

Star Trek: The Breen War

Prologue

"You will pay in a lump for all those sorrows of my companions you killed in your spear's fury." -- The Iliad

Everywhere

A Starfleet runabout banked gracefully away from the USS *Memphisto*, following the sweeping arc more similar to atmospheric flight than was required in space. It was the style of noncombatant flying they taught at the academy.

The runabout was different from others of its class in that the hull was marked with the seal of Starfleet Command. The *Memphisto*, having brought it the great distance from Alpha Centauri, hung in the background, watching carefully as the craft made its way toward the planet below. A trio of Kestrals followed in close formation.

As the runabout pierced the sky into the lower atmosphere, a green burst of plasma energy erupted from the surface of the planet. The runabout darted from its leisurely glide into an assortment of evasive maneuvers, avoiding the initial shot, but not the ones that followed. Damaged but not beaten, the runabout took in closer protection from its escorts, until they too began to come under fire.

Precision blasts from multiple vectors soon overwhelmed the group of small craft, and before the *Memphisto* could move to offer assistance, the battle was over.

On board a small probe, a camera zoomed out to capture the full frame as the *Memphisto* moved into a lower orbit and made preparations to search for survivors.

Not many had seen the actual event, but now even the farthest reaches of the Federation were repeatedly viewing the incident. It was being played in multiple languages across thousands of worlds, and no one could believe the Commander in Chief of Starfleet was dead.

Perhaps some could believe it. Alone in the universe, no family, few people she would even bother calling friends, and a hundred times as many she could call enemy, it was all Cohen could do to pull her into the any coherent conversation.

"I'm still amazed they caught all that on video," he said watching the video feed of the attack for the sixth time. He took some pleasure in the fact that his efforts to ensure the entire event had been so carefully captured in near perfect high resolution, had gone so well.

“Hmm, yes,” she said dazed and lost in some random thought.

“One would think something that spontaneous would have easily been missed,” he mused.

“Right place, right time,” the woman said calmly, not in the mood to repay his self-gratification. Such things should not be lost within the expanse of space, but captured for all to witness. Like anyone else, they were playing the game. Wheels within wheels.

“It's time for you to go, Cohen,” she said, nodding towards the door. Starfleet had made its move, and now it was their turn to act...no; now it was their turn to strike.

Chapter One

Cardassia Prime 15 Minutes Later

A searing sun blistered down on the Cardassian jungle. After five years, and with a little help from the Federation, the thick mantle of smoke and debris that had smothered the world had finally begun to clear enough that the sun could penetrate the upper atmosphere.

At the moment, Cohen would have preferred some of that lost shade to the baking heat that seemed to permeate the entire planet. He hated Cardassia Prime for more reasons than he cared to admit, but most of all he hated the unbearable deserts that every city seemed to be built upon, and the thick tangle of jungle that surround most of those deserts. All he wanted was to be done with this mission, knowing that the sooner he captured the target, the sooner he could return to his environmentally controlled suite.

There was almost no breeze to provide relief from the heat, and he had soaked his shirt already. But still he marched on, letting his two companions, hired help, clear a path through the jungle.

A few meters ahead of Cohen, the Cardassian and the Breen worked to fight through the jungle with large machete-like knives. The two thrashed their way through the thick mesh of vegetation, not caring how much noise they made.

The Cardassian stopped to take a drink from a water bottle. He poured the water down his throat, letting some of it run across his face and over his head.

Cohen sighed at the generally poor work ethic they exhibited. *It's so difficult to find good help*, he thought. "Something wrong, Nevak?" he asked, irritated that their progress was being stopped every hundred meters.

Nevak slid the water bottle back into his pack before looking at Cohen disapprovingly.

"I can't very well speak for my Breen colleague here," Nevak said nodding towards what Cohen had called his 'work buddy,' "but this is a far cry from the fieldwork I had in mind when I signed on to this little expedition of yours."

The Breen soldier mumbled something unrecognizable.

"Well I'm glad that someone understands the value of hard work," Cohen said. "As for you Nevak, I don't care what you had in mind; this is what I hired you for. Now get back to work." Cohen leveled his phaser rifle on Nevak.

“Do you really expect me to be afraid of you?” he asked. Nevak turned his back to Cohen, as if to prove his defiance.

“I think you’ve been afraid all your life,” Cohen explained, “just like every other Cardassian I’ve ever met. It’s what drives your race.”

“You’re wrong,” Nevak said, staring Cohen down.

“Am I?” replied the agent.

The Breen simply stood back watching the display, wondering which of the two would come to blows first.

Nevak stood his ground. “You’ve let the Klingons contaminate your thinking, with that ‘only a fool has no fear’ mentality. Fear is debilitating and breeds weakness. Sometimes it can be used to ones advantage, but most often it serves to cripple a person within their own mind. Surrender to it, and you are finished; overcome it, and nothing can stand in your way.”

“So when Cardassia betrayed the Alpha Quadrant to the Dominion,” Cohen said, “Were you succumbing to your fear, or overcoming it?”

Nevak suddenly jerked forward, but stopped as Cohen edged his phaser just a little closer.

“Another time *human*,” he said backing off.

Cohen grinned, amused by the whole exchange. “You spoonheads are all the same,” he said, lifting the phaser from its direct aim towards Nevak’s chest, “particularly those that fell out of the Obsidian Order. You think you have the market cornered when it comes to cruel and unusual punishment, but let me tell you something; we humans are far more imaginative than you give us credit for. And I can dream real dark.”

Nevak burst out laughing. “Is that supposed to scare me into believing you’ll do me harm?”

Cohen instantly lost his amusement. “I don’t care how you take it,” he said, raising his voice a notch, “just as long as you get back to work.”

Nevak pulled his machete from its sheath, holding the weapon for a long second before turning away from Cohen to continue clearing a path.

The Breen mumbled something incomprehensible to anyone without a universal translator.

Cohen pulled his tricorder from his jacket and began to scan ahead of their position.

“Yes, I’m reading it to,” he said finally pleased they were making some progress. “It should be just over that next hill.”

Nevak looked towards the ridge, which he was sure was more of a mountain.

“Lets go,” Cohen ordered.

