



Episode 8-22 – Echoes of the Mind

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The images and voices came at Harry Kim, fast and furious, like star streaks rushing past a ship at maximum warp.

"You've been infected," said the Ocampan.

"We call it the olan'vora," said Tal gently, "the Shared Heart."

"Your pupils are dilated, your respiration uneven," said Seven of Nine.

"You look like hell, buddy," said Tom Paris jovially.

"We are Defenders of the Realm," the Sernaix male taunted.

"But you're a better man," said Kathryn Janeway proudly.

"I'll be seeing you again, Harry," said Ozymandias, "Real soon."

"Get well, soon," said Seven again.

Then the voices and faces melted together into whirlpool of light and matter...spreading outward...taking on the consistency of sand...

...Endless sand...stretching out across the oncoming landscaping. Dunes, rocks, flat open plains...the desert...

Yes! A desert planet, rotating silently through the void. It expanded to fill the entire field of view. All tan and ochre and earth tones as far as one can see...

And then, a speck of green on the horizon.

The singular dot expanded to reveal a field, abundant with life and growth, bucolic comfort and sanctuary in the midst of the barren wilderness. And situated at the heart of this paradise was...a barn.

And for just a brief flash of time, an old man sat on the porch of the barn, looking up and smiling.

"I've been waiting for you."

At that moment, Harry Kim bolted up from his bed in a panic, his body bathed in a cold sweat. He quickly darted his eyes about the room, trying to get his bearings and control his rapid breathing. The old man, the barn, the planet, they were all gone. He was back in his assigned quarters, in the middle of the night, station time. None of it had been real.

A dream, he groaned silently, another damned dream.

Harry glanced over at the dim red numerals of the clock on his nightstand. 0330 hours. Another three hours before he had to get up. He got up out of bed and padded over to the viewport along

the wall, gazing out at the inky blackness of space, to remind himself of where he was. There was indeed a desert planet below him, but it was the familiar rusty plains of the planet Mars, showing scattered patches of green on the daylight side where terraforming was slowly taking hold. The night side revealed the glowing threads of human settlements and irrigation projects.

The expanse above Mars was filled with the jumble of silent space stations and work bees darting about in a frenzy of nonstop motion. All together, this hive of activity made up the vast complex of the Utopia Planitia Ship Yards. Harry glanced downward, to see one of the docking booms of the Robert J. Fulton Engineering Station, the small habitat where he was currently assigned.

And there, docked at the end of the boom, cocooned in her dry-dock assembly, was the reason he was here. It was a ship, or rather, the half-completed framework of a ship. It didn't have a name at this point, or a ship class. She was the pride and joy of what had come to be known as the Montana Project, referring to her only as 'the prototype.' Of course, she had acquired her fair share of nicknames among the station staff. "Fulton's Folly" was Harry's personal favorite, even though the name itself was not flattering. Considering that the Montana Project was created to bring numerous disparate alien technologies together into a single ship design, Starfleet skeptics were doubtful that the ship would ever fly.

The dreams bothered him, this particular one most of all. There hadn't been any follow-up after the initial mysterious visions he experienced during Voyager's last confrontation with the Sernaix. But then, as he started his assignment here at Utopia Planitia, the imagery had returned with a vengeance.

He had been to the station's Chief Medical Officer and counselor, and they had both assured him there was nothing wrong with him. His counselor was certain that the dreams had more to do with the anxiety he was feeling upon returning to the Alpha Quadrant and his new responsibilities. After all, being away from his family and everything familiar for so many years was bound to leave some sort of psychological impact. She assured him that as he gradually acclimated to life in his new environment, the dreams would fade and his sleep would return to normal.

So far, he had told none of his superiors about his dreams, other than Counselor Darret and the station's medical staff, and they were all bound by confidentiality, as long as his condition failed to affect his work and other areas of his life. The only person on the station whom Harry felt even comfortable confiding in on this matter was B'Elanna. He knew that if Commander Vargas or any of the project coordinators suspected him of mental instability, however ungrounded their fears might be, it would guarantee him a one way shuttle back to Earth. And Harry knew it was just too important for him to be here, seeing the new ship through to completion, even if he wasn't entirely sure why that was.

As per Counselor Darret's recommendation, the young officer reached for his personal log recorder. He held the small cylindrical device to his lips, and hit the record button. The counselor had advised him that he might be able to get a better handle on these dreams and decipher their meaning if he could get his thoughts on record soon after awakening, while his memories remained fresh.

"Personal Log, Stardate 55895.3," he began to speak. "I had another one of the visions tonight. I think this was the longest one yet. Like the others, I saw...memories, things from my past. People I knew speaking to me. It all came out in a jumble.

I also saw the planet again. Dry, with no oceans. I'm not sure, but I think I've seen it before somewhere. I mean, I know I've been to a number of desert planets while I was on Voyager, but this one was different. It's like I had some kind of special connection to this place.

But this time, I saw something else. A barn. And an old man. He was speaking to me...like he was..."

Harry paused, trying to recollect his feelings, the initial flashes of foreboding and enormity that had overcome him in the dream, that had forced him awake. It hadn't been terror, he knew that much. Somehow, he knew the old man wasn't someone he should be afraid of. Rather, it was the overwhelming sense that this ethereal visitor was a harbinger of great change in his life. But Harry didn't know how.

"I don't know," he mumbled into his recorder. "Maybe I am losing my mind. Deep Space Isolation Syndrome. That's what Dr. Carmine thought. Maybe he's right. Perhaps I need to get away from this place.

Only I know I can't. Getting this ship ready for launch is important. Vitrally important. I'm not sure but...I just can't help but feel that the future of the Federation depends on what we're doing here."

Harry managed to catch another two hours of sleep before having to awaken to keep to his planned schedule. He shuffled his way down to the station's commissary for his breakfast, and more importantly, a cup of strong coffee to jolt him to full awareness.

