



Episode 9-09 - Marriage of Convenience

By: Jeffrey Harlan (lead_ink@yahoo.com)

Deep space, Sycorax's habitat

Stardate 56305.7

21 April 2379 1547 hrs

The pleasures of controlled chaos. The root of her power. The aggressiveness of the males kept them easy to control. A weapon she simply needed to point in any particular direction or no particular direction. The other females deferred to her out of fear. She had the vision and the ruthless drive to carry it out, nothing that stood in her way would prevent her from obtaining her goal and as she surveyed the progress of their conquests from the Realm, she could feel the threads of the chaos she wrought stretching out throughout this galaxy. The sensation was intoxicating.

A small ship on its approach drew her attention. Never wanting her 'allies' to get too comfortable, she kept all their weapons on alert, tracking their small ship. She could imagine their discomfort and smiled, knowing that they would be on edge, easier to control, easier to lead through the hoops she wishes them to jump through. Tractors lanced out and ensnared the small vessel, guiding it into the bay prepared for it. Sycorax watched silently

as two humans, unimportant puppets in the organization that she was allied with, stepped forth from the vessel. If she were a fool, Sycorax would have been insulted by their failure to send someone more important to her. However, she had not come to full control of the Realm by being a fool. Whether important to Section 31 or not, anyone they sent was still an insect to her, below her notice. What did she care if the creature they sent was above or below another of their own? In the end, they were all below her and lesser beings than West were more likely to give something away if they were plotting against her.

For her the show continued as two young females, still in their meat bodies, led the humans to a featureless room, fixed the operatives with a cold stare and told them to wait. Their body temperatures rose as she watched, the tension in them evident. Patience was not their strong suit. Neither was it Sycorax's, but in this she had time, she was in control and could afford to wait. It allowed the humans to set themselves more off balance.

Kelley paced back and forth, not realizing nor caring that he was doing exactly what Sycorax expected. He could feel his heart racing in his chest, between the featureless room and the deafening silence his mind screamed one thought -- 'escape,' which of course was impossible until they had completed their mission here. The sooner, the better by his estimation. He turned his attention to his partner, Collins, and focused his mind on the situation at hand in order to control the primitive fight or flight response his body was having to the situation at hand.

"How long do you think it will take before the Sernaix will provide us with the complete technical specifications on the frozen light technology?" Kelley asked, the tension evident in his voice. He opened his mouth to continue but the stare Collins fixed him with communicated two words. Shut. Up.

A booming voice filled the space, the air vibrating around them as the sound spread throughout. "The information will be yours when I feel you have fulfilled all parts of your bargain with me, humans. And not a moment before."

Sharing a look, knowing that Sycorax would not 'grace' them with her presence today, Collins spoke, casting his attention in the direction her voice seemed to come from. "As you say, Sycorax. We accept your judgment in the matter, however we need your assurance that you will restrict your attacks in the Alpha Quadrant to the list of pre-approved targets we have provided you."

This one was good. Almost as good as West, but not quite. The advantage she held over the puny, restricted humans made their attempts to hide anything from her laughable. Everything was evident to her from here, from the smallest nuance of speech to the pounding of their hearts. The power she held from this vantage was intoxicating. To think they would expect her to lower herself to joining with that pathetic meat shell she once inhabited was equally laughable to her. Her voice was bored and this time she projected it from the opposite side of the room, making the humans whirl inanely to 'face' her once more. "Yes, I know what you want. You've made that abundantly clear. I still fail to see that my people are getting anything of equal value for my restraint."

"Perhaps your people do not, but you, Sycorax, do." Collins kept his voice even and cool, despite the natural tension he felt. "Section 31 has proved useful to you so far. As long as you continue to abide by the terms of our agreement, our operatives will bring you whatever information you wish, from whatever section of our government you wish. We will be your eyes and ears in whatever places you wish to know of."

Again the position of her voice changed, this time coming from underneath them, making the floor vibrate as though in an earthquake. It was a voice of power, a voice of a goddess or the devil herself. "So, you will help me to carry out whatever goals I set within your quadrant and in exchange you get to keep your little worlds safe."

"That is our intention, yes," Collins replied, trying to maintain his balance with some dignity.

The shaking stopped abruptly and the voice was an almost pleasant purr. "Then that will be sufficient."

Both the operatives could hear the unspoken, 'For now.'

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Romulus, Tal Shiar headquarters
Stardate 56307.6
22 April 2379 0825 hrs

Koval tr'Doowrom sat in a very comfortable chair. He sat facing a window overlooking the magnificence of Ra'tleihfi with its spires and pillars adorned with the birds that had come to so symbolize the Rihannsu. Romulans, they were called by the Federation. He was chairman of the Tal Shiar. He had power. And he feared he would never escape the fact that it was the Federation's Section 31 who put him there.

"It would seem," one of the others among the Tal Shiar hierarchy, Xor tr'Sharien, was saying from behind him, "that Section 31 has formed an alliance with the Sernaix."

"Interesting," said another, Radaik tr'Annhi. "While they are at war with them, no less."

"Our contacts within the Federation," Xor continued, "indicate that this alliance has been ongoing since shortly after the return of their Starship Voyager. Thirty-One's ultimate goal is unclear, but it would seem likely they intend to gain some or all of the Sernaix's advanced technology in order to gain an advantage over the Rihannsu and the other powers in the quadrant."

"We cannot allow that to happen, of course," Koval said, still facing the large window in this, his office.

"One would think that goes without saying, chairman," Radaik said.

"Never assume what would seem to be obvious, Radaik tr'Annhwi," Koval chided, turning to face his companions. "Others may believe something entirely opposite to be the same."

"I will endeavor to remember that," Radaik replied, but his tone indicated irritation at the chairman's words. Koval made a mental note that he would have to watch this one more closely; it could be hazardous to his health should anyone ever have cause to suspect the circumstances that led to his ascendance to the chairmanship.

"Should they succeed," Xor continued, "it would undoubtedly and irreparably tip the balance of power to the Federation. Something must be done to avert such a catastrophe."

"Yes, yes," Radaik said impatiently, "but what?"

"Perhaps," Xor suggested, "we should approach the Sernaix."

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Somewhere on Earth
Stardate 56310.6
23 April 2379 1043 hrs

Admiral Alistair Warhol stepped through the open doorway and into a brightly lit room. He wasn't the first to arrive; several others had already taken their seats and were waiting. But he also wasn't the last; he could hear footsteps in the hallway behind him. He took one of the seats across from the large oak desk that dominated the room and waited with the others for the straggler to arrive.

A few moments later, everyone was in their seats and waiting anxiously for the meeting to begin. Their host looked at each of them, one after the other, then began to speak.

"Good morning," Mr. West said at last. "Our latest envoy has returned from their meeting with the big lady herself. She seemed unusually receptive to our proposal." His eyes surveyed his guests once more before he continued, "Nevertheless, our plans are still moving forward. Once we've secured the secrets of their frozen light technology, be it from the source or from the Federation's own scientists, we'll be able to move from there: severing our ties with the Sernaix and delivering the killing blow. Once we have the frozen light technology, no one will be able to stand in the way of the Federation."

"What if the Borg get it first?" Warhol asked. He regretted the question the moment he saw the change in West's expression.

"What makes you think they're after it?" West asked with a quiet voice that precipitated a deafening silence in the room.

"Just a hunch," Warhol said a moment later, choosing his words more carefully now. "We know the Borg have been interested in any new technologies they come across. Can we afford to risk

the possibility that hasn't changed? We already know there are Sernaix ships spread across the galaxy."

West gazed at Warhol for a long time in utter silence, judging, appraising. He obviously suspected something, but just as obviously had nothing to go on. It couldn't have been just the Borg comment, even though it did seem to come out of nowhere. On the other hand, an above-average amount of suspicion was also common this high up in the hierarchy of Section 31.

"Perhaps you're right," West said at last, "but at the moment that's beyond our control. If it becomes an issue later, we'll deal with it then."

"Do you want contingency plans devised," one of the others in the room, Kelley, asked, "to prepare for such an event?"

"That would be prudent," West admitted, then turned his attention to another one of his guests. "Mr. Collins, has there been any new information received from our contacts on Romulus?"