USS *Hudson* Cardassia Prime

Admiral Jason Bailer woke up amid a fire. The acidic smell of burning circuitry was the first sign that something was wrong. The odor burned his nostrils and forced him awake, or maybe it had been the searing pain of scorching flesh. Either would have been enough, but in the wreckage of the runabout, so many other direct dangers threatened to take his life, that it didn’t really matter.

He almost had forgotten where he was, until the memory of it all came rushing back. Disruptor fire from the planets surface, and despite the best efforts of his pilot, they had gone down. As much as he wanted to lay back and forget about all of it, he knew he couldn’t sit around and do nothing.

He instantly scanned the around wreckage, taking in everything he saw. A body was lying next to him. The pilot. He checked for any signs of life, putting two fingers two his neck. No pulse. *There’s nothing you can do. Move on.*

Bailer tried to stand, faltering whenever he put weight on his left leg. Caught off balance by the sudden loss of stability, he fell back to the floor and barely missed rolling into another fire. He reached for something he couldn’t see, a place to get some leverage.

Bailer pulled himself clear of the wreckage. He grabbed the one remaining medkit, which had been thrown to the floor and took it with him. As smashed as it was, it might be better than nothing. Other things had been thrown around the interior of the small ship as well, making his slow exit from the wreck, even more difficult.

When he reached the door of the runabout, blown open by some crushing force, he saw the broken weapons locker. Like everything else, its contents had been thrown out. One piece of luck. He saw what could only have been the grip of a phaser rifle under some lose debris. He reached for it, found the shoulder strap and moved on.

He looked back to see the fire was spreading. It wasn't safe to stay near the wreckage. Getting back to his feet, he managed to hobble clear of the runabout. He pulled himself up a small hill, but lost his footing at the top and fell down the incline, away from the runabout.

Several explosions ripped through the remains of the *Hudson*.

If they hadn't known where he was before, they sure did now.

He tapped his combadge. "Bailer to *Memphisto*, respond."

Nothing.

He tapped it again. "Bailer to anyone within the sound of my voice. Please respond."

Still nothing. Not even static. Whatever type of blanketing interference was being used to disrupt communication was quite effective.

Bailer took the skeletal regenerator from the kit, one of the few pieces of equipment still working and placed it around his leg. It was barely operational, but would have to do for now.

As the device worked it's magic, he looked through the rest of the kit, inventorying his supplies. He had several vials of trioxin, which on a perfectly good class-m planet were useless. There were also a few vials of assorted medicines and one vile of pain medication. He attached the vial of pain medication to the hypospray and pressed it to his neck...

...and nothing. The familiar hiss of the needless injection was gone. He checked the setting and saw that no medication had been used. The hypospray was broken. He removed the vial from the end of the instrument and threw it away.

While he was able to heal his broken leg, the dermal regenerator was damaged, leaving his burns unhealed. All he could do was try and bandage some of them. He was going to need more medical attention than a smashed medkit could provide.

Now able to move, albeit painfully, he managed to pull himself up, enough to lean against the hill to at least get a good look at his surroundings. He was in a bad tactical position, low in a valley with steep hills all around him.

Bailer began trying to reconfigure the sensor of the medical tricorder to scan for life signs, but with the interference that was blocking his comm signal he doubted it would work. Finally fed up, he put it down to try and fix what was left of the

one-phaser rifle he had been able to save from the wreckage. It didn't take long to discover that the power cell was ruptured. Of course.

To his surprise, the tricorder began to beep; three life signs were approaching. Somehow he wished it was still broken.

Bailer looked down at the wound on his right side, already beginning to bleed through the bandage. He couldn't stay here much longer and be sure he would live to tell about it.

Part of him was still unsure any of this was going to work, but it had to be done. Any misgivings aside, this was bigger than himself, threatening more than his own life, and would not end until he had faced that moment of no return. *Would it even end there* he wondered.

Then he saw them come over the ridge.

He looked to the ground where his broken phaser rifle was laying. He picked it up and checked the power readout one last time—nearly depleted. He watched as the trio of men marched down the hill and steadily approached his position.

"Admiral Bailer," Cohen said. "I'm pleased to see you survived the crash in one piece."

With the flick of his wrist, Cohen motioned for his companion to spread out their coverage, just in case Bailer had any surprises waiting for them.

"Your knack for finding smoking wreckage boggles the mind," replied Bailer.

"Throw your weapon away," Cohen said.

Bailer did as he was told, tossing the weapon some distance away. "It's no good anyway. The powercell is ruptured."

"A shame," Cohen said.

"You should be thankful for small favors," Bailer said, "or else we wouldn't be having this pleasant conversation."

"Indeed. Turn around, then get on your knees put your hands behind your head," Cohen said, trying to seem as if he had done this sort of thing before.

Bailer did as he was told, moving slowly through the pain of his injuries, and realized he was being positioned in a standard Starfleet arrest procedure. He somehow doubted Starfleet had anything to do with this however.

"Mind letting me in on who you're working for?" he asked the Cardassian binding his arms.

"You can call me Cohen," he said, raising his voice.

Nevak pulled him to his feet and turned him back around to face Cohen. Bailer winced, nearly collapsing as he was moved into positions his body would have rather not made. Bailer could taste the salty tinge of blood in his mouth, and swallowed hard to keep Cohen from knowing just how much leverage he held.

"A human, a Cardassian, and a Breen tromping around the forest," Bailer said looking to each of them. "Sounds like the beginning to a bad joke."

"This is no joke," Cohen said.

"That much is obvious." Bailer paused. "I doubt that you're working for yourself," he continued.

"And why is that?" Cohen asked.

"You don't seem the independent type."

"And what type do I seem like?" Cohen asked.

"I picture you as more of a lackey, taking orders from someone with far more intelligence than you think you have. I doubt you even know why you've been tasked with apprehending me."

"I know what you're doing and it's not going to work," Cohen said.

"Then you're smarter than you look," Bailer said.

The Cardassian knocked him down with a swift kick to the leg.

He heard a beeping noise and turned to see Cohen pull a comm device from his jacket.

"Well?" a female voice, one Bailer couldn't immediately recognize, echoed through the small device.

"We have him," Cohen answered obediently.

"Any problems?" she asked.

"None that weren't expected," he said, looking at his Cardassian hire.

“Very well. Bring him to me.”

“If that’s your boss,” Bailer said getting up to his knees, “tell her I’ll see her soon.”

