

STAR TREK: DOMINION

By

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Acknowledgements:

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Lieutenant, Junior Grade, James (Jim) Kelly stared at the transmission that was currently displayed on the viewscreen in his quarters. In fact the display was on every Starfleet frequency, everywhere. The Dominion were making sure that as many Federation citizens as possible could see the devastation. They were also transmitting on Klingon and Romulan, and even Ferengi, frequencies just to ensure that the *entire* Alpha-Quadrant knew of the Federation's defeat at the hands of the Dominion.

The Federation's Seventh Fleet, commanded by Admiral Borren D'gret, had engaged the Dominion-Cardassian fleet at Tyra, a system 12 light years *inside* Federation space, in an attempt to halt the Dominion's advance into the Alpha Quadrant. The Federation fleet was greatly out-numbered by the Dominion who attacked with a fleet of 248 ships. Admiral Borren D'gret rallied his force of 112 ships in a valiant, but ultimately, futile attempt to stop them.

There had been a fierce, but short lived, battle in which Admiral D'gret's own flagship, the *USS North Star*, having survived the first wave of the assault, was obliterated by multiple torpedo spreads from the lead Cardassian vessel, the *Gevrok*, commanded by Gul Pettar. Thus decapitated, the Seventh Fleet fought a losing battle from the beginning. Although it struggled on valiantly for over an hour, it could not overcome the superior number of Dominion vessels. It suffered a bitter defeat. Of its 112 ships that took the field, 98 were either destroyed or so badly damaged that they were unable to retreat from the battlefield, leaving only 14 ships of the Seventh Fleet intact once the order to retreat was given. As they left the system at warp the surviving ships monitored the victorious Dominion fleet destroying the disabled vessels, taking no prisoners. The Federation casualties were listed at over 24,000. The Dominion had taken Tyra.

James shut off the display and sank back on his bunk aboard the Defiant-class *USS Hunter*. Her current patrol assignment, along the Tzenkethi border was just completed, ahead of schedule, and she had just received her new orders. She was to proceed at maximum velocity to *Deep Space 9*.

How in God's name are we going to beat the Dominion when they can do *that* to the Seventh Fleet, almost at will?, he asked himself and he feared that he would never have an answer. He lay his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes. He tried to sleep but all he saw, in his mind's eye, was the far-off star system that now contained so many destroyed Federation starships and even more dead bodies.

It would be weeks before James could close his eyes and sleep properly but not because he was relaxed. It was because every day that passed brought further casualty reports from the front and more and more of his friends' names were appearing on the constantly updated lists of the dead, injured or missing in action. He was becoming more accustomed to the carnage and war-weary *before* he even saw battle, at least this time round. He had seen battle before when the *Hunter* had assisted in the defence of Earth against invasion by the Borg not too long ago. She was now on her way to battle again. She was to join the Federation's Ninth Fleet based in the Bajoran system at the Federation station *Deep Space 9*.

Based at *Deep Space 9* the *Hunter* was destined to, and indeed did, see a lot of action along the front lines. Her crew would be rewarded, several times, with many medals for bravery and gallantry. Her Chief Medical Officer was also honoured, posthumously, with the Christopher Pike medal for bravery for sacrificing her life to save

her patients in Sickbay. She sealed herself off in the corridor that led to Sickbay with a hand-held fire extinguisher and fought a losing battle against a blaze that threatened her patients. When her extinguisher was exhausted she drew her phaser and blasted a hole in the bulkhead, opening the corridor to the vacuum of space. With the air vented into the void the blaze had nothing left to feed on and died just as the emergency forcefield erected over the hull breach. Unfortunately there was nothing that could be done to save Lieutenant-Commander McFadden. Her grip on a bulkhead failed her and she was swept out into the merciless void before the emergency forcefields were erected.

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When the Federation Alliance finally decided to go on the offensive and successfully wrested the Chin'Toka system from the hands of the Dominion after defeating the automated orbital weapons platforms, Jem'Hadar Attack Ships and Cardassian Galor-class battle cruisers based there, they began to reinforce the ground their troops had captured.

One of the vessels that was left to patrol the system was the *Hunter*. She had a quiet few months there patrolling the border and having the occasional skirmish with a probing Jem'Hadar attack ship. She was then rotated back to *Deep Space 9* for refuelling, re-arming and repairs. There she was once again part of the Federation's Ninth Fleet.

Just as *Deep Space 9*'s Chief of Operations, Chief Miles O'Brien's engineering teams had finalised their repairs and the ship was outfitted with a full complement of Quantum torpedoes some disturbing news came in from the front. The Dominion was moving to retake the Chin'Toka system with a massive fleet which included their new allies: the Breen.

The counteroffensive was spearheaded by the Breen forces who broke through the Federation Alliance defences in two places. The Ninth Fleet then departed from *Deep Space 9* to reinforce the beleaguered defenders. It was here that the crew of the *USS Hunter* was to taste defeat for the first time.

The Federation Alliance was easily outnumbered by the Dominion's fleet in the Chin'Toka system by at least 3 to 1 but put up a valiant fight in the belief in their ships and their recent successes. That was until the Breen unveiled their secret weapon, their energy dissipators. 311 Federation Alliance ships, including Captain Sisko's vaunted *USS Defiant*, were incapacitated by the Breen energy dissipators, which drained every single system on the ship dry, leaving them powerless and helpless. Their crews were forced to abandon their ships to slowly limp back to Federation territory in cramped escape pods. Their abandoned vessels were then destroyed at the Dominion's leisure.

The *USS Hunter* was luckier than most of the fleet in that she survived the first attack run against the Dominion fleet. Two other Defiant-class ships, the *USS Victory* and *USS Cheyenne*, as well as an Akira-class vessel, the *USS Hornet*, in their attack wing were destroyed on their first pass. The Defiants were destroyed by Cardassian fire while the Akira was obliterated by being rammed by Jem'Hadar attack ship. The *Hunter* had managed to defeat her pursuer, a Cardassian Galor-class battle cruiser. She managed to defeat the Cardassian ship by flying close to her superstructure on a strafing run. The *Hunter* was too close to the Galor for her weapons to get a lock on the diminutive Federation warship. The *Hunter*, meanwhile, was nimble enough to evade the incoming fire while, at the same time,

firing several devastating Quantum torpedo volley's which punched through the Cardassian shields and destroyed the ship utterly. As she emerged on the far side of the exploding Galor, the *Hunter* was battered by two Jem'Hadar attack ships.

