

Star Trek: The Breen War: "Conspiracies and Deceptions"
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Star Trek: The Breen War

Prologue

"Throughout our history there has been a need to know those details which our adversaries would keep secret. In those cases we have employed the bravest most highly trained among us to infiltrate those secrets and provide us with an edge. These people operate above the law and as result must be beyond reproach. But consider the possibility of an organization answerable to no one, acting on our behalf in actions that no Federation Council would ever justify or hope to regulate. This is the single most dire threat we face, not the Borg, the Dominion, or even the Breen, but rather the destruction of our principles and ideals in the name of safety and freedom. It is a fight we dare not lose..." --Exert from the testimony of Lieutenant Commander Julian Bashir before closed hearings on the activities of Section 31.

Constitution City New Federation Council Chambers

The ceremony was not something for which a plan existed. So in haste, a thrown together gaggle of ambassadors and other dignitaries, mainly whoever could be rounded up, assembled in the makeshift Council Chambers and watched as history unfolded before them.

Gone were the President, his Vice President, their entire Cabinet, the Security Council, a significant portion of the Federation Council, as well as three of the five members of Starfleet's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Little did anyone know that for several days, junior ambassadors and the Starfleet admiralty were running the Federation. It was not something anyone wanted publicized and a problem that required an immediate fix. Hence the rush.

Gathered in the council chambers, were those that had survived and those that would take the place of the ones less fortunate. They all watched as T'kal recited the presidential oath in that cool emotionless Vulcan tone.

"I do solemnly affirm that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United Federation of Planets, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the Federation."

T'kal followed with her inaugural address, a rather lengthy speech of war rallying platitudes. The crowd cheered in appreciation and took comfort in the belief their best interests were being put forward. There were hard times ahead, she

told them, but the Federation would prevail.

In the back of the room, Admiral Colther took a good look around the room at the dignitaries in their dress whites, and then put back the last swallow from his glass.

"Why did you drag me to this thing?" he asked, turning back to his companion. "It's not as if I'm burdened with an abundance of free time."

Admiral Jason Bailer sat up a little straighter, his back to the wall--his eyes on the crowd...watching.

His eyes never wavered.

"It's important to mingle among those that make the decisions."

"I thought we made the decisions," he said jokingly.

Bailer shot him a glancing look. "Everyone works for someone."

"Knock it off, here they come," Bailer said, motioning to the group heading towards them, led by T'kal. She nodded her head at them.

"Commander in Chief, Admiral."

"Madame President, congratulations," said Colther.

She nodded in acknowledgement. "No congratulations are required Admiral. As a servant of the Federation, I am required to perform my duty. The same as you." She turned toward the other member of her captive audience. "Admiral Bailer, I look forward to working with you in the coming days to resolve this crisis." She gestured at a member of her entourage. "This is ambassador Sutock. He will fill my absence on the Council now that the position is vacant."

"You have some big shoes to fill." *And what an interesting way to fill them...*

"I hope to perform adequately in my unforeseen role, Admiral."

"I'm sure you will," said Bailer, smiling.

"Come," said T'kal. "We have many important guests to talk to, to help reinforce my position on the council." She abruptly walked away from Bailer and Colther, and her entourage followed. Bailer watched as she introduced herself and her appointed replacement to another dignitary, Jedna from Cait.

"Let's go," Bailer said, hastily walking towards the exit.

Colther tagged along, wondering what was so urgent. "What's going on?"

"Hang on," Bailer said as they rode a turbo lift through the station to the Admiral's office. Colther asked repeatedly, but Bailer just cut him off several times, until the younger admiral stopped trying.

"Do you mind explaining what the hell is going on?" Colther asked, after they finally reached Bailer's office.

Bailer held up a single finger before activating some sort of device. He held the purple glowing dagger-looking device in front of him and paced the room, before grunting in satisfaction.

If he hadn't known him better, Colther would have thought Bailer was scanning for bugs.

"The new Vulcan ambassador, he's An'shrack."

Colther made some strange face as if Bailer had started speaking an alien language that his universal translator couldn't decipher.

"It's a Vulcan security agency akin to the Tal'shiar and Obsidian Order."

"Oh? I've never heard of it."

"Of course not. They're almost as good at keeping themselves hidden as Section 31."

Bailer frowned when a quick flicker of recognition passed across Colther's face.

"A good commander keeps in the loop," said Colther, who had the grace to look somewhat sheepish.

Best keep an eye on this one...

"How do you know he's An'shrack?"

"The Vulcans do a fine job of keeping Starfleet Intelligence apprised of their operations. Sutock, as he's calling himself, is one of their best agents. We've worked with him in the past."

"So why does a Vulcan secret security force have a spy on the Council?"

"T'kal requested him."

"Why?"

"I honestly don't know... And when I don't know something, that worries me."

Suddenly, a young lieutenant paged the admiral. "Sir, you're receiving a priority one message, a conference call from the *Swiftsure* and the *Dauntless*."

Colther and Bailer shared a look of confusion, unsure why the two ships would be calling in together.

"I'll take it right here," said Bailer.

Chapter One

Constitution City Admiral Bailer's Office

Commander Ian Wallace struggled to pay attention, his thoughts wandering from the stress that had been forced upon him. For a second, the memory of weapons fire flashed through his mind. He could not help but imagine how close they had come to action none of them could ever live down. It haunted him like some sort of nightmare that his mind refused to wake from, only because it had actually happened.

The official record would surely account for the actual causes, and for history's sake that might be enough. But for the people living now and for Starfleets lasting morale, second hand maneuvering and altered command codes were hardly an adequate explanation for two Federation starships nearly tearing each other apart.

Wallace could hardly justify his own actions. He had nearly killed H'kut while that vile piece of filth Jameson had actually been to blame. Their one shining hope, nearly ended by a blast from a phaser. That close...

