the starboard side, the place where his XO, Si Hrezel, usually stood. He’d known the Saurian since their days on the *Silverfin*, Richards had been the Conn Officer whilst Hrezel was at Ops and they’d been good friends since they’d met, so much so that when Richards was promoted up to Captain of the *Peregrine* his first act had been to poach Hrezel from under Captain Ja-Inrosh to serve as his Second Officer, then in time promoted him to XO.

The Saurian had an odd sense of humour that not many got, but Richards appreciated it as well as his pragmatic approach which kept him grounded. But for the time being Hrezel was on Zurdaan IV overseeing the evacuation, which had to be done using shuttles due to the atmospheric interference.

On the port side, Lieutenant JG Na-Veisek manned Tactical. Richards always found the long light-brown moustache on his face to be amusing, as it was just out of place on the baby faced Efrosian tactician. Oddly, though he had the facial hair, Na-Veisek kept his hair short, despite the cultural norm on Efros to let it grow.

Settling into his chair and trying not to fidget, Richards tapped the comlink panel. “*Peregrine* to Hrezel. What’s your status?”

*“Hrezel here, Captain. Things are moving along slowly but smoothly. Some of the researchers seem more willing to stay here and face the Talarions than leave their work behind. But Senior Chief Tanaka is being suitably intimidating to get them to rethink their standpoint.”*

Richards smiled to himself. “I’m glad to hear it. How much longer will you need?”

*“I’d estimate another thirty-five minutes and we’ll be lifting off.”*

“Underst—” a chirp from Ops caught his attention. He looked down at Pryce expectantly.

She took just long enough to glance at the sensor display before looking over her shoulder at him. "I have multiple Talarian contacts entering the system."

Instantly Richards was on his feet. "Red alert, all hands to battlestations! Lu, number and type. Sammy, break orbit and move to intercept."

"Captain?" Hrezel asked over the comlink.

"We've got incoming, Commander. I need you to shave off as much time as possible."

"On it."

"You'll have to dock with the *Luckes*, we're moving to engage."

"Acknowledged. Hrezel out."

"We've got six scout-type ships in an attack formation," Pryce stated once the channel closed.

"Scouts?"

"Yes sir."

He looked from Pryce to Na-Veisek. "*Dah'je*?"

"That'd be my guess, sir," the Tactical Officer confirmed.

*Dah'je* was a Talarian word, the closest translation for which was kamikaze. It was a tactic they used during the Border Wars two decades ago, sending scouts out to either ram into starships or packing them full of explosives and detonating them. The *Peregrine* was facing off against six ships and crews that had set off, knowing they would never return home.

"ETA?"

"They will be in weapons range in twelve minutes," replied Samyra.

"Lu, get a status report from Zurdaan two and hail the *Luckes*."

Pryce promptly had Captain Chatterley on the viewscreen as she contacted the transports orbiting the colony. Chatterley had obviously been told about

the approaching ships and the *Peregrine's* move to intercept, though her face was composed there was a hint of fear in her eyes.

*"What's the situation, Captain?"* she asked, her voice surprisingly calm.

*"We've got six scouts on approach. Going by their previous tactics we believe they are dah'je."*

*"I thought they might be,"* Chatterley admitted. *"I saw the damage they can inflict during the Border Wars. They are small, highly manoeuvrable and utterly focused on their final task."*

*"Understood. We will move to confront them and try to keep them occupied long enough for the evacuation, but if they get past us you have to be ready to bug out, fast."*

Chatterley gave him a sombre look before nodding. The *Luckes* was filled with almost one thousand people, whilst less than a hundred were still down on the surface, they needed to save as many as possible and not sacrifice so many for so few. Luckily, Chatterley was an experienced officer and knew that compassion had to give way to reason during times like these.

*"We will stay in orbit for as long as possible. Good luck Captain Richards. Luckes out."*

The channel closed and he settled back down into his chair and gripped the armrests. Samyra and Na-Veisek were readying their stations for the battle, whilst Pryce was just finishing up with the transports.

*"Sir, the Lakul reports that they have ninety-seven percent of the colonies population onboard. They say they need another twenty minutes to finish."*

*"Three minutes to intercept."*

*"Tactical status?"*

*"I've hooked emergency batteries to the shields, overall strength now at one hundred twenty-five percent. Phaser banks fully charged, photon torpedoes loaded in all four launchers, and pulse-phaser cannons are hot,"* Na-Veisek stated.

“Just what I wanted to hear. Ready attack pattern sierra, I want those ships focused on us and not the convoy.”

“Aye sir,” Samyra and Na-Veisek replied in unison.

Richards watched the viewscreen as the small, triangular ships with their vertical and horizontal fins, grew larger. As hostiles went, they weren’t the most intimidating he’d ever seen, but as with many things in life, they were more than met the eye.

“Sixty seconds,” Samyra counted down.

“Hostiles maintaining formation,” reported Pryce. “They are raising deflector screen. No sign of weapons being charged.”

That was to be expected. Scouts had minimal armament (even by old Talarian standards) and *dah’je* ships wouldn’t waste time shooting or evading, they would keep going until they hit a target.

“Thirty seconds.”

The Bridge grew quiet and tense, all of the officers and crew focused on their duties and what needed to be done.

“Ten seconds. Five.”

Harrison Richards, his eyes boring into the lead ship, ordered, “Fire.”



## T'Vor – Cast Adrift

The oppressive silence in the packed escape pod was getting to be too much for Lieutenant Isabella Nutini; but to make matters worse she was feeling a familiar itch, one that always made it difficult for her to concentrate until she scratched it and scratched it good. However, with seven of her shipmates around her there was no privacy to be had and so she would have to grin and bear it.

The former Operations Manager of the cutter *T'Vor* had always been very sure about what she wanted and never afraid of pursuing it, regardless of what gossip was spread behind her back. To her, having a good tumble with a partner (or two or three) was the best way to blow off some steam and relax—and those she shared the time with enjoyed it almost as much as she did. She'd been called promiscuous (and worse) more than a few times, but if that was the price of enjoying sex without commitment and attachment then she was happy to pay it. And after the last two days, she needed a release.

The *T'Vor* had been partnered up with the *Mandela*, *Black Kettle* and *Khukuri* from the Sixth Fleet and sent to counter the Talarian forces encroaching on the Privatt System. Unfortunately, the Talarians were better organised than they'd expected and instead of finding only two squadrons of ships, they had encountered a full tactical wing. With the odds six-to-one against them, the Starfleet task force had had no choice but to withdraw. But the Talarians weren't about to let them go easily and threw everything they had at the cutter and starships.

The Freedom-Class *Mandela* had been the first to stumble. With her warp core going critical, the *T'Vor* and *Khukuri* are laid down covering fire whilst the *Black Kettle* evacuated the stricken ship. The two ships used their greater manoeuvrability to their advantage, ducking and weaving through the frigates and cruisers, keeping them off-balance until the *Mandela* was empty and the *Black Kettle* was clear, before regrouping. One ship down, they headed back for their staging ground continuing to trade blows with the pursuing hostiles.

One lucky shot using a Romulan heavy disruptor bank took out the *Khukuri*. None of the forty-three people onboard the Sabre-Class ship had survived. The *T'Vor* and *Black Kettle* increased their speed, pushing their engines to their specified limit and beyond. Fortunately, the Talarians hadn't put as much effort into upgrading their warp drive as they had their weaponry, so

the two Starfleet ships were able to edge out in front. Beyond the range of their weapons, they were safe from the Talarians until they reached the rendezvous point, where around a dozen ships would be waiting to back them up.

The chase had been ongoing for just over an hour when the *Black Kettle* developed a problem. One of the primary warp plasma conduits that fed the two ventral nacelles was overheating; a diagnostic scan showed that microfractures were already starting to form within the conduit. The Cheyenne-Class ship could remain at warp with just the dorsal nacelles, but couldn't maintain the high speeds needed to stay ahead of the two attack squadrons pursuing them. The ship and the five-hundred and eighty people onboard would be at the mercy of the Talarians if the conduit was shut down or ruptured.

It was a tough situation they faced. Two ships already destroyed and a third on the verge of giving up, leaving just the cutter fully operational. Already the Talarians had destroyed one Griffin-Class ship, though the odds weren't as bad as the *Cyclops'* encounter with the initial invasion fleet, it was eight against one.

Captain Lowe had advised the *Black Kettle* to maintain their heading and stay at maximum warp for as long as they could, telling the Fleet ship that the *T'Vor* would buy them the time they needed to escape. Immediately the ship was readied for battle and they'd come about, barrelling into the pursuing ships with every phaser array and torpedo launcher firing.

The fight had been hard and brutal, but short. A full spread of Rat Trap torpedoes had blinded their sensors for a few minutes and the cutter had used every second to its advantage, landing precision hits on each frigate, enough to disable an engine or navigational array which forced them out of warp for a brief time. Once the Talarians regrouped, for every hit the *T'Vor* landed they retaliated fivefold.