Her weakened shields could not absorb the full fury of the firepower unleashed on her and she was very badly damaged. The Captain, First Officer and two other junior officers were killed by direct hit to bridge. Several others were hurt as consoles exploded across the bridge. Lieutenant James Kelly, the *Hunter's* Tactical Officer, was then forced to assume command being the most senior officer left alive on the bridge.

The young Bajoran helmsman, Ensign Jokana Preal, had managed to use the enforced roll put on the ship by the combined Jem'Hadar phaser assault to force the little warship into an extremely tight turn that evaded their pursuers for a few moments, which gave the bridge crew enough time to sort out the chain of command. That done the *Hunter* re-entered the battle and succeeded in taking out two Jem'Hadar ships with devastating fire from her pulse-phaser cannons and a Breen warship with a spread of Quantum torpedoes. Unfortunately with her own shields at 32% they sustained major damage to all major systems as they were caught by the blast wave from the exploding Breen vessel.

The blast that engulfed the *Hunter* drained the last of the power from her shields and knocked her weapons off-line. Life support dropped below minimum capability and the multiple alert klaxons blaring throughout the ship did little to help the crew focus on their jobs. And to make matters worse, a Cardassian Hideki-class cruiser was closing on them. Its first volley of torpedoes battered the little starship. Down in Engineering her crew were desperately trying to get Warp power back on-line and all the while the ship was being battered from all sides. The impulse engines were almost gone leaving the ship with docking thrusters only. They were swiftly running out of operational systems, options and time.

"If we're gonna go, why not take some spoonheads with us? Let's ram the bastards!" someone shouted.

"That may not be necessary!" James said evenly. The calmness in his voice not betraying the absolute fear he was feeling. His mind was hinting to him that they did indeed have one more weapon, besides the self-destruct, to use. James accessed his console and smiled evilly when he got the results he hoped for. His conscious brain finally caught on to the idea that was hanging at the edge of his mind.

"Helm, set a ramming course for that cruiser. Best possible speed!"

There was stunned silence on the bridge for a split second. It seemed as though even the alert klaxons had suffered shock at the order.

"Aye sir," she said dejectedly. Ensign Jokana, who as a young Bajoran had expected to have been killed by Cardassians years ago during the Occupation of Bajor but had been lucky enough to have avoided that fate, slowly input the appropriate commands. It looked now though that she was destined to die at Cardassian hands.

At least I'll have the satisfaction of taking some of the Spoonheads with me, she thought morosely, as her finger hovered over the thruster controls. She said a quick prayer to the Prophets to watch over her family as she waited to punch the button that would launch the ship on its suicidal course. She did not realise that her prayer had been said aloud and had been heard by the entire bridge crew, who were all praying the same thing to their own Gods.

"Course plotted and laid in, sir", she announced with defiance.

"Engage!"

Jabbing her finger into the controls she launched the ship on a suicidal charge directly towards the on-rushing Cardassian warship as fast as her thrusters could force her. Jim counted off the distance in his mind. Just before the collision alarm sounded he gave his orders.

"Helm, all engines full reverse!"

The Ensign was amazed to hear that order. She felt cheated of her fate but complied with the order nonetheless. As soon as the young Ensign started to punch her console, Jim entered commands on the panel in the arm of his chair. As soon as he did, the computer announced the decoupling sequence and began to give a five second countdown. Then, with a thump and at the precise moment of zero inertia, when the ship's momentum began to change from forward to reverse, the warhead was released. The warhead was the entire forward section of the ship, which contained the navigational deflector and the forward torpedo launchers. Since use of the warhead in this manner is considered a last-ditch measure, depriving the ship of its navigational deflector at that point should not cause a problem. In the event that the ship survives an encounter in which it has to use its warhead, it cannot safely go to warp speeds until the warhead is replaced.

Jim was fully aware of this fact, now that his mind had finally grasped the idea, as the warhead burst forward from its housing while the remainder of the ship flew in reverse as fast as she could go. The on-rushing Cardassian warship could do nothing to avoid the rapidly approaching warhead. Its already battered shields crumpled and collapsed beneath the force of the impact and the exploding warhead tore the Cardassian ship to pieces.

Ensign Jokana thanked the Prophets for their mercy and Jim quietly gave them a little thank you too. After a quick stock take of their ship's condition the consensus of the bridge crew was to withdraw from the battlefield and hide somewhere until they could contact a Starfleet ship for assistance in making it back to *Deep Space 9*. They were in no shape to fight off a shuttlecraft never mind a warship. Their limited sensors revealed nothing but hulks of damaged and destroyed starships and hundreds of Dominion warships. Jokana expertly piloted the badly wounded little starship into the devastated hulk of what had once been the saucer section of a magnificent Galaxy-class vessel but was now little more than scrap. She had been decapitated by seemingly unending volleys of torpedoes. The massive damage inflicted, once she had been hit by the Breen energy dissipator, had caused her warp core to breach, destroying the stardrive section, while also ripping open the saucer killing most of the occupants instantly. The young Ensign had managed to find a large enough gap inside the remnants of the saucer to hold the *Hunter*. Once inside they powered down absolutely everything they could and began the difficult job of repairing their battered little ship, all the while hoping beyond hope that firstly they wouldn't get detected by a passing Dominion ship, secondly that they wouldn't be killed by a stray or lucky shot, and thirdly that when they had restored weapons, shields and engines they would be able to contact a friendly ship to help them home.

Their hiding place was buffeted several times by stray shots and the energy wakes of passing vessels as the battle raged on around them but they were not detected and the saucer held intact.

Repairing a battle-damaged Starship is no mean feat. Generally a veritable army of engineers equipped with environment suits, Work

Bees and a Starbase or Spacedock are required. However, the crew of the *Hunter* had none of these available to them. They were armed with a small engineering crew, a few damage control teams and every spare hand that was available. That meant that everyone except those in Sickbay or on the bridge, who were conducting their own repairs while watching for signs they'd been detected, were helping the repair effort.