"I want to thank you for what you did on the bridge."

"I was only doing my job sir."

"You could have been a bastard about it, especially after everything that happened. Most of which was my doing."

"I didn't see the need to cause a problem just then sir."

"Hmm... Anyway, I won't forget it."

He vowed never again to get that close.

There was less he could say about Admiral Walker. He wished Falco could have spoken with him, maybe taken some of the pressure off the man. He seemed devastated, but there was little he could do about it now. The admiral was gone, and the Captain was all but confined to bed rest.

A voice broke through his thoughts.

"Well?"

His mind raced back to the moment.

"We authenticated the orders," Wallace said carefully holding back the fervor of rage that had burned within him. The ship and done those...things under his watch. He would have answers and he knew perfectly well were to start.

Admiral Bailer stared back at him on one side of the screen, Admiral Martin on the other.

Trying to control the situation by keeping his own cool, Bailer added "I find it hard to believe..."

"Well believe it Admiral, because taking shots at other Starfleet vessels is not how I get my jollies."

"I understand Commander," Bailer said in a conciliatory tone. "I just want to know all the facts. I never saw those orders."

"Commander," Martin began, also joining in, "what's done is done. All we can do now is move on and try to not repeat our mistakes."

"I would suggest a place to start is letting the rest of us in on the game. We can't run blind out here with everything that's going on."

"I assure you Commander Wallace that we have not so neglected our most valuable assets." Bailer paused looking down at a PADD before continuing. "Mr. H'kut's skills were helpful were they not?"

Wallace's eyes narrowed. "Yes his skills were helpful, if not suspiciously convenient."

"H'kut is onboard the Swiftsure under my orders commander, and I assure you he is the only one aboard the your ship."

"I see... Why? Not that I'm not thankful mind, but I have to admit, I am curious," said Wallace diplomatically. But a look of triumph flashed over his face.

Bailer frowned. "Now would not be the time to ask questions Commander," he said, cutting him off.

It never is Bailer thought.

"Of course not," Wallace replied.

"Let me speak with Admiral Walker," Bailer said. His frown did not abate; he wasn't completely convinced that the Commander was sufficiently cowed.

Wallace looked downcast. "He elected to make the trip home via runabout, so as

to avoid disruption to our current op.”

"What's your status?"

"We have resumed our course to the rendezvous, and we should arrive at most a day late.”

"Very well commander. Give your captain my best when you speak with him."

Bailer closed the channel, leaving just Martin and himself.

"This was far too close," he said.

"It's not your fault," replied Martin.

"If nothing else," he began, "this does prove that we have a leak, or a traitor. Either way, we're never going to win this by playing fair."

"I'm afraid I have to agree. For the time being I think the *Dauntless* should stay in the DMZ; this latest incident is proof we that we've struck some kind of nerve. Also, if I may make a request?"

"Go ahead."

"It's my opinion that this Fonon character will be vastly more useful to our mission in the DMZ than he could ever be sitting in some brig back at Constitution City.”

"I agree, however if he doesn't offer any useful information..." Bailer paused for a moment, choosing another phrase. "Rather if you can't *get* any useful information from him; I want him on the first transport back here. Understood.”

"Perfectly. I just don't expect him to be a problem; he seems to be legitimately angry at Section 31, if only for the sake of his own people."

"Understood. Bailer out.”

Bailer tapped the control panel shutting the monitor off, and then leaned back in his chair, arching his hands. Bailer knew one thing for certain; it was time to change the rules. He had a call to make.

USS *Potomac* NCC-79091
Theta Cygni Shipyards

Personal log; stardate, 57161.2. The admiral has ordered me to the Theta Cygni Shipyards to investigate the sabotage committed against several Starfleet

vessels prior to the Breen assault on the Sol system. While this mission is rather low-key, I feel a distinct need to be on alert. Something feels...off. Perhaps it was his tone, or maybe it was just his news about the war. Either way, I'm not taking any chances. End log."

"Save and encrypt, Halvo-nine security sequence."

"Acknowledged."

Halvo collected his belongings, a single duffle bag, and headed for the hatch. The hatch swooshed open, letting in a breath of recycled air. A familiar smell at least.

"Engage safety protocols, ten second countdown," he added

"Acknowledged."

"Commander Keel I presume," he said, as a human walked up to him.

"The one and only," Keel said cheerfully. But then his smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. "If you'll pardon me for saying so, Starfleet was rather vague as to the nature of your function here," he told the Tellarite.

"If Starfleet did not see the need to inform you of the details, then it is not my place to do so either."

"Still, I like to know what's going on under my watch."

"I see." The Tellarite paused to consider. "As I'm sure you're aware, several Starfleet vessels were the subject of sabotage before and during the Breen assault on the Sol system. And while the skills of said saboteurs is impressive, I do not believe those acts could have been undertaken without help from personnel at this station."

"You think Starfleet personnel helped sabotage the fleet?" he asked disbelievingly.

"Yes," Halvo answered simply. "I have compiled a preliminary list of station personnel I wish to speak with. I want to start with Chief Onayo. He was in charge of the engineering teams aboard the Swiftsure before she left drydock."

"Then you mean to get straight to it."

"Of course. There is little time to waste."

"Very well. We've set aside a conference room for you to work in. I'll show you

to it.”

“By all means.”

USS *Avalon* NCC-76549
Bajor Sector

An Andorian materialized on the pad, as the transporter cycle finished. His antennae instantly began moving, placing everything in this only somewhat familiar environment. He started to take a step forward, but was caught by an overly eager ensign moving forward with an out stretched hand. He didn't return the gesture.

“Mr. Ch...Chane...” said the young ensign. He smiled. He had come aboard the *Avalon* a dozen times and the girl still could not pronounce his name correctly.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I don't have a family name the same as humans do?” he said teasingly. “However, since you seem to want to insist on being formal, despite my urging, Roak will do just fine. However, I would simply prefer Sheranroak ch'Hane, or sir.” His smile lightened the impact of his words.