Their shields gone, weapons destroyed and warp core on the verge of breaching, Lowe had ordered the crew to abandon ship. They had barely had time to get to the escape pods and launch before the cutter was destroyed and the frigates resumed their pursuit of the *Black Kettle*. Before evacuating, Nutini had done the math and determined that if the *Black Kettle* was able to keep going at their previous speed for another twenty minutes, then they would be able to make it to the staging ground before the Talarians caught up. Unfortunately, she had no way of knowing if they had or not.

Now, she huddled inside the pod, with Captain Lowe, Commander King, and five other shipmates, with no way of knowing what had happened to the *Black Kettle*. They were adrift, with all the other pods, hiding within a debris field that had only hours earlier been their home. All of her personal possessions had been in her quarters, mementos and trinkets she'd collected over the years that could never be replaced. She was still alive though, as were the vast majority of the crew (or so the last casualty reports she'd seen had stated). Though even that came at a price, she was alive but antsy, and with no way of knowing how long until a rescue ship arrived she might not find relief anytime soon.

Gritting her teeth she tried to focus on the small console next to her, from which she could monitor their limited communications, environmental and sensor systems. There was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to distract her or keep her busy—just as it had been for the last twenty-six hours.

The *T'Vor* had been sacrificed for the greater good, but they had no idea if that sacrifice had even been worth it, no way of knowing if the *Black Kettle* had got to safety in time or not. All any of them could do was hope for the best and wait. Patience was not a virtue she possessed, and they faced days in the pod.

"Anything Lieutenant?" Lowe asked.

"Negative Captain," Nutini stated, her tone sounding sharp to her own ears. "It's quiet. All other pods report the same."

"Keep monitoring the distress beacon, hopefully someone will get to us soon."

"Aye sir."

Lowe looked over at Lieutenant Commander Das, who was tending to Commander King (who had been injured during the evacuation by a falling support beam). "How is he?"

"He's doing alright, so far. It's a mild concussion, but all his vitals are stable," the Tactical Officer replied. "Our comlink with Doctor Freisbod's pod is stable and she is monitoring things from that end."

"Good."

The Captain checked on the rest of the crew in the pod, trying to reassure them and bolster their spirits, but Lowe too looked nervous. Nutini could only wonder how things were going on other escape pods, where the occupants were younger and less experienced, where nerves and worries beat out experience and training.

The sensor panel chirped and she quickly checked its readout. When she saw what had set it off she glanced over at Lowe. "Sir, we've just been scanned."

The cramped interior of the pod allowed Lowe to be next to her in a heartbeat, looking at the small screen.

"Any idea who it is, Lieutenant?"

"No. Our sensors aren't detecting anything, but range is extremely limited."

"Put all pods on alert and prepare to move out."

"Aye," Nutini confirmed. During the Border Wars the Talarions had left escape pods alone, but that might have changed along with their weapons. She sent out a warning to the rest of the pods and then readied their RCS thrusters, they wouldn't be able to outrun anyone at sub-impulse, but the pods were extremely manoeuvrable so she would make it as difficult as possible to hit them should the need arise.

With the tension building, she managed to suppress her desires and focus on the task at hand, her fingers ready to input a wide array of evasive sequences. The pod, with seven other bodies so close to her seemed to get warmer, as all those that were conscious braced themselves for whatever they were about to face.

Just then the companel flashed. Tapping the receive button, the speakers within the pod came to life.

*"TVor escape pods, this is the Sutherland. Prepare for retrieval, all those carrying the seriously injured will have priority,"* came an authoritative female tone.

Lowe nodded at the panel. "Open a channel."

Nutini quickly complied. "Open."

*"Sutherland, this is Captain Lowe. Thank you for getting here so quickly. We stand ready for rescue and recovery."*

*"Thank you, Captain. If it wasn't for the T'Vor, we would have lost four ships rather than three."*

*"The Black Kettle made it to safety?"*

*"That they did, and we managed to beat the Talarians back to Braselius nine."*

*"I'm glad to hear that. Captain, my XO has a concussion—though the rest of us in the pod are fine. Any chance you could beam him out?"*

*"Standby. Sutherland out."*

Lowe sat back and exhaled. A wide grin spread across Nutini's face, as a feeling of relief filled the pod, which only increased as Commander King's body was enveloped in a transporter beam and taken onboard the *Sutherland*.

## Obion – Standing Firm

“Freedom standing by,” Lieutenant Asher stated from Tactical.

“Neera, disengage tractor beam,” ordered Captain Verj.

“Tractor beam disengaged,” confirmed Lieutenant Neera. “Freedom has tractor lock.”

On his own sensor display, Lieutenant Commander J. Ulysses Kane watched as the Excelsior-Class *U.S.S. Orpheus* was towed in to one of Star Station Freedom’s empty docking ports. Since the Talarian incursion had started, four days ago, command of tactical operations was held at Starbase 375 under Vice Admiral Coburn, whilst the Border Service outpost Freedom had become the primary repair and hospital facility along the frontline. As such, the most severely damaged ships were berthed at the star station, including the Fleet ships *Orpheus*, *Kursk* and *James Kirk*, as well as the hospital ship *Mercy* and the cutter *Peregrine*, which had survived six *dah’je* ships but paid a heavy price. The only other ship in dock was the *U.S.S. Silverfin*, which was undergoing a massive refit and overhaul that rendered the ship unusable for the conflict.

Behind him he heard the command chair creak, followed by the popping of Verj’s knees then her derisive snort. He looked over his shoulder and saw the heavyset Tellarite step down to join him at the Conn. A Border Dog for over forty years, she had a wrinkle and line etched onto her face for every pirate she had engaged and each ship she had helped to rescue, of all the CO’s in the Third Squadron she was the most experienced after Captain Yolix. Kane had found her to be a valuable teacher, a formidable officer and a good friend over the years he had had the pleasure of serving with her. But as enjoyable as he found her dry wit and sarcastic tongue, she was still very much a Tellarite and could be infuriatingly stubborn at times.

Ghemari emal Verj rested a hand on his shoulder. “Nice flying as always, Kane.”

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. “Any chance we’ll get some R&R this time?”

She scoffed. “Oh Kane, that’s a good sense of humour you’ve got there.”

He chuckled. It was a long-shot, but he'd needed to ask. The crew of the asteroid breaker/warp tug were used to hard work, but they needed some respite from the constant rescue and recovery operations they'd been running since the incursion had begun. Every available ship of the Third Squadron (though with the *Cyclops* and *T'Vor* destroyed, the *Silverfin* all but disassembled and the *Peregrine* badly damaged, there weren't many cutters left) was out on the front, shoulder to shoulder with their Fleet cousins.

The number of Fleet ships had increased over the last day, so they were starting to gain some ground and had scored a few important wins against the Talarian Republic. It still wasn't enough to bring victory, as the Talarians had a full third of their Militia invested in the invasion, but it was enough to hold their position.

"We might have time for a drink, if so they're on—"

She was interrupted by a priority alert from Tactical. They both looked over at the sandy haired officer manning the console.

"Asher?" Verj asked.

He looked back at them, his usually confident visage tinged with concern. "Sensors have just picked up three Talarian ships entering the system, two cruisers and one destroyer."

From beside Kane the comm system chirped at Ops. Neera looked at the incoming comlink and then at Verj. "It's Commander Garrett."

"On screen," she ordered turning back to the viewer. It took only a moment for the handsome face of Freedom's CO to appear, like Asher, he too was worried. "I take it you've seen them."

*"Affirmative. None of the ships in dock are combat ready, and only two have functional warp drives. There are also no others within range. We're on our own."*

Kane felt a cold shiver run down his spine. The *Obion* was equipped with phasers and a small complement of torpedoes, but they were intended for defence or breaking up asteroids, not offensive combat. However going by the reports that he'd read about the Talarian upgrades, their destroyers were outfitted with Romulan heavy disruptor banks and Klingon photon torpedoes, whilst the cruisers had Ferengi phasers and a few had even been reported to

use plasma torpedoes. The station wouldn't be able to withstand an attack on its own, and with the crews of six ships also onboard there were a lot of people that needed to be defended.

"Commander, we will move to intercept and try to keep the destroyer busy. Can you manage the two cruisers?"

*"We'll throw everything we have at them, Captain. Freedom out."*

Verj looked around at the small Bridge and the four other crewmembers on duty. "Batten down the hatches. Red alert. Sound battlestations."

She moved quickly back to her chair and sat down as the klaxons wailed. "Kane, intercept course."

As soon as she'd said to Garrett what she planned to do, he'd locked the coordinates into the navicomp. "Course laid in, maximum impulse on standby."

"Engage."

The *Obion* moved to meet the three hostiles, the crew readying for battle. He cast a look at the jade-green Orion beside him and was surprised to see a smile on her face, but then again Neera was a scrapper—it was rare for them to put in somewhere and for her *not* to get into trouble with security.