Eight hours after settling into her hiding place the *Hunter* still lay hidden within the saucer of the devastated Galaxy-class ship. Most of her systems had been patched up and the Engineering crews had managed to coax the impulse engines up to half power. Warp velocity was out of the question without their navigational deflector which they had lost when they had dispatched the Cardassian warship when they jettisoned the warhead during, what seemed at the time, a suicidal run.

Sensors had been partially restored and the few passive scans they managed to sneak had revealed a terrifying picture. The Federation Alliance fleet had withdrawn from the system and was limping back to *Deep Space 9* leaving the crew of the *Hunter* effectively stranded. She could move and partially fight at the moment but she could not go to warp speed and crawling at impulse speed back to *DS9* would take years. Years in which they would be vulnerable to Dominion attack because they were now behind enemy lines.

A few hours later the Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Granger, using a bit of ingenuity and a lot of luck, managed to procure some replacement parts for their damaged systems from the damaged saucer they were hiding in. Rather than use the transporter, which could have been detected by the enemy, he and a few volunteers had ventured out into the saucer in environment suits armed with some hand-held cutting torches and wrenches. It was exhausting and time-consuming work but, in the end, their efforts were rewarded when they returned to the ship and managed to get the salvaged equipment installed to find 99% of it compatible and, more importantly, functional.

Within twenty-four hours of going into hiding with minimal systems, the *USS Hunter* had most of her major systems restored to within operational limits. Life support was functioning normally. Engines were ready to be restarted at a moments notice. Shields had been restored to 65% whilst weapons were fully operational but they had to use manual targeting. Full sensors had also been restored and their passive scans had revealed something that, although initially horrific, could prove to be a life-line to the crew of the *Hunter*. The wreckage of several destroyed Defiant-class vessels littered the battlefield within several hundred kilometres of the *Hunter's* current position. It would mean several Away Teams to inspect the wreckage one by one in the hope that a warhead could be retrieved. This all depended on several things: avoiding the almost inevitable Dominion patrols, which they had been fortunate enough so far to have evaded; finding a ship that had not been hit by a Breen energy dissipator for that warhead would be every bit as useless to them as their own one would have been right at that moment. The final component to the plan was down to prayer and fortune, which so far had been their constant companion.

Three hours had passed since the last Dominion vessel passed by the *Hunter's* hiding place. It was 0200 hours and frayed nerves were

beginning to show themselves. Several minor disputes had broken out among the crew. Mainly they were disputes over points of view as to how to best repair certain systems. These were quickly stamped out because, much like an untended camp fire, they were liable to blow out of all proportion and burn down the forest.

Jim was exhausted. He had been on his feet for about fourteen hours before his newly promoted First Officer, Lieutenant Andrea Flynn, had told him to get some rest before she 'relieved him of command' and threw him in what was left of the brig. So here he was lying on his own bunk in his own quarters. He may be the Commanding Officer of the Federation starship *Hunter* but he would not take the Captain's quarters. To do that would be to dishonour the great man who had been, not just a leader, but a friend to all his officers whether they were Senior or Junior officers. Before his worn out brain even realised what was happening Jim fell asleep. His crew worked on through the night in four hour shifts. They worked for four hours, rested for four hours and were back on duty for another four hours. Several who were supposed to have been 'resting' quietly sneaked back out to finish the jobs they had started on their previous duty shifts.

Lieutenant Flynn, a good friend of Jim's since their Academy days, made sure he wasn't disturbed until he had at least six full hours of sleep. At least the sedative she had slipped into his tea had broken down the defences that Jim had built up against the onslaught of his fatigued body enabling him to get some rest. After all, she told herself with some mirth, that was her duty as First Officer. At precisely 0800 hours she entered Jim's quarters and woke him.

They had a breakfast of Combat Rations (ComRats) and cold coffee in the Mess Hall while Andrea brought Jim up to speed on the status of the repairs. For a small crew they had done a magnificent job in getting as much done as they had. They were now able to manoeuvre, at impulse speed at least, and fight. Her photon launchers were out of commission as was her dorsal phaser strip. However, her quantum torpedo launchers and pulse phaser cannons were fully operational. She was still a ship with teeth and she would use them again in defence of herself and the Federation.

The sensor grid had been returned to an operating efficiency of 75%. This meant that the ship's eyes had developed a few blind spots. This could prove a very dangerous prospect if they had to fight against more than one enemy vessel at a time. When Jim and Andrea took the short trip on the turbolift to the bridge half an hour later Jim was mightily surprised. The bridge had been transformed from a scene of utter carnage, after her earlier battering, to one of quiet efficiency. Every duty station was manned and operating, despite the fact that several consoles were doubling up on their duties because several terminals had been damaged beyond the crew's ability to repair.

Jim took his place in the command seat. It still felt a little uncomfortable for him to be there. He looked approvingly around the bridge at his crew, receiving a few proud nods from the officers manning their stations. They were proud of their accomplishments in getting so much of the ship repaired in so short a time, and quite rightly too.

"Tactical. Any Dominion ships on sensors?"

"None sir," replied Ensign T'Vral. "But we are operating on passive systems only. It is highly unlikely that a Dominion vessel would detect our passive scans."

Jim mulled this over for a few seconds. It was entirely possible for a Dominion vessel to be hiding among the debris like a spider just waiting for an unsuspecting fly to tip off the web and

spring the trap. The problem was he needed information before they could dare to move the *Hunter* from her concealment. He needed to know if, in fact, there were any Dominion vessels in the vicinity and also if there were any Federation starships still around, hiding like themselves. More importantly he needed to know if there were any other Defiant-class vessels near to them because, as much as he felt like a grave robber, they needed to extract its warhead - providing it was operational - and attach it to the *Hunter* in order for them to use the warp drive to escape back to Federation space. Trying to get there on impulse was out of the question. Not only would it take them hundreds of years but there was absolutely no chance of them even getting out of the Chin'Toka system undetected. Unable to wait any longer Jim ordered a quick, but low powered, active scan of the vicinity of the battlefield. A few tense seconds passed before Ensign T'Vral gave his report with typical Vulcan stoicism.