The momentary crisis past, Warhol decided that he would have to be more cautious in the future, lest West suspect the truth: his visit from Ankin Rotor had potentially compromised both him and the whole of 31. And the Section did not suffer such risks any longer than was absolutely necessary.

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Somewhere on Cardassia Prime
Stardate 56310.7
23 April 2379 1135 hrs

Gul Makret stood before the other assembled members of the Order, watching as their body language betrayed their growing tension as they considered the information he had provided them. The murmuring around the table became louder as each of them set down another PADD and looked from each other to Makret. This was the single most potent threat they had faced since the resurrection of their organization after the fall of the Dominion. Gul Makret bided his time waiting for the best opportunity to seize control of the chaos brewing in the room, knowing that this opportunity, properly exploited, could be the turning point for both the reinstatement of the Greater Cardassian Union and his own stepping stone to power within that organization.

The tension in the room reached its peak and he struck like a viper from its nest. "You see now that Section 31 is seeking to upset the balance of power within the Alpha Quadrant. To raise the Federation above any other powers in this quadrant. It is in our best interests to stop them now. To seize and overturn the alliance they have made with the Sernaix and forge our own in its place."

Gul Timur stood slowly, of all the others in the room only he seemed non-plussed by the news of Section 31's alliance. "The humans have a saying: when you bed down with dogs, you get fleas. Our last alliance with an aggressor should have taught us to trust only ourselves. Section 31 did not learn from our errors; let the humans make their own mistakes. We do not need to repeat the errors of our past."

Makret sneered, "Spoken like an old man. The technology that the Sernaix have will make whoever controls that technology the power of this quadrant. No other single race will be able to stand before them." He turned and paced in front of the other members of the Obsidian Order, his actions calculated to raise the tension in the room further before he turned abruptly to address them. "Despite the noble words of the Federation, we all know it is only a matter of time until they set their sights on us. 'Bringing us into their fold' or destroying us completely. If our goal is the

reformation of the Greater Cardassian Union, then we can not allow Section 31 and the Federation to control this technology."

"What makes you think that for all their alliances, Section 31 will control this technology when all is said and done?" Timur asked, his voice quiet but drawing attention with its very timbre.

Makret spun and fixed Timur with an glare meant to intimidate, but the older Cardassian just watched him with a bemused, imperious expression. Gul Makret once again disregarded the older man and addressed the others assembled. "The risk is great, but the reward if we are successful is greater still. With this technology we will have the power to make Cardassia the power it was destined to be."

The murmurs turned to nods of assent and Makret turned a smug gaze on Timur. Timur still showed no signs of being impressed with the younger man. In fact his gaze conveyed the opposite and no show of submission to the upstart. "Of course, should our envoy fail, there will be no second chances, no return. Our resources will be spent and we will have to refocus on rebuilding our homeworld solely." His gaze traveled around the room, taking in the expression of each of the other members. "And perhaps we will be better for it."

Silence enveloped them as Timur stood regally and left them to their plotting.

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Earth, Starfleet Headquarters
Stardate 56311.0
23 April 2379 1413 hrs

Admiral Warhol stepped into a large, fairly dark room. At its center was a massive, open-centered ovoid table that was designed to seat a large number of officers for important briefings. A relatively modest podium sat at the head of the table, the arrowhead insignia that was, for more than a century now, the emblem of Starfleet emblazoned on its front. To the side of the room were smaller tables flanked by stewards with drinks and hors d'ouvres.

Warhol took his customary seat near the head of the table, three seats to the right of the podium. The other admirals who comprised Starfleet's Command Division were still arriving, but nearly all were present.

Warhol redirected his attention to the entry as Admiral William Ross, now head of the Personnel Division and a thorn in Section 31's side for years, entered the room and took his seat while exchanging muted greetings with admirals Paris and Patterson. Together, the three had completely upset the Section's plans for the Voyager crew. But the Section was nothing if not adaptable, and new plans were put into motion to deal with each change in circumstances. Unfortunately, it had been quite some time since Agent Barton had last checked in; on the other hand, it had also been quite some time since Voyager herself had checked in. Perhaps there was a connection there, but it was best to assume the worst: Barton had been neutralized somehow, and Voyager was still at large and simply unable to make contact at present.

Once all of the admirals in the room had taken their seats, an Andorian with lieutenant commander's pips on her collar stepped up to the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she announced, "the CINC." All the admirals rose, more or less, to the position of attention as Fleet Admiral Brackett entered and took the podium from her adjutant, who stepped off to one side of the room.

"As you were," Brackett said. After everyone had taken their seats once more, she continued, "As you're all no doubt aware by this point, the conflict with the Sernaix is continuing to turn against

us. In a matter of months, their forces have managed to overrun, cripple and destroy much of our defensive capabilities. And, following a mission into the heart of what has become Sernaix territory, all communication with the Starship Voyager has suddenly ceased. We're not certain if it's due to interference, hostile or otherwise, or if the ship has been destroyed. As far as tactical planning goes, until such time as we regain communication with Voyager, we should consider her lost. Admiral Nechayev, could you fill us in on the latest tactical developments?"

"Since the Sernaix established their picket," Admiral Alynna Nechayev began from her seat near Warhol, "much of the Alpha Quadrant and part of the Beta Quadrant have been, effectively, cut off from the rest of the galaxy."

"Cut off?" a confused Admiral Bennett, head of the Judge Advocate General, asked. "How is it possible for them to seal off an entire quadrant? From what I hear, we've got at least ten times the ships they do, and we'd be hard pressed to just try sealing off the Federation."

"Their ships," Nechayev replied, "which typically travel in 'packs' of fewer than a half-dozen, are scattered throughout the region, but their slipstream capability makes it impossible for any of our ships save Voyager to outrun them. And with their immunity to most of our arsenal and an arsenal of their own reportedly powerful enough to wipe out entire planets, any one of their ships could intercept and destroy our own traffic with ease."

"You make it sound as if they're unbeatable," Admiral Cobum of the Logistics Division observed.

"Granted," Nechayev conceded, "there have been a few notable victories: a few days ago, the Enterprise led two corsairs on a chase through an asteroid belt. One was destroyed in a collision with an asteroid, the other after the Enterprise lured it into the atmosphere of Galorndan Core and overloaded the corsair's refrigeration units. Both maneuvers were highly dangerous."

"What are our chances?" Cobum asked. "Can we beat them?"

"As things stand," Nechayev said grimly, "unless something radical happens, and soon, the Federation could fall in a matter of months. We're at their mercy, and so far they've been content just to toy with us. We have no idea how long that could last."

"We've lost a number of people," Ross interrupted, "from their attacks on our outposts, ships and facilities. We've got to find some way to start rebuilding our forces, and fast, before we lose this war by simple attrition."

"Perhaps," Nechayev began thoughtfully, "we could begin accelerated training for our more promising cadets. Outstanding junior officers could take part in advanced tactical training, and the cadets could join them upon completing their training. That could help us in the long run."

"If it saves lives, I'm all for it," Ross said.

"I agree," Brackett said. "Make it happen, Admiral."

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Earth, Starfleet Academy
Stardate 56313.6
24 April 2379 1301 hrs

Cadet Icheb walked into his room in one of the dormitories on the Starfleet Academy campus, a standard-issue travel duffel slung over his shoulder. His roommate glanced up at him indifferently.

"Hey, Itchy," the redheaded human Cadet Caleb Fromme said, a small smirk suddenly appearing on his face.

Icheb spun. "Where did you hear that... appellation?" he demanded.

Fromme recoiled, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Some guy came here about a week ago looking for you," the human explained. "Found him sitting at your desk, and he said he was looking for 'Itchy.' I told him I didn't know where you were and got out of here. When I got back, he was gone."

"You told him you did not know where I was?" Icheb asked in disbelief.

"Yeah," Fromme replied. "Figured you owed him latinum or something."

"You did not tell him the truth," Icheb said. "You knew quite well that I was in flight training on Io."

"So what?" Fromme said. "So, you know who I'm talking about? Tall, thin human with brown hair? Wore a cadet's uniform, but I didn't recognize him..."

"Yes, I know him," Icheb replied. It had to be... Secretly, Icheb was glad there was no visual monitoring equipment in the dormitories, as that would have resulted in more questions he didn't wish to answer from people with admiral's pips on their collars...

