

Stardate 57524.1

The *Akira*-class U.S.S. *Vostok* came out of warp and approached Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. As it slowed to one-quarter impulse, two state-of-the-art Mitsubishi SF-76A *Starhawk*-class starfighters emerged from the shuttle bay and accelerated toward the starbase.

“*Raptor Two to Raptor Leader,*” Lieutenant Ricardo Hernandez said.

“This is Raptor Leader. Go ahead, Aztec,” Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Thomas responded as she checked her sensors.

“*Do you think we can get away with a full impulse flyby?*”

“Not this time, Aztec. Let’s wait until the rest of the pilots have; been trained on these new ships; You want everyone to join in the fun, don’t you?”

Hernandez frowned as he flew the new fighter. “*Do you want an honest answer, CAG?*”

Thomas smiled. “What do you think, Senior Chief?” Thomas asked the flight engineer in the back seat.

“You’ll get your chance, Lieutenant,” Senior Chief Leann Dotson said.

Thomas smiled and pressed another communications touchpad. “Starbase *Gateway Alpha* Control, this is Raptor Leader. I have two new *Starhawk* fighters requesting permission to land.”

“*This is Gateway Alpha Control. You have permission to land in Shuttle Bay Two. Welcome back, CAG.*”



To Boldly Go: War Games

A Starbase Gateway Alpha Story

By Cleve Johnson

Thomas and Hernandez entered the pilot’s day room where the other members of the 63rd Fighter Wing greeted them. “CAG!” Ensign Josiah Carnegie said. “How fast do the new birds go?”

“What about maneuverability?” Lieutenant Haran Tamar, the 63rd’s Trill maintenance officer asked, his excitement growing. “Can they outfly a *Peregrine*?”

All the pilots crowded in, wanting to know if the new *Starhawk* starfighters were as good as they had heard. Thomas held up her hand to try to quiet her squadron. She knew that all the pilots were anxious to start flying the new ships, but they had to be trained on the new systems and control layout first. Unlike the *Peregrine* starfighters, the *Starhawks* were designed to operate in both space and a planet’s atmosphere, so the new fighters incorporated old-fashioned joysticks as well as the contemporary LCARS interface touchpads. “Aztec and I just returned from Starbase 214, and after four weeks of intense training on the Mitsubishi SF-76-A starfighter, I can tell you that there are several differences than what you are used to. I know that you’re all anxious to fly these new ships.” She paused to take a deep breath. “But you need to

wait a little longer. Aztec and I will be beaming back to the *Vostok* to fly each of the other six ships to *Gateway Alpha*, and then we are going to take the rest of the day off. In the meantime, the rest of you are going to start studying the manual on the SF-76A. I want you to read the first three chapters in preparation for tomorrow's class."

The pilots started to grumble, but a sharp look from Thomas shut them down quickly. "As you were," she said. "I know that you all want to get behind the stick and see what these birds can do, but you all know that the cockpit is not the place to start flying a new ship." She pointed to the wing's executive officer. "Aztec?"

"The CAG is right. We spent four days in the classroom before we even were allowed in the simulator."

"You mean we have to wait four days before we can even fly in a holodeck?" Lieutenant J.G. Lacey Keyes asked, her disappointment evident in her tone.

"That's right, Starburst."

Thomas held up her hand again, palm forward, before more complaints could be voiced. "If you all pay close attention in class and pass the written test by day three, then you can get in the simulator on day four. You might, and I emphasize the word *might* get into your ships by the middle of next week." She nodded to Aztec.

"Just so you all know, the CAG and I were not allowed to fly the real birds until the end of week three, so I don't want to hear any complaints. Any questions, ladies and gentlemen?"

"Is it true that the *Starhawks* require two people to fly?" Ensign Robert Jonas asked.

Aztec smiled and lowered his head and then looked back up to face the young pilot. "No, it only takes one person to fly, Nova, but the design does require a flight engineer to make sure that the pilot has the right balance of power going to the various systems—weapons, impulse engines, shields, etc. Unlike the one-seater *Peregrines*, the *Starhawks* require teamwork to fly them." Aztec looked around the room to see if anyone else had anything else to say. When satisfied that they were done with the informal briefing, he said, "Attention!"

The pilots all stood and snapped to attention.

"Dismissed," Lieutenant Hernandez said, and he and Lieutenant Commander Thomas exited the room as the other pilots started to mingle and discuss pairing up to study the fighter manual.



The pilots of the 63rd Starfighter Wing, also known as the Raptor Squadron, had spent three days immersed in the *Starhawk* flight manual and the classroom with the CAG and the XO as their instructors. They spent their evenings in the common area, where they could relax when off duty, getting to know the flight engineers that had recently been assigned to the 63rd Starfighter Wing. Lieutenant Commander Thomas had emphasized the necessity of the pilots spending time with the engineers so that the engineers could start to feel like part of the team and for the pilots to start building camaraderie with those who would be sharing the cockpits with the

pilots. Thomas wanted to observe their interactions to see which pilot and which flight engineer would work best together. She wanted to see what personalities were compatible as well as how each pair worked together in the cockpit, so she scheduled simulator flights with various mixtures of pilot/engineer teams.

By the end of the third day of classroom instruction, all six pilots had taken their written test. All passed with flying colors, which was no small feat since the written test covered every aspect of the SF-76A according to the instruction manual. Out of three hundred questions, each pilot had to answer two hundred eighty-five correctly in order to pass. All did on the first attempt. Lieutenant Haran Tamar, pilot and maintenance officer, got a perfect score. CAG and Aztec were both impressed, especially since no one in their class at Starbase 214 had scored that high, and nearly half of the thirty-four members of their class did not pass the first attempt. Kim Thomas was extremely proud of her team.

After six days in the simulator, with every pilot having been matched with every flight engineer, CAG had a strong sense of which pilot/engineer matchups worked best. To make sure that her view was not biased, she conferred with her XO, Lieutenant Ricardo Hernandez, on his opinion. She handed him a PADD with the preliminary list. "Take a look at the pair-ups and let me know what you think, Aztec."

