

# The Path Not Taken I

*By Tanorath-drgn*

**Snr Captain Tano'rath**

**Cmdr, DES Defiant**

"Tano'rath, Captain, Personnel number C-zero-sero-one-one-five-seven-seven-nine-Z." I spat as Edge, who was supposed to be my chief engineer glared at me.

The Synth snarled, jabbing my snout with his pistol and then changing his mind and hitting me with the hilt, "Drop the act already! You can't even get the number right!"

I spat a mouthful of blood off to my left as I glared at him. "I don't know what you want, but I don't have it."

As Edge raised his arm again, a familiar black-scaled hand stayed it. I squinted a little, but the owner walked into the light soon enough – no less than my own brother, but I've been here for all of two hours and I know that he's not the same. "Put a lid on it, Edge."

"But-" The synth protested, "The files show that the number isn't right!"

"And my brother is dead, yet here he is," Talorath replied with a snort as he turned round to make eye contact, "so tell me, how are you not an I.I.S. plant, mm? Lets start with how you even ended up here."

"This is so fucking textbook," I replied with a snarl as Edge reached for the baton, only for Talorath to stop him, "Good cop and bad cop? Fucks sake. You want to know? Fine. We were doing an engine test and it didn't go so well. I was in Engineering, keeping an eye on things because my Edge had gone to get some planned maintenance done. There was a flash and the next thing I knew, I'm in this fuckin room and I get fuckin jumped."

"Swearing is dishonourable," Talorath replied as he glared at me, giving me the most judgemental look in the universe.

I snorted, "Well, fuck you too, it fucking isn't. Besides, I am clearly also not dead."

Talorath glared at me, he even looked at my sidearm that had been placed on a table and then pointed at it, “Who made that, your sidearm?”

“Drakobar Industries. Everyone knows that, they make everything,” I replied flatly, “It’s stamped on the slider.”

“Your phone, uniform and armour, how about those?” He snapped, poking at my body armour that they hadn’t been able to remove and I had refused to tell them how, “Who made those?”

“Same,” I replied again, glaring up at him, “My First Officer would’ve fucking caught on by now, I said that they make everything.”

“Next thing you’re going to tell me, I’m your first officer in your universe,” He replied with a sneer.

I glared at him for a moment and found him refusing to meet my eyes. He knows.

I would’ve crossed my arms if I could, but they were still tied to the bed. “You *are*. Fuckwit. Enough proof for you?”

He glared at me for a moment before he holstered his pistol, which had been in his hand all this time. I hadn’t cared to pay attention to it because, well, I’m tied to a bed, if he shoots me, there’s nothing I can do. He glared at me again and then motioned for Edge to untie me. “Nobody else abuses me like that, Tano. At least you survived the Eras disaster in that timeline.”

I found myself rubbing my wrists and ankles as I sat up. Edge still glared at me and I simply ignored him. “So what, you want me to join you?”

“Oh no, you’re not the first Mirror-Drakonian that we’ve met,” Talorath replied with a sigh, “I know you’ll have your own priorities, but first, I need a blood sample to validate things.”

“I assume this also means that I’ll go into the brig till you’re happy?” I replied with a snort as I continued to rub my wrists. The rope they had used was not in any way fine and it showed, “spare me the knots and you have a deal.”

“We can do it now,” Edge replied as a needle poked out of his wrist, “You’ll need to present your arm.”

“Do you not have a smaller needle?” I replied as I looked at the needle that was very obviously half the size of a finger and I really did not want that jabbed into my arm, “I don’t particularly like having things jabbed into me, especially that.”

Edge looked down at the needle and rolled his eyes before it was replaced with a hypodermic one of a more believable diameter, “Your arm please.”

I extended my arm and he jabbed it more than violently in, having me bite back a snarl of pain as the cold metal slid in. His visor went blank for a moment as I felt the needle pull out a sample before he withdrew, leaving a coating of gel on the wound as his visor flashed back to life. He stared at the needle then at me. “Oh, shit. You’re for real-“

“Fuck me, Edge, Drakonians don’t lie!” I snarled, glaring at him as I nursed my aching arm.

