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## The Battle of Betazed (Star Trek Next Generation (Unnumbered))

By Charlotte Douglas

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A breathtaking novel of suspense and action in which Deanna Troi risks all to save her home planet from the forces of the Dominion. As the war between the Dominion and the Federation rages across the Alpha Quadrant, Counselor Deanna Troi finds she is faced with more than she expected when she kidnaps a telepathic killer to bring to the aid of the resistance movement on the occupied planet of Betazed. At the same time, the Enterprise-E is leading a Starfleet attack against a Cardassian space station is orbit above the skies of Betazed. Dominion scientists are using the Betazed people as raw material in their experiments to create a more highly evolved Jem'Hadar -- the genetically engineered warrior species which forms the core of the Dominion forces. What transpires is an awesome battle -- including hostages and narrow escapes -- with unexpected twists which lead to a truly explosive ending.

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS is a member and past president of the Mystery Writers of America. She is known for her suspense and gothic fiction and more than a million copies of her books have been printed in ten different countries. SUSAN KEARNY is best known for her distinctive romantic suspense novels each of which has a unique, clever twist. She has been published in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, France and Brazil.

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## **Chapter One**

Commander Deanna Troi stared out the wide expanse of windows in her quarters aboard the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Sadness darkened her deep brown eyes, and worry etched the smooth perfection of her attractive face. Her long dark hair, usually sleek and shining, looked as if it had recently been attacked by a Myrmidon wind devil. She gazed at a cluster of stars that she knew included that of Betazed, her homeworld, shining through the spires of Starbase 133 as if mocking her with their peaceful glow. For once, the sight of home failed to brighten her spirits. If anything, it depressed her more.

"A fine state for a ship's counselor," she muttered, aware that her mood fluctuated between depression and anger but unable to throw off the negative emotions and provide for herself the cheer and encouragement she supplied so readily for the rest of the crew.

The Federation had been at war with the shapeshifting Founders of the Dominion, their genetically engineered soldier species, the Jem'Hadar, and their Cardassian allies for more than a year now. Four months ago, they had invaded and annexed Betazed, gaining a strategic hold in the very heart of the Federation. Starfleet's attempts to break that hold had so far failed disastrously. On every front, casualties were growing daily, with no end in sight. Too many ships lost, too many dead, too little hope of victory against an enemy that bred new soldiers faster than Starfleet could recruit and train cadets.

Deanna rubbed her burning eyes. Every bone in her body ached with fatigue. In less than two hours she had to report for duty, but she hadn't been able to sleep. How could anyone sleep, knowing what was happening out there? Every time she closed her eyes, she saw

The chime on her door sounded.

She didn't answer, knowing who it was and hoping he would leave. The last thing she felt right now was sociable.

The chime sounded again. She flung herself down on the window seat and pulled a pillow over her head.

*Imzadi?*

She sensed Will Riker's presence, picking up telepathically his concern for her. Will had been her first true love and would always be her best friend, her *Imzadi*. But she was in no mood to face anyone now. Not even Will.

"Go away," she called.

For an instant there was quiet, and she was breathing a sigh of relief when the doors to her quarters slid open and Will stepped inside. He'd used his security override to enter.

She bolted upright. "What part of 'go away' don't you understand?" Anger filled her voice, but her more rational side realized it wasn't Will who angered her.

It was the damned war.

Will crossed the room and slid onto the window seat beside her. "I'm worried about you."

"You have a ship to run. Go worry about it."

He cocked his head in that little-boy gesture that always tugged at her heart because it seemed so at odds with the strength and maturity of the tall, seasoned Starfleet officer with his piercing eyes and regal beard.

"Maybe I should call Beverly," he suggested. "Have her look in on you."

"I don't need a doctor, Will," she snapped.

Will inclined his head toward the tabletop next to her. "You never met a chocolate you didn't like. And you're losing weight. I think Beverly should check you out."

Deanna glanced at the dish on the table that had once held a sinful concoction of chocolate ice cream, hot fudge sauce, whipped cream, and chocolate sprinkles. The bowl's untouched contents were now indistinguishable from a mud puddle.

"I'm all right," she insisted.

Will slid closer on the bench, draped his arm around her shoulders, and fixed her with a stare. "Try again."