The ensign smiled back at him, obviously in some form of relief. “Welcome aboard the *Avalon* sir. Would you like to visit your quarters?”

“Do I ever go straight to my quarters?”

“No sir.”

“So lets get moving.”

“Yes sir. If you'll follow me.”

As they walked out into the corridor, heading towards a turbo lift, Roak felt compelled to add, “Don't feel bad ensign; I don't know your name either.”

The short turbo lift ride to the captain's ready room was made in silence. It wasn't that he didn't like the ensign; she was good for a few laughs. However, she could be tiring after some time.

Captain Jordana Klyce sat patiently behind her desk.

“Thank you ensign,” she said without looking up.

“Aye captain.” She nodded simply, and then left the ready room.

He took a seat before without asking, prompting her to finally look up from her PADD. She took a deep breath. "I heard this joke. An Andorian, a Vulcan, and a Tellarite book passage on a starship..."

"I've heard it," Roak said cutting her off.

"You couldn't have. I just heard it this morning."

"I hear everything you do," he said, teasing. "Only I hear it half a day earlier."

She laughed, and then asked, "So what brings you to my neck of the woods, besides my charming company?"

"I, or rather we, have a mission."

"And you think I'm going to just take off on some wild adventure with you."

"You've never said no before. Besides, this time you're under orders."

"As always." Nevertheless, she took the padd and read through the contents. She let out a low whistle. "These are rather vague, aren't they?"

"That's how we like it."

Klyce grimaced, and then slapped her badge. "Bridge, set course bearing one three seven mark two and engage at warp eight. When we arrive at our destination, keep an eye out for a Starfleet runabout."

"Aye captain."

"Klyce out." She looked back at Roak. "Now that that's out of the way, where did we leave off?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," he said toying with her.

"Maybe this will refresh your memory." She began to move in, close the distance between them in seconds.

"Wait," he said stopping her. His antennae began to twitch towards the door to the bridge.

"What is it?" she asked.

Roak turned back with a rather sinister smile, bearing across his face. "Lock the door."

She simply smiled. "Computer..."

Constitution City

In a sparsely decorated suite of the residential section a Vulcan male sat quietly at a computer terminal.

Sorick, as he would have to think of himself for the next few months, opened his data packet. Inside were diplomatic credentials and an id pass to the presidential entourage. He was now officially a reporter for the Federation New Service. He would have to keep that in mind at all times. It always felt...odd, know that oneself was legally a different person.

He scrolled through the information the data packet contained, contact information, possible objectives, and background information. He read the final line with some curiosity.

Warning: Secondary agency involved. Avoid interaction if possible, neutralize if necessary.

"Fascinating."

He quickly uploaded his new credentials and id just in time to see the data packet begin to corrupt. The information became fragmented and began a deletion sequence that would make it nearly impossible to reconstruct.

He packed the remainder of his belongings and headed for the docking ports. He had a ship to catch.

Chapter TWO

Theta Cygni Shipyards

The conference room was bare of pleasantries, aside from a dying plant in the corner. The only furniture was a table and the six chairs surrounding it; there wasn't even a window facing outside, a regular feature in most conference lounges.

Sipping some unidentifiable drink from his mug, Halvo was surprised when commander Keel entered the room instead of Chief Onayo. He already didn't like this assignment and the trouble he suspected Keel was going to cause only made it worse.

"I'll be sitting in on all questioning," Commander Keel said as he walked into the room.

"This investigation is classified," Halvo said, not even glancing up from the computer terminal. "I checked your clearance; it's not high enough to be in this rooming during the interviews. I honestly cannot allow you to sit in when I talk to the individuals that I wish to speak to."

"The last time I checked, the Federation Constitution was still in effect. So I'm going to have to insist."

He sighed heavily, knowing there was no point arguing with him and honestly not feeling up to the fight.

"Very well. But understand that if any information revealed in these interviews is released, we do know who to track it back to."

"Of course." The commander slapped his badge. "Bring him in," he said.

In walked an older man, of uncertain--at least at first glance--mixed racial heritage; his bluish-green skin hinted at possible Vulcanoid ancestry, but it was difficult to determine.

"Take a seat," Halvo said to the non-com, indicating a chair across the table from him.

"Yes sir."

"State your name, rank, and current assignment for the record."

"Jak Onayo, Chief Petty Officer. I am the head of a team of technicians who inspects EPS conduits."

"The station crew manifests states that four engineers were transferred to Theta Cygni only two days before the *Swiftsure* departed. One of those engineers was stationed to your team."

"That's correct. EPS tech, second-class, John Tyler, an EPS relay specialist."

"As a specialist he had clearance to unsupervised inspection and maintenance on the EPS relays that run to the new aft impulse engines on the *Sovereign* Mark-Three refit, correct?"

"Yeah, along with a lot of other people. When we upgraded the *Swiftly* to Mark-three specs, quite a few engineers worked on those impulse engines before the *Swiftsure* left dock. Are you planning on asking me about all of them?"

Halvo made a note on his PADD.

"I will, but for now we shall start with Mr. Tyler."

Onayo shrugged. "I don't know what to say. He's a bright kid, really good with EPS conduits..."

USS *Avalon* Demilitarized Zone

Captain Jordana Klyce held the center seat as they moved to intercept the runabout; as she had suspected, it was only a matter of time before they would find it. And in that time, Roak had offered no more information about their mission, nor let on that he even knew anything else about what they were doing out here. Neither possibility sat well with Klyce.

"Open a channel," she said as they began to close in.

"Channel open sir," an ensign responded.

"Starfleet runabout Rio Grande, we have been ordered to intercept you and escort you back to Constitution City. Bring your vessel to a complete stop and prepare to be boarded."