“You have no idea,” Cohen said nodding to the Breen. “We’re on our...

Without warning, the rifle came crashing down, striking Bailer in the head across his temple. He slumped to the ground and everything went dark.

Chapter Two

USS *Dauntless* Sickbay

The all too familiar glow of artificial lighting pressed into Bailer's eyes, forcing him awake. As his eyes adjusted, he felt as though he hadn't used them in weeks or longer, but he was glad to see the sight of familiar surroundings. He couldn't be sure what ship he might be aboard, but there was no confusing the distinct style of a Starfleet sickbay.

He raised his head, before an ache caught his neck, as if he had been lying in bed for sometime. He saw a nurse off in the distant look in his direction. He turned away from him, but it was clear he was making a call.

"Nurse," he said finally his voice raspy and dry.

The young man crossed the sickbay to Bailer's private suite. It was no one he recognized. "Yes sir," he said more as an acknowledgement.

"How...where..." his voice cracked. "My throat's dry," he finally said.

The nurse reached for something out of sight and Bailer was greeted with a small a glass of water. "Here," he said handing him the glass, "but go easy, it's been a while since you've drunk anything on your own."

He sipped the water; it had an odd taste to it. He took another swallow and began to cough, "What..."

"It's best that you hold off on the questions sir," he said helping him raise the bed up to a sitting position. "We've contacted Admiral Martin and is on his way down. I'm sure he'll be able to explain everything. Try to drink some more of your water."

Bailer didn't say anything, but was left curious by his desire to remain silent. The nurse waited by his bedside for Martin to arrive, leaving only when the Admiral finally arrived.

Captain Falco trailed close behind, but Bailer thought that neither man looked particularly well-rested. He didn't know Falco well enough to judge, but a decent shave would have done wonders to clear up Martins haggard appearance.

He took another drink before setting his glass down on the side table. "Gentleman, thanks for the rescue, even if I can't remember it."

There was an awkward pause before Martin stepped forward. "What is the last thing you remember Admiral?" he asked.

"The last thing I remember is being knocked unconscious on Cardassia. I suppose I was taken prisoner, and eventually rescued as we planned. So how did we make out, Nikolai?"

Martin and Falco could only look at each other nervously.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The rescue didn't happen as planned. We did finally manage to rescue you, but not until you had spent several weeks in the captivity of Section 31. When we found you..."

"How long?" he asked, the anger and disappointment bleeding through his voice.

"You've been in a coma for the past six months," Martin answered.

"Six months," he said unable to grasp how that much time had passed without a single memory to show for it. "I want to know how this happened."

"Up to ten different ships had detailed sensor logs of your shuttle from the time it launched till it crash-landed on the planets surface. We knew the assassination story was a fake, but our resources in and around Cardassia were so limited, Section 31 managed to get to you before Starfleet could."

"So where are we?"

"You're aboard the *Dauntless*, in orbit of Vulcan," Falco said.

"What happened?" he asked, as neither Martin nor Falco seemed willing to answer.

"Maybe we should wait..."

"Bottom line Admiral."

Martin noticeably stiffened, as if recalling the event brought on some personal loss or failure.

"On stardate 57806.4, a Breen raiding party laid waste to Alpha Centuari's biosphere, and during the subsequent evacuation, they managed to cripple Constitution City. Trilithium-tipped warheads. The damage was irrecovable. The president was killed and the home fleet was decimated. We've regrouped

here at Vulcan and the *Dauntless* is currently serving as the mobile base of operations for Starfleet Command."

"Why does Command need to be mobile?" Bailer asked.

"The Breen have begun targeting command installations. During the attack on Alpha Centuari and after we thought you might not regain consciousness, we had lost most of our core of senior Admirals."

"Who was named Chief in my absence?" he asked. "Well be out with it," he said when neither of them answered,

"I was," Martin said.

"Someone had to take it," he said not sure how to feel. He stumbled to find the words. "I'm glad it was you."

"Thank you sir," Martin said, less than relieved.

"Are we holding the line? And don't sugar coat it."

"The Breen have made several inroads into Federation space, taking most of what was left of Cardassian territory and several key Federation sectors. We estimate it should only be a matter of months before they're capable of striking in force here at Vulcan."

"What about the Klingons and the Romulans?"

"We discovered evidence suggesting the Romulans had been aiding the Breen. When we confronted them with the information, it resulted in a coup, which led to the rise of a new Praetor who promptly withdrew all remaining Romulans forces from the conflict. They have since turned to fighting amongst themselves and with the Klingons over border disputes. Currently neither government is in any condition to oppose the Breen. The Federation is alone."

"We've been alone before, no allies to turn to," said Bailer. "We've faced worse and prevailed, and we'll beat back the Breen as well," he said. He wanted to feel useful again, placing himself in the center of the decisions---the center of Starfleet. He had been that once, but wondered if too much time had passed to be that man again.

"Now if you don't mind I'd like to leave sickbay. I think I've spent enough time here for two lifetimes, not that I can remember any of it."

"I think we can arrange that," the nurse said, seeming to appear from nowhere.

As the three of them began to leave sickbay, Bailer noticed that things were much more busy than he had previously believed. "These injuries look recent," he said stepping up to a biobed.

"Every ship not on the front has standing orders to assist in medical triage. We don't usually get much spill over this far from the front, but the fighting near Betazed has become particularly fierce."

Bailer looked to Martin, expecting more details.

"We're holding the line Admiral," said Martin, "but it's costing us."

The nurse returned, to give him permission to leave with the usual request to report and lingering symptoms. Bailer agreed and made his way for the door. He turned back for just a second, to see the nurse making rounds and wondered where the CMO might be. *No doubt occupied with more urgent matters*, he thought.

Bailer nodded to the guards standing outside of sickbay.

The three officers walked down the corridor, and Bailer was taken back by what he saw. The talent of starfleet engineers had always amazed him and this was no exception. If the exterior of the *Dauntless* any way mirrored her internals, the ship was no doubt being held together with sheer determination, and both hands of her chief engineer.

Everywhere he looked, there were signs that repairs had only recently been made, were still under way, or had simply been but on hold. No doubt in lieu of repairing more vital systems.

The carpet, a luxury that once set the tone of every *Galaxy Class*, had long since been burned away, exposing the bare plating of the deck.