As they approached, Kane kept the crew apprised of time to intercept. Behind him he heard Asher ready their weapons and reinforce their shields, whilst Neera locked down systems and organised damage control teams.

"Weapons range in thirty seconds."

"Kane, keep us on course directly for the destroyer then takes us right over the top of her, all available power to the engines—but stay close to them. Asher, adjust shield geometry to give us as much protection up front as possible. Neera, ready tractor emitter one."

"Aye sir," they replied in unison. Kane was a little puzzled at her orders; he would have thought that they should have been making themselves as scarce as possible, not charging straight for them. As for the order about the tractor beam, it made little sense to him. The *Obion* had six tractor beams, two



forward, two aft and one each dorsal and ventral, emitter one was at the front of the ship.

Kane didn't even need to say when they were in weapons range, as on the viewscreen all three ships opened fire. They rode through the chop and continued on course, he was ready to boost their impulse power and alter their heading the moment Verj ordered.

"Forward shields down twenty percent. Holding."

"Standby," was all Verj said.

The hits kept on coming, each one pounding into their shields, which weakened with every hit. As with all asteroid breakers, their hull was armoured and reinforced, Kane wasn't sure how effective it would be against Romulan-based disruptors though. He glanced back at Verj, but she remained focused. She wasn't a reckless CO, she knew how to handle tough situations, but unlike other cutters she'd commanded the *Obion* wasn't used to going into combat.

"Shields at forty percent!"

"Ready tractor beam and course adjustment."

Kane and Neera nodded and sat with their hands next to the appropriate controls. His sensor panel showed that they were getting very close to the destroyer, well within the minimum specified safe distance for the use of photon torpedoes.

"Now!"

Kane adjusted their course by only a fraction of a degree, just enough to keep from colliding, and ramped up their impulse power, while their tractor beam locked onto the front of the destroyer. The *Obion* had a powerful set of impulse engines, not as good as those on an Albacore-Class cutter, but definitely better than what the destroyer was using. With their tractor beam locked on, they wrenched the hostile ship off course. The tug jolted and groaned under the sudden clash of momentums, but ultimately won out. As the destroyer pitched upwards the two flanking cruisers continued on towards the station.

“Cut tractor. Evasive pattern theta-six. Phasers, target weapons and engines.”

Kane quickly turned the tug away from the destroyer and down the z-axis, as Asher fired off the first volley of beams from their type-ten arrays. As he switched to another manoeuvre sequence, he couldn't help but be impressed by Verj once again. The tug had been designed to haul bigger ships and clear debris from space lanes, so she had used one of its more prominent features to their advantage and pulled off something they had never expected.

“Sensors show they have hull strain throughout their forward sections,” Neera called out, her tone triumphant. Another indicator beeped on her sensor readouts and she looked at it and announced, “The station has engaged the cruisers.”

It didn't take the destroyer long to right itself and open fire once again. Kane dodged and ducked the majority of the disruptor blasts and torpedoes, only a few found their mark. The tug shot back at every opportunity he could give Asher, as he tried to out-fly their targeting sensors. He did notice that the closer they got to the destroyed the easier it was to keep them from landing a hit, obviously whoever had supplied them with the weapons had skimmed on the sensors necessary to make them truly destructive. But what they lacked in accuracy, they made up with in volume.

The Ouachita-Class tug, like her Everest-Class predecessor, was designed to be highly manoeuvrable. When he'd first come aboard, Kane had been surprised at just what the little ship was capable of, but over the years he had come to learn exactly what the ship could handle. He had never expected to put those abilities to use in full-on battle, but the *Obion* dodged, turned and pitched as well as any cutter in the Squadron.

“Captain, our phasers are having little effect on their shields,” Asher announced.

“What if we switch to photons?” she asked the Second Officer.

Asher shook his head. “We only have ten photons in the mag. By the time we could do any effective damage against their shields, we'd be out of torpedoes.”

From Ops, Neera stated, “Captain, Freedom's shields are down to seventy percent.”

The ship shook when a disruptor beam skimmed the edge of their shields. She looked around at the rest of the Bridge crew. "Options."

Kane racked his brain for an idea. Given time the *Obion* could continue to out-fly the destroyer and wear down their shields bit-by-bit, but the station might not last that long against two powerful opponents.

"Captain, I could modify a deflector dish to emit a resonance pulse, at the inverse frequency of their shield modulation," Neera said quickly, her words almost tripping over each other. "If we get the right setting, it may open up gaps in their shield bubble."

"Will it work?" he asked her.

"With so many of their systems cobbled together from other species, they might not be as reliable as originally designed, so it might work."

"Do it!" Verj ordered as the ship shook again.

"Aye," the Orion called, already making the modifications.

As Neera worked on her plan, Kane kept the ship moving, ducking and diving, missing the worst of the hits, whilst Asher kept their phasers firing. Kane also kept an eye on his tactical display which showed the station and the two cruisers, as well as telemetry on shield integrity and weapons output. Freedom was holding its own for now. Though armed, it hadn't been since the Talarian Border Wars that the star station had needed to use its weaponry. Had even one of the ships in dock been able to fight their odds would have been better, but previous engagements had rendered them all useless.

"Deflector dishes ready," announced Neera. "I'm going to have all three running through different spectrums; it should make it faster for us to lock onto the correct one." She looked over her shoulder at Verj. "We will have to remain on a direct course though, sir."

"Shields double front, Lieutenant, and have photons loaded and ready. Kane, keep us straight and steady. Engage deflectors at your discretion."

Kane swung them around in a wide arc, missing a volley of Klingon torpedoes, before pointing the *Obion* directly at the destroyer and engaging the impulse

drive. On the viewscreen, three amber beams appeared from the tug and impacted on the Talarians shields. The beams remained constant, as Neera worked furiously next to him, her green fingers a blur as she adjusted and analysed the results of the beams.

It took the destroyer only a few seconds to reacquire their target, coming in from port, and open fire. Slowly they turned to face the tug, so as to make use of their most powerful disruptors.

Kane had to fight the instinct to alter their heading, pull off some crazy new sequence of manoeuvres that would keep them safe. It was unnatural for him to just sit and take a beating, and this was the second time they'd done so in less than ten minutes.

"Shields at forty percent," stated Asher. The ship jolted hard. "Thirty-three and falling."

"Neera?" Verj asked, gripping the armrest of her chair.

"Just a few more seconds, Captain."

"Shields at twenty-six percent."

The tense seconds counted down, but still Neera didn't have any luck. Kane was ready to break off their heading the instant Verj gave the order, but he held back suggesting they alter course, wanting to give the Ops Manager every possible moment.

Suddenly her console gave an optimistic chirp. "Got it!" she called out. "Adjusting all three beams to match."

"Asher, ready torpedoes; maximum yield. Target their warp core."

"Target locked," he confirmed. "Shields down to eighteen percent."

On screen, the Talarian's shields flickered and crackled. They launched another three torpedoes, all of which crashed into the *Obion* and caused the beam on the right of the screen to dim.

"They've hit one of the plasma conduit junctions; I'm losing power to the starboard deflector dish. I can't get any more out of it."

“Asher, have you got a clear target?”

“I can’t get their warp core, but their antimatter pods are unshielded.”

“Lock on and fire!”

It took Asher just a few seconds to change target and launch three torpedoes, followed up by a barrage of phaser beams. Each strike found its mark and carved into the unshielded hull and volatile antimatter within. The brilliant explosion that flared out into space lasted only a moment, before being extinguished by the vacuum of space. When Kane could look at the viewscreen again, he saw that the ship hadn’t been completely destroyed, but rather it had been blown into two distinct sections, every deck exposed to space. Smaller explosions rippled throughout the hostile ship, plumes of fire bursting out of the ship before going out.

“Kane, bring us about, head for the station. Tactical status.”

“Our shields are at ten percent. Starboard phasers are out due to damaged plasma junction, all others fully charged. Seven torpedoes remain, already loaded.”

“The station’s shields are down to forty percent, weapons fully operational. No structural damage,” Neera added. “One cruiser’s shields are at seventy percent, they also have buckling along the port nacelle. The second’s shields are down to fifty percent, their forward torpedo launchers are out as is their main impulse drive.”

“Kane, adjust course towards the second cruiser. Neera, hail the station, tell them to concentrate fire on that ship. Asher, we’ll need all those torpedoes.”

“Adjusting heading. Weapons range in twenty-one seconds.”

“Target locked.”

“The stations confirmed orders, sir. They say they’ll open fire as soon as we’re in range.”

Kane kept his eye on the proximity sensors, watching as they got closer and closer to target. The Talarians were increasing their firing on the station, no doubt wanting to do as much damage as possible before their reinforcements got into range. When they were nine seconds away, the first cruiser

manoeuvred away from Freedom towards the *Obion*, trying to block their advance.

“Evasive sequence kappa.”