Deanna couldn't help smiling. Will knew her better than anyone, and although she was the ship's counselor, he could give her a run for her money in the listening department any day.

Remembering the source of her depression, she let her smile fade. "You've heard the latest news?"

Sympathy filled his eyes, and he squeezed her shoulder gently. "I'm sorry."

Deanna snatched a padd from the table beside her and rattled off the information. "Thirty-six ships destroyed -- hit before they could even enter the Betazed system! Starbase 19 practically obliterated."

She leaped to her feet and flung the padd across the room. It bounced off the far wall, barely missing a gilded Louis XIV mirror. Her reflection glared back at her, eyes flashing with rage, hair tousled, her cheeks sunken hollows from weight loss and worry.

She pivoted, all her anger and frustration focused on Will. "Thousands died. And for nothing! The Dominion's grip on Betazed is as strong as ever."

Will folded his arms across his chest and waited, as if sensing she needed to vent her frustrations without interruption. She wouldn't disappoint him. "And where were we? Sitting safely here at Starbase 133 while others did our dying for us!"

Unruffled by her heated display, Will rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms. He smoothed her hair and held her silently for a moment, as if trying to transfer his calm to her. "That's not fair, Deanna. There isn't one of us who wasn't itching to help, but the *Enterprise* wasn't battle-ready. The damage we took at Rigel still won't be repaired for a couple more weeks."

Her ragged breathing eased and her temper cooled.

Will offered her his hand and led her back to the window seat.

"Lwaxana?" he asked.

Deanna blinked back tears. "I've had no word from Mother, not from anyone on Betazed. With the Dominion's communication blackout, I have no way of knowing if Mother and my little brother are even still alive. No way of knowing how many on Betazed have died."

"Your mother is one of the most resourceful women I've ever met," Will assured her. "If anyone can outsmart the Jem'Hadar, it's Lwaxana."

Deanna stood up again and stomped across the floor. She didn't want comfort. I want to *do* something."

"We all do. " Will retrieved the padd from the floor on the other side of the room. Handing it to her, he raised an eyebrow. "No more throwing things, okay?"

"I can't agree to that."

"Why not?"

"Because throwing things can be very good therapy."

Will nodded toward the mirror she'd almost shattered. "Then use the holodeck next time you need a therapy session. You'll be less likely to destroy your prized possessions."

"Right now, possessions are the least of my worries."

"*Picard to Troi.*" The captain's rich, crisp tones sounded over her combadge. "*Please report to the observation lounge. And bring Commander Riker with you.*"

Deanna closed her eyes and sighed, got a grip on her emotions, and tapped her badge. "Acknowledged."

With Deanna at his side, Riker navigated the corridor toward the nearest turbolift. Although the interior of the ship was mostly deserted, Riker knew from the duty roster that work crews in environmental suits were swarming like ants over the port nacelle. The warp engine housing had been severely damaged by a disruptor wave cannon from a Cardassian *Galor*-class warship in a battle for the Rigel system two weeks earlier. The *Enterprise*, however, had been lucky. It had managed to limp back to Starbase 133. Four other ships and their crews hadn't returned at all.

"Those repairs should have been completed weeks ago," Riker said. The war had produced a critical shortage of resources and personnel needed for rebuilding, delaying La Forge's efforts to get the *Enterprise* back into the fight.

Deanna nodded. "Even Geordi is losing patience. He's barking orders like an Academy drill sergeant. After

several scathing rebukes to members of his staff who weren't giving a hundred and fifty percent, he came to see me. He was mortified at his loss of control."

"I'm sure you gave him good advice."

"I told him to repair the *Enterprise* first and work on rebuilding rapport later."

Riker didn't blame the chief engineer for his impatience. The dismal progress of the war was affecting everyone, even Deanna. Although her mother was Betazoid, Deanna's late father, Ian Andrew Troi, had been human, a Starfleet officer. Given her genetic heritage, Deanna didn't possess the intense telepathic abilities of a full-blooded Betazoid. She was, however, a talented empath who could sense another's truthfulness and experience what others were feeling. That ability enhanced her effectiveness as a counselor, but at a time when so many suffered the fear, grief, and stress of war, her job was taking its toll on her usually sunny and optimistic nature.

They reached the turbolift. Riker followed Deanna inside.

"Observation lounge," he ordered.