"This way Admiral," Martin said. "The nearest turbo lift is...out of order below deck twelve."

"Is it like this throughout the ship?" Bailer asked as they passed another section of corridor, stripped down to the frame.

"Some areas are worse than others," Martin answered.

The continued along the battered corridor for some time, until they approached the working turbolift. Two well-armed security officers stood by the entrance

"What's with all the guards?" asked Bailer

"The Breen have taken to disabling our ships and boarding them to round up the survivors, rather than destroying them outright," said Falco. "The number of missing in action is quickly beginning to overtake those actually killed in combat."

"Do we have any reasoning for this new tactic," Bailer said.

"Slave labor," the captain said. It was clear to Bailer, the crushing weight of it seemed personal. He decided not to ask.

"We're dishing out as much punishment as we're taking," Martin said, "which has caused the Breen to devote a substantial portion of their workforce to the front lines. They continually need fresh workers to replace their own ranks and the prisoners that are worked to..."

He didn't need to go on and it wasn't hard to imagine why. Although Starfleet didn't practice such ruthlessness, it wasn't hard to imagine why the Breen might indulge such things. The best way to ensure your workers never revolted was to work them past their breaking point, and then replace them with new workers.

"I understand," Bailer said, putting his hand up to touch his friend's shoulder. He didn't need to go on.

"The Breen aren't going to get our people without a fight," Martin added.

"How are we getting so many recruits?" Bailer asked.

Falco and Martin look nervously at each other, not entirely sure how to breach the subject.

"I'm getting tired of having to repeat myself, gentlemen."

"The new president," Martin began, "against the urging of Starfleet Command, has instituted a mandatory conscription for all Federation member worlds."

"A *draft*?" Bailer asked, aghast. His voice was shallow and lost, the wind almost knocked out of him as he tried to fathom such a thing. Jason Bailer was...no stranger to unorthodox thinking, and given the circumstances he would tread as far outside the rules as he needed to guarantee the safety of the Federation. But never in his wildest dreams had he ever considered instituting a draft. It was counter to everything he was willing to sacrifice his life to protect.

"Yes sir," Martin asked.

"How could we come this far in six months?"

“As much as I hate the idea,” Falco said, “it may very well be the only thing that has kept us in the fight.”

“*Captain Falco,*” the intercom snapped, “*please report to the bridge.*”

“On my way,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me sirs.”

“Of course,” Martin said. Bailer simply nodded and let him go.

Falco turned to back track his way to the turbo lift and was gone around a corner. Martin and Bailer continued there slow walk, letting the doors part as they entered Ten-Forward.

“Isn’t it sort of quiet in here,” Bailer said; the last time he had been aboard ship, Ten-Forward was anything but deserted.

“There aren't many that aren't on duty sir,” Martin said.

“Yourself included.”

“Someone has to hold Starfleet together.”

“Well it’s not your burden alone anymore Nikolai.”

His shoulders seemed to ease as if the weight of the universe had suddenly been lifted, or at least was no longer his alone to carry.

“If I could have a little while,” Bailer said.

“Of course Admiral. Is there anything I can get you?”

“I’ll need to be briefed in detail as soon as possible. Fleet status and deployments, current intelligence reports, the whole game.”

“Understood.” He turned on a heel, the first act that didn’t seem forced. At the door he turned to his friend. “It’s good to have you back with us Jason.”

He only nodded, still unsure if he agreed with that sentiment.

Bailer stood for several minutes at one of the large windows looking out over the rag tag fleet of ships that stood watch over Vulcan. They all showed signs of recent engagements.

“If this is the best Starfleet can muster to stand guard at command, then what’s left holding the line.”

“Sheer determination,” a voice said.

He turned to see who had snuck up on him. “I’m sorry,” he said not knowing the woman’s name. She was dressed in a well-tailored suit, in better condition than most of the uniforms he had seen.

“Starfleet fights with sheer determination,” she continued, “and with my guidance, they’re doing a fine job.”

He finally put it together. “Madame president,” he said, bowing his head.

She stepped up to the next level. “They said you were clever.”

Bailer moved to one of the tables, and motioned for her to join him. “I’m sure they say a lot of things,” he said taking a seat, “and you can believe most of it.”

“I tend to make my own decisions,” she said. She handed him another glass of water. He took a swallow; again it tasted odd.

“A wise move.”

“So I take it you don’t agree with some of my methods.”

“Starfleet is a volunteer organization,” he said without missing a beat. “And it always has been. It’s what’s held us together this long.”

“I agree,” she said all too quickly, “but now we need something more.”

“And when this is over?” he asked.

She paused for a long second before answering. “You’re optimistic. I like that. When this is over...” she paused a moment, as any politician would, to find the words, “we’ll see.”

“Those stars out there,” she said nodding turning to the window. “Somewhere near at least one of them, people are fighting, and dying for the Federation. Some of them do it by choice; they feel they owe it to the rest of us. The others do it because we tell them it’s important. Just between you and me, does it really make any difference why they fight, as long as the Federation wins in the end?”

Bailer was sure he knew the answer, or maybe he had known it once and now after everything that had happened—after the Borg, the Dominion, the Breen, and a hand full of others, he had lost sight of it.

“It isn’t right,” he tried to say, but the words only came out as a mumble. “This isn’t right.”

“What makes you think any of this is real?” she asked. “Aren’t you are beginning to suspect that it’s all a fantasy, some sort of computer generated dream world we’ve stuck you in to gauge your reactions to certain situations.”

Bailer didn’t answer.

“What if I told you this was all some holodeck fantasy? An elaborate charade specifically tailored to suit your mindset.”

“I’m not sure I would believe you,” he answered.

“What if I told you the Breen are capable of doing everything you’ve been told that’s happened in the past six months? Not in a few months or next year, but today. Would you hate them even more? Would you pledge your life to fight them till every last Breen had been wiped clean of the galaxy?”

“I would fight them,” he said in almost a daze. His mind was blank and his eyes were clouded, almost like he’d been hypnotized.

“Good,” she said.

The mystery woman, an as yet unknown figure with a control and ambition that stretched the quadrant and beyond, rose from her seat. She tapped a small communication device underneath the jacket she wore. “Have him sedated, and then return him to his cell.”

A Breen voice replied over the intercom acknowledging her order.