The Mirror-Talorath shook his head in response, “In this reality we do.”

“Great. What else?” I retorted, “Are you going to tell me that the Homeworld is uninhabitable too?”

“Most of it is.” Talorath replied with a snort, “We won through fission warfare. Most of the cities are safe-ish, but they’re still radioactive. What, isn’t that your reality too?”

I found myself staring at him, “No...? I live on the Homeworld.”

“How’d the Empire win in your reality, then? I’ve heard bits and pieces but not the whole thing. It’s a closely guarded secret and all that, they don’t want dissent spreading,” Talorath replied, resting his rifle on the table and cocking his head at me, “How did the Empire win, or did they not?”

“Before I tell you, you’re going to have to prove to me all the shit you’ve spouted,” I spat, glaring back at him, “For all I know, this could be another ridiculous Alliance ploy to get information!”

“Finally, progress!” Edge exclaimed, “Set a course to Drakonos, yes?”

“If you really want to see it, sure,” Talorath replied with a sigh as he rubbed his forehead, “Though, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I found myself sighing as I rubbed my still sore snout, “You did well enough.”

“You called yourself a captain,” Talorath added as I laid back on the bed, “what kind of captain?”

“Space-Fleet,” I replied with a snort, “you know about the Eras disaster.”

“Clearly not your one.” Talorath snapped as he glared at me before turning to leave, “That ship sent the last transmission from you before I got the killed-in-action report.”

“I-“ He cut me off, whirling around to glare at me.

“You were Imperial trash. You died for a false cause.” He snapped, glaring at me and reaching over, as if wanting to grab my shirt, “bloody loyal to a fault!”

I held eye contact with him through his outburst and caught his hand, “I’m not like that.”

Talorath snarled at me as he pulled his arm free before nodding to Edge to jump the ship.

-----  
**Cadet (Senior) Quaren**  
**I.D.A.F. Command Training Program**

“What do you mean you lost the Captain?!” Talorath, the first officer roared at me as Edge ran between stations, frantically trying to figure out what had happened, “It was meant to be a rift no bigger than a fucking teacup, how did it manage to suck him in?”

“I...I don’t know, sir,” I stammered, “the test has been repeated over ten times with no issues and it had been signed off. Edge just got back and is trying to figure it out.”

Talorath sighed and rubbed his snout as Edge came walking over. “Good news and bad news, which do you want first?”

“Do your worst.” Talorath replied with a sigh, “Is he dead?”

“No. He’s just in another timeline at the moment,” Edge replied with a sigh, “The drive unit glitched out and made a rift ten times bigger than what we specified and it sucked him in during the test two

hours ago. I've only been here five minutes, didn't have time to unpack because Quaren here ran up to me screaming for help! Why, might I ask, was the Captain covering for Engineering, of all things?"

"He has to do a refresher every few months for his original department and because our research department might as well not exist, he just did engineering," Talorath replied, sighing again, "and he chose to do it during a test because of course he did. Any chance of us getting him back?"

"We can try, but unless he has access to equipment there, it'll be hard. We're working to determine what timeline he's in, but so far, it doesn't look friendly," Edge replied as he wiped his visor with a cloth, as if for effect, "We should inform Command."

Talorath shook his head, "No, Call Lieutenant Telricktus. The I.I.S. handles the inter-timeline work. Too sensitive for regular staff."

"Are you sure?" Edge replied with a frown, "Doesn't the Captain not like him?"

"Nobody likes him, but he's all we got," Talorath replied with a sigh, "and rumour has it that they have their backdoors in and out. You have my authorisation as acting captain. Call him now, there's no time to waste."

"I'll get it done," Edge replied with a snort before looking over at me, "Relax, Quaren, it's not your fault. We'll sort it out. Captain Tano'rath will be back soon."

