

# **STAR TREK: SWIFTFIRE**

*The True*

By Jay L.R.

In the infinite expanse of space there are things that the human mind cannot imagine or comprehend, it is a realm of endless possibilities. A place of amazing beauty and a place of terrifying danger, and nowhere showed both of these like the region of space located in the Alpha Quadrant known as the Badlands. From a distant it appears like a stunning golden nebula but when you get closer you see that it is really a huge cloud of fire. The beauty of the swirling colours, gold, yellow, red, orange, were almost hypnotic. But this didn't hide the danger of the thousands of plasma storms that plagued the region. Against this backdrop of fire was something so alien, so out of place that it stood out like an Andorian in a group of sheep. The sleek grey hull of an unusual starship appeared to slice through the flames. The beauty of the Badlands even penetrated the alien vessel; the ships windows reflected its fiery beauty back into space. The Badlands also showed the ship the danger it was in. As the ship passed by a funnel of plasma, the funnel lashed out, sending a bolt of fire in multiple directions, one of the bolts smashed against the ships shields, making them flare brightly. It was almost like the Badlands was reminding the ship that it was insignificant and that the only reason it continued on was because the Badlands allowed it to.

On the bridge of the starship the Captain Jonathan Masters looked to his first officer. "Who would be crazy enough to take a heavy cruiser into the heart of the Badlands?"

"We would be, captain," replied Commander Core.

Captain Masters shook his head and looked to the man seated to the other side of him from his XO.

"I don't know how you could have lived here."

The man tugged at his overly black clothes.

"We didn't have much choice. We were outlaws in Federation and Cardassian space. The Badlands were perfect place for the Maquis to hide," said the man.

"But it's so dangerous and unpredictable. You must have lost quite a few ships to the storms," said Commander Core.

"I can only think of one Maquis ship ever disappearing in the Badlands."

"One ship! You're kidding?"

"Dead serious," assured Patol. "It was as if the Badlands were sympathetic to our cause. It hid us, protected us, it even provided us with a place to live. The number of times our ships escaped because the Badlands disabled or destroyed pursuing ships..."

"Are you saying that the Badlands is a sentient being, Mr Patol?" asked Masters.

"Maybe not the Badlands itself but an advanced lifeform could live here, much like in the Bajoran wormhole. On the other hand, I've heard of sentient lifeforms that appeared to be things like nebulae before, why can't the Badlands?"

Commander Core gave Mr Patol a look of disbelief.

"However I doubt it," continued Mr Patol. "I would say that the universe shines on those who fight the good fight."

Masters suspected that part of the reason the Maquis suffered very few losses, if Patol was correct, was that they relied on smaller vessels, which were better suited for traversing the Badlands.

"Ever been in the Badlands before?" asked Core to Masters. "This is my first time."

Masters nodded. "A few years back we, the previous *Swiftfire*, took part in a search operation looking for a missing ship in here."

"What ship?"

Masters thought about it for several seconds. “Without looking it up I couldn’t tell you. I do know that we didn’t find it.”

“You do tend to remember the ones that have a happier ending,” said Core.

“Anything else you quickly push out. It makes it easier to get on with life.”

“It was the USS *Voyager*,” said Patol. “The ship you were searching for.”

“Well, I’ll take your word for it,” said Masters. He had no reason to doubt Patol was correct, but the name still did not jump out to him.

The *Swiftfire* shook again.

“Another discharge has hit us. The metaphasic shielding is still stable,” reported Lieutenant Letac.

The *Swiftfire* had specially adapted metaphasic shielding for its mission into the Badlands. Several years ago metaphasic shields were an experimental shield design so that a ship could withstand intense heat. It was successfully used by the USS *Enterprise-D* to get close to a sun and released a solar flare to destroy a pursuing Borg starship. While the *Swiftfire* was not going into a sun it was going into a sea of fire. Without the metaphasic shielding the *Swiftfire* would have little chance in the Badlands. Its size was its Achilles heel in this situation, especially when they went into the more intense and unstable regions, which was exactly what their mission entailed.

The metaphasic shielding did have a downside; it was power extremely hungry, even for a ship that had two warp cores feeding it. The metaphasic shields were separate units from the ship’s usual shield generators but if they overloaded they would most likely take down the entire shield grid.

“We have reached the coordinates, captain,” reported the flight controller.

“Hold position, ensign. Mr Patol, do you have an idea what we are looking for?”

“Some sort of marker, a buoy maybe...something to direct us to the base.”

“Lieutenant Letac, scan the area for anything out of the ordinary.”

The *Swiftfire* held position while its sensors scanned the immediate vicinity for the object it was looking for. Finally the lieutenant found something.

“Captain, I have found what appears to be a starship’s log buoy. It’s an older model and according to our database it doesn’t match any known vessel lost in the Badlands.”

“That must be it. Beam it to cargo bay 4. Mr Patol, let’s go and see if this is what we’re looking for.”

Brendan Patol examined the device. He was not a technological expert but he had dealt with a lot of similar technology in his time with the Maquis. It was recognisably Federation technology, only older than what was standard. The device was a rather plain looking object, somewhat like him he mused. He was often referred to as average in appearance. It was something that had become very handy in his current profession. The ability to disappear in a crowd or be unremarkable enough that people were not sure you were at a certain place at a certain time was very useful.

“It’s an old Starfleet device, dating from the late 23rd, early 24<sup>th</sup> century, and typical Maquis equipment. This was probably “liberated” from one of the nearby scrap yards.” He opened up a panel the size of the device and started to punch buttons. “Maquis code, high level one. This has to be it. Whoa, it’s a holorecording!”

While holographic technology was not new it was uncommon for people to record messages as holorecordings, as it required a lot of memory and limited the places where you could display it.

“We have a holodeck just down the corridor. We should view it there,” said Captain Masters.

Patol took out the memory core and handed it to Masters and they made their way towards the holodeck. This was the first time he had spent much time with Captain Masters. The only other time he met him was after his assignment on the *Swiftfire* several months earlier. Despite that he knew a lot about the man from reading his files. The ‘Hero of Hyralan’, as some people called him, though in truth he had probably done several more heroic deeds during the current war with the Dominion.

From his files he was a good Starfleet officer, skilled, cunning, clever and resourceful. Though Patol knew you never really knew someone until you spent time with them, but he had come to surmise that the files were accurate. He was an officer who would go far in Starfleet, much like his father.

Once they got to the holodeck Masters quickly uploaded the data to the computer.

“*Unable to display due to file encryption,*” said the monotone computer voice.

“Mr Patol, if you would please decode it.”

“Certainly.”

He went up to the controls and quickly started to decode the data. In the middle of the room an image appeared, it was of a tall middle-aged black man. He was dressed in the typical brown civilian clothes that the Maquis wore. Patol easily recognised him as the ex-Starfleet commander, Calvin Hudson. He looked slightly different from when he had last seen him, this image was most likely much closer to his final days. He had more lines on his faces; his eyes were darker and more solemn. His eyes showed that he had seen a lot of conflict and death and that it weighed heavily on him.

“It’s ready,” he said.

“Computer, play recording.”

As Hudson came to life a smile came to his solemn face.

“I see you have found the recording, Brendan. If you are listening to this then something has happened to me. Whether I meet my fate at the hands of the Cardassians, the Federation, another faction of the Maquis or by accident it no longer matters, all that matters is that the Maquis are in trouble.” Hudson stepped to the side. “Here I give you the Maquis last resort, last stronghold and possibly the birth place for a new stronger Maquis.”

A three dimensional representation of the Badlands appeared next to him.

“The Badlands, an area of severe plasma storm activity, for a long time it was thought to be too unpredictable and dangerous to traverse. A place where only the foolish or the damned would dare venture and like the Bajorans before us it has aided us in our struggle for freedom by providing us with shelter and protection against those that would hunt us. In our darkest hour the Badlands will again protect us. Near where I left this recording is an area of intense storms, non-traversable, empty. Wrong. Several years ago I discovered this.”

A planetoid appeared. Next to it a box with data on the planetoid also appeared. Patol quickly read it as he listened.

“A rogue planetoid that somehow found its way into the heart of the Badlands. It sits in a stable area in the middle of these storms, in the eye. It is a place where the sky is a never-ending fire, where the chaotic patterns swirl in the sky like a poetic dance, a place where I could retire in peace.”

The hologram’s eyes gazed up into space as he described the sky. Then he looked back down, as if his dream was rudely interrupted.

“But that is just a pipe dream of an aging man. With some help I built a base on the planetoid and turned it into a place where the Maquis could retreat to that would be

safe and secure from our enemies. A place we could recuperate and rebuild before returning to the fight. The important thing is getting to it. As you can see the plasma storms around the planet are particularly violent, but..."

There was a sudden and sustained heavy vibration through the ship. Patol stumbled as he struggled to keep on his feet.

"Is it me or are the discharges getting worse?" he asked.

He looked to see a concerned look on Masters' face. "That didn't feel like a plasma discharge."

"*Captain to the bridge,*" came Commander Core's voice over the ship's intercom. The tone in her voice did not ease Patol's tension.

"Keeping reviewing this information, Mr Patol," ordered the captain as he headed out of the holodeck.

Patol watched him leave as another vibration shook the deck. He turned back to the recording, which had continued unperturbed.

"...get a kick out of the name. I've named the base, Phoenix's Roost. Hopefully that will prove to be an apt name..."

"We're getting a priority update from Starfleet Command," said Lieutenant Letac. "Two wings of Dominion ships have entered the Badlands. Three Jem'Hadar battle cruisers and a dozen attack ships. The message was sent thirty-four minutes ago."

The *Swiftfire* was too deep inside the Badlands to maintain communications with outside units. To help facilitate communications the ship had seeded relay probes behind it, which allowed messages to be sent to the ship. However, the process was not instantaneous as each relay that received the message then had to check the message was intact before sending it on. So depending on the interference between the individual relays and then to the *Swiftfire* influenced the time it took.

"Damn, they're bringing battle cruisers into the Badlands! They are a lot bigger than us and we're having trouble making it through here, even with the extra thrusters, metaphasic shielding, increased structure integrity and inertial dampening," said Core.

The *Swiftfire* had undergone some modifications for its mission to allow it to travel as deep into the Badlands as it had. Large ships had problems with safely traversing the Badlands due to the storms and Core had hoped that the Jem'Hadar would be reluctant to bring in their larger cruiser in to hunt for them.

"It can be assumed that the division by the rest of Task Force 59 has failed and the Dominion has detected our entrance into the Badlands," said Karak.

The rest of Task Force 59, which was the unit the *Swiftfire* was assigned to, was meant to be running an operation to distract the Dominion from the ship going into the Badlands. The *Swiftfire* had left a squadron and a platoon of Marines to assist in that mission. It now seemed that that operation was a waste of time.

"Not much chance of them finding us though," said Ensign Cole.

"Dominion sensors are very advanced. So the chances of them finding us are not as low as you may believe. Plus the fact we are stationary increases those odds," stated Karak.

"You really are a "glass in half empty" type of guy, aren't you Smiley?" said Letac.

"If you are saying that I always look at the negative side of a situation you are incorrect. I merely state the facts."

"Karak is right. Keep an eye out for any surprise arrivals," said Commander Core.

Just as she finished the entire ship shook. Unlike the previous times the shaking was harder and longer.

"Whoa, what was that?" she asked.

“I’m detecting gravitational anomalies,” reported Lieutenant Letac. She turned to talk to Letac. “Can you determine the source?”  
“No need, Commander,” said Lt. Commander Whitechapel. Core looked at Whitechapel, who motioned to the viewscreen. She looked. Directly ahead from a central point, space rippled in shades of blue in a sickening contrast to the fiery colours of the Badlands.  
Core immediately hit the internal communications button. “Captain to the bridge.”

“What the hell is that?” asked Masters as soon as he stepped onto the bridge.  
“It’s a spatial vortex. It is responsible for messing with the gravity in this area. It has been increasing at a steady rate.”  
“A spatial vortex in the middle of the Badlands? That’s new. What can you tell me about it?”  
“Not much, sir. The plasma activity is fouling up my readings. We need to be closer before I can get a clearer reading.”  
“Is it safe to move any closer?” asked Masters as he sat in his captain’s chair.  
“It is expanding at a rate which we can easily account for,” said Letac.  
Masters knew that investigation any type of phenomenon had risks attached. His science officer seemed confident that in this case the risks were manageable. At least for a change they would be exploring rather than preparing for battle. “Okay. Ensign Cole, close distance with the anomaly. Slowly, ensign,” he clarified.

The *Swiftfire* carefully edged closer to the vortex and the vortex expanded closer towards the *Swiftfire*.  
“Oh my! This thing has temporal properties!” exclaimed Letac.  
“So this is a vortex that traverses space and time?” asked Core  
“And is artificially made,” added Letac.  
“You’re kidding? Who would be advanced enough to create something like this?” asked Whitechapel.  
“No one we know,” replied Core.  
“So is it from the past or future?” asked Masters.  
“Still trying to figure that out,” replied Letac.  
“If it is artificial, then logically someone or something should be coming through,” commented Cole.  
“It is not large enough,” said Letac.  
“Not big enough! It’s huge!” said Cole.  
“She is referring to the exit point, which is too small for a shuttle to get through at the moment. It is also the cause of all the gravitational disturbances. The rest is what you humans refer to as “eye-candy”,” said Karak.  
“Karak is right. That is part of the reason it is safe to get close to it. The vortex terminus has been a stable size since it appeared.  
Suddenly three rapid shockwaves struck the *Swiftfire*. Masters grabbed his armrests to steady himself.  
“Uh oh,” said Letac.  
“Uh oh?” questioned Core concerned.  
“I might have spoken too soon. I’m reading a large surge in energy around the terminus. I think...”  
The ship suddenly lurched violently. Nearly everyone on the bridge was thrown off their seats and away from their stations.  
“Report!” said Masters as he pulled himself back onto his chair.

“The terminus has fully opened. Its gravity is increasing. It is sucking everything towards it, including us!”

Masters barely registered what Letac had said as he stared at the hellish chaos displayed on the viewscreen. Like churning water going down a plug hole the superheated plasma from the surrounding storms were being sucked towards the terminus. A wave of plasma swept over the *Swiftfire*. As it eclipsed the viewscreen, everyone but Karak flinched. He imagined it was like been in fire itself. It seemed like she could touch the individual flames, the individual colours as they moved randomly over the screen but it appeared like an intricate dance. The ship shook again, bringing back the crew’s attention.

