

Sleeper

By Tanorath-drgn

Snr Captain Tano'rath
Cmdr, DES Defiant

“A scouting mission? Since when was this a cruiser-class assignment?” I remarked, flicking through our new orders, “Don’t they send frigates and other small nonsense for that?”

Talorath, who was sitting across from me shrugged as he looked through the same set of orders. We had met up early to discuss the details before the staff briefing, as usual. “It’s not all that deep in their space, I think they’re worried about those defences they have around. No frigate will survive being caught out there. We might.”

“Barely,” I snorted, pausing to have a sip from my drink, “and we’re being sent alone. I don’t like this.”

“Well, they promised to have a few ships on standby, but I don’t either,” Talorath added, flicking his tail, “This reeks of the I.I.S.”

I chuckled, shifting in my seat, “It really does, hey. I’m surprised Telricktus hasn’t turned up with his cronies.”

Talorath chuckled, putting his tablet down and nodding in the general direction of my quarters, “Don’t say that, the last time you said something like that, he walked out of your cupboard, remember?”

I couldn’t help but laugh along as I opened my drawer to grab a biscuit, “Well, we’re in my office now. What, you think he’s going to unfold himself out of my drawer?”

“You know, I wouldn’t put it past that fucking spook,” Talorath added with a snort as I handed him a biscuit.

As I reached in to grab another snack, I felt something small and metallic in the box. Pulling the entire box out and emptying it on the table revealed a small listening device. Very I.I.S., and very much meant to be found. I picked it up, held it right up to my mouth and burped into where I guessed the microphone would be. Talorath, who had stared at me in confusion for a moment giggled as my comms unit buzzed with an incoming call from the very person we had been talking about.

“Told you.” He remarked in between laughs as I put the biscuits back into the box with a chuckle, “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I waved as he left, deliberately taking my time to clean everything up before tossing the listening device into the bin. I ended up waking my terminal from standby and taking the call there. “Why are you putting bugs in my snacks, Telricktus?”

“Captain, I would appreciate it if you could refrain from throwing our equipment in the trash,” Telricktus replied with a slight glare.

I snorted, “Then stop fucking putting bugs on my ship. What do you want, Lieutenant?”

“I’m here to warn you that we suspect one of your crewmembers is an Alliance agent,” Telricktus continued with a sigh, rubbing his temples as if talking to me is tiresome. If anything, the opposite is true. “And with the sensitive nature of your mission, they might decide to take action.”

“It’s a bit hard to gauge the threat. The briefing didn’t exactly say what we were looking at, just said it was a station of some sort,” I remarked with a snort, letting as all the sarcasm on the ship drip into my tone as I continued, “For all I know, it could be a biscuit factory.”

“No, we suspect an affiliation with the *A.E.T.N.D**.” Telricktus replied as he tapped away on his terminal, trying very hard to hide his annoyance at my glib and failing miserably, “They’ve been sending a lot of scrambled signals into our space, seemed random for a while, but it’s starting to be targeted. We’re investigating the locations, but one of the recipients was specifically your ship.”

**Alliance External Threat Neutralisation Division*

I rubbed my chin for a moment. No more jokes this time, “Right, hence the suspicions and you want to see what they’ll do, I suppose?”

“More or less. Tread carefully, Captain,” Telricktus replied, sitting back in his seat, “If anyone starts behaving oddly, I suggest you isolate them for questioning.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I replied tersely, “Not sending an agent?”

Telricktus shook his head, “No, that’ll be too obvious, Captain. We don’t know how much information they have and who’s compromised. Either way, I know you’ll find a way to survive it, you have a tendency to do that.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Telricktus. Any other bombshells to drop on me?” I replied, snorting.

Telricktus shook his head, “Other than that cadet that you’re training having a photo of you on his table, no.”

“Fuck’s sake, Telricktus.” I replied with a sigh, “Either way, I’ll be seeing you soon, I suspect. Good day.”

Telricktus simply nodded and closed the channel.

While I had initially planned to go to the staff meeting once the call was done, I found myself pausing for a moment. The moment turned into a few minutes as I paced the room, cherrypicking what to say and not to say before hurrying off – I’m late.

Cadet Quaren I.D.A.F. Command Training Program

While Edge was off attending a staff briefing of sorts, I ended up asking one of the engineers to show me how to work the new reactor. While I hadn’t been on-board when the old one was fired at an Alliance ship, I had heard enough stories to know what had happened. Either way, everyone seemed happy with the newer, more powerful unit and I’m not going to be a wet blanket about having to relearn the systems.