He smiled to himself as he input the new command. The tug feigned a move to starboard and the cruiser followed, her forward weapon banks glowing. At the last second, he slammed the ship into a tight port roll and boosted impulse power. They shot past the cruiser, which fired into empty space.

“We’re in range of the second ship,” he announced as soon as they were past the cruiser.

“Fire.”

The *Obion*’s launched the first of her remaining photon torpedoes, as she did Star Station Freedom opened fire as well. The two volleys of torpedoes pummelled the damaged cruiser, which didn’t have the engines necessary to evade them. It didn’t take long for the station and tug to collapse their shields and score several direct hits, crippling the ship to the point where she was no longer a threat.

“Captain,” said Neera, a wicked smile across her face, “the first ship is turning tail. They’ve gone to warp, heading for the border.”

“Lock on tractor beams, Lieutenant. It looks like we have ourselves some POWs. Kane, get a boarding team together and secure their Bridge.”

“Aye sir,” he replied quickly getting to his feet and heading for the aft turbolift. “Mr Asher, you’re with me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Cam Rahn Bay – Down But Not Out

“By Tygrath’s Claw,” Captain Mirothrin R’Shav gasped.

He was squeezed into the compact cockpit of Workbee 1, looking out the viewport at the hull of his ship, the Soyuz-Class *U.S.S. Cam Rahn Bay*. The ship was parked in close proximity to an asteroid, on the outer edge of a small belt they had been able to limp into following the collision.

They had been playing cat and mouse with two frigates, which had led them away from their task force and then into the region of space the Talarians had annexed. Cut off from support and on the wrong side of the frontlines, they had managed to finally gain the upper hand and disabled one of the frigates allowing them to focus on the second. But the Talarian ship wasn’t as easy as its partner and put up a brave fight, landing a few damaging blows, but ultimately the cutter had beaten them.

The second ship hadn’t survived the battle. Her warp core breached and sent out a strong shockwave. It was the shockwave that propelled the first ship towards the *Cam Rahn Bay*. Unable to avoid the spinning hulk, they’d braced for impact. The remains of the frigate ploughed into the cutters hull, slicing through the duranium plating and support structure as though it were a sheet of paper. Most of the Talarian ship had crumpled and broken apart, with sections of hull and debris smacking against or gouging into the rest of the cutters squat saucer, ripping off the starboard sensor array and pummeling the nacelle below it, whilst a large triangular wedge remained imbedded in their hull.

It was the extent of the external damage, that he now surveyed, that had made him gasp aloud. But as bad as things looked on the outside, inside the ship things were far worse. Aside from deck one (which had remarkable been spared), every deck had suffered a breach or been compromised. The foreign ship imbedded a third of the way into the starboard side of the *Cam Rahn Bay* had sliced through multiple power lines, plasma, EPS and ODN conduits, destroyed many systems and made warp drive impossible.

That was negligible when compared to the loss of life. Out of a crew of two hundred and twenty-one, only eighty-nine had survived which included twelve who were in critical condition in sickbay. Doctor Richmond, one of the few remaining members of the senior staff, had told him their chances of

survival were low—even if they could get to a Freedom or another starbase, the prognosis wasn't good.

A throaty groan of mourning escaped his lips.

"*Captain?*" came the questioning voice of Senior Chief Kahmor, who was in Workbee 2.

"Nothing Chief," he told the non-com, knowing that an apology or excuse would mean nothing to the Zaldan. "It's worse than I thought it would be. I'm surprised she survived at all."

"*Engineers last century obviously knew what they were doing,*" Kahmor replied.

"The ones this century still do, Chief." He didn't let the COB reply, switching the comlink to the second channel. "Lieutenant Treigtakda, are you getting the sensor data?"

"*Affirmative. Data stream coming in strong,*" Treigtakda replied, her voice shaky. Anya Treigtakda had been his Chief Operations Officer for the last three years, ever since she'd made full Lieutenant, but now, with the deaths of commander's Priestley, Jharss and Andrews, she was next in line and as such was acting up as First Officer. It was obvious that she was a little overwhelmed by their current situation, the damage and loss of life, but with the added responsibilities on top of her as well, R'Shav had been worried about her. However, as stressed and exhausted as she was (as well as the rest of the crew) she continued to stay focused and was doing a truly exceptional job of co-ordinating what needed to be done.

With the damage the *Cam Rahn Bay* had taken, both their external and internal sensors were almost non-existent. As the Workbees swept around the damaged cutter, they ran visual and sensor scans of the ship and sent the detail back to Treigtakda, so that she could compile a full damage assessment. R'Shav and Kahmor worked in silence, going over every meter of the ship. Every scuff, dent and tear in the hull R'Shav catalogued felt like a cut on himself. The *Cam Rahn Bay* had been his first command, and in the last decade since he'd first set paw onboard he'd become very fond of the old cutter, constantly awed by how she handled whatever situation was thrown at her—this latest incident was proof of that—whilst over the years he had managed to pull together a crew he was proud to call his own. But now, sixty percent were dead, whilst all those that had survived were injured to some degree and now trapped behind enemy lines.



It was his responsibility to get them home, no matter what.

The full inspection of the hull took them a good three hours to complete, by which time his muscles were cramping and sore and he could smell the day's worth of sweat, soot, grime and grit. With the ship on barely functional emergency batteries, they didn't have the power for sonic showers nor the time to spare to see to hygiene and grooming.

With their task finished he led the way back into the main shuttlebay. The starboard hanger was a mess, with shuttles and stallions thrown loose from their parking berths, and the port hanger being used to store the bodies that had so far been recovered. A call to the Bridge saw the doors open and the two utility craft quickly entered the ship. They then had to wait as the doors closed again and the bay was repressurised, they couldn't waste power on the hanger forcefields, not when other sections of the ship needed them.

Once safe, he exited the pod and took a deep breath of clean air, fortunately the CO2 scrubbers were still working, but even they couldn't quell the stench of scorched metal and meat that his heightened olfactory sense could detect—a constant reminder of the losses they'd taken only two days earlier.

R'Shav led the way into the corridor, where they split up. He headed for the Engine Room, whilst Kahmor would help to co-ordinate damage control teams. The corridors were oddly empty. Every able bodied officer, non-com and crewman was assigned to a DC team, trying to patch up a damaged section, reroute a conduit, or gain access to a key system. Every couple of hours another body would be pulled from the wreckage, but due to what little sensors they had left, he knew that there were no more survivors to be found.

He shook his head to clear it as he entered Engineering. It was as bad as any other room onboard; blackened consoles, blown panels, debris and dust littering the ground after being swept off of consoles, traces of blood on terminals, floor and bulkheads. In the middle of the hexagonal room the warp core stood proud, but it was dark and quiet. R'Shav noted an engineer of a hover platform up near the ceiling, performing essential repairs to the core.

It took him a few moments to take in the room, before spotting the man he wanted and heading for him. Lieutenant JG Cogan stood by the Master System Display, probably the only console not flickering in the whole room, looking at the displays.

Thanks to the thick pads of R'Shav's paws, his approach was silent, so Cogan jumped when he asked, "What's our status?"

Composing himself, Cogan turned to face R'Shav. He was stripped down to his grey vest, which was grimy as were his uniform trousers, whilst his bare arms, neck and face were slathered with grease and lubricants. Cogan had been fourth in command of Engineering, but with two of his superiors in the port shuttlebay and another in sickbay, he was now Acting Chief.

"I've just started going over the scans you took outside and comparing it with what we were able to garner from the internal sensors," he began, turning back to the MSD. "The structural damage is as bad as I thought it might be, but the starboard nacelle is in pretty good shape considering. As for that lump of Talarian scrap we've got in our side, there's no way we can get that out ourselves—it's so well packed in that it's actually keeping the saucer from decompressing."

"But it's also keeping us from warp."

Cogan was looking at a smaller screen that showed the visual scans they had taken, biting his lower lip as he studied them. R'Shav looked at the image as well, like a dagger sticking out of his side—sometimes removing the object that caused the injury did more harm than good.

"It's not actually as large as I expected," Cogan mused.

"That's because when it smashed into us, most of it shattered across the rest of the hull," he pointed out.

"What I mean, sir, is that if we can alter our warp field, I might be able to get us to low warp for brief times. Of course I'll need to completely redesign our field geometry to account for the additional mass and structural weaknesses, and we would have to start and stop a lot, not to mention I'd need power from pretty much every other system to keep the SIF operational."

"Lieutenant Cogan, are you telling me, that you have a way for us to get back to Federation space?"

"A theory of one sir—assuming the warp core wasn't too badly damaged."

R'Shav smiled for the first time in what felt like months. "Do whatever you need to, Lieutenant."

“Actually sir, I could use someone who is a warp field specialist, grade three or above.”

He paused and pondered for a moment, trying to think who had a suitable qualification and was still able to help. There weren’t many left, though one did come to mind. “Ensign Siora is a grade four if I remember correctly. Once I get up to the Bridge, I’ll send her down.”

