



Episode 9-3 - New Moon

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"It was the dawn of the Third Age of mankind," intoned Sam Morgan in a deep voice. "The year the great war came upon us all."

He grinned. Seated next to him, Barry Bruner looked at him strangely, but Shari Young gave him a broad smirk. "Okay, Sam," she said. "What are you on about this time?"

"Allow me to demonstrate." Morgan picked up his mug of synthehol and held it out a bit. "This," he said, "is the universe."

"Sam, do we need to treat you for syntheholism again?" quipped Marsha Jones. The others chuckled.

Unperturbed, Sam continued. "We can call this the First Age. The universe is all in one big happy piece. But now suppose we take this' -- Morgan picked up Bruner's empty glass -- "and pour some of our universe into it."

"So we have a duoverse, or what?" asked Bruner.

"Sorta. Call it the Second Age. See, the way I hear it, the universe these Sernaix come from used to be part of ours, but then it was

chopped off into its own little bubble." Morgan gestured at the glass. "Over here by itself, the bubble just stayed the way it was. But our universe moved around and grew." Morgan reached for Jones' glass of water. "May I?"

Jones gave him a suspicious look, but agreed. "Sure."

Morgan poured a little of the water into his mug, then stirred it around. "So that's our situation -- one universe growing and the other standing still. That's when we get to the last coupla weeks." With a flourish, Morgan emptied Bruner's glass back into his mug and stirred it once again. "Voilà! What do we get?"

"A lot of watery synthehol," said Young with a wide grin.

Morgan glared. "A whole new universe, different from the one we had at the start. Third Age."

"You," said Young, "have way too active an imagination." She took a swig of her Saurian brandy.

Bruner winced at the sight. "How can you drink that stuff? It's like reactor coolant, except stronger."

"Ha! If the skipper can hold his brandy, I'll be a Horta if I can't do the same."

Everybody knew what that meant. At the last First Contact Day party, Captain Grant had imbibed a grand total of five mugs of Saurian brandy -- and somehow remained completely sober. It was a feat Shari Young was determined to top next year.

“Okay,” said Bruner, addressing Morgan again, “I get the idea about this Third Age thing. But ‘the great war’?”

Morgan shrugged. “It’s a war, and it’s big. So far, anyway.”

“What if we come up with some new weapon? Your great war would be a couple of weeks long.”

“Oh, come on. Nobody’s got a weakness that bad.”

Bruner was about to counter that when he noticed a new arrival to the mess hall. “Uh oh,” he muttered to the others, gesturing with his thumb. “Here comes the life of the party.”

The officers turned to see Commander Chakotay, new first officer of the starship Logan, ordering some kind of pasta from the replicator. Jones suddenly looked uncomfortable; Young’s near-constant smile vanished. But Morgan seemed oblivious to the others’ awkwardness. “Hey, Commander!” he called out with a broad smile. “Pull up a chair!”

Chakotay turned to look at the group. He stared for a few moments, apparently gauging how welcome he really was. Finally he waved Morgan off and pleasantly replied, “Thank you, Lieutenant, but it’s all right. I shouldn’t crowd your table.”

“You sure?”

With a nod, the first officer turned and headed for an empty table. Beside Morgan, Jones looked relieved, but Bruner continued to frown.

Young lowered her voice. “So... what do you all make of the new guy, anyway?”

“I don’t like him,” said Bruner. “Not very open-minded of me, I know. It’s just a feeling I have.” Jones nodded her agreement.

“Aw, come on, guys,” said Morgan. “Why not give him a chance? You did for me.”

“You were here willingly,” Jones reminded him. “And the skipper was glad to have you. But Chakotay’s not happy about this posting and Captain Grant’s no happier.”

“Know what I heard?” said Young, leaning forward conspiratorially. “This guy can’t keep his pants on when there’s an alien woman around -- even if she’s one of the bad guys. They say he’s put the moves on Cardassians, Borg, Species 8472...”

“...Captain Janeway...” added Jones. This got a round of chuckles.

Morgan gulped down the last of his diluted synthehol and got up. “Alas, comrades, duty calls. I’m on for Tactical this shift.”

Young gave Bruner a confused look. “Isn’t it your shift, Barry?”

“It was,” replied Bruner with a slight sigh. “But the skipper’s had me doing double time analyzing the Sernaix battle logs, and if I don’t get some sleep soon I’m gonna pass out on duty.”

“So you’re making poor Sam take your shift? Jerk,” said Young with a look of mock disgust.

“Hey, if I fall asleep at Tactical, my head’s gonna hit the quantum torpedo button -- and Murphy’s Law says we’ll be in front of some kinda civilian thing at the time. What’s that gonna cost us?”

“Besides,” added Morgan with a grin, “he’s paying me.”

Young laughed. “In what? Moneyless society, people!”

“Next time we have shore leave,” Bruner explained, “I get the bridge duty. Sam got stuck with it last time.”

“Hey, that’s not so bad,” replied Jones. “All you have to do is stick the new guy with it!”

The four officers all laughed at that. Morgan then waved goodbye and headed off... wondering whether they’d noticed a certain half-heartedness in his laughter.

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It was one of the very latest developments from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers: a conference room with holoemitters wired to each seat so that participants could meet “in person” all the way from their homeworlds. It had passed through the beta-testing process with flying colours, and the SCE had deemed it ready to go online.

Of course, the SCE was a gaggle of idiots.

Near the head of the conference table, Admiral Alistair Warhol made a mental note to find out who had approved this holoom and have him, her, or it transferred to the Waste Extraction Bureau. Next to him, Chancellor Martok was flickering in and out of existence, while Legate Gadur was oblivious to the absence of his torso. Praetor Ru’Vraes seemed unscathed, but the Vorta next to her was in noticeably low resolution, and Grand Nagus Rom possessed either his left or his right arm at any given time but not both.

If they didn’t realize that, best not to tell them. That was Section 31’s guiding philosophy. But Warhol was the one who had to look at them with a straight face.

“...which is why,” finished Admiral William Ross, “we in Starfleet consider it imperative to join forces with you. Together, we stand a much better chance of ending this new threat to our quadrant.”

“Speaking as the previous threat to your quadrant,” said the Vorta with an amused smile, “I must wonder what the Dominion would stand to gain from such an alliance. There is no guarantee that the Sernaix will ever come after us if we simply leave them alone.”

Seated opposite Warhol, Admiral Owen Paris frowned. “I remind you that Starfleet did not ask for war with the Sernaix. It was they who attacked us.”

“For what reason?” asked Ru’Vraes. The Romulan’s tone made it clear that she knew the answer and was planning to make a point.

“We don’t know all the details yet,” answered Ross, “but their first attacks were on Voyager, and they were unprovoked.”

“Not so. Voyager was in their space -- whether by chance or by design -- and many races consider such trespassing to be an act of war.”

Touché, thought Warhol, rubbing his chin. The Romulan praetor’s implication was obvious: Starfleet itself applied that policy to the Romulans, and vice versa. Seen from that perspective, the UFP genuinely had started the war.

It was a moot point, however. “Praetor,” he reminded her, “is it not true that the Sernaix recently destroyed one of your Warbirds?”

“That is true, yes.”

“Then I don’t see what further proof we need that the Sernaix are moving against the Alpha Quadrant as a whole. The Star Empire and the Federation have no military alliance at this time.

The Sernaix destroyed your ship not because they thought they were justified but because they are, essentially, spoiling for a fight.”

“If a fight is what they want,” growled Martok with a toothy smile, “they will not find the Klingon Empire wanting.”

“Glad to have you on board, Chancellor,” smiled Ross. “Praetor Ru’Vraes, my colleague has reinforced my point: the Sernaix intend to destroy us all, not just the Federation. Wouldn’t it be best for us to join forces to respond to this threat?”

Ru’Vraes was silent for a moment; then she stood up and announced, “The Star Empire will not enter into a military alliance with the Federation without extensive consideration. Expect to hear from us in seven days’ time.” The hologram vanished.

In his head, Warhol added Romulus to the list of the UFP’s allies. Ru’Vraes had done a good job of appearing uninterested, but he could tell that the praetor was convinced. These past few years of truce have softened up the Romulans, Warhol thought with something almost like regret. The Tal Shiar I remember would never have let such a Federation-positive praetor stay in power.

Grand Nagus Rom grinned. “I’ll join!”

“We know,” said Ross. “That’s the fifth time you’ve said so.”

The Nagus hung his head. “Sorry-y-y-y,” he said, prompting Martok to cover his ears and Warhol to wish he could tactfully do the same.

Legate Gadur, who had been silent and pensive throughout the meeting, finally straightened up and began to speak. “As you know,” he said, “this is a difficult time for the Cardassian Union. We are still rebuilding after our homeworld suffered its heaviest losses to date, both in damage received and in lives lost. The damage can be repaired; the lives never can. The last thing Cardassia needs, especially now, is a new war.

“However, it must also be remembered that we are, above all, an honourable people. We mean what we say. We pay our debts. Right now, as loath as some of us may be to admit it, the Union owes a debt to the Federation and its allies. It was you who liberated us from Dominion rule and made us a free people again. Justice demands that we remember this.

“Cardassia’s forces are not what they once were. Our military is a shadow of the one that was feared in millions of sectors a few short years ago. But we are still a powerful ally -- and today I offer that allegiance to the United Federation of Planets. We will stand against your enemy as you stood against ours.”

The Legate stood, made a formal Cardassian bow, and deactivated his holotransmitter. Paris and Ross exchanged a look of delighted surprise. In his mind, Warhol swore. The Klingons and the Romulans were known factors, and Section 31 had expected them to join this fight, but the Cardassians? According to simulations, their wounded pride should have kept them out of the military arena for the next ten years. The last thing anyone in the Section had expected from them was gratitude.

Warhol wondered to himself if Gadur had been aiming for exactly that effect. Cardassians were nothing if not subtle. Perhaps he had taken the surprising route because it was the surprising route. Then again, considering the failure of the old Cardassian ideal, he might be trying to establish a different one and see if it achieved better results. Or might this all be some trick of the new Obsidian Order?

The admiral shook off his mental debate when he noticed the Vorta, Eris 291, getting ready to speak. "Admirals," she began, "it is safe to say that there is no love lost between the Federation and the Dominion."

"That's true," admitted Ross. "And not difficult to understand -- the war is still fresh in all our minds."

Eris nodded. "But history has shown that the distance from enemy to friend is greatly shortened when a new power enters the game. On your world, for example, the two most powerful nations in your second global conflict, bitter enemies at the time, re-established close ties very soon after the war when a new threat became clear."

"America and Germany," replied Paris. "You certainly know your Earth history."

"It's a Vorta's business to understand the worlds she deals with," said Eris with a smile. "My point, then, is that this new threat may be enough to outweigh the enmity between our peoples. But that only makes sense if the Sernaix are a threat to both of us. You have yet to prove that to me."

"Let me put it this way," said Ross. "Suppose the Sernaix overrun the Alpha Quadrant and sweep through Federation territory. One thing they're bound to notice is the Bajoran system, considering how important it's been to galactic politics in recent years. And it's only a short step from there to the wormhole."

"You forget, Admiral -- the wormhole is more than just a cosmic phenomenon. It's the home of aliens who don't grant passage to just anyone."

"But they did allow you to come through."

"Only at first -- I trust I don't have to remind you of the losses we took when the aliens decided to revoke that permission."

"But that was only after you'd firmly established yourselves here. Can you really afford to take the chance that the Sernaix will meet the Prophets' approval, as you did at first?"