A few seconds later, the ensign looked back. "No response."

Captain Klyce looked back at Roak. "We can't accommodate that class of runabout in our shuttlebay."

"I doubt you'll have to," he assured her airily.

Klyce turned back to the Ops Officer. "Repeat the message every minute. Helm, move to intercept."

"Aye captain."

This had better be worth it...

"The runabout's changing course and increasing speed," said the Ops Officer.

Where does he think he's going to run?

Klyce looked at Roak again. Something felt wrong, as if they shouldn't be there, and would regret what they were getting into.

"Move to overtake him," Roak said.

The ensign at helm answered without question. "Aye sir."

Klyce gave him an odd look, then turned back to the tactical view on the main viewscreen. She could hardly approve of him issuing orders on the bridge, even if he did have operational command. The bridge was no place for the confusion of multiple command decisions.

"We should be within visual range," said the lieutenant at Ops.

Klyce and Roak both answered in unison. "On screen."

The viewscreen snapped on to display the emptiness of space. The runabout was nowhere to be seen; in between the stars that streaked by at warp speed.

Roak bolted from his seat in frustration. "What the hell?"

Running a new sensor scan where he thought the runabout should have been, he reported, "It was a sensor echo."

Klyce glanced back at the ops officer. "Can you filter out the echoes and find the real runabout?"

"I'm attempting to do so now," he replied. The lieutenant set in on filtering out the variety of sensor information that was bombarding his scanners.

"Who is this guy?" Klyce asked, now more interested in who they were chasing, rather than the chase itself.

"Admiral Walker of Starfleet," Roak said nearly under his breath.

Captain Klyce hesitated for a moment, unsure what to say. That little revelation certainly changed things. She'd thought that maybe they were chasing some criminal that had managed to steal a runabout, or some AWOL officer that didn't want to fight. She had never thought the mission would involve the admiralty.

"I've got him," the Ops Officer said, breaking her thoughts.

"Move to intercept," Klyce said immediately.

"I'm getting some strange readings from that runabout."

Roak began to move back to his seat. "I would suggest you go to red alert Jordana. Remember, by any means necessary."

"I read the orders Roak," she said. "And on the bridge, it's 'captain,'" she added. "Take us to red alert, raise the shields, and stand by weapons."

USS *Washburn* NCC-43210
Starfleet One
Mars

The USS *Washburn* was an *Excelsior* class starship pressed into service as the temporary '*Starfleet One*' after the Breen assault on Earth. The actual Presidential transport had been lost in the battle, and until a replacement could be constructed, it was up to Starfleet act as chauffeur.

The *Washburn* had made the trip from Alpha Centuari to Mars in short order. The tour of the colony and Utopia Planitia gave Sorick the opportunity to familiarize himself with the ship and the president's schedule

While walking the corridors and attempting to look as if he belonged there, a Starfleet crewman approached him to question his presence.

"Can I help you find something?" asked the crewman.

"No thank you Chief," replied Sorick. "I can find my way."

"Very well sir." The nameless petty officer continued, clearly not happy.

Sorick continued on past the distraction, stopping to look out a view port, while really keeping an ear out for any possible...oddities. While doing so, a very familiar face walked up to him.

"Mr....?" asked 'Ambassador Sutock.' The other Vulcan seemed to search for

Sorick's name as if it were on the tip of his tongue. Sorick was somewhat confused; he hadn't thought the 'ambassador' to be so careless.

"My name is Sorick. I am a special correspondent of the Federation New Service, but a relatively junior one."

"Have we met before?"

"I don't believe so," replied Sorick. "I am sure that I would remember meeting such an important personage as yourself."

"I was only recently assigned to the President's entourage. Your remembering me may not be so certain, Mr. Sorick."

"Perhaps not." He paused as if to consider. "I was wondering if I might ask a favor?"

"It depends on the favor."

"I was hoping to arrange an interview with president T'kal."

"You don't waste time," Sutock said, "for one so junior." He motioned towards a door. "Come."

Sorick simply nodded as they walked into the office, believing both his actions and statements were misdirections. "Logic dictates the need for punctual service," he answered finally.

"Indeed. However logic often gives way to the chaotic nature of the universe, in which remaining hidden can be beneficial."

Sutock removed a small device from his pocket, and activated it. As it hummed softly, he laid it on the desk. Sorick instantly recognized it as some sort of interference generator, designed to disrupt listening devices.

"You know who I am?" Sutock asked simply. Sorick noted the 'ambassador's' drastic change in tone.

"Proceeding into such a venture as this without knowing those involved would prove most foolish."

"Then what are you doing here?" he asked.

Sorick spoke as if addressing a superior officer. "I am not at liberty to discuss the nature of my mission."

"Of course not." Sutock turned to face him, accepting the answer at face value, even though he knew it to be a diversion. "Perhaps we can possibly help each other."

"I prefer to work alone," Sorick said.

Sutock's tone changed a second time. "That is most unfortunate. I have orders to remove any obstacles that prevent me from carrying out my mission."

"As do I."

Sutock began to walk towards the exit, but turned stopped before the doors opened. "Then we will no doubt meet again."

Sorick watched him leave. "No doubt."

Theta Cygni Shipyards

Halvo sighed as crewmen Tyler rattled off another nondescript answer. He was beginning to tire of what he believed to be scripted responses, sure that those in question were being coached.

"So you didn't see anything out of the ordinary?" he asked trying to coax some shred of insight from the crewmen.

"No sir. The work we were doing was pretty routine and we were under a deadline, so I wasn't paying much attention to anything else."

"What about the rest of you team members? Did they do or say anything that might seem suspicious?"

"There are four of us on the team and we were all concentrating on getting the *Swiftsure's* impulse engines up to spec before she left dock."

"I think we're finished for now. You can go crewmen."

"That went nowhere fast," Halvo said as he watched the crewman leave the room.