“Thank you, sir.”

From the other end of the room, someone called out, “Lieutenant?”

Cogan looked towards the voice then back at R’Shav. “I’ll keep you apprised, Captain.” With that, he headed over to help with whatever had cropped up.

R’Shav nodded and headed for the Jefferies tube access (with so many turbolift tubes compromised it was too risky to use the system, besides it helped them save some energy too) and began the climb up to deck one.

He emerged onto Bridge from the hatch on the floor just in front of the viewscreen. With his arrival, there were now three people present, the other two being Lieutenant Treigtakda, who had pulled a seat up to the MSD console at the aft bulkhead, and Ensign Siora at the Conn. The young Rigellian looked half asleep, with heavy bags under her bleary eyes—an unusual look on the young officer who was a lover of adrenaline-producing activities. Upon seeing him though she perked up a little.

“Ensign, Lieutenant Cogan could use your expertise down in Engineering.”

“Aye sir,” she replied before trying to stifle a yawn.

Siora left her post and began the long climb down. R’Shav had a quick glance over the Conn displays; they were still holding position within the asteroid belt, their minimal power emissions wouldn’t make them register on all but the most intensive of scans, and no one within that limited sensor range they had. Satisfied that the ship was safe for the time being, he headed back to Treigtakda.

“How are we doing, Anya?”

“DC team five has managed to restore internal communications, though they’re still a little patchy on the starboard side. Team three has managed to get into sensor control and has begun assessing damage. Gravity has been restored on decks ten and eleven and waste management is now up to half capacity,” she fired through the list of what had been accomplished in the time he’d been in the Workbee, but then hesitated.

“Sickbay has also reported that Lieutenant Boon and Petty Officer Mills have died from their injuries, which takes our total losses up to one hundred and thirty-four.”

“Damn,” he growled, clenching his fists tightly.

It took him a moment to calm the surge of anger that filled his chest. The only consolation he could take was that they had destroyed the two ships that had killed so many of his crew. He had fought against the Talarians before, twenty years ago as a brash young lieutenant during the Border Wars. Though they had numbers on their side, the Border Service of twenty years ago had been able to hold their own against the Little Cousins (as they had been disparagingly nicknamed by Starfleet, a reference to their similarity in appearance and aggression to the Klingons) for far longer than the present incursion. It just showed R’Shav how little Starfleet respected the Border Service, letting it become so weak in recent years. After all the conflicts and wars of recent years, this was the time for the Federation to focus on their border security; forget about deep space exploration and worry about keeping their outlying planets and bases safe with a strong Border Service. Had the Third Squadron had more ships and a better network of sensor buoys along the frontier, then the Talarians would never have dared attack.

Barely containing his resentment, he said through gritted teeth, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

He looked down at the young Human/Ktarian officer and felt a pang of guilt. She was trying hard to stay focused and alert on little sleep and a lot of caffeine, whilst stepping up to fill a role she had never expect to occupy so early in her career, in the midst of a situation that was trying even himself, so the last thing she needed was him getting self-righteous and bitter about situations well out of their control.

“My apologies, Anya.” He let out a long sigh, trying to soothe himself. He looked over the numerous displays and readouts, all showing different data

feeds and telemetry—it was no surprise that her eyes were bloodshot having to make sense of all that information.

“When was the last time you took a break?”

“I’m not sure, sir.”

“Take an hour, get in a nap.”

“I’d rather stay at my post, Captain.”

“Lieutenant—” he began, but she cut him off.

“You need a break as much as I do, sir, but that hasn’t stopped you. Given the higher metabolism of Caitians compared to humans or Ktarians, you need it more than I do.”

He gave her a faint smile. “Touché, Lieutenant. Why don’t I go get us a couple of field rations?”

“Sounds good, sir.”

“I’ll be right back,” R’Shav told Treigtakda, giving her a pat on the shoulder, before heading back for the Jefferies tube access.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Freedom – The True Cost

Every hour brought new reports and statistics to her desk. Rear Admiral T'Rona read them all thoroughly, remembering each name of those killed, wounded or missing. Command of the Starfleet forces in situ to repel the Talarian Militia had been assigned to Vice Admiral Coburn out of Starbase 375. Headquarters undoubtedly believed that the Starfleet ships would react better to the strategic planning and orders of Coburn, a decorated combat officer, than they would a Border Dog.

Had T'Rona been concerned about her ego or sense of self-importance, she would have taken offense, however such concepts were illogical—more so given their current situation. She was in constant contact with Coburn, supplying him with all the tactical and strategic information she had gathered over the years, so that he knew as much as possible about the region. Whilst he saw to the fighting, it fell to her and everyone else on Star Station Freedom to handle the fallout from the battles and engagements.

Every berth the station had was occupied by damaged ships, whilst their infirmary was overflowing with casualties. Every engineer and technician onboard was on double shifts, whilst vacant quarters had been converted into wards for the injured. They had even taken over the sickbay onboard the cutter *Silverfin*, which was still stuck in dock—the pace of the refit work having slowed due to the station's techs being redistributed to other ships.

Fortunately the attack on Freedom three days earlier hadn't caused serious damage. The surviving crew of the Talarian cruiser were being held in the brig, whilst the ship was in a parking orbit around the base. It had been an odd experience; taking fire from hostiles and being unable to manoeuvre out of the way, she had been onboard Star Station Freedom as Squadron Commander for five years, and in all that time they had never once been fired upon. Due to the attack, Starfleet had assigned the Constellation-Class *U.S.S. Starseeker* to guard the base until hostilities ended. The old ship was well past its prime, but she had shields and weapons and freed up a newer vessel for the front.

The door chimed.

“Enter.”

From where she sat, when the doors parted there didn't appear to be anyone awaiting entry into her office. That combined with the sound of four pairs of skittering limbs let her know exactly who it was, before Lieutenant Commander T8 Blue's head popped up on the other side of her desk. Her Nasat aide had a habit of moving through the station on all eight legs, which allowed him to get up to a good speed and easily weave through the predominately humanoid crew.

He let out a stream of weary clicks, before handing her a PADD. "The latest reports from the front, sir."

"How bad?" she asked.

"Just one ship lost, another four badly damaged. One thousand, six hundred and eighteen wounded. Two hundred and seven dead. However they held the line and gained ground close to the Galen System."

As he gave the brief version of events, she was looking at the datapad—which held the full reports of the battles and outcome, as well as some additional information from Starfleet Intelligence. Blue stood quietly as she looked at the after-action report, which included the extent of damage the starships *Othello*, *Garv*, *Yeithal*, and *St. Enoch* had sustained. The *Garv* could handle its own repairs; the others however would all need time in dock. As for the injured, many would need treatment at Freedom or another facility.

The door chimed again.

"Enter."

This time the doorway was filled with the broad shoulders of Commander Lucas Garrett, Freedom's CO. He strolled in, a tense look on his face and a PADD of his own in hand.

"Admiral, Tate," he said by way of greeting, using Blue's common nickname.

"Commander, is there a problem?"

He reached her desk. "You could say that, sir. I've just been informed by the SMC, that a transport will be arriving at nineteen hundred hours."

"Starfleet Marine Corp?" Blue asked. "Why are they coming here?"

“They have five hundred jarheads ready for deployment. In the meantime they want to use us as a staging area, until they can be distributed to the task force.”

T’Rona’s eyebrow shot upwards. The SMC already had a number of units deployed to help increase their fighting force, especially for ground combat, but she had never been told of additional troops coming to the station. She made a mental note to speak with Vice Admiral Coburn at her earliest convenience.

“Can we manage another five hundred people onboard?” she asked.

“I can get a couple of cargo holds fitted out as barracks, but we’re pushing out cargo capacity as it is. We can’t accommodate more than a couple hundred.”

“What about the transport they’re coming on?” Blue queried.

“I already asked about that. Once it’s beamed them over, its withdrawing back to Starbase 300.”

Blue made an annoyed chirp. “They’re dumping them on us and expecting us to handle it?”

“Yup,” Garrett said simply.

T’Rona was looking at the PADD her attaché had given her, with the list of wounded needing hospitalisation at a facility already beyond its limits. She then looked up to the two officers before her, men whose opinions and input she had come value over the years she had worked with them.

“Commander Garrett, am I correct in assuming the *Starseeker* doesn’t have a full complement onboard?”

He nodded. “Yes sir. There are only one hundred and eighty onboard.”

“Inform Lieutenant Commander J’pohs that we will require the use of the empty quarters. We will take on two hundred of the marines; the remaining will be beamed to the *Starseeker*. Also have Master Chief Colt increase security on the Arcade.



“Commander Blue, check with Doctor Valentine. See how many patients are stable enough for transferral, then have them ready by the time the transport arrives.”

“Aye sir.”

“T’Rona to Yavin,” she called into the intercom.

*“Yavin here, go ahead Admiral,”* the station’s Communications Officer replied promptly.