“I think it’s time to beat a hasty retreat,” suggested Core.

Masters could not agree more. Whatever it was he had no wish to enter it or be displaced in time. “Helm, full reverse!” he ordered.

“We are still being drawn in. We don’t have the reverse thrust to counter the pull,” said Ensign Cole.

“Turn the ship around; our extra thrusters should do the job.”

To aid the ship in the Badlands extra thrusters had been fixed to the hull at various locations, including the top of the engineering spars and on the nacelles. The thrusters made the already fairly manoeuvrable *Akira* class vessel even more so. At first Ensign Cole had difficulty with the system often over doing the manoeuvre and in one instance he nearly spun the ship in a complete circle by accident. Thankfully he had got use to them.

Masters watched the Badlands spin as the young flight controller reoriented the ship. The ship now appeared to be fighting against the tide as funnels of plasma whipped around the ship towards the vortex behind them.

“Turn complete. Impulse engines at full power,” commented Cole. “We’re pulling away!”

“We have incoming!” reported Whitechapel.

“On screen.”

The viewscreen switched back to show the vortex. From within shapes started to form and then out of the chaos three starships appeared.

“Holy...”

“Transition nearly complete,” said the helmsman.

“Excellent. Prepare the weapons, I desire to be the first one to hand out punishment to these Federation worms,” ordered VenQa’ Var’tak.

Var’tak was the VenQa’ of the powerful Vendoth battle cruiser, *Pri’tak*. The ship was his instrument in which he would right the wrongs that had been done to his people. It was a weapon of honour that would glorify all those that served within it.

Var’tak could not help but smile at the thought. While honour, justice and order were important to him as they were the cornerstones of the Vendoth psyche they were secondary to him. What he really valued was the slaughter, the godlike power to take life and to rain down unimaginable destruction and terror. To cleanse the unworthy before him was what he sought in command.

He was known as one of the most effective commanders in the Vendoth fleet. He had brought order to a dozen planets in his career and he had done this by whatever means necessary. He had slaughtered millions of sentient beings in the process but he was successful and often little else mattered. He was also just as brutal with his subordinates and did not accept failure. This had also earned him a well deserved reputation as one of the most brutal commanders in the fleet.

His methods had gained him much success, possibly too much. Had had recently suffered a setback in his career when he was demoted from commanding a dreadnought to the VenQa' of a battle cruiser. It was apparently due to his overzealousness in the prosecution of a mission that led to his downfall but he had another theory. He was a threat to the Roj Che'dak, the head of the military. She was jealous of his success and worried that he would replace her so had made sure to retard his progress. It mattered not, no one would deny Var'tak want would be his.

Var'tak gripped onto his chair as the ship shook around him.

"Report!" he growled.

"We have encountered a gravitational surge, VenQa'. The computer indicates we can expect more as we near the exit point," reported his VenQe'.

As if to push the point the ship shook again.

"VenQa', we are about to exit the vortex."

Var'tak could imagine the infidel's homeworld and the panic it would be in when the armada appeared out of nowhere right on top of them. The carnage would be beautiful.

"For the glory of the Roj Che'dak!" he said sarcastically. There was only one person he would wish glory for and that was himself.

VenQe' Che'va stood to the right, slightly behind VenQa' Var'tak. As the executive officer of the *Pri'tak* this was his place, by his commander's side. He stood silently as the mighty battle cruiser made its transition to its new hunting group. The Vendoth were about extend their will over a new domain, a new galaxy and the *Pri'tak* would be part of that first thrust.

He heard the helmsman notify the VenQa' of the ship immediate exit from the transition. He glanced down to VenQa' Var'tak. A sadistic smile was smeared across his face, no doubt dreaming of the misery and suffering he would inflict on this new enemy. All Che'va could feel was the heavy weight on his shoulders. Something had happened or rather nothing had happened. He had been given a difficult but important task to complete and it seemed that his plans had failed. All was not lost however; he still could complete his mission he would just need to devise a new plan. He could not fail; his conscience would not let him.

Var'tak hungrily watched the viewscreen as the ship burst through the terminus into the distant galaxy known as the Milky Way. However, instead of the sea of stars with a lush planet spinning before them they exited into a realm of fire.

"What? Report!" yelled Var'tak.

"Severe plasma activity in all directions. No sign of Earth. I'm trying to get a fix on our location but sensors are not optimised for this environment."

Var'tak felt his glory slip away and his fury rise. The spines that run along and down the middle of his head started to rise, showing his anger. He could sense the fear of the officers around him as they saw this sign. His wrath was rarely avoided.

"I have a ship on sensors. It is a Starfleet vessel."

"Show me," growled Var'tak.

A grey streamlined ship appeared. It was heading away from them, running like a guilty child caught in the act.

"Starfleet," Var'tak said with utter disgust. "Somehow they have pulled us out of our transit to Earth."

"VenQa', two other ships have exited behind us. It's the *Tava'* and *Av'ran'*."

Var'tak pounded his fist on the armrest of his chair. "Target all weapons on that ship and destroy it!" he yelled. "Signal the other ships to stay back, this is our kill."

"The lead vessel is powering up weapons!" called out Whitechapel.

"Ensign, get us out of here," ordered Masters

"I'm trying but that vortex is slowing us down!"

"They're firing!"

"Evasive manoeuvres!"

Yellow balls of energy lanced out of several weapon emplacements on the ship. To Masters' surprise all the balls of energy missed by a considerable distance. More than could be attributed to the evasive manoeuvres Cole would have put the ship in.

"They've missed!" said Whitechapel.

"Either they're bad shots or the Badlands is fouling their targeting sensors," guessed Commander Core.

"They are closing on us fast. Soon they'll be close enough they can touch the hull," said Letac.

They were in a bad situation. Their ship was struggling to get away from the vortex while the hostile vessels had more than enough to make it clear and catch them. They were also outnumbered three to one. On their current course it was hard to see them making out of this one. Then an idea struck him.

"The vortex, is it still there?"

"Yes."

His plan was not one he particularly wanted to order. It was crazy and to put it lightly desperate, but he could not think of another solution.

"On my mark cut engines and fire the forward thrusters upwards and the rear thrusters downwards."

"That would point us back towards the vortex," pointed out Core.

"I know," he said. "We can't run from them but we can run to them."

He saw the realisation of his plan on his first officer's face. A grim smile came to her face as she nodded her acceptance of his plan. Not that it mattered if she did not, Starfleet vessels were not a democracy, but it was a nice gesture none-the-less.

"Are you ready, ensign?"

Cole replied a hesitant, "yes."

Masters took a deep breath. He could not afford to waste too much time so he gave the order. "Mark."

"You fool," screamed Var'tak. "You have missed!"

"The plasma storms are interfering..."

"Don't give me excuses," he threatened as he stood from his command seat.

"Yes VenQa'. We are closing on the starship. We will be at point blank range in a moment. We will not miss."

"For your sake you better not."

They closed on the Starfleet ship thanks to its slow forward momentum. The ship might have stop him from reaching the Federation capital but it would come at the cost of their lives, as meagre as they were.

The *Pri'tak's* progress towards the vessel seemed agonisingly slow to Var'tak. He wanted a quick conclusion to this matter. The sooner it was destroyed the sooner they could figure out where they were and what to do next. They were no particularly on top of the ship.

"Firing," reported the tactical officer.

Several gold balls of energy shot into view and closed on the Starfleet vessel. Then something unexpected happened. The ship noticeably slowed and spun. The *Pri'tak's* fire passed in front, which was now the rear of the craft. They had missed again.

"The ship...it...I couldn't..." cried the weapons' officer in a panic.

"They have reversed their direction," said head Doth on the bridge. "Their new heading is sending them back towards the vortex."

"It is still open? They are trying to strike at the homeworld. The audacity! Collapse the vortex with an anti-graviton pulse," ordered Var'tak.

"But it will create a large gravitational shockwave, we could receive damage," replied the Doth.

Var'tak spun around and stared daggers at the Doth. The scientist was quick to avert his gaze and take a placatory stance.

"Do not question my orders! Minor damage to us is preferable than allowing an enemy warship to launch a sneak attack on our homeworld. Fire the pulse, NOW!"

"20 seconds until we hit the vortex," said Letac as she struggled to keep her seat as the ship rocked.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Commander Core.

"No, but anywhere is better than here," replied Masters.

The turbolift at the back of the bridge opened and out stepped Patol.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

"It's our way out of here," said Masters succulently.

"Hostile ships have turned and are in pursuit," said Karak.

"Hostile ships? Has the Dominion found us?" asked Patol.

"No, we're under attack by unknown hostile vessels. They came through that vortex we're about to go through," filled in Core.

"Where does that vortex go?"

"We're about to find out," said Masters.

"He left out 'when'. We'll also find out 'when' we are."

Masters stole a look at Patol as what Core said sank in.

"Oh. I definitely missed a lot when I was off the bridge."

"We have passed the point of no return, captain," reported Letac. "It's now impossible to break free of the vortex's gravitational pull."

Masters had his eyes focused on the vortex as it filled the viewscreen. It was too late for a change of heart now; they were locked into this course of action. Wherever the hostile ships had come from they were now going. He just hoped that they would not find even more hostile warships at their destination...wherever and whenever that was.

Suddenly an energy pulse passed the *Swiftfire* and hit the vortex. The vortex collapsed in on itself. The resulting shockwave hit the *Swiftfire* so hard that it threw everyone on the bridge around like ragdolls.

Masters felt as if his chair had dropped out from under him and he scrambled to grab something as he went flying. He crashed heavily onto the floor. His vision went blurry for a second and everything seemed to slow down. He was suddenly very aware of his breathing and he felt his eyes grow heavy.

"This isn't the right time for a nap," cut a voice through the haze around him.

Masters looked up and saw a human Starfleet captain with short, black, curly hair. He immediately recognised him as anything but human or a Starfleet officer. The being reached down and Masters stretched out to take his hand. The ship shook again.

and Masters' hand fell onto something padded. When he looked up he saw he was pulling himself up using the seat of his chair.

Masters looked around him. Everyone seemed to be picking themselves off the ground but Whitechapel who looked like she had never left her station.

Core was by his side offering her help, he waved her off as he got back into his chair. Masters could not think of a part of his body that did not ache and he could taste blood in his mouth, but apart from that he was fine.

"The vortex! It's gone!" said Whitechapel in shock.

"Impulse and warp engines are damaged, warp engines are offline. Three quarters impulse is the best we can do," said Cole.

"I am getting damage reports from all over the ship," said Karak. "Casualty reports are also coming in."

"We'll get to that when we get out of here," said Masters.

"How?" asked Core.

"Well, we are going to have to plough our way through."

"Captain, two of those ships are the size of *D'deridex* warbirds!" said Letac.

"If you have a better plan I'm listening. We can't go in any other direction. We are in a storm corridor; the other way out is towards Cardassian space. If we run that way when we exit we'll have to run a gauntlet of Dominion warships."

"If we make it that far. We have Dominion ships in the Badlands looking for us. The report came in just before the vortex appeared," explained Core.

"Another reason why we have to go through those hostile ships. Commander Whitechapel, I want a full torpedo spread and light them up with our phasers."

The *Swiftfire* fired its impressive weapons. No less than twelve torpedos and eight phaser blasts came from the *Swiftfire* and impacted on the two leading enemy ships.

"Damage?"

"We didn't penetrate their shields. I don't believe it, their shields...where we hit...they have gone solid."

"Solid?" asked Masters.

"Yes, like a shell. I've never seen anything like it before."

The hostile ships returned fire; all went wide of the *Swiftfire*.

"Fire another spread. Hit the solid areas."

The *Swiftfire* started to fire more torpedoes. The hostile ships scored their first hit right on the upper forward shields. Before Masters' eyes the area the weapon impacted went solid. Two torpedoes hit the solid area and all he saw was an expanding ball of fire. The shockwave rumbled through the *Swiftfire*. While not as violent as the previous shockwave this one was more destructive.

"What the hell just happened?"

"The shields went solid where the enemy hit and the torpedoes impacted with it. Hull breaches all along the leading edge. The dorsal port phaser array is offline. Shields are still up but the forward is down to 57%."

"We're not going to make it," said Ensign Cole as he shook his head in disbelief.

"I am detecting a break in the storm. Bearing 034, Mark 310," reported Karak.

"That's towards the base," said Mr. Patol. "How is that possible? It should be surrounded by storms."

"The gravitational shockwave must have put the hole in it. But it is closing as the effects wear off."

"Great it's closing. Helm, all speed toward it. Put everything you can into shields."

The *Swiftfire* headed for a break in the storm with the hostile ships in close pursuit.

“They appear to be heading for a gap in the plasma storms.”

“There is no way we can catch them, VenQa’,” reported the helmsman.

“Fine. Tell the *Av’ran* to leave its position and catch them.” Var’tak did not attempt to hide his disappointment in not getting the kill.

The small scout ship broke formation and accelerated quickly past his ship and after the retreating Starfleet vessel.

The *Swiftfire* rocked as it received weapons hit on its aft shields.

“Most of the aft shield is solid.”

“Will they crack it?” asked Masters.

“Not the way they are firing. They are still missing a lot. By the time they hit again the effect has worn off considerably. But as they get closer they are hitting more.”

“We’re not going to make it through, Captain. The gap is closing too fast,” said Cole.

“Head straight for it, ensign.”

“Sir, there are a number of plasma funnels in our...”

“Then it’s time to really test these metaphasic shields.”

The *Swiftfire* drove through a plasma funnel.

“We’re still not going to make it,” said Letac.

“It might not be a bad thing. Their shields might not be able to stand the pressure and the heat,” suggested Core. “They are definitely not prepared to be operating in this environment.”

Masters hoped she was right. “Time until the storms collide?”

“15 seconds.”

“All power to shields, even weapons. It’s not like we can hit them with our shields the way they are.”

The storm fronts collided with brutal force. The *Swiftfire* shook violently.

“Shields holding!” reported Letac as she monitored the metaphasic shields.

Sparks exploded out of one of the unattended consoles.

“Several EPS units have overloaded.”

“The hostile ship, is it still with us?”

“She’s tucked in tight behind us, she’s riding in our wake. Their shields have gone totally solid but they have not cracked. At least she can’t fire on us anymore.”

“Great just when we have no weapons. Expand our shields and push her into the open,” he ordered.