"Do not call me 'Itchy,'" he continued. "I shall also have to report this incident."

"So I was right," Fromme concluded smugly.

"I was referring to your lying," Icheb said, then quoted the cadet creed: "We shall not lie, cheat or steal, nor tolerate those among us who do."

"I was just trying to look out for you," Fromme argued. "For all I knew, he could've been some Borg hater like I was before I got to know you. Besides," he added with a wicked gleam in his eye, "if you want to be technical, I really didn't know where you were. Specifically."

Icheb pondered his roommate's argument. While obviously what Lieutenant Paris would call "a stretch," he decided it wouldn't be worth reporting. With a small, almost imperceptible sigh, he placed his duffel on his bed and activated the terminal on his desk.

Icheb checked his message queue. Being new to the quadrant, he had few correspondents, so there weren't many message headers listed on his screen. The majority were from his professors, most of which concerned make-up work that he was expected to complete to compensate for his absences during flight training. But there was another that caught his eye, from the commandant of cadets. He opened the file.

The face of Captain Keegan Williams, familiar to all the cadets in a general sense, and to a handful in a more specific sense, appeared on his screen. The commandant was, like a large percentage of Starfleet seemed to be, a human. Fair skin, blue eyes, dark hair. Unremarkable, but also unmistakable.

"Cadet Icheb," the recording began, "I realize that when you get this message, you won't have as much time to prepare as your classmates, but that's unavoidable. In light of the current crisis facing the Federation, as well as your oft-demonstrated ability to learn quickly and think on your feet, you've been selected to join a group of about a dozen cadets for advanced, accelerated training."

"You will assemble," the recording continued, "in Transporter Room Six in Robert April Hall on Stardate 56316 at 1430 hours. That gives you about twenty-four hours to prepare. Good luck and Godspeed, Cadet. Williams out." The recording ended, and the image vanished from his screen.

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Deep space, Sycorax's habitat
Stardate 56316.4
25 April 2379 1333 hrs

The warp effect faded from view leaving only the ominous looming presence of the habitat before them. Makret's eyes widened and fought to bring his emotions under rein. Something about the black on black behemoth before him triggered his most basic responses. Unwilling to allow his aide, standing beside him, to see the fear the habitat had triggered, he pulled his mask of indifference over his features once more and regarded the still stunned junior with a cold glare. "Open a channel..."

His words were interrupted as the telltale shimmer of a Romulan cloaking device came into existence on the view screen. Makret eyes narrowed, "What in..."

"... Ch'Rihan's name are the Cardassians doing here?" Sepel hissed as he focused on the small Cardassian transport already hanging to the starboard side of the Habitat.

His aide's hands flew over the console, tapping into the Tal Shiar's vast database of knowledge, his voice calm as he announced, "It is the Cardassian courier ship N'toth." His gaze was even as he continued his pronouncement, "It belongs to Gul Makret."

Sepel turned his attention back to the view screen, his lip curling in disgust. "Damned Obsidian..."

"... Shiar." Makret leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers as his gaze went from disgust to suspicion. "The question is: did they come here because they knew what we planned, or is this purely a coincidence?"

His aide watched as the Gul pulled himself to his feet and turned his attention back to the space station before him. "We go forward with our plan, regardless of these Romulan vultures. Open hailing frequencies with the station."

Before the aide could open the channel, a low, ominous voice filled the cabin, "You are trespassing in Sernaix territory." Sycorax's curiosity had been piqued, which was the only thing standing between the two ships, their occupants, and complete annihilation. "If you value your continued existence, convince me why I should not set the nearest Adimh against you."

"With all due respect, you would be foolish to limit your options of trade with only one partner..." Makret's voice took on the honeyed tone of a Cardassian negotiator.

"... There are other powers in this quadrant that have equal interest in the technology that Section 31 is bargaining for." Sepel's voice was calmly logical as he stated his government's interest in the technology. His people may not adhere solely to the principles of logic, but found them useful tools when necessary. "Eventually Section 31..."

"... will betray you. If they are willing to betray their own people, how can you trust them?" Makret opened his arms wide, on the off chance that the Sernaix leader could see his gestures. They were gestures specifically chosen to ingratiate and win trust.

Sycorax could barely restrain her glee. These species were so amusing with their plots and counter plots. Simplistic, but overall an enjoyable show. The fact that their diatribe was inherently

interchangeable only added to her amusement at their antics. The same answer filtered into both vessels simultaneously. "Of course they aren't to be trusted. In their place I would do the very same thing." Practically smelling their fear, she allowed the seconds to tick by, allowing it to build. "However, you have intrigued me with your offer." Two small bays opened in the habitat and tractor beams caught and held the vessels, pulling them towards the behemoth. "You may continue to plead your case aboard my vessel."

She watched from the Realm as the tiny ships were pulled into the belly of hers, engulfed by its magnitude. This would be a pleasant diversion for a few hours, or at least until her amusement faded.

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Earth, Starfleet Academy
Stardate 56316.5
25 April 2379 1426 hrs

Finding the correct hall to which he was required to report was not a problem; Icheb hiked a large, black duffel over his shoulder as he entered the sprawling innards of Robert April Hall and found himself mired within a grandiose amount of buzzing, curious fellow cadets. Each had no doubt been given a great deal more preparation time than himself, leaving Icheb to feed into his curiosity as to the nature of this particular mission. Captain Williams had been intriguingly brief in his message, and the cadet approached a rigid, trim individual whose own duffel sat, unmussed with straps folded, at their feet as they awaited orders. So unlike everyone else within the hall, and that alone gave Icheb incentive to approach and clear his throat to gain attention.

"Excuse me. I am curious--" A slim neck turned upon slender shoulders to give Icheb a most-improved glance upon his now familiar colleague, T'Kara, her brown eyes peering impassively across the short expanse between them. "Hello, T'Kara."

"Greetings, Icheb." Cool and collected, the Vulcan was the epitome of composure, an island in the sea of furrowed brows and bright-eyed curiosity exhibited by the scores of other cadets that rushed and swirled throughout the large transporter room. Icheb examined the area briefly for himself, finding it to be much larger than what he had experienced on Voyager, and yet feeling a slight pang at the thought of the smaller size of Voyager's own transporter rooms. Captain Janeway would have been grateful for such a relatively cavernous area with the dilemmas she had faced in her time.

"Greetings," he returned, adopting the formal tone readily, watching as T'Kara's own eyes scanned the tumultuous area inexpressively. Discomfort was not obvious in her demeanor, but he himself was not immune to it. Many bodies, pressed against one another in haste... Seven of Nine had not "been a fan" of such a thing, as Tom Paris would have phrased it... and neither was he. "What do you know of this mission?"

"I too have been ill-informed." T'Kara gestured toward the transporter pad, several cadets having moved away to allow more than enough space for the two of them to stand. "However, might I suggest we move toward the head of the crowd if we wish to be better informed when our commander arrives?"

As they wormed their way through the crowd, Icheb couldn't help but feel slight admiration at the Vulcan cadet's straightforward determination. No one stood in her way, a natural commanding presence creating an invisible aura. Seven had possessed the ability to do that, he recalled, as had Captain Janeway. It came with time, with experience, and perhaps with stern training in logic.

"T'Kara... why is it you chose to join Starfleet?" he queried, watching her maneuver the crowd easily, at last reaching safe haven close to the azure-hued transporter. Much of the room's

contents were such objects as cargo containers and transporter consoles, and Icheb took refuge beside one, resting his duffel at the foot as he awaited T'Kara's reply. His friend was hesitant, and after exhaling, responded.

"It was the wish of my father, S'Rol, that I be admitted to Starfleet to follow in the path of Ambassador Spock, knowing as I that the years among humans had built up much tolerance to the wayward emotions and illogical behaviors of non-Vulcans. I admit... I am finding the time spent among you to be... intriguing."

"And may I ask how?"

A hush spread over the room as doors hissed open to the south, admitting a trio of imposing figures, two breaking off into the crowd, their balding heads glistening beneath pale overhead lights. A shrill voice called over the dying whispers, and Icheb pivoted, utilizing his best attempts to see above the sea of heads. He was quite tall, in fact -- but was he tall enough?