The Sergeant was quite patient, slowly walking me through the circuits and such and showing me the way around the control systems, pausing now and then to point out things of interest and a few items to avoid. All in all, it looked like they had to do a fair bit of work to integrate it into the older DN-II class, but it worked, mostly.

Eventually, Edge returned with the Captain in tow, talking in hushed tones before they went into the office and locked the door. They stayed in there for a while before Tano’rath walked out, pausing to greet the other crewmembers and ask how they’re doing, me included. I still find it strange that he actually bothers, but it seems like captains either stay lightyears away from their crew, just like in the command manual, or they just do whatever they want like Tano’rath.

Edge spent a while in his office before he came out with a stack of tablets, handing them out as he walked around, saying something about a change in priorities. He even handed me a new job and laughed at me as my face fell – he had me on housekeeping duty again.

“Come now, a clean house is a happy house, Quaren, everyone knows that,” Edge remarked, chuckling as he thumped me lightly on the shoulder, “and an important habit to build when you’re just starting out!”

I nodded along, tapping away on the tablet. In the background, I heard a few of the other engineers grumbling. Seems like the bulk of the work was security related and those systems are always a pain to work on. Nonetheless, they eventually started work when Edge remarked loudly that this was very urgent.

Snr Captain Tano’rath
Cmdr, DES Defiant

I had Edge shoring up the security around the mainframe while running combat drills throughout the ship, using the pretext of expecting trouble to have people ready...and to justify the increased security presence. While I couldn’t really tell all my officers what was going on, I still spoke to Edge and Talorath, trusting that they weren’t the rogue elements. Besides, if Talorath was a traitor, I’m sure dad would have turned up and painted a wall with his brains long before the I.I.S. even got wind of it.

The funny thing about setting up for a mission like this is the fact that nobody is actually doing routine tasks, nor are they going about their regular duties, so it actually makes it harder for one to spot atypical behaviour. We all do our best, of course, but it is what it is. While most officers and specialists are trained to spot subtle shifts in behaviours and such, most of the rank and file aren’t, so while department heads had their eyes out, as they usually would anyway, it’s still not the best combination of things. Besides, our training is geared more towards spotting crewmembers who are unwell, or need someone to talk to, rather than to spot spies. That’s the job of the I.I.S. and the security troopers.

Either way, the modifications were completed early and with the drills mostly done, I had the crew put on stand-to as we cloaked and broke off from our patrol route. In our place, another cruiser decloaked and resumed the patrol. We usually time it so that the other ship only decloaks a few minutes later so that we’ll make easy prey of anyone wanting to play games with us. This time, though, nothing happened.

With the course set, I had diagnostics run on all key systems while Edge did a few checks on the peripheral systems to weed out any nasty surprises lurking within. Nothing.

We did a few checks of the physical control panels and access hatches and so on, with Telricktus helping out by sending an order down for the entire detachment to do it to supplement existing security measures. Nothing.

Maybe the spy is still waiting. Maybe there's no spy. Who knows...

Either way, my thoughts turned to the actual mission at hand as we crossed the border and I ordered the ship to run dark, with all non-essential systems shut down and we reduced speed slightly to reduce our footprint. This, coupled with the cloak should buy us a few more seconds when we got close to the station of interest.

I hate waiting.

Cadet Quaren
I.D.A.F. Command Training Program

I've never seen Edge actually rushing around before, but there he was, running between workstations and access hatches and at times, crawling out of other access hatches and getting people to pass him tools.

A few of the engineers were talking, and there were whispers about a spy ring aboard the ship that someone supposedly overheard being mentioned by the Captain when he was speaking with Edge earlier. Apparently, Edge was dismantling a bomb...supposedly.

It looked more like he was checking the systems for funny business, which made far more sense, but well, a bomb is more exciting and makes for better gossip. Everyone knows that.

As we drew closer to our destination, a station that we're supposed to get recon data on, the lights were dimmed as the ship swapped to silent running and Edge finally resumed his post. He seemed more than a little amused when someone actually asked him about a bomb and quickly dismissed it, saying that he was just checking the systems.

As the captain ordered us to move in closer and for the sensor array to be powered fully, I couldn't help but notice one of the technicians fidgeting, which is fine, Arktak does that when he's nervous, but then his eyes seemed to go blank for a moment before he stopped and continued with his work as if this was just some routine mission. A few minutes later, he simply walked out of the reactor room.

Strange.

I waved Edge over and pointed to the now empty work station, “Sir, Arktak is acting weird. He went blank for a moment, stopped fidgeting and then left.”

“As in Corporal Arktak? The Tech?” Edge replied, raising a digital eyeridge at me, “Are you sure, Cadet?”