The *Swiftfire* sliced through the sea of fire with the smaller hostile ship nestled tightly below and behind it. The *Swiftfire*’s shields were flaring as it was bombarded by superheated plasma. The *Swiftfire*’s shield expanded until it hit the solid shell of the hostile ships shields. The hostile ship pushed back but the *Swiftfire*’s shields continued to push. Suddenly cracks started to appear on the hostile ships shield. The ship’s captain realised he was risking cracking open his shields so he stop pushing back. The hostile ship, without any opposing force got a severe shove from the *Swiftfire*’s shields pushing it clear of the *Swiftfire* wake.

Masters watched as it disappeared into the storm.

“Finally we catch a break. How long until we’re clear?”

“Thirty seconds, Captain,” reported Letac.

The *Swiftfire* finally cleared the storm and entered an area of tranquillity. Directly ahead was a planetoid totally surrounded by plasma storms.

“That’s it,” said Mr. Patol. “That’s Hudson’s hidden base.”

“Take us into orbit,” he ordered.

“Captain, we are getting a request for an authorisation code from the planet,” reported Karak not sounding the least bit surprised.

“Mr. Patol. Have a look see if it is a Maquis transmission.”

Mr. Patol got out of the seat he had taken on one of the unmanned side stations and quickly made his way to Letac station.

Suddenly the ship lurched.

“The hostile ship! It made it!”

The ship lurched again as it was hit by weapon’s fire.

“Aft shields are failing,” said Whitechapel.

“Transfer energy from the forward shields. We need weapons up now.”

Masters watched the viewscreen as the hostile ship fired on the *Swiftfire*. Suddenly out of nowhere phaser fire hit the enemy ship.

“Was that us?” he asked.

“No,” said Whitechapel. “It came from orbit of the planet. I’m detecting several satellites in orbit. They are targeting and firing on the enemy ship. More are decloaking!”

The hostile ship was taken by surprise by its new attackers. Its firing paused as several satellites fired phasers and torpedoes at the vessel. The ship’s shields already weakened from the trip through the plasma storms shattered. Phaser blasts cut into the ship and photon torpedoes left craters in the hull. The ship started to turn away but it was too late. One of the phaser blasts or torpedoes hit something important and the ship exploded.

The bridge was in stunned silenced.

“Whatever they are thank god for them,” said Commander Core.

“Helm, put us in standard orbit of the planet. I want a full report of damage in 10 minutes. Mr. Patol I want you down on the planet in 5 minute. Lt. Commander Whitechapel, take a security and Engineering team and escort Mr Patol. Meeting in the observation room in ten minutes.”

10 minutes later in the observation room off the bridge Masters meet with his senior staff with the exceptions of Whitechapel and Patol who were on the surface of the planet and linked to the meeting.

Lieutenant Commander Pavlo Celcho, his chief engineer had just gone through a lengthy report on the damage the ship had received in its short engagement with the hostile vessels.

“What does that mean for getting out of here?” he asked Celcho to clarify.

“Well, basically we’re stuck here. Our biggest problem is the metaphasic shields. The unit is heavily damaged and has taken down all our shields. To get shields back I’ve had my teams remove the unit and we’ll repair it separately. We think we can get them work again,” said Celcho, though Masters did not think he sounded too convinces.

“*Can we get out of the Badlands without them?*” asked Patol.

“If we have to we can but it would be much safer to have the unit repaired. Especially if our trip through the surrounding plasma storms is similar to our journey in here.”

“What about our engines?”

“Warp drive is offline, maybe ten hours to get it back online. We did take damage to our impulse systems so we’re stuck under three-quarters impulse. The ETH system is useless, it overloaded trying to stabilise the ship when the shockwave from the

collapsing vortex, which also damaged some of our other thrusters, so our manoeuvrability is not great.”

“Tactical analysis?”

With Whitechapel on the surface of the planet it was Commander Core who answered. “Our shields are damaged partly from the battle and partly due to the metaphasic shield unit. We’ve lost around half of the dorsal array, which means our port side has a significant shadow. We’re short a squadron of fighters with Wing Commander Benton’s squadron off ship.”

“It could be worse. Casualties Doctor?”

A mournful look came to Dr. Carol Murphy’s face. “7 dead, 16 seriously injured. 23 others should be back in circulation soon.”

“What about that base, Lt. Commander Whitechapel?”

*“It is amazing what Commander Hudson managed to do here. I’ve gone through the bases computer with Mr Patol and I have found a lot out. First this place is well defended; it has three large planetary defence phasers, two rapid photon torpedo launchers and a Type IV garrison shield grid. Oh, and 12 defence satellites, which have 3 Type IX phasers and 4 micro-torpedo launchers and Klingon cloaking devices. The entire facility also has a holographic generator, which means we can hide the base.”*

“How on Earth did he build all that?” asked Commander Core.

*“Well, according to the computer he had a lot of help. The Orion Syndicate supplied a lot of this. However, the Klingons also contributed a lot, as did Starfleet Intelligence.”*

Masters gave Patol a look. “Care to explain?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s not get into this. You’re not fooling anyone, you work for Intelligence now and you probably did back then.”

*“Fair enough. I was a plant for Intelligence, however I was in a different cell from Hudson and I don’t know the specifics behind other operations. However, I do know that Starfleet Intelligence did have some relationship with certain factions of the Maquis, such as Hudson’s. The Maquis gave us a lot of information on the DMZ, on the Cardassians and even information on the Klingons after they invaded the Cardassian Union. This was probably part of the deal.”*

“Starfleet was hunting for the Maquis for years and Intelligence was aiding them! I know more than a few officers who would be pissed about that.”

*“I don’t doubt that. Luckily I know none of you will tell anyone about this.”*

“For a secret base, a hell of a lot of people seemed to have helped build it.”

“What about those hostile ships what do we know about them?”

“Well, we have identified them as Vendoth ships. The big ones are classed as battle cruisers the small one the satellites destroyed is a scout. I couldn’t get out much useful information from the computer. It is all heavily classified beyond the highest security clearance of anyone on this ship. All I really learned is that first contact happened 80 years ago, they like to use ground troops and that their shields and weapons have a weird energy to matter property, which we already know and if we run into any Vendoth ships Starfleet Command wants us to report it straight away,” said Lieutenant Letac.

“Great. Why is it whenever you need something Command has it sealed beyond your reach? The answer is that would be useful and we can’t have that happening, can we? So what are our options people?”

“Well, without the Metaphasic shielding we can’t risk a trip out of here and since the Scout managed to make it through I don’t see why those Battlecruisers couldn’t make it.”

“How long do you think we have?”

“It is hard to say. But if I had to have a guess I would say they would give the Scout up to an hour to report back. Seeing as they weren’t ready for this environment they would need time to set up their systems to work properly, maybe 2 hours. I have no idea since I don’t know their technology.”

“So we have 2 hours to come up with a way to destroy 2 ships the size of Warbirds that have superior weapons and shields. Can this day get any better?”

“We have nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. We are doomed,” said Letac.

“What about making it look like we have been destroyed. Take some of the damaged hull and the ETH system and scatter it in space.”

“But they would still probably search for survivors and if they do then it would still be a waste of time.”

“I think I have an idea,” said Mr Patol.

“Go ahead Mr Patol.”

“What if we but the debris on the planet, near the base. The Battlecruisers would then go where we want them to and the Base can engage them while the Swiftfire either escapes or outflanks them.”

“It is a good plan, but I doubt we have the firepower to take both ships out and we can’t escape without the Metaphasic shielding.”

“We may not be able to take them out but maybe 2 Dominion Battlecruisers and 12 Attack ships could.”

“What?”

“Just before the vortex appeared we got an update saying a Dominion Taskforce had entered the Badlands and were looking for us. If we use Mr Patol’s plan we would have the Battlecruisers in one spot, they would not be looking in space for us and the Dominion could handle the problem for us and any surviving Dominion ships would be easy targets.”

“Even if the Vendoth beat the Dominion taskforce they will most likely be weakened enough that the Base and this ship could deal with any surviving ships. All we need to do is draw the Dominion here.”

“Maybe if we send a message back to Command. If we use the Deflector dish we should be able to punch a message out of this area into the Badlands proper. Plus a message of this type would be very easy to intercept and trace. If we use the right bait in the message the Dominion should rush here.”

“But how do we get the Swiftfire around the Battlecruisers to signal the Dominion?”

“We don’t need the Swiftfire. The Deflector Dish on the Scoutship would suffice. We can also get a cloaking device from a satellite and install it on the Scoutship, if I remember correctly Class IV Klingon Cloaking devices are very modular and easy to install.”

“Did you hear that Lt Commander Whitechapel? Could you decloak the satellite closest to us and shut it down?”

“I’m on it.”

“Lt Commander Celcho, can you supervise the collection of debris that we can send down to the planet.”

“We should put a bit of debris in orbit to add a bit of icing to the cake.”

“Commander Core, go and get Colonel Tiki. I want his Marines on the planet to help set up the debris and organise the defence of the base since I am sure the

Vendoth will send down troops to check out the debris and check for survivors. I want everyone available to work on getting this plan set up.”

“Qi’doth, have you figured out our location?” Var’tak asked an aging scientist or Doth as they were referred to.

“Yes VenQa’. We are definitely in the Alpha Quadrant but we are hundreds if not thousands of light-years from Earth. It is hard to get a fix when we are in the middle of this storm. But more importantly I have checked the reading and we are several years in the past. We have no way to correct the error. The way we destroyed the vortex also turned the vortex generator into a useless waste of space.”

Var’tak looked ready to rip the Qi’doth to shreds.

“How is that possible? How can Starfleet set a trap for us when they haven’t even encountered us yet.”

“I think I have the answer, Ven’Qa’,” said a nearby Vendoth nervously.

Var’tak looked at the Vendoth with suspicion. “How is that, Qo’doth?”

“The device you originally thought was responsible for drawing us out is some sort of thruster system.”

“Are you saying I was wrong?”

“Yes.” All the Vendoth in the room seemed to quickly draw in a breath. The tension in the room increased dramatically. “I mean no, VenQa’. You made a good judgement with the facts you had on hand. But the reason we came out here is because the vortex calibrations calculations were incorrect. They were slightly out so when the generation came online it knocked us slightly off course. When we moved off the right path we created a gravitational eddy, which dragged the Av’ran and Tava’ with us.”

“So we are responsible for dishonouring ourselves and the crews of two other ships?”

“Yes, VenQa’.”

“No, we are not responsible. The only responsible party are helmsmen and the Doths who did the calculations. VenQe’, round them up and see that they pay for their indiscretion.”

“There is no need, VenQa’,” said the Qi’doth. “I oversaw the whole thing. It is a failure on my part that we are here.”

Var’tak looked surprised at what the Qi’doth said.

“Qi’doth, how can you let this happen? You have been under my command for 10, 15 standard cycles. I have come to rely on you to keep the other Doths honest. You have failed me.”

Var’tak moved closer to the Qi’doth as he spoke and as he finished he placed his hand on the Qi’doth’s shoulder.

“I know what you expect of me, VenQa’. But it will never happen again.”

“You are right, old friend,” said Var’tak in a light, friendly tone. “It will never happen again.”

The Qi’doth’s eyes flared and he looked at Var’tak. He whispered a silent question as he slid to the ground. Var’tak moved away from the Qi’doth and the ever-expanding pool of blood.

“Let this be a reminder to the rest of you Doth. I expect no failure and if you do fail me...you will not get a second chance to do it again.”

Var’tak whipped his bloody dagger on his upper arm. He turned and started to leave the room.

“Clean up this mess, Ven,” he said to the Guards. “Prepare the ship to go after the Av’ran, VenQe’.”

“Yes, VenQa’. I have already started to prepare and the Doths say that we still need another hour for all systems to be ready to traverse the storms.”

“They have 5 minutes. The Av’ran should have reported back by now. The only answer for its silence is that it has been destroyed. I want this Starfleet ship and I want its crew dead now.”

As soon as the Swiftfire had shed its “debris” and beamed the personnel to the planet it moved to the far side of the planet so to hide if from Vendoth sensors. While the Swiftfire prepared the Scoutship for its mission, Colonel Tiki and around 300 other personnel were working on the ground plan.

“The Debris is all in place, Colonel. And they are starting to set up the trap”

“Good work Major Stevens. What about the defence lines?”

The Major took a step forward and pointed down the hill. The Base was located at the top of a small hill.

“Both lines are set up. The first along the lower part of the hill where those rocks are, the second line is around  $\frac{3}{4}$  the way up along that line of rocks. We have the trenches set up. We have checked the Weapons and shields. The holographic generator also works and will go up as soon as needed.”

“Good work. Hopefully the Captain’s plan will work and we won’t need to use any of our defence plans.”

“So what is the Captain’s plan, sir?”

“The Vendoth will be attracted to the debris and will set up orbit above us. They will most likely send down a search party to check it out. We take out the party and they will either send more troops or just raze it to the ground. The Captain is hedging that they will raze the area. By then the Dominion should arrive and take the Vendoth out. If not the Vendoth should hopefully get bored and leave. But if they decide to make a fight out of it, at least we will be prepared.”

“Prepared for what? By the size of those Battlecruisers they could hold up to 5,000 troop each. We have 120 Marines and 80 Security officers. 50 to 1, those are great odds.”

“As a famous spacehero said, “Never tell me the odds”. But I doubt we would get to that point,” said David.

David’s combadge chirped.

“Colonel, we just got a contact on the fringe of the Plasma storms. It’s the Battlecruisers.”

“Damn! We’re not ready. Get me the Swiftfire.”

“Already on it.”

“Colonel, this is Captain Masters. The Battlecruisers have turned up. Are you ready?”

“They are an hour early. We need 20 minutes to finish setting up the explosives.”

“You have 10 minutes until they are in orbit. It is all up to you to keep them there while we get the message out to the Dominion. Good luck.”

The transmission was cut and Colonel motioned for Major Stevens to follow him back into the base. As they ran back Colonel tapped his combadge and contacted the officer in the base’s control centre.

“Lt. Commander, we have ten minutes. Are we ready to disappear?”

“Yes, Colonel. The Satellites are all powered to minimum levels and in position. The hologenerator is ready to go online but the debris...”

“I know. We are changing the plans a bit. I’m going to take a squad down to the debris field I want you to pull out all the other officers, my men will finish the job.”

“Yes Colonel.”

David had reached one of the many munition rooms in the base. He grabbed a Phaser rifle and an isometric disintegrator.

“Major, we are going in heavy. I want the 10 best heavy weapons specialists; it is going to get hairy.”