While the lift moved soundlessly through multiple levels, Riker eyed the woman at his side. Before leaving her quarters, Deanna had changed into her uniform and brushed her hair, but she still wore the same exhausted expression, and her uniform hung loosely on her formerly curvaceous figure. She appeared to be wasting away before his eyes, and he felt helpless to comfort her. Since they'd lost all communication with Betazed four months ago when the Dominion invaded, no one knew what was really happening on her home planet. Not knowing freed the imagination to conjure the worst.

"Any idea why the captain wants us?" she asked.

"Someone docked in shuttlebay two while I was on my way to your quarters. Maybe there's news."

Her dark eyes clouded. "I don't think I can stand more bad news."

He started to reassure her that the news might be good, but held his tongue. Lately, good news had been scarcer than the grizzly bears that had once ranged his native Alaska.

The turbolift stopped and its door slid open. Riker motioned Deanna ahead and followed her into the observation lounge.

Captain Picard and an unfamiliar officer stood at the windows, their backs to the door. Admiration for his commanding officer flooded through Riker. He'd been offered his own command many times, but he hadn't wanted to leave the *Enterprise*. He loved the ship. His loyalty was to her captain, and it was difficult to imagine one without the other, or himself anywhere else.

"Ah, you're here" Picard said, tugging by habit at his jacket as he turned to greet them. His voice was warm, but his expression somber, and Riker feared Deanna was probably right about more bad news.

The unknown officer turned away from the window and faced them. He was a Starfleet commander, taller than Picard, with a full head of silver hair and a closely trimmed beard of the same color. Fine lines etched the corners of the stranger's serious blue eyes and the broad expanse of his tanned, high forehead. Riker noted that while he appeared relaxed, the man moved with a precision and economy that he'd seen before only in the most seasoned officers.

"Commander Elias Vaughn," Picard said, "my first officer, Commander William Riker. Commander Vaughn is attached to Starfleet special operations."

"Commander," Riker said. Vaughn nodded but said nothing as he gripped Riker's hand.

"And I believe you already know my counselor, Commander Troi," Picard went on, which puzzled Riker. He couldn't remember Deanna ever mentioning an Elias Vaughn. *Not that that means anything. There's probably a long list of people in our pasts that Deanna and I have never discussed.*

"Hello, Deanna, it's been a while." Vaughn shook her hand as well.

Troi nodded to him, though Riker could feel her growing tense next to him. "It's good to see you, Elias," she said evenly.

"Now that everyone's acquainted," Picard said in a tone that inhibited further pleasantries, "let's begin. Commander Vaughn?"

Vaughn clasped his hands behind his back and eyed his fellow officers from beneath thick brows. "As I've already explained to Captain Picard, I'm here under orders from Starfleet Command to brief you on the *Enterprise's* next assignment."

"Begging your pardon, Commander," Riker interrupted, "but our ship's in no condition -- "

"She will be," Vaughn said. "Effective immediately, *Enterprise* is Starbase 133's top priority. Your ship will be mission-ready in less than four days."

"Everything Commander Vaughn is about to tell you is classified," Picard said as he took his place at the head of the table, "and not to be shared with anyone outside this room until I give you clearance. Is that understood?"

Riker watched Picard settle in his chair with the same air of undisputed command that he assumed on the bridge. Vaughn sat opposite Deanna with the easy grace of an athlete. Riker could sense Vaughn holding back and, from the grim set of Picard's face, guessed he wouldn't like what the senior commander was going to tell them.

"Yes, sir," Riker answered, and Deanna nodded.

Vaughn looked directly at Deanna. "As you know, last week's attempt by the Twelfth Fleet to retake Betazed was preempted by the Dominion's attack on Starbase 19, in which much of the force gathering there was wiped out."

Riker could sense Deanna tensing next to him.

"What you don't yet know," Vaughn went on, "is that Starfleet now believes that the recent battle actually was more disastrous to the Dominion forces stationed at Betazed than we previously believed. Recent reconnaissance indicates that only a dozen Jem'Hadar and Cardassian ships are left to defend the system. The diminished Dominion force gives us a new opportunity to retake Betazed," Vaughn explained, "if we act quickly before they can bring in reinforcements."

Deanna said, "That's excellent news."