-----

**Snr Captain Tano'rath**  
**Cmdr, DES Defiant**

I had initially thought that we were on a shuttle, but we were instead on a bashed up freighter that was full of self-proclaimed freedom fighters.

Most of the interior panels were a mishmash of mismatched bits and half the cargo pods were missing. People came and went, but they all eyed my armour and unit patch with wariness, even the ones who were of my kind. There were a lot of Alliance fighters that I recognised too and they glared at me with obvious disgust as I went past. It was surreal, really. I'm usually regarded with indifference and occasionally respect. Hard to believe that this is a Dakonian ship.

The registry was different too. We usually tag these as D.C.S – Drakonain Cargo Service, but this vessel was instead identified as I.C.F – Imperial Cargo Freighter. It's what known to me as the old registry, but we retired that decades ago.

I was allowed into the bridge and unless this is some elaborate hoax that the Alliance was pulling, the ship registries, the design where the workstations orbited the command chair and the gun racks everywhere were pretty telling. At least the readouts and the interface on the various consoles were similar enough and I could at least make some sense of what was going on.

Regardless, there was no reform here. This isn't the Empire I know. There's no real point in looking for deeper similarities at this stage.

"Hey! Mirror universe boy! Do you rent your apartment in the capital or did you make enough to buy?" One of the officers hollered over and I squinted enough to realise it was Arktak, or well, their version of him, of all people.

It was a strange question to me, obviously, our system isn't like that, "Buy? What?"

"So you were paid piss like us here then!" Arktak replied with a snort and I cut him off.

"No, we did not need to. The apartment is mine up until I die, and then it is returned to the state. I pay maintenance and utility fees and that's about it," I replied with a snort, "You're an android, Arktak, you should literally know all there is to know."

Arktak stopped and stared at me for a moment before snorting, "So you're a bunch of communists, then. Right, and how'd you know about me?"

"Socialists. There's a difference," I replied flatly, "And suffice to say that we've crossed paths."

"Fair enough, mister communist," Arktak sneered, glaring over at me as the ship shuddered slightly while the engines struggled, "we can talk more later, I have to keep theses engine stable. I suggest getting some rest while you can, I'll set your clock alarm off when we arrive."

Since I'm not actually commanding this ship and I was still sore from the various beatings from earlier, I ended up walking out and realising that I had no actual quarters here. Besides that, I was not swallowing my pride and going back to the brig. I also didn't have a watch or a clock, so whatever. They can find me and for once, I didn't actually feel obliged to remain easily found.

I ended up going to the lunch hall, grabbing one of the communal tablets and flicking through articles, mostly reading up on the history of this supposed 'mirror universe' that I was in. How it was mirrored became apparent rather quickly.

I dug around a bit and found that while in my reality, we tend to stick to tradition here and there, my counterparts here seemed to have lost less of their culture in the wars, which meant that tradition was front and centre. Warfare was done through specific means and there were pages and pages of instructions on very specific ways to complete seemingly trivial tasks. There were rituals to start a shift, specific ways to eat on certain occasions and whatnot.

Didn't the homeworld get nuked to oblivion? How do they have all this?

I dug deeper only to find that the space landings happened during the Unification Wars in this timeline and the Empire simply sent all the books, videos and art, anything of value, really, to the colony on Drakobar once things were ready. Clearly, though, the war was in no way as brutal as ours, I suppose,, but it was as big a bloodbath. Either way, it ended with a massive salvo of fission warheads launched from Drakobar. Explains a lot.

And yeah, they consider swearing to be uncultured. Bloody idiots.

My thoughts were only interrupted by a thump on my shoulder. I turned around to find my mirror brother looking down at me, "You're an engineer, aren't you? I saw you stealing looks at the readouts earlier."

"Well, yeah. And your engines are running like shit," I replied as I put the tablet down, "Let me guess, you want me to work on them."