Eris frowned... or was it a smile? "You have a point. Debatable, certainly, but sound. It is enough to take back to the Founders." She stood. "I will make your case to them, Admiral, and if they see fit, we may find ourselves allies before long. It will be a strange thing to get used to. However, the effect of Legate Gadur's words was not limited to you. It is because of forward-thinkers like him that Cardassia was a welcome addition to the Dominion."

The Vorta shook her head sadly. "If only they understood what they've given up."

"I think they have some idea," said Warhol, not bothering to keep the anger out of his voice. He knew the other admirals would think it was Eris' superior attitude that angered him; in fact, it was the fact that the Dominion, too, seemed ready to join the war. Another damned X-factor! Where did the simulations go wrong?

Hands together, Eris bowed to each of the admirals. "Be well. I will speak to the Founders."

"Say hi to Odo for me," quipped Admiral Ross. As she vanished, Eris seemed annoyed to hear one of her gods named in vain.

Martok shook his head. "'An honourable people,' my je'Dasq. My pet targ's glob flies have more honour than any Cardassian."

Warhol frowned at the generalization, as a Starfleet officer should, but Ross simply smiled and stood up to shake hands with Martok. "Good seeing you again, old friend. Take care of yourself."

The Klingon grabbed Ross's forearm and shook with gusto. "Ha! Save that wish for my foes. It'll be a hot day on Breen when any man gets the better of me."

Releasing the admiral's arm, Martok stood back for a moment gazing at his own. "Remarkable," he mused, more to himself than to anyone present. "For two hundred years my people have used this technology, but it has not lost the power to surprise." Then, straightening, the Klingon vanished.

The admirals spent a moment in thought. Something went seriously wrong in the projections for this meeting, pondered Warhol darkly. There should have been resistance, tension. Instead, even the Klingon and Romulan representatives seemed to get along. I may need to rethink some aspects of the plan.

"I'll join!" shouted Rom.

Certain that no jury in the Federation would convict, Warhol deleted the Nagus hologram.

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On Voyager, Chakotay had always been especially fond of his office. That didn't mean he'd spent a lot of time there -- in general, he'd been more likely to be found in his quarters or the mess hall during his off-duty hours. That was intentional. Chakotay liked the office so much that he'd decided not to get used to it and lose the "new-car smell," as it were; by limiting the time he spent there, he'd been able to keep it interesting to him for the entire eight-year trip.

The first officer's office on an Intrepid-class starship was larger than most, since ships of that class were built for a small crew. Losing the one on Voyager was bound to be a step down. But that was all right -- a small office was better than none.

Unfortunately, Chakotay didn't have a small office.

As he sat in his quarters reviewing suggested changes to the duty roster, Chakotay was surprised at how much he found himself missing that office. Minor tasks like this were the kind he'd often saved up to do there. However, he reminded himself, of all the adjustments he'd have to make for his new life aboard the Logan, this was surely one of the simplest. Besides, now was the time to relax and cool down after a rough shift. So Chakotay sat back on the couch and scrolled through his PADD and took a sip of his tea and spat it out instantly because it was some kind of demon tea and what in the world was his replicator thinking?

Broken replicators... he missed Kathryn.

Beep beep.

"Come," said the first officer, setting his cup of tea-like thing back on its saucer.

The door swung open; behind it was Sam Morgan, carrying some sort of present. "Hiya, big guy!" he said. "Housewarming present?"

Chakotay was touched at the gesture. "Thank you," he said warmly, taking the box.

As he began to unwrap it, Morgan held up a hand and said, "Now it's only fair to warn you -- they do say to beware of Fqeeks bearing gifts."

Uh oh. "What exactly is a Fqeek?"

Morgan grinned. "Beats me. I couldn't think of a good rhyme for 'Greeks.'"

Chuckling, Chakotay finished unwrapping the gift. The box turned out to contain a plant; the first officer inspected it for a moment. "Aha! Vagran orchids, right?"

"In the flesh... well, plant matter. My sister always loved them."

"So did mine," said Chakotay. "Now let's see where these should go... ah, here's a good spot." He set the plant down on one corner of the low coffee table by the window and looked at it for a moment. "Hmm. No, that's not going to work... it's a good placement, but the colour doesn't fit well with the chairs. Where else could --"

"Hang on a sec," said Morgan. "Try this." He reached under the plant's base. Chakotay heard a light beep -- and suddenly the plant's petals began to change colour. After a moment, Morgan beeped again and the change stopped. "Better?"

"Perfect," said Chakotay, picking up the plant in wonderment. "How did that work?"

"Tell you a secret -- the plant's really a simple hologram. The base contains a specialized version of that emitter your Doctor open-sourced last year. All you have to do is tap once to cycle and tap again to stop when it's on the right colour."

"Clever idea. Who designed it?"

"Dunno -- I picked it up the replicator pattern a coupla shore leaves ago. But the guy I got it from said it was created by a hologram too."

I wonder if the Doctor knows what fruit his idealism has borne, thought the first officer. I hope I get the chance to tell him.

"Well, thanks again. Please -- have a seat." Morgan did, and Chakotay headed for the replicator. "Can I get you something?"

"Nah. I drank too much universe earlier."

"What?"

"Long story."

Chakotay returned with a new cup of tea, recycled from the old one. He took a sip, swallowed it, set the cup down, and went to get his phaser.

"Something wrong with the tea, big guy?"

"No no, I don't blame the tea. I blame the replicator. Do you know offhand if there are any regulations that outlaw phasering your appliances?"

"Probably not in those words."

"Good enough for me."

While he waited for Chakotay to come back, Morgan picked up the cup and took a sip to see just how bad it was. To his surprise, it seemed just fine. "Hey, Commander? I don't see the problem with the tea."

Chakotay returned and took another sip. "Well, there's the fact that it tastes like brake fluid."

"What?"

“Sorry, I’ve spent too much time with Paris. All I mean is that this drink, whatever it is, doesn’t taste anything like my family’s traditional blend.”

Morgan blinked. “You’re from the Earl Grey family?”

“Earl Grey?”

“Yessir. It’s the skipper’s favourite -- he set it as the default for the replicator system. Figured you knew.”

“But I didn’t just say ‘tea,’ I specified the blend. I brought the program myself....”

“Doesn’t matter. Skip’s funny that way. Heard him explain it once: ‘If an officer can’t handle my tea, he can’t handle my ship.’”

Chakotay couldn’t believe it. He’d seen tough commanders before, but this? “And I thought Kathryn took her drink too seriously....”

“Kathryn Janeway?” asked Morgan, a little awe edging his words.

“The one and only. If she didn’t get her coffee in the morning, somebody’s planet would be in pieces by evening.”

Morgan grinned. “Must have been amazing to serve under her.” In the pause while Chakotay tried to figure out how to field that one, the lieutenant continued: “Man, if half the stories I’ve heard about her are true, I’m surprised you took as long to get home as you did. Hey, tell me -- is it true that when the Borg Queen nabbed one of the crew, she went right into the centre of Borg space and made the Queen give her back?”

Chakotay beamed with pride. “It’s true all right.”

“And what they say about the first time you got home -- that there were two of her working together to pull it off?”

“Right again.” The first officer still looked back on that happily, despite the brevity of their homecoming. Working with two Kathryn Janeways had been an unforgettable experience.

“Wow.” Morgan sat back, marvelling at all his crewmate had seen. “I wish I’d been on that trip. Musta been a helluva ride.”

Chakotay said “You bet,” but he couldn’t keep the sadness out of his voice. I’m talking about Voyager’s journey in the past tense, but it’s not over. She’s still out there somewhere... her story is still being written. I’m just not a part of it anymore.

The commander’s melancholy didn’t escape Morgan, nor had it earlier in the day. It was time to bring that up. “Hey, bud... you’ve got something on your mind, haven’t you?”

“It’s nothing,” Chakotay replied. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You don’t wanna talk about it, you mean.”

He sighed. “I don’t want to weigh others down with my worries.”

“What kind of worries have we got here?”

“Look, as I said, I’d rather not talk about it. Can we please drop the subject?”

“Actually,” said Morgan, whose tone was suddenly serious, “we can’t. Part of my job is to identify and solve problems that occur on this ship. If you’ve got concerns, I’m the one to tell.”

The switch from personal to professional caught Chakotay by surprise. He’s right, though -- unless he hears otherwise, he’s supposed to assume that “worries” are his department. I haven’t handled this carefully enough. He needs an answer now, but can I trust him? The first officer decided he probably could.

“It’s Captain Grant, Sam. He’s harsh, inconsistent... I’m worried about his judgement.”

“I won’t say you’re wrong, bud, but I’ve served with him for a while now. So far, he seems perfectly stable to me.”

“You may well be right.” Chakotay frowned. “Something about this whole scenario makes me feel like there are things going on behind the scenes. I just wish I knew whom to trust.”

Dead serious now, Morgan leaned forward. “For what it’s worth... you can trust me.”

“I appreciate that,” said the first officer. The two men shook hands firmly.

Morgan stood up and stretched his arms. “Well, I gotta get going... you hold it together, okay?” Chakotay nodded, and the lieutenant left.

“You can trust me,” replayed Chakotay in his head. I wish that were enough.

* * *

In her quarters, Marsha Jones listened to Chakotay and Morgan’s conversation with concern. This new first officer might become a serious risk....

“Risk is our business!” declared Sycorax. “It’s what the Sernaix are all about. A battle with no element of danger is no battle at all.”

Officer Johns sighed, internally. “Far be it from me to advise that you take the fun out of your war. All I’m saying is that it might be prudent to move to a new theatre of operations for a time. The Alpha Quadrant is volatile right now -- alliances are shifting. It’s conceivable that the combined forces of Starfleet and its allies would be capable of defeating you.”

Sycorax grinned a frightening grin. “Good! I love a challenge, and it’s been so long since my people had a real one.”

“But don’t you think it might be wise to --”

“NO!” roared the matriarch, suddenly so furious that Johns took several steps back. “Our goal is not the same as your little Section’s! We will capture the Voyager! We will recover the Touched One! Everything else is secondary!”

“I apologize, Sycorax,” said Johns with a bow. He knew a dead end when he saw one. “May the Alpha Quadrant campaign continue to bring glory to the Realm.”

“Of that,” said Sycorax, “I have no doubt.”

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“I tried to persuade her, Admiral, but she wouldn’t hear of it. The idea of Starfleet gaining allies actually made the war more appealing to her.”

Warhol frowned. "That's Sycorax all right. Those Sernaix must have Klingon blood in them somewhere. No doubt Chancellor Martok would be happy to hear of it."

"Sir, do you think it's time to go to Phase Four?"

The admiral thought for a minute. "No... no, it's too soon. We're still within acceptable Phase Three parameters for now."

"To be honest, sir, I'm becoming extremely uncomfortable with this whole situation. I think we should consider stepping up the pace. Working with the Sernaix entails more and more risk as the war intensifies."

"Mr. Johns, I don't need to remind you that we are doing this for the good of the Federation. Everything must be seen in that perspective. We will move against the Sernaix when the probability of success is highest and not before. Are we clear on that?"

Johns straightened up. "Perfectly."

"Glad to hear it. Dismissed."

The operative turned to leave. As he approached the door, Warhol added, "Just keep doing the good work you've been doing, Officer. Phase Four will come soon enough." The officer nodded and headed out.