"Captain," he began, using the correct title for Jim even though it made Jim a little uncomfortable, "there are no Dominion ships within sensor range. They either have withdrawn back to the planets to support their ground forces or they are hiding within our sensor holes. It is possible, though unlikely, that there are cloaked Breen vessels hiding out there among the debris. I am detecting the remains of approximately 311 Federation, Klingon and Romulan vessels. I am unable to ascertain the number of Dominion casualties due to the low power of the sensor scan."

Jim waited, a little impatiently, as the Vulcan Tactical Officer slowly gave a run down of the results of the sensor scan. It ranged from the amount of radiation that was still present and affecting the sensors to how many escape pods were destroyed while they were evacuating crews from dying starships. Finally he got to the information Jim was waiting on.

"I have detected the remains of seven Defiant-class vessels ranging from 5 to 500 kilometres from our current location. I am, however, unable to determine the status of their navigational deflector arrays from such a low power scan."

Seven. That was more than Jim had dared hope for and he suddenly realised he had been holding his breath. He exhaled slowly and forced himself to calm down, to approach this 'logically'.

"We can't take the *Hunter* out to check out those ships so how do we find out if there is a suitable warhead out there that we can salvage? Suggestions?"

"The only thing I can think of is to go EVA. We can hop from hull to hull, using minimal thrusters, to get there. A two man team can easily manage it sir without being detected. It might take us a while but its better than revealing the presence of the ship," volunteered the *Hunter's* Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Granger.

"We might not have enough time for a two-man team to search all seven vessels. We can send seven teams out which will minimise the search time," replied Jim. "Each team can send their tricorder data on a narrow-band comm line back here. Anyone not in line of sight should not be able to pick up their transmissions." He didn't add the 'I hope' that he felt like saying and probably everyone on the bridge was thinking.

"Okay Granger, have your teams prepped for departure within the hour. First team to find one wins a prize," he said with a wry smile, hoping to ease the tension on the bridge. Everyone knew that sending out one team would take longer but would be infinitely safer, as it would draw less attention than fourteen environment-suited individuals jetting about the debris like ants.

It was 1000 hours on the second day that the *USS Hunter* was spending in the Chin'Toka system when her small army of engineers, armed with all the necessary tools to remove the warhead from whichever ship proved to have an operational or reparable deflector assembly, stood ready for a hard day's labour. Everyone hoped that they would be lucky enough to find that one of the closer vessels would be salvageable. The teams that had to travel out to the farthest vessels went first. They started out from the shuttlebay, stepping out through the atmospheric forcefield into the vacuum of space. They crawled out to the edge of the remnants of the saucer that concealed their vessel. Taking a visual aim on the area of space that contained their target vessel they pushed off into the debris field only using short, controlled bursts from the manoeuvring jets on their environment suits to alter their trajectory as necessary to avoid a large price of debris, or a hulk that was once a beautiful and mighty starship, and to maintain their velocity. It was difficult and tiring work for the engineering teams, as well as slow going, as they were crawling across the devastated hulls as much as possible both to conserve propellant and to remain as hidden as possible. Just before they moved from one vessel to another they performed a quick tricorder scan of the debris field to ensure that no enemy vessels were about.

It took just over an hour for the perimeter teams to travel the full five hundred kilometres out to their target vessels. Given the same return time, or a little longer depending on fatigue, the three hour oxygen supply in their environment suits would be almost gone by the time that they got back if they took too long to search the ship, and/or remove the warhead. Almost as soon as they got their the bad news began to filter back to the *Hunter*.

The three outermost vessels were utterly useless. They had been incapacitated by the Breen energy dissipator weapon. Not one single system aboard the vessel had the slightest erg of power in it. Even the independently powered hand phasers that were in the storage lockers that were checked when the engineering teams boarded them were drained of all their energy. There was nothing that could be salvaged from them and one team member was carrying an injury on the return trip. Crewman Richmond had tripped while crawling over the hull of a Romulan Warbird and broken his left arm in two places and twisted his right ankle. The fall had also opened a small tear in his environment suit when he caught it on a jagged outcropping of hull where a Cardassian torpedo had penetrated the ship's outer plating which was rendered as fragile as an eggshell with no power to its Structural Integrity Field, or its shields. The relentless Cardassian fire ravaged the helpless Romulan vessel killing all on board. The leak in Richmond's suit was not immediately life threatening in and of itself, but coupled with his injuries the leak and the distance he had to travel back would tax the young engineer's strength to its very limit.

The two mid-range ships were not in much better shape. They had some salvageable parts but their warheads had been damaged either by weapons fire or by drifting into another ship and were beyond repair. The two teams gathered what they could from Lieutenant Granger's wish-list that he had generated before they had set out. It was a list of spares that the teams were to look for as a secondary option should the warhead prove of no value. Things like plasma relays, bio-neural gel packs and any power-packs that contained any energy at all in them were on the list. Hope was fading fast on board the *Hunter* that the search teams would find a salvageable deflector assembly as

the time ticked slowly along. All they could do was wait. Wait and hope and pray to God, or the Prophets or whatever deity was in one's faith for help.

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That then left them with only two ships to search and their teams were just arriving at them. One was the *USS Victory*, which had been on the *Hunter's* port wing during the initial attack run, and was now drifting 50 kilometres away, and the other was the *USS Swiftsure* which was slightly closer in. The *Victory* had been blown in half by multiple torpedo strikes directly amidships from above and below from several Cardassian warships but she had *not* been hit by the energy dissipators. The status of the *Swiftsure* was largely unknown. The *Hunter's* sensors had been off-line when she had been destroyed so it was not known whether or not she had succumbed to Breen energy dissipator fire. If she had, then all their hopes were pinned on the *Victory* because their sole remaining shuttlepod could not carry all 40 survivors of the *Hunter's* original 73 person crew.

The *Victory* and *Swiftsure* search teams had left at the same time to investigate the vessels. Lieutenant Granger was checking over the *Swiftsure* with his tricorder. He did not look too happily at the readout on its display screen.