Jonathan strode into the Shuttlebay and flinched as he saw the damage that the last encounter with the Vendoth had brought to his ship. The forward section was a blackened mess. Part of the deck had collapsed and had crushed two shuttles. Parts littered the deck and the area was devoid of any human life. The back was the absolute opposite. It was a hive of activity. Most of the activity was around a single Scoutship. Lt Commander Celcho noticed Jonathan approaching and moved to intercept him.

“Lt Commander, we need to launch this bird now. The Vendoth have arrived early.”

“She’s nearly ready. We are having a problem with power fluctuations in the cloaking device. I’m not sure how it will fair when the message is sent through the Deflector. Which reminds me, we need the message to upload it on the computer.”

“We don’t have it. That is why I’m here. We are launching it now and I’m going to put the message together on the way.”

Lt Commander Celcho looked down and shook his head. “That’s not possible Captain. With the Cloaking device and the extra generators needed only one person can fly in it. You need to record it before we send the ship.”

“The Vendoth is here. They are moving into position over the planet. 300 of your crewmen are there, directly in the line of fire, Pavlo. If we don’t get this plan happening now we will all die.”

Lt Commander Celcho didn’t budge. “I’m sorry Captain. But I can’t let you go. With the power fluctuation the risk is a lot more then you think.”

Jonathan took a step closer to Lt Commander Celcho. Jonathan was several inches taller then Pavlo and he used this to his advantage. Jonathan stood over Pavlo and stared down on him.

“Look, Celcho. We have no time. You can either step out of my way or I’ll have you thrown in the brig.”

It almost looked like Pavlo would defy Jonathan but he folded under Jonathan’s bluff. Jonathan knew that he would not be able to throw Celcho in the brig without attracting attention from Commander Core, or even worse Dr Murphy who could actually overrule his decision. Pavlo stepped back and turned to the crew scurrying around the Scoutship.

“Alright. You have 2 minutes to get this ship ready to go.”

Jonathan went over and climbed into the Scoutship’s cockpit. Jonathan did a quick systems check and all systems were green.

Pavlo lent into the ship. “Ready to go, Captain?”

Jonathan nodded, “You did the right thing, Pavlo.”

Pavlo looked back with a hint of defiance in his eyes.

“I did the quickest thing, Captain. Nothing more. Good luck.”

Pavlo moved out and the cockpit sealed itself. Jonathan started the Scoutships powerful impulse engines and felt the ship slowly rise above the deck. The Deck Officer signalled all green for launch. Jonathan lifted the landing struts and eased the ship forward. The Scoutship smoothly exited the Shuttlebay.

“Swiftfire, this is SC-193.”

“Captain? What the hell are you doing?” demanded Commander Core.

“I’m getting on with the mission.”

“You could have told me you were going to do this.”

“I did.”

“No you didn’t. You said you were going to the head.”

“Head, Shuttlebay, they sort of sound the same. Anyway, I’m just about to engage the cloaking device. When I do I’m going to run silent. No communications in or out. Stick to the plan and everything will be all right. The important thing is to survive. Even if I get into trouble I don’t want you to do anything. Keep the ship out of sight.”

“I understand, Captain. Good luck, you’re going to need it.”

“SC-193 out.”

Jonathan switched the communications array off. Jonathan shut down every system that he didn’t need and then engaged the cloaking device.

“Computer, plot the shortest route to transmission point.”

“This is a bad idea.”

Masters nearly jumped through the roof of the cockpit. He turned and saw the same being he had seen on the bridge earlier.

“What the hell are you doing here, Q?”

“A question you should ask yourself,” replied Q. “You shouldn’t undertake this mission. You should send someone else or wait until the Vendoth ships are closer to the planet.”

“Time is of the essence. People will die if things don’t get done. And again, why are you here?”

“I’m just voicing your conscience, Jonathan. You know this is a bad idea and someone had to speak up.”

“I must have banged my head harder than I thought.”

“If only this were a dream. However, this is very real and you’re about to make a mistake.”

“Course plotted. Warning, current course means the ship will pass within weapon range of hostile vessels,” said the computer as it completed its preparations.

“In that case I’ll only have myself to blame,” he said. “Warning noted. Remain on course.”

The Scoutship silently and invisibly cruised around the planet. As the ship rounded the planet the Vendoth Battlecruisers came into view.

“Computer record hostile ships.”

As the ship past the Battlecruisers the computer recorded the ships as they approached the planet.

“Computer, end recording. Computer prepared to record a message.”

Var’tak loosened his grip on the arm of his command chair.

“Damage report.”

“We have received moderate damage, but the improvements we made to the shield before we came through helped a bit. Sensors are badly damaged, and we have lost power to several decks. The Tava’ is in worse shape; they lost shields to several quadrants and received hull damage. Their shields are back up but are weak, although they have sensors still, though they are not at optimal running.”

“We should have waited longer before we came through. Given the Doths more time to prepare the systems,” said Che’va.

“Every minute we waste out there our prey gets further and further away, VenQe’,” said Var’tak.

“But with the damage we have sustained we could...”

“Be beaten? I think you overestimate the enemy’s chances. If I remember correctly, they were very badly damaged in our first encounter.”

“VenQa’, the Tava’ has picked something up in orbit of the planet directly ahead.”

“What is it?”

“Their sensors are still having trouble in this environment. But it is metallic and has an energy signature.”

“Head for the contacts and prepare to engage.”

Jonathan recorded the message and uploaded it to Deflector control. He checked that it was all set and pressed the controls to fire the burst through the Deflector dish that would put the message out into the Badlands. Nothing happened.

“No, no, NO! Come on you bastard!” swore Jonathan. He re-entered the command again and again. “Come on you piece of shit! I am not going to let you stand in the way of saving 600 good men and women. Computer why can’t a use the Deflector?”

“The use of the Deflector might jeopardise the silent running of the ship.”

“What is it you humans are so fond of saying, ‘I told you so’? Well, I told you so,” said Q.

“If you’re not going to be helpful piss off. Computer, override safety locks.”

The computer beeped as it complied with Jonathan’s orders. Jonathan again put in the command to launch the message. The ship vibrated and the ship’s lights flickered. Jonathan started hitting buttons in a panic as he tried to fix the problem. He soon got it under control. Jonathan quickly checked his sensors, while the power problem had only lasted several seconds it was still long enough for a ship to get a fix on his location. Nothing appeared on his sensors and Jonathan breathed a sigh of relief. Jonathan then checked to make sure his message had been sent and then turned his ship around and saw a Vendoth Battlecruiser bearing down on him.

Jonathan swore and checked his sensors again. Jonathan realised that nothing was on his sensors, not the Battlecruiser, not the planet not even the plasma storms around him. He must of redirected power from the sensors to the cloaking device.

“Computer initiate program Masters –Alpha-5-1-Ro.”

The computer signalled it had completed its task. Masters turned to gloat to Q. Before he could speak he felt the tingling of a transporter locking on and saw Q give him a look that said, ‘I told you so’ as he was beamed away.

He materialised in a small room with several short but bulky green aliens. Jonathan reached for his phaser but one of the aliens, with surprising speed for their size, kicked his hand away from his phaser and then smashed the butt of his energy rifle across Jonathan’s face, knocking Jonathan to the ground. Another alien grabbed Jonathan’s phaser and handed it to the only unarmed alien in the room.

“I have a few things I want to talk to you about, human. You two strap him to the interrogation chair.”

The two aliens easily picked up Jonathan despite the fact Jonathan were over a foot taller and threw him into a chair and strapped him in. Jonathan, still reeling from the last hit he took, offered no resistance.

“Welcome to the Pri’tak, human. A Vendoth Battlecruiser. I am its commanding officer or VenQa’, Var’tak. This is my executive, VenQe’ Che’va. You might have noticed the similarities between my name and the name of my ship, it is because this

ship is named after one of my ancestors who was a great Ven and led the glorious Ven army in the purification of Ooria IV.”

Jonathan managed to look Var'tak in the eyes. “I don't really care about your ancestry, car tech. Why don't you just kill me instead of waiting for me to die of boredom.”

Var'tak snarled and backhanded Jonathan's face, drawing blood where his claws raked Jonathan's face.

“You are a pathetic species. Look how easily I draw your weak blood from your veins. But I don't waste my time with you for sport; you will tell me what I want to know. Where are we, how far are we from Earth? What are you doing here? What do you know of us?”

“You are in the Badlands, the hottest place in the Alpha Quadrant. You are here because you are so stupid you can't follow the road signs to Earth. Our mission here is none of your business. What do I know of the Vendoth? Well, they are green, they smell and they have the intelligence of a roasted peanut.”

The spikes that ran down Var'tak's head immediately shot up when Jonathan said that.

“Get out!” he snarled to the other Vendoths.

Che'va nodded and took the two guards out with him, as the door slid shut behind him. Che'va heard a cry of pain.

Che'va hung his head slightly as he heard the muffled sounds of the beating going on. Var'tak would probably kill the human if he were left too long with him. This is not the way of the Vendoth, a cultured, advanced civilisation. This is what they had spent centuries fighting, this kind of uncivilised, brutal and chaotic behaviour. The Vendoth were quickly become nothing more than bloody hypocrites.

A Doth hurried towards VenQe'.

“VenQe', we have started to examine the infidel's ship. Most of the systems have been destroyed but the Qo'doth has managed to retrieve some files. It appears the human we have is the captain of the Starfleet ship.”

This was all Che'va needed. He quickly entered the interrogation room and nearly as quickly came to a halt. The scene in front of him shocked him. Blood covered the walls and floors. The human lay on the ground in a bloody heap. By the human's movements he seemed to be struggling to breathe. Var'tak stood over the human, breathing heavily. Var'tak turned to face Che'va with a look of fiery rage; his hands and wrists were covered in the blood of the human.

“Ven, get a Qa'doth here now!”

Var'tak looked even more enraged. “You dare call for a healer for this infidel! I should kill you where you stand!”

“VenQa', we have learned that this human is the commander of the vessel we were pursuing. He can tell us what happened to the Av'ran.”

Var'tak didn't look too convinced.

“It is true,” said the Doth who had given the news to Che'va. “The Qo'doth has managed to learn a lot from the infidel's ship in a short time. This, human, is the Captain of the ship that we are after. He is The Jonathan Master of the Swiftfire.”

Var'tak turned back to face Jonathan.

“So we have their leader, excellent. You may repair any life threatening injuries he has, but do not repair the bruises or the cuts. I want him to remember who is in charge here.”

“Commander, the Defence satellites have sent this transmission back.”

“On screen.”

The viewscreen showed the small Scoutship suddenly decloaking and then been tractor beamed onboard one of the large Battlecruisers.

“Looks like the cloaking system overloaded. I wish the captain wasn’t so impulsive, if he just waited,” said Lieutenant Letac.

“Jonathan has a habit of running off half cocked. But he also has a habit of getting out of these types of situations. I wouldn’t count him out yet,” said Commander Core.

“I don’t like the chances of the Captain fighting through several thousand little green men getting to a ship and getting away from two heavily armed Battlecruisers,” said Lt Commander Whitechapel.

“In fact the chance of this scenario happening is 70 bill...”

“That is enough Lieutenant Karak. We all know the odds are against the Captain. But there are some things we can do to help him out.”

Jonathan was once again strapped to the interrogation chair. He thought that he was going to die at Var’tak’s hands but they had got a medic in who had fixed him up, though he still had numerous bruises and cuts on his body. Several Vendoths stood in the room talking in their strange language. One of the Vendoths handed over a small PADD like device to Var’tak. Var’tak moved towards Jonathan.

“Well, Captain Masters. It seems you are in a bit of trouble. You have lost your ship and have been captured. You have also failed to save the survivors.” A cruel smile came to Var’tak’s face. “I know your plans. You did succeed to sabotage your ship so that we can’t use it but you failed to properly dispose of your classified files, which make for an interesting read.” Var’tak bought the PADD device up and read from it. “This is Captain Masters to Starfleet Command. Swiftfire has been destroyed. 123 survivors have made it to the planet. The Vendoth are after us but we have destroyed one vessel. Admiral Hayes is hurt but alive, he has the data and it is secure.” Var’tak looked up at Jonathan. “I know of this Hayes from your own file but this data you mention sounds...important. What is it?”

“Go to hell,” said Jonathan.

Var’tak raised his left hand and motioned forward the Vendoth who had healed Jonathan. He said something in his native language.

The Vendoth nodded and came up to Jonathan. He went to take Jonathan’s hand. Though Jonathan’s wrists were strapped down he still managed to make it difficult job for the Vendoth to take his hand. The Vendoth turned to Var’tak who barked out an order. The Vendoth produced a device, which he placed on Jonathan’s neck. Jonathan felt it eject him with something he instantly felt the effects. The Vendoth went to take his hand; Jonathan went to move his hand but couldn’t. Var’tak seemed to notice his confusion.

“It has shut down your nervous system, well, enough of your system that you don’t die.”

Jonathan felt an immense pain in his fingers and cried out. He looked down to see that the Vendoth had just pulled out one of his fingernails. Jonathan’s mind raced. He kept trying to move his hand away but it was futile. He screamed again as the Vendoth removed another nail.

“But as you see it leaves your pain receptors active. I’m glad to see that you are like a lot of species with nails, having them removed is quite a painful experience. Now Captain you will tell me why you are here or the Qa’doth will remove another nail.”

Jonathan had a look of defiance in his eyes and just stared at Var’tak as if his stare would kill the Vendoth.

Var'tak barked out another order.

Jonathan screamed.

"Tell me and the pain will stop."

The Qa'doth went to remove another nail.

"NO! Stop, please stop," broke down Jonathan. "We were here on an exploration mission to categorise the plasma activity."

Var'tak looked at his PADD and shook his head. "Incorrect."

A fourth fingernail was removed.

"YOU BASTARDS! I TOLD YOU WHY WE'RE HERE!"

Var'tak barked another order to the Qa'doth and he turned Jonathan's hand over so the palm was up. He pulled out a blade and quickly sliced along Jonathan's fingertip, one of the body's most sensitive areas.

"Tell me the truth, Captain."

"I did! We are here on..."

Var'tak cut him off and the Qa'doth quickly sliced along two of Jonathan's fingertips.

"...a mission of exploration," finished Jonathan. Tears rolled down his face, Jonathan couldn't stop the tears as the pain swept his body.

Var'tak pushed the Qa'doth out of the way and grabbed the blade. He drove it into Jonathan's palm.