Looking out upon the crowd of faces, it struck Harry just how unnatural this all seemed to him. The commissary dwarfed Voyager's more intimate mess hall, displaying a much more utilitarian environment. And although he recognized a handful of his new teammates scurrying around the buffet table, most of the people here were complete strangers, and probably always would be. For almost eight years, Harry had dined, served, and fought alongside the same faces, and had come to know their personalities and natures as well as his own cousins and childhood neighbors. Occasionally someone new would join the crew, or more often, someone he knew would be lost. But essentially, the crew of Voyager since the beginning of their journey had remained a steady constant for him.

But that was not the case here. Fulton Station alone had a complement of over two thousand people, with many hundreds of engineers and managers commuting in daily from other stations in the Utopia Planitia complex. He had come to know his own team quite well, and had developed a comfortable rapport with the leaders of other project teams with whom he collaborated. But these were but a small fraction of the vast sea of humanity (and non-humanity) in this, his new assignment.

One more thing that he had to adjust to now that he was back home.

It wasn't that he was unhappy here at Utopia Planitia, thought Harry. Quite the contrary. As the Engineering design team leader for the Montana Project, there were opportunities available to him here that had simply not been possible on Voyager. For the first time since his initial posting on Voyager as Operations Manager, he felt that his career was back in motion again. He had been specifically requested for this assignment, considering his experience in working with alien engineering technologies in the Delta Quadrant and the Time Bubble. He had also acquired the aura of a minor celebrity since coming to Fulton Station, with many of the station personnel seeking him out to hear of his adventures on the far side of the galaxy. And his contributions to the project had even earned the respect of the station's commanding officer, Commander Vargas, a man who had attained a well-deserved reputation of not being impressed easily. And best of all, it was just a short shuttle ride away to visit his family on Earth.

Yes, Harry Kim had come into his own at last, the young officer mused. But that didn't stop him from missing what he had on Voyager. What he had gained in opportunities, he had lost in family.

Scanning the room, he was pleased to see one especially familiar person gesturing to get his attention. B'Elanna Torres was seated alone at a table in the back of the room, beckoning him to come join her. Harry lit up at seeing his friend. He was glad that at least one of his friends from Voyager was able to be here, especially one as talented and capable as B'Elanna. It had been

difficult for her these past few months. B'Elanna did not have the academic credentials that so many expected from an engineer these days. She had grown up on the frontier and her talents, impressive as they were, were entirely self-taught. No one wanted to take a chance on her, especially with her Maquis past.

But Harry had interceded on her part and talked the project managers into bringing her on as a civilian consultant while she went for her engineering certificate. She had been grateful for the opportunity, even if it meant being away from her daughter and husband for days at a time. But as fulfilling as motherhood was for her, it was important for B'Elanna to feel like she was still an engineer, and that she could contribute to the greater good and make a difference.

"Hey, you," B'Elanna greeted him as he came closer to her table. She had already snagged herself a tray of the day's breakfast special. It was easy to pick out B'Elanna from the crowd, as she was one of the distinct few in the room wearing civilian coveralls and a Fulton Station compatch instead of a Starfleet uniform and insignia.

"Morning," Harry greeted her weakly as he eased into the seat across from her. He sipped at his coffee, hoping the caffeine would gradually bring him a semblance of full awareness.

"Jeez, you look awful," teased B'Elanna as she looked at her exhausted friend. "Just how late were you up last night, anyway?"

Harry looked across at her glumly. "Not too late," he said, trying not to reveal too much.

But it was obvious to B'Elanna what he was trying to hide. "You had another dream last night, didn't you?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"God, Harry," B'Elanna sighed. "You have to start taking this seriously. First those visions you had aboard Voyager, and now this? I've got to tell you that this is starting to creep me out."

"Well, thank you, B'Elanna," Harry retorted with sharp sarcasm, "I know I can always count on you to help cheer me up. Don't you think this is unnerving enough as it is?"

The half-Klingon engineer looked over at her friend with sympathy. "Harry, I know how important this assignment is to you. And I'd be the first one to tell you that you've been doing one hell of a job here. But your health and your piece of mind have to come first."

"I know," he groaned, trying to be conciliatory. "I just...I don't know. Maybe we've all been working too hard."

"Well, maybe getting away for First Contact Day weekend will help you clear your mind," she suggested graciously. "Think you can hold out for another three weeks?"

"Maybe," he acknowledged. "Oh, that reminds me," he said, his expression lightening up as he shifted topics. "I spoke to my folks last night. They said they'd be delighted if you, Tom and Miral came to our barbeque."

"I don't know, Harry," she said warily. "Are you sure its okay? I don't want your mom to go to any trouble on our account."

"Are you kidding?" he answered with a smile. "You've obviously never been to a Kim First Contact Day barbeque. Between my mom and my aunts, there's usually more food than anyone knows what to do with. You'd be doing us a favor by taking some of it off our hands."

"Well..." she hesitated, but inwardly pleased by the delight Harry was taking in talking about his family now. She knew how isolated he had felt on Voyager these many years, and how difficult it

had been for him to make a life for himself away from home the way she and Tom had. She was sure that just being with his family for the holidays would dispel the cloud that her friend now seemed to be under.

"And besides," Harry joyfully continued, "you'd be cheating yourself if didn't have a taste of one of my dad's grilled tuna steaks."

"Okay, okay," she answered with a laugh, "you've convinced me. Tom and I will be happy to be there. And I'll be holding you to that promise about the tuna steak. I'm very particular about what I feed my daughter."

"Huh? You're going to give a piece of tuna to a baby?"

"Hey, she's part Klingon, remember?" said B'Elanna with a mother's pride. "Miral's already developed a taste for meat. Not to mention her first tooth is starting to come in."

"Thanks for telling me," Harry chuckled. "I'll be sure to keep my fingers away from her mouth."

"Nice, Harry," she retorted back, enjoying the repartee.

The two of them laughed together, enjoying this moment. Harry knew it was difficult for B'Elanna. As much as it made her happy to feel like an engineer, there was the constant reminder every day that she wasn't in charge here. On Voyager, she had grown accustomed to giving out orders as Chief Engineer. Now here on Fulton Station, she was just a civilian consultant, there to advise and offer her expertise, but nobody was under any compulsion to follow her lead, unless Harry requested it. And there were more than a few senior officers here, including Commander Vargas himself, who made it clear that they were less than enthusiastic about having a former Maquis rebel on staff.