His Section business done for now, Warhol looked at the stack of PADDs on his desk and sighed. He picked up the first. Hmm... the latest report from Thalia. This should be interesting. He had begun to read the PADD's contents when the door chimed again.

"Enter," said Warhol, wondering who it would be. He hadn't scheduled anyone for this afternoon.

The door slid open and Admiral Ross walked in. "Alistair. Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all. Just going over some paperwork." He gestured. "Take a chair."

Ross sat. "I was wondering what you thought about today's meeting. In my opinion, it was a success -- more so than I for one had expected. But it seemed you felt differently."

"Did it? I must have been letting that Ferengi get to me."

"Grand Nagus Rom," chuckled Ross. "Three years gone by, and I still can't believe it. But I still don't think you were satisfied with the results of that meeting. What's bothering you?"

Warhol sighed. "I just don't think we can trust them, Bill. The Klingons, probably. The Romulans, perhaps. But the Cardassians? The Dominion?"

"Believe me, I understand how you feel. I sent some of the best officers I've ever known to die at their hands. But we have to be honest in looking at this situation -- we have to admit that the Sernaix are far more than Starfleet can handle alone. If help comes from an enemy, we still must be ready to accept it."

"Perhaps," he replied. "Perhaps not. Help from some enemies is more dangerous than the actual threat. Have you considered Starfleet's record with Borg treaties?"

"As far as I know, there's only been the one."

"And the Borg went back on it at the first opportunity. Thanks to Janeway's carelessness, they nearly assimilated her ship, and then they would have been ready to come for us."

"It was 'Janeway's carelessness' that kept Species 8472 out of this galaxy," countered Ross. "I'd say it's a fair trade."

"To each his own."

Ross leaned forward. "Let me guess. Section 31 isn't too keen on a Dominion alliance."

"I wouldn't know."

"Oh, come on!" said Ross with genuine annoyance. "We both know full well you work with them. I want to know where they stand in this business."

Warhol frowned deeply. "You must know I can't tell you, Bill."

"Then tell me the extent of their involvement. Are they working with one of the other powers? Or maybe working against one -- say, the Romulans?"

"This line of conversation can't help either of us. I suggest we drop it." Warhol picked up the PADD again.

Ross angrily took it out of his hands. "Alistair... we've been friends a long time now. Do you really think I'm going to turn you in? I've worked with 31 myself -- almost all of us have at one time or another. That doesn't mean I condone what I did or what you're doing, but it does mean you can trust me. All I want is to know what's going on."

"I see where you're coming from," sighed Warhol. "You know there's information that could help you understand the situation better."

Ross nodded. "That information is all I'm after." He set down his comm badge on the desktop.

"Very well." Warhol detached his own badge and looked Ross in the eye. "The Section is currently conducting an extensive intelligence operation on Cardassia Prime. We have reason to believe that Legate Gadur is in communication with the Vorta, trying to negotiate a new Dominion alliance."

Ross was stunned. "Then Odo's mission to the Founder homeworld failed?"

"We don't know yet for certain. It's possible that, after he cured the other shapeshifters, they were able to win him over through the Great Link instead of vice versa. Until we know more, the Section doesn't want to risk working with Gadur in any capacity."

Warhol clipped his comm badge back on; he had kept it in his hand throughout. Ross picked his own badge back off the desk and reattached it. "You understand," he said, "that I can't let those suspicions affect my Cardassia policy until they're confirmed."

"If and when they are, I'll make sure you hear about it."

"Thank you." Still rather shaken, Ross left the office.

Alone again, Warhol frowned. There was nothing harder than lying to a friend, especially in confidence. But Admiral Ross couldn't be allowed to know Section 31's real agenda -- the danger to all concerned, Ross most of all, would be too great. Better that he hear a fabricated but believable tale of Cardassian treachery.

Knowledge must be limited to those who will use it for the good of the Federation. It was Section 31's highest and only law... its Prime Directive, Warhol reflected with irony. Would that more people could be trusted to use knowledge that way; however, the few who worked with 31 were enough.

People like Warhol. People like Thalia, whose PADD he now read with interest.

* * *

In the sector of space the Klingons call Re'fruPaQ Deep, glorious battle is being waged!

Raging into the sector in war formation come nine Klingon ships! Nine mighty defenders of the Empire! Each one carries a dozen warriors, blood pumping hot in their veins, their hearts burning with the anticipation of glorious victory!

Before them, the enemy! A giant vessel filled with the dark, loathsome forces of the Sernaix! A worthy foe!

Boldly, General Gagruk's Vor'cha-class attack cruiser leads the attack! It flies straight at the monstrous enemy vessel, its disruptors blazing with red fire! Behind it come two K'tinga-class battlecruisers on each side, loading their torpedo tubes to spill enemy blood across the sector! In the rear, the four noble Birds of Prey engage their cloaking devices -- they will reappear and attack when the enemy least expects it!

The flagship's mighty blasts reach their target! The target quakes! For nothing can stand against the might of the Klingon Empire!

Now the node ship enters the fray in earnest! Its hideous rays sweep out across the battlefield, attempting to lock onto a Klingon ship! But they fail! The pilots of the Empire are skillful and swift!

The rays sweep out again! This time a battlecruiser is hit! It cannot survive, so it brings glory to its Empire by ramming the enemy ship!

Klingon weapons blaze out from all sides! Enraged at the deaths of their comrades, the warriors demand blood for blood! Their disruptors flare! Their torpedoes crash!

But the node ship is strong! Nearly unharmed, it launches its own torpedoes! Two more battlecruisers are destroyed! The blood of more Klingon warriors cries out for vengeance!

The Birds of Prey decloak and come screaming at the enemy! But the Sernaix ship locks onto them with tractor beams! Unable to escape the beams, the Birds of Prey are all pulled to the same place and explode!

Now the final two Klingon ships change their course, arriving at a planet whose gravity well confuses the enemy shots! The node ship's blasts all miss and the mighty Klingon ships begin to weaken their foe's forward shields! The tide of battle begins to turn!

But now the node ship has compensated for the gravitational gradient! Its beams lash out anew and strike their targets! The two bold Klingon vessels spiral down into the atmosphere and are unable to return! The Sernaix launch corsairs to give pursuit!

Today is a good day to die! Fight on, mighty warriors! For the Empire!

* * *

"Ten," said Shari Young suddenly.

Everyone looked. "Ten what?" asked Captain Grant.

"Ten," she repeated, and turned back to face her console.

There was a pause. Chakotay gave Grant a What's going on? look. The captain could only shrug.

"Ten," said Young again, more insistently this time.

All at once, Sam Morgan's face lit up. "Nine," he said triumphantly.

"Good!" Young smiled at him. Morgan glanced at the others smugly.

Chakotay was confused. "Just what exactly is --"

"Eight!" exclaimed Mike Mool at the Engineering station. He looked rather pleased with himself -- which was rare, in Chakotay's experience.

Young traded a look with Morgan. "Hmm... think so?"

"We can probably let it go," said Morgan, making a show of considering the question carefully.

"All right, that does it," said Grant, getting to his feet. "What are you people doing?"

"Ten," said Young patiently.

"Nine," said Morgan.

"Eight," said Mool.

Grant glared, then put on a Well, why not? expression. "Seven," he tried.

All three officers spun on him. "NO!" they shouted.

Young grinned. "Sorry, Skip. You fail. Better luck next time."

"But -- but --"

"Siddown!"

To the first officer's amazement, Grant acceded, taking his seat. "I hate it when they do this," he muttered to Chakotay on the way.

Near the back, Bruner gave it a shot. "Eleven?"

Morgan looked at Young. "I dunno, Shar. Doesn't sound to me like he's sure."

"Not sure at all," agreed Young. "Sorry, Barry. You fail too, and shame on you for guessing."

Bruner's jaw dropped -- but Chakotay smiled. Now he knew what was going on. He got up, made eye contact around the bridge, and boldly made his statement: "Eight."

"Nice!" said Young. Morgan gave Chakotay a thumbs-up sign.

Grant, on the other hand, looked more confused than ever, and Jones little better. "Can I tell them?" asked the first officer on an impulse.

Young thought. "I dunno. They may still get it."

"True. We don't want to deprive them of the joy of discovery, after all." Chakotay grinned at Grant, who was about to answer when -

"Message coming in, Skip! Looks like we've got a Sernaix engagement going on about five sectors down!"

Grant stood, ready for action. "Who's fighting them?"

"Klingons. Says there were nine of 'em originally and just two now, versus one big mother of a node ship."

"We go. Activate the cloaking device and prepare for maximum warp. Red alert!" The captain sat down and waited the one second it took to get his officers' reports.

"Shields ready at 100%!" declared Chakotay.

"Weapon systems standing by!" said Bruner.

"Cloak operational!" chimed in Morgan.

"The core's powered up... we're ready for warp speed!" finished Mool.

"What direction, Barry?" asked Young, already punching in the numbers she knew.

The tactical officer checked the source of the distress call. "Three-two-nine mark zero," he answered. "The Klingons call it Re'fruPaQ Deep."

Young finished her course programming. "We're off on your signal, Skip."

Grant didn't hesitate. "Give 'er the gun!"

* * *

During the brief warp flight, Captain Grant reminded the crew that this would only be an observational mission. They would be ready for battle, just in case, but not enter the fighting unless their own survival were at stake. Chakotay could only shake his head at the absurdity of the situation -- an action that Jones noticed out of the corner of her eye and made sure to add to her mental list.

At last, the Logan re-entered Einsteinian spacetime at Re'fruPaQ Deep. Following the indicator on the distress signal, the ship located the planet where the attack had ended and moved into a standard orbit.

"Sensors," said Grant. "What have we got here?"

Jones looked at her scan results and frowned. "No ships left intact, skipper, but I'm reading a lot of Klingon debris. Some of it is on the planet's surface."

"Life signs?"

"Some," said Chakotay. "Very faint. I can't tell from here whether they're Klingon or not."

"Then we'll have to go find out for ourselves," said Grant. He headed for the door. "Jones, Bruner, you're with --"

"Sir!" Chakotay called. The captain stopped. "We don't know what the situation will be down there. You shouldn't put yourself at risk by leading the team."

"I'm aware of the regulations, Commander --"

"Then, with all due respect, I think you should follow them. I can handle whatever's down there; the ship needs you here."

Grant gave Chakotay a long look, his expression unreadable, but finally backed down. "Very well. Mr. Chakotay, choose your team and investigate the crash site."

Chakotay was already on his feet. “Mr. Bruner, Mr. Morgan, Lieutenant Jones -- let’s go.” The three officers followed immediately. After the lift doors closed behind them and the relief crew moved into place, there was a long pause. Grant shifted in his chair, deep in thought. Finally he spoke.

“Twelve?”

“No, sir,” said Young with a pitying look.

* * *

Chakotay and his team materialized in a rocky area, surrounded by the debris of a massive Klingon attack cruiser. “Vor’cha-class,” said Bruner, recognizing the blue-green hull immediately.

“Are you sure?” asked Chakotay. The officer nodded. “That’s not a good sign. Those ships are among the heaviest the Klingons have. Losing one will be a blow to them.”

“Not to mention what it says about the Sernaix’s capabilities,” added Jones.

“Believe me, Lieutenant -- I know all about the Sernaix’s capabilities. This is one of the less impressive examples of their work I’ve seen.”

Jones was skeptical. “Then how did Voyager survive alone?”

“Luck,” said Chakotay simply. Then he handed out the assignments: “Jones, Bruner, concentrate on scanning for lifesigns. Morgan, monitor the debris readings for Sernaix content. I’ll be recording the crash site data for later analysis. We’ll head in this direction.”