"I won't force you...or well, I can, but I rather not," Talorath replied with a snort, pausing to point to his sidearm, "It's just surreal seeing you walk around and...I don't think you enjoy sitting here and doing nothing. Besides, if I don't give you something to do, someone else who's less kind will."

"Yeah, I get it," I replied as I got up, pausing to stretch slightly and burped, earning me another glare, "What, is burping also not allowed?"

"No, but it is considered rude. Do you lot not have any culture?" He replied with a third glare as he ushered me to the door.

I shrugged, "No, clearly we don't," I paused to gesture back to the tablet as we walked, "you know all this tradition stuff you guys have?"

“Yeah, everyone knows this stuff,” Talorath replied as we brisk-walked down the slightly grimy corridors, foot-claws clicking against the dented metal floor, “it’s one of the first things you learn.”

“Yeah, we don’t have that. Lost it all in our Unification War,” I replied with a snort, “we didn’t get to space till after, so Drakonos was all we had. Got bombed to fuck and back, but no fission warheads. Nobody dared.”

“How do you manage to add swear words into everything you say?” Talorath snapped, glaring at me as a few others who were walking past did the same. I figured that I had nothing left to lose so I made various rude gestures back at them and that earned me another glare, “Stop that!”

“It’s funny. Besides, it’s fairly obvious that my society is more liberal and open than yours,” I replied with another shrug as we were buzzed into the engine room. I was immediately hit with the scent of coolant and the horrendous out-of-phase throb of the twin engines assaulted my ears, “Fuck me, no wonder your fuckin ship sounds like it’s about to explode. It borderline is!”

I found myself snatching a set of screwdrivers off a desk just in case and shoving one of the technicians, a red-scaled female out of my way as I tapped away at the screen, finding that the interface was at least similar. I half expected to have to check the fuse and breaker panel, but thankfully, nothing seemed to be tripped on the readouts. Talorath, who seemed ready to tell me off again, just stood quietly and watched.

As I pulled up the menu to start recalibrating the fuelling system and the containment fields, a red-scaled hand came swooping into my vision, only to have me whirl around and grab it, catching the same technician off guard as I glared at her.

“Who do you think you are, stomping into my engine bay and pushing me around?!” She snarled at me, trying to pull her hand free, “Another hotshot engineer, Tal? Where’d you drag this one out of?”

I gave her a shove and let her go, glaring at her, “I’m a better engineer than you, considering how shit these fucken engines are running, you dim-witted fuck-knuckle! My day has been shit enough, do not make it worse.”

She stared at me while her jaw hit the floor and I turned my attention back to the console, tapping away and tweaking things, harmonising the twin engines and bringing the FTL fields into line. She tried to say something, as did Talorath. They did eventually talk in the background as I worked and eventually, I had the pair of engines purring quietly as the ship settled into a proper cruise.



“A Fleet engineer,” She remarked, snorting, “I should’ve known. I don’t care which universe you’re from, we all know that you lot are good. You owe me a lesson.”

“Read the parameters yourself and learn,” I replied flatly as I turned around, having them both nod along, “I’ll leave some notes if I can. Now, show me these alleged ruins of Drakonos.”

“Definitely your brother, Tal,” She remarked with a smirk as Talorath scowled, “He has that charisma that you definitely didn’t inherit!”

“Oh shut up, you smelly grease-lizard.” Talorath mumbled as he led me away. Once we were out of earshot, he snorted, “She’s sizing you up.”

“No surprise there,” I replied with a shrug, wrinkling my nose a bit, “she’s in heat, I could smell it.”

We eventually made our way to the bridge and they gave me a vacant station to sit at as well as a set of clean clothes to change into. My armour and uniform went into a sling bag that I held onto. I half wondered why they had taken to me so quickly, given that the crew here had already stopped looking at me funny, but it had already become apparent that the rumours about my predicament had already spread. People would come up to me and ask me about the most mundane things in my life and would leave wide-eyed. It was wild and I was quietly taking note of quirks here and the like.