But the chime of the station's intercom interrupted Harry's thoughts. "Attention all project managers and team leaders. Please report at once to Conference Room Three by 0800 hours."

That was just fifteen minutes, Harry realized as he grabbed his coffee and got up to leave. He looked back at B'Elanna and saw the look of grim understanding on her face. As head of the Engineering Design Team, his presence was mandatory. Civilian consultants, on the other hand, were not included.

"Sorry, B'Elanna," he said regretfully, "Commander Vargas was supposed to be in conference with Starfleet Command this morning. That's probably what he wants to talk about. I really have to go."

"Hey, I understand," she said, before rolling her eyes, thinking about her previous run-ins with the station commander and how welcome he made her feel because of her Maquis past. "Mustn't keep God waiting."

"B'Elanna," he sighed, as if he were warning her not to aggravate her already precarious position here on the station. "I'll see you later."

And so the former Chief Engineer of the starship Voyager waved goodbye to her friend, remembering a time when she too went to meetings and made a difference.

There were eighteen other project leaders assembled in Conference Room Three besides Harry, all eagerly awaiting for their commanding officer to speak. Commander Alejandro Vargas wasn't the sort of man you gave command of a starship to. That wasn't his job. He was, by training and inclination, an engineer. He built starships and took pride in his work. Harry had known instructors at the Academy like him. He was the kind of man who got things done, as requested and on time.

He did not suffer fools or coddle incompetence gladly, but was able to recognize talent and praise it when he saw it. All in all, Harry thought he was a firm but fair leader, but was secretly glad to not have been stuck with him in the Delta Quadrant for seven years.

Vargas took his position at the head of the briefing table and looked out upon the men and women under his command. He ran his fingers through his thinning salt-and-pepper hair before speaking. "Okay, people. There's no easy way to say this, so I'll be direct. I've just finished talking with Starfleet, and we have new orders. Our timetable has been moved up." He then turned to a young man seated four chairs down from Harry. "Mr. Darcy, we're going to need to have the new transphasics and the enhanced phasers ready for field testing." Not missing a beat, he then faced an Andorian lieutenant standing across the room. "Mr. Thrakass, we need a complete shakedown of the hull plating and structural integrity field systems. And Mr. Kim," he added looking down at Harry. "The transwarp system and the new slipstream drive are to be up and ready to go online." He then gazed out across the room, addressing everyone. "Starfleet wants all of these systems ready for inspection...in four weeks. The goal is an eventual launch and shakedown cruise for no later than eight weeks."

The room was filled with gasps of disbelief. "Sir," said Lieutenant Aree, a furry-skinned Caitian, from her seat next to Harry, "there's no way we can be ready for an inspection that quickly. The Analysis and Research teams are still sorting through the Sernaix debris we recovered. It could take months before we have a proper analysis."

"Starfleet isn't willing to wait that long, Lieutenant," said Vargas coolly. "This ship is being built for one reason only: to serve as the nucleus of a viable defensive force in the event of a Sernaix invasion. Our work will be for nothing if the only ship we have that can go head-to-head with those devils is sitting in dry-dock during an invasion."

"I understand, sir," Aree pleaded. "But this technology...it's just so...different. There's still so much we need to learn before we can reproduce it."

"You obviously have little experience in shipbuilding, Ms. Aree," said Vargas, his gaze focused steadily on the unsteady young feline officer. "The Advanced Starship Design Bureau has a saying: The perfect is the enemy of the good. The ship doesn't have to be flawless, just functional enough. Any bugs in the system can be worked out later. That's what shakedown cruises are for."

"Yes, sir," said Aree meekly, as she took her seat.

"Mr. Kim," said Vargas as he turned towards Harry. "According the status reports I've read, it looks like the slipstream will be our biggest challenge to assemble by our target date. What can you tell me about where your people are with that?"

"Well, sir," said Harry uncertainly, "we've been studying the slipstream drive core that we found in the ruins of Voyager's last battle with the Sernaix. My team is pretty sure that it functions similarly to a standard warp core. It generates power and regulates the output to the deflector array in accordance to a set of calculated phase variances. These were the areas that Voyager had problems with whenever we tried to recreate our own quantum slipstream back in the Delta Quadrant."

"So you feel that you're close to a solution, then?" asked Vargas.

"Not exactly, sir," Harry continued. "What we have is a theory, that's all. We think that the drive core is able to tap zero-point energy from the quantum foam of space-time itself, something we've only managed to do on a limited basis with quantum torpedoes. We aren't sure how to reproduce the technique the Sernaix use for a sustainable output, and as Lieutenant Aree said, it could take a lot longer than four weeks to figure that out."

"So you have nothing?" Vargas's tone grew colder in response.

"Well, there may be a way to meet the deadline, Commander," said Harry, an idea coming to him. "We could...that is, if we can understand how the control interfaces operate...install the Sernaix core itself directly into the prototype's slipstream drive system."

"What?!" said Lieutenant Commander Singh incredulously from his seat across the room. He oversaw the Operations Design team and was responsible for the overall integration of the various systems into a coherent whole. "Harry, that's absolutely insane! We have no idea how this technology works or what might happen if we incorporate it into one of our vessels. The ship could end up destroying itself leaving dry-dock!"

"Not to mention that we still need to reproduce the core's function if we're going to install this technology in other starships," Aree joined in.

"And what if we go to all this trouble just to find out that the two systems can't be meshed together?" Singh continued. "We will have thrown away weeks of effort, all for nothing!"

"I know it's risky," said Harry defensively to the assembled group, just realizing how reckless his proposal was beginning to sound, "but I don't see any other way we can roll the ship out on time. Besides," he continued, looking at Aree, "if we want to understand how Sernaix technology works, what better way to do it than by observing it in the field?"

The commander remained silent during this debate, nodding his head and listening to all sides offering their point of view. But he weighed the information against his experience and balanced it against the constraints Starfleet had placed on him. In the end, he made his decision.