The team began walking, each officer focusing on his tricorder. Suddenly Bruner gasped. “Commander! Over here!” He pointed left and began running; the others hurried to catch up.

At the crest of a small natural hill, Bruner stopped and could only stare down. Below him was a field of Klingon corpses.

“Barry!” Morgan caught up with Bruner and took in the sight. “Ohhh boy. These guys didn’t go down easy.”

Chakotay and Jones arrived, and the first officer reacted quickly to the discovery. “We’ll investigate these bodies for information that could help us. It’s also possible that some are still alive, with life signs faint enough to slip below our scans. Morgan, you’ll look for those survivors. Bruner, you and I will examine the nature of the death wounds to determine what killed them. Jones, set your tricorder on broad-spectrum and record all the data you can. Let’s go!”

The away team headed down the other side of the hill. Jones found a central spot and scanned in various directions. Morgan waved his tricorder quickly over each Klingon in turn, hoping in vain for some small sign of life. Chakotay and Bruner reached the first corpse; the first officer knelt to take a look.

“Hmm... puncture wound, centre of the torso. I’m guessing that the Sernaix -- if the attackers were Sernaix -- don’t know where the Klingon hearts are. Do you agree, Lieutenant?”

There was a pause, and then Bruner said, “Yes, sir.”

Concerned, Chakotay stood and looked at his crewmate. The man was staring at the corpse, his face a mask of uncomprehending dismay. His skin had gained a very distinct green tint. It saddened Chakotay to remember where he’d seen this look before -- on new members of the Maquis after their first battle.

“Barry,” he asked in his most sympathetic voice, “are you going to be all right?”

Bruner nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ll be okay. It’s just been a long time since I’ve seen a battlefield... and I’ve never seen one this bloody.”

“It’s never easy, Lieutenant. There are --”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Bruner spun around. “That was Marsha’s voice!”

“Isn’t she -?” Chakotay looked around; Jones was indeed missing. He sprang into action. “Let’s move! Morgan, stay here and guard this position; Bruner and I are going in!” With a serious nod, Morgan moved to the centre of the field and drew his phaser.

Sprinting, Chakotay and Bruner reached the source of the scream in ten seconds. It was another mound of Klingon debris. Seeing them, Jones ran out from the other side of the heap and called out desperately. “Sir! I picked up some Sernaix readings and --”

Marsha Jones’ sentence ended with a sudden, sickening THUD as she hit the ground, face first. Chakotay saw the blade jutting viciously out of her back, the wound that could only be lethal, and forced himself not to connect the corpse at his feet with the living human being he had known. That had to come later -- action had to come now.

The first officer looked up to see, standing about twenty meters away, a lone, badly-wounded Sernaix. The creature was reaching for another knife. “Damn! Bruner, look out!”

Both officers dove out of the way just in time to feel the breeze as the Sernaix’s second blade whizzed past them. Thinking quickly, Chakotay ran to take cover behind a shattered cockpit, Bruner following. The first officer immediately struck his comm badge. “Chakotay to Logan! We need an emergency beamout!”

Chakotay recognized Ensign Russell’s voice on the other side. “Sir, something in the wreckage is scrambling the beam! It’ll take a minute to lock onto you....”

The two men braced themselves for another Sernaix attack, but the creature seemed in no hurry. It was obviously in great pain from its injuries -- and its attention was focused on Jones. Standing above its prey, the Sernaix lifted her by the hair and picked off her comm badge.

Bruner stared, enraged and confused. “What’s that thing doing with --”

The badge began to glow.

“Oh, no,” said Chakotay. “It’s recognized it as a power source.”

The glow became brighter and brighter until they had to shield their eyes. When they could see again, the badge was gone -- and the Sernaix was standing tall, all signs of injury erased. Effortlessly, it tossed Jones a good five meters away.

As the monster stood for a moment integrating the new energy, Russell’s voice came through again. “Sir, I’ve broken through the interference, but I’m only picking up three of you!”

“Stand by.” The first officer turned to Bruner and whispered, “One of us has to get over there and make contact with Jones so we can beam her up. If we get her back to the ship in time, there may still be a chance.”

Bruner nodded hopefully. “I’ll distract him. You go for Marsha. “

"All right. Let's --"

"BASTARD!"

The officers looked up to see Sam Morgan screaming at the Sernaix. Adrenaline fueling him, the security chief dodged a thrown blade and charged the alien, readying his phaser. No! thought Chakotay. He doesn't know the Sernaix can feed on weapon energy.... There was only one chance to save Morgan's life. "Russell, energize! NOW!"

For an agonizing moment, Morgan got closer and closer to the Sernaix. He didn't notice the fourth blade until it was already in the alien's hand. Chakotay could only look on, helpless, as the knife arced upwards to meet Morgan's unprotected head....

....and sweep right through it, the transporter effect swirling around now-empty air.

Chakotay and Bruner rematerialized, still crouching, on the transporter pad; Morgan's inertia carried him into the back wall. The security chief hammered the wall with a punch, suddenly noticed that the Sernaix wasn't there, and realized he was back on the Logan. He immediately looked for Jones; not finding her, he spun around and demanded of Russell, "What's going on here? Beam her up!"

"I'm... I'm sorry, sir. I had trouble just getting you three. Without a communicator in this interference, there's no way to --"

Morgan was no longer listening. Instead, he turned on Chakotay, who'd just gotten up, and knocked him into the wall. "DAMN YOU TO HELL!" he screamed. "Do you know what you've done?"

Chakotay couldn't answer. There was nothing to say.

His eyes welling up with tears, Morgan took another swing at Chakotay, but this time it was weaker and the first officer easily blocked it. Morgan raised his other fist... and then, unable to bear it any longer, he fell to his knees and wept.

* * *

"Marsha Jones," he said, "had been serving with me for the last ten years. She was one of the finest officers it has ever been my privilege to command."

"I can't imagine what it must be like for you," said Chakotay with as much sympathy as he could muster under the circumstances. He had only known Jones a short while, but her death had still left him shaken. No one deserved a life so suddenly, violently cut short. Grant, too, had to be hurting terribly.

But Chakotay still didn't like where this conversation was going.

"You tell me the attack was too sudden to stop," continued the captain. "Are you certain of that?"

"It was too sudden even to predict. Mr. Bruner and I literally saw nothing until she was already dead." Were the ready room lights darker than usual?

"'Already dead.' How could you be sure of this?"

Chakotay took a deep breath. "The blade was protruding from her cardiac area. Injuries like that are --"

"Are you a doctor, Mr. Chakotay?"

"No, sir."

"Then why such confidence in your field diagnosis?"

"I needed to decide quickly. The rest of us were at risk."

"You felt, then, that the three of you were not enough to defeat one Sernaix?"

Now the first officer was really getting angry. "The Sernaix may be the most physically formidable race I have ever encountered. The danger was too great."

"Too great? So great that it outweighed a chance to save Marsha's life?"

That did it. "I request permission to speak freely." The captain glared, but consented. "Sir... you don't have a case here and you know it."

"Is that so?"

"It is. With all due respect, I think you're taking out your anger about Officer Jones' death on me. You've been a first officer -- you've led away teams. You know full well that this kind of snap decision is required of a team leader. You know that however good his intentions... he sometimes has to make sacrifices."

Captain Grant was silent for several moments. At last he sat down in his chair and turned it 180 degrees to face the window. "You're dismissed, Commander," he said.

Feeling compassion and frustration in equal measure, Chakotay turned and slowly left the ready room. When the door slid closed, Grant lowered his head, and he sat thinking for a long time.

* * *

Chakotay paced his quarters. That was odd, because pacing wasn't something he habitually did - he preferred to stay as calm and collected as possible, whatever the situation. But this time it was different. His usual control was failing him. The first officer was full of frustrated energy, with no outlet he could see.

And so he paced.

There's more going on here than meets the eye -- a lot more. Chakotay felt as if he were trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing. While being poked in the temple with a sharp stick. Repeatedly.

Trying once again to get a hold of himself, Chakotay sat down and took a series of deep breaths, in and out. It was a time-honoured calming technique, so effective that even the Vulcans used it. And indeed, after ten repetitions, the first officer found that he had finally managed to not calm himself down at all. The energy wasn't going away.

Focus. Think. Get a grip.

Lieutenant Jones was dead. She knew the risks when she got the uniform. Captain Grant was devastated. Any captain would be. Morgan had attacked Chakotay. Heat of the moment. Everything has an explanation. So what is it that's nagging at me?

The first officer felt himself pulled into self-recrimination, but he knew that was just a natural response to losing an officer. He fought the guilt reflex as best he could. He tried to stop replaying the moment in his mind.

She screamed. She must have seen the Sernaix and been trying to escape. We came to investigate. She ran out to us... her eyes were filled with the fear the Sernaix somehow provoke in all living things, the same fear that was in Kathryn's eyes when she first saw one. "Sir! I picked up some Sernaix readings and --"

Wait.

Why hadn't she mentioned the Sernaix readings before? Why had she gone off to investigate them alone?

That was it. That was one of the missing pieces. Whatever secret force was working on this ship, Jones was part of it. And that meant, almost without doubt, that Grant was too. Maybe they were working for the Cardassians. Or this Section 31. Or....

Stop it. You're getting ahead of yourself. A Starfleet officer trusts his commander without question unless the reason not to is overwhelming. Without that benefit of the doubt, the chain of command would collapse. Chakotay forced himself to remember that this wasn't the Maquis or even Voyager -- this was Starfleet, the real one. No good could come of jumping to conclusions.

But that left him right back where he'd started.

Chakotay went to get a drink. Maybe some tea -- no, wait. That wasn't going to happen on this ship. With a sigh, he ordered a coffee instead. He found himself specifying "black," even though he preferred his coffee with a bit of cream.

The drink materialized and he carried it back to the couch. He picked it up to take a sip... and stopped the motion halfway, pausing to stare down into the cup. The liquid's surface was smooth, featureless, and perfectly black; nothing could be discerned within. It was like looking out into empty space, into a starless void beyond measure.

Chakotay opened his mouth, though he knew there was no one to hear.

"What would you do?"

* * *

"We finally managed to get her back," Barry Bruner told his captain. "It took us ten minutes to lock onto a human life sign without a communicator in all that interference."

Captain Grant looked up from the computer on his ready room desk to meet Bruner's eyes; his own had a frightening, hollow look to them. "And?"

"The doc said she'd been killed instantly when the blade hit her. Even a Code White revival procedure wouldn't have helped. It was just too late."

"The Sernaix are good shots," said Grant, his tone measured. "We'll remember that if we encounter them again."

"Aye, sir. Actually, we learned some other useful things too. Now we know they can leech energy from machines with their own power sources, and they can use it to heal themselves. And we know that the debris from their ships is hard to detect or transport near."

"That's the kind of thing this observatory mission is all about," agreed the captain.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence.

"Well, um, Mr. Bruner... in light of Marsha's death, I've reassigned Commander Chakotay to her bridge station. He has a background in science, so he'll do. We need a new officer for Tactical II - I'll let you decide who's best qualified."

"Understood, sir." It felt odd to be speaking so formally -- the Logan had never worked that way -- but these were serious circumstances.

"Is there anything else to report?"

"Just one thing. Obviously we won't be sending anyone else down to the planet, but there's nothing to stop us from beaming that Sernaix up. Mike says we could set up a containment field in one of the cargo bays, find a frequency it couldn't absorb...."