The XO read down the list and pondered over his CO's choices. He handed the PADD back to the CAG. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course. That's why I wanted you to look it over."

"Put Chief Grika with Lieutenant Calis and Chief Shentir with Ensign Carnegie."

Thomas looked at the PADD and contemplated the possible change, but she was curious why her XO suggested it. "Chief Shentir would get along with either one, but I'm wondering if putting Calis and Grika together would be a good idea. I've seen them get into several heated debates."

Aztec smiled. "Exactly. Grika's a Tellarite, so he's going to argue with anyone he's paired with, but did you notice that Calis is the only one who doesn't shy away from Grika when he tries to start an argument?"

Thomas nodded as she saw Aztec's point. "And I thought that Calis chose the call sign 'Resistance' because he was part of a resistance cell against the Cardassians."

"Yes, but it seems like he enjoys a good argument, too, especially when he *resists* accepting the opposing point of view. I think that he likes playing the devil's advocate with Grika."

"Point taken." Thomas keyed the changes into the PADD. "Any other recommendations?"

"No, I think the other teams look fine."

"Okay, I'll announce the assignments at tomorrow morning's briefing."

“CAG, can I make one more suggestion?”

Thomas nodded her head.

“They have all been working hard. How about giving them a day off before the advanced flight simulations?”

“Ricardo, I think that is a great idea,” Thomas said as she patted her XO on the side of his left shoulder. “Please inform everyone to gather in the common room at 1800 for a briefing. Include the maintenance crew.”

“Aye, aye, CAG.”



The pilots, flight engineers, and the maintenance crew had all gathered in the common room and stood around conversing, speculating why the CAG called a briefing, albeit an informal one. Right as the digital chronometer on the wall displayed 1800, the main doors parted. Lieutenant Commander Thomas and Lieutenant Hernandez entered the room. Everyone stopped their conversations and gathered close to face the CO.

“Thanks for coming on short notice,” Thomas said. “You’re probably wondering why I called you together at this time, but I wanted to congratulate you all on your hard work. The training of the pilots and flight engineers has been going better than I could have hoped, and the work that the maintenance crew has been doing to get the *Starhawks* prepped for their first flights is ahead of schedule.”

Hernandez stepped forward at Thomas’s cue. “CAG has decided on the pilot/flight engineer teams, and the assignment will be posted on the monitor immediately after this meeting. Now, because of all your hard work, the CAG has authorized a day off.”

Everyone cheered and started congratulating each other and talked about what they were going to do with their free time.

Hernandez held up both hands and whistled loudly to restore order. “Hold on. Silencio!” he shouted. “Enjoy your time off, but you are back on duty at 0700 the day after tomorrow. Flight crews, the training is about to get more intense.”

“Sir,” Ensign Josiah Carnegie shouted from the back of the room. “Do we get our birds after the briefing?”

Hernandez shook his head, “Sorry, Speed, but you’re not quite ready. You have four or five days of advanced flight simulations before you get to fly the real thing.”

Carnegie and the rest of the pilots expressed their disappointment, but they understood the necessity of being fully trained for their safety as well as the safety of their “back seaters.”

Thomas smiled and interjected, “Enjoy your time off. Dismissed.”

“Thanks, CAG,” Lieutenant J.G. Lacey Keyes said and was echoed by all the others as they started to move toward the monitor that the XO activated to display the crew assignments.

CAG and Aztec nodded toward one another and exited the room.



Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Thomas entered the turbolift and was looking forward to having dinner with her friend, Lieutenant Commander William Powers, the head of the starbase JAG office. “Deck eleven, section H,” she ordered the computer, but just as the turbolift started to move, her communicator chirped, and she tapped it. “Thomas, go ahead.”

“CAG, can you join me in my office?” It was Admiral Sjögren who made the request.

“On my way,” Thomas replied as she tapped the combadge to close the transmission. “Computer, halt and redirect to deck six, CnC.”

Within moments, the turbolift opened and Thomas made her way to CnC and continued past the main entrance to the next set of doors that separated the starbase CO’s office from the circular corridor. She pressed the call touchpad on the wall next to the door. The two halves of the door parted, and she walked in. “You wanted to see me, Admiral?”

Sjögren, sitting behind his desk looked away from the computer monitor and motioned for Thomas to sit in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the desk from him. “Thank you for coming, Commander. I wanted to see how the Raptor Wing is doing with the new fighters.”

As she was sitting, Thomas started to smile. “Training is ahead of schedule, sir. I gave them tomorrow off since they are doing so well. Day after tomorrow, the advanced simulations begin.”

“Very good. What about combat maneuvers?”

“I’ve scheduled those to begin on day two of the advanced sims.”

“Excellent! How soon do you think your flight crews will be ready to get out of the simulators and into the new fighters?”

Thomas rubbed her chin and leaned back in her chair. “If all goes as well as it has so far, within a week.”

“Good,” Sjögren said as he leaned forward to place his elbows on the desk and clasp his hands together. “I would like to have your flight crews participate in war games so we can see how well these new fighters perform against live targets.”

“Sir, what live targets do you have in mind?”

“Well, I think that you should pit the *Starhawks* against the *Peregrines*, to start, and then go up against the *Cheron*.”

“Well, I can safely say that our SF-76As are extremely maneuverable and can potentially do some damage to several different starship classes, even the *Cheron* if our tactics are sound and if we coordinate our attacks.”

“Just remember that Starfleet crews are familiar with standard fighter tactics.” Sjögren leaned back and smiled. “You might need to develop something new.”

“I have a Bajoran tactician, and she’s the best I’ve ever seen.”

“Fought against Cardassians, I take it.”

“She started fighting them as part of the resistance when she was only twelve,” Thomas said. “And she provided a lot of intel to Starfleet when DS9 was in the hands of the Dominion during the war. Lieutenant Calis learned to be very creative in implementing non-standard tactics.”

“I look forward to seeing what she and the rest of the Raptors can do against superior forces.”

“So do I, Admiral. When do we begin?”



Thomas entered the café and looked around the room. She saw her friend and former wingman sitting at a booth, so she made her way toward him and sat down. “Sorry, I’m late, Will,” she said, smiling. “Admiral Sjögren needed to see me.”