"All hands! Attention!"

"At ease!" A voice snapped mere moments later, gravelly with what seemed to be too many attempts, perhaps, of speaking above a crowd. "Cadets! We have assembled you here today for a mission that is crucial to your development as Starfleet officers--"

"It's Nimembeh," a young woman emitted an intimidated whisper, Icheb turning his head to stare scoldingly at her. Commander Nimembeh was well known to be a tough nemesis for many -- Commander Chakotay and Lieutenant Kim among them, the former drone noted. As Nimembeh continued to speak from a dais across the room, Icheb began to make mental notes of the important points in the lengthy speech, many including survival skills with which he had already been familiarized.

"For the first stage of your assignment: the Rocky Mountains. Earth possesses some of the most fierce wilderness... and it is up to you to survive among it. My aides -- Lieutenant Shikara and Ensign Lohan -- will split you into teams, assigning each a commander. I will be among one team, other instructors will be with the rest, and we will expect the very best of all of you."

Icheb felt a slight tremor at those final words, feeling not intimidation, but a sense of uncertainty. He did not prefer surprises, but was certain that this would be an occasion in which he would have many.

Nimembeh's aides began calling off names, directing them to different areas of the large room. Icheb listened for his own name to be called, then grabbed his duffel and stood where he was told. Within the space of fifteen minutes, the teams had been segregated, and Icheb noted gladly that T'Kara was in his group as well.

One by one, each team made their way onto the large transporter pad and vanished in a dazzling lightshow. In the end, Icheb's team remained, with Nimembeh and his aides the only others in the room with them.

"I will be joining your team," Nimembeh announced. "Step onto the transporter."

The cadets quickly did as they were instructed, and moments later found themselves in a modest clearing somewhere in North America's Rocky Mountains. Icheb took a moment to look around and appreciate the scenery; he had no idea when he'd have the opportunity to do so again.

"You have just survived a shuttle crash," Nimembeh began. "An encounter with an uncharted ion storm disabled your warp drive and navigation systems. You managed to call for help before attempting to set down on this Class-M planet, but it will be at least a week before help can arrive."

You have only your personal luggage and the shuttle's standard survival equipment to survive. Unfortunately, an EM dampening field generated by mineral deposits in these mountains prevents your phasers, tricorders or communicators from functioning. Cadet Thelev, you're in command here. Keep your team alive."

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Deep space, Sycorax's habitat
Stardate 56316.7
25 April 2379 1611 hrs

Sepel settled into his seat and prepared for launch. Despite the unnerving quality of a meeting that was held in an empty, featureless room and negotiating with a disembodied voice, things had gone very well in his estimation. Better than he had expected. Nodding to his aide, the Romulan shuttle pulled away from the habitat, and maneuvered out to a safe distance while he prepared his preliminary report for the Tal Shiar command. He looked up and noted the Cardassian courier pulling away as well and grinned slightly. He doubted very much that Makret was leaving with as promising a report to provide to his superiors in the Order.

The small courier ship had never felt so comfortable in all his years, but Makret didn't regret a minute of discomfort he had endured on the Sernaix station, in that insufferable white room. His place in Cardassian history was assured. There was no doubt in his mind as they maneuvered to a safe distance to engage their engines that the Romulan vessel visible out his view screen was returning to their territory with less positive news to share.

It was a surprise for both vessels as the rippling shimmer of yellow green rolled across the blackness and revealed two Sernaix Corsairs, the smallest of the invading fleet but more than a match for the two small Alpha Quadrant vessels. "Best speed, now..." Makret's eyes widened as he realized that he had been misled by the Sernaix leader.

"Full shields now... Engage cloaking," Sepel called out to his aide as his fingers flew over the console, trying to plot a course back to Romulan space.

Sycorax watched with renewed amusement as the two inferior ships dodged and rolled, trying to outwit her warriors long enough to escape. About now they were finding out that no communication was possible with their home sectors. Another volley of fire from the Corsairs chewed away the starboard engine on each of the vessels. The Corsairs' commanders were following her instructions exactly. Making certain that each vessel was damaged in the exact same place as the other. Fitting that they were to be destroyed in exactly the same way, since they had wanted exactly the same thing and had offered the same inducement. Watching as they were slowly whittled down, a duplicate version of the other's damage until... Sycorax felt a deep satisfaction as the blue white flash of the vessels' warp cores exploding filled the space outside her habitat.

They had made for a pleasant few hours' diversion.

* * *

Earth, Rocky Mountains
Stardate 56317.2
25 April 2379 2041 hrs

"Icheb, T'Kara," the blue-skinned Andorian Cadet Thelev called as the cadets finished pitching their tents for the night. "Build a fire to provide us some warmth and light for the night. You have first watch."

"Aye, sir," the two cadets said simultaneously.

They made their way toward the clearing in the center of camp, which Nimembeh had made certain the cadets keep clear for safety concerns. The last thing they needed was an errant spark from a campfire setting one of the tents ablaze.

At the center of the clearing was a circle of rocks, piled at Nimembeh's orders, which served as a fire ring that would help contain the small blaze. A few meters away was a small pile of firewood gathered by the cadets earlier that evening. Icheb and T'Kara began to carry some of the smaller branches and twigs to the fire pit.

Icheb placed a handful of twigs and wood dust kindling at the center of the pit, then took a pair of fairly straight sticks that had been set aside earlier. One had a string tied from end to end, and was attached to its counterpart. This was another part of the lesson: the cadets needed to know how to start a fire without the aid of technology.

Icheb took the pair of sticks, as had been demonstrated in a classroom survival course earlier in the semester, and placed the free stick into the pit, standing it vertically atop the kindling, and held it in place with a palm-sized block of wood. The second stick he held perpendicular to the first like a bow, and he set to work making quick back-and-forth movements to spin the first stick and generate the friction against the kindling that would eventually cause the heat and sparks necessary to ignite their campfire.

Several minutes passed. Icheb's arm was rapidly tiring, but he had to continue. There wasn't so much as a hint of a spark so far, and it frustrated him. He continued the repetitive motion. It certainly looked easier in the classroom demonstration.

"Perhaps I could take over," T'Kara suggested. "Your arm should be quite sore by now, even taking into account the likely enhancements provided by your remaining Borg implants."

Icheb paused, looking up at the young Vulcan. She was correct, of course. He loosened his grip, and nodded. T'Kara knelt beside him and grasped the apparatus, then quickly set to work with the same back- and-forth motions Icheb had been making once he stepped aside.

Icheb sat on a nearby log that had been moved near the fire pit to serve as a seat, resting his admittedly tired muscles. Within five minutes, there was a small puff of smoke from the kindling. T'Kara quickly set the apparatus aside and bent down so that her face was mere centimeters from the pile of smoldering kindling and began to blow gently until she had fanned a decently-sized flame.

He handed her some twigs, then a few moments later a pair of sticks. Once those had also caught aflame, he handed a small log to his Vulcan companion. Soon, the fire was well underway and they sat on the makeshift log bench once more.

"It would seem that I require... practice," Icheb commented.

"Doubtless you would have generated the flame, had you continued," T'Kara replied. "The heat generated by your earlier efforts eased my involvement considerably."

"Nevertheless," Icheb countered, "I spent far longer than the demonstration we observed earlier this semester. Repeated efforts will likely enhance my performance."

"That is a logical assessment," T'Kara said.

"You did not get the opportunity to answer my earlier query," Icheb said after a moment's silence had passed between them.

"How so?" T'Kara asked.

"Our conversation was interrupted when Commander Nimembeh entered the transporter room," Icheb said.

"No," T'Kara said, "I was restating your question." Icheb nearly laughed, but managed to stop himself in time. Whoever said that Vulcans had no sense of humor obviously didn't know many.

"So," Icheb prompted a moment later, "what is it about we non-Vulcans that you find so intriguing?"

"I subscribe fully to Surak's treatise of IDIC," T'Kara began, then clarified, "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. Though our numerous species often have great and inarguable differences, it is that same diversity that makes us stronger as a group when we find common ground from which to work together. We must embrace our differences and those of our fellows, for it is that same diversity that makes each culture, each individual, what they are. Without diversity, the universe would be far less of a challenge to our logic, our belief systems, and our very selves."