He heard voices, clearly two people, but his vision was blurred. One was unimaginably alien, the other... The voice was certainly familiar by now and maybe he had seen her before...but he could put no name to her.

The small device on his forehead blinked several times and Bailer began to appear wobbly. Before he could lose consciousness though he was grabbed by the pull of a transporter, disappearing in a shimmer of light.

“End program.” Ten forward dissolved to reveal the reality of a holodeck.

Cohen entered the holodeck.

“He’ll need to undergo the procedure again,” she said. “Make the preparations to take the procedure to level four.”

“Level four has not been tested on a purely human subject,” Cohen reminded her.

She thought for a moment. "Then we'll kill two birds with one stone," she said finally.

"Yes director," Cohen said moving off to carry out his orders.

She smiled, pleased with the level of success they were achieving. "First Bailer, she said, speaking no one, "then the FSA."

Chapter Three

Cardassia

Location: Unknown

Bailer woke up in a dimly lit room, lying on a stiff wooden slab of a cot. The pain was gone from his leg, but maybe that was just because his head was throbbing. His burns had been healed as well, and the gash in his side was gone.

While looking over the place where a huge gash used to be, instinct began to kick in.

This place was not right.

He tried to stand up, but stumbled back down. He placed a gentle hand to feel the bruised whelp on his head. He had a concussion

A voice from the darkness begins to speak. It was strangely feminine. "All your injuries have been taken care of. Well mostly healed," she added.

The voice caught him off guard. He had not realized there was anyone else in the room.

"Should I even bother asking where I am?" he asked.

"Believe it or not, you're still on Cardassia."

"Hiding in plain sight," he said. There was some truth to the saying after all, even if hiding she was concealed within a shadow.

"It helps to be close to the things one has interest in."

Bailer shook his head, trying to clear his mind from the fog. He began to stumble, then sat back down on the cot, before he completely lost his balance.

"Fascinating," she said. "He's regaining his memory faster this time. I had hoped otherwise."

"You must admit," Cohen, said, "if we could turn him, he would make an excellent agent."

"Indeed. But we can't take the risk."

Bailer heard the voices, but the words simply floated by him. His mind a jumble of thoughts...

The voice...there was something familiar about it. He was sure he had heard it before somewhere...he couldn't place...maybe...the Breen...

He would kill them all, wipe their race from existence and turn their planet into a smoking cinder; a graveyard the likes of which the galaxy had never seen. Men women, and children, all gone so that no straggler was left to carry on their pathetic race; all because of earth...

"Starfleet fights with sheer determination, and with my guidance, they're doing a fine job."

He finally put it together. "Madame president," he said, bowing his head.

She stepped up to the next level. "They said you were clever."

He had heard her voice before, but it was almost a dream. There was a face... young and beautiful, but with something in her eyes. Maybe it was loss, pain, or despair. Or maybe it was hatred. He couldn't be sure it was any of those, or maybe it was all of them.

But it slipped away the more he tried to hold on to it.

The Breen...they should be punished, but...the Federation doesn't condone genocide. We can beat them without wiping them out...had he said the words or merely thought them...

"You may like to believe that, but it's certainly not true," she said. "Given the chance, the Breen Confederacy would lay waste to the Federation. You remember Earth don't you?"

He suddenly remembered standing somewhere...he was on a ship, in a shuttlebay looking out through the open doors. He turned back to see the rows of flag draped coffins that even in the massive chasm of the shuttlebay seemed to be crammed together. Then he turned back to earth and saw that even from their orbit high above the planet, the destruction was still clearly visible. Clouds that were more billows of debris and smoke had begun to circle the globe.

The destruction, the loss of life, it was unimaginable. Where had Starfleet been, what act of negligence had permitted such an atrocity that paradise itself had been set ablaze.

But that was over...they were paying for their mistakes...trying to make them right...fighting to make the Breen pay for what they had done...

The door to the cell opened and the illusion was suddenly broken.

"I gave orders that we weren't to be disturbed!" she shouted.

Bailer looked up to see whom it was. He couldn't make out the figure. His mind was still hazy, clouded in some memory that was as real as anything he could see coming.

"This isn't right," he whispered.

He heard the alien speak, some language that he couldn't understand, but was at the same time familiar. He shook his head again trying to clear his thoughts, then placed a steady hand to his temple trying to remember...

A quiet song began to play in the forefront of his mind. The simple melody soon began to spread, breaking through the walls of new conditioning, and separating the real from the imaginary.

He looked up again, and saw them standing at the other end of the room, a human female, and a Breen soldier. They continued to speak for another minute before the Breen left and the woman returned to her seat, her appearance still caught in blanket of darkness that divided the room

Looking around he realized they were alone again. Had the others been there or had they simply left during his confusion. He decided it didn't matter.

"You should change careers," Bailer said.

"Why is that?" she asked.

"Your performance as president was truly memorable," he said finally putting a face to the voice. He was sure of her voice, but not positive of her appearance. Altering one appearance was simple enough.

"What makes you think that was me?" she asked finally.

"Your ego fits," he said simply. He got up and walked toward her. "No force field," he said, taking another step forward. "You're pretty sure of yourself."

"What reason would I have to restrain a dead man?"

"Pardon?"

"You have been unconscious for nearly 36 hours Admiral. Starfleet has already given up its search. As far as the Alpha quadrant is concerned, Jason Bailer is dead."

"I doubt very much that anyone would so easily believe your half truths."

She switched on the viewer.

“...spokesman has confirmed that Admiral Bailer's transport was shot down sometime this morning and that three bodies have already been recovered from the crash site...”

The broadcast continued as his mind wandered. There had only been three of them on the runabout.

“...Starfleet has made no official announcement, but we can confirm at this time, the death of Admiral Jason Bailer; Commander in Chief of starfleet...”

“It amuses me that you hold yourself in such high regard, as if the Federation could not go on without you. Despite what you tell yourself, Admiral Jason Bailer is only a man. Flesh and blood, and like so many men like him, he won't live to see the end of this war.”

She clicked the viewer off, and watched as he fell back to the small barren cot. “You look troubled. Maybe it was something I said.”

It was just then that a slight tingle began to pulse through a tiny nerve behind his ear. It was so slight that it could have even been missed, and given the pain still swimming in his head, it nearly had been. Bailer lowered his head, and began to rub behind his temple as if to ease the pain. He tracked back along his ear, and then with the slightest touch, tapped a single confirmation signal.