"I am sick of this! You are here with the commander of your fleet with some sort of data. You have more than exploration on your minds. I know your mission; I have your computer files. Now tell me what data your Admiral has that is important enough to be mentioned in your rescue message."

Var'tak started to slowly slice open Jonathan's palm.

Jonathan's face showed the excruciating pain he was in.

"The data is fleet information!" cried Jonathan.

Var'tak paused and motioned for Jonathan to continue.

"It has the lay out of the Fleet. Deployment, number of ships, type of ships, weaknesses, strategy they are using and the defences of all the sectors in Federation control, including Earth."

Var'tak took the blade out of Jonathan's palm and ordered the Qa'doth to seal the wound.

"Thank you, Captain. You have just doomed your Federation and made certain my glory."

On the Bridge of the Vendoth Battlecruiser Pri'tak Che'va stood nervously. Var'tak had been with the human prisoner for a while now, leaving him on the Bridge in command. The entrance to the Bridge opened and in strode Var'tak.

"Report, VenQe'."

"We have found what we believe to be the crash site of the Starfleet ship. The Tava' reports it is picking up signs of life but it cannot make out what kind or how many lifeforms are present. We are approaching it and are preparing a scout team to check it out."

"No, prepare a heavy recon team," said Var'tak.

"I don't think that is necessary, VenQa'. We don't know what we will find. I doubt we will need over 200 Ven down there."

"You are not informed enough to make that judgement. I have learned that there are 123 survivors and an Admiral with important information with him. 200 Ven will be more than enough to destroy them or make them surrender. Once we have the

Admiral we will get the information out of him and proceed to crush this Federation. By the time the Roj Che'dak gets here it will be under my control. As soon as we are in position launch the Assault shuttles. Oh, make sure the Ven see a picture of the Admiral, I want him alive."

Soon several Vendoth Assault shuttles landed several kilometres off in an arc around the "crash" zone. Over 200 Ven, warrior Vendoth, moved out and approached the zone.

The "crash" zone was a small area, which had around 20 escape pods and a lot of debris around it. In the debris were 20 Marines, 15 at predetermined positions; the other 5 were still setting up the explosives. The Marines waited until the Ven were only 600 metres away before opening fire. Several of the Marines were carrying isometric disruptors and opened fire. The weapons were set for a wide burst and when they hit they exploded, causing damage to a large area. The Ven were not slow in responding. They started to return fire not long after the fire shots were fired. Like their ships, their weapons fired gold balls of energy, which splattered on contact. The Marines returned fire with their Disruptors. The Marines had the better position, with great cover, while the Ven were on open ground with no cover.

Colonel Tiki surveyed the situation from his position behind what used to be an ETH system. He was at the forward edge of the main debris field with most of the Marines. He had set up two lines in the debris. The forward line ran along the edge of the debris, while the second line with about 5 Marines was further back and had the Isometric Disruptors. The Debris had been set on a hill, so the further you went the higher up the hill you went; this meant the Marines with the Disruptors had an elevated position, giving them a tactical advantage. The forward Marines were just armed with Phaser rifles and the plan was they would start firing when the Vendoth were less than 200 metres away. So far the plan was working great. The Isometric disruptors had taken a large toll on the Vendoth, plus had been herding the Vendoth into the kill sectors of the forward line.

Colonel Tiki activated his helmet comlink. "Okay, forward line. They are just about to get into range. On my command open fire. FIRE!"

Colonel Tiki swung around the ETH system and dropped to one knee and opened fire. Lines of Phaser fire lanced out of the main debris field and started to cut into the Ven lines. The Ven were taken by surprise, they were concentrating away from the forward Marines. The Ven faltered. Since landing they had been advancing, the Ven took cover in the debris. The Marines let the Ven get within 200 metres because then they would be within the greater debris field. This meant they had some barely adequate cover, which they took.

The several Marines were also rovers, meaning they moved from position to position and firing from different positions. This gave the impression of a larger number of Marines than there really were. The forward Marines were also spraying fire around. They weren't as concerned with hitting the Ven, as they were with slowing them down. The rear Marines had stopped firing their Disruptors and had picked up their rifles. They were acting like Snipers from their elevated positions. They were choosing their shots and making every one count.

The Ven had composed themselves and now were returning a murderous amount of fire. Colonel Tiki held his rifle around the thruster and just blindly fired several shots off. There was no way he was sticking his head out, with the Vendoth's weapons splatter effect it would be suicide.

“They are pinning us down here, Colonel,” came one of his men over the comm. channel.

“I know. Just keep firing and hold them back.”

“Colonel, they are moving again. Not all of them, just several small groups,” said one of his men at the rear line.

“Acknowledged. Marines, fall back to the rear line. Demolitions, are you ready?”

“Not really but we have enough for a pretty big bang.”

“Good. Fall back everyone, now.”

The Marines started to fall back. The Colonel was no more than 10 metres away from his previous position when several Ven appeared there. He quickly fired several shots and took cover. As he took cover several shots splattered around him.

“Colonel, keep your head down,” came an order over his comlink.

The Colonel looked up to see the blue ball of energy from an Isometric Disruptor flash over his head. As it hit it created a large explosion, which the Colonel felt.

“Clear, Colonel.”

The Colonel got up and quickly retreated to the rest of squad.

“Are we all here?” asked the Colonel.

“Affirmative, Colonel. Everything is set. The Vendoth are closing in and we are total surrounded.”

“Great. Set the count down for 10 seconds.” The Colonel contacted the base. “Lt Commander Whitechapel, this is the Colonel. We are all set. Get us out of here in now.”

An orange haze surrounded the Marines and they faded away. Then from the outer edges of the debris field there were several explosions. The explosions seemed to move in as the closer explosives exploded. A wave of fire surrounded the Ven force before the larger explosives in the centre of the debris exploded, where most of the Ven were. The explosives erupted in huge columns of fire turning the debris and flesh into vapour. By the time it was over the debris field and everything in it was nothing more than a large smoking crater.

On the other side of the storms that trapped the Swiftfire was a large Dominion force, holding their position close to the storms.

“The transmissions seemed to come from beyond these storms, Vorta.”

“Play the transmission again, First,” ordered the Vorta.

The First nodded and followed orders, just like he was bred to do.

The transmission appeared on the console monitor.

“Starfleet Command this is Captain Masters of the Swiftfire. Everything is going well, the new Battlecruisers are working perfectly. We are about to begin the Planetary Invasion simulations, which will take several more hours. The only bad news is that the shields didn’t work as well as they should and we can’t get back through the storm. Engineering reports that it will take 8 hours to get them up. But once they are up the ships will be near invincible. With this transmission I’m sending some recordings of the ships.”

“Freeze the transmission.”

The First paused the recording showing the two Battlecruisers. They were very large and were very different design to the Federation ships the Dominion had encountered so far. It looked more like a Klingon ship than a Federation ship. But he could tell that one of the ships had taken fairly heavy damage. But with their size and probable firepower they couldn’t be allowed to escape and threaten the Dominion’s hold on the Alpha Quadrant.

“First, signal all the ships that we are going to go through the storms. Also tell the Attack ships to target the ship that is more damaged than the other.”

“Vorta, is that a wise decision? The Attack ships could probably find a way through the storms but there is no way our Battlecruisers will make it through undamaged.”

“It is worth the risk. We must destroy those ships while they are vulnerable.”

“I agree. But we could wait for several hours to upgrade the shields to counter the storms effect.”

“No, the longer we wait the more time those famed Starfleet Engineers have to repair those vessels. We go now and if you disagree with me again you will no longer be First. Remember you serve me and by serving me you serve the Founders.”

“Yes, Vorta. Victory is life.”

“Yes, victory is life indeed.”

Var'tak smiled as he watched the “crash” zone explode, killing all the Ven who were assaulting the area.

“Excellent, these Starfleet infidels will make this sporting. I seem to have underestimated their resolve. Prepare for a complete deployment of Ven.”

“VenQa’, with all respect an orbital bombardment would be far easier and less costly in personnel. That hill is rugged enough to offer ideal protection for enemy forces. Any attack force` will take serious losses as they try to take the positions. A simple bombardment will level the area and kill any personnel there.”

“You forget that I want one of them alive. Anyway it is more fun this way plus the Ven will get invaluable training against Federation troops.”

“But we are here with no support. We are here early, without a way home. We need to use our resources wisely.”

“You are testing me, VenQe’,” hissed Var'tak. “We are the Vendoth! We shall have all the resources we will ever need, countless races will run to our side begging us to get rid of the Federation once we leave this infernal fire storm. Now do as I command or you will face the same fate as the human Captain will.”

“Yes, VenQa’. Communications, contact the Tava’ and order them to commence invasion of the planet.”

In an impossible short time over a hundred Assault shuttles massed near the Battlecruisers as they got into formation for their invasion.

“The Assault shuttles are ready, VenQa’,” reported Che’va.

“Start the invasion.”

“VenQa’,” came a surprised yell. “Contacts coming out of the storm.”

“On screen.”

From out of the storms came 14 purple ships. 2 were half the size of the Battlecruisers, while the rest were small, less than a hundred metres long.

“Starfleet!” yelled Var'tak.

“The markings do not match, it is not Starfleet.”

“Then it must be one of their Allies, the Captain must have been able to signal them. Tell the Tava’ to cover the Assault shuttles, we will engage them.”

The Pri'tak broke formation and headed to engage the Jem'Hadar. The Attack ships engaged the Vendoth Battlecruiser. Using their speed and manoeuvrability they easily avoided the enemy's fire while raking the ship with fire.

“VenQa’, our targeting sensors are still offline. I cannot hit the small ships.”

“Fine, ignore them. The Tava’ has operational scanners they will deal with them. Close on those larger ships. We will destroy them at close range.”

The Dominion Battlecruisers opened fire hitting the Pri'tak. But they were hopelessly outmatched. As the Pri'tak closed it opened fire. At such close range the Vendoth Battlecruiser hardly missed. In two spectacular explosions the Dominion Battlecruisers were reduced to atoms.

The Tava' was having a harder time with the faster and more manoeuvrable Attack ships. The Attack ship managed to close on the Tava' without loss. When they were in range they started to destroy the Assault shuttles. The smaller Assault Shuttles were slaughtered. But as the Jem'Hadar Attack ships concentrated on the Assault Shuttles their movements became predictable and they started to suffer losses from the Tava'. The surviving Assault shuttles were in chaos and decided to make planetfall instead of dying in space. As the shuttles hit the atmosphere the Jem'Hadar were forced to disengage because of the murderous cover fire coming from the Tava'. By now the two Dominion Battlecruisers were gone and the Attack ships knew they weren't going to make it. The Attack ships decided that if they were going to die they would take the Vendoth with them. Using the same tactic they used when they first encounter a Starfleet warship they all concentrated their fire on one area of the Tava'. The Tava' shields went solid as the Jem'Hadar's Phased Polaron beams hit. The VenQa' of the Tava' thought the Attack ships would loop around and attack again but he was fatally wrong. The first Attack ship smashed into the hardened area of the Tava' shield and exploded, shattering the shield, leaving a huge hole in the shields. The next Jem'Hadar Attack ship passed through the shields and impacted on the hull of the ship. The next and then the next Attack ship impacted on the hull of the ship. As each of the Attack ships hit the Tava' they dug deeper and deeper into the heart of the ship. The explosion of the last Attack ship had only just cleared when it was replaced by another explosion, an internal explosion. More explosions raked the ship. The ship's light flickered, and then died as the ship lost power. The Tava' started to surrender its position to gravity as the most powerful force in the universe reached out and took hold of the ship. But gravity was beaten to the punch; there was a huge internal explosion that came from the centre of the ship. It expanded in a ball of pure energy, disintegrating everything in its path. The ball engulfed the whole ship and then seemed to stop growing and just hold still, the ball was brighter than the sun. The ball then quickly collapsed in on itself, releasing a huge shockwave that shook the Pri'tak as it returned to help the ill fated Tava'.

"The Tava' has been destroyed," said the Sensor operator.

"I can see that," said Var'tak. "How many Assault Shuttles survived?"

"42. They are landing on the planet now."

"Less than a third. The Tava's VenQa' is lucky he died in the explosion. I cannot stand such incompetence. While we have a 25 to 1 advantage on the planet, it has significantly reduced our ability to destroy the Federation. But that is a matter for later. Helm, put us in orbit over the battlefield and put it onscreen. I desire to watch our forces exterminate this group of infidels."

"Here they come!" yelled Colonel Tiki.

Most of Starfleet crew were in position and waiting for the Vendoth. There were around 300 personnel on the planet and all but 24 were out in the Defensive lines. The 24 that were not in the Defensive line were inside the base, running its systems to keep it hidden until the right moment. In the sky the Colonel noted several small, but intense flashes. Then a large fireball as something entered the planets atmosphere. Using the image enhancers in his helmet the Colonel magnified the image. He saw

the large Vendoth Battlecruiser as it burnt up in the upper atmosphere. Then suddenly it exploded in a large explosion. The Colonel had to look away as the magnification made the flash painful to his eyes. He looked back up to see the sky empty. The Battlecruiser had been totally destroyed. But he made out numerous, smaller dots that became bigger. Soon they were big enough for the Colonel to make out their features. By the size of them he guessed that they held over 50 troops. Some of the shuttles shot past other shuttles and left trails of smoke as they plummeted to the ground out of control. Some were either damaged from the Jem'Hadar Attack ships or by the explosion by the Tava'. The Colonel kept an eye on the shuttles and using his helmets sophisticated systems, worked out the range of the shuttles. He opened a channel on his comlink.

“Several Shuttles are in range. You have permission to take them out.”

Numerous acknowledgements came over the channel.

Seeing as they knew the enemies attacks would come from above and knowing that they would most likely land they had set up some Anti-Air Marines. These Marines were armed with small personal Micro Torpedo launchers. These weapons were common but because they had a small payload and were very bulky, the Isometric Disruptor was a more popular weapon, while less powerful it was more practical. Several Marines fired. Small yellow balls of light zipped up and hit the incoming Shuttles. The Marines concentrated on a few shuttles to maximise the chance of destroying the ship. The Colonel saw the Shuttles' shields go solid and then shatter. The Marines' torpedoes hit the unshielded shuttles, causing severe damage. Only a few exploded, most just lost control and smashed into the ground, killing all onboard. Despite their efforts most of the shuttles landed and disgorged their troops.