"Mr. Kim," he said somberly, "I agree that under ordinarily circumstances, what you propose would be exceedingly dangerous. But these are not ordinary circumstances. Proceed with your analysis of the core's operating system and interface protocols, assuming that there are any. Inform me of your results, and I will then make my decision as to whether we should install the core." Vargas then turned back to the rest of the assembly. "I know this schedule may seem unreasonable, everyone. Believe me, these aren't the conditions I'd choose to build a new starship under. But we're all officers and professionals here, and these are the orders that we've been given. Starfleet is committed to a final launch date of no later than eight weeks from today." His expression then softened slightly, looking faintly apologetic. "From this point on, all leave is hereby cancelled. I'm sorry to say that also includes First Contact Day weekend."

Everyone tried to stifle their groans of disappointment, but it was hard not to see the looks of distress on everyone's faces. Many had been hoping to celebrate the holidays with their friends and families. Harry had been among them. For the past eight years, he had missed out on his family's annual barbeque, and had longed for the chance to celebrate with the extended Kim clan. But it seemed that fate had once again conspired to keep Harry from experiencing happiness.

"If it's of any consolation," Vargas continued, "Starfleet Command has agreed to give our efforts here their complete support. We have carte blanche authority to requisition any resources we may need to meet our deadline. That includes personnel, equipment, research data, what have you. I want all department heads to submit their requisition lists to my office by no later than the end of today."

Looking around the room one last time, the commander concluded his remarks. "If there are no further questions, then that will be all. Go break the bad news to your teams, people. Dismissed." And with a wave of his hand, the meeting was adjourned.

Harry got up from his seat, eager to speak with his commanding officer, but was briefly waylaid by three of his colleagues.

"I sure hope your team knows what they're doing," said Singh, his tone one of bewilderment and mild rebuke.

Lieutenant Thrakass from Tactical seemed in complete agreement. "All I know is you wouldn't catch me flying around in a starship with an engine that nobody knows how to work."

"Hey, I'm not thrilled about it either, guys," replied Harry.

"I guess this was all normal on Voyager, wasn't it?" purred Aree, "coming up with crazy solutions like this?"

"Uh, I suppose," said Harry. Just when had he become the kind of daredevil officer who solved problems by the seat of his pants? As a cadet, he had been as by-the-book as they came. And now? Had eight years lost in space turned him into, as Tom might have put it, some kind of cowboy?

"Excuse me," he said as he disentangled himself from his co-workers, noticing that Vargas was about to leave. "Uh, Commander?"

"Yes, Mr. Kim?"

"Sir," said Harry as he approached the older man. "I've been thinking about what you said, about how the project had complete authority to bring in whomever and whatever we needed?"

"If you have a requisition, Lieutenant, then you can send it to my office as I said."

"Well, this is a special case, sir. I'd like to request that we bring Seven of Nine on board as part of my design team."

That stopped Vargas in his tracks as he turned to face his young subordinate. "Seven of Nine? You mean, the Borg woman? Mr. Kim, you already made that request of me when you first joined this project, and I believe my answer then was a definitive 'no.'"

"Sir," said Harry, a little more forcefully than he intended. "I know that you already turned down my first request, but please hear me out. If we're going to get this ship launched in less than eight weeks, then we're going to need someone who understands the ins and outs of transwarp technology and advanced physics better than anyone. That person is Seven of Nine."

"Honestly, Mr. Kim," Vargas sighed, "isn't it enough I accepted your request to take on the Maquis woman as..."

"B'Elanna Torres," Harry interrupted. "That's her name. And she was instrumental in our efforts to..."

"That's not my concern at this moment, Mr. Kim," Vargas said with an arched eyebrow, clearly not pleased by Harry's flippancy. "People can look the other way with a former Maquis, especially since she's had some Starfleet training, but do you really expect me to grant a security clearance to a former Borg drone?"

"I understand your concerns, sir," said Harry carefully, trying to strike the right balance between being a decisive leader and a respectful subordinate. "But consider the fact that Seven of Nine was only other person besides myself to ever board a Sernaix vessel. She had direct access to the technical schematics of that ship. If there's anyone who can help us crack the mystery of how their slipstream works, it's her."

"Yes, it's her 'direct access' that has me concerned, Lieutenant," said Vargas sourly. "I'm sure I don't need to remind you of how she was compromised by the Sernaix Ship Mind. As if her being a Borg drone wasn't enough of a security red flag."

"Commander," Harry said with great urgency, "believe me when I tell you don't have a thing to fear from Seven of Nine. All of those points, her being a Borg and the Sernaix thing, that's all in the past. I can tell you with complete honesty that I'd trust her with my life."

Vargas stood there silently and scratched his chin as he considered the young man's words. "Trust her with your life, eh? How about your career?"

"Sir?"

"I don't like it, Mr. Kim, but as you've so clearly put it, we're under a timetable. I'd be a fool not to make use of every available resource at my disposal. So against my better judgment, I'm granting your request. I'll make the necessary calls and have her on the next available shuttle from Earth."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet, Lieutenant," said Vargas coolly. "I expect this woman to perform. I'm assigning her to your team. That means I expect you to take full responsibility for her behavior and actions. And I will remind you that your first priority is to this project, and not to your so-called friend. I expect you to watch her very carefully. If she displays any anomalous behavior, you're to report it to me immediately. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, firmly but with a touch of apprehension.

"That's good to hear, Mr. Kim," said the commander, as he leaned in to the young lieutenant, "because if your Borg friend does anything to undermine this project or my command, I won't hesitate to reverse-engineer her myself."

Seven of Nine sat listlessly in the softly lit room, her attention torn between the view outside her window, and the caller on the viewscreen. The rain had lightened up to that of a light drizzle, but the sun had yet to fully break through the overcast sky.

She looked about her new surroundings, the guest room that her aunt had prepared for her. It was all so...inefficient. There was excessive material on the curtains, frilly lace on the seats and nightstands, an area rug that seemed to serve no discernable purpose. There was even a bed that took up far too much unnecessary space, for which she would have no use at all, as Starfleet engineers had already installed a makeshift regeneration apparatus in the corner. Everything in this room was a testament to uselessness.

And in Seven's mind, that included herself as well.