“Got called to the principal’s office, huh?” Lieutenant Commander Powers loved teasing his friend. “I hope you’re not in trouble.”

“You know that I am a by-the-book type, Will. I never get into trouble.”

“Except for that time when you took off to rescue that stray pilot at the Battle of Chintaka.”

“If that stray pilot hadn’t gone off on his own to take on a Jem’Hadar fighter...”

“Hey, I was young and cocky. I thought I was invulnerable.”

“Well, you weren’t then and you’re not now.”

“Cocky or invulnerable?”

“You’re still cocky,” Thomas said with a light slap to Powers’ arm. “Did you order yet?”

“Not yet. I was waiting for you. Do you need a menu?”

“Thomas shook her head. “No, I think I’ll have what I had last time.”

Powers looked around until he made eye contact with one of the waiters and waved him over. As soon as the waiter reached the table, Powers said, “We would like two salmon dinners with broccoli, yeast rolls, and one Caesar salad.”

“And what would you like to drink?”

“Water for me,” Powers replied.

“Saurian Brandy, please.”

“Synthetic?”

“No, I’ll have the real thing this time.”

As the waiter left, Powers looked at his friend with a surprised expression. “That’s a little unusual for you, Kim.”

“I feel like celebrating...a little.”

“Don’t get drunk on me, now.”

“I have not been drunk since we were at the 602 Club celebrating the end of the war.”

“I guess that was the last time I was, too.” Powers smiled. “But I was still able to stand up on my own when the bartender told us to leave.”

“I don’t remember you standing on your own two feet.”

“I’m sure there’s a lot you don’t remember from that night.”

Thomas chuckled. “You’re probably right. Did I ever thank you for stopping me from decking that jerk who tried to take advantage of me outside the club?”

“I’m sure you did.”

Thomas started to say something else, but she saw the waiter approaching with a tray of food and drinks. She smiled and thanked the waiter as he put transferred the contents of the tray onto the table. After he left, she inhaled the aroma of her meal. “If it tastes as good as it smells...” She took a bite of the salmon. “I was right.”

Powers started to eat and took a drink of water. After setting the glass down, he looked at his friend. “Kim, I heard that training on those new *Starhawk* fighters is going well. How do they compare to the *Perigrines*?”

Thomas finished chewing before she swallowed. “Well, they aren’t as fast, and their range is limited to under fourteen light-years without refueling, but they are more than capable of flying circles around just about any other fighter or starship that I’ve seen traveling at sub-light.”

“Is it true that they can outfly a *Peregrine* in a planetary atmosphere?”

“The *Peregrines* can fly in an atmosphere, as you are aware, but they weren’t designed for atmospheric combat. That’s one of the advantages of the *Starhawk*.” Thomas paused. “Once all of the Raptors are trained, I’d be glad to bring you up to speed if you want.”

“I’d love to fly one.” Powers missed being part of the 63rd, and he gladly would accept any chance to get into a fighter cockpit.

Thomas saw the look in Will’s eyes. Before he joined JAG, he was one of the best pilots that she had ever flown with, and his skills would be beneficial in training her flight crews. “Favor?”

“Ask away.”

The admiral just informed me of upcoming war games to test the capabilities of the Raptors with the new ships. Would you be willing to go against them to see what they can do?”

“War games, huh?” Will thought about it, mentally checking his schedule. “I assume that you want me flying a *Peregrine* against a *Starhawk*.”

“Actually, I was thinking that you and I would both go two-on-two or maybe two-on-three in several mock combat situations.”

“Two-on-three? You think that the two of us could win against three of these new starfighters?”

“I don’t know, but I want to make sure my crews are as prepared as they can be when they go up against the *Cheron*?”

“You’re going to send out fighters against a *Defiant*-class vessel?”

“Admiral’s orders.”

Will placed his hand on his forehead and rubbed his hair back as he imagined the outcome. “I’m in. When do we start?”

“Two weeks. And thank you.”

Will smiled and reached over the table to place his hand on Kim’s arm. “Anything for you, CAG. It will be like old times.”

“Except we don’t need to worry about being killed by the enemy this time.”

“Only virtually killed.”



Commander Carl Johnston, commanding officer of the U.S.S. *Cheron*, entered CnC and looked around the circular room searching for Admiral Sjögren. Not seeing the admiral, Johnston walked toward the Duty Officer’s station and waited for the Vulcan lieutenant commander to acknowledge his presence.

“Can I help you, Commander?” the Vulcan asked.

“I’m looking for the admiral. He wanted me to report to him as soon as I was available.”

“Admiral Sjögren is in his office. I will inform him that you have arrived.” Lieutenant Commander T’Kara activated the communication controls on his console and said, “Admiral, Commander Johnston is here to see you.”

“*Send him in, please.*”

“Thank you, Commander,” Johnston said as he nodded and walked toward the door to the admiral’s ready room. The door opened upon his approach, and he stepped inside. “Admiral.”

Sjögren stood up and walked around his desk reaching out his hand toward Johnston, who willingly reciprocated. Shaking his hand, Sjögren said. “I’m glad your schedule allowed you to meet with me.”

“Sir, when an admiral requests my presence, I assume that it is an order, and my schedule immediately changes to obey that order.” Johnston smiled.

Sjögren smiled back and led Johnston toward the ‘comfortable’ chairs and couch in the corner of the room where both men sat. “I wanted to run something by you, Commander. As you know, Starfleet has always been at the forefront of conducting peaceful exploration, but we are also tasked with defending the federation from hostile species.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“That means we must be always prepared in case certain forces decide to attack.”

“Such as the Enkara,” Johnston interjected. “I know that Fleet Captain Stuart is hopeful that the Enkara are less of a problem since the renegade Bek has been taken into custody by his own people.”

“That is my hope as well, but we need to be ready just in case Zar-Pela or the next supreme leader decides to renege on the non-aggression pact.” Sjögren sat back. “We are in virgin territory, Carl, so it is possible that we will encounter other hostiles as we continue to venture farther into unknown space.”