Colonel Tiki didn't need to count them; there were over 2000 Vendoth. They immediately started to run towards the waiting Starfleet officers. From several points on the hill blue balls lashed out and exploded in and around the oncoming Ven. As the Ven got closer the officers with Phasers opened fire. The Marines fired with lethal accuracy; the other officers fired with much less accuracy but all the targets in the field made it hard to miss.

Obviously the Vendoth's personal weapons had shorter range than the Federation versions, since not firing their weapons while the Starfleet officers cut them down made no sense. But soon the Ven at the front got into range and fired. The Ven had little hope of hitting anyone since the Starfleet officers had very good cover plus they were running, making it difficult to aim properly. But as more and more Ven started to fire it didn't matter if they missed by metres. The splatter effect made it dangerous for the officers to leave their cover and fire. The Marines could risk it since their body armour shrugged off most of the splatter that hit them, but the normal officers didn't have this protection. Several crewmembers returned fire and got caught in the fallout of the Ven's weapon fire. While it didn't kill anyone the officers received severe wounds and burns.

“Pattern explosives One. GO!” yelled Colonel Tiki over the comm. Channel.

A Marine pressed a button on a control device he held setting off several explosives in the hill. The explosives were spaced out around the hill, as they went off they caught several Ven in the explosion. The explosives were the last line of defence before the Ven reached a position where they would get some protection. As the Ven reached the position they stopped and assessed their situation. The Ven realised that they had underestimated the size of the Starfleet force, their skills and preparations. The Ven set up their positions and started to exchange fire with the Starfleet officers from their positions.

“VenQa’, we are getting a communication from the planet.”

“On screen.”

A Ven appeared on screen. In the background he could see and hear other Ven move about and return fire with an enemy he could not see in the picture.

“VenQa’, we have met heavy resistance. The number of infidels is more than twice what we were expecting. They were prepared for us. They attacked the shuttles before they landed and have been controlling our actions. We have lost over 500 troops.”

“You lost a quarter of your force! How many have you killed?”

The Ven looked reluctant to answer. “As far as we can tell, maybe half a dozen.”

Var’tak slammed his fist onto his armrest.

“You are failing me, Ven! I want them dead now.”

“The quickest way to kill them is to rush them with numbers, but we would probably lose more troops than we would kill. I suggest that we take a more cautious approach, I can have them all dead with much less casualties but it will take time.”

Var’tak didn’t try to hide his anger. “Get on with it, Ven. Remember my patience does not last forever.”

The battle was fast and furious. In less than 30 minutes from Var’tak’s communication with the planet the entire situation was settled. The Ven changed tactics; instead of trying to overrun the Starfleet troops they went for small quick sniping attacks. The point of the attacks was to rattle the Starfleet forces and to quickly injure or kill them.

“Colonel, this is Major Stevens. We have another officer down. We can’t hold them here. They’ll slowly kill us one by one.”

“I agree. We are going to fall back. I want seven men left here. Everyone else is to fall back. We’ll cover the retreat.”

The Starfleet forces started to retreat up the hill towards to the second Defensive line, moving between rock cover so to hide their retreat from the Vendoth. The few Marines who stayed in the first line moved around and fired to give the impression that most of the troops were still there. But the Ven realised that the Starfleet troops were falling back and started to advance.

“Shit! Move! Move! Get up to the Defensive line as fast as you can!” ordered Colonel Tiki as he jumped up and started up the hill.

The Ven were soon into the trenches that the Marines had used for cover. Colonel Tiki practically ran backwards as he fired at the Ven who continued up the hill after the Marines. The only thing that kept the Marines alive was that most of the Ven didn’t continue up the hill, but instead checked out and secured the trenches. The Colonel fired his rifle hitting a Ven in the head, throwing it back down the hill. Suddenly the Colonel felt a sharp pain in his leg and he collapsed. The Ven he had just killed managed to get a shot off that hit near his foot and most of energy fallout hit his foot, piecing the armour around his calf. The Colonel dropped his rifle as he put his hands out to soften his fall. He put his hand to his calf, when he removed his hand it was covered in blood. He was surprised, a wound from an energy weapon normally didn’t lead to external bleeding as the energy cauterised the wound. He took a closer look as so that part of the armour had buckled inwards and had stabbed into his calf.

“Damn! I am in trouble.”

He noticed a Ven approaching, the Colonel quickly looked for his rifle and saw it was out of reach, so he went for his backup a Type 2 Hand Phasers. He whipped it out and fired, hitting the Ven in the chest.

“Oh shit!”

The Ven seemed to stumble and then straightened. A huge smile came to the Ven's face as it realised the Colonel's mistake. The Colonel took a look at his phaser; it was at a low setting, used to heavily stun most humanoids. The Ven levelled his rifle at the Colonel and said something in a language the Colonel didn't understand. But by the laughing that followed the Colonel knew it wasn't too complimentary. The Colonel got prepared to die. The Ven started to tighten his finger on the trigger of his weapon when out of nowhere several balls of energy struck the Ven, jolting his body before he fell down in a smoking heap. The Colonel turned to see a Marine standing not far away, holding a Rapid Pulse Rifle. The Marine came down and knelt next to the Colonel.

“Colonel, what is the damage?” said the Marine as the Marine's faceplate retracted, revealing the Marine's face.

“Major Stevens, didn't I tell you to get to the second line?”

“Yes, but you also said that we never leave anyone behind. Plus if you die I would become the commanding officer and I wouldn't be able to wing it anymore,” said Major Stevens with a large smile on her face.

“I knew you came back for selfless reasons. My injuries are just energy weapons injury to my calf and I have a piece of my armour sticking in my leg. It won't support my weight and I'm losing blood.”

“Okay, let me have a look.”

The Major took a good look at the Colonel's calf. She didn't look too happy. Suddenly she grabbed the rifle and fired it down the hill. The Colonel jerked and looked to where the Major was firing. He saw a Ven stumble backwards and collapse, with smoke coming out of his chest. The Colonel looked at the Major and saw that the Major hadn't even looked up from his calf.

“It is bad. I would say we take the armour out of your calf but I have nothing to stop the blood that will come out when we open the gates. You have some pretty severe burns too, but they should be okay. We need a medical kit. I'll get a Marine down here with a kit soon.”

“No. No one else is to come down here. You go back up and leave me here.”

“Look Colonel, I am not leaving you here.”

“It is not up to...”

A voice over the comm. Channel interrupted the Colonel's sentence.

“Attention any Marines near the Defensive line one; you have ten seconds to get under cover.”

The Colonel and Major exchanged confused glances.

“That sounded like Ensign Fenris,” said the Colonel.

“But he is on the Swiftfire. The only way he could be down here is if he is...”

The Major's eyes lit up in realisation as it dawned on her. She jumped up and pulled the Colonel up.

“Major! MAJOR! What are you doing?” said the Colonel as he struggled to stand.

“Get up, Colonel. We need to get to cover.”

The Major practically dragged the Colonel up the hill. The Colonel struggled with the pain he felt from his foot. He then heard something that sounded out of place; it was a low whine that slowly got louder. He looked up to the sky where it was coming from. Suddenly a Starfleet Attack Fighter shot overhead. As it got near the First

Defensive line it opened fire with its Pulse phasers that chewed up the earth and Ven alike. The Major pushed the Colonel behind a set of rocks and ducked down with him.

The Peregrine fighter started to turn around to make another run when a second fighter appeared and opened fire on the Ven. But this fighter continued on and as it passed over the Vendoth Assault shuttles it dropped several oval objects. As they hit the ground they exploded in an impossibly large force of energy that could only be from a matter/anti-matter device. Even though the Colonel and the Major were several kilometres from the shuttles and behind cover they still felt the heat wave and shockwave from the explosion. The Ven started to fire into the sky at the Peregrine fighters as they made another pass. Despite how advanced the Vendoth weapons were they were only meant for anti-personnel use and were completely useless against the fast moving fighters. The Fighters fired micro-torpedoes into the trenches levelling the area.

“Peregrine fighters, sir,” said the Major. “The Swiftfire must have sent them to help us. That large explosion was from Photon torpedoes. The Fighters dropped them on the Vendoth shuttles. The fighters are making another pass.”

The Ven started to flee out of the trenches and moving away so to make it difficult for the Fighters to target them, but unfortunately several moved towards the Colonel and Major.

“Keep your head down, Colonel. I’ll keep them off us,” said the Major.

The Major crouched and quickly moved away from the Colonel and into the open. The Major started to fire on the fleeing Ven. The Major cut down the Ven but bought attention to herself. With a target that they could fight against the Ven moved to strike. The Major summed up the situation and saw that her position would soon be overrun by the Ven. Despite this the Major kept fighting. Suddenly a hail of Phaser fire rained down on the Ven. The Starfleet troops seeing the Ven’s confusion had decided to move in and attack. They were now moving down the hill, engaging an enemy who was confused and been slaughtered.

“It was a trap,” said Che’va. “The Ven are been slaughtered.”

Var’tak looked fairly calm for the current situation.

“Start orbital bombardment.”

“But VenQa’ the scanners are offline and the Ven are close to the infidels. We have a large risk of killing our own troops,” said the Tactical officer.

“Just do it. The Ven signed their lives away by failing to wipe out the infidels.”

The Pri’tak manoeuvred into a position over the battlefield and opened fire.

Var’tak smiled as he saw the yellow balls of energy smash into the ground below destroying all life in its way.

The Ven had been split into two groups; a large percentage of the Ven fell back and was heading back to the remaining shuttles that had survived the fighter bombing, while a smaller group went on the offensive. They stormed up the hill and meet the Starfleet forces head on.

A Ven charged at Major Stevens. The Major didn’t noticed the Ven until it was nearly too late. The Ven swung his rifle at the Major’s head. The Major ducked and rolled out of the way just in time. The Major got back up onto one knee and levelled her rifle. The Ven was quick for his size; he was on top of the Major before she could do anything. The Ven knocked the Phaser out of the Major’s hand. The Major replied by quickly jabbing her elbow into the Ven’s face. She grabbed hold of the

Ven's rifle in an attempt to rip it out of the Ven's hand. The Ven's rifle was a lot stockier than the Federation counterpart. It had hard lines of the 2360s version but only thicker. It had an unusual handle that curved out of the back and back up towards the front before ending at a point, it looked a lot like a large claw. The Major tried to overbalance the Ven; suddenly the Major lost her balance and fell backwards. The Major hit the ground but had the rifle in her hand. She went to fire it when she realised that the rifle had no handle or trigger. The Ven stood just over a metre away and in its hand was the claw shaped handle. The edge snapped open and retracted revealing a glistening blade. The Ven struck with the blade embedding it into the rifle as the Major moved it to parry the Ven's attack. The Ven ripped the blade out and quickly stepped back. The Major heard a whine increasing with intensity. The Major realised that the attack had ruptured the weapons power cell. The Major threw the weapon away; it landed several metres away where it exploded. The Ven stood over the Major and prepared to deliver the killer blow; suddenly something leaped from nowhere and wrapped its arms around the Ven, stopping it from delivering the blow. The Ven started to thrash around like a trapped animal. Despite all the commotion the Major could make out Colonel David Tiki's face.

The Colonel was having trouble overpowering the Ven, he had managed to get to his feet and hobble over but trying to wrestle with someone when you couldn't put much weight onto one of your feet was impossible. It took the Ven sometime to finally throw off the Colonel who stumbled back but stayed on his feet. The Ven turned and faced the Colonel with a look of mad rage on its face. The Ven sliced at the Colonel with his blade. The Colonel stepped back but didn't get far enough back; the blade hit him on the side, the attack was meant to slice his chest open but the Colonel's armour stopped it. Instead of destroying his chest the blade stopped. The force of the strike was strong enough that it threw the Colonel onto the ground. The Ven was on top of the Colonel before he knew it. The Ven struck down with his blade. The Colonel instinctually moved his forearm into the way, stopping the blade. The armour around his arm crumbled under the force, but it held the blade. The Ven pushed harder, the Ven had the advantage with leverage. The Colonel punched up at the Ven's face, striking it several times, but the Ven did not cease. The Colonel suddenly got a warning signal in his helmet.

"Warning: Right forearm armour breach imminent."

The Ven was planning to slice through the Colonel no matter what. The Colonel got ready to feel the immense pain of having a limb cut off before he was killed when he saw a look of incredible pain in the eyes of the Ven before its body broke apart and disappeared in a yellow haze.

The Colonel looked up to see the Major kneeling not too far away with a rifle in her hand. The Major stood up and walked down to where the Colonel lay.

"Didn't want to take the risk this time of that Vendoth not staying dead. A low power blast didn't stop them, so I put the Phaser up to disintegration."

The Colonel was about to say something when they heard something ominous. They looked up and said in unison. "Holy shit!"

Ensign Fenris pulled back on the ship's control stick as he turned to make another pass. The Vendoth were in chaos. They were all over the place trying to get away. The Ensign could tell which Vendoth were the smart ones, they were the Vendoth who went up the hill and engaged the Starfleet troops. Since they were close to friendlies the Fighters couldn't risk strafing them.

The Ensign stole a look down to below him as he turned. He saw that several Vendoth had reached what remained of their shuttles. Despite dropping several Photon Torpedoes quite a few survived. This was because the Photons were set to a low yield. This was because they emitted radiation that was harmful to most beings and a high yield would have irradiated the area and the friendlies, plus the explosion would have been big enough to stun most beings for kilometres around the impact zone.

Suddenly something caught the Ensign's eye above him. He turned his head to see what looked like numerous suns in the sky above him. The only difference was that they seemed to be getting bigger. The Ensign finally realised what it was just as the first one past near his Fighter and smash into the ground. The Ensign swore as his Fighter rocked from the bombardment.

“Crazy bastards! They are bombing their own troops!”

The Ensign looked forward to see a sight that terrified him.

Gold balls of energy slammed down from space. The destructive beauty of it all transfixed the Colonel. The bombardment was totally off target; the bombardment was landing kilometres away. The bombardment hit the area where the Ven had landed their shuttles. The bombardment engulfed the shuttles, destroying them. One of the Peregrine Fighters unfortunately got caught in the middle of the bombardment tried to dodge through the weapon's fire. But it was a futile attempt, a blast hit the fighter solidifying its Port shield and shattering it before it took the Port wing clean off the fighter. The fighter immediately went into a spin as it lost control. The pilot tried to regain control; the Colonel could see the pilot using emergency thrusters trying to level out his crash landing. But he didn't succeed. The fighter hit the ground hard; bouncing back up, hit the ground again and flipped, leaving pieces of the hull behind in its wake.