"Seven," said the Doctor, his image flickering slightly across the screen, "were you listening to what I was saying?"

"I...I heard you, Doctor," she replied, her mind elsewhere, her mood as murky as the cloudy skies over the harbor.

"I don't think you were at all," he said, folding his arms and looking down at her with authoritative sympathy. "Seven, I know how difficult it must be for you, adjusting to life on Earth. But I really feel that you haven't taken advantage of all that your new home has to offer you."

"This is not my home, Doctor," the former drone said somberly. "I am merely a guest in this house."

But the Doctor wouldn't hear of it. "First of all, Seven, I was referring to Earth. And second, I don't think that you have a full appreciation of what family means. Your aunt has graciously offered her home to you, and you seem to be treating the entire experience with loathing."

"It is not loathing," said Seven defensively. "I simply do not feel...comfortable...here."

"And how do you think she feels?" the hologram said to her sincerely. "For years, the woman was thinking that she had no one. And then she learns that her little niece is alive and well and is half Borg? She's trying to reach out to you, Seven. You could at least try to meet her halfway."

"It is difficult for me, Doctor," said Seven. "My aunt looks at me, and she tries to see the child that I once was. But I am not who she wants me to be. She does not know me."

"Give her a chance, Seven," said the Doctor, his face looking somewhat forlorn as he spoke. "At least you actually have a family to take shelter with. Some of us aren't so fortunate."

Seven looked up at the lonely visage of her friend and mentor. It was then that she realized that the Doctor's fight for the recognition of all holographic beings was so crucial to him. It was more than just a matter of preserving his own life, but of preserving the existence of his holographic brethren, his fellow Mark Ones. In a sense, they were the closest things he had to a true family, at least as humans defined the term.

But to Seven of Nine, the crew of Voyager had been her family, her collective. But now her collective had broken up. She was as Captain Janeway had found her when she had been separated from the Borg Collective that first time five years ago, lost and adrift.

"Perhaps, Doctor, you might come to Earth? I would very much like to be with those with whom I am already familiar," she said.

"I'd like nothing more," he said to her graciously, "but I'm afraid my efforts here on Jupiter Station keep me quite busy. Someone has to fight the good fight after all."

"It is unfortunate that I am not engaged in activities of equal importance," sighed Seven. "Starfleet apparently has no use for me. I am considered untrustworthy."

"Now, Seven," said the Doctor, "I'm sure it's just a matter of people getting used to you. And you shouldn't measure your value simply by the amount of work you've accomplished. If I've taught you anything, it's that life is a banquet, something to be savored and enjoyed." He then took on a distant ecstatic look as he continued. "Why you're just a short transporter hop away from the streets of Roma, or the sun-drenched fields of Tuscany...ah, yes. What I wouldn't give for the chance to simply wander about those same cobblestone roads that..."

"Doctor," said the young woman, rousing him from his reverie.

"Sorry," he replied, coming back to the conversation at hand. "My point, Seven, is that it pains me to see you feeling so down about yourself. Yes, you've known adversity, but you've also known triumph. I just want you to recognize just how truly blessed you've been in many ways."

"I...I will consider your words, Doctor," she said hesitantly.

"That's all that I ask," he replied warmly. "I do have to be going. I'm presenting a paper to the Daystrom Institute on algorithmic dream-consciousness states."

"Thank you for communicating with me, Doctor," she said to him. "I realize that of late we have not spoken as often as we used to."

"I know," he said to her, his eyes conveying affection. "It feels good again, doesn't it? Especially in light of...well, I'm just pleased to know you don't feel uncomfortable around me."

"Perhaps I did at one time," she answered him. "But you were there for me many times, especially when the Sernaix took control of me, even though I had treated you unkindly. When I reflect upon how cruelly I responded to your affections for me, I feel...ashamed."

"It's all right, Seven," said the hologram. "I can't make you feel something for me that isn't there. I'd rather have you as a friend than not have you there at all. I suppose that some boundaries simply aren't meant to be crossed."

"I too am grateful for your friendship, Doctor," Seven said, and nodded silently at the Doctor's image on the screen. "I would not wish to lose it."

"You'll be all right?" he asked her gently.

"I will be fine," she replied. "Thank you." And with a nod, the Doctor signed off, leaving Seven of Nine staring at the blank wall screen, alone and uncertain.

Seven sat in silence; trying to consider what meaning she could give to her life now that her circumstances had changed. The interrogations and depositions by Starfleet were finished, Voyager was to be decommissioned, and her crew scattered to their respective destinies. Before she had designed her life around the need to feel useful, that no matter how much uncertainty being an individual might generate, she would always take solace in the structure of having a specific function. But that was over now. She had no duties, no responsibilities, and no goals to perform.

She considered the Doctor's advice to simply experience life and acquire all that Earth had to offer. But she simply didn't know how. Every new venture, every step in the growth of her humanity, had always take place within the context of a guide, someone she trusted who would lead the way and provide new insight for her to consider. But now, there was no one, except possibly her aunt. And there were issues she had with Irene Hansen that she wasn't quite prepared to deal with just yet.

Seven shook her head despondently. It was moments like this that made her regret ever asking the Doctor to remove her cortical safeguards. A simple curiosity as to how to experience passionate emotions had led to a flood of new feelings that she had not anticipated. The despondency she was now feeling over her lack of purpose and function. Guilt over her dismissal of her longtime friend, the Doctor, regret over the casual manner with which she ended her brief 'fling' with Chakotay, and of course, her recognition of the unconscious cruelties that she spoken every day with Lieutenant Harry Kim.

The Doctor had warned her that these would be the consequences of experiencing the same emotions that other human beings felt every day. If this was what it felt like to be human, she thought, then it was a wonder that all of humanity did not lapse into depression.

"Annika?" a gentle voice spoke up from outside the doorway. Seven turned to see her aunt standing there, looking at her with that same patient smile she had worn for the past two weeks, ever since she had first come to live here.

"Yes, Irene?" Calling her aunt by her first name had been a minor victory on the part of the elder Hansen, something which Seven had graciously conceded. Somehow it had seemed inappropriate to refer to her aunt by the more formal 'Ms. Hansen,' but she could not yet bring herself to refer to her in the more familial 'Aunt Irene.'