"Happy now?" Commander Keel asked brusquely.

"Hardly."

Keel snorted. "I didn't think so. If there's nothing else today, I have things to do."

Halvo didn't answer directly, letting the commander's irritations fall on deaf ears. He didn't care what the commander thought of him. It was not his mission to make friends, and even if such was the case, he very much doubted Commander Keel was the kind of person he would choose to spend time with. No doubt the commander would have agreed about Halvo.

Once Keel had left, Halvo made his way to the computer. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but deciding to check and see if there was something he might have missed.

"Show me the most recent updates to the station's personnel files.

"No updates have been made in the past twenty-four hours."

"Then show me the most recent version."

The computer worked for a few seconds to retrieve the information.

He began looking through the file when something caught his attention. Something was different. He couldn't exactly put his finger on it, but it just felt wrong. Halvo had long ago learned to trust his instincts, and all of his instincts were screaming at him after a quick glance at the file. "Computer, when were these files changed?"

"The personnel files have not been altered."

Halvo grimaced. "Computer, where is Commander Keel?"

"Commander Keel is aboard the USS Ascendant, moored at dock..."

"That's enough."

He took the turbo lift to the station's operation center, and upon finding who he was looking for, walked over to the Ops station.

"Lieutenant," said Halvo, "I need your help accessing a file that's been altered. Can you run a retrieval program to recover the original data?"

Not even a flicker of recognition flashed on the lieutenant's face, Halvo noticed with satisfaction. "I should be able to recompile the original file as long as the data hasn't been corrupted," she said.

She began to work, running programs that Halvo wasn't familiar with. After only working on the file for about a minute, she stopped, looking somewhat puzzled "That's strange."

“What is?”

She leaned over to speak with him *sotto voce*. “Someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure there were no traces of the original file. There are data corruption techniques here that I’ve never seen before.”

“But it’s not a total data loss?” he asked, somewhat startled at her difficulty.

“No sir. There are still traces of the original file, but I’m not going to be able to recompile the file in my lifetime.”

“Who has access to these records?”

“Anyone can access the personnel files, but only a senior officer has clearance to alter them.”

“And the skills needed to make those changes?” he asked, already cycling through the names of possible suspects. One name in particular came to the forefront.

“The computer skills needed are substantial, not to mention impressive,” she said pausing a moment to consider the possibilities. “Sir...”

“Don’t ask Lieutenant.”

“Of course,” she said. “Will there be anything else sir?”

“No. That will be all. Thank you Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant went back to her work arranging docking schedules, leaving him to face what he had suspected all along. He had been questioning the wrong man.

Chapter THREE

USS *Avalon*

It was only a matter of time before the *Avalon* caught up with the *Rio Grande*. The small runabout could not hope outrun an *Intrepid* class starship, but she was trying nonetheless.

"I won't fire on him," Klyce said for what felt like the twentieth time.

Roak looked at her askance. "If this man is what my superiors believe him to be, we must attempt to disable him. You have orders to apprehend him by any means necessary."

"Captain, if I may," interrupted the ensign at Ops. "We probably won't have to do anything. He's pushing his warp core beyond its limits. The runabout's already losing speed."

Klyce looked relieved. "Helm, get us within transporter range."

"Aye sir."

"Beam him directly to the brig," Roak ordered.

"He's a Starfleet admiral," said the Ops officer.

"You have your orders," Klyce said. She glared at Roak. "Energize."

"We've got him," the ensign responded.

"I think I'll speak with our guest," Roak said, heading for the turbolift.

"Not alone you won't," Klyce said, getting out of her chair. "Helm, set course for Alpha Centauri, maximum warp."

"Aye sir."

Klyce and Roak rode the turbolift in silence. Roak could feel the anger emanating off of her, but he felt that it was acceptable; the mission was more important than any bruised feelings.

Walker was already standing when they arrived; Klyce was surprised to see the Admiral as well composed as he seemed to be.

Roak approached the cell and stood straight before the admiral, stressing the forcefield that separated them. "Admiral Walker I presume," said the Andorian.

"Do you have any idea what it is you're doing?" Walker asked rather calmly.

"Yes. I am operating on the authority of Admiral Bailer, whose orders clearly state you are to be apprehended and escorted to Constitution City. By any means necessary."

"You're playing directly into their hands," said Walker. He turned to eye the captain, a human woman he was not familiar with. Drawing back, he suspected this Andorian had the support of the captain and her crew. No chance at escape.

"Would you mind explaining where you were going in such a hurry?" asked Klyce.

"I was trying to get back to Constitution City before you found me."

Captain Klyce and Roak both had the grace to look confused, as if they had seen a Vulcan smile.

"Not you specifically," Walker continued, "but I knew Starfleet would send a ship to bring me in. And I can't very well uncover who set me up from the inside of a brig."

"You don't trust us?" asked Roak.

"Quite frankly, I don't trust anyone at the moment."

Captain Klyce stepped forward. "Tell us what happened?"

"I received orders to proceed to the *Swiftsure* and oversee the destruction of a vessel believed to be a Breen spy ship. The ship in question was the *Dauntless*, Admiral Martin's flagship. Through acts of sabotage and manipulated orders on both ships, the *Dauntless* and the *Swiftsure* exchanged weapons fire three days ago."

He smiled inwardly as the realization of the seriousness of that event sank into the two standing in front of him. He had reacted similarly after he'd realized just how close the two ships had come to tearing each other apart.

"Both ships survived the encounter relatively unscathed," he continued, "but it could have been much worse."

"Did you authenticate the orders?" Roak asked briskly.

Walker tried to suppress the rage that he felt bubbling up; it wouldn't help. He wasn't sure who this Andorian was, but he was pushing the admiral's patience.

"Of course," Walker sneered. "They contained all the proper command codes and security clearances from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The data packet even carried the seal of the Chief in Command."