"You thrive on challenge, then?" Icheb asked.

"It is our responses to the challenges in our lives that define us," T'Kara said. "You, for example, have overcome obstacles and challenges that would doubtless humble many of our peers at the academy: assimilation, for example, by both the Borg and yourself."

"Myself?" Icheb asked, confused.

"You must now," T'Kara responded, "for lack of a better word, force your own assimilation into the greater culture of the Federation. You must choose whether to honor the culture of your birth, or adopt another, while also adapting to the myriad cultures of your new, adopted home. I find such a challenge... fascinating."

"Icheb," Nimembeh's gravelly voice suddenly came from behind them, "T'Kara, good work on the fire."

"Thank you, sir," Icheb replied, turning as he rose to his feet to acknowledge his superior officer, T'Kara doing likewise beside him.

"As you were, cadets," Nimembeh said, waving his dark hand gently before himself, indicating for them to take their seats again. "Go ahead and relax now while you can. You've got a long week ahead of you."

* * *

Romulus, Tal Shiar headquarters
Stardate 56318.1
26 April 2379 0427 hrs

Koval sat in his very comfortable chair, staring out his large window at the cityscape of Ra'tleihfi in total silence. The scheduled check-in time for the Sernaix envoy team had long since past; they were among the Tal Shiar's best, and would never have missed their check-in. That left only one conclusion: they had failed. Obviously, they must attempt a different tactic to turn the situation to their advantage. But what? At the moment, Koval had no idea.

Suddenly, Koval's office, his window, and the cityscape on the other side of it vanished. Koval doubted that he'd been transported; he'd experienced a variety of different transporter technologies firsthand, and all had a distinctive physical sensation while in transit. Whatever had just happened, it didn't have any physical sensation that he could detect. And whatever it was, it was apparently able to shrug off his office's transport inhibitors as well as those in place throughout the rest of the building.

He looked around, attempting to take in his new surroundings. Everything -- **everything** -- was made of metal: plants, trees, the very ground itself. All intricate forms of twisted and shaped metal. But there was no animal life in evidence. Wherever he was, it was most certainly not in Ra'tleihfi, nor even on either of the twin worlds. A holodeck, perhaps?

"Welcome, Koval tr'Doowrom," a voice boomed from behind him. Koval spun. Where moments before was nothing but metallic plant life now stood a man. But not just any man. His body was covered in tubes, armor-like plating, implants of all varieties half-sticking out of his body. Unmistakably Borg.

"Who are you?" Koval demanded. "Where have you taken me?"

"My name is Ankin Rotor," the Borg announced. "I am... leader of the Borg Constructive."

"Then the reports were accurate," Koval said. "The Collective truly is no more."

"There were... enclaves of the old Collective," Rotor said, "but they have been dealt with. As to your second question, I've taken you nowhere. You are still in your chair, sitting in your office. This is but a projection into your mind."

"How?" Koval asked, thunderstruck.

"The Constructive has a number of telepathic species among its number," Rotor said. "Their combined abilities, coupled with Borg technology, allowed me to... visit you."

"Why?" Koval asked.

"I have a proposal for you," Rotor answered. "One that would be to our mutual benefit."

"I'm listening," Koval prompted.

"I can help make it possible for the Tal Shiar to work its way into Section 31's deal with the Sernaix," Rotor said.

"And what do you get out of this?" Koval asked. "I find it difficult to believe you would help the Rihannsu out of the goodness of your heart."

"Very true," Rotor admitted. "Very true. The advantage this will gain for the Constructive is simple, really: Section 31 intends to destroy the Sernaix as soon as they gain control of their frozen light technology. The Constructive wants to... prevent that."

"Why?" Koval asked.

"I-- **we** have our reasons," Rotor answered.

"What if I refuse?" Koval asked.

Rotor grinned wickedly. "That would be... **unfortunate** for you."

"How can you help us?" Koval asked.

"I have... connections," Rotor answered cryptically, "to the Section 31 leadership."

Koval silently pondered Rotor's offer. After what seemed like ages of internal debate, he concluded that this was the chance he'd long been awaiting to finally end his debt to Section 31.

"It would seem," Koval said at last, "that we have a deal."

* * *

Earth, Rocky Mountains
Stardate 56318.4
26 April 2379 0713 hrs

Icheb awoke to a loud clanging sound. Due to his Borg implants, he actually needed very little sleep, and was completely refreshed. He half-turned and disconnected the cables leading into the regeneration connection points near the small of his back, then briskly stowed the portable regenerator that he and Seven of Nine had designed while he was still aboard Voyager. He quickly dressed himself, and checked to ensure that his uniform was presentable before stepping out of his tent and into the morning air.

Icheb felt the chill of the air hit him like a physical force, and quickly wrapped his arms around himself as his body began to shiver. He was the first out in the open, and was joined by T'Kara a moment later as she stepped out of her tent a few meters away from him. Her appearance was, as ever, immaculate, a stark contrast to their relatively disheveled companions who were now beginning to make their groggy way out of their tents around them. They all gathered around the campfire, which was already burning nicely, Nimembeh waiting for them, still beating a stick against a metal pan.

"We don't have all day, cadets!" Nimembeh called to the stragglers. "Mr. Thelev, what are our plans for breakfast?"

"Sir?" Thelev asked.

"Breakfast," Nimembeh repeated. "Who's cooking? What are we eating?"

"I... I don't know, sir," Thelev replied, the young Andorian's antennae drooping in resignation. He knew what was coming next.

"You don't know?" Nimembeh asked. "Aren't you in charge, Mr. Thelev?"

"Yes, sir," Thelev replied.

"Why don't you know, then?" Nimembeh asked.

"I was unprepared, sir," Thelev replied. "I didn't plan ahead, sir."

"Very well," Nimembeh said, then turned to look at the other cadets gathered nearby. "Cadet Icheb, what do we have to eat?"

"Sir," Icheb began, "I do not believe we had any food supplies with us when we beamed in."

"That wasn't my question, cadet," Nimembeh said.

"We don't have any food, sir," Icheb replied.

"Wrong," Nimembeh said. "Look around you. Everything you need to survive is here already. Including food. What do you see, Cadet T'Kara?"

"There are a number of edible plant species indigenous to Earth," T'Kara replied. "I must admit, however, that my ability to identify them is limited."

"That's the best answer I've heard all morning," Nimembeh said. "And that is exactly why we're out here, cadets. You need to learn how to survive in an inhospitable environment with only the bare essentials. Get your gear together; we're going on a hike in fifteen minutes."

*

Thirty minutes later, the cadets were standing in a semicircle around Nimembeh as he knelt at the edge of a cliff-side trail.

"This," Nimembeh was explaining, "is called a dandelion. It is abundant throughout the planet, and is easily identifiable by its small, yellow petals. Its young spring leaves are actually quite good and are best served raw." He stood, then looked at each of the cadets assembled around him as he continued, "There are a number of things that you should keep in mind while searching for edible wild plants. First and foremost, you should be able to chew it either in its raw state or after cooking has made it tender. Secondly, it should be good for you. If you're in doubt if a plant is edible or poisonous, don't take a risk by eating it. Learn from someone who knows the plants if possible."

"How will we know about the plants on an uninhabited world?" one of the cadets asked.

"That's a little more tricky," Nimembeh admitted. "Most Class-M worlds share many similarities in their plant life. There are occasions where plants that look like edible varieties from other worlds are poisonous, but those are actually rather rare. By and large, many edible plants look similar on different planets."

He paused, waiting for another question, then when none came, continued his lesson. He reached up to an overhanging branch from a nearby oak tree, and brought a handful of acorns to the cadets' attention. "These are acorns. Indigenous tribes of humans would grind them up and use them to make flour for breads. The flour was treated with boiling water, or even left in a running stream, to wash away their bitter taste caused by the tannin in the nuts."

Without warning, a stream of rocks cascaded down the cliff-side. Nimembeh and most of the cadets managed to get clear in time to avoid being hit, but a few were hit by smaller rocks. One cadet, however, lay face down on the ground near the cliff, unconscious. Nimembeh ran back to the cadet's side, and rolled him onto his back, noting immediately the blood flowing freely from his scalp.