"I don't think it's a good idea, Lieutenant. The risk is too high."

That's odd, thought Bruner. The captain seemed perfectly sincere, but it wasn't like him to reject a plan on the basis of risk. Not like him at all, in fact. Well, it wasn't important.

"No further reports are in yet, sir."

"Very well. Dis--"

Grant's communicator chirped. "Message for you, sir," announced Young from the bridge. "It's Command."

"Put it through," he replied. The viewscreen flickered on; Admiral Warhol appeared. Bruner noticed that the admiral's expression seemed milder than usual.

"Carl. I heard about what happened to your science officer... I'm sorry."

"Thank you, sir. But I assume this isn't a social call...."

"No." Warhol picked up a PADD and glanced over it. "Starfleet Intelligence has been monitoring enemy communications and has managed to locate a Sernaix stronghold. Your mission is to take the Logan there under cloak and conduct the most detailed scans you can."

"We can be under way in less than ten minutes."

"Good. I'm transmitting the coordinates to you now."

The numbers appeared on Grant's PADD. Bruner leaned over to have a look -- and froze. "These coordinates... the base is in the Alpha Quadrant!"

Warhol smiled ruefully. "Right on our front porch, Lieutenant."

* * *

The star lay within eight light-years of Earth, but it couldn't be seen with the naked eye. Red dwarfs simply don't put out enough energy to cover the distance. So, although it was the third closest stellar body to the Federation's famous homeworld, it had rested, undiscovered, for thousands of millennia. No planets had whirled around it; no comets had kept it company. It had been alone.

In the year 2366, for the first time, the star called Wolf 359 had no longer been alone. A cosmic eye blink later, that was true again.

Hidden between the star and the debris field, shielded from prying sensors by the intense electromagnetic radiation, a dark fortress waited patiently for the call to action. Soon it would be time to strike. Soon the vengeance would come. Soon.

And more than anything else, Wolf 359 longed to be alone again.

* * *

The first thing she saw when she entered the darkened room was Mike Mool on his way out. "Lieutenant," he said with a nod, and walked through the door.

Shari Young smiled. "I dunno about you," she said, "but I'd say he liked you more than he let on. He looked pretty down even for Mike."

There was no reply, of course. She hadn't expected one. Young was the only living thing in Deck 3, Section 9.

She ambled over to a window and gazed out. The stars were their usual stoic selves: motionless, silent, eternal. No matter what happened to the crew of the starship Logan, those stars would always be there.

"See, that's why I needed you around, Marsh," said Young. "If you ever caught me saying that stuff out loud, you'd have hit me with a fish or something. I can hear you now: 'What a silly cliché. You know full well that stars are gonna die like everything else -- they'll just take a little longer.' Guess we didn't know how much longer, eh?"

She turned around. "Sorry. That musta sounded mean. You're pretty close to the joke right now."

There was no answer from the torpedo tube where Lieutenant Commander Marsha Jones lay in state. Young walked up and put a hand on the UFP flag draped across it. "Scuse me a sec," she said, and put a small rumple in the flag. "There. Much better, dontcha think? Nobody's ever been comfortable in a blanket that flat."

Young sighed. "Course, the next person in here is just gonna smooth it out again. And swear at whoever messed it. Nobody on this ship knows what's really up. But why should today be different, eh?" She patted the coffin affectionately.

"That's Logan for ya. The boys got no idea what's right under their noses. It's always been you and me running this place... and Skip, of course. The rest of 'em? Pfft. No clue. They're all so busy thinkin' about their jobs and how important the mission is, they barely have lives of their own. They're still good guys, fun to be around, but they're kinda like kids. You can only talk to 'em about the stuff they understand."

Young sighed again. "I am really gonna miss you, you know that? You've left me all by myself on the U. S. S. Testosterone here. I'll keep piloting, an' I'll keep being the same Shari everybody knows. But without you... it's just not gonna be the same. I don't have an equal anymore."

With a quick turn, she pushed herself up on top of the coffin. She looked down at the head of it. "Hey, Marsh," she said, "remember when Skip told us? You know, about the whole Section 13 thing? Boy, he hates it when I call it that.... Anyway, I always wondered what you thought about the whole deal. What you really thought, I mean. Didja buy what Skip was sellin' about saving the Federation from itself? About how guys like us needed to go a step or two outside the rules once in a while, so everybody else could go on thinkin' they were the Good Guys an' they'd always win?"

"Me, well, you know me. I can never turn down an invite. But I still haven't figured out whether you believed in what he was saying... or just believed in him. He'd already been captain for a coupla

years, and we both liked 'im. I think he meant what he said about wantin' us in so he wouldn't have to hide stuff from us anymore. I mean, maybe the 13ers told him to get a coupla signers, but maybe it was just something he needed to do. To keep from goin' nuts, ya know?

"I kinda think that's where I'm headed. Nuts City. Stuck on a flyin' kindergarten with just Skip to talk to about what we're really up to, and you know he's not gonna win any conversation prizes. And right now nobody's any fun -- they're all busy goin' bats over this new guy. Come on, who cares what his story is? If he's an okay guy, we'll get to like 'im, and if he's not, we won't. After all, he came for free, right? S'not like we traded somebody for him."

A pause.

"Well, we didn't think we did."

Young got down. "Sorry, Marsh. Wasn't really thinkin' there. But hey, half the folks around are that way 24/7, so no biggie, right? Didn't mean to bug ya. Lemme just say that if this was some kinda trade, we came up way short. A bucket of Tattoo Boys won't get me my pal back."

With another sigh, she wandered toward the door. "Yep, it's nuts for me. A big bucket a' cashews. If ya ask me, this whole Section 13 thing just isn't fun anymore. Maybe I'll finally bring the whole thing down. Or the Federation -- that'll be neat to watch. An' then I'll set up the United Federation of Shari and make everybody wear duranium pants and stand on their heads all day. You'da helped me do that, wouldn't ya?"

Young smiled. "See ya around, Marsh. I'll be joinin' you one of these days. Till then, send a postcard now an' then, huh? Lemme know what's up. It's gotta be more exciting wherever you are. Don't worry about us, hon. You just have yourself a time."

With one last wave to the coffin, Shari Young turned and walked out.

* * *

"We're going where?"

"Wolf 359, Commander. To the Sernaix base Intelligence has located there. I don't see what's not to understand."

"How about what Starfleet is thinking?"

"Mr. Chakotay... you surprise me. Earlier today, you were reminding me of the necessity of risk. How is this any different?"

"Because some risks are too high to run. My ship barely survived its encounters with single Sernaix vessels. The idea of taking a weaker ship to investigate an entire Sernaix fortress... it's suicidal!"

"Admiral Warhol feels differently -- and so do I. Your Voyager may have had futuristic armour, but it lacked a cloaking device. With that advantage, we should be able to avoid engaging the Sernaix at all. I remind you that our mission has always been observatory, not conflictual."

"It's too dangerous! The Sernaix have technology we can't imagine. How can you be so certain our cloak will fool them?"

"What made you so certain that the Sernaix wouldn't stop your plan to destroy their armada?"

"That was different. Earth's survival was at stake!"

"Mr. Chakotay... Wolf 359 is within twenty-four hours of Sol at maximum warp. The Sernaix base was there for days before we managed to detect it. I submit that Earth's survival is at stake again."

"The destruction of this ship won't do Earth any good."

"But the data we gain from our scans may. This mission is critical, Commander, and we're the only cloak-capable starship for thirty light-years. I think you understand why we need to do this -- and I think you'd be pushing for the same thing in my place."

"Sir --"

"Mr. Chakotay! I have heard your concerns and I have taken them into consideration. I have also made my decision. The time for argument is over."

"Aye, sir."

"And I expect you now, whatever your misgivings, to do your duty to the very best of your ability. Is that understood?"

"It is, sir."

"Good."

"Am I dismissed, Captain?"

"No... not yet. Commander, the remainder of this discussion is off the record, and I want you to be completely up front. You don't think much of me, do you?"

"Sir, I --"

"Drop the formalities. As I said, off the record."

"All right. I don't necessarily... dislike you, as a person. I would say that I have some concerns about your command procedures."

"Ah. So I'm not a bad person, just a bad captain."

"That's not what I --"

"I'm kidding, Commander. Let's hear these concerns of yours."

"Well... you're inconsistent. You seem to be bent on taking whatever course of action I disagree with. You're secretive about many elements of our mission. You respect the opinions of your other officers, but not mine."

"You're new to this ship, Chakotay. I've served with these 'other officers' for as long as you served with your friends on Voyager. I trust them because I've learned to, and they trust me for the same reason. Let me ask you a hypothetical question."

"All right."

"I worked with your former chief of operations, Mr. Kim, and found him a solid, dependable officer. You must have relied on him a great deal in the Delta Quadrant. Now suppose Starfleet had somehow assigned you a new Ops officer -- call him Daniel -- and he had taken Mr. Kim's place among the bridge crew. Would you have immediately relied on Daniel as you had relied on Harry, or would there have been a period of... adjustment?"

"I suppose there would have been."

"My belief is that it would have gone even further. What I just described could happen on any ship, but your Voyager crew was close-knit, bonded by years of forced coexistence. One might almost go so far as to say you were a family. And this intrusion, this non sequitur in your midst -- how comfortable could you have been with him? At least at first?"

"I realize the point you're trying to make, but there's a difference. Newcomer or not, I'm your first officer. It's my job to support you -- and also to provide a check in case you need to rethink what you're doing. If you don't listen to what I have to say, why am I here at all?"

"Do you want an answer to that?"

"By all means."

"What I'm about to say doesn't leave this room. Mr. Chakotay, it's no secret that Admiral Warhol has strong objections to the way Kathryn Janeway ran her ship."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. He came very close to ending her career last year."

"Something else that's no secret is the good captain's fondness for you."

"Now just a --"

"Don't read too much into what I'm saying, Commander. The admiral is a good man -- he and I have been friends for many years. But he does have his faults, and one of them is his willingness to hold a grudge. I think that one of the reasons he assigned you to me was to take a small revenge against her."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I think you deserve to know the whole truth. And because you're right -- I haven't been treating you with enough respect. The simple fact is that I didn't want you here any more than you wanted to come."

"I never said I don't want to be here."

"It's written all over your face, Chakotay. Right next to the tattoo. Relax! We all understand how you feel. You've been ousted from the crew you've known for so long, thrown into a new one without any time to adjust. No one would desire that fate."

"With all due respect --"

"Save it. Still off the record."

"If you're so understanding and sympathetic, why were you ignoring me in the first place?"

"Because I'm not perfect either. I've been too caught up in my own frustration to notice yours. I imagine the same is true of the rest of the senior staff. It genuinely isn't true that we don't like or respect you. But you're not...."

"I'm not one of you."

"Not yet, Commander. You'll fit in. Well... now that we've got some of that out in the open, do we understand each other a bit better?"

"I think we do, Captain. I hope so."

“Very good. Dismissed. Commander?”

“Yes?”

“You will fit in.”

“Thank you, sir.”

* * *

Outside the starship Logan, a slow transformation began. All the exterior lights and EM emitters went offline. The glow of the pseudonacelles and phaser banks faded to black. The ship’s power signature became dormant, unreadable.

Then, beginning at the front of the ship, space began to twist . An observer gazing through those few cubic metres of space would have seen them as if through the heated air above a candle flame. The stars beyond wavered from side to side, their light deflected and bent by the “ghosting” effect.