He rose up standing to stretch his arms behind him, before looking directly at her. “You shouldn't speak of someone as if they're already dead and gone.”

“And why is that?” she asked, clearly at ease with herself.

“They have a way of coming back to bite you in the ass.”

An alarm suddenly began to sound within the compound. From within the darkness, a distressed voice cut through the room into an open comm channel. “What's going on?”

Before anyone could answer, Cohen had returned to the room. “A strike team of Starfleet marines and FSA agents has located our position and are fighting their way towards this location.”

He sat back down on the cot, content to let the rest of this game play out. “For all your advanced measures of secrecy, you never thought to scan for a subdermal locator ID. I expected better from Section 31.”

"It was your plan to get captured all along," she said.

"I heard you were clever," he said.

"This is far from over," she said.

"Of that I have no doubt, but you should know we Bailers are a strong lot. It takes more than a shuttle crash and attempted brainwashing to slow us down."

"I'll remember that next time," she said.

"Consider it an invitation," Bailer said.

Cohen and the woman vanished in a shimmer of transporter light that cast just enough light into the room for Bailer to get a look at her face. He was struck by the resemblance. Now he was sure.

It was only a moment later that the first team found their way to his location. They quickly moved in securing the room. The team leader, a human he had never laid eyes on before, and who seemed too young to be in any command position approached him.

"Sir, are you all right?" he asked.

"Nothing that won't heal Corporal," Bailer answered.

"Understood sir."

"I have your ticket sir." The Marine slapped a comm badge on him, before activating his own. "This is echo-seven. The Admiral is secure. Energize."

Avocet Class Dropship

He materialized on a transport ship. A figure turned to make his way to transporter pad, his features distinctly Tellarite. "Welcome aboard sir," Halvo said. "I'm glad we arrived in time."

"Not as glad as I am," Bailer said. "Thank the rest of your team for me."

"Yes sir," he said knowing it was more of a courtesy than a direct order. There were more important things to deal with at the moment.

"What's our status?" he asked, having to hold onto an upper support rail. The turbulence was becoming a problem.

"We've infiltrated seventy percent of the base," Halvo said checking the updated team reports. "Our teams are sweeping the lower sections now."

"Any sign of their outgoing transporter signal?" Bailer asked, hoping for more than he knew they would find.

"None sir."

Given all the advances starfleet had made in circumventing the various technologies employed by Section 31, their use of untraceable transporters still went unchecked. He had an idea about that, but it would have to wait.

"The *Dauntless*?" he asked, getting back to his priorities.

"In orbit coordinating the assault," Halvo said. "Admiral Martin sends his regards."

Bailer ignored the extraneous comment, even from a friend, consumed by the matter at hand. "I want their computer core and any other equipment found down there isolated and transported aboard the *Dauntless* as soon as possible."

"I already have teams on it," he answered. He pulled his PADD to check their progress. "Two teams are securing the computer core now, and a third is dumping the holodeck memory banks."

"Good," he said, eager to know what other jewels of intelligence they might come across besides his own attempted brainwashing program. "Any prisoners?" he asked.

"Not yet," Halvo answered. "The base seems relatively spartan, with accommodations for no more the four to six people. It wouldn't have been difficult for them to have all left at once."

True enough, he thought, but that didn't change the fact that he still wanted someone to interrogate. "Find me someone..."

The shuttle suddenly lurched violently as if something were trying to knock it from the sky.

"Report!" Bailer yelled.

"My god."

Bailer pushed past him to see the sensor readout for himself, and was crushed by what he saw. The entire compound had just been engulfed in a massive explosion. Looking down at the surface, Bailer could see a swatch of the scared

jungle cleared around the now missing compound as a plume of smoke and debris chased into the atmosphere. And he could see the waste of a mission this had become.

“Survivors?” he asked.

“Too early to tell,” Halvo said checking his PADD, “but there were at least fifty Marines still down there.”

Bailer moved to the back of the ship, away from the others. He took a seat and strapped himself in, for the return trip. He let the moment wash over him, not enjoying or loathing the time, but sitting in a complete void on thoughtlessness.

A whisper crept from his throat. “More sacrifices...”

“All may not be lost sir,” Halvo said working his way to the aft compartment. “Team three is reporting they made it clear of the blast. They also report that they have a prisoner in custody.”

I could not be that lucky, Bailer thought.

“A Breen soldier,” Halvo finally reported.

It was perhaps not what he had hoped for, but it was better than nothing.

“Pull all remaining teams from the surface and transfer the prisoner to the *Dauntless*.” He paused, hating to have to add, “and have them begin search and rescue procedures.”

“Understood sir.”

Chapter Four

USS *Dauntless* Shuttlebay

The main shuttlebay of the *Dauntless* ran hectic with *Avocets*, *Kestrels*, and a few *Golden Eagles*, all vying for a spot to touch down.

Stepping off his *Avocet*, Admiral Bailer was quickly ushered out of the way as the large craft was maneuvered farther down the flight deck to make room for the reaming incoming craft. He turned quickly enough to see the sight of a *Golden Eagles* power down into a landing that looked as if it might have been a borderline collision. When he saw a *Kestrel* make a similar landing, he realized it wasn't an accident. They were executing some type of combat landing, getting aboard in the shortest amount of time rather than hanging around out in the open of Cardassian space. He couldn't say he blamed them.

Martin was there to greet Bailer, but neither man spoke. Together they simple watched the choreographed movement of the deck crews.

Martin stepped forward to shake Bailer's hand, a final realization that the main ordeal was over. He shook his friend's hand and for that instance was not in this place, or in any war that asked him to make such sacrifices of those under his command. But as quickly as the feeling had come over him, it was gone.

Off in the distance, approaching their position, Bailer could see a marine officer crossing the shuttlebay. He did not know her name, but she did not look pleased. Her jaw was clenched tightly, holding back some scathing remarks, her fists balled, and she been in the presence of anyone else there would have surely been a brawl.

"Colonel," Bailer said unsure of her name. At the moment he didn't really care who she was or what her problems were. All he wanted was to get at that Breen pry open his head and learn what secrets lay within.

She stopped a good arms length before reaching Bailer, arms folded in front of her. "Faris *sir*," she said trying to maintain some level of self-control.