“I would say that not only is it possible, but it is likely, sir.” Johnston was starting to wonder why the admiral was showing more concern than normal about the possibility of meeting non-peaceful species. Johnston had always thought that Sjögren was optimistic about making friends with the first contacts in this region. “Sir, is there a specific reason that you are telling me this?”

“Yes, there is, Carl. Before the *Alliance* was transferred to relief duty at the edge of Cardassian space, it had a less than friendly first contact with a species known as the Idar in Sector Gateway 02.”

“Yes, sir. I read Captain Jans’ report. From what I recall, Idarus does not have technology that comes close to ours. At least not yet.”

“Not yet,” the admiral echoed. “They are at least a couple hundred years behind us, and I’m sure that our technology will continue to advance so that we will remain ahead of them, but...” Sjögren paused and pursed his lips together tightly. Relaxing, he finally said, “The Nazar representative brought something to my attention the other day. Something that we need to be aware of. There is a species in the Nazar Sector that Representative Bethrei calls ‘Gifar,’ and his description of them was less than...well, let’s just say that we probably don’t want to invite them to dinner.”

“Have these *Gifar* made aggressive moves toward any of the species that have allied with us?”

“The Nazar have had little contact with them—none in the last several years. But some of their ships had a run-in with the Gifar and paid the price about fourteen years ago. Nazar lost three ships and the fourth—the only surviving ship from that encounter—was badly damaged with nearly eighty percent crew casualties. Nazar has avoided the area of space where the encounter occurred ever since then.”

“Nazar’s tech is pretty advanced, isn’t it?”

“Not quite at the Federation’s level, but yes.”

“Then we can assume that this species might be close to our level?”

“Possibly, but I don’t want to make any assumptions.” Sjögren tried to make light of the subject by offering a hint of a grin. “Maybe we won’t encounter them at all, Carl. The Nazar think that the Gifar might stay close to their homeworld.”

Carl Johnston could see that the admiral was trying not to show that he was worried about this rumored hostile species. After all, there was little to go on without first-hand experience, but he suspected that eventually one of the Starfleet ships would encounter the Gifar. “Sir, do you want me to take the *Cheron* to the Nazar Sector and try to gather some more information about this species?”

Sjögren smiled but shook his head. “Oh, no, not at all, Commander. I apologize for giving the impression that we are going on an offensive with a species that we’ve not met.” He sighed. “I just want you to be aware. And I want you to make sure that your crew is prepared for any attack against this starbase if it should occur, but I am not expecting anything like that to happen.”

“I understand, sir,” Johnston said. “After the Dominion War, I have always maintained that we should be prepared for anything, including hostile aliens.”

“I’m glad you think that way, Carl because I want you and your crew to get prepared to conduct war games.”

“Really?” Johnston sat forward in anticipation. After the war, he didn’t want anything to do with space battles, real or imaginary, for months, but in the aftermath of fighting the Dominion and Cardassians, he realized that preparing for war was a necessary evil. If Starfleet didn’t prepare for war, then war, wherever it might come from, would be inevitable. He remembered the history of Earth well and believed in the axiom that the best defense was a strong offense, which is what stayed off a nuclear war until the NATO countries grew complacent and the Eastern Coalition grew bold enough to attempt to impose an iron fist against the West resulting in World War III and the Post-Atomic Horror. “That’s a great idea, Admiral. What other starships will be involved?”

Sjögren smiled. “No starships. The *Cheron* is going up against the 63rd Starfighter Wing.”

Johnston’s euphoria faded. “Sir, with respect, to Lieutenant Commander Thomas and the members of the Raptor Wing, that is not much of a challenge.”

“It’s meant to be a challenge to the flight crews of the 63rd more than to your crew. It will be not only an exercise to test the new Starhawk fighters but to the people flying them against a superior vessel.”

“What chance will they have against a *Defiant*-class starship?”

Admiral tilted his head to one side and back. “That’s the point, Carl. Can you think of a better way to prepare them in case *Gateway Alpha* is ever attacked by a superior force?”

Johnston thought about the admiral's words and had to concede his point. "I just hope I don't damage one of their fancy new ships or hurt anyone."

Admiral Erik Sjögren just smiled at the other man's overconfidence. "Don't worry, Commander. All weapons on your ship and the fighters will be configured by the computers for low yield so no damage will be inflicted. Phaser and torpedo hits, as well as faux damage to the shields and hull, will be simulated."

"In that case, Admiral, I look forward to attending the simulated funerals of CAG and her team."

"Don't underestimate them, Carl."

"You do remember that my tactical officer is a Zakdorn, right?"

Sjögren stood up, smiling, and shook Johnston's hand. "I'll transmit the parameters of the exercise by the end of the day."

"How long until the games begin, Admiral?"

"You have two weeks to prepare, Commander. Good luck."



After the Raptor Wing completed its training, all the pilots were confident that they were as ready as they could be for the war games. On the first day of the games, Lieutenant Commanders Thomas and Powers in *Peregrine*-class fighters flew several engagements against the rest of the Raptor Wing in the new *Starhawk*-class ships under the command of Lieutenant Ricardo "Aztec" Hernandez. Thomas and Powers' first few combat missions were against two of the new fighters. Although the newer ships were more agile, CAG and Legal Eagle (Powers), had more experience than all other pilots except for Aztec and maybe Lieutenant Haran "Spots" Tamar. On the first day, CAG and Legal Eagle won five engagements out of eight. It was a good day for the defeated to learn not to underestimate the "enemy." During the debriefing, CAG made sure that her flight crews understood that.

After Thomas and Powers left the room, the pilots immediately started talking about how the two *Peregrine* pilots must have cheated in some way.

Aztec laughed at the others. "You think they cheated?"

"They must have," Ensign Robert Jonas said. "Our birds have the advantage."

"That's right, there is no way that JAG lawyer should have been able to outfly even one *Starhawk*," Ensign Josiah Carnegie boldly stated.

"It's not just the ship, Speed. It's the pilot's skill." Aztec patted the young hotshot pilot on the shoulder. "He drew you in close and he reversed his thrust causing you to shoot past him so he could then have a clean shot at your backside."