Centimeter by centimeter, the transformation crept along the hull. The bridge dome disappeared. The ablative hull armour became first translucent, then invisible. In less than fifteen seconds, the ship was completely hidden from the visible spectrum.

Hidden, but not gone. A few short moments later, space curved again -- in a strikingly different way. The warp effect, whose defining equations were first laid down by Stephen Hawking in his final years and which was finally observed by Zefram Cochrane four decades later, spread through subspace for parsecs in every direction. The distance between Re’fruPaQ Deep and Wolf 359 grew tens of light-years shorter in less than a second. A primitive, planet-bound race would have called it a miracle; the Federation knew it to be nothing more than the application of science, but it was no less awe-inspiring for that fact.

In a flash of silent, invisible thunder, the Logan was away. On its back rode the hope of the Federation.

But whether that hope was to be found anywhere within, no one could say.

* * *

“Good question,” said Professor Miles O’Brien. “You’re right -- the new optronic sealers do look promising. I won’t be a bit surprised if they’re the standard ten years from now. But they’re also an unproven new technology, and until that technology is proven, we have to stick with stem bolts. We don’t want our nacelles falling off the minute we hit Warp 5, do we?”

The class got a laugh out of that thought. “Does that answer your question, Cadet?” asked the professor with a smile.

“I guess,” replied Caleb Fromme. “Still, maybe it’s just me, but the whole stem-bolt procedure seems pretty tedious. I know it means extra safety, but couldn’t there be a little more automation?”

O’Brien chuckled. “I used to think the same thing -- but just wait till you get some practice in. After you’ve worked with stem bolts for a while, you’ll be able to lock down a full-size bulkhead in less than a minute. They really are simpler than they seem.”

“They could sure be simpler,” said Fromme rather ruefully. “Somebody oughta make them self-sealing at least.”

“Self-sealing stem bolts? Never heard of such a thing.”

"Hmph," muttered Fromme to the cadet next to him -- his roommate, Icheb. "Where's progress when you need it?"

"In the Delta Quadrant," replied the ex-Borg.

Fromme stared blankly.

"On Stardate 53982.0, Voyager encountered a being who claimed to be the living embodiment of progress. After a brief conflict, during which the being briefly accelerated Voyager's technology to 39th-century level and then reversed it, Captain Janeway negotiated a ceasefire. To the best of our knowledge, the being is still there."

Fromme was still staring. His pupils had dilated.

"Gotcha," said Icheb.

"HA!" The human laughed loudly and slapped Icheb on the shoulder. "You're finally gettin' the hang of it! I'm telling you, just a couple more weeks and you'll be ready for stand-up...." The Brunali smiled at that.

O'Brien cleared his throat, feigning annoyance at the disruption. "Now then, if you gentlemen are done, we can --"

The bell rang.

"- call it a day. See you next week, cadets. Remember: if you try to combine studying and watching the dom-jot match...."

"....you'll end up doing neither very well," the class finished for him. O'Brien grinned; he'd taught them well.

As the students filed out, Admiral Warhol got up from his back-row seat and met O'Brien at the front of the room. "Admiral," the Irishman said good-naturedly. He stuck out his hand, which Warhol shook. "Decided to bone up on our first-year engineering courses, have we?"

The admiral smiled. "Fundamental Equipment Procedures isn't exactly the class I remember most fondly. But after this past hour, I think I might recall it better if you had been teaching back then."

"Oh, you give me more credit than I deserve, sir," said O'Brien, looking a little embarrassed. "I just tell the kids what I know. Well... not all I know. A man's gotta keep a trick or two up his sleeve, eh?" Both officers chuckled.

"Now, Mr. O'Brien...." Warhol straightened up and took on a slightly more serious tone. "Does the name Thomas Gregory ring a bell?"

"Does it ever. I served with him for five years on the Uhura -- best damned engineer Alpha Centauri ever came up with. He's stationed at Starfleet Headquarters now, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's chief engineer -- for a little longer, anyway. Mr. Gregory will be retiring at the end of the week."

"Is he? Glad to hear it. After sixty years in the Fleet, nobody deserves it more."

"I agree, but we certainly will miss him at Headquarters."

"I know what you mean. After my assistant went into politics, it was never quite the same. So tell me, who's gonna replace Tom?"

Warhol smiled.

"Well, come on, te-" O'Brien froze. "Sir... are you serious?"

"Always, Mr. O'Brien. I've spoken with the executive in charge of personnel deployments on Earth, and he's authorized me to promote you to Chief Engineer of Starfleet Headquarters."

O'Brien was speechless, so Warhol continued. "Of course, the transfer is entirely voluntary. Don't think, however, that you'd have to give up teaching. If you wish to continue, we can make room in your schedule for one or two classes a week, and someone else can handle the marking."

"Is... is there a rank upgrade as well?"

Warhol smiled knowingly. "Not in your case. I can tell that you're not the kind of person who finds the notion of high rank attractive. You're just a man who likes his work, and we'll respect that... Chief."

O'Brien was surprised at how good it felt to hear that title again. It seemed somehow right. Still.... "Sir, this offer is... amazing, but I hope you'll understand that I need to talk to my wife before I decide anything. We have two kids and a third on the way. I can't rush into anything without thinking about what's best for them."

Warhol raised a hand. "Not a problem in the least, Mr. O'Brien. Take the rest of the week to decide if you need it. But I do hope you'll accept. Not just anyone can fill Mr. Gregory's shoes." The admiral checked his wrist chronometer. "Oh -- I shouldn't be keeping you. Your next class begins at 1700, and you'll need time to get there."

O'Brien checked the time and nodded. "You're right -- I'd better go. Will you be auditing that class too?" he jested.

"I have business here, I'm afraid. An admiral's work is never done."

"Then we'll have to get in touch again in a couple of days. Do I contact you through Headquarters or --"

"Not to worry, Chief. I'll find you."

"Very good, sir." O'Brien shook the admiral's hand again. "And thanks."

"Not at all, Chief, not at all. Good luck with the next batch."

O'Brien headed out the door. As soon as he was out of earshot, Admiral Warhol glanced around the corners of the room, found the darkest one, and stared at it. It would just be a matter of time. He waited for -

* * *

Interlude.

In Re'fruPaQ Deep, three Vor'cha-class attack cruisers came out of warp. They were uncloaked.

General Rodek had made it Imperial policy to spread the cruisers out, never using more than one in a single fleet. They were few and badly needed. But these three were now required for something far more important.

Vengeance.

The cruisers made no effort to hide their movements. They would be visible to any enemy in the sector, but that was no longer important. Vengeance called them.

They brought their disruptors to the maximum safe power levels, and then exceeded those levels. They armed their state-of-the-art ion torpedoes, setting them for maximum yield. They slid open secret hatches that held devastating hexicobalt warheads. Vengeance called them.

On the bridge of each ship, the same events happened in the same order. The captain called for a scan of the planet below. An officer reported that the crash site and one Sernaix life sign had been found. The viewscreen displayed a bloody field where hundreds of Klingon warriors lay dead. As one, the captain and crew leapt to their feet and howled. Their voices swelled to a deafening pitch. They made certain that their warning would be heard in Sto'vo'kor.

Vengeance called them. Vengeance called them.

Every weapon on every cruiser plunged with mad velocity to the planet below. Disruptors carved deep into the crust. Torpedoes vaporized the mantle wherever they fell. Hexicobalt warheads plunged into the deep pits dug by the other weapons. Shielded from the heat by five independent force field systems, they continued their descent until they reached the outer core -- where they detonated in unison.

The three cruisers had just enough time to go to warp before the planet exploded. Its particles spread across the sector like seeds in the wind. Re'fruPaQ Deep was forever changed.

The cruisers made their way back to Qo'noS, and the warriors on board laughed and sang songs of death in honourable battle.

Vengeance called no longer.

End of interlude.

* * *

"Wondering how many marbles you could stack in it, AI?"

The admiral spun around. It was West, of course. When had Warhol ever seen him coming?

"I'll admit to a flair for drama -- and dark corners -- but surely you know me well enough not to think me predictable. I'm getting old, my friend, but not that old."

"Well, I'm glad you haven't lost your touch," said a mildly peeved Warhol. "Did you perform that background check?"

"Yes. Your suspicions have been more than confirmed."

Warhol smiled. "I knew he had to have some kind of experience with the Section."

"More than that. He was a key player in the sting operation that killed Sloan and renewed the changeling threat."

"Are you serious?"

"Always. This man is a dedicated enemy of Section 31."

"But not an active one -- which is all the more reason to continue as planned."

Mr. West shook his head. "Sometimes I don't understand you, AI. It would be effortless for us to stop this threat. Engineers suffer on-the-job accidents all the time. Why go to all this bother?"

"We've never thought the same way about these things, have we?" replied the admiral. "I remind you that I work with Section 31 only because I believe such an organization is necessary for the greater good. That greater good includes going to any necessary lengths to avoid the loss of human lives. Besides, where you see a threat... I see a resource."

"Oh?"

"Headquarters does need a new chief engineer; O'Brien's qualified, though not really the best choice. More to the point, his record shows moral dedication. I assume you noticed the reprimand on his record for actions on Stardate 51536?"

"Those actions were the reason we stopped considering him as a potential recruit. He assaulted a superior officer to save a criminal's life. This is your "moral dedication"?"

"In fact, it is. O'Brien is governed by personal morality; when that conflicts with his orders, the orders fall. People with that philosophy aren't swayed by changes in government or popular opinion. They will do the right thing. Hasn't that always been 31's goal as well?"

"No," said Mr. West. "The 'right thing' is relative. The security of the Federation isn't."

"Say what you will, but I would rather command officers with minds of their own."

"And I would rather command those who recognize that their minds can be wrong. Only a person who knows his own limits has any business going past the limits others place on him." West smiled. "We've had this argument often enough to know that we won't resolve it today."

"True. To return to the point, then, I see O'Brien as a potential ally as well as a potential enemy. By transferring him to Headquarters, I give myself the opportunity to evaluate the chances and, eventually, sound him out. If he can be turned, he'll make a useful ally; if not, I'll be in a position to find out quickly. I've done this before with officers who've been involved with the Section -- it's how I recruited Thalia."

"Yes, she is an asset to us now."

Warhol smiled. "Your friends close, your enemies closer... but the closest spot to those who may yet become either."

"How quotable."

"Thank you. Marsha Jones is dead."

"That's less quotable."

Warhol was startled -- he'd expected at least a little surprise. "You knew?"

"I run the largest intelligence network in the quadrant. I know what you had for breakfast every day of last summer."

"July 29."

"Ktarian eggs."

"How?"

"Scrambled."

"I meant as in how did you know."

"That's classified."

The admiral sighed. "Moving along, then. I'd just like to say how deeply I sympathize with your loss and how furious I am that you caused it."

"Really?" smiled West. "Do tell."

"She was killed by a Sernaix! You assured me that there would be none left alive!"

"We underestimated their physical prowess. The one that killed Agent Jones had survived a corsair crash and hand-to-hand combat with a large group of Klingons. Do you know any humanoids that can do that? Neither did we. Now we know better."

"You're missing the point. Jones can be replaced -- but the Logan's cover no longer can. At least one Sernaix knows about her now. Do you have any idea what that means for the plan?"

West shook his head. "As always, Al, you're worrying too much. The witness has been dead for" - he checked his wrist chronometer -- "nine minutes now. He may have been in touch with the Realm beforehand, we don't know; however, even if he was, all he knew was that Starfleet officers were investigating the battlefield. There's been no leak."