He simply nodded, an acknowledgement of her name, if not her visible anger. "Include my condolences to the proper parties, Colonel." He turned to her once; saying with a stare, *now is not the time colonel*. "Carry on."

She looked to Martin for some kind of support but found none. She snapped off a salute, a gesture the marines had instituted much to the disdain of the rest of Starfleet, turned on a heel and left them to that which so occupied their minds.

"We have the prisoner detained in holding cell four," Martin said.

"I want to see him before we get underway," Bailer said.

"I'll lead the way," Martin said making his way out of the shuttlebay.

"Has he offered anything yet?" Bailer asked as they stepped into the turbolift.

"He's demanding to be turned over to Breen authorities, under some treaty I don't even think they ever fully recognized."

"How convenient," Bailer said. "He had better tell us something useful." *Or we're screwed.* He had better tell us something...he had better tell us something...he had better tell us something. Martin might have tried to carry on the conversation but Bailer wouldn't have known. His mind kept repeating the same worried feeling, till he felt the familiar jerk of the turbolift coming to a stop.

The doors opened and Martin stepped forward into the corridor. "He'll talk."

Unregistered Transport Location: Unknown

The small transport ship, which had come to be her home as much as any other place in the universe; steadily cruised away from Cardassia Prime. All in all, she was glad to get away from such an alien planet, even if it meant the near complete failure of the mission.

Someday...she wondered if this would all be over...if someday she could once again walk among her own kind without the cloak of secrecy that shadowed her every movement. They were questions that haunted her thoughts, and ran rampant through her dreams.

Would she ever see Earth again? Would anyone ever know the sacrifices she had made to protect her home? *No on both accounts.* She wasn't doing any of this for the glamorous recognition of a hero's worship.

But to see Earth again, to breath the rich salt air of the San Francisco bay, and feel the warmth of the sun as it beat down on her skin...she missed her home. And now that city, everything that she might have recognized...she couldn't bring herself to picture the image of what the Breen had done to Earth. In some sort of denial, she even refused to read the full reports of the incident, and all the vivid details they provided.

She turned away at the sound of the door chime, facing the window and the void of space that race by, to wipe a single tear from her cheek. "Enter."

She didn't have to look to know it was Cohen. No one else would have the need, or the nerve, to bother her at this exact moment. He stood at the door waiting...for approval or permission; neither of which she felt the need to give.

"I've been exposed because of this," she said, thinking that her voice was still a bit unsteady. She cleared her throat and took a long drink of water before continuing. "You should have checked Bailer more thoroughly for EM signatures."

"I personally screened him through every security protocol we have at our disposal," he said, irritated for an entirely different reason. Cohen possessed many traits, but incompetence was not one of them. "The FSA has obviously developed a few tricks of their own."

"Obviously."

"Maybe if you took a more active role in this endeavor, instead of remaining in the shadows all the time..."

She suddenly caught a revival of spirit, and turned to face him directly. "You would do well to remember Cohen that in our profession, no one is above replacement."

"Then I would offer you're the same reminder," he said, holding his ground. "I know all about your position and the risks you take, but the thing about shadows is that they work both ways. They may allow you to remain unseen, but they also hinder what you can see."

She cursed under her breath. "There is logic to that, I suppose." She was willing to admit her mistakes, in the few instances she made any, and Cohen did have a point. Her strategy of cloak and dagger maneuvering had as of yet failed to produce any tangible result, and may have cost more than it was worth. It was time to take a more direct approach.

"Arrange a meeting with the Council," she said settling back into her seat. "It's time we amend our approach."

"As you wish," Cohen said, turning to leave. The door opened, and but he stopped before moving out into the corridor. He gave her one longing look of something that perhaps he could never say. It only lasted a second, and before she could realize he was still there, he passed through the door and was gone.

In his absence she turned to look where he had stood. She closed her eyes and tried to purge his memory from her mind, and with it the feelings of loyalty,

friendships, and something perhaps more. But this time pure will alone would not suffice.

She removed a cloth-wrapped container from the cabinet next to her chair. She thought only briefly of pouring a glass of the thick liquor, before removing the stopper and drinking straight from the bottle. In one solid gulp she could begin to feel the affects of the potent ale, but knew it would not be enough to wash away all the thoughts that plagued her mind.

USS *Dauntless* Brig

When Martin and Bailer arrived in the brig, Doctor Golding was already there. Inside the cell with the prisoner, he held an open tricorder, thoroughly scanning the Breen for injuries.

At the sound of the door opening, and Admiral Martin approaching, Golding commented, "Perhaps Admiral Martin would like a phaser so that he might work some of his magic."

"Doctor Golding," Bailer said, "please leave the brig."

"I doubt I need to remind either of you that regulations require the presence of medical officer during all interrogations of enemy prisoners. I have no intention of leaving."

"I have ended people's careers far older than yours doctor, and for far less," Bailer said.

Golding stood in defiance. "I will not allow a repeat of the last interrogation that took place aboard this ship. We are starfleet officers, we're better than this."

"An impassioned plea doctor, but hardly worth the effort. And before you cite the seniority matters of a medical nature provides you, you would be best to remember that no seniority takes precedent over the security of the Federation. Leave the brig."

The doctor continued to stand fast.

"Lieutenant."

One of the guards stepped forward. "Yes sir."

"Escort doctor Golding to his quarters and confine him there until further notice."

The guard took Golding by the arm and began to lead him out of the brig. He was obviously defeated, but clearly not finished.

"I think we'll hold onto this," Martin said taking Golding's medkit as the doctor finally left.

He turned to the one remaining guard. "Wait outside," Bailer said.

Before he left Bailer instructed the guard to relinquish his sidearm. He readily complied, never questioning his orders.

Bailer handed the phaser to Martin, and in turn removed the laser scalpel from the medkit.

The Breen captive said something unrecognizable.

"That may very well be true," Bailer said, "but one way or another; you'll give up the information we require."

"Everyone has a breaking point," Martin added.

"Shall we begin?" Bailer asked. He flipped the laser scalpel on, and the instrument came to life.

The Breen soldier seemed to squirm a bit in his seat.

"Computer, initiate reserve program Bailer1-4-7 in detention cell four. Authorization Bailer-omega-red."