"Nothing. Not a damn thing. Not one bloody system has an ounce of juice left in it. Everything is drained. Its just like during World War III when the nukes went off and the EMP blast killed anything with an electrical circuit within the blast radius," he said to his assistant. Rather than use his suit's comm unit, so the crew wouldn't hear the defeat in his voice, he sent a message and his tricorder readings to the *Hunter*. Everything now depended on the *Victory* but only those on the bridge of the *Hunter* and Lieutenant Granger, who had been kept informed of the search teams' progress, were aware of this fact.

Hovering over the wreckage of the starship that resembled his own ship in almost every respect, except that his ship wasn't all 'shot to hell' as his assistant had put it when they saw the state of the *Swiftsure*, Granger said a quiet prayer and gripped the lucky charm that he always carried inside his equipment pocket when he performed EVAs even harder. *Please God, don't let it end like this. Don't let me fail my shipmates and condemn them all to death!*

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Although she had suffered terrible damage and was split in half, from the bridge section forward, the ship was still in one piece while the aft section had been blown to pieces. Ensign Caldwell crossed his fingers as he accessed his tricorder. He opened it up and began its scanning cycle. Please, please, please, he kept saying softly, chanting it over and over again like a mantra. His tricorder vibrated softly in his hand to indicate that it had finished its scan cycle. The tricorders had been modified to use vibrations to alert the user because they would not hear the tell-tale little beeps that had become second nature to them when they used the little scanning device. Now that there was no little beep Ensign Caldwell suddenly found that he missed its reassuring little sounds. Deciding that he could not ignore his tricorder's insistent vibrating he looked at the read-out. He couldn't believe his eyes at first and performed the

scan again. The exact same reading as before was there. He reacted without thinking out of sheer enthusiasm.

"Ensign Caldwell to *Hunter*. The *Victory* has come through for us! We have a functioning warhead here!"

He looked at the display read-out again. The tricorder had actually found an energy signature. There was a chance that they could salvage the warhead from the *Victory* for use on the *Hunter* enabling them to engage their warp drive and escape. Everything depended on them now getting the massive section of the starship detached from the *Victory*, moved over to and attached to the *Hunter*. But there was now a bigger chance of them being detected because Lieutenant Granger and his assistant jetted over to assist Ensign Caldwell. The risk was deemed worth taking if it sped up their chances of getting away before being discovered by a marauding Jem'Hadar, Cardassian or Breen warship.

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The crew just couldn't believe it. Everything had been going well up to this point, perhaps too well. The final warhead inspected proved to be the only one, of the seven their reduced sensor capability, discovered that was even remotely salvageable. The Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Granger, was there at the moment inspecting it and was just starting to extract it from its housing aboard the destroyed *USS Victory*. He, himself, risked a quick message to his ship over a comm channel so he could cheer up the crew.

"Granger to *Hunter*, I think we've struck gold here. The warhead will have to be manually extracted from the housing, the auto-sequencer is out, but initial scans are positive. Granger out."

That had set the bridge crew cheering and clapping like crazy. How strange it was that they were now celebrating the demise of a fellow Starship and its crew that only a few months before would have been horrific to them. But that was all the recent months of war had done to their outlooks on life. And death. But no sooner had the cheering begun on the bridge than the alert klaxons sounded and drowned them out. Everyone stopped their cheering and concentrated on their dutystations.

"What the hell is going on?," asked Jim from the command seat.

"Multiple systems failure, sir," answered Lieutenant Flynn, shouting to be heard over the wail of the klaxons.

"Shut off that damn noise!" Jim shouted. The sudden silence that descended across the bridge was almost deafening, then suddenly the damage reports flooded in.

"The structural integrity field is failing."

"Life support is failing on decks 3 and 4."

"Emergency forcefields have collapsed, we're venting atmosphere out through the hull breaches."

"What's causing it? Are we being fired on?."

T'Vral scanned the surrounding space for enemy vessels.

"No sir. The damaged saucer section we have been hiding in is collapsing all around us."

"The deck structure must have been weaker than we imagined before we bored in here. Damn it, we'll have to get out of here before it crushes us!"

"Propulsion is off-line sir!"

"What? Get it back on-line, now!"

"I'm trying to sir! The engines are not responding."

Jim stabbed the button on the control panel on the arm of the command chair that opened the communications channel to Engineering.

"Bridge to Engineering. Get those engines back on-line now!"

"We're working on it sir!"

"Hull pressure is increasing sir. She can't take much more of this!"

"Do we have anything left in the forward RCS thrusters?"

Lieutenant Flynn accessed the computer and smiled when she saw that the Reaction Control System had just enough fuel left to nudge them out of their hiding place.

"Yes sir. Engaging RCS thrusters... now!"

At that instant the expelled gas from the RCS thruster ports on the bow pushed the compact starship out of the collapsing saucer section. They were fortunate that the shattering saucer section spread enough debris around to keep them covered.

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While all the commotion was going on aboard the *Hunter* Crewman Richmond was being dragged and carried back to the ship over the destroyed hulks of the devastated fleet, all the while his precious oxygen was slowly bleeding from his torn suit. They could not call for help because it would not arrive in time and the Away Teams were unaware of the *Hunter's* predicament.

When they arrived back at the saucer section they found, to their delight, that the ship had emerged from its hiding spot and was much easier to gain access to. They hauled the, by now, inert form of Crewman Richmond through the airlock and waited for the atmosphere to be returned to the room so that they could remove their helmets. As soon as they did they called for a Medical team to meet them in the airlock. While they awaited their arrival Crewman Richmond was attended to. His helmet was released and removed so that he could breathe and a tricorder was scanned over his body. It revealed what they had expected but were hoping against. They were too late.

"Bridge, Crewman Richmond didn't make it."

When that message came over the comm system the bridge became deathly quiet. Everyone looked to Jim to see how he would respond. Richmond was the first crewman to die under his command. He swallowed hard and gently pushed the comm button on his chair.

"Understood. Report to me on the bridge as soon as you can."

"Aye sir."

It was the hardest thing that Jim had ever had to do to keep his voice level as he gave his orders.

"Alright people. We still have jobs to do. Lets get to it."