"It's you who aren't worrying enough. Maybe all your explanations are right. Maybe Phase Three can continue. But this is easily the closest we've come to a major breach, and that wouldn't be so if Section 31 had been thorough in its planning. You got sloppy -- that's all there is to it."

"Fine. Then we can move on." Maddeningly, West seemed completely uninterested in the accusations; Warhol's anger passed through him as if he weren't there. Warhol decided he might as well simply change the subject.

"The Logan is en route to the Wolf 359 base now," said Warhol, "and damn the Sernaix for building it there. They know it gives them a psychological advantage from the first move."

"Oh?"

Warhol was stunned. "What do you mean, 'oh'? You don't think a Starfleet crew will find it uncomfortable to battle so close to the debris of the greatest massacre in modern history?"

"I for one would find that inspiring. It's a chance to reverse the historical record -- to balance the Borg's victory with one of our own."

"West... you may protect Earth's interests, but sometimes I wonder if you're even human."

That got him angry. "Consummately human. If I were an alien, I could have taken over the Federation a long time ago."

"In a sense, you have," said Warhol.

It took less than a second. The admiral blinked his eyes, and before he had opened them, Mr. West had gripped his uniform collar and shoved him into the wall. He glared fiercely at Warhol. "I protect the Federation. I believe in the Federation. The very last thing I intend to do is tear it down. Section 31 is not about petty power, it is about safeguarding the individual freedom of every Federation citizen. If that can only be done by crossing certain moral lines, I will do it, but that does not make me immoral by nature."

"No," said Warhol, unimpressed. "It makes you a martyr. You're proud of what you do because it makes you the noble, silent hero, sacrificing your own morality for others. You're a hypocrite."

West relaxed the pressure against Warhol a little... and actually laughed for a moment. "I like that about you, AI," he said. "The way you don't let anyone intimidate you. The confidence in your personal power."

Then, without warning, he shoved Warhol even harder. "But do not make the mistake of thinking of us as peers," he hissed. "You and I are not equal. Remember who calls the shots in this alliance of ours."

"I will," agreed Warhol. They both knew who he meant.

Mr. West released the admiral and stepped back into the main part of the room. "A pleasure as always," he said, and he vanished during another eye blink. Warhol immediately walked out of the room.

* * *

"Entering home sector of Wolf 359."

"Red alert. Commander Chakotay to the bridge," said Grant, and he turned to Shari Young. "Remember -- don't start until we've completely dropped out of warp."

The pilot smiled. "I know, I know. 'Faster than light, no left or right.' First thing they taught us at the Academy."

"I coulda sworn I caught you maneuvering at warp on the Tau Cygna run."

"Skip! How can you accuse me of such a thing?" Young's expression screamed false innocence.

Grant smiled. "Just making sure. Okay, ladies and gents -- let's do it!"

* * *

Vacuum crackled as the spacetime metric prepared itself. Less than a moment later, subspace opened its incomprehensible mouth and spewed forth an enormous, irregular blob of mass/energy. The shape instantly resolved itself into a tapered disc whose surface was marked NCC-148607 in some places and U. S. S. Logan in others. The rupture closed; the warp envelope vanished. The law of mass/energy conservation, violated locally when the ship went to warp, was now satisfied globally. All was well with the universe... or its physics, at least.

Twenty microseconds after Logan appeared, its cloaking generator established a perimeter around the ship. Hidden photon redirectors and luminal emitters began their work, using computer algorithms so complex they could only be explained through other computer algorithms. Not only did every visible trace of the starship disappear, but a tachyon matrix, powered by a barely-contained quantum microsingularity, was able to spread the cloaking effect a full millisecond backward in time. This was the Romulans' brilliant solution to the problem of cloaking devices not working instantly after warp: the tachyon matrix covered tracks after they had been made. All was well with the starship... or its illegal Romulan cloaking device, at least.

After one second, it was all over. The Logan was in normal space and perfectly hidden from prying eyes.

And barrelling, at a speed Einstein would have considered ludicrous, straight into the largest graveyard in Federation history.

* * *

Chakotay reached the bridge and froze. The viewscreen showed the wreckage of 39 Starfleet ships -- coming up fast. It could only mean one thing. "You took us out of warp right behind the debris field!"

"That's right," said Grant, turning his head. He gestured to the Science console. "Going to take your station? You can switch with Sam if you'd prefer."

"Why are we doing it this way? There are dozens of other places we could have come out of warp --"

"But none with a field of wreckage to help break up our warp signature. A good scanner could have detected that, cloaking device or none."

Chakotay was still shocked. "So now we have to fly through it! Don't you find that a little disrespectful?"

"Maybe, but the practical benefits outweigh that. And now, if there are no further questions, would you please have a seat?"

A tense moment passed between them... and then Chakotay began to walk over to his station. Grant turned back to face the viewscreen.

As Chakotay passed the Ops station, Morgan pulled him over for a moment. "Sir," he said in low tones, "I want to thank you for not... well, turning me in. You coulda had me brigged for the next eon after what I did."

The first officer put a hand on Morgan's shoulder. "Sam, given my past, how could I justify not giving others a bit of slack? I've been where you were -- I know how hard it is. Losing friends is the worst part of a Starfleet career." Unbidden, an image of Kes came to Chakotay's mind.

"Yeah... yeah, I know. First time for me, though. Does it get easier?"

More mental images flashed before Chakotay. Hogan. Kaplan. Carey. Dalby. Admiral Janeway.... "I wish I could say yes, Sam. But it doesn't."

Before Morgan could answer, the pilot's console beeped loudly. "Debris field in five seconds, gang!" said Young. "Everybody brace!"

Chakotay hurried to his seat and got a solid grip on both sides of the Science console. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the others do the same -- except Grant, who lacked a console and instead gripped the arms of his chair. The ships on the viewscreen grew larger....

...and twisted at a stomach-churning right angle. Young's fingers flew over the conn, maneuvering the Logan through a series of twists and loops that no twentieth-century roller coaster could have matched. Shattered hulls whizzed past the ship; some were only centimetres from a collision. The bridge crew held on with all their might, jolted at every turn as the inertial dampers struggled to keep up.

Finally, the view on the main screen stabilized again. The Logan's path to Wolf 359 was clear.

"Well done," said Captain Grant, catching his breath. "Were we at full impulse that entire time?"

Young nodded. "It's why you pay me the big bucks, Skip."

"Sir?" Barry Bruner was pointing at a dark spot near the star's bottom left corner. "There's our target."

"Take us in, Shari. Steady as she goes."

Chakotay downloaded the base's coordinates from Tactical and ran through the usual sensor sweeps. "Odd," he said. "I'm not picking up any energy signatures or life signs. It's as if the base is deserted."

"Is that likely?" asked Grant.

"I wouldn't have thought so. It's atypical of the Sernaix to abandon their equipment."

The captain rubbed his chin. "They must be hiding their life signs. Or else...."

"....it's a decoy," finished Chakotay. They exchanged a worried look.

As if on cue, Bruner shouted "Incoming! We've got a slipstream channel somewhere within three thousand kilometers!"

Grant stood bolt upright. "What's coming through?"

"A Sernaix ship. I'm getting mass readings...." He paused. "No, this has gotta be wrong. We've never seen anything like it."

"How big, Lieutenant?"

"Remember the Rondax mission? That fleet they turned out to have?"

"Yes, that was a nice surprise."

"Right. Bigger than that."

"The ships weren't all that big."

"Not bigger than the ships," said Bruner ominously. "Bigger than the fleet."

Everyone inhaled quickly -- except Chakotay, who felt out of the loop yet again. He didn't have long to feel that way. "Captain," he said, noticing the data on his console, "the channel is opening right underneath us!"

"Ahead full impulse! Now!" Young's fingers were already moving. The Logan sped forward just in time....

....and the largest Sernaix ship ever sighted spun out of the vortex, all weapons at the ready.

The crew stared, unbelieving, at the monstrosity on the viewscreen. Grant was the first to snap out of it. "All right, everyone start scanning. We want all the information we can get on this thing. Barry, get me tactical data. What can hurt it?"

"Nothing," said Bruner after punching a few buttons. "It's shielded with at least six layers of that photonium stuff. Not even another Sernaix ship could take it down."

"Dreadnought," said the first officer quietly.

Grant turned. "Chakotay?"

"When I was in the Maquis, I once captured a giant Cardassian missile. My engineer upgraded it with all the shields and weapons she could find and fired it off without my knowledge. We thought it had been destroyed -- but Voyager found it again in the Delta Quadrant. We couldn't stop it. Nothing we threw at it did the slightest damage. We nearly had to autodestruct to keep it from destroying an inhabited world." Chakotay shuddered at the memory. "The Cardassians, the Borg,

Species 8472... they've all had weaknesses I could exploit. Dreadnought was the only truly invulnerable enemy I ever faced. Until now."

A few moments of worried silence passed. Finally, Morgan reported: "The good news is, it doesn't look like they can see us. Their scans are equal in all directions and they're not using a tachyon sweep."

"Good," said Grant. "Then we can still accomplish our mission. When we finish these scans and get them to Starfleet, maybe they'll come up with --"

"Sir?" said Bruner. "You just spoke of the devil." He switched the viewscreen to aft view. Behind the ship, hundreds of lights were flashing. One by one, a fleet of Starfleet ships appeared. With them in lesser numbers were Klingon vessels, Romulan warbirds, and... Cardassian ships? Chakotay tried, but honestly couldn't remember whether the Cardassians were supposed to be allies or enemies now.

"It's the cavalry!" said Morgan with a grin.

Grant spun around. "And we're right between them and the dreadnought! Shari, GO!"

The Logan desperately powered up its engines as a torrent of friendly fire came to claim her....

* * *

Alistair Warhol sat mulling over the meeting with Mr. West when his office door chimed. Hmm... 1800 hours. I don't remember booking a meeting then. "Come," he said.

Agent Johns walked in and characteristically went right to the point. "I just met with Sycorax again. She's frustrated about losing people to the Klingons, but I don't think she knows we were involved."

"What does she know?"

"That Klingon forces successfully downed two corsairs and destroyed the planet they crashed on. She says not even her people can survive that."

"Good. The longer we can keep her from finding out Logan's involvement, the better." Warhol stood. "Good work, Johns. The next thing I need you to do is --"

Without warning, the room and Johns disappeared. Admiral Warhol found himself standing on what looked like a planet... a metal planet? He reached down -- metal, all right. But there were also plants all around, some alien and some terrestrial. Inexplicably, they were rooted directly in the planet's metal surface, without any signs of malnutrition or ill health. Somewhere in the distance, machines were thrumming steadily.

Warhol looked up; the sky was filled with an eerie green light. There was no sun.

"Welcome," said a voice behind the admiral. He turned to see, standing behind him, a human with light brown skin and long, white hair. The human was male and looked to be in his late fifties. He wore a maroon Starfleet uniform, but an out-of-date one, the mid-60s design.

"Who are you?" demanded Warhol. "Where did you bring me?"

"I am Ankin Rotor," the man replied, "and this is my world. It is the world that I am gradually bringing into existence."

Looks real enough to me, thought the admiral.

"It would," replied Rotor. "And it will."

"You read my thoughts!" accused Warhol.

"Thoughts are mine. Now, Alistair Warhol, let me explain why I brought you here. You and I have a common enemy."

"Who?"

The human stared.

"Kathryn Janeway," said Warhol, not knowing how he knew.