The computer responded immediately. "Authorization accepted. All record keeping devices have been neutralized. All access points have been secured."

Bailer took a single step forward towards the detention cell, and lowered the containment field as he passed the control panel. "Lets begin."

Ten-Forward Seven Hours Later

Sometime later Martin and Bailer were sitting alone in ten-forward. Their hands were visibly clean of the day's events; their minds and consciences, however, were not so easily whitewashed. Or at least that was the prevailing hope that they had not settled so easily into the act of death that the very action was taken without a second lingering thought.

The doors opened and both men turned to see Captain Koloudi enter the lounge. He approached them with a determined stride, hands clasped firmly behind his back.

“Arrangements have been made to transport the body of the Breen soldier, back to the proper authorities,” Koloudi said.

“Very good captain,” Bailer replied.

Koloudi was very cold not showing any emotion to what he knew had happened aboard his starship. Part of him believed it might have been worth it, but another part was sickened by it and in the back of his mind he knew that if not for the war he would resign his commission in protest and disgust.

“We’re enroute to Starbase 521,” he said finally. “Our ETA is approximately three days.”

“Is that the best you can do?” Bailer asked. He didn’t really care to know, but simply wanted to remind the captain of his place. From what Martin had told him, the chain of command aboard the *Dauntless* was seriously stressed and had at least once nearly broken. They could not afford such mistakes, under any circumstances, but now more than ever.

“Evans is worried about residual damage from the *Kennedy* incident,” Koloudi answered. “He wants a chance to make repairs before any problems become serious.”

“Very good captain,” Bailer said. “If there’s nothing else?”

Koloudi turned to leave without another word. Bailer thought of bringing it up, but Martin didn’t seem to want to discuss the growing rift between them. Martin and Koloudi would have to work it out on their own, or else...

“What are you working on?” Martin asked.

“Just trying to put together a familiar face,” Bailer said. He saved his work, and put the PADD down. It was then that he realized for the first time just how tired he really was, and hungry. He went to the replicator for a moment, and returned with a plate of steaming food. Martin didn’t recognize most of it, but thought he spotted a piece of fried chicken.

“So how are you really doing Nikolai?” Bailer asked between bites.

“After what we just did, do you really have to ask?” He thought of asking how Bailer could eat, but decided to hold onto that particular question. Perhaps it wasn’t every man that lost his appetite at the sight of death.

“Don’t let the loss of one Breen soldier keep you up at night,” he answered.

“It’s not his death that’ll keep me up at night, but what we’ve lost in so recklessly killing him.”

“It’s easy to sit in judgment of a single action,” Bailer said, “while ignoring the larger picture.”

Martin was no fool and even though he might not have been privy to every shred of intelligence that found its way through the fingers of Starfleet intelligence, it didn’t take a genius to know that the Breen were only one small part of the problem.

“We’re fighting the wrong enemy,” he said, simply and without hesitation.

Bailer straightened up a little in his seat. He didn’t like talking about such things in the openness of a public area, but looking around at the vacant room, he thought it safe enough.

“We’ve known from day one that Section 31 had some part in this war. Any new knowledge we gained from this venture doesn’t drastically change our priorities, but it does mean that we must more seriously consider threats both foreign and domestic. As far as the rest of Starfleet is concerned, the Breen started this war and that will remain their focus. I see no need to split the fleet’s attention.”

“I agree,” Martin said. “But something has to be done. I doubt Section 31 ever intended the war to go this far, but now that it has we can no longer operate business as usual.”

“That’s why I want you back out there as soon as possible,” Bailer said, “looking for signs of Section 31. On this front of the war, this ship and your experience is our best asset.”

“We may have gotten too close this time and we’ve come across a few leads in the DMZ, but I suspect they’ll surely run silent from now on.”

“Then use that half breed to help you weed them out,” Bailer said. He would have thought Martin had figured that out already.

“I don’t trust the information Fonon provides anymore than I would dental hygiene tips from a Ferengi. Besides I’m not sure how much use he is anymore. His mind seems to be half-gone.”

“We can’t give up the search now,” Bailer said. “They’re on the run and more likely to make mistakes. I’ll give you the support and authority you need to tear the whole damn DMZ apart if need be. Just find them.”

“I will,” Martin said.

There was silence for a minute as the two architects of the future sat in contemplation.

“This man named Cohen,” Bailer started, “and the women he works for. Their influence runs deep and spreads far into the Federation’s highest levels. There may come a day when...”

He trailed off, not sure how much to say just yet. It seemed as if Martin had changed, maybe for the better, maybe more committed than he had been months earlier. He couldn’t tell exactly, but he wasn’t sure yet he wanted to give everything away.

“We can discuss that bridge when we come to it,” he said. He took another drink and turned back to his dinner.

The intercom suddenly broken the silence.

“Admiral Martin. Your presence is requested in sickbay.”

He slapped his combadge at the interruption. “What is it?”

“Fonon has regained consciousness.”

Sickbay

Bailer and Martin rushed to sickbay, but when the doors opened and they crossed the threshold, Bailer stopped, as if caught by some haunting familiarity. He but the thought out of his mind and followed Martin to one of the private medical suites.

Arms crossed firmly on his chest, Doctor Golding greeted them at the door. “He’s just beginning to come around,” the doctor said. “It’s quite miraculous actually. I didn’t think the humanoid mind could withstand such punishment.”

“Thank the smart folks at Section 31,” Bailer said.

“Can we go in?” Martin asked, nearly ready to push past the physician.

“If I said 'no' would it matter?”

Neither admiral answered, but Golding knew their response. He moved aside to let them pass.

“...I was having such peaceful dreams.”

“He’s babbling sir,” the lieutenant said, handing Bailer a PADD. “I’ve taken down everything he’s said so far, but I can’t make sense of it.”

Bailer help up an arm to hold him back.

“And you can go back to those dreams if you help us. We’ll let you out of the brig, make your life comfortable, and when the war is over...you can go on your way.”

Fonon turned to the two men, unsure of anything.

“This is a one-time offer that will never come again,” Bailer assured him. “Pass on it now and if you do survive the war, you’ll do the hardest time the Federation can manage.”

“Clear the room,” Martin said nodding towards the door.

They left without protest.

Bailer and Martin took a seat across from the bed. “So Mr. Fonon. What can you tell us about the Romulans?”