He then slowly made his way to the Ready Room leaving Lieutenant Flynn in command. No sooner had the doors closed behind him than the tears began to fall. He stifled the sobs in his left arm as he wrapped his arms around his head. He had never had to deal with something like this before. The closest he had come was when his uncle died when the Borg had decimated a forty vessel strong Federation fleet at Wolf 359 years earlier.

Five minutes later as Ensign Blackman exited the turbolift onto the bridge Jim re-emerged from the Ready Room. He had taken the time to compose himself before he stepped back onto the bridge. Blackman spotted him coming from the Ready Room and walked over to him and gave him a brief account of what had happened.

Glinn Dobran stared at the screen before him. He was searching for something that had been there before for a few moments but appeared now to be gone.

"Sir, I swear I saw something on the sensors."

"What did you see?," asked Gul Elan.

"Well for a moment it looked like a Defiant-class ship but now all the sensors are showing is a massive debris field moving."

"Where was the contact?"

"Right beside that Galaxy-class saucer section that's collapsing."

Dobran indicated the area that he had seen the contact. He enlarged the area and performed another sensor sweep of the area. All the sensors could pick up were parts of destroyed ships. There was so much debris that they would have found it hard to differentiate between a piece of debris or an actual starship.

The two Cardassian officers watched the screen intently for a few more minutes. Nothing changed.

"Run an energy scan. See if there are any active power emanations. If there are we will know for certain."

It was as just as Dobran ran the energy scan that the *Hunter's* main power failed. That little accident saved them from detection. If they had been spotted they would have been immediately destroyed by the marauding Cardassian patrol craft. They had been assigned the ignominious task of patrolling the ruins to see if any ships had survived the Dominion fleet's assault and to terminate any that had. So far all they had found was dead hulks and a few escape pods that had not been picked up by the retreating Federation Alliance fleet. These survivors had been beamed aboard and held in the detention cells for interrogation later. They numbered twenty-seven so far. Gul Elan had been extremely put out that his vessel was not permitted to take part in the liberation of Chin'Toka. That honour was being left to their Breen allies.

"Alert me the instant that contact reappears."

"Yes sir."

If it is a surviving Federation ship, Elan thought to himself as he returned to his command seat, I intend to take it intact. That will take the smug look off that damned Vorta!

The Cardassian Galor-class cruiser, *Dinok*, swept back and forth across the debris field like a bloodhound that had lost the scent of quarry and desperately wanted to reacquire it.

Back on the *Hunter* things were finally starting to look up.

11

Jim stared in disbelief at the panels around him. They were actually glowing from the restored power, albeit at minimal power levels. They wanted to restrict their electronic signature to as little as possible until they were ready to make their run for Federation space. He barely managed to keep the smile from his face as he opened the comm channel to Engineering.

"Well done Engineering! How long until the new warhead is in place?"

Chief Engineer Granger came on the line.

"Sir, we've got the warhead lined up at the bow but the debris is making it slow going to attach. We have to keep clearing the tracks before we can move it in and we don't dare use the auto-sequencer to pull it in, just in case the Spoon-, er Cardassians, manage to detect the energy signature. It'll take another hour to get it attached manually, then about thirty minutes to run diagnostics.

No point in all this effort if we blow up due to a faulty power relay!"

"Very well, keep me informed! Bridge out!"

This is going to be a long 90 minutes! Jim mused as he looked around the bridge at the expectant faces. He rubbed his tired face and ran a hand through his hair to try to shake the lethargy that had been stealing over him because of the stress of the new position he had been forced to adopt.

"Okay people, we've got ninety minutes, lets get this ship ready to fight!"

The crew adopted his assertiveness and made it their own as they went about their tasks and repairs. All over the ship the crew moved like an army of ants, repairing anything they could that was vital to getting the ship in a condition to fight her way home. None of them doubted that they would indeed have to fight for their freedom and so all of their efforts were spent in repairing the primary systems. They would not have time, nor would they be able, to repair the secondary systems as well. They would have to wait until they returned to *Deep Space Nine* before being repaired - if they could get there. It was by no means a forgone conclusion that they would make it but everyone, including the *Hunter* herself, was giving one hundred and ten percent.

An air of hope began to rise on the ship as the minutes ticked by without reports of systems failure. The Damage Control and Engineering teams began to report in to the bridge with encouraging news. The major hull breaches had been sealed as best they could, many by welding pieces of shattered bulkheads over the exposed hull plates, and all reparable systems aboard had been repaired. Several sections of the ship remained without power or life support and, having been evacuated earlier, were sealed off.

12

Slightly later than his ninety minute deadline Lieutenant Granger's voice came across the bridge speakers.

"Granger to Bridge. Diagnostics complete. We had to replace a few burnt out circuits but the warhead is now fully active."

"Excellent. How soon can we get under way?"

"She's ready for restart now, Captain!"

Jim could almost see the prideful smile on Granger's face as he winced at being called Captain. He had to fight off a sudden urge to vomit as he gave the order to get the ship under way. He sat back in the command seat and watched with pride as his crew, yes they were his crew now, went about their work with a renewed purpose.

"Right then, let's get going!"

"Yes sir," replied Lieutenant Flynn as she began the start-up sequence for the vessel. The voices formed a chorus on the bridge as the sequence was gone through.

"Impulse manifold purged and clear."

"Initiating impulse pre-start sequence."

"Micro-fusion generators on-line."

"Culminate the nadion emitters!"

"Culmination sequence in progress."

Lieutenant Granger arrived on the bridge looking pleased with himself. *And well he might!* Jim thought as he nodded his thanks to the Engineer whose efforts had saved the ship.

"Dilithium matrix is aligned and calibrated!" he announced as he took his seat. "Opening anti-matter injector ports."

"Emergency life support and damage control systems standing by."