"If that's the case, then we should have no trouble authenticating your orders once we get back to Alpha Centuari."

"The orders were contained within a self-corrupting data packet. There won't be any record of them on any computer."

"I find that rather convenient," Roak said.

"I find it rather inconvenient, seeing as how that very piece of evidence would no doubt prove my story."

"No doubt."

"Dammit, what do you think I am? Do you think I *enjoy* setting Starfleet ships at each other's throats?"

Roak eyed Walker. "I think we're done for now. We'll speak again."

"Count on it," Walker said under his breath as the two left.

"Is there any truth to what he said?" Klyce asked after they left.

"Partially. The *Dauntless* and the *Swiftsure* did exchange weapons fire."

"And you think he had something to do with it?"

"The orders that put the *Swiftsure* on the trail of the *Dauntless* can be traced no further than Admiral Walker. So whether the plot originated with him, or he was just a pawn following someone else's orders, he is involved."

The red alert claxon suddenly came on.

"Captain to the bridge," said her XO.

Starfleet One **Earth**

President T'kal entered the transporter room with Sutock by her side. The room was crowded with security personnel, while there was no real threat, no one was taking the chance of losing a second president.

Stepping onto the pad, T'kal turned to her left. "I assume that everything is in order?"

"All necessary preparations have been made," her aide responded.

"Excellent. Energize."

The familiar hum of matter energy transportation filled the room, and in a few short seconds, the group vanished in the transporter field.

A small indicator light blinked on his computer console, informing him the two people he had been observing had transporter off the ship. Sitting at his desk, Sorick turned to the window that looked out to the planet below.

The terran home world, Paradise as the humans so frequently called it, was just becoming visible through the window. The world looked different now, the surface scarred and the atmosphere tainted with the pollution of a planetary bombardment.

The Breen had done their worst, and Earth had suffered greatly from it. It was all President T'kal could do to make a ceremonial visit. It would not help the situation in any real, physical fashion, but the morale effect on the scattered civilians trying to rebuild the planet might help.

Might.

Her absence would allow Sorick the opportunity to complete his mission. He wished to leave the *Washburn* as soon as possible. He wasn't sure that he trusted Sutock. No, he was sure that he *didn't* trust the other Vulcan. And the fact that he had identified Sorick was...troubling, to say the least.

Slipping into T'kal's quarters, Sorick wasted no time uploading the search program into the computer. While the program was running, he took the opportunity to use his tricorder to scan the room. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, which was exactly what bothered him.

He had expected there to be some elaborate security system, but he found no trace of such countermeasures. The mission was proceeding far too easily. Sorick had easily slipped past the few guards standing watch near the VIP sections of the ship.

The search program signaled it had finished and he collected his belongings. Making sure not to disturb anything, he moved to the next objective, placing a small listening device. The manufacturer had assured him that it would go unnoticed under the most intense scans, and transmit through the highest

interference.

With the 'bug' placed, Sorick felt that it was time to leave, and he exited the room as quietly as he had arrived.

He saw the president and her entourage returning and quickly ducked into the hastily converted officer's lounge, ordering a mug of *plomeek* soup as he walked in. For the time being, the lounge would serve as good a place as any to remain inconspicuous.

Activating the transmitter on his tricorder, he placed a small earpiece within his inner ear just in time to hear T'kal return to her quarters. Sutock accompanied here, and, as they began to speak, he activated the record feature on his tricorder. He listened a while longer, while they spoke of the trip and other things. It was not until Sorick had nearly given up that they mentioned anything of interest. It was then that the awkward feelings he had felt toward Sutock began to seem justified.

"Fascinating."

USS *Avalon*

Returning to the bridge, Captain Klyce was quick to snap, "What have you got?"

The officer at tactical, was the first to answer. "Two Breen warships on an intercept course. They're demanding we turn Admiral Walker over to them."

"Do you believe me now?" Roak asked.

She didn't answer, couldn't answer. If the admiral was innocent, if he had nothing to do with the events in question then the current situation was damn peculiar. If he was somehow involved in a plot to pit two Starfleet ships against each other...it was too much to risk.

"How far?" she asked.

"Half a light-year."

"Are there any other ships in the area?"

"None."

"Of course not," she said. There never were.

"Helm, set an escape course; best speed."

“Aye,” he said setting to work on his orders.

“For the time being, whether I believe you or not is irrelevant. I’m not handing him over.” She didn’t want to make the choice of declaring right or wrong, in fact it was not her place. She had orders to escort Admiral Walker to Constitution City and that was what she was planning to do. Nothing more and nothing less.

“I would hope not,” Roak said, settling back into his chair. “He’s much to valuable an information source.”

“Captain,” the helm officer interrupted. “I may have found us a place to hide. There’s a dark matter nebula just over a light-year from here.”

Theta Cygni Shipyards Dock Four—U.S.S. *Ascendant*

He had never cared much for starships. His heart just wasn’t in the whole idea of exploration and everything else Starfleet claimed to do. He much preferred the familiarity of a planets gravity, or if need be, a starbase. In all honesty, space travel made him sick to his stomachs.

Despite his aversion to starship, he had never had trouble finding what he needed, and this was no exception.

Looking back to see who had interrupted him, Commander Keel yelled, “Go away, I’m busy.”

“I’m sorry if you have some more pressing matter to attend to, but this can’t wait.”

Commander Keel stepped forward.

“As a matter of fact I do have something more important than this to attend to. You see there’s little war on and it’s caused a rush on repairs making my crews skills highly sought after. Or did you just assume the ships hanging around the station had finished exploring the known universe and were calling it a day?”

“You’re protective of you crew and I respect that. And I certainly don’t want you to hold up the war effort on my account, but get one thing straight....”

This time it was Halvo’s turn to step forward.