"Save your enthusiasm," Vaughn said, not unkindly. "You may not like what else I have to say. The loss of

the Twelfth Fleet has further diminished our already overextended resources. Simply stated, we're spread too thin to retake the planet with a full-scale assault before the Dominion's reinforcements get there."

Deanna's shoulders slumped, and resentment poured through Riker toward Vaughn, who had raised her hopes only to dash them again.

"How do we liberate an entire system without a full-scale assault?" Riker demanded, not even trying to keep the anger from his voice.

Vaughn's weathered face lost none of its seriousness. "A covert action. My specialty, which is why I've been assigned to help."

Deanna's stricken expression didn't change. "How can you expect to liberate Betazed with one covert action when an entire battle group couldn't do it?"

"During the last attempt," Vaughn said, "I was acting as tactical adviser to the fleet aboard the *U.S.S. Nautilus*. Just before we engaged the enemy, we received an encrypted transmission from a member of the Betazed resistance. "

Captain Picard gave Deanna a sympathetic glance. "The news, I'm afraid, isn't good."

"First," Vaughn explained, "the resistance has confirmed what our limited reconnaissance already suspected. The Cardassians have begun construction of a new space station in orbit around Betazed -- Sentok Nor."

"So quickly?" Deanna asked. "They've been there only four months."

"For what it's worth, the station isn't quite complete, but it's already operational," Vaughn explained. "Apparently, the same resources the Dominion uses to rebuild their fleets so quickly were put to work prefabricating the key structural elements of Sentok Nor months ago, suggesting that the Betazed invasion was a long time in the planning. Cardassian and Dominion transports hauled the major components into the system right after it was secured. Betazoid slave labor has apparently been utilized nonstop to complete the construction as quickly as possible."

At the mention of slave labor, Deanna winced, then seemed to pull herself together. "Why even build a space station there?"

"Our information from the resistance suggests that the station is serving as a combined maintenance facility and Jem'Hadar hatchery. According to resistance estimates, almost fifty thousand Jem'Hadar are already serving in the occupation force on Betazed. Moreover, the station is the Dominion's strategic operations command post in this sector. Any attacks against Earth, Vulcan, or their nearest neighbors will be launched from Sentok Nor, sooner or later." Vaughn turned his gaze from one member of the group to the other. "That's where we come in. The destruction of Sentok Nor would severely weaken the Founders' hold on the system. The Eighth Fleet is already assembling to intercept a Dominion fleet we've detected leaving Cardassian space. While that's happening, the *Enterprise* will lead a smaller task force against Sentok Nor and the remaining ships in the Betazed system."

"Weaken the Founders' hold," Deanna repeated. "How do we break it?"

"That, Commander Troi," Vaughn said, "is where you come in."

Deanna frowned. "I don't understand."



"The Betazoid resistance is led by some very clever people," Vaughn said. "They know Starfleet's forces are spread thin. They know it all too well, in fact, since it was that very handicap, along with Betazed's antiquated defense systems, that allowed the planet to be invaded in the first place. They've asked -- *demand*ed might be a better word that if we can't help them retake their planet directly, we bring them someone who can."

"Someone?" Deanna wrinkled her brow in a frown. "Surely you're not talking about me?"

"No, not directly." Vaughn glanced at Picard, and Riker noted the captain's troubled look. Apparently the two shared differences of opinion on this part of the mission. Picard, however, gave a nod of assent to Vaughn, who continued. "While the *Enterprise* is carrying out the assault against Sentok Nor, Commander Troi will be joining an infiltration team, led by me, to Darona."

Early in his Starfleet career, Riker had been stationed on Betazed. He recalled that Darona was a small colony in the Betazed system known for its agricultural, medical, and scientific research facilities, but he'd never visited the place. "What's so important on Darona?"

Picard frowned, and Vaughn plunged ahead. "The man who's going to help a handful of resistance fighters rid Betazed of fifty thousand Jem'Hadar."

"That's impossible," Deanna said. "No one person can do that."

"According to the resistance," Vaughn said, "there is. His name is Hent Tevren."

"Tevren!" The color drained from Deanna's face.

"Who's Tevren?" Riker asked. "Some national hero? I've never heard of him."

"Hent Tevren," Troi explained, her voice shaking as she glared at Vaughn, "is a serial murderer, the worst Betazed has ever known. He kills with his mind."

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