I nodded, feeling my wings twitch slightly under Edge’s gaze, “He always,,fidgets when we have missions like this, but never leaves his post. I..I’m not sure, could be nothing.”

“Could be,” Edge remarked, snorting, “Computer, locate Technician Arktak.”

The computer dinged, “Unable to locate crewmember.”

“Interesting...” Edge added, walking over to the workstation and poking at it before nodding to me, “Resume your duties, Quaren, I’ll handle this.”

With that, Edge walked out the door, seemingly following in Arktak’s footsteps. His sensors could probably pick up the technicians scent or something. Either way, I turned my attention back to what I was doing while the assistant chief engineer took over.

Snr Captain Tano’rath
Cmdr, DES Defiant

As we drew close to the station, I realised that the grainy photos they had given us that were taken from long-range sensors didn’t do it justice at all. It was huge, with two saucer sections connected by a central spine. One saucer seemed to host mostly living quarters and associated support systems, including food production, and what seemed like a mall. The other half was the real enigma, with enough machinery in there to run several factories, storage for metals and a lot of sophisticated chips and systems. The computer also flagged several faint Drakonian lifesigns and enough DNA traces to clone a small town.

I had the data packaged up, ready to be sent along as we made a few rounds, noting the sheer number of defence platforms around and the presence of a pretty expansive minefield. This, too, was packaged up and readied to be sent.

As I gave the order for us to come about, having noted that trying to fly the ship through the minefield would be outright suicide, I received a short message from Edge “CPL Arktak. Got a lead.”

I had the ship jump out of their scanner range before the transceiver was powered back up and we began transmitting the data. I ended up having to call Telricktus from my office, “Data is being sent, Telricktus, but I’ve got a name for you to look up.”

“Thank you, Captain, it’s coming through now – excellent work as always. I assume you’ve suspicions about someone?” He replied, cocking his head at me slightly as he tapped through the data that he was doubtlessly receiving.

“One Corporal Arktak. Look him up for me, Lieutenant, Engineering spotted him acting strange, I think. My chief is investigating now,” I replied, flicking my tail, “Let me know-“

Before I could finish my sentence, the ship shuddered and the lights flared! The video call was replaced with an error message before the screen went dark.

“Fuck!” I roared, bolting to the door to find the bridge in chaos, alarms blaring at Talorath shouting, “Report! What the fuck just happened here?”

“Power surge! We’ve lost the transceiver and half the primaries! I’ve got it burning out the non-essentials, but we’ve lost comms and cloak!” Talorath yelled, frantically tapping away at the comms station as he snarled, “Two Alliance frigates inbound!”

“General quarters!” I roared, “Weapons and shields!”

“Working on it!” Talorath snapped, “I’ve got shields, no weapons yet.”

“I’ll fucking take it!” I snarled, slamming my fist on an armrest as I sat down, “Tell Edge to catch that cunt!”

Cadet Quaren
I.D.A.F. Command Training Program

After the shaking and shouting during the power surge, I was thrown together with a damage control team and sent to one of the main power relays, to find that it was a burning wreck, with plasma venting all over the place, ruined cabling dangling and bits of metal all over the place.

Off to one side, I saw Edge trying to calm a rather distressed Arktak, both of whom were covered in soot and debris, but Arktak... was missing the skin on his right arm, but instead of the usual flesh and bone, I saw the shine of metal...

When we arrived, Edge beckoned me over, "Look, we have enemy contacts incoming, I need to bypass this as soon as possible, but I need someone to take care of Arktak while we work. You up to the task?"

"Wh-what happened?" I blurted out, looking at Edge, then Arktak who had sunk to the floor and was holding his head in his hands, one of which was very much robotic, with bits of burnt skin and scales hanging off it.

"No time to explain, he got thrown clear and I dragged him away, what matters is that he's not a threat anymore," Edge replied, but pressed a pistol into my hands anyway, "But take this just in case. Just...make sure he doesn't do anything rash."

"Got it," I replied, as Edge shooed me over and went to take charge of the repairs, sending people around to patch broken cables with quick-links and such.

I ended up sitting down slowly, next to Arktak who seemed to be missing most of his right wing too, exposing more metal, "Uh. I..."

"It's fine, I heard what Edge said," He muttered into his arms, sighing, "I...I don't even know what I did...?"

I couldn't help but glance over at the ruined junction, parts of which were still smouldering and raised an eyeridge at the brown-scaled corporal, "What do you mean you don't remember?"

"I...well, I blacked out, and the next thing I knew, there was this bang, and Edge dragged me from the fire," He replied quietly, pausing to look at his metallic arm, "I...I'm a robot...? I'm slowly remembering, but...it's still all a blur... Doesn't matter anyway, the I.I.S. will probably pull me to bits and toss me into an incinerator."