Nimembeh tapped his communicator. "Nimembeh to Starfleet Academy. We have a cadet down; he has a head injury from falling rocks. Recommend he be transported to Starfleet Medical for treatment."

"Acknowledged, commander," a voice replied over his combadge. A moment later, the cadet disappeared in the familiar shimmer of a transporter beam.

Nimembeh stood, then looked at the stunned cadets. "Where were we?" he asked, then saw the hanging oak branch. "That's right: acorns."

* * *

Deep Space Nine
Stardate 56322.2
27 April 2379 1624 hrs

The corridor lighting was on minimal settings as it was 'night' shift on the former Cardassian space station. For all appearances he was a Vulcan visitor, no more or less interesting than any other Vulcan who happened to find themselves on Deep Space Nine.

His gait was measured as he walked the length of the docking ring, pausing only momentarily while he assessed the engineer inspecting the circuitry behind one of the docking panels. Not an unusual sight, a Starfleet engineer repairing circuitry in this space station.

In the relative darkness of the corridor, it wasn't surprising that the engineer, engrossed in his repairs, did not hear the light footsteps of the Vulcan as he moved into corridor behind him. So when the seeming Vulcan's hands gripped the engineer's throat and squeezed, it wasn't surprising that the engineer had no reaction but to struggle momentarily, then hang limply from his assailant's hands.

* * *

USS Enterprise NCC-1701-E
Stardate 56322.2
27 April 2379 1630 hrs

The dark of the Jeffries tube was shattered by a sudden, momentary flash of light. The silence was broken by a soft roar, an angry protest from subspace over its violation. The emptiness was replaced by a crouching man in a uniform of metallic-looking cloth that looked nearly black in its dark hues, its shoulders characteristically wide and sharply pointed. His olive skinned face was framed by short, dark, close-cropped hair that accentuated his pointed ears.

After taking a moment to get his bearings, the man -- a Romulan -- began to crawl through the ductwork of the starship's bowels. According to his information, his target should be very near, and at this time of day should be completely isolated from the rest of her crewmates.

*

"Sir, I'm picking up something strange on internal sensors."

"What is it, Mr. Daniels?" Captain Jean-Luc Picard asked, pivoting his chair at the center of the Enterprise bridge to face his chief of security. The lieutenant had served on the Enterprise-E for a number of years, distinguishing himself not only during the Ba'ku incident, but also while the ship had been overrun by Borg while three centuries in the past.

"I'm not sure, captain," Daniels admitted. There was just a blip in a Jeffries tube on Deck Twenty a minute ago."

"Hm," Picard pondered. "Send down a security detail. I don't want to take any chances, this close to the Neutral Zone."

*

The Romulan peered through a ventilation grate, still crouched inside the Jeffries tube. He could see his quarry, not three meters away. Her guard was down; she suspected nothing. Pitiful. No, downright pathetic.

Slowly, cautiously, he began to remove the grating from its housing, taking care not to make any sudden movements that might catch his target's attention. She was seated at a terminal, her left side facing him.

At last, the grate was loose. He held it steady, taking care not to drop it. Her head turned away from him. This was his chance.

Suddenly, the doors hissed open. Security! Somehow, they had detected the subspace transporter that had brought him aboard through the starship's shielding! There was no time to lose. He was vulnerable as long as he stayed where he was. He couldn't replace the grating to retrace his steps; the security men were on guard, and they would notice. Besides, they probably had more people in the ducts behind him. After all, that's what he would have done.

He dropped the grate to the deck and surged forward, pulling his disruptor from its holster at his hip as he did so. Within a second, he had his quarry by the neck, his weapon pointed at the side of her head.

The security guards hadn't expected this sort of move from an otherwise unknown foe, and they hesitated. In that moment's hesitation, the Romulan let go of his target's neck long enough to slap the transport activator on his belt. He and his quarry disappeared in a flash of light and a dull, soft roar.

* * *

Location unknown
Stardate 56324.6
28 April 2379 1326 hrs

Alistair Warhol woke up surrounded by Romulans.

He couldn't see them, of course. The room was too dark to see anything at all. But after decades working with Starfleet -- and Section 31 -- Warhol knew Romulans. He knew when he was in a room full of them lying in total darkness with his arms and legs tied and his communicator confiscated. All right, this was the first time for that particular situation, but the point was the same.

"What do you want?" he asked, keeping his voice level.

Immediately, Warhol felt himself buffeted by clubs. They didn't seem particularly Romulan, but clubs weren't very different from planet to planet. Warhol had survived torture on more than one mission; he was confident he could do the same here. He steeled himself and waited for the blows to stop.

In point of fact, they didn't. About thirty seconds in, while the barrage continued, one voice broke in: "You work for Section 31! You know what we need to know! Tell us or die!"

Novices, Warhol thought. The Romulans didn't send trained torturers here. They must be under heavy time pressure -- which means I, not they, have the advantage.

The beating stopped, and silence filled the room again. The Romulans were waiting for their prisoner to speak. After a moment's thought, Warhol did. "S--Section 31?" he said, with a measured jitter in his voice. "I don't know what you're talking about."

More beating, of course. A new torturer never knew how to use the tool of violence, how to hold it back and administer it at exactly the right time. Warhol had learned that in his time with the Section; he'd worked with their torturers when necessary, and had quickly learned that subtlety

and precision worked far better than a simple good-cop/bad-cop approach. Almost anything, in fact, was more effective than "punch it till it talks."

"I don't know!" he shouted again. His masquerade as a spineless officer who panicked under the slightest pain had served him well before. With these Romulans' "skill," he thought, they'll believe me in no time -- and then they'll have to return me to Starfleet. They can't afford to attract the kind of attention my disappearance would bring.

That was when Warhol saw the light and everything changed.

It was a small light, green and fairly distant, but he knew it immediately. In a room full of Romulans, it could mean only one thing: mental conditioning. He hadn't known they had this kind of equipment with them. It meant that his strategy was for nothing. No human without special engineering had ever been able to resist a Romulan mind probe.

Warhol knew what he had to do. His knowledge could never be allowed to fall into enemy hands. Without hesitation, he ran his tongue against the backs of his molars, looking for the one designed to release a fast-acting neural toxin. As soon as he nudged that molar out of position, he would have only minutes to live.

Or he would have... if it were there.

Warhol felt again, but there was nothing. His indental necrolyzer was gone without a trace. How? he thought. It's shielded against conventional scans... were they told I would have it? Who would do that? An enemy of the Section, or --

But then there was no more time for thought. The device made harsh, sudden contact with Warhol's temple, and he held his breath and waited for what would follow. No one was sure exactly what a Romulan mind scan felt like, but Warhol knew he was about to find out. He steeled himself for the painful and the violent.

What he got was the unexpected.

The darkness was gone. The silence was total. Around him were plants, trees shining in the sunlight with the cool glare of polished metal. Under his feet, a gleaming globe reflected his unbound and in-uniform image to him. Warhol knew this place... and he knew what was coming.

A shudder passed through his very soul as he looked once again into the face of Ankin Rotor.

* * *

Earth, Rocky Mountains
Stardate 56325.4
28 April 2379 2119 hrs

Dusk fell as Cadet Thelev stoked the campfire, his antennae arching toward the radiant warmth of the flames that illuminated his blue skin. He turned toward the wood pile to select another log to throw onto the fire, and noticed there were only three left.

"We're getting low on fuel already," Thelev announced.

"I will gather more firewood," Icheb said, rising from his seat on the makeshift log bench. T'Kara, who was seated next to him, rose as well.

"I shall join you," she declared. "Together we will be able to find more wood than you alone."

Commander Nimembeh, who was sitting quietly to the side, nodded his approval. The volunteers turned and exited the campsite, and made their way into a nearby stand of trees.

"Why did you volunteer to accompany me?" Icheb asked his companion after a few moments' silence.

"As I said," T'Kara replied, "together we would be able to locate and carry more firewood than on our own."

"Is that the only reason?" Icheb asked, turning his head to look at the young Vulcan and arching a single eyebrow as he'd seen Commander Tuvok do on many occasions.