"Autonomous guidance system initialised and active."
 "Verify astrometric database!" Jim ordered.
 "Data sets loaded and verified," answered the helm officer.
 "Phaser safeties engaged," called the tactical officer.
 "Field stabilisers on-line."
 "Synchronising warp-plasma flow."
 "Nacelles holding at pre-warp threshold."
 "Weapons array on-line! Phasers are fully charged, quantum torpedo launchers loaded and standing by!"
 "Helm, set a course for *Deep Space Nine*, half impulse until we clear the debris field, then maximum warp!"
 "Aye sir. Course plotted and laid in. Firing impulse engines!"
 The *Hunter's* crew now held their collective breaths for two reasons. The first was wondering how far they would get before being detected, and the second was would the new warhead hold up under the stress of warp flight?
 The answer to the first question came very soon after they left the cover of the debris field. They were detected instantly.

13

Glinn Dobran was just about to go off shift when his console suddenly began chirping. He ran a quick scan and smiled triumphantly to Gul Elan as he turned to face him on the *Dinok's* bridge.
 "Sir, I have them. A Federation ship, Defiant-class, has just emerged from the debris field and has jumped to warp. Their course will take them back to *Terok Nor*."
 He used the Cardassian name for the station which was now known universally as *Deep Space Nine*. He also saw the glint of delight in Gul Elan's eyes as he ordered a pursuit course.
 "Maximum speed! I want them caught before they can get close to Federation space and support!"
 And so the *Dinok* set off in hot pursuit of the fleeing Federation Starship. The pursuit did not go unnoticed on the *Hunter* that, because of her battle damage, could only manage a top speed of warp 7. Jim was delighted that the replacement warhead was holding together, as well as the ship, but he was a little concerned at the shortfall in speed. A quick calculation showed that the harrying Cardassian vessel would catch them before they reached safety. So Jim began to search his mind, and the navigational database, for a suitable location to make their stand against the Galor. They knew that the Cardassians would not simply let them escape, nor would they give up the pursuit. No matter what trick they tried to shake them, Jim knew that the Gul commanding the Galor-class cruiser would not give up this chase.
 The only place that would serve their purposes and was close enough was, oddly enough the same location that had caused the Cardassians so much trouble in the past, the Badlands.
 The Badlands is an area of space, on the Cardassian/Bajoran border, that contains severe plasma storms. These storms can get large enough that they are a menace to any vessel attempting to navigate through the Badlands and also cause severe sensor disruption. The plasma storms are large enough to damage, or even, destroy ships that are unmindful of the danger.
 Fortunately the *Hunter*, being a smaller ship than the pursuing Galor-class warship, could manoeuvre around and between the plasma storms with relative ease. This had been proven earlier by Captain Sisko and the *USS Defiant* when they had pursued the Maquis, the Federation colonists and former Starfleet officers who fought the

Cardassians all along the Demilitarised Zone for their freedom, to one of their hidden bases there.

"Helm, alter course to the Badlands. Are there any plasma storms present at the moment?"

"Yes sir. A great-grandmother of a storm," smiled Lieutenant Flynn.

The *Hunter* raced as fast as she could for the limited safety of the Badlands and managed to get there just ahead of the *Dinok*. The little starship danced around the plasma streamers as she tried to avoid the fire from her pursuer. Because of her small size she provided a very small target aspect ratio for the Cardassians to aim at and, consequently, many of their shots failed to hit the little warship. Several minutes later Jim decided that he'd had enough of a one-way firefight and that he wasn't going to run anymore.

"Helm, get as close as you can to the largest plasma streamer ahead. When the Cardassians come abeam of it, I want the *Hunter* to circle around it as quickly and as closely as you can. Stand-by phasers and torpedoes! I want us to come around fighting!"

"Aye sir."

The concentration on Ensign Jokana's face was clear as she danced her fingers over the controls of the ship. Her expert control sent the ship in a turn so tight around the plasma streamer that the inertial dampers took a couple of seconds to react. As a result several crewmembers who were not seated were thrown violently to the deck. She broke out in a sweat which began to run down her face and into her eyes, she was concentrating so hard, but she did not let it interfere with her piloting skills. She did not want to let down her Captain, her ship or her crew.

The *Hunter*, being a smaller and more manoeuvrable vessel than the pursuing *Galor*, danced and jinked around the plasma streamer. She came so close that the streamer was only a few metres from the hull. Because of the severe sensor interference that is part and parcel of the Badlands the *Dinok* almost missed the *Hunter's* evasive turn around the plasma streamer. The *Galor*-class vessel took longer to round the streamer because of her larger size and had to take drastic evasive action to avoid a collision with the particularly nasty and wholly unpredictable streamer that her quarry had just turned around. This unpredictability suddenly became clear when the *Dinok's* evasive manoeuvre was not executed swiftly enough and she took a heavy hit to her forward superstructure. Her speed dropped significantly as her helmsman tried to avoid any further collisions that might severely damage or possibly destroy them.

This gave the *Hunter* time and space to work with. She came around bringing her weapons to bear on the *Dinok*. As soon as they were lined up the *Hunter* flew in on a strafing run. Her pulse-phaser cannons tore into and brutally assaulted the *Dinok's* shields. As she passed over the much larger Cardassian vessel she let fly with a quantum torpedo from her aft launchers. The shields of the *Dinok* could not withstand this assault and collapsed.

Unfortunately the *Hunter's* previous battle-damage was worse than they had first thought. Her own shields collapsed under the strain of the manoeuvres that she was put through. Until they could figure out a new plan of attack Jim ordered them deeper into the Badlands. Still hugging the plasma streamers, as closely as safety allowed, they began to mask their trail. The sensor interference, while it hindered their own tactical situation, served to hide the *Hunter* from the Cardassian sensors. Now it was a game of hide-and-seek where the victor would be the one left alive at the conclusion of the game!

Slowly drifting through the currents and eddies created by the streamers and the plasma storm the two ships pursued one another.

Neither knew where the other was and their sensors were extremely limited in their effective range. Even the viewscreens refused to operate fully. Any spike on a sensor scan could be the enemy vessel or it could simply be another product of the Badlands that served to confuse and dismay all sensors.

14

Jim stared at the viewscreen almost straining his eyes in the hope that he would be able to spot the Cardassian Galor at the earliest opportunity. Any advance warning could be the difference between survival and destruction.

"What do we know about the Badlands that could help us?"

"Well, for one thing, it makes navigation extremely difficult," announced Ensign Jokana from the helm. There was a sprinkling of nervous laughter on the bridge at the comment.