"I...there's a crafts fair over in town," the older woman said hesitantly. "I was going over to take a look, to see if there were any antiques for the living room. I don't suppose you'd like to come along?"

"It is raining," said Seven succinctly.

"Oh, its just a light drizzle, nothing to be afraid of," she chuckled softly. "Besides, the grass and the flowers look so much brighter when it rains, wouldn't you agree?"

"I do not like to get wet."

Irene displayed that same smile she always used whenever she looked like she was about to lapse back into her memories of the past. "That doesn't sound like the Annika that I remember. When you were a little girl, you used to love running around outside, come rain or shine. It didn't matter one bit. Your poor mother had such a time chasing after you..."

These reflections on the past might have provided some comfort to Irene Hansen, thought Seven wearily, but they did nothing but serve as a painful reminder of everything she had lost. "I am not a child anymore, Irene. Those experiences are from another time, and have no relevance to me anymore."

"Now, Annika..."

"And why do you insist on calling me by that name?" she demanded, her voice an icy hiss of frustration. "It means nothing to me!"

"I...that's the name that your father gave to you," Irene pleaded with her.

Seven's expression was as cold and pitiless as her tone of voice, as old memories of her assimilation came rushing to the surface. "That means nothing to me either." Almost immediately, Seven regretted her choice of words, as she saw the pain and hurt in her aunt's eyes. Perhaps the Doctor didn't fully realize, she thought, what a mixed blessing family could be.

Irene Hansen said nothing as she motioned to leave. Seven got up from her seat and went to her. "I did not intend that as it sounded."

"Yes, you did," said Irene softly. "It's all right. I don't blame you. You see, when I think about your father, I remember the little brother who I used to tease and play with when he was a little boy. But that's not who he is for you. I know that you hold him and mother responsible for what happened to you, and I think that's why you feel so uncomfortable around me."

"I don't understand," said Seven curiously.

"You're afraid that if you accept me as family, it will mean that you've forgiven your father for bringing you into contact with the Borg. I don't think you're quite ready to do that yet."

Seven stood there, not quite certain how to respond. Before she could answer, or even think of a proper reply, the house computer released a soft chime.

<< Excuse me, Irene," said the computer voice, in its pre-programmed, almost human sounding voice. << There is a long distance call for Annika, from Utopia Planitia."

"Another call?" said Irene with a nervous cheer, trying to erase the earlier tension. "My goodness, you are a popular one today, aren't you?"

"I should answer this," Seven responded.

"I'll leave you to..." Irene said as she motioned to leave.

"No, you may stay." Seven then returned to sit down again before the viewscreen and taped the desk console to accept the call. Utopia Planitia, she thought. That could mean that the caller was either B'Elanna Torres or...

"Harry Kim," she said as the young man's face materialized on the monitor.

"Hey, Seven," said the young officer with a smile as he looked down from the wide screen across from her. "I hear that it's raining in your neck of the woods."

"My aunt does not live in the woods," she answered with a playful arch of her eyebrow. Her attempts at humor were not always well received, but Harry Kim was usually a gracious listener and it gave her good practice.

"Right," he laughed softly. "Listen, the reason I called is that I have a proposition for you." Harry went on to present his offer of a position on the Montana Project, explaining to her that Starfleet would be ready with a shuttlecraft to take her to Utopia Planitia as soon as she accepted and was ready to leave. It was a three-hour flight to Mars, which would give the staff at Fulton Station plenty of time to set up quarters for her tailored to her special needs, including a makeshift regeneration rig. In the meantime, Harry could send her an encrypted file detailing the work on the slipstream accomplished to date, so that she would be up to speed by the time she arrived on station. If there was one thing that Seven was good at, it was assimilating data quickly.

"So, does it sound like something that interests you? I don't want to put pressure on you, but we really need you up here. I need you. Um, your help, that is."

Seven took in what it was that Lieutenant Kim was telling her. The idea of it, working with Sernaix technology again, it...something seemed to stir within her. A faint trickle at the back of her mind seemed to tell her that this was what she wanted to do, what she needed to do. It was strange, she thought, that she should feel this way. But somehow it all seemed so right.

"I must confess that I find your proposal to be...intriguing," she said with a gradual smile. "It would most certainly be a stimulating intellectual challenge."

"Then you'll do it?" said an excited Harry.

"I..." She held off on answering the young man right away. Working on Fulton Station with Lieutenant Kim and B'Elanna Torres would not be quite the same thing as her service aboard Voyager, but it would be a close approximation. It was a gradual means of adapting to a new life, while keeping some comfortable aspects of her old one. And that compelling sensation within her grew stronger. She wanted this. She knew she would accept.

But she looked back at her aunt, looking sadly back at her niece, trying to force a smile as she overheard the conversation.

"I...I have been given an important opportunity," said Seven. "It is the chance to contribute to something of great significance to the Federation."

"I understand, dear," said Irene. "You should go."

"Please do think that I wish to leave you. It is simply that..."

"It's all right, Anni...I mean, Seven," said the elder Hansen. "You didn't do anything wrong. It was a mistake for me to try and force this on you so quickly. Maybe it's for the best if we take some time apart, and learn to get used to each other gradually."

"You are certain of this?"

"Quite certain," said Irene with greater confidence. "You're my family, Seven, and that means I love you no matter what. This is your house and it always will be. The door will always be open for you when you're ready to come home."

Harry and B'Elanna stood at the docking hatch later that day, awaiting the arrival of Seven's shuttle. There were a few other onlookers who were interested in meeting their newest colleague, while others who were just morbidly curious to catch a glimpse of the infamous 'Borg woman.'

Harry wished they would all just go away. This would be a difficult enough transition for her, without people making her seem like some kind of freak.

"She's here," he said excitedly. "Is everything ready? I mean, was Maintenance able to set up the regeneration rig without any problems?"

"Take it easy, Harry," B'Elanna said as she rolled her eyes. "The rig works fine. I checked the equipment myself. What's gotten into you, anyway? You've worked alongside Seven for years. What's the big deal about her coming here, anyway?"