Edge, who had been passing by, paused to look down at both of us, "I think they meant for you to be killed in the explosion and fire, so they removed all the locks on your memory as a message to us."

"I...I...know." Arktak muttered, burying his snout between his knees. "...why me?"

Edge seemed to want to say something, but he kept quiet and moved on, leaving me to scoot closer and offer Arktak a hand, “Perhaps we should speak to the Captain.”

“He’ll probably have me thrown in the brig,” He muttered, but took the hand anyway. “...or shot”

Edge nodded to me before we went off, with him pausing to send a quick message to the Captain before returning to work. “Knowing him, I highly doubt it, Arktak.”

Snr Captain Tano’rath
Cmdr, DES Defiant

Talorath had just gotten weapons on-line and we were bracing ourselves for battle. While backup was on the way, we would still have to survive alone for a few minutes. This meant that the last thing I needed was more problems, but the lift dinged and delivered a new problem.

Quaren walked in with what’s left of Arktak trailing behind him. The latter was missing most of a wing and his right arm had been stripped of skin and scales, revealing the robot underneath. He was still dripping a small amount of blood, but otherwise actually seemed fine. Arktak refused to make eye contact as I looked over.

“I don’t suppose you can explain what you did to my ship, Corporal?” I snapped, glaring at the former Technician, who flinched slightly, before I turned to glare at Quaren, “And why the fuck, Quaren, did you bring him here, of all places?”

“Sir, Edge and I have been keeping an eye on him,” Quaren replied, his tail twitching slightly as he shifted under my glare, “We don’t think he did it willingly.”

“You don’t accidentally blow up a primary power relay.” I snapped, letting the sarcasm drip from my tone, “On what grounds am I supposed to believe this?”

“Edge sent you the details, I believe,” Quaren replied, pointing to my station, “Perhaps I should take him to your office?”

“I haven’t had a chance to look them over, but I will after this action is done. Yes, take him to my office,” I replied with a sigh, “Your timing is shit, Quaren.”

Quaren nodded quietly and led Arktak away. However, the latter stopped when they walked past the ops console and saw the incoming contacts. I saw Talorath whirl around, hand on his sidearm before Arktak actually spoke quietly, “Sir, just aim for their forward cannons, those have faulty electrics on them and you can cause a surge that’ll knock their weapons out.”

Talorath, who looked ready to shoot the both of them, looked over at me and I shook my head, causing him to let go of his weapon, “Uh, Captain?”

“We’ll try that little trick of yours, Arktak, call it a leap of faith,” I replied flatly, receiving a slight nod from the Technician before they made their way to my office.

I had a guard posted at the door. One leap at a time.

Cadet Quaren I.D.A.F. Command Training Program

I offered Arktak a chair, but he sat on the floor instead, still wallowing in his guilt, but there seemed to at least be a little more light in his eyes now. I sat on the floor across from him with a sigh. “See? He’s given you a chance.”

“I..I don’t understand,” He muttered, “What sort of sick game is this? T-the training, I remember it, they said that-“

“Now look here, Arktak, you’ve been on this ship for longer than I have and you know better than to believe that,” I retorted, cutting him off, “and I doubt the Captain is going to toss you out of airlock just like that.”

Arktak nodded quietly, muttering to himself as his suppressed memories returned. The ship started moving, dodging and weaving, shaking as we took a few hits and swerving around before after a few minutes, it was all over. It seemed as if we had barely taken any damage too. As I picked myself off the floor, the door slid open and Tano’rath walked in, followed closely by Edge, who waved.

“So, are you sure the comms chip was burnt out, Edge?” Tano’rath remarked, looking over at Arktak and then at Edge himself, “So we won’t have any more fireworks?”

“Yes, I scanned him a few times,” Edge replied, nodding as he strolled over and offered Arktak a hand, then hauling him to his feet, “Seems like he was meant to be a warning to us.”

“A suicide bombing is one hell of a warning, yes.” Tano’rath replied, snorting, “And since we got comms back, the I.I.S. has been baying for his blood.”

Arktak went deathly pale at the mention of the I.I.S. and barely stammered out his reply, “I...I...P...please...no”

Tano’rath flicked his tail almost dismissively as he talked around Arktak, inspecting him, “You’ve got a fair bit of kit in you, Arktak, how much do you know?”

“I...didn’t know anything, I thought I was normal...until the explosion,” Arktak replied, seeming to regain his composure as he spoke. He probably realised that if Tano’rath had wanted him killed, the captain would have already done it, “I...think I have full control now. I...know that I’m...robotic under the skin and scales...”