"Next time, Nova and I will take him out."

"Spots and Bluefish will be your wingmen tomorrow."

“No offense to Lieutenant Tamar, but why split up Nova and I?”

“You and Jonas have the least experience, so pairing each of you with more seasoned pilots should improve your chances to survive.”

“Makes sense to me,” Jonas said. “Who am I flying with?”

“You and Resistance will be with me.”

“What about me, sir.?” Lieutenant J.G. Lacy Keyes asked.

“I’ll have you rotate in the third engagement, Starburst,” Aztec replied. “Resistance will brief you on a new tactic that I hope CAG and Legal Eagle won’t expect.”

Keyes looked at the Bajoran pilot. “I look forward to it, Elara.”

Calis Elara, also known as Resistance, smiled. “We’ll have a surprise for the CAG and Eagle.”



The next day, the tide turned when Thomas and Powers went up against three opponents. The Raptors won six of eight engagements. Both were impressed with the unexpected maneuver that Starburst and Resistance pulled right as Legal Eagle had Starburst’s ship in his sights. Right as he locked phasers, he was ready to hit the fire control when suddenly, Resistance and Starburst peeled away in opposite directions, looped around, and fired on Lieutenant Commander Powers from each side, scoring simulated destruction of the *Peregrine*.

CAG was trying to outrun the other Starhawk, flown by the 63rd’s XO, but just as she tried to turn, he fired, and the combat computers indicated that CAG’s ship lost shields and taken damage to the port warp nacelle. “You got me, Aztec. This round is yours.”

“*Speaking of rounds, are you buying?*”

CAG smiled. “Yeah, I’ll buy the first round.”

“*Just for me or the whole squadron?*”

“Everyone. You all deserve it.” Thomas activated the com to all members of the Raptor Wing. “Great job today, Raptors. Head for the barn. Tomorrow, we take on the *Cheron*.”



Commander Carl Johnston entered the bridge of the U.S.S. *Cheron* and looked around to see that all of the stations were powered down and seats empty. Closing his eyes, he mentally went through what the next day would bring. Before going into battle, even a mock battle, he tried to spend a few minutes alone to contemplate possible scenarios that his enemy might throw at him and his crew.

As he continued to imagine the next day’s outcome, he opened his eyes when he heard the door hiss open. He turned and welcomed the officers—Lieutenant Commander Michelle

McNeal, Lieutenant Garfen Amari, and Lieutenant NOG. “Thank you for joining me. I wanted to get a sitrep before tomorrow.” He focused his attention on the chief engineer. “Lieutenant Nog?”

The Ferengi smiled. “Engineering is ready, Captain. All systems are at peak efficiency, and I was able to successfully navigate the Great Material Continuum to replace the main power coupling that was giving us trouble.”

Johnston’s brows tightened as he cocked his head to one side. “What?”

“The Great Material Continuum, sir. If one can successfully navigate it like a river...”

“Never mind, Lieutenant,” McNeal interrupted. “You can explain it to the captain at a later time.”

Johnston figured that it must be a Ferengi belief that he was not aware of, so he decided to follow his XO’s lead and move on. “Lieutenant Amari, you’re the tactical officer, so let’s hear what you’ve got.”

Garfen Amari was a Zakdorn, and his people had made a reputation for being the most proficient tacticians in the known galaxy. “Sir, I’ve studied the holo-simulations of the Mitsubishi SF-76A fighters and their performance during the 63rd Starfighter Wing in training. The ships are impressive in their capabilities, but the pilots have not had enough flight time to acclimate yet. That is their disadvantage.”

“Are these ships powerful enough to do any damage to the *Cheron*?”

“Potentially, yes, in a well-coordinated attack by all eight fighters.” Amari paused to take a deep breath. “I predict that they will target our rear targeting sensors and rear torpedo launcher first and then the plasma vents to disrupt our main power.”

“What do you suggest we do to keep them from doing that?”

“We should take out Raptors One and Two as soon as possible,” Amari said. “Without the top two pilots, the rest of the fighter wing will be demoralized and confused. We can wipe out the rest of the fighters in the confusion.”

“Are you sure that they will be that easy to take out even if we dispose of Thomas and Hernandez?” McNeal asked. “I hear that the 63rd has a Bajoran pilot that is quite experienced at unorthodox fighting.”

Amari’s smugness immediately shone on his face. “Bajoran terrorist I assume. They had to fight for survival and rarely had a good tactical advantage over the Cardassians. They were sloppy in their methods.”

McNeal shot a glance at her CO, who tried hard not to smile about the Zakdorn’s attitude. She cleared her throat. “Well, Mister Amari, I hope that you’re right about *that* Bajoran’s abilities.”

“Or lack of abilities,” Amari added.

Johnston was starting to hear Admiral Sjögren's voice in his head. "*Don't underestimate your opponent, Carl.*" He looked to his XO. "McNeal?"

"The crew is chomping at the bit, sir. They're looking forward to humiliating the Raptors."

"Just remember that these pilots and their crews are our allies."

"Tomorrow, they are the enemy," Nog said.

Johnston sighed. "We are helping each other to sharpen our skills for when we have to go against a real enemy."

"When do we launch, sir?" McNeal asked.

"Have the crew report aboard at 0630. We launch at 0800. This is going to be a cat and mouse game, and we will be the cat."



The next morning, Lieutenant Commander Thomas entered Shuttlebay Two, commonly called the Raptors' Nest by members of the 63rd Starfighter Wing. She did what she always did right before a mission—walk around each fighter and kiss her hand and lay her hand on the hull. It was her tradition. It was akin to providing a blessing upon each ship almost as if it was a religious ritual.

Thomas heard a sound behind one of the fighters. "Who's there?"

Petty Officer Ralynne Brooks, one of the maintenance technicians, stepped from around the ship and approached Thomas. "Good morning, CAG. I hope I didn't startle you."

Thomas smiled. "I wasn't expecting anyone else to be here this early, Petty Officer. It's only 0530."

"I just wanted to do some last-minute checks on the ships before the mission."

"Bucking for a promotion, Brooks?" Thomas asked as she smiled at the technician.