Either way, the time eventually came for us to drop out of FTL. It felt surreal, of course, and a lot of things were missing. There were no challenges from the orbital defence systems, no patrols, nothing. Just silence...

-----

**Cadet (Senior) Quaren  
I.D.A.F. Command Training Program**

“So, Cadet, he just went poof into a flash of light, did he?” Telricktus remarked, tapping away on his tablet before pausing to clear a non-existent crease from his uniform, “did you see anything else?”

“No, there was a flash and he just vanished,” I replied, rubbing my snout, “Nothing was left behind either. He went, armour and everything.”

“Sounds about right for these occurrences,” Telricktus replied with a snort, “I think the sensor data has enough for us to map the jump, we’ll take it from here. I’ll let you know when we get the good captain back. Thank you for your assistance, Quaren.”

I nodded along as Telricktus flipped the cover back onto his tablet and slipped it into his sling bag, “Am I allowed to ask what you’ll do?”

“You’re a witness, so yes,” Telricktus replied as he grabbed his cup of iced tea, “This is time-sensitive, but suffice to say that we’ll tunnel across the barrier to send him a message telling him what to do and where to go. And yes, we know where to go. The gaps between these timelines have far more holes than people think. Of course, your assistance will be required.”

I nodded again and Telricktus gave me a little wave before tuning to go. Talorath, who had been questioned earlier and had lingered to watch shook his head. “You know, I was hoping they sent that deep cover agent instead. I can never remember his name, but he’s agent five, I think. He’s less of a prick.”

“At least he was nice this time,” I remarked, shrugging, “didn’t he tell you that we’d get instructions too?”

“Yeah, I’d think so since we caused it,” Talorath replied with a nod, “and I’d like to get my older brother back in one piece.”

“What do you think we’d need to do?” I replied, rubbing my chin, “Some engine work, maybe?”

“Who knows, we’re not trained for this,” Talorath replied with a snort, “I’ll have the ship given a quick once-over and prepped for everything. I’ll see you later, Quaren. As Tano would say, we’re out of the toilet and into the sewage.”

“You know, I don’t know how he comes up with shit like that,” I remarked as we both walked to the door.

Talorath snorted as he made a beeline for the bridge, “Neither do I, but it adds flavour, I suppose.”

-----

**Snr Captain Tano’rath**  
**Cmdr, DES Defiant**

“Oh yeah, here, have your phone back,” Talorath remarked as he tossed my comms unit to me, whose screen lit up showing two new messages, “but I’m holding your gun.”

“It won’t work if you try,” I replied flatly as I glanced at the messages – there weren’t any new ones when I had started the test. The screen showed two high priority ones from Telricktus and I thought better than to read them here, so I pocketed the device, then extended my hand to receive my sidearm. “Give it back.”

“Trust has-“ Talorath started as he took a step back, still holding my pistol and I glared at him.

He didn’t get to finish as I walked forward and snatched my sidearm out of his grip, then holstered it as the entire bridge drew their weapons on me, “You do not stand between an officer and his weapon, whelp. Besides, you missed the knife strapped to my leg. Sloppy!”

This mirror version of my brother, with all his big words and posturing, still quelled as I snarled at him and as his crew lowered their guns, I glared around at all of them, finding them mostly staring at me, “What? This ship doesn’t fucking fly itself, do your damn jobs and stop staring!”

Arktak was the only one that was unfazed and he instead giggled, “You know, if your universe is as colourful as your language, I’d want to see it.”

“Sorry, I already have my own Arktak.” I replied with a slight smirk, leaning on the command chair as Talorath sat back down, still glaring at me, “but I wouldn’t mind if you shared some of your confidence with him.”

“Perhaps,” Arktak replied as the engines spooled down and I felt the ship decelerate, “speaking of staring, we’re arriving at the homeworld. I will strongly recommend you hold onto something, mister mirror-captain. You’re not going to like what you see.”