T'Kara looked at Icheb, an eyebrow raised as well. She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could utter a single word, there was the unmistakable sound of an explosion behind them. They spun, in time to witness the remnant of a massive fireball rising from the area of the fire pit. At that moment, the shock wave from the blast hit them as well: a stiff, hot burst of wind that would have felt good in the rapidly cooling night were the circumstances different. Immediately, the two ran back to the campsite.

What awaited them was nothing short of carnage. Every single one of their fellow cadets had been seated around the campfire, relaxing after a long day. Now, they were nothing less than a dozen bodies lying... what? Unconscious? Dead? Icheb heard a moan, saw one of the cadets stir. He rushed to his fallen comrade's side.

"They have all suffered severe injuries," T'Kara said. "The blast most likely originated from the campfire, radiating outward while all were vulnerable. Those nearest the explosion may be dead; I cannot be certain at the moment. It would appear that someone is attempting to actively interfere with our training."

Icheb slapped the combadge on the chest of his uniform. "Cadet Icheb to Starfleet Academy. Medical Emergency. Beam out the entire squad now!" He waited a moment before he felt the familiar tingle of the transporter claim him. The scene before his eyes blurred, then coalesced into the interior of a hospital facility, a half-dozen doctors and a number of nurses waiting for them.

Icheb and T'Kara were ushered aside by a Tellarite orderly, who simply spread his arms and walked between them without saying a single word. His meaning was clear enough: step aside and let those who had been trained for this kind of emergency do their jobs unencumbered. There were several seats against a nearby wall, and the two cadets silently sat down, their attention never wavering from the chaos before them.

"Damn!" one of the doctors spat as he hovered over the broken, bleeding form of one of the cadets. "Neural stimulator!"

"This one's got massive internal bleeding," another doctor called. "Get me a -- cardiac arrest! Defibrillator, now!"

The orders from all the doctors, followed by the acknowledgements of the nurses attending them, blended into a dull roar in the emergency triage ward. Even with his implants that worked to sort out the varied voices and orders of the Collective, Icheb had trouble sorting the noise that assaulted his ears, catching only snippets.

"--bone knitter!"

"This kid's got a--"

"Sweet Jesus, I haven't seen anything like this in years..."

"Right away, doctor."

"Come on, kid! Don't die on me!"

"I need twenty cc's--"

Icheb turned his head to see how T'Kara was handling this turn of events. Her face was impassive, her expression neutral. She must have seen his head turn in the corner of her eye, for she turned to look at him as well. He looked into her eyes, and saw what he suspected was there, but controlled enough not to show in her face: emotions, barely restrained, roiling beneath the surface.

T'Kara turned her head at the movement at the periphery of her vision. Icheb was looking at her, his emotions plainly evident in his expression. Rage, fear, determination... Her training would never have allowed her to so openly display her own emotions, which admittedly churned so near the surface. He looked into her eyes, and his expression changed. She now saw... compassion.

* * *

Romulus, Tal Shiar headquarters
Stardate 56325.5
28 April 2379 2147 hrs

"Warhol," Xor began, "has broken."

"Excellent," Koval replied, Xor and Radaik seated once more in the chairs across from his imposing desk. "The information he provided will doubtless be of use. The standard post-interrogation procedures have been implemented, I trust?"

"Of course, chairman," Xor said. "I don't understand how he could have broken so easily, however. We had barely begun the interrogation procedures."

"Let's not concern ourselves with that," Koval chided, hoping to divert attention from his alliance with Rotor, which he hoped to keep secret for the time being. "The important part is that he has provided us with the information which we had sought. Soon, we can move on to the next phase of the operation."

"The next phase being what, exactly?" Radaik asked.

"Warhol will bring the Tal Shiar into the agreement Section 31 holds with the Sernaix," Koval said, his tone making it clear that he felt the information should be obvious to someone as high in the Tal Shiar hierarchy as Radaik. "If he so much as *thinks* about betraying us, we need only remind him of the consequences of his compatriots suspecting that he's been compromised."

* * *

Earth, Starfleet Medical
Stardate 56325.5
28 April 2379 2159 hrs

"Cadet Icheb, Cadet T'Kara," a man in a gold-necked Starfleet uniform said as he approached the two cadets in one of the lounges in Starfleet Medical's hospital section. "Lieutenant Shawn Wallace, Office of Special Investigations." He indicated the other man standing behind him and to his left. "This is my partner, Lieutenant Grodenchik."

"Sir," Icheb said as he and T'Kara rose to attention.

"As you were, cadets," Wallace said. "I'm here to ask you a few questions about what happened to your squad." He looked down at a PADD in his left hand and prepared to begin taking notes. "Where were you when the explosion occurred?"

"We were several meters from the campsite," Icheb replied.

"What were you doing?" Grodenchik asked.

"Gathering firewood," Icheb said.

"Did you see the explosion?" Wallace asked.

"No," T'Kara said. "Our backs were to the campsite. We heard the explosion, and saw the remnant of the fireball it produced rising into the sky as we turned."

"Who could have had the opportunity to cause the explosion?" Wallace asked.

"Any one of the cadets," T'Kara said, "or Commander Nimembeh. The entire squad was gathered around the campfire."

"Who was tending the fire?" Grodenchik pressed.

"Cadet Thelev," Icheb replied.

"Were any of your fellow cadets acting suspiciously?" Wallace asked.

"Not to my knowledge," Icheb said.

"It's convenient that you managed to leave the scene just before the explosion," Grodenchik noted.

"I am not responsible for the explosion," Icheb declared. "We were running low on firewood, and T'Kara and I left to gather more."

"Who ordered you to gather more wood?" Wallace asked.

"No one," Icheb said. "I volunteered."

"I see," Wallace commented. "And you, Cadet T'Kara? Did you also volunteer?"

"Yes," T'Kara said. "Logic suggested that two of us would be able to gather more wood than one alone."

"Of course," Wallace said. "And what was Commander Nimembeh doing while all of this happened?"

"Observing the squad," Icheb replied.

"From where?" Grodenchik pressed.

"Commander Nimembeh," T'Kara began, "was seated behind Cadets Dows and Sadeet approximately two meters from the fire pit and directly across from Cadet Carey's tent."

"I see," Wallace said again.

"You seem to believe," Icheb commented, "that either one of the cadets or Commander Nimembeh himself caused the explosion. Is it not also possible that someone could have transported an explosive device into the fire from another location?"

"The satellites monitoring your team didn't detect any transporter activity on their sensors," Grodenchik replied.

"Inconclusive," Icheb retorted. "There are transport technologies undetectable by Starfleet sensing equipment. While aboard Voyager, for example--"

"Thank you, cadet," Wallace said, cutting Icheb off mid-sentence. "That will be all for now. If we have any further questions for you, we'll be in touch.

With that, Wallace and Grodenchik rose, turned, and left the room.

* * *

Earth, Warhol residence
Stardate 56328.7
30 April 2379 0123 hrs

Alistair Warhol woke up surrounded by Romulans.

They were everywhere. He swung at them, but they kept coming. They slammed him with their clubs until he --

No.

Warhol shook himself. The darkness was still around him, but there was no one else. His arms and legs were free. Could he be...? "Lights," he said.

The lights went up obediently, forcing him to squint. When he could look again, he saw the familiar surroundings of his house on Earth. And Romulans. They were everywhere, battering --

No!

There were no Romulans. No Romulans. Warhol repeated the two words in his mind like a mantra, trying to pull himself together and remember what had happened. Darkness... torture? It was unclear. Something about a mind probe....

"Computer, list all occupants of this building."

"Admiral Alistair Warhol."

"No Romulans? No intruders?"

"Negative."

Warhol was still shaken, but he trusted the computer and its mindless drone of reassurance. Starfleet's sensors were the best in the field. Sensors... he could check where he'd been, resolve the question decisively. That would end his confusion. "Computer, in what locations have I been in the past... six days?"

"Admiral Alistair Warhol has most frequently been at Starfleet Headquarters, building theta, room --"

"Thank you, computer." My office, he thought. "Anywhere else?"

"North America, Montana, city of Bozeman, district --"

"Here. Where else?"

"No other locations found."

"What? Search again, level 3."

A pause, then: "No other locations found."

Warhol rubbed his chin in bewilderment. Had someone really gone to the trouble of kidnapping him and altering Starfleet records? Who had those kinds of resources? Or... had it all been a dream?