"Just wanting to be diligent, Commander," Brooks replied. "But if you're offering a promotion...."

"Hey, you're eligible in a few months. Keep up the good work, and there's a good chance that you will get it."

"Thank you," Brooks said. "If you don't mind, I need to finish so I can get to the mess hall for breakfast."

"Carry on, Brooks. I will see you at launch time." Thomas watched the petty officer go back around to the other side of the fighter before continuing with her *ritual*, after which, she left the Raptors' Nest to get her breakfast.

Two hours later, Thomas entered the Raptors' ready room.

Her XO, Lieutenant Hernandez stood at the front of the room facing the seated pilots and their flight engineers. “Attention on deck!”

Everyone quickly stood up at attention and waited for their CO.

Thomas approached the podium at the front of the room. Standing behind it, she said, “Be seated.” She looked around the room into the eyes of each person, trying to read their thoughts. She wasn’t a telepath, but she was more than capable of reading the body language of those that she knew well. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, this is it. This is the day that we are going up against an enemy that has more firepower than all of our fighters combined, but we will meet them in battle, and we will prevail. You have all learned a lot in a short time about how to fly the *Starhawks*. Pilots, you are all proficient and skilled, but you have been used to flying single-seater *Peregrines*, and now you have had to adjust to working with a flight engineer in the cockpit with you. You’re still learning to work together, but I believe that you all have it in you to bridge the gap to work and think together like a well-oiled machine.” Thomas looked at the group’s tactician. “Resistance, give us your input, please?”

Lieutenant J.G. Calis Elara stood up and approached the podium as Thomas stepped aside. Calis faced the other pilots and the flight engineers. “We all know that our target is a *Defiant*-class starship, one of the most powerful and most maneuverable starships. It was designed for combat, and a single Mitsubishi SF-76A *Starhawk* doesn’t stand a chance against it, but there are eight *Starhawks* with skilled crews. We are more agile, and we have the same type of pulse phaser cannons that the *Cheron* does.”

“But ours are smaller and less powerful,” Ensign Jonas said, interrupting the Bajoran. “What chance do we have?”

“We have a better chance than you think, Nova,” Calis said, not allowing the other pilot to distract her. “Although we have less firepower, as I said, we are more agile, and there are eight of us. What we lack in power, we make up in numbers...and we will fly smarter.”

Lieutenant Haran Tamar raised his hand. “Excuse me, Resistance. What do you think our chances are?”

“Well, Spots, I would say better than fifty percent.”

“Are you trying to build our confidence with that estimate, Lieutenant?”

Calis gazed at the wisecracking human who had spoken out of turn. “I’m a realist, Speed. And I don’t underestimate our opponent,” she said. “This enemy knows our tactics, so we have had to devise new ones, but they know that we know that they know our tactics and will be expecting us to do something unexpected. With that in mind, we need to go above and beyond to do something *truly* unexpected.”

“And what is that?” Ensign Josiah Carnegie, a.k.a. Speed, asked.

“We will use our standard tactical maneuvers...at least in the initial attack. After following standard attack patterns for several minutes to get Commander Johnston thinking that

is how we will be flying, then we will switch to the new attack patterns that we have been practicing.”

Thomas stepped forward. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Are there any more questions?” She looked at her audience once again to see if anyone would speak. When no one did, she continued the briefing. “The *Cheron* will launch at 0800 and make way to the Retrala star system, which is roughly two point five light-years away. It is likely that it will be hiding behind one of the system’s six planets or within one of the two asteroid belts waiting for us. Our job is to locate the *Cheron* and engage it in battle.”

Again, Thomas waited to see if anyone had questions or anything to add. “One more thing,” She said. “The tactical officer of the *Cheron* is a Zakdorn, and you the reputation of the Zakdorn.”

“But we have a tactical officer who was fighting a hopeless fight against a superior foe since she was just a kid, CAG,” Lieutenant J.G. Keyes said.

Thomas smiled. “Yes, we do, Starburst.” Looking at her XO, Thomas asked, “Any last words, Aztec?”

“Let’s kick the *Cheron*’s butt,” Hernandez said with the cheers of pilots and their flight engineers echoing his sentiment.

Lieutenant Commander Thomas nodded with a grin and held up her hand to settle the rowdy and eager flight teams. “Report to your ships in five minutes and do your preflight checks. We launch at 0802.”



Later, the U.S.S. *Cheron* came out of warp and entered the Retrala system. It was made up of a red dwarf star with six planets, none of which were habitable by humanoid life, and several small moons and two asteroid belts with the first ring of rocky debris orbiting the star between the orbits of the first and second planets and the second orbiting between the fourth and fifth. The fourth planet, although uninhabited, did have an atmosphere made up of carbon dioxide, methane, and minimal traces of nitrogen, oxygen, and other gases. Since the planet was close to *Gateway Alpha*, and since it did not appear to be claimed by any other species, it was a potential candidate for terraforming and eventual colonization even though it would take many decades to accomplish. The Federation powers-that-be were still trying to decide if it would be worth the effort in such a remote area of space that had only been open to exploration for a couple of years. The Omicron Ceti Colony and the Caitian Colony were in the same sector, but those planets did not require terraforming to make them suitable for humanoid (and feline) lifeforms.

“Scan the system, Mister Matsuka,” Commander Carl Johnston said to the science officer. “Any anomalies?”

“There are two asteroid belts, and all but one of the planets are class D. No anomalies readings detected.”

“Mister Amari?”

Lieutenant Garfen Amari, the Zakdorn tactical officer, quickly looked at the readout on his console. “I would suggest that we hide in the outer belt and waiting until the fighter wing heads for the inner planets. We can come in behind them before they know what hit them.”

Johnston looked up at his XO standing beside his chair. “Michelle, what do you think?”

“Lieutenant Commander Michelle McNeal nodded. “I concur, Captain. The fighters don’t have rear weapons, so we can hit them from behind without risk of retaliation before we destroy them all.”