“I will stay on this station till Earth’s sun grows cold and dies, if that’s how long it takes to find out who is responsible for sabotaging the *Swiftsure*.” He paused for a moment letting the threat sink in. “Not that it will take that long.”

“What is it you’re going on about?”

“You’re in charge of personnel aboard the station. You can transfer people back and forth without suspicion. I saw personnel files before they were altered, and I’ve seen the updated files that cover up the transfer orders. There was another engineer that came aboard for only a day.”

“What was his name?” Keel asked.

“Crewman Salvers, a human EPS relay Tech, assigned to your section.”

“I’ve never met anyone named Salvers, and I know every engineer on this station.”

Halvo saw the commander reach for something and in turn slipped his phaser out of his pocket.

“Why are you armed?” the Commander asked.

“I was going to say the same thing.” The commander held up the small cricket phaser he had hidden in his tool kit.

“I’m going to have to ask that you come with me,” Halvo said.

“This isn’t going to end well,” he said as they began to leave.

“No it isn’t.”

Starfleet One **Earth**

Returning to his quarters, Sorick was not surprised to see Sutock sitting at the desk in the front room. He had been expecting T’kal to send her lap dog to do her fetching.

He entered the room and went about his business, as if the presence of the man he suspected was more than he seemed, didn’t bother him in the least. “Your disregard of personal privacy is most inauspicious.”

“What did you find?” Sutock asked curiously.

He didn’t respond immediately. Sutock’s presence had caught him off guard and in doing so he had not had the time to prepare his mind for the confrontation. Sutock would register any change in his mental

“Nothing of consequence,” he said simply. It was not completely false. He had not found the information he had been looking for, but what he did find was far more valuable.

“Did you expect to find such incriminating material just lying about?” he asked. He let no hint of deception.

“Of course not.”

Sutock seemed to take great pleasure in the answer, as if it was more telling than he had hoped for. He rose from the chair and made his way to the door.

“What will you do now?” he asked.

“That remains to be seen.”

They both stood in silence for a moment before Sutock left the room. Sorick could not imagine why Sutock or T'kal for that matter were continuing with the ruse they seemed to be portraying. If neither of them truly suspected his real motives...

That could not be it. He was fairly certain they were playing some sort of game. The only question was why.

Chapter FOUR

USS *Avalon*

Days later, the Breen were still on their trail with little more than sensor echoes to go on. They couldn't distinguish the *Avalon* from the variety of sensor interference that clouded their scanners.

"We can't stay here forever," Roak said, bright eyed and alert.

"Thank you for spelling it out for me," Klyce quipped. She had been awake and on the bridge for the duration of the crisis. She was far beyond pleasantries.

"Another one bearing one three seven," the helm called out.

"Alter our course accordingly."

"We're about to lose our lead," the helm responded.

On the tactical display, Roak saw the Breen ships were methodically probing the nebula for any sign of the *Avalon*.

"They're closing in," Roak said.

"I can see that," Klyce snapped.

The tactical display began to change as the Breen ships began to move off. Klyce watched as the small icons on the viewer representing the Breen pulled back and left the nebula.

"What the hell is going on?"

"They're pulling back," the helm officer said. "They passed right by us."

"Perhaps they've given up," the Ops officer suggested.

"We're not that lucky," Roak said, half in jest. Only half though.

"Maybe," replied Klyce, "but I'll take whatever we can get. Keep an eye on them."

"If we're in the clear," Roak said, "as it appears we are, you should get some sleep captain."

"I'm fine," responded the captain.

"You've been awake for nearly two days."

Klyce looked at the chronometer on her armrest, then sagged in defeat. "Fine," she said. She turned to her XO. "You have the bridge."

"Aye sir," he responded.

Captain Jordana pulled her sore body out of the center seat and began to leave the bridge. She looked back once as her crew worked. Nearly falling into the turbolift, she decided on a different direction.

"Deck eight."

The turbolift followed her commands, and without really realizing it, she found herself in the detention center. Captain Klyce tried to address the Admiral with some level of respect. "Sir."

"Come to take my confession Captain?" he asked, no less hostile than before.

"Consider me your best chance," she replied.

"You know that Starfleet wants me because they think I betrayed them."

"Which you didn't?"

"I could no more betray Starfleet than I could wish myself out of this cell."

"Then explain the Breen," she said

"I can't. Except that it makes me look guilty." He looked down. "Who is that Andorian?"

"No one of importance."

"Oh? It seems as if he's calling the shots on this op. But I don't get the impression that he's Starfleet."

Klyce shrugged.

"Have you ever heard of Section 31?" asked Walker.

"Rumors mainly," she said, somewhat surprised at this *non sequitur*. "Nothing tangible. I'd honestly thought that they were just a myth."

Walker snorted. "Be glad that's all you know of them. Those who know too much have a habit of disappearing. I can't prove it yet, but I know they're behind

this.“

"And how do you know about them?"

"Information about this...agency is on a need-to-know basis. A better question is how you know about them. Starfleet Security seems to be doing a bang-up job, eh?"

“And somehow the Breen are involved with them?” she asked.

“Honestly, your guess is as good as mine. But I do know that Bailer's been hot to get them for years now, and that Martin, who just happens to have his flag on the *Dauntless*, is an old friend of Bailer's. Guess whose ship I was sent to destroy...and who's chasing us now? Coincidence?"

“Oh God...”

Klyce left the brig in a rush, and didn't stop until she got to the nearest turbo lift.

Starfleet One

Sorick felt that it was time to leave the *Washburn*; he had completed his mission, and any further delay would just endanger the mission. He was attempting to pack as quickly as he could when he heard the door up.

"Well done," Sutock said. "I did not expect you to make it this far."

"Your under-estimation of my abilities was factored into my escape plans."

"Indeed. However, your under-estimation of mine was an error on your part."

"Clearly."

"You have something that belongs to me," said Sutock.

"I have nothing."