"Look, B'Elanna," said the lieutenant pointedly. "It's not about Seven." He saw the skeptical look on his friend's face. "Honest. It's just...I want this to go well. This project, everything reflects on who I am as a leader on this team. And the stakes are just so high. I just don't want anything to go wrong."

"Relax, Harry," B'Elanna said as she reached out and tousled Harry's hair playfully. "Between you, me, and Seven, you've already got the most talented design team in Starfleet. Hell, if Tom were here, the four of us could be running the Federation by this time next week."

"I trust that that will be the next goal on our agenda once the current design project has been completed?" said a familiar feminine voice that was now emerging from the docking hatchway.

"Seven," said Harry with a broad grin, "it's good to see you again."

"I am equally pleased, Lieutenant," replied the former drone. She then looked past Harry to see B'Elanna standing behind him. "Ms. Torres," she nodded respectfully.

B'Elanna smiled in return. "Nice seeing you too, Seven."

"I thank you both for allowing me this opportunity. It is...good...to be of use once again."

"Believe me, Seven," Harry answered with a wry chuckle, "you'll be working hard every second that you're here. We've got four weeks to get a working slipstream up and online."

"Then I suggest we proceed to our assigned duties, should we not?" said Seven with an arch of her brow. "I have already assimilated the latest status reports you encoded to me while en route from Earth. I believe..."

"Whoa, hold on a second," said Harry with a comfortable laugh. "You've just arrived here after a three-hour flight. Don't you want to put away your stuff and get situated first before diving into work?"

"Perhaps that would be best," said Seven. "Would fifteen minutes be sufficient time to orient myself with my quarters? I have already downloaded the station's and the prototype's schematics."

Harry smiled and shook his head, as if there were something he and he alone found amusing. "Promise me that you'll never change, Seven. You're...an original."

Seven smiled unconsciously at Harry's words of amused praise. "I pride myself on being unique."

"Glad to hear it," said B'Elanna dryly. "I don't think there's room in this universe for more than one of you."

At that moment, the door leading to the main corridor, and in walked Commander Vargas, his mood and expression both an unreadable darkness, which showed a slight tightening as he saw Seven of Nine.

"Commander," Harry exclaimed as he noticed his superior officer enter the room. "I'd like you to meet..."

"I know who she is, Mr. Kim," Vargas said coolly. "Seven of Nine. Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero One. I've read your files, Ms..." he trailed off, trying to think of a proper title. "What exactly do you call yourself, anyway?"

"I call myself Seven of Nine," said the former drone, her expression a mirror of that of Vargas. The two eyed each other warily, each waiting to see a weakness revealed in the other.

"Very well, Seven of Nine," said Vargas. "I want you to know up front that I am not pleased with the idea of having you here, and that if I weren't forced by circumstance to make use of your considerable assets, I'd send you packing with a fully armed security detail. So make no mistake about it, young woman, you are here solely because Lieutenant Kim has persuaded me that you can add value to this project." He then paused for a moment as he folded his arms, and stared at her intently. "I read many of the Voyager logs regarding you. Captain Janeway seemed to let you get away with quite a lot while you were on board her ship, probably because she felt sorry for you. Well, let me assure you that we're all far too busy to feel any pity here. The minute you become more of a hindrance than a help, you're gone. Are we clear on this?"

Seven's voice was low and steady, betraying no emotion whatsoever. "We are quite clear."

"Very good," he replied sharply, as he then looked up at a startled Harry Kim, who was watching with alarm at the icy exchange. He never even bothered to acknowledge B'Elanna's presence. "Lieutenant, see that she's properly oriented and introduced to the rest of your team as soon as possible. I'll expect a progress report at 0900 tomorrow morning." And with that, he turned in crisp military fashion and left.

Harry was left dumbstruck, and almost wanted to apologize to Seven for this manner of treatment. But B'Elanna leaned over to the statuesque young woman, who was stiff with a repressed fury and hurt.

"Don't take it personally," said B'Elanna. "He said the same thing to me when I got here. Apparently he likes Maquis about as much as he likes Borg." She then gave Seven a wry smile. "Welcome to Utopia Planitia."

Seven's integration into Harry's engineering team went as well as could be expected. Out of fourteen officers, there were one or two who had difficulty at first working with her. But Harry had had a sit-down with them and had managed to calm them down, which had been especially difficult in the case of Ensign Allenby, who had lost two cousins at the Battle of Wolf 359. But at least everyone had learned to act civilly around her and be patient with her suggestions.

A bigger problem had proved to be Seven's working relationship with the rest of the team. On Voyager, Seven had often had difficulty working in teams, usually because of her instinctive belief that she was automatically smarter than everyone else, which technically was true. On the other hand, it had often caused her to conduct herself as if she were the automatic leader of any assigned project, and as if the rest of Voyager's crew were better off serving her.

Thankfully, thought Harry, Seven seemed to have learned from experience and kept her worst aristocratic instincts in check. If Commander Vargas's harsh warning had done any good, it had reinforced to her just how precarious her situation was on the Montana Project. Of course, sometimes her tone or harshness would rub someone the wrong way, which meant that Harry had to step in and smooth over any ruffled feathers.

Harry had never realized that leadership positions involved so much handholding and ego-stroking. It seemed, he thought with great amusement, that he was ever-so-slowly turning into a politician.

But at least Seven was more than making her inclusion on the project a worthwhile investment. Within days of her arrival, she manifested insights into the Sernaix slipstream core just from the schematics alone. By the end of the first week, she and B'Elanna had constructed a scanner that was able to generate an internal tomographic diagram of the core's interior. It was already leading to a new understanding of the inner workings of the core, proving not only B'Elanna's hypothesis that the slipstream core was a zero-point energy generator, but that the device also exploited quantum fluctuations within condensed matter matrices as a computing medium, thus allowing for incredibly detailed calculations of the slipstream variance. The core was quite likely the most powerful computer ever seen by Starfleet.

Just watching Seven work was a miracle for Harry to behold. He wondered just how much knowledge Seven had managed to retain from her contact with the Sernaix Ship Mind, because the ideas were coming so rapidly to her, it was almost as if someone were whispering them into her ear.