“I doubt that’s gonna make a diff-“ I remarked, snorting as the view-screen up front refreshed, but well, there was no way I was finishing that sentence.

I’ve seen my share of ruins, ravaged planets, tomb worlds, you name it. There’s always worse out there, but then there’s this – seeing your home in ruins. The atmosphere was spotted with storms and the land was a dead grey. The shells of skyscrapers, flats and farms sat amongst dust storms. While I could’ve asked to go down, what’s the point. The details were too right for this to be a hoax – I could even pick out the rebuilt clan commune.

“Oh.” Was all I could manage as I stared.

Talorath looked over at me as I stared, "Believe me now?"

"Yeah." I replied flatly, still trying to tear my eyes away from the visuals, "I know how this shit works, what do you want from me?"

"Look, if I don't send you home, the I.I.S. agents will find you and make you disappear," Talorath replied, inclining his head as he held my gaze, "Can you drive?"

"You're talking out your tail, you fuckin nitwit," I replied with a snort, "You're bad with misdirection and worse with lies."

"Fine, they'll find you eventually, but will you help us or not?" Talorath replied with a snarl, "Or do you want the rest of your life to be drudgery in an Empire that's not yours? My brother might've been deluded, but even he wasn't stupid enough to turn fairly-priced help down."

"Fuck you, you haven't given me the price," I snapped, finding myself stalking forward so that our snouts almost touched, "You're trying to rev me up, and bloody hell you're shit at it! You want my help? Sure, but no more lies. You said that you've seen my kind before and if that's true, you should know that it's a fuckin stupid idea to lie to us."

I really did not mean to start shouting, but I did. Instead of guns being drawn, the crew seemed to stop and gather to watch. I found several gazes thrown towards our sidearms and arms and while Talorath reached for his gun, I grabbed his arm.

"I don't want your command," I snapped, feeling him relax and letting him go as I held his gaze. His striking blue eyes, that I see everyday in my timeline told a whole different story. He's had to find his own way and not come out whole, "tell me what we need to do and I'll make it happen. I'll help you and you help me. That is what family is for and fuck me, I wish my brother had the steel that you have."

"What, does he just stick to the rules?" Talorath replied as he rubbed his arm, "everything by the book?"

"Kinda, sorta," I replied with a shrug, "I can see him in you, but you've had to find your own way. I assume the rest of the family isn't around either?"

“Long gone,” He replied with a sigh, “The clan is still around, but the bloodline isn’t exactly amazing with most of us getting shot up and killed in the wars of expansion. It has to stop.”

“I am not allowed to agree or disagree with that,” I replied, rubbing my temples, “but I am allowed to bargain for my release. What do you want?”

“In order to get you access to anything of meaningful power to generate some sort of rift to get you home, we need to break into a ship with one of the new space-folding drives and to do that we need weapons,” He replied, rubbing his chin as he looked over at me, “you don’t need to get shot up, we can handle that, but our best driver was executed last month. My brother street raced till he lost his license. Did you?”

“I never street raced, or well, never got caught doing it,” I replied with a snort, “Not much time spent on-planet and all that.”

“Good enough. Get us out and away from the armoury and we’ll find you a way home,” He replied, nodding, “I know you can’t take us with you, but just do me a favour and remember us, yeah?”

I wanted to give him a hug, but thought better of it. Instead, I nodded, “I won’t be in a hurry to forget this. Now, lets get going. I’ve seen enough depressing shit for one day. Let us get the briefing ready.”

With that, the engines were fired up and we left.

I took a few photos, of course, and managed to read the messages from Telricktus. The first one was just a ping with no actual data, but the other one told me to find a similar drive unit to the one we were testing and that I could send a signal through the rift with my comms unit. If they received it, I would get a ping back and receive further instructions after... This, of course, all hinged on me being able to help finish this other mission first...