“CONN, take us into the outer asteroid belt and put us behind one of the larger ones,” Johnston said. He pressed the communications call pad on the panel to his right. “Bridge to engineering. Mister Nog, prepare to place the engines on standby and power down all non-essential systems as soon as we find a nice place to hide. But be ready to power up in a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Nog replied. *“I will be waiting with my hands next to the controls the whole time.”*

“Mister Amari, how long will it take to target the enemy?”

The smug officer smiled almost evilly. “Faster than Mister Nog can power us back up, Captain.”



“Raptors, we’re coming up on the Retrala system. Does anyone have anything on long-range sensors?”

“Nothing so far, CAG,” Hernandez said.

“I don’t have anything, CAG,” Lieutenant Haran echoed as did all of the other pilots.

Thomas wondered what Commander Johnston’s strategy was. She had studied the holimage of the star system and considered all the possible places that Johnston might have taken his ship to wait for the Raptors to arrive. She knew that he was a smart captain that had proven himself in a real battle against the Jem’Hadar and the Cardassians when he found himself in command when his superiors were killed or injured. She had found herself in a poker game on two different occasions with Johnston, and what she had learned about the man was that he was a fighter who refused to lose. If he did lose, at least at cards, he went down fighting. There was no reason to believe that today would be any different. “Raptor Leader to Raptor Two. Aztec, I think that we should delay coming out of warp until we are well inside the system, but I don’t want all of us to come out at the same time.”

“That should surprise them,” Aztec said. *“It will keep them from picking us off all at once.”*

“Raptor Leader to all ships. Raptor Two will take Raptors Three and Four out of warp approximately seven hundred thousand kilometers from the first asteroid belt and turn around

toward the belt with active sensor scans and weapons hot. Raptor Eight, you take Raptors Five and Seven out of warp two seconds later about ninety-four thousand kilometers beyond the fourth planet's orbit and do the same thing. Raptor Six, you're with me. We will come out of warp another two seconds later just inside the outer asteroid belt's orbit at thirty thousand kilometers.

"That's cutting it close, CAG," Raptor Eight/Lieutenant Haran "Spots" Tamar said. "You know that Ensign Carnegie might have a difficult time slowing down enough to avoid smashing against a big floating rock."

"That's why I'm called 'Speed,' Lieutenant," Josiah Carnegie said.

"This is one of those times that rushing in might be a disadvantage, Ensign," CAG said. "Just follow my lead."

Thomas focused on the mission at hand and what was about to happen was anyone's guess. Either the Raptors were going to win the engagement or the *Cheron* would. "This is Raptor Leader. Engage in five, four, three, two, one. Engage."

The fighters entered normal space just as the CAG had ordered—three ships followed by three more two seconds later and the last two another two seconds after that. By the time CAG and Raptor Six arrived, Aztec's team had already detected the *Cheron* coming out of the asteroid belt and started firing its phaser cannons. The combat vessel and all the fighters had weapons locked at one one-hundredth power with onboard computers programmed to register hits as if they were full strength.

"Raptor Two to Raptors Three and Four, attack break and reassemble. Attack pattern delta."

The three fighters scattered and came back together in a delta formation firing pulse cannons at the oncoming *Defiant*-class starship. The small fighters were able to narrowly avoid the blasts from the *Cheron* and still manage to score simulated damage against it. As the *Starhawks* passed the "enemy" starship, they scored more hits, which the *Cheron*'s computer registered as a drop in shield strength.

Commander Johnston looked at the viewscreen and then at the tactical officer. "Report."

"Shields are at ninety-one percent," the Zakdorn said. The look on his face showed frustration at allowing the tiny fighters to get by unscathed. Suddenly, the ship began to shake; the computer was programmed to make the simulated attacks as real as possible. "Shields now at eighty-four percent."

The CAG and Speed flew by, firing a second time as Spots, Starburst, and Bluefish flew in from the other direction and scored hits on the *Cheron*'s starboard nacelle. The *Cheron* banked away and tried to turn away as quickly as it could. The ship could not outmaneuver the more agile fighters.

On the bridge of the *Cheron*, Johnston slapped the arm of his chair. "CONN, give me a three-second warp burst now!"

The ship shot past the speed of light and came out of warp hundreds of thousands of kilometers away.

Johnston, mentally kicking himself for thinking that this mock battle would be a simple win for his crew, tried to regain his composure and think clearly through his next decision. “Mister Heyman, bring us about full impulse.”

“Aye, Captain,” the CONN officer replied.

“Set course zero one four mark two. Mister Amari, photon torpedoes. Fire.”

The torpedo warheads had been removed, so there was no threat of any real damage to the fighters as long as the shields were up. The torpedo casing would either bounce off the shields or be pulverized on impact. The computer would score a direct hit against a fighter as a fatal blow—total destruction.

CAG’s console started flashing red. “Raptors, scatter now!”

The torpedo narrowly missed CAG’s ship as she pulled a hard turn to port; however, Aztec was not so lucky. He could not pull away in time, and the casing glanced off his ventral aft shield. The computer, ever so politely, said. *“I am sorry, Lieutenant, but your ship has been destroyed.”*

“I hate a sassy computer,” Hernandez said.

“Sir?” Petty officer Katrina Richmond’s voice sounded shaky. “I’m getting a power spike in the warp core.” The flight engineer was starting to panic.

“Try to stay calm, Petty Officer. Work the problem.”

“We’re looking at a breach, sir. Two minutes or less.”

Aztec was a well-trained pilot who had experienced many near-death events during the war. Other than Thomas, he was the only other pilot left from the original 63rd Starfighter Squadron that had fought in the war. He remembered a similar situation where his ship was severely damaged to the point where he almost lost antimatter containment. “Shut the warp core down, Kat.”

“I’ve tried, sir. I can’t shut it down.”

“Eject the core.”

The computer calmly announced, “Warp core ejection protocol is offline.”

“Raptor Two to Raptor Leader. My warp core is critical and cannot be shut down or ejected. This is not part of the simulation, CAG.”