The bombardment slowly moved closer as the Vendoth corrected their targeting. So far, apart from the fighter, no Starfleet troops had been caught in the bombardment. The same could not be said for the Ven, they were being slaughtered. The Ven who had not retreated had turned and watched in absolute terror and amazement. Their own people were killing them. The Starfleet troops took the advantage cutting down the Ven. The bombardment landed not far from the Starfleet troops, the next bombardment would most likely land on target, vaporising the Starfleet officers. The next bombardment raining from the sky was on target, the Colonel looked up and saw what he thought would be the end. The end never came, instead it stopped, metres above their heads. They hit a shimmering object and splattered, turning an area solid. More blasts hit the shields, turning more of it solid.

Inside the command bunker of the base Lt. Commander Whitechapel swore as she watched the bombardment hit the base's shields. Parts of the shield went solid. The shields protecting the base and the surrounding troops was a Garrison IV shield, designed to protect an area of several square kilometres from orbital bombardment. The Vendoth's weapons were having a reduced effect on such powerful shields, they were solidifying the shields much more slowly and as of yet they had not shattered.

“Lt. Commander, do you want us to return fire since they know we are here now?” asked a Lieutenant.

“Yes, but just torpedoes. Put all Phaser power to shields. Target the torpedoes so that they solidify parts of the Vendoth Battlecruiser's shields where their weapons fire are travelling through.”

“I suggest you activate the satellites and have them surround the Battlecruiser. This will spilt its fire and give us some breathing space,” suggested Mr. Patol.

“Good thinking, Mr Patol. Add that to the list.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why don’t we signal the Swiftfire to assist us?” asked another officer.

“We don’t want to give away her position. Remember our mission is to make sure the Swiftfire makes it out of here, if to do that it cost us our lives, well, so be it.”

Commander Nathaniel Waugh nudged forward in his Peregrine fighter, in turn pushing forward the debris. The Commander and three other fighters were among debris that orbited the planet, totally hidden from the Vendoth sensors. The debris would have passed by the Vendoth Battlecruiser so the Fighters had been nudging it slightly so it would pass close to the Battlecruiser.

The Commander’s communication system chirped and he responded.

“Commander, there has been a change of plan. The Base has revealed itself and is getting hammered by the Battlecruiser. We are going to attack now,” said Commander Core

“But we aren’t in position.”

“I know, but it doesn’t matter we are going to plan 2. On my mark start the 2-minute countdown. You’ll need to leave a bit early but it still should work. Start the count down now. Good luck Commander.”

The transmission was terminated.

“All tubes are ready, Commander,” said Lt. Letac.

“Excellent on my mark fire.”

The Commander watched the countdown. This was a complex plan that relied on split second timing. This was their backup plan and it wasn’t often that a backup plan was more complex then the primary plan but this was a rare instant. They were originally going to try and rescue the Captain. They were going to use the defence satellites to punch a hole in the Battlecruiser’s shields by concentrating all their fire on one single spot. The Fighters in the debris would then use their sensors to locate the captain and beam him out through the hole. A risky plan that all worked on the Captain still been alive and that the Defence Satellites would be able to punch a hole in the shields. But with the base exposed so to protect the 200 or so Starfleet officers who were engaging the Vendoth ground troops. It had powerful shields but she doubted that they would be able to last forever. So they had to take out the ship, whether the Captain was in it or not. The Commander knew that the Captain would know it was the right thing, the only thing to do. But this didn’t make it any easier to do.

The chrono counted down painfully slowly and the Commander got ready to give the order.

Commander Waugh watched the countdown.

“Steady. Steady. GO! GO! GO!” he yelled.

The four fighters burst out of the debris and headed straight for the Battlecruiser.

“FIRE!”

The Swiftfire reverberated as the ship fired a large spread of Quantum Torpedoes. If there had been anyone watching the ship they would have been amazed by the sight. The ship’s bow was pointed slightly at the planet as it fired. Nearly 20 torpedoes

were fired from the rear weapon pod and the bottom forward torpedo launcher. Blue spheres of light appeared to appear out of nowhere, as they zipped along the Swiftfire's hull they illuminated it in an eerie blue hue. The torpedoes headed for the planet before they straightened up and started to fly along the atmosphere.

Commander Waugh's fighter closed on the Vendoth Battlecruiser. He doubted that the Vendoth would have detected them yet, but they soon would. His Fighter's computer chirped and the Computer's voice rang in the cockpit.

"Countdown, 5...4...3...2...1...0."

The Commander switched on his targeting computer and locked on to the Vendoth Battlecruiser, giving away his and the other fighter's position. Up until now it would have been hard to make out the fighters from the rest of the debris in the area but with the ship's sensors online it was like painting the fighters fluorescent green and putting a huge flashing sign above the fighters saying, "Fire here."

The Vendoth Battlecruiser started to fire at the fighters.

"Come on you stupid bastards," mumbled the Commander as he easily evaded the Battlecruiser's fire. "That is right. Watch us; you are going to get a big surprise."

Meanwhile in the planet's atmosphere 20 torpedoes cruised along flying along a simple course that would make them circle the planet until they finally ran out of power and either exploded or plummeted down to the planet. Suddenly they picked up a signal and they lurched up out of the atmosphere towards their fate.

"VenQa', I have several more fighters off the port side."

"Well, destroy them. But don't take too many weapons away from the bombardment."

The Vendoth nodded and started to reorient several weapons to target the fighters.

Var'tak turned back to the viewscreen and watched the bombardment rain down on the planet. The Infidel base was no longer firing back. They had solidified enough of the base's shields that they could no longer fire back, not that it matter if they could. They were doing little damage.

"VenQa', I have multiple contacts coming out of the planet's atmosphere!"

"More fighters?"

"No, they are smaller."

"Show me."

The viewscreen changed to show several blue flashes of light. Var'tak turned to ask what the blue lights were when the ship was rocked by explosions.

Commander Waugh watched the torpedoes loop up directly in front of his fighter. They were slaved to his targeting scanner and were heading straight for the Battlecruiser. The first of the torpedoes slammed into the Vendoth Battlecruiser's shields, exploding in a brilliant ball of fire. The impact area went solid as the torpedoes hit. In an area of only a few metres squared 15 Quantum torpedoes impacted in less than 30 seconds. When the fifteenth torpedo hit it shattered the shield area allowing the remaining torpedoes to impact on the ship's hull. The final torpedo's explosion had only just stopped expanding when Commander Waugh's fighter group reached the Battlecruiser. They flew through the explosion and under the Battlecruiser's shields.

"Okay. We're under the shield. Break up and destroy any targets of opportunity. But priority targets are the weapons," said Commander Waugh.

The Commander thumbed the trigger on the fighter's control stick, firing the Fighter's phaser.

Var'tak smashed his hand down onto the armrest.

"The infidel Captain lied! It was all a trap to destroy us, to destroy me!" yelled Var'tak.

"The Captain would never have intentionally betrayed his men, VenQa'. Pain was not enough; we should have used the drugs. Then he would not have been able to lie to you," said Che'va.

The ship was rocked by another explosion.

"The Fighters are strafing our hull and we are receiving fire from what appears to be Defence satellites," said the Vendoth Tactical officer.

"Why have they not been destroyed yet? I gave you one simple mission, kill the fighters."

"I could not turn enough weapons to target them. You asked for me not to take away too much from our bombardment. Now I can't get a lock at all, they are too close and fast for the turrets to target them."

"Ignore them. They do not matter. I want a full weapons bombardment, maximum firepower. I want all life on that planet extinguished."

In his rage Var'tak didn't notice Che'va slip out of the Bridge. Che'va had a mission to complete and he had finally realised how he could do it.

If Jonathan had not been secured to the chair he would have definitely have been on the ground. He was slumped over, blood still flowing freely from his nose, lip and head. His breathing was ragged from the pain of several broken and bruised ribs.

Var'tak had severely beaten him and all Jonathan could feel was a dull pain all over his body. He heard the door slide open and he looked up expecting to see Var'tak coming back for another round. Instead he saw two guards and Var'tak's second in command.

"Captain, you will be pleased to know your trap is working but for your treachery you have earned yourself death."

The Vendoth reached for his sleeved dagger. The guard on his right stepped slightly in so to stop Che'va.

"VenQe' Che'va, I think that the VenQa' will want to hand out sentence to the infidel," he said.

Che'va nodded, "You are correct Ven. Thank you for stopping me from making a mistake. Var'tak will hear of your loyalty."

The Ven bowed slightly and was in the middle of thanking Che'va when Che'va struck. Che'va ripped out his dagger and thrust it into the Ven's neck. He grabbed the Ven's weapon and spun around and fired at the other Ven. It took 3 seconds from Che'va touching his knife to when both Ven lay dead on the floor.

Jonathan wondered if he had gone insane and was imagining this all. He couldn't believe it when Che'va moved around and unstrapped Jonathan.

"Can you walk?" Che'va asked.

Jonathan grimaced in pain as he stood up.

"I'll manage," he said.

"Good. Let's go, follow me."

Che'va slowly checked the hall outside the room and then motioned Jonathan after him. They started to stealthily move out.

"Why are you helping me?" whispered Jonathan to Che'va.

Che'va continued on for several metres before answering.

"Because it is the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do would have been to not attack us without warning before!" retorted Jonathan loudly.

Che'va turned and signalled for Jonathan to keep it down.

"That could not be helped."

"I still don't believe you. From what I know you are a hostile race who is trying to kill us for no reason!"

"If I wanted to kill you I would have done it back in the interrogation room," snarled Che'va. Then he softened. "But it is true for centuries we have been conquering and destroying others in the name of bringing our order to the Galaxy. At first it was a noble cause, we actually made a difference to several races but over time it has been perverted into what you see now. We slaughter millions for the actions of a few, isolated individuals. We conquered and enslaved millions and stole their resources to strengthen us and when we had all that was theirs, we left them to die. But this is a time of change; many are now questioning our way of life. But they are ignored or silenced. In fact hundreds have been killed for their so-called dishonour. So we have formed a new order, one to return our race to a cultured, enlightened civilisation we once were. We are the Mer'jat Vendoth, I am a Mer'jat Vendoth. We have positioned ourselves within the old order, waiting for the time to strike. Unfortunately most of our followers are positioned back closer to our Homeworld. Only a small number are part of the armada heading for Earth."

"There's an armada heading for Earth!"

"Yes. Though not now, they will not arrive for several years. We were part of the Armada, one of the Mer'jat, the head Qi'doth, put the calculations slightly off in the hope that we would be destroyed, since the slightest miscalculation can lead a ship to be destroyed in transit or thrown off course and off time, which is what happened to us. But in the end it was for the better. I thought that your Federation was like all the other races we have...dealt with. But I was wrong, your Federation is what we use to be, what we strive for now. That is why I have acted, why I help you. I help you in the hope it will change our ways for the better."

"I don't know what..."

Che'va signalled for Jonathan to be quiet and to stay where he was. He continued on his own until he was out of sight. Jonathan heard a door whoosh open and then the dull sound of heavy weapons fire. Che'va came back and Jonathan followed him into what looked like Main Engineering. A dozen dead Vendoth littered the room.

Che'va threw something to Jonathan, which he plucked out of the air. It was a Federation Tricorder.

"Get to that console. Use your tricorder to translate the console; I have already uploaded my language to it. When I tell you transfer power from secondaries to storage units one to twelve."

Jonathan went to the console and held his tricorder over it. He soon found the necessary controls.

"Transfer power now," said Che'va.

Jonathan pressed the controls, transferring the power.

"Good, now transfer power from auxiliary shield generators to storage units 34 to 39."

Jonathan again ran a scan of the console to decode the cryptic language.

"What are we trying to do?" he asked.

“We are transferring power from systems so to save your friends and at the same time we are preparing to destroy this ship. We cannot destroy it directly as the VenQa’, Captain, can cancel the order. Once we have set this ship to destroy itself I will evacuate you to your people.”

“So all we have to do is shut down the ship, destroy it and then escape. I thought that this was going to be complicated.”

“They are really hammering the garrison shields. I doubt they will hold for much longer,” reported Lt. Letac.

“The Fighters aren’t doing enough damage to their weapons systems and the last Satellite just went down. Most of them destroyed themselves when they were hit, they continued firing all their weapons and hit the inside of their solidified shields, disabling or destroying them.”

“Damn it! Okay, we have no choice. Get to battle stations we are taking the Swiftfire in. I want all power to weapons and shields.”

Commander Core tugged at the bottom of her top as if it would make the situation more comfortable as she got ready to commit suicide.

“VenQa’, we have lost a weapon.”

“Those Fighters are like insignificant bugs. They cannot save themselves or their friends.”

“VenQa’, the Starfleet ship is rounding the planet. It was not destroyed!”

“Another thing the human lied about. No matter, it will soon be dead. No, wait. Disable the ship. I want some hostages to play with after this is all over.”

“Shields are overloading, Commander!” cried Lt. Letac.

“Transfer shield power to weapons. Whatever happens we have to keep firing,” said Commander Core as she tried to stay seated as the ship rocked from the heavy fire. The Swiftfire had only been in battle for over a minute and it was being hammered. The ship was not ready for battle; with most of its systems running on minimum power it wasn’t a matter of if they would lose it was how long it would take.

The ship rocked heavily.

“That’s it. They’ve disabled our weapons, engines, and shields. Life support is only just holding,” said Lt. Letac.

Commander Core just stared intently at the Vendoth Battlecruiser and waited for the killer blow. But to her surprise it never came.

“We have the Starfleet vessel, VenQa’.”

“Excellent. Now destroy that planetary base, I grow tired of it.”

Var’tak smiled dispassionately as he watched the gold balls of destructive energy enter the atmosphere. Suddenly it all stopped.

Before Var’tak could start yelling one of his officers spoke.

“We’ve lost weapons power!”

“How?” growled Var’tak.

“I don’t know. We just have no power to any weapons. I can’t seem to free up any power from elsewhere. The only power we have is in storage units and it will take over an hour to start to get the power out and redistributed to systems.”

“Get me the Doth in Engineering,” ordered Var’tak.

The communication officer tried to raise Engineering but failed. He tried twice more before telling Var’tak that he could not get a reply from Engineering.

“VenQe’, go and see what is going on down there,” ordered Var’tak.

Several Vendoth looked at each other seeing who would speak first. Finally one of them spoke.

“He is not present on the Bridge, VenQa’.”

Var’tak spun around on his chair, his eyes darting around, looking for his Executive.