"Warp drive can't be used inside a plasma storm," said Lieutenant Flynn. "It would ignite the highly charged plasma!"

"That's it!" Jim announced as he thumped the arm of his chair in triumph. "But first we'll have to let the Cardassians find us."

"That's crazy!" someone said and then silence descended on the bridge. Jim looked around at the worried faces of his crew. He knew that he could simply order them to follow his plan but as their friend he felt obliged to offer them an explanation.

"What I plan to do is to let the Cardassians find us. Then we'll make a run for the edge of the Badlands. As soon as we reach the trailing edge of the plasma storm we'll jump to warp. That will ignite the plasma behind us taking out the Galor. Hopefully we'll be far enough away by that time to avoid being destroyed ourselves."

He could see the crew think this over and one by one they saw that it was their only chance of escape. They were the equal in weaponry of the Galor-class vessel but she was larger in size than the *Hunter* and without shields she could take more punishment than the Federation ship, even with the help of her ablative armour. That decided the crew began the search for the *Dinok*. The little Federation warship was now living up to her name, the *Hunter* set off in pursuit of the Cardassian vessel.

Down in Engineering, Lieutenant Granger, the Chief Engineer began to tweak the systems of what he referred to as **his** ship. He set his engineering teams to reinforce the Structural Integrity Field while he concentrated on fine tuning the warp engines. He wanted to make absolutely sure that the *Hunter* would enter warp speed ahead of the shock wave that was sure to follow the ignition of the highly charged plasma of the storm front. They also got damage control teams ready to go at a moments notice should they be damaged when they carried out Jim's plan.

Ensign Jokana continued to pilot the *Hunter* expertly but blindly through the plasma storm. They had begun to feel that the Cardassians had given up the chase and gone home when they got a flicker on the viewscreen. A few seconds passed before the image cleared and they realised what they were seeing. They had come to within a few metres of the Cardassian vessel. If they had spotted it on their viewscreen a few seconds later it would have been too late, the two ships would have collided. Realising that they were too close to the Cardassian ship Jim now knew that executing his plan now would present a greater danger than before. Nevertheless it must be attempted, it was their only hope.

In the command seat on the bridge Jim sat nervously. It was time to execute his plan but he hesitated. He was afraid that he had

miscalculated and by his orders he would doom the *Hunter* and its crew. Finally he put his doubts aside and decided to press forward.

"Battle stations!"

15

The lighting dimmed on the bridge and all voices became hushed. The Red Alert klaxons blared for a few moments then grew silent. The red lighting strips flashed on and off bathing the bridge in scarlet.

"Status of shields?"

"Still inoperable sir."

"Charge phasers. Target their engines. Fire!"

Defiant-class ships employ pulse phaser cannons that release phased energy in rapidly repeated short bursts. They were now targeted on the *Dinok's* engines and when they fired twin lances of energy raced out from the *Hunter's* forward mountings in bursts and impacted on the unprotected hull of the Cardassian warship. Their engines were severely damaged, which reduced their forward momentum. As soon as they realised that they were under attack the Cardassians returned fire.

The *Hunter* took damage as she raced ahead of the Galor-class vessel but Lieutenant Granger's efforts were not in vain. The damage sustained was minimal and the extra effort that he put into his engines proved useful. The *Hunter* was able to outrun the *Dinok* which was rapidly falling behind. Jim ordered Lieutenant Granger to co-ordinate with Ensign Jokana to simulate damage to the engines so that she would slow down a little but would keep just far enough ahead of the *Dinok* for the plan to work.

16

On board the *Dinok* there was cheering when a phaser blast appeared to strike the fleeing Defiant-class vessel's engines. She was visibly slowing.

"Now we have them!" growled Gul Elan. "Ahead full, continue firing! I want that ship disabled!"

"Yes sir!" answered Glinn Dobran. "But their vessel is of a design that it presents a very low profile and a minimal target for our weapons. We are having difficulties in locking onto it!"

"They are slowing sir!" announced the tactical officer. "It appears that their propulsion systems are experiencing intermittent failure!"

On the viewscreen the Federation ship was growing larger as the *Dinok* closed on it. There were visible fluctuations in their power systems, and especially in the engines. The nacelles were bright one moment then dimming the next. The *Dinok* closed on her prey little knowing that they were actually walking into an unseen trap.

"They are heading out of the plasma storm," said Dobran. "They will try to get out ahead of us so they can engage their warp drive and escape!"

He was half right. The warp engines on the *Hunter* were ready to be engaged but not where Dobran thought.

17

On the *Hunter's* bridge Jim watched the tactical overlay that was being shown on the viewscreen. The distance to the leading edge of the plasma storm was decreasing, as was the distance to the *Dinok*. As soon as they reached the leading edge of the storm Jim gave the order.

"Helm, set a course for *Deep Space 9*, warp 7. Engage!"

The *Hunter* streaked forward into warp igniting a blazing trail of super-charged plasma in her wake. The conflagration engulfed the *Dinok* as she charged after quarry and totally destroyed it. There wasn't even any debris left to mark the spot where the Galor-class vessel had once been.

On the *Hunter* there was a moment of panic as the viewscreen showed the flames from the ignited plasma licking up the sides of the ship. Fortunately the ablative armour handled the worst of it. This protective skin was designed to vaporise and detach from the surface of the ship if weapons fire overwhelmed the primary energy shields. As the flames attacked the *Hunter* the ablative armour took the brunt of the impact and, as its designers intended, it detached from the ship taking the attached plasma with it leaving the ship relatively unscathed.

She flew on unhindered to the Bajoran system and the Federation station *Deep Space 9*. Six hours later she arrived at the station to a hero's welcome. It was probably the only piece of good news to have reached the Federation since the disastrous attempt to reinforce the Chin'Toka system against the Dominion.

Most of the crew received medals for bravery. Jim was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Commander and was offered the position of First Officer of the *USS Agamemnon*.

"With all due respect, Admiral, I'd prefer to remain with the *Hunter*."

"I thought you'd say that! Very well Commander, report back to the *Hunter* as XO. Congratulations!"

The End