"You know because I know. Janeway is your enemy because you have made her so. She is my enemy because this world will never come into existence while she lives."

"She would stop you?"

"To her last breath, as would her crew. She has taught them her blindness. They must all be nullified."

"Killed?"

"Nullified. You can do that."

"Not now, I can't," said Warhol. "Believe me, I would have Janeway decommissioned if I could. But right now she has too many high-placed allies, and I hate to admit it, but she may be right about our needing her to defeat the Sernaix."

"The Sernaix are irrelevant. We must stop Janeway now, while we can."

Warhol began to get an odd feeling... "You're not really human, are you?"

"No. This form is the one I use when communicating with those of your race."

"Very well. You think we have to stop Janeway -- fine. Why don't you do it?"

"My resources are great but finite, and I can spare none yet. That was why I contacted you."

Warhol was becoming frustrated. "Look, I've given you my reasons. And even if I hadn't, you've barely told me anything about who and what you represent."

"I represent myself, and I am Ankin Rotor."

"Then Ankin Rotor can do his own dirty work."

Warhol started to turn -- and found that he couldn't. Something had paralyzed him. He tried to speak, but couldn't do that either. What's going on here? he thought, starting to panic.

"I tried diplomacy," said the human with a nasty smile. "You can't say I didn't."

Intense pain swept over the admiral, reaching into every part of his body. To his horror, Warhol suddenly realized that his paralysis was total. His heart wasn't beating. His lungs weren't pumping. His blood wasn't flowing. Then why can I feel pain? Why can I even think? The answer came to him immediately: Rotor had spared his nervous system and brain. Warhol couldn't believe the man's sadism. This had to be the most painful thing that could be done to a human.

Rotor grinned. "Not at all."

All around Warhol, the metal planet came alive. Steel tendrils shot out in every direction, their tips sharper than any razor blade. The plants, too, began to move and grow. Metal and living matter stabbed into Warhol's legs, his arms, his chest. A needle-like branch shot through one temple and came out the other. A metal tendril coiled around Warhol's neck and squeezed until his flesh ripped apart.

And he could feel everything.

"This is the least of my power," whispered Rotor conspiratorially. "I would show you more, but your pain receptors have a fairly low capacity. Remember one thing: I can do this to you whenever I wish, for as long as I wish. Eliminate the threat of Kathryn Janeway -- or I will wish." With that, the human version of Ankin Rotor faded away.

Warhol would have screamed, but he couldn't move a muscle as the tentacles tore at him. They kept up the torture for a good fifteen minutes before coming together for the grand finale. Together, they shot into his abdominal cavity and ripped their way up through his neck and into his skull, where they wrapped themselves around his brain and -

"Sir? Sir?"

Warhol was back in his office. He could move again, and he forced himself to do it, despite the red-hot pain he could still feel. "J... Johns... I..."

The operative tapped his comm badge. "Johns to Sickbay. We have a --"

"No!" With an overpowering effort, Warhol threw off the effects of his mental torment. "I'm all right. I just had a moment of... confusion there."

Johns smiled bemusedly. "Getting old, Admiral."

Warhol sat down, trying to get used to the concept of breathing again. "Thank you for your concern, Johns. You can go."

"Sir, didn't you say there was something else?"

"It's not important. Go ahead... I'll contact you later."

"Aye sir," said Johns, not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. He turned and left.

Warhol slowly brought his hand up to tap his comm badge. "Leucking," he said, "get me Carl Grant. Now."

* * *

A Romulan disruptor passed within millimetres of the Logan's stern, but didn't make contact. The ship had leapt to full impulse with only microseconds to spare.

"That was too close," said Morgan, letting out a held breath. "With our shields down for the cloak, one hit and we'd have been completely felled."

"Hey!" said Grant, annoyed. "I've told you about using that kind of language on my bridge. Young, take us to a safe distance."

"Is there a safe distance?" she asked.

"Seventy thousand light-years."

Young smiled. "Understood, sir."

Chakotay waited for ten seconds, but saw that, for whatever reason, Grant wasn't giving the order to engage. Had he frozen under pressure? Whatever the cause, someone had to give the order for him. "Barry," the first officer said, 'drop the cloak and raise shields. We'll target their weapons syste-

"Belay that!" Grant turned to look at Chakotay. "Is there still some part of our mission you don't understand? It's really just a one-sentence concept. Look, but don't touch."

Chakotay was about to reply when Bruner spoke again. "More Sernaix ships coming in, sir! I'm reading nine slipstream channels!"

"More dreadnoughts?"

"No -- they're smaller ones, like we've seen before. Scouts, mostly." Another beep. "And did I mention that the dreadnought is launching corsairs?"

"How many?"

"So far? Two." (Beep.) "Hundred." (Beep.) "Two hundred and two."

"Not good. Fleet status, Chakotay?"

"It looks like we're holding our own so far. Only three ships destroyed, three disabled. And we've taken out at least five corsairs."

Grant raised an eyebrow. "Not bad. Do you think the Cardassian weapons may be working better because they're new to the Sernaix?"

"They're not new to the Sernaix," said Chakotay with a grimace. "There were two Galor-class cruisers in the Bubble. The Sernaix took them both out in less than a minute."

"Killjoy."

Chakotay refused to return the attempted camaraderie. "Sir, we have to enter this fight! One ship may not make a difference, but if there's any chance we can help, we have to try!"

"Commander, our orders were very clear. We've transmitted our information on the dreadnought to Starfleet over subspace, and they'll forward it to the fleet if they can find any kind of weakness. That is the absolute maximum action we are authorized to take."

"Dammit, Captain, those orders weren't written for this situation!"

"That doesn't matter. Orders are orders."

"With all due respect, that's not true. Orders are orders plus context. If Starfleet knew we were here, don't you think they'd tell us to fight? People are dying right here, right now!"

"Mr. Chakotay, maybe your time in the Delta Quadrant has left you believing that rules don't matter when you're far enough from Starfleet, but this is not the time for --"

"Sir!" shouted Morgan. "We've got a signal coming in from Command. Admiral Warhol needs to talk to you."

"Now?" asked captain and first officer in unison.

"I know, but it's a Priority Minus One secure transmission. Urgent, top-secret, eyes only."

"Damn." Grant headed for his ready room. "Put it through. Chakotay, you have the conn."

I'm in command? NOW? What do I do? Follow orders and watch people die, or cross the line and betray my captain?

As the door closed behind Grant, Chakotay would have given anything for the guidance of the Sky Spirits....

* * *

"End it," said Warhol, and Captain Grant could see a wild terror in his eyes. What had happened to him?

"Sir," said Grant, "we're nowhere near that part of the plan. I don't think we'll need to do it at all. Chakotay's a good officer, and I he's finally beginning to stop thinking of me as his enemy. If I can win his trust, I bet I'll be able to convince him to see things our way. I just need a little more time."

"NO!" Grant had never seen the admiral so shaken. "It has to end now. I have no time to explain. Janeway's crew is too great a threat -- we can no longer afford to continue these efforts. Find out what Chakotay knows and eliminate him."

Grant was stunned. "Alistair... you've never ordered me to kill before. You've always said that human life is --"

"DO IT!"

Warhol ended the communication, and Grant tried to collect his thoughts. There had to be some new factor in play, one powerful enough to make Warhol take desperate actions.

But to knock down Chakotay? NOW? What do I do? Follow orders and abandon all the progress I've made with him, or cross the line and betray my commander?

As the door opened before him, Grant would have given anything for some kind of guidance -- but the only god he had ever worshipped was Duty. He had no other choice but to do his duty to the Section.

* * *

Moments earlier, Chakotay had made his decision. It had been one of the hardest in his career. But he had decided, and there was no turning back.

"Helm," he said, "take us within --"

"Get off my bridge!"

Chakotay turned to see Grant leaving his ready room. "Sir?"

"I heard that order! You were going to engage!"

"What? No! I was bringing us closer to get more accurate --"

"The hell you were. Barry, get this bastard to the brig."

Chakotay couldn't believe his ears. "Captain, you can't be serious!"

"Yeah!" Both men turned, startled, at the sound of Sam Morgan's voice. "Give him the benefit, Skip. You only heard half his sentence. How can you be sure what he meant?"

"I can't take the chance," said Grant angrily. "Maybe he is innocent, but if he was going to break my orders, I can't risk having him here at a critical time like this. Bruner, now!"

"Captain," said Morgan even more earnestly, "unless he's a proven criminal, you can't put him in the brig!"

"Fine. Take him to his quarters, Barry. No need to lock them -- he'll be a good boy. But get it straight, Chakotay -- you're relieved. You don't come back on this bridge until I tell you to."

The tactical officer slowly drew his phaser. "Sir... I'm sorry. You'll have to come with me."

"Lead the way," said Chakotay without turning his head from Grant. The first officer's expression was of pure disgust. After two seconds of silence, he turned and marched to the turbolift. Bruner followed.

Grant stood for a moment at Chakotay's station. Then he walked back to the command chair and sat down, two thoughts in his head.

The first thought: He probably wasn't going to engage... but I needed a reason. Lucky he provided one, or I'd have seemed even farther off the deep end.

The second thought: This is just the beginning of what I have to do.

It was so much simpler when I thought of him as a criminal, a Maquis, someone who insulted the uniform just by wearing it. But now I know him. He's got some damned annoying qualities, but he's a decent man. And I have to destroy him to save the Federation.

God help me.

* * *

Chakotay had checked himself into his quarters, leaving his comm badge and rank pips with Bruner. If he was going to be a prisoner, he might as well dress like one. After apologizing again, the tactical officer had returned to his station.

There could be no doubt anymore. Carl Grant, for all the good signs he had shown earlier, was a traitor. So, probably, was Admiral Warhol. For whatever reason, they and their associates were trying to control the Sernaix War -- and who knew whether their plans included victory for the Federation?

He would have to escape. He would have to find a way off the ship and rendezvous with Voyager. Once he had reinforcements, he could return to find out what Grant's real agenda was.

But could he get that far on his own?

Of course I can. I've fought alone before and I can do it again.

And he had fought alone. But he had to be honest with himself, and that meant admitting that he had never fought as well alone. Chakotay could be either a leader or a follower, but his strengths were not individual.

More than he had in eight years, he missed his colleagues from Voyager ... his friends. He missed B'Elanna's strength and engineering skill, Tuvok's quick mind and tactical brilliance, Paris's loyalty and humour. He missed the Doctor's expertise, Harry's dedication, Neelix's odd brand of wisdom. He missed Seven's efficiency, her amazing breadth of knowledge, her beautiful smile... and the effort it took to get her to use it.

Above all, he missed Captain Janeway. If she had been here, no force in the galaxy could have stopped them. But knowing that she was out there somewhere gave Chakotay hope, and that would have to be enough.

Chakotay stood, a new determination filling him. One way or another, he would stop Grant. He would make a difference.

And then the ship lurched, klaxons blared, and Chakotay realized that the Logan was under fire. His furniture slid around; the coffee table hit him in the back of the legs and knocked him on his face.

The cup of Earl Grey, now very cold, spilled off the table onto his shoes.

The holographic plant hit the ground, snapping something in the emitter. The plant's petals cycled through the spectrum of colours, dizzyingly fast, over and over.

Chakotay started to get up, and for a moment, out of the corner of his eye, he could have sworn he saw the Earth's moon. Round, full, and white, craters covering its surface. A thing of beauty that had inspired poems and songs. A symbol sacred to his people.

But it wasn't there.

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