"We shall see."

Sorick felt the cold tip of a hypospray pressed to his neck. The room darkened and he passed out.

When his mind began to function again, he was sure that where he was, was not where he had been.

He began to here voices, both familiar.

"With this last loose end removed, we should be able to move forward."

"Good. I'm getting tired of dealing with these agents."

"He's waking up."

Sutock's face appeared in Sorick's field of view. "You've been given a neural sedative," Sutock explained, "which for the time being has paralyzed your motor functions. We also took the liberty of suppressing your verbal responses."

Another figure stepped forward from the shadows, a woman. Also a Vulcan.

"Give him the verbal inducer," she said. I want to know what he knows and who he told it to."

"I must wonder if any of our people truly are who they say they are," said Sorick as soon as he felt the bite of the hypospray.

"Our people clearly make efficient agents," replied the woman. "Did you truly expect anyone else?"

"Truthfully, no," said Sorick.

"In case you hadn't noticed, we are no longer aboard a starship; you are on the surface of Sol IV. As such, any attempt to escape *will* end in failure."

She walked over to Sorick. "Shall we begin?"

USS *Avalon* Dark Matter Nebula

The *Avalon* made its way through the thick of the nebula towards the edge, with no sign of any Breen threats.

"Should I wake the captain?" asked the XO.

"No," Roak said. "Let her sleep."

Suddenly, Klyce bolted from the turbo lift. "Get us back into the nebula!"

"Why?" Roak asked nearly jumping from the center seat.

"Just do it. And keep us there till I say otherwise."

Roak believed sleep deprivation was beginning to cloud her judgment. "Would you mind explaining that one?"

"I'm giving Walker as much a chance as I would give you. The Breen aren't finished with us."

"We've run a full series of sensor sweeps Jordana," Roka said. "The Breen are nowhere near here."

"They're here somewhere," she said. "They wouldn't just..."

Klyce began to slump forward, but before she could hit the deck, Roak was at her side.

He slapped his combadge. "Medical team to the Bridge!" He was sure it was exhaustion, but he wanted to be safe.

When the medical team arrived, they transported the captain to sickbay. The bridge crew began to settle back down.

"Is this nebula charted?" he asked, settling back into the center seat. He was worried for her, but he still had a ship to look after, and a mission to complete.

"Yes sir," the helm officer answered.

"Jensen isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes sir," the ensign answered.

"Jensen lets see if we can't find an another way out."

**Constitution City
Bailer's Office**

On the viewscreen, Halvo appeared physically and mentally drained.

"Why were you in the brig?" asked Bailer.

"There was an altercation," replied Halvo. "I was forced to take the Commanders life."

"That's unfortunate," Bailer said. "But if he was Section 31, then it needed to be done."

"I'm not sure he was 31."

"You're preliminary report suggested..."

"I know what I said, but listen to what I'm saying now. There is enough back channel maneuvering and side stepping to implicate everyone on this station."

"Your conclusion?"

"Either everyone on this station is an agent of Section 31, or they have spread enough misinformation to make finding the real culprit impossible."

"So you're giving up."

"No. There are a few more leads I would like to explore, but unless I stumble upon some great mystery, my report will cite the known individuals as the sole parties responsible."

Bailer grimaced. "I had hoped for more from you Halvo."

"I am unable to produce that which does not exist."

Bailer closed the channel, leaving the Tellarite staring at a blank screen.

Admirals personal log, stardate 57249.4; encrypted level one. Two days have passed since Sorick's last report. He is overdue, and, in situations like this, I believe that his return is...unlikely.

He was a good man, a fine agent.

I dread writing the letter. Not because it will be hard to explain the loss to his family, but because I'm allowed to tell them so little. There should be more recognition for his sacrifice, but explaining how he died and why...it would cause more problems than it would solve.

I'll give him another twenty-four hours before I make it official, but...

The door chime interrupted his thoughts. Bailer quickly turned the computer off, never sure who might be standing on the other side of the door.

"Enter."

An ensign, his personal aid walked in holding a small box.

"Admiral, this just arrived for you sir." She held a small box

"Has it been cleared through security?"

"Yes sir."

She handed him the box, and as he began to examine it, she continued with her report.

"Have you seen the news?"

"What is it?" he asked, not having the least idea as to what she was referring to. He had spent most of the day in his office, trying to get some work done. It had been one of those days...

"The Federation Secret Service apprehended a Vulcan trying to infiltrate the President's personal office," she said. "They say he was killed while being detained."

"No, I hadn't heard," he said. *He knew what he was getting into...so why do I feel like I'm just trying to assuage my conscience?* "That's good," he continued. "We can't afford to have anything happen to the president."

"Yeah."

"Has there been any word from the *Avalon*?" he asked.

"None sir. The *Enterprise* is searching their last know position, but there is heavy Breen activity in that area."

"I see. If you'll excuse me please ensign."

Once the ensign left, he opened the box to find a single data rod. He quickly loaded the data rod into a reader and began to decode the information. He watched in amazement as the truth was revealed.

"I'll be damned."

USS *Swiftsure* H'kut's Quarters

Falco looked around the room. H'kut's quarters were rather sparse, reminding him of a certain other young officer. He doubted though that it was for the same reason.

"I've decided to keep you on duty for the time being, but don't take it as an endorsement," he said. "We're understaffed and I need a competent officer at ops."

"I understand sir."

"I of course don't expect you to tell me everything, but I do expect a certain amount of cooperation when it comes to this ship. Remember, anything that puts the *Swiftsure* in danger puts you in danger."

"Of course."

Falco sat down at the table, folding his arms and leaning back to get comfortable.

"So Mr. H'kut, if that is your real name, what can you tell me?"

H'kut considered something for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm part of an organization called the Federation Security Agency. We were founded about two years ago at the recommendation of Admiral Bailer and Commander Bashir..."