“Ensign, open up a priority channel to the marine transport and route it to my office.”

*“Understood. Standby.”*

She studied Garrett and Blue, the former was smiling widely whilst the latter’s antennae were twitching excitedly—they both knew what she had in mind. T’Rona was well-known for her meticulous organisation, as well as the highly logical arguments she used to get what she wanted—both highly useful for commanding a Border Service Squadron.

Garrett and Blue departed her office to see to their new tasks, so she was alone when her desktop computer screen came to life. The emblem of the Starfleet Marine Corps appeared, before being quickly replaced by the weathered face of a Bolian Major.

*“This is Major Breis of the Iwo Jima.”*

“Rear Admiral T’Rona, Commander of the Third Cutter Squadron.”

The Bolian’s posture stiffened further—something she had not believed possible. *“Yes ma’am. What can I help you with, ma’am?”*

“Major, I understand you will arrive at Star Station Freedom in several hours, where you will then offload five hundred marines for deployment along the front.”

*“Yes ma’am. Starfleet Command requested reinforcements against the Talarians.”*

"We are presently making arrangements to accommodate them, however we are currently close to maximum occupancy—with so many damaged vessels and injured personnel using up a substantial portion of our resources, and more due in within a few hours.

"As I understand you are returning to Starbase 300 after offloading the marines."

"Yes ma'am," he said again, his brow furled slightly.

"Major, with your vessel empty on the return trip, it would be logical to move as many patients from Freedom to SB300—so that we can continue offering emergency treatment and care to the injured from the frontlines."

*"I'm not sure we can do that, ma'am. My orders were to offload and depart ASAP, another contingent of troops will be arriving for deployment along the Tzenkethi border—in case they try to use the situation to launch an invasion of their own."*

"Major, if we cannot transfer stable patients to another facility, we will not be able to receive any others. The loss of life would be unacceptable. If necessary, I will contact the Sector General for the SMC and lodge a formal request—he owes me several favours. However, I would rather not have to, but rather establish an agreement between us."

Breis hackles were raised, obviously he didn't like the thought of having the Sector General being dragged into things—something she could understand, General Mrr'Shaa was a force to be reckoned with.

*"It won't be necessary to involve the General, ma'am. I'm sure we can hold back for a short time, as we load on as many injured as are able for travel."*

She bowed her head slightly. "Your assistance is appreciated, Major. We will be ready to receive your troops as soon as you arrive."

*"Understood. Iwo Jima out."*

The channel closed and her monitor went dark again. With that task seen too, she looked back at the damage reports of the incoming ships. She then brought up the latest status updates on the ships already in dock, most were still too badly damaged to leave and those that did have warp drive had little

shielding or weaponry, not to mention severe structural damage which would only be further compromised at warp speeds.

“T’Rona to Weir.”

*“Weir here, go ahead,”* the Squadron Maintenance Officer replied with her thick German accent.

“Commander, we have three more damaged ships incoming. Can we make any space for them?”

After a short torrid of German profanities muttered under Weir’s breath, she responded. *“Admiral, we’ve got fourteen ships in dock, all damaged, all needing major repair work. We’re patching up what we can, but it’s all temporary work—enough to get them to the nearest dry-dock. But none are ready for departure.”*

“What if we rotate the ships in dock? Leave the ones that need more extensive work, but have the others orbit the station for regular intervals.”

*“Sir, all ships need extensive work—it’s all just degrees of how worse the situation is on each.”* There was then a heavy sigh over the comlink. *“I assume if they’re coming here, then they can’t get to anywhere else?”*

“Correct.”

*“Very well, Admiral. I will see what I can arrange.”*

“I know you will, Commander. Keep me apprised. T’Rona out.”

Taking a moment, she closed her eyes and followed some basic meditation techniques she knew. The terse situation over the last week had left little time for rest, but she always tried to fit in a couple of brief focusing exercises a day, so as to keep her mind sharp and focused. Vulcans could cope with little sleep over long periods, but even their bodies had limits, and long periods of tension could fray even the strongest resolve.

*“Ops to Admiral T’Rona,”* Lieutenant Commander Areia’s lyrical voice called through the comgrid installed in the ceiling.

She opened her eyes as soon as the channel chirped open. “T’Rona here. Go ahead, Lieutenant Commander.”

*"Sir, we've just received word from the Pisces. They have detected a very faint distress signal in the Yento Sector."*

"The *Cam Rahn Bay*?" she asked, the slightest hint of hope colouring her tone.

The *U.S.S. Cam Rahn Bay* had last been seen three days ago, leading two frigates away from a troop convoy. Since then, all contact had been lost. She had managed to secure the use of the Sabre-Class *Pisces* to search for her missing cutter, but their search had come up empty; until now.

*"They're unsure at present, sir,"* Areia admitted, sounding despondent. Even for a Deltan, she was emotional; her feelings swayed her strongly—although strangely she was also the best poker player on the station. *"It was only a partial transponder code they were able to verify before the signal was cut off, but what they did get matched the Bay."*

She quickly brought up a tactical display and focused in on the Yento Sector. Starfleet was spread lightly in the region, only the *Pisces* and five other ships were patrolling the front in that sector. She then spotted exactly what she needed.

"Commander, the *Bonito* is in close proximity to the *Pisces*. Have them move to assist."

*"Acknowledged."*

"Thank you. T'Rona out."

Rising from her desk, she headed over to the replicator and ordered a Tellarite spice root tea before standing by her viewport for a moment and looking out. From her office she could see the damaged Talarian cruiser, a constant reminder on their current situation. Vice Admiral Bouvier, the Commander of the Border Service, would be awaiting her latest report on the incursion. T'Rona was supplying her with all the reports and statistical data that came through Freedom, as she would continue to do so until the conflict was concluded. Once it was over, she would need to have a serious talk with her superior, once again reiterating her request for reinforcements—something she had been asking Bouvier for since last summer.

*"Yavin to T'Rona."*

“Go ahead, Ensign.”

*“Sir, we’ve just received a priority message from the Yamaguchi; the Talarians have launched a new offensive from the Castal System.”*

She looked over at the large monitor on the bulkhead opposite her viewport, on which was a display of the Squadrons entire operational area. From Castal they were within striking distance of several other colonies, as well as the member planet of Grazar.

“Relay the message on to Starbase 375, then monitor all channels. T’Rona out.”

She turned back to her desk and sat down, there was still a lot to do and not enough time to get it done. On her desktop there were the lists of dead and injured, as well as evacuee status, damage report, intelligence analyses—all of which needed her attention. Stifling a yawn, she picked up the first PADD and set to work once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

## H'krii – Find The Crack

Day eight of the incursion and they were still on silent running. The *H'krii* had been out on their own since the announcement of the *Cyclops*' destruction, conducting covert reconnaissance of Talarian fleet movements and strengths, then sending out comm probes to relay their findings. They hadn't been able to respond to any communiqués as it would give away their position and they'd have to run like hell—the scout ship was no match for the greatly improved weaponry the Republic now had at their disposal.

Lieutenant Commander Ilahn knew all of this; he knew that the *H'krii* had to keep a low profile and monitor what was going on for the benefit of the Squadron and the task force, but they were cut off from the news on how the invasion was progressing, who was winning and how badly they had been hit.

A sigh escaped his lips.

"We'll be alright," Chief Nadi stated from her seat at Ops.

He looked over at his fellow Deltan, who still faced her console, looking over the various sensor displays and readouts. He couldn't help but smile a little at his Chief of the Boat, she was often the one on the crew who tried to boost morale—exactly when it was needed.

"You think?"

She turned back to him and fixed her deep drown eyes onto him, with such intensity that it was hard to refute what she said next. "We may have a bruise or two, the occasional bloody nose, but however bad it is for us, they'll have it worse once the full fleet gets mobile."

"I hope you're right, Nadi."

"You can count on it."

With that she turned back to her displays, whilst he returned his attention to the Conn. With only two of them on the Bridge he preferred to man a console, rather than sit in his designated chair—he only did that when they were at red alert and all eight of the ship's crew were at their stations.

According to what he saw, all was quiet. They remained on course, their speed constant at warp four (any faster and their warp signature would be too easily detected and traced, even with the graviton pulse they were using to disperse their emissions), and the navigational array showed nothing ahead of them. There wasn't much more he could determine from the sensors as they were set to passive sweeps, whilst the *H'krii* itself was on Grey Mode so as to limit their energy output as much as possible.

It wasn't often they took such extreme precautions to maintain a low profile, in spite of that however his crew had put their training into practice without a thought—as though they operated in such a manner every other week. It was times like these that made him even prouder to command the *H'krii* and her small complement than he already was.

They went about their duties under an easy quiet. It was something that Ilahn had always been conscious of when he'd first been given command, he wanted to have a relaxed and easy going feel to his ship, which was why he allowed them a lot of leeway when it came to uniforms (he preferred to work in his red duty shirt and waistcoat, Nadi was just in her duty shirt with the collar open) and didn't stick to the rigours of protocol (he called his crew by their names and they call him by his, well most of them did). No doubt others in the Squadron thought that there were continuous orgies going on throughout the ship, or that they ran through the corridors naked—he'd heard all the jokes possible for a ship staffed just with Deltans.