“Hold on Aztec.” Thomas hit the emergency signal to warn all of the Raptors and the Cheron that the war games were over due to an emergency. *“Raptor Leader to Cheron. Commander Johnston, Raptor Two’s warp core is about to breach!”*

On the *Cheron*, Johnston said, “Lower shields,” and quickly tapped his combadge. “Bridge to transporter room. Lock onto the cockpit of Raptor Two and beam those people out now.”

It was only a moment later that the transporter chief responded. “*I have them, Captain.*”

Johnston nodded to Amari at tactical. “Shields up. Mister Heyman, move us away from that ship before it blows.”

The U.S.S. *Cheron* sped away from Raptor Two at full impulse. The fighter exploded seconds later.

“Raptor Leader is hailing us, sir,” Amari said.

“On speaker.”

“*Were you able to get my people, Commander?*”

“We got them, CAG. I wonder what happened.” Johnston relaxed in his chair. “I can’t imagine that our torpedo would have caused any damage. Our scans showed that the shields were up, and the torpedo just bounced off on impact.”

“Sir, the fighter crew has been taken to sickbay,” the tactical officer said.

Johnston looked at his XO. “Michelle, please go check on our guests.”

“Yes, sir,” McNeal said as she was already moving toward the exit.

“*Thanks for the assist, Commander,*” Thomas’s voice said over the communications channel.

“Glad to help,” Johnston replied. “My ship’s doctor is checking them out, and my XO is on her way to check on them.”

“*Thank you, sir.*”



In the *Cheron*’s sickbay, Lieutenant Hernandez got off the exam table just as Lieutenant Commander McNeal entered. Hernandez nodded to the XO. “Commander, thank you for getting us out of that little predicament.”

“Our pleasure, Lieutenant.” McNeal turned to the doctor. “How are your patients, Gayle?”

“They seem to be fine for a couple of people who narrowly escaped incineration, Doctor Gayle Henderson said as she smiled at the Hernandez and Petty Officer Richmond. “You two are good to go.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Hernandez said.

“Yes, thank you,” Katrina Richmond repeated. “I guess this means the war games are over.”

McNeal used her head to motion toward the door. “I’ll have quarters assigned, but let’s go to the bridge first.” The XO led the two members of the Raptor fighter wing into the small corridor. As they slowly walked toward the turbolift, McNeal asked, “Do you know what happened?”

“We were hit by the torpedo casing, and it just bounced off the shields,” Hernandez said. “A few moments later, Kat—Petty Officer Richmond—said that the warp core was building up to a breach, and she tried to eject the core, but the ejections systems were offline.”

“That’s what I don’t understand,” Richmond said. “The *Starhawk* fighter has quadruple redundancies so that it is next to impossible for the ejection system to fail.”

“And the petty officer tried to shut down the warp core before trying the eject it,” Hernandez added. “That should have worked, but it didn’t. I can’t explain it.”

“The data from the black box should help us figure it out once it’s analyzed,” Richmond said.

McNeal turned her head toward the petty officer as they walked. “I don’t think that your fighter’s flight recorder would have survived a matter/anti-matter explosion.”

Richmond smiled. “I ejected it a few seconds before we were beamed out.”

McNeal immediately stopped, as did Hernandez and Richmond. She tapped her combadge. “McNeal to bridge. Mister Matsuka, scan for Raptor Two’s flight recorder. It was ejected before the breach occurred.”

“I’ll try Lieutenant Commander, but it will be easier to find a flea on a dog.”

“Just do your best,” McNeal replied and tapped her communicator to end the discussions. “Well, Lieutenant, Petty Officer, our science officer is good at what he does, so I’m sure that he will find your black box.”



It had taken almost two hours, but Lieutenant Matsuka finally detected the flight recorder, commonly called the black box. Matsuka wondered why it was called a black box since it was painted orange, but the naming tradition went back to Twentieth Century aircraft.

The 63rd Starfighter Wing and the U.S.S. *Cheron* returned to Starbase *Gateway Alpha*, and the flight recorder was turned over to the starbase security section. Lieutenant Commander William Powers, the senior JAG officer started the obligatory investigation into the loss of Aztec’s fighter, and the investigations began with interviews of the pilot and flight engineer of Raptor Two, the bridge crew of the *Cheron*, and the other flight crews of the 63rd. Master Chief Petty Officer Viktor Balakin, the Raptors’ maintenance crew chief, was interviewed along with several members of the maintenance crew to see who had worked on the fighter before the mission. Powers had asked the Raptors’ CO Lieutenant Commander Thomas to be present in all the interviews partially because the destroyed fighter was part of her command and partially because she wanted to make sure that the truth would come to light. Was Lieutenant Hernandez

at fault? Was Petty Officer Richmond? Did the fighter have any engineering or manufacturing defects? These were questions that Thomas wanted answers to.

After the interviews were concluded, Powers met with Thomas privately to discuss the findings. “Kim, I’m at a loss. The flight recorder is still being analyzed, but I’ve ruled out pilot error, and Petty Officer Richmond appears to have done all she could do to shut down the warp core and eject it. I’m satisfied that the maintenance crew checked out all the fighters, including Raptor Two, according to standard protocols.”

“The maintenance crew,” Thomas said, trying to remember everything leading up to the mission. She suddenly snapped her fingers as she looked Powers in the eye. “I just remembered that when I was walking and touching the fighters before the mission.”

“Your pre-mission ritual,” Powers said. “I’m not surprised that you still do that.”

Thomas smiled. “Yeah, I still do that. Anyway, I remember that when I was in the Raptors’ Nest, I heard a noise and Petty Officer Brooks walked from behind Aztec’s bird. When I asked what she was doing up so early, she said that she was just making some last-minute checks on the fighters.”

Powers’ eyebrows drew close together as he frowned. “I never interviewed her. Why wasn’t her name on the list?”

Thomas tapped her combadge. “Thomas to Balakin.”

“*Balakin. How may I help you, CAG?*” the maintenance chief replied with a slight Russian accent.

“Master Chief, where is Petty Officer Brooks?”

“*She shipped out on the transport, U.S.S. Roma this morning. You approved her leave request two days before the war games began.*”

Thomas and Power looked at each other, both realizing that the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. Raptor Two had been sabotaged. Now they had to figure out why.

To Be Continued...