“FIND HIM!” yelled Var’tak.

“He is in Engineering, with an identified person.”

Var’tak raised an eyebrow as the officer said there was an identified person with Che’va. Then it dawned on him.

“Interrogation room,” hailed Var’tak.

There was no reply.

“The human must have escaped and is using Che’va to sabotage this vessel.

Scramble the Ven; I want the human captured alive. I want to be the one to deal out what he deserves.”

“They will know where we are,” said Che’va. “They will try to capture you alive, which will work to our favour. Vendoth rifles do not have a stun setting; they will have to physically overpower you.”

“So what do we do?” asked Jonathan.

“Protocol for this type of situation is for several Ven to beam in and while the target is dealing with them the main attack force will come through the front door. It will be impossible for you to take out all the Ven who beam in before they get to you or the main group are in the room. But I doubt they know I am working with you. That gives us the advantage.”

Che’va explained what they would do. They figured out the most likely places the Ven would beam into. Jonathan got ready and pointing his rifle at one of the spots, while Che’va stood behind another spot.

Soon the Ven arrived. Several green hazes appeared in the room, which formed into Ven warriors. Just like Che’va thought a Ven appeared where Jonathan was targeting. The Ven didn’t have a chance, as soon as the beam in completed they were cut down by energy weapon fire. Where Che’va was a Ven materialised in front of him facing away. Che’va quickly drove his dagger into the base of the Ven’s neck, severing the spinal cord, killing the Ven. Jonathan swivelled to target another Ven, Che’va was right. None had rifles but instead they had stocky rectangular objects. Jonathan cut another one down as Che’va moved with the speed of a cheetah behind another Ven. Che’va kicked up knocking the object out of the Ven’s hand into the air and over the Ven’s head. Che’va caught it as the Ven turned. Che’va jabbed it into the Ven’s stomach and thumbed something. There appeared to be a huge electrical discharge in the Ven’s abdomina, the force threw the Ven across the room. Jonathan had no time to admire Che’va’s work. He quickly fired; killing another Ven. Five down, Jonathan started to relax. Suddenly he heard a light hum of power behind him and he remembered that there had been six. Jonathan waited for the shock but instead he heard a gargle and then the sound of heavy breathing. Jonathan turned to see a Ven about a foot off the ground. Che’va stood behind the Ven. Jonathan heard the sound of a knife being pulled out of flesh and the Ven fell to the ground, dead. Che’va stood over the body breathing very heavily.

The door to the room burst open and a dozen Ven stormed in. They stopped suddenly as they saw the sight. Six of their colleagues lay dead and one of their own stood over the body of a Ven, in his hand was a dagger, dripping with the blood of the slain.

Jonathan quickly lined up a Ven in his rifle's sight.

"Stop!" barked Che'va. "I will deal with them."

The lead Ven stepped forward, "VenQe', you dishonour yourself and your race by helping this inferior."

"I dishonour no one. In fact I reclaim some of our honour that we lost because of fools like you and the VenQa'."

"You are no longer a Vendoth, Che'va. As soon as you allied with the infidel you become nothing more than an infidel yourself."

"I became more of a Vendoth than you will ever be. But if that is what you believe then you will have no trouble defeating me in honourable combat."

The Ven seemed to be taken aback. But he got himself together and then threw his weapon away. He ordered the rest of the Ven out of the room.

"Your death will bring great honour to me and my family."

The two Ven closed until they were a metre apart. Then the Ven pulled out his dagger. But for some reason Che'va slewed his dagger. The Ven looked surprised and then smiled. The Ven was first to strike. He lunged forward Che'va easily sidestepped the move. The Ven lunged again and Che'va again easily moved out of the way. The Ven lunged again and this time slashed in the direction that Che'va moved. Che'va expected the move and grabbed the Ven's wrist, quickly twisting it back. It snapped so loudly it made Jonathan feel sick. The Ven dropped the dagger. Che'va pushed the Ven away as if he was nothing more than an annoying pest. The Ven fell to the ground. As the Ven got back up Jonathan saw a look of intense rage in his eyes. Che'va motioned for the Ven to come to him as if it was a family dog. The Ven screamed and charged. Che'va looked vaguely amused at this all. The Ven got into arms reach and threw a brutal punch at Che'va. Che'va ducked under the punch and came back up, grabbing the Ven's throat, stopping the Ven in his tracks. Che'va lifted the Ven off the ground and then back slammed him onto the floor. The Ven went to sit up but Che'va fell on top of him thrusting the Ven's very own dagger into his heart. Che'va twisted the dagger. Che'va stood up, the Ven's body twitched as his body went into death spasms.

Suddenly another Vendoth beamed in at the far side of the room. Che'va was already rushing to attack the Vendoth when it levelled its rifle and fired, hitting Che'va and knocking him back across the room.

"Traitor," hissed the Vendoth.

Fear seeped into Jonathan's every pore as he recognised the voice, it was Var'tak. Jonathan froze. He didn't know what to do. But he knew he had to do something. Jonathan spun around to shoot the Vendoth but Var'tak had silently closed the distance so they were nose to nose. Var'tak easily slapped the rifle out of Jonathan's hand and then backhanded Jonathan, causing him to stumble backwards. Jonathan regained his balance only to get a punch in the face. Jonathan fell to the floor and didn't bother trying to get up, he knew he was dead.

Var'tak stood over him and planted his foot on Jonathan's neck.

"You have caused me quite a bit of damage and annoyance. But it was for naught. You will die and so will all your friends and I will continue and conquer your pitiful Federation. Pity you can't live to see it."

Var'tak started to increase the pressure on Jonathan's throat. Jonathan looked up at Var'tak's smiling face and realised that it was the last thing he would see before he died. Var'tak's smile disappeared as he coughed; something came out of his mouth. He stumbled off of Jonathan's throat. He stumbled away; as he leaves Jonathan notices a dagger in his back. Var'tak collapses. Jonathan turns away and sees Che'va

standing defiantly not far away. Che'va collapses. Jonathan forced himself up and rushed to Che'va. One look at the Vendoth Jonathan realised it is not good.

"Che'va. You're dying."

"It comes to us all," forced out the Vendoth. "I am prepared knowing I have fulfilled my mission. I have stop Var'tak and helped save the innocent."

"You have made yourself proud."

"Take this," Che'va reached out. Jonathan took his hand and Che'va put something in it. "When the Armada reaches Earth it will contact the leader of the Mer'jat Vendoth on the Mer'jot Ducmre."

"You have a ship named after your movement in their Armada?" asked Jonathan.

"No. Mer'jot means, "Law", Ducmre means "Bringer". Mer'jat means "True/Truth", as in the True Vendoth."

Che'va's hand slips away and falls beside him. Jonathan opens his fist and has a look at the device. It was very small for a communications device. It had a square base with a rounded top. It looked totally smooth, no screen, no buttons, nothing. It was an unusual device and Jonathan didn't know how he was going to use it. But the look in Che'va's eyes told him that when the time came he would know what to do.

"Don't lose it because you can't reverse engineer it. Keep...keep it safe," Che'va was really struggling to speak now.

"I will keep it close."

"Promise me one thing. One thing only, you will free my people of the tyranny and evil that they are trapped under. Promise me on your Starfleet honour."

"I promise, Che'va. I will see that the True Vendoths will return to their former glory."

It seemed that this was all Che'va wanted to hear. He reached out and put his arm on Jonathan's arm and with his last ounce of strength he mouthed a "thank you" and then he died.

Jonathan closed the Vendoth's eyes and put his hand back down. Though he didn't really know Che'va he felt a great respect for the alien and he felt truly sad at the Vendoth's passing.

Jonathan's mourning was broken by a beeping noise. Jonathan turned to see Var'tak slumped over a console.

"You Vendoth are harder to kill then the command crew of the Enterprise."

"Joke while you can human. This ship is on a collision course with your planetary base and we will also take your ship with us. There is nothing you can do about it. We will die together along with all your friends."

Jonathan got up and to the nearest console. He scanned it with his tricorder, which confirmed what Var'tak had said.

"You cannot override my codes. There is no escape we will crash into the planet long before you can make it to an escape pod or a shuttle."

Jonathan kept trying to override Var'tak's commands. The ship had just reached the upper atmosphere and it would be less than a minute before it was all over. But Jonathan remembered Che'va's plan. Jonathan ran over to a different console and started to input a new command.

Jonathan felt rather than heard the effects of his commands as the storage units exploded. As they got close the vibrations got more violent until Jonathan felt an intense heat and saw the flames coming to engulf him, then everything went a bright, endless white.

Instead the ship locked a tractor beam to the ship and started to draw it in, all the time still firing on the planet. Then for no reason it stopped firing and it stop tractoring in the Swiftfire but it still had the beam locked on the ship. For several agonizing minutes nothing happened, and then the ship started to move forward, towards the planet. The Swiftfire moved with it, trapped under its power.

“Oh my god! They are going to crash into the planet and take us with them,” said Lt. Letac in absolute horror.

“I would make peace with whatever you believe in,” said Commander Core, her voice wavering. “There is nothing we can do now.”

Commander Core hung her head, a flood of emotions threatened to overwhelm her. One thing that kept racing through her mind was that she and failed, failed the crew, failed herself, and more importantly she failed the Captain.

Commander Core raised her head and was going to tell the crew that she was sorry when the ship suddenly lurched. Lt. Letac was all over the sensors.

“The Tractor Beam! It’s gone! I’m also getting strange reading from the Battlecruiser.”

Commander Core looked up to the viewscreen and saw the Battlecruiser shake slightly and then more violently. Suddenly a column of fire burst out of the ship. Another column appeared and then another. The Battlecruiser started to break into pieces before it was engulfed in a gigantic explosion.

Cheers erupted on the Bridge, as the explosion died leaving just small pieces of the huge Battlecruiser spinning out into space.

Commander Core rose out of the Captain’s chair as she watched what happened.

“Jesus, the Captain,” whispered the Commander

Through out it all the Commander had never doubted that the Captain was still alive, but now there was no way the Captain could have survived.

The Bridge went quiet as they too realised what had happened. A deathly silence filled the Bridge, which was broken by the computer chirping.

Lt. Letac checked what was going on and saw that the ships scanners had picked something up.

“I don’t believe it! I have something, directly in front. It’s a Starfleet Scoutship, the computer has identified it as SC-193. It is out of tractor beam range and transporters are down.”

“I want this ship up and running in five minutes. Get Impulse, thrusters, anything that will move us forward. It is time to welcome the Captain home.”

Commander Core didn’t try to hide that stupid smile that crossed her face. Despite it all the Captain had manage to survive it all and probably saved 600 lives.

Jonathan was confused. He was sure he was dead but he didn’t feel dead. The last thing he remembered was the white. But it was gone now; all he could see was black. He didn’t know when the black replaced the white but it had. It suddenly occurred to him to try and open his eyes. He did and saw the small, compact Bridge of the Scoutship. He was seated on the command chair facing the forward window.

“Not sure how you got here, Captain?”

Jonathan turned and saw the last person he expected to see.

“Q! You did this?”

“No, the Tooth Fairy did! Of course I did this.”

“Again you interfere with my life,” said Jonathan angrily.

“Thank you Q for saving my life, again. It’s okay, Captain. I do what I can.”

“Why do you keep doing this, Q?”

“Like I’ve said before. It is not time for you to die. You still have a part to play.”

“What is this, a game? This is my life!”

“Don’t you understand? You are needed to...”

“What? Save the universe? You don’t need me; you already have someone, Picard.”

“If you let me finish. To save humanity and the Federation, which is a much harder to do than save the universe. You need two maybe three people to do this.”

“I’m surprised no one has punched you yet, Q.”

“But they have. The then Commander Sisko punched me; there is an entertaining story behind that. But it will have to wait.” Q looked at something behind Jonathan. “Your friends have found you.”

Jonathan turned and saw the Swiftfire closing on the Scoutship.

“Captain,” called Q. Jonathan turned and instinctively caught an object that Q threw at him.

“Do as Che’va said and keep that close. You’ll need it sooner than you can imagine.”

With that Q just disappeared. Jonathan took another look at the device Che’va had given him.

The Scoutship’s computer chirped.

“Swiftfire to Scoutship. Are you there Captain?” came Commander Core’s voice over the ships speakers.

Jonathan responded. “Captain here. Good to hear your voice Commander. I’m ready to come home.”

Q watched with interest as the Swiftfire tractorbeamed the Scout into the rear Shuttlebay.

“I really don’t see why you are so interested in them, Q.”

“They are an interesting species,” replied Q.

A second Q appeared next to Q. This Q looked younger and had blonde hair. But other than that they were similar size and build.

“I don’t see why you interfere with them so much either.”

“Like I told the Captain,” said Q. “They tend to end it too soon. Before they are needed, before the right moment.”

“It is not our choice to make for them, Q. You are interfering with them too much again. We can’t and will not let you interfere any more in the Human/Vendoth conflict. Let the mortals deal with it for themselves. I am sure they can handle it. War is what they do best. Anyway I am sure they can do it.”

“My friend because of me they will do it.”

In space a couple of years is like removing a hand full of sand from the beach, meaningless. Time doesn’t have a meaning unless it is in the order of billions. But to a humble species such as humans, a couple of years can mean all the difference. This is true to the crew of the USS Swiftfire. The events of the Badlands were just a memory and a lot more important things had happened since then.

The Swiftfire was in a standard orbit around Earth. The Swiftfire had just been in dock for a refit. On the Bridge the Turbolift doors opened and out stepped Jonathan.

“Captain on the Bridge,” said Ensign Cole.

“As you were,” said Jonathan. The crew returned to what they were doing. “So how’s the old girl?”

“I am fine, Captain,” said Commander Core. “But it is rude to call me old girl. If I remember correctly you are older than me, old man.”

“I meant the ship.”

Commander Core flashed a smile at Jonathan. “Great. The new cores are more efficient, we have the latest Phaser Arrays on the ship, a full stock of Quantum torpedoes, the Medical Bay has all the latest equipment and stock and we even got a squadron of Valkyrie fighters.”

“Excellent. Prepare the ship to leave orbit.”

The crew went about their duty as they prepared the vessel to leave Earth orbit.

“Priority message from Starfleet Command,” reported Lt. Letac.

“All ships in the Sol system are to move to Jupiter and form a defensive line.”

“Admiral, this is the Swiftfire. Why are we forming a Defensive line?” asked the Captain.

“The Vendoth have arrived.”