The quiet was broken with a chirp from Ops. He looked over just as Nadi was answering the alert and studying the latest sensor sweeps. After only a few seconds, she glanced back at him, her face serious.

"Three Talarian ships have just entered sensor range."

"Have they spotted us?"

She looked back at the display and shook her head. "Negative. They are on a heading of two-one-six-mark-zero-zero-three, holding steady at warp six."

Ilahn quickly brought up the star charts for the region and plotted their most likely heading. What he saw puzzled him.

"They're course will take them towards the Hedakas System," he mused aloud. "There's nothing there."

Hedakas was a system on the outskirts of the Republic, but despite its location it was seen as strategically unimportant. It only had a gas giant and three barren moons, none of which contained anything worth mining. Why three ships would be falling back to there was a mystery.

“From the looks of these readings, I’d say they were freighters.”

He turned back to the Operations Manager, an eye brow raised. Tapping the intercom he announced, “All hands to stations.”

Rising from the Conn, he moved to Ops and looked over the readouts, a theory starting to form in his mind. He and Nadi worked on the sensors, squeezing every last iota of data out of the passive sweeps that they could. Three minutes after he had called everyone to their posts, the doors opened and in marched Lieutenant Yinn, immaculately presented in his full uniform.

He glanced at his Tactical console then at Ilahn and Nadi. It took a split second for him to decide and approach them.

“Sit-rep Commander?”

Ilahn didn’t look up from the screens he was monitoring, hoping that his theory was right. “We’ve just picked up three Talarian freighters. I want to monitor their movements; I think we might have found something useful. Keep monitoring sensors, make sure no warships sneak up on us.”

“Aye sir,” his XO replied, turned on his heel and moved over to Tactical, just as Petty Officer Ama stepped onto the Bridge and took her place at Conn.

“Ama, lay in a parallel course to those freighters. Maintain warp four.”

“Yes Ilahn,” the flight controller replied and adjusted their heading.

There was silence on the Bridge as the four Deltans worked quietly, each of them keeping a close eye on their sensors and readouts, just as they had done since the incursion had begun. Ilahn was immensely proud of his little ship and his crew; he had assumed command of the *H’krii* two years ago and been able to handpick his small crew, all of whom had continued to serve under him since the very first day. All-Deltan crews were a rarity in any division of Starfleet, so the chance to serve on such a ship was rare, but he had wanted to let himself and others of his people have a chance to flourish in an environment where they had no restrictions imposed on them by the Oath—



the same way all-Vulcan crews avoided the more turbulent emotions of others and all-Andorian ships were a little more militaristic than most others. Over the last two years, he had shown that his people were more than up to whatever challenge was given to them.

They continued to follow for almost an hour, the freighters remaining just within sensor range due to the differences in their speed. But they kept the Talarian ships in their sights, aware they were now within the Republic's territory, but they had yet to detect any other ships close by. He moved from console to console, helping out the one manning the post and looking over their results himself. The theory that had presented itself seemed to be holding.

"Where are their other ships?" Nadi asked.

There was a moment's pause on the Bridge. They had all been thinking the same thing, but no one had voiced the question until now.

"I think," Ilahn began slowly, attracting the full attention of his crew, "that they've pushed so far and so fast into Federation space, that they've devoted so much of their forces to the advance that their support lines have been left unprotected."

From what they had witnessed, the Talarians had plied at least a third of their Militia into the invasion with the primary object to seize as much territory as possible. As the advanced forces lead the attack, others were being left behind at the planets they had claimed to try and subdue the inhabitants and fortify their locations. It was a full-scale operation, but as Starfleet built its forces to repel them, they would divert more and more of their ships into holding the new boundaries they had created. It left an opening in their flank, one Ilahn hoped they had discovered.

"Ilahn, the freighters have entered the Hedakas System," stated Ama.

He looked at her. "Drop us out of warp and hold position." Then he looked at Nadi. "Ready a class-three probe, launch when ready."

"Aye," she replied, turning back to her controls. Class-three reconnaissance probes was designed to be undetectable, unless you exactly what to look for, and travelled at over warp nine. It would reach the system in a matter of minutes and start to compile data for them. "Probe launched," she announced a moment later.

They only had to wait eight minutes for the probe to start transmitting. Ilahn was standing at Ops when the telemetry came through. He brought up a tactical display of the system, showing the star, gas giant, three moons, and, most importantly, the three freighters. They were heading for the planet, their course direct and holding steady at maximum impulse. The probe slowed down and moved further into the system, as it did several other contacts became obvious in the planets orbit.

"What are those?" he asked.

Yinn got in first. "They look to be orbital weapon platforms. We'll need to get the probe closer in order to get more on their design and capabilities. I'm detecting over sixty of them so far, dispersed in a defensive grid around the planet."

"I'll edge the probe in closer, but we can't get too close or they might detect the scans," reported Nadi.

"As close as you can, Nadi," he instructed, not taking his eyes from the three ships.

They were getting closer and closer to the gas giant, their course never altering, though he did note their speed decreased. What he did find unusual was that they weren't moving to establish a standard orbit. Ama confirmed it a moment later.

"It looks like they're heading into the atmosphere. Why would they do that?"

A chirp for the probe data answered her question.

"I've got a large metallic signature coming from within the upper atmosphere," Nadi exclaimed, her body trembling in anticipation. "It was obscured from our long-range sensors by the gasses, but the probe has gotten close enough for a more thorough sweep."

"It's a supply base," Yinn stated resolutely.

Ilahn smiled. Just as he'd hoped, they had stumbled onto their forward supply depot. No other Talarian bases were this far forward, so none of them would be suited for them to use to press the advance. Without this one base, their supply lines would crumble and the invasion would be halted.

“Nadi, keep the probe as close as possible and get me all the data you can. Yinn, begin assessing the tactical capabilities and threat of those platforms. Ama, keep monitoring for other Talarian ships,” he ordered quickly, moving to the communications board as they all acknowledged.

He set the scrambler, security encoded the message and then hit record. “This is the *H’krii*. We have located what looks to be the Talarian supply base for the invasion, located within the atmosphere of the gas giant in the Hedakas System. There have so far been no patrols or warships in the region, but the planet is defended by weapon platforms in orbit—capabilities of which we are still assessing. All data on the platforms and the base is included with this transmission. We remain undetected and will continue to monitor the situation. All additional information will be sent out every three hours.”

Once he stopped recording, he pulled the isolinear chip onto which it had been recorded and tapped a signaller on the console. As he waited, he had Nadi transfer all the data they had gathered into other chips. A few moments later, Crewman Oron entered the bridge and approached him.

“You signalled, sir?”

“Oron,” he began handing the four chips to him, “install these on the next communications probe.”

“Aye.” With that the handsome Deltan hurried out as quickly as he entered, heading to the launcher bay directly below them.

Ilahn waited for only five minutes before he saw the comm probe was ready. He launched it. The probe would head back for Federation space, programmed on a course towards Star Station Freedom, but once it picked up the proper codes from a Starfleet ship it would zero in on its position and start signalling for retrieval. Like the class-three, it was fast and hard to spot, which would allow it to get to where it needed to go. Afterwards, Starfleet would be able to end this incursion in one short, sharp move.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Bonito – Final Push

Flying in formation, the *Bonito* made up one of the twenty-four ships that had been assigned to destroy the supply base in the Hedakas System. The sole cutter of the Third Squadron still fully operational, the *Bonito* had been assigned to the task force on Admiral T'Rona's insistence. Captain Yolix Va Edar sat in his chair, watching the viewscreen and waited. It had taken only two days for the report from the *H'krii* to reach fleet command and the task force to be pulled together, after all they couldn't risk the Talarians moving their base or reinforcing it with more than just the platforms.

The latest reports showed that there were seventy-nine weaponised satellites orbiting the gas giant, each one was lightly shielded but packed a big punch; plasma missiles and Ferengi phaser banks. They could do a lot of damage, but weren't anywhere as deadly as the weapon platforms the Cardassians had developed in the war—unfortunately they all contained their own reactor, so each satellite was self-sufficient. This would be tough, as they needed to take out the platforms and destroy the base before the Talarians could regroup and counterattack. As the task force did what needed to be done, a dozen starships along the border would launch a new offensive to keep the Republic off balance. They all hoped the diversion would keep the Talarians away from Hedakas long enough for the task force to secure the system.

A system of sensor decoys and misinformation would make it look to the Militia forces that Starfleet still had all their ships in position, but if they tried anything they would find sections of their lines were weak and could be easily broken. They just had no other options. The attack had to be now and had to have just under half their forces committed to it, in order for the plan to work.