“So, what am I supposed to do with you?” Tano’rath snapped, before rubbing his forehead with a sigh.

Arktak looked taken aback at the question before he nodded, “I would like to stay on.”

Tano’rath nodded. “You’ll have to go through one hell of a security check with the I.I.S., you know that, right?”

“I would rather stay here and make amends, sir, I’m useless on an examination table...” He replied, finally making eye contact with the captain.

Tano’rath held his gaze easily. “Oho, Telricktus isn’t going to like it, but I can arrange it. They’re sending an Agent to check you out anyway. For now, I will have to confine you to quarters.”

Arktak nodded and Edge walked over to lead him away. Before they left, though, Tano’rath paused for a moment and laid a hand on Arktak’s shoulder, “It worked by the way.”

Snr Captain Tano’rath
Cmdr, DES Defiant

While repairs were being done, I spent the next three hours arguing with Admiral Hector and Lieutenant Telricktus over what to do with Arktak. I had laid out all the facts that I had, together with the scan data that Edge had gotten for me. While we all eventually came to a compromise about it, one thing was clear: there's definitely more like him.

Arktak had already agreed to be screened again and Telricktus wasted no time in sending our equivalent – a certain Telaroth. While we were waiting, though, I had the doctor help regenerate Arktak's skin, which did wonders for his morale.

Doubtlessly, Telricktus was already planning counter-intelligence missions, but I pushed him to agree to getting these sleeper agents to defect. After all, they seemed to be used as simple intelligence gathering drones or disposable agents, since they'd be of no use once caught.

Hector seemed less than thrilled about having a former sleeper agent running around in my crew, but he eventually came round to it when I listed his abilities and the fact that he had been loyal till the Alliance had sent the trigger signal and instructions – something that can't happen again as Arktak had allowed Edge to physically remove the comms chip. The only catch? I had to vouch for him.

By the time I was done, Telaroth was already on board and with Arktak, and I walked in to find him literally elbow deep in Arktak's mouth. "What the fuck, Telaroth?"

"Oh, just making sure everything's in order, Captain!" Telaroth replied with a grin, "He seems alright, don't worry!"

Arktak looked like he was going to throw up and honestly, I don't blame him. Edge was leaning against the wall, watching as Telaroth finally slid his arm out of Arktak's mouth with a nod. "Yessir, he's not lying to you, he wants to stay and he said that he'll help find others like him."

"Great," I replied, before turning to Arktak, "And you better not be setting any bombs again, because I had to put my name against yours. Now, the plan down the line is still being discussed, but you get to stay."

Arktak stared at me for a while before coughing up a blob of Telaroth's blue goo, which went splat against the latter and rejoined the whole. I snout-clawed, "For fuck's sake, Telaroth. Really?"

"That was actually an accident." Telaroth replied with a snort, "Sometimes you forget a little."

"At least it was painless," Arktak muttered, "and Captain, I must thank you...a lot...?"

He seemed at a loss for words before he just gave me a hug...? I stood there for a moment before I decided to just let it happen and hugged him back. He seemed relieved, if anything, and when he finally let go, I nodded. "Well, welcome back, then. I'll have to update your records and we'll have a chat about what comes next in a few weeks. Consider it your probation period."

Arktak nodded, looking around again, "I understand, Captain. I suspect I will need to adjust to this...new normal."

"He's probably as strong as your Synth officer there," Telaroth remarked, pointing to Edge who smiled and waved, "and has a lot of goodies tucked away under his good looks. Anyway, I'll be spending an undisclosed amount of time here to keep an eye out and to gather information from him about his counterparts if that's alright."

Arktak and I both nodded and after going over a few extra details, including letting him speak with both Telricktus and Hector, a few initial arrangements were made and things mostly returned to normal.

We did eventually send the data along and the station was assaulted later that week, with Arktak informing us that that was the main production unit for sleeper agents like him. Telricktus kept pushing for Arktak to be sent to the I.I.S. headquarters for a debriefing, but I made him come to us instead, knowing that I would never see Arktak again if I let the I.I.S. take him. Telaroth spent most of his time getting information from Arktak before putting a report together and sending it along. He subsequently moved on to his next mission.

Arktak himself stayed on with the crew, though it took most of us a while to get used to who he actually is. Hector eventually put him on the command track and I begun training him as a bridge officer. Good timing too, since Talorath had been manning the ops station for weeks, since we couldn't get a replacement in. Arktak turned out to be one of the best officers I've ever worked with and I've never once regretted fighting to keep him around. Besides, he even laughs at my bad jokes.