On a sudden impulse, Warhol felt for his indental necrolyzer. It was there, its elegant, deadly mechanism no different from any other day.

Admiral Warhol frowned.

* * *

Earth, Starfleet Academy
Stardate 56329.7
30 April 2379 1009 hrs

"Icheb," T'Kara asked as she and her fellow cadet sat in the Starfleet Academy campus library at one of the many computer interface terminals, "are you certain we have the proper authorization to access the sensor data collected by the satellites monitoring our team?"

"I am uncertain," Icheb admitted. "It is possible that the information is restricted due to the current investigation into the explosion; however, we would have no reason to look at such data if those events had not taken place."

The touch-activated display screen showed a familiar Starfleet LCARS terminal, now connected to the database where the sensor data in question was stored. When prompted, Icheb entered his name and security code.

"Access denied," the computer's voice said a moment later. "Insufficient security clearance."

Icheb paused for a moment in reflection, and T'Kara turned to leave, their attempt to access the data obviously beyond their clearance.

"Access granted," the computer announced another moment later. T'Kara turned in confusion.

"How did you obtain access?" T'Kara asked.

"I don't believe you want to know," Icheb replied. Before T'Kara could insist that he explain himself anyhow, the data they had sought appeared on the screen.

"Computer," Icheb prompted, "do you have a visual scan of the campsite of Commander Nimembeh's team?"

"Affirmative," the computer replied.

"On screen," Icheb ordered. "Begin at time index 56325.4 and play from that point forward." The screen changed, to show an image of the cadets seated around the campfire, obviously photographed by an orbiting satellite. "Enhance image, grid reference 12 mark 47 to 74 mark 13." The computer immediately zoomed in on the requested section, and the two cadets could see the others more clearly, but still too indistinctly to positively identify each individual. Icheb saw himself stand, then a moment later T'Kara follow suit. They walked out of the image.

There was a flicker of movement from one of the cadets, and a moment later, the screen filled with the overpowering visual of the explosion and its resultant fireball.

"Computer, pause," Icheb said. "Back two seconds. Enhance grid 14 mark 37 by 18 mark 30." The computer immediately complied. "Replay, half speed." Icheb and T'Kara watched as one of the cadets -- they couldn't tell whom -- threw a small object into the fire. A moment later, the screen went white once more as it filled with the image of the explosion.

"We must speak to Commander Nimembeh," Icheb said. "He likely knows who was responsible for the explosion."

"How did you come to this conclusion?" T'Kara asked.

"Computer," Icheb ordered, "pause playback and return to previous time index. Zoom back out to grid reference 12 mark 47 to 74 mark 13." After the computer complied, Icheb pointed to the cadet who had cast the explosive into the fire. "This is our saboteur," he said, then moved his finger directly across the image, passing over the campfire until it came to rest above another figure directly across from the cadet in question. "This is Commander Nimembeh. You can tell it is him because the cadet uniforms have brightly-colored shoulders, whereas his uniform has the standard gray shoulders."

"Logical," T'Kara commented.

* * *

Earth, Starfleet Headquarters
Stardate 56329.8
30 April 2379 1111 hrs

Admiral Warhol sat at the desk in his office in the wing of Starfleet Command dedicated to the Operations Division, the reconstructed Golden Gate bridge visible through the large windows behind him. He grabbed one of the PADDs on his desk and tried to read the report contained in its memory, but he couldn't keep his concentration on the task at hand. He still had too many unanswered questions about the past three days. Without warning, there was a flash of light and a dull roar, centered less than three meters from his desk, behind the set of chairs across from the metal and plastic workspace. He looked, only to see, quite to his astonishment, a Romulan in a Tal Shiar uniform.

"Admiral Warhol," the Romulan said, almost genially. He indicated one of the chairs in front of him. "May I?" Warhol nodded mutely, still in shock from the audacious entry. "I bring a message from the Tal Shiar: we know of your... associates. We want to be brought in on your group's deal with them."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Warhol managed to say without stammering, his composure rapidly returning.

"Please don't insult our intelligence," the Romulan said with wounded pride. "We are, after all, in the intelligence business. The Tal Shiar wants in. And if you believe even for a moment that you

have the luxury of telling us no, consider this: we know what you know. I'd imagine there's a hole in your recent memory. Your computers and your staff all will insist that you've been here the past seventy-two hours, but you know better. The man they believed was you was in reality one of our agents, perhaps even me, with a holographic mask to give him your face and more... mundane methods to mirror your... *other* physical attributes. As far as anyone else knows, you never left San Francisco."

"You're trying to tell me," Warhol began, "that I was a captive of the Tal Shiar for the last three days?"

"Captive?" the Romulan echoed. "No, no. You were our guest." Suddenly, the Romulan's eyes narrowed and his voice took a more aggressive tone. "We've covered your tracks for the last three days, because you're far more valuable to us as a continued resource, but don't mistake that for foolishness on our part. If you so much as *think* about doing anything to the contrary of what we tell you to do from this moment forward, your friends in Section 31 will find a recording of you, in our care, willingly telling us everything you know about them and their activities. Have we made ourselves clear?"

Warhol felt the blood drain from his face. Even if the Romulan was bluffing, it wouldn't be difficult for the Tal Shiar to create a holographic version of him for such a recording. And since Mr. West already seemed to have his suspicions about him to begin with... he was quite firmly stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Admiral?" the Romulan pressed. "Are we clear on this?"

Warhol nodded.

"I'll be in touch," the Romulan said, then he pressed a button on his belt and disappeared in a flash of light and a dull roar.

* * *

Earth, Starfleet Medical
Stardate 56330.2
30 April 2379 1443 hrs

Section 31 agent Tagawa, who had spent much of the last year in deep cover as a Starfleet Academy cadet, moved quietly down the hallway in the Starfleet Medical hospital facility. Making sure no one noticed him, he slipped through the doorway and into Commander Nimembeh's room. Inside, he found the room all but empty, and Nimembeh lying unconscious on his bed, bio-monitors softly displaying his vital statistics.

He walked, nearly on tiptoes, as quietly and cautiously as he could manage. When Icheb and T'Kara had departed the campsite, he had taken the opportunity to strike there and then, in the hopes that the explosion would be blamed on them. There was just one problem: just as he threw the device into the fire, the motion of his arm caught Nimembeh's attention. In order for the Borg to take the fall, Nimembeh must be disposed of. He had to ensure the Section's plans to neutralize the Voyager crew -- the young ex-drone included -- went forward. He also knew that, if he were exposed, the Section would disavow any knowledge of him in order to prevent its own exposure.

He gently lifted Nimembeh's shaved, dark-skinned head and pulled the pillow out from underneath. Grabbing both sides firmly, he reached forward and shoved it into the instructor's face.

Nimembeh's hands shot out, grabbing Tagawa by the wrists, attempting to push the pillow away. Any other time, the bigger Nimembeh would have easily succeeded, but this time, he was barely holding his own against the relatively scrawny "cadet," his injuries had drained him so. At that moment, the door opened, and Icheb and T'Kara stepped into the room, looks of shock and surprise on their faces.

"Tagawa," Icheb said softly. He half-turned to T'Kara, and said, "Go. Alert security. I will handle him." T'Kara turned and followed her friend's instructions, and Icheb launched himself forward, tackling the human.

They collapsed atop Nimembeh's midsection, and Tagawa lost his grip on the pillow, which flew out of his hands upon Icheb's assault. Icheb, however, lacked Tagawa's training in hand-to-hand combat, and the human quickly turned the tide against the young Brunali, who was sent crashing into a chair two meters away.

Icheb, undaunted, picked himself up and rushed Tagawa once more, and the two crumpled to the floor, clutching one another's fists, struggling to regain the upper hand. For the moment, they were at a stalemate.

The door flew open, and three Starfleet officers wearing the gold-necked uniforms of security rushed into the room, T'Kara close behind. They quickly joined Icheb in subduing Tagawa, and among the four of them easily overpowered and subdued the would-be assassin.

He was caught, Tagawa realized. He had utterly failed in his mission, and he knew precisely how dim a view the Section took on failure of any kind. He screwed up his courage, resigned himself to his fate, and bit down hard on the false molar with its store of fast-acting poison. And everything went black.

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