Yolix would have felt better going into the battle with a few of his fellow Border Dogs beside him. But with the loss of the *Cyclops* and the *T'Vor*, the *Peregrine* and the *Cam Rahn Bay* both heavily damaged, the *Silverfin* barely operational, and the *H'krii* and *Obion* not really being up for much in the way of combat; the *Bonito* was going in with their Fleet cousins.

The task force had been divided up into six four-ship units, each with their own directions. The *Bonito* was working with the *Yeguko* and *Triumph*, two Miranda-Class ships, and the Intrepid-Class *Serenity*, which was leading their unit. They would be going in ahead of the command unit (the *Gandhi*, *Lakota*, *Hood* and *Akira*); their job was to clear a path through the platforms so that

the heavy-hitters of the task force could take out the base itself. It was risky, as the greatest concentration of platforms was near the base, so they would be facing more than any other unit.

“Captain, incoming signal from the *Gandhi*,” Lieutenant Burke announced from operations.

Yolix rose up on his three spindly legs and clasped two of his hands behind his back, before saying, “Onscreen.”

A moment later a Napean male appeared on the viewscreen. His head was shaved bald, his face was well-lined and his sharp green eyes would be looking into every Captain he was addressing.

*“Units three and four, prepare to enter the system and start immediate jamming of all communications,”* Captain Nahro Sayel, the commander of the task force, instructed, *“then move in and engage your targets. Units five and six, enter on vector bravo and engage. Unit two, assume position and give covering fire. We’ll be heading straight to primary target.”*

Yolix gave a nod. “Burke, signal our confirmation of the orders and tie in with the *Serenity*. Melkon, adjust course and speed. Take us into position. Patel, shields double front, load torpedo bays and all power to phasers.”

The three officers acknowledged the orders and waited. The assault would begin in a matter of seconds, the first units swooping into the system and flooding the region with thoron radiation, which would knock out all subspace communications, cutting the base off from making any distress calls. It was only after that was done would the others pounce, dropping out of warp as close to the planet as possible. The first few seconds and minutes would be the worst, as they faced off against the full force of the platforms before they were able to thin out their numbers.

Yolix looked around at his crew; Quinn Burke, Melkon and Meera Patel all at the customary positions, focused and ready, whilst Commander Carlos Delgado stood next to his chair, the XO every bit as professional and composed as he’d come to expect over the years. Yolix returned to his seat and waited with the rest of his crew.

They didn’t have to wait for long. “We’ve got the signal from unit three,” announced Burke. “The *Serenity* is ordering us to move in.”

“Execute warp jump,” Delgado ordered.

The *Bonito* followed her unit as they leapt up to warp 9.4 for only a few seconds, before dropping down to impulse. They emerged into the system, the gas giant filling the viewscreen and were immediately under fire. Unit two was in a diamond formation, the *Serenity* at the front, the two *Miranda*’s flanking her and the *Bonito* at the rear, but even in her position the incoming fire was fierce.

“Fire at will,” Yolix ordered after barely a second of the ship being buffeted about.

Patel threw everything they had at the platforms, as Melkon kept them barrelling towards the planet. Each ship in their unit was taking a battering, whilst behind them the *Gandhi* led its ships closer to their target, firing on what platforms they could.

Delgado moved over to help out at Tactical, as Yolix gripped the armrests of his chair and continued to press forward their advance. After all the more substantial hits, their shield status was called out, fortunately they hadn’t suffered much in the way of structural damage and no casualties had been reported. Yolix glanced at the viewscreen as the *Serenity* was fired upon by four separate platforms.

“Patel, target the platform to port.”

It took her a second to adjust her targeting and unleash a barrage of phaser fire and photon torpedoes on the satellite. The stationary target took every hit, which punched through its shields and into the hull, exploding a few moments later, taking some of the heat off. But it was too late; a volley of missiles struck the *Serenity* across the forward port quarter, penetrating her shields and into the hull. The sleek starship bucked and lost control. The Intrepid-Class ship hurtled towards the *Bonito*, numerous decks and sections open to space.

“Evasives!” Yolix barked as Melkon slammed them to port.

Narrowly missing the out of control ship, the Benzite righted their course and kept them in formation.

Yolix knew they couldn’t worry about the other ship, they had to press forward. “Melkon, move us forward. Burke, contact the unit, tell them to

form up on us and lay down a spread of torpedoes—it'll either blind or destroy them, either way it works for us."

"Aye sir," she called over the din of battle. "Sir, the *Gandhi* is asking for a status report."

"Tell them we're assume charge of the unit and moving into position."

"Acknowledged."

Ahead of them the three remaining ships of their unit launched their torpedoes. Most found a target, but those that didn't were detonated by those that did, the explosions playing havoc with the targeting sensors of the platforms. The three ships followed up with multiple phaser arcs, finishing off the satellites that hadn't been completely destroyed. By the time they were finished the shaking and pounding of enemy weapons was substantially diminished.

"Report," he called.

"We've opened a hole in the grid, sir," replied Patel.

"Commander, inform the *Gandhi* they are clear to proceed. Melkon, head to secondary targets."

"Heading one-four-four-mark-oh-one-three," the Conn Officer confirmed.

As the *Bonito*, *Yeguko* and *Triumph* veered off heading to engage the nearest platforms, the *Gandhi* led her unit through the debris that was left by the satellites and into the upper atmosphere, their phasers and torpedoes firing unabashedly. Yolix ignored them for the time being; instead he focused on what was ahead of them. There were still dozens of active platforms to take care of.

Working together, the three ships targeted each platform they came to and unleashed everything they had. Their shields taking the full brunt of the assault, but managed to hold out, whilst they used up their stock of torpedoes and relied on their phasers. They were luckier than many others in the task force, as some took serious blows that saw them crippled and adrift or forced to withdraw, many calling for help as they lost control, explosions rippling across the ship. Despite his want to help those ships in need, as he had done

for decades as a loyal officer of the Border Service, he had to ignore the distress calls.

When they were down to the last two dozen platforms, the *Gandhi*, *Lakota*, *Hood* and *Akira* emerged from the planets turbulent atmosphere, as the supply base fell from its low orbit. Deep within the atmosphere, as the pressure increased, the base would be crushed and compacted into something the size of a runabout.

It wasn't long until all seventy-nine platforms were either destroyed or disabled. With the platforms no longer a threat and the base out of commission, the Hedakas System was quiet once again.

Yolix rose from his seat and moved over to Ops. "Status of the task force?"

Burke took a few moments to compile data from sensors and communications, whilst all the other stations checked in with other sections of the ship and assessed just how bad the damage was.

"Five ships destroyed, six more have been severely damaged, seven more have taken moderate damage," Burke told the quiet Bridge. The comm system chirped and she answered it. "Incoming hail from the *Gandhi*."

Sayel's face filled the monitor again, but this time he had a bloody gash above his right eye, with dark red rivulets running down his face. *"I've just heard from the diversion task force, they need reinforcements. All ships that are still combat capable, proceed to nav-point alpha and prepare to move out. Bonito, Asgard, remain on site to assist the damaged ships and recover escape pods—support ships will arrive shortly to assist with search and rescue."*

"Understood, Captain Sayel. We'll see to things here," Yolix confirmed.

*"I know you will, Captain Yolix. Gandhi out."*

On the viewscreen, eleven starships moved away from the gas giant, heading to the muster point on the outer edge of the system before they departed. The two remaining ships have a lot to see too, but now they were in the Border Services realm of expertise.

Yolix turned to Ops. "Burke, scan all damaged ships, assess stability of life support and warp drives, then prioritise rescue and recovery on those ships that are in the worst shape."



“Scans already underway, sir,” she replied, moving over to the hooded viewer.

He gave the faintest approximation of a smile his face could manage, then looked at Delgado. “Inform the *Asgard* that we’ll run triage, we’ll let them know in a moment what ships to begin with.”

“I’ll have Watters prep all SAR-Op teams,” the Commander replied, moving over to one of the mission ops consoles that flanked the MSD.

He then looked at Patel. “Send out a broadband message to all escape pods. Have them give you an assessment of damage and injuries, then route that to Ops. Tell them we will get to them ASAP, but they are to hang tight for the time being. Also keep monitoring sensors, make sure the Talarians don’t double back on us.”

“Shall I prep recon probes to monitor the far side of the system?”

“Good idea, Lieutenant.”

Yolix then stepped down towards the Conn. “How are you doing, Lieutenant?” he asked the young Benzite at the controls.

Melkon gave him a confident nod. “I’ve got secondary nav-points set for all damaged ships and informed the *Asgard* helmsman as well, once we have priorities we’ll be ready to move.”

“Nice work, Mr Melkon.”

“Captain,” Burke called, “I’ve assembled the triage list and transmitted it to the *Asgard*. We’ll start with the *O’Rourke* and they’ll take the *Serenity*.”

“Very well. Let’s get to work,” the old Border Dog instructed.

\* \* \* \* \*

**END**