Seven of Nine held her lunch tray as she navigated the wide shuffle of the station commissary, looking for somewhere to take her meal. There were many tables with empty seats, but few with anyone that she had come to know. And fewer still with any she would feel comfortable spending time with.

Only after a few quick scans around the room did she find where B'Elanna Torres and Harry Kim were seated. Her heart lightened, as she knew that there were at least some people on this station that she could call her friends.

"May I join you?" she inquired of the two former Voyager officers.

"Please do," said Harry, as he shuffled over to make room for the young woman. "There's always room for one more."

"Thank you," she replied as she eased down next to him.

B'Elanna leaned in closer to the blonde woman to speak. "We managed to get a link-up with that nano-adaptive fiber you developed. We think it will have no problem interfacing with the slipstream core, assuming the programming protocols are compatible."

"It was not I who developed the fiber, Ms. Torres," replied Seven. "The Borg Collective acquired the technology from Species 1109. I have merely refined the adaptive sequence so that it will successfully bond with the Sernaix interface ports."

B'Elanna's eyes rolled and chuckled at Seven's response. "Ms. Torres? Jeez, you make me sound like an old woman, for crying out loud. Can't you just call me B'Elanna? We've only known each other for five years already."

"I...I did not think you would consider such familiarity appropriate," said Seven.

"Appropriate? Come on, Seven," B'Elanna groaned. "I can admit we're friends, even if you can't."

Seven blinked at B'Elanna's open admission of friendship. "I...I can admit it," she answered. In truth, Seven had always considered the half-Klingon engineer to be among her closest of associates, although the differences in their personalities had usually precluded any truly close connections.

"So does this mean that we can be on a first name basis at this point?" B'Elanna joked.

"I believe that I can adapt to that...B'Elanna," said Seven, revealing the barest hint of a smile.

"Well, now that's certainly progress," laughed Harry, watching the exchange between the two women. "Four years ago, who would have thought you two would be talking like this?"

"I believe that it is possible for one to adapt over time," said Seven, turning to the man to her right. "Did I not also learn to address you by your familiar name?"

"I'll admit, you did," Harry said with a smile. "Although I've noticed that you've kept things rather formal since you came on board."

"I did not wish to undermine your command, Lieutenant," she answered him. "You are, after all, my superior on this project and no doubt wish to project an air of authority with your subordinates."

"Yeah, now if only you'll remind B'Elanna of that," Harry smirked.

"Will you look at this guy?" said the engineer in amused exasperation. "Put a pip on his collar, and he thinks he's Kahless."

Before Harry could issue a retort of his own, Lieutenant Commander Singh came up to their table, and gave Harry a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Hey, we need to get going," the officer said to Harry. "The boss wants to see you, me, Thrakass, and Darcy on the double. I think you know what it's about."

"We're going to get the go-ahead on the slipstream installation, aren't we, Ramesh?" Harry said, trying to contain his excitement. After all, he wasn't a first-year ensign anymore. He had to comport himself as a responsible senior officer. But even so, the thrill of knowing he'd be overseeing the construction of what could possibly be the first successful slipstream drive in the fleet was difficult to hide.

"We'll see what the commander has to say," Singh replied. "I've got to admit it, Harry," he continued with a friendly grin, "I never believed you would have pulled off as much as you did in the last two weeks. I didn't think we'd learn so much this fast."

"Well, the credit goes to my team," Harry beamed proudly as he gestured to Seven and B'Elanna. "I'm just the guy who settles the personality conflicts."

"That is not true," said Seven. "Lieutenant Kim is a most capable engineer and operations manager and was successful in forming a coherent synthesis of many of our concepts and insights."

Ramesh Singh laughed in amusement at Seven's spirited defense of her team leader. "Maybe you ought to have her write up your officer evaluation," he said. "You'd probably make Lieutenant Commander by this time next year." He then looked at the time on the wall chronometer. "C'mon, Harry. We can't keep the boss waiting."

Harry waved good-bye to the two women and left to go to his meeting. B'Elanna smirked as she saw him leave. "Well, looks like Moses is being called to the mountain."

Seven said nothing, but simply watched Harry exit the room, her eyes still on him as he went down the corridor.

"Helloooo, Seven," B'Elanna teased, trying to get the former drone's attention. "See anything you like?"

"I...forgive me, B'Elanna," Seven stammered as she returned her attention to the woman across from her. "I was merely ensuring that Lieutenant Kim departed without incident."

"Yeah, right," the other woman grinned mischievously at her.

"I am grateful to him for including me on this project," said Seven, trying to explain further. "It is good to feel useful once again." In truth, it was Seven who needed the explanation for her behavior most of all.

"Yeah, I guess I can appreciate that," said B'Elanna, "the wanting-to-feel-useful part."

"Is that why you desired assignment to the Montana Project? You wished to feel useful?"

"In a manner of speaking," said B'Elanna. "Don't get me wrong. I love being a mother and raising Miral. I can't think of anything that I've done which has been more important. But I guess I needed to prove to myself that I was still the same person I was before I had the baby. That I was still an engineer."

"And you feel that your uncertainties have been sufficiently answered? Even though you are no longer Chief Engineer?"

"Gee, Seven, thanks for not sugarcoating it," B'Elanna sneered sarcastically. "Oh, I'm just kidding. The truth is, I miss being Chief Engineer more than I realized. But it's still worth it, being a part of a skunk works like this."

"A skunk works?" Seven cringed at the choice of words, bothered by the very thought of comparing her efforts to that of a Terran mammal known for its offensive odor.

"Yeah, a skunk works," answered B'Elanna with a twinkle in her eye. "Rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty, and making up the rules as you go along, doing what it takes to deliver your product as promised. That's what being an engineer is all about. I haven't felt a rush like this since my days in the Maquis. Do you know what I mean?"

"I believe that I do," said Seven. There had been a strange compulsion on her part to come here, as if the Montana Project and its fascinating array of recovered alien technologies had somehow called to her. But now that she was here and working alongside her friends, she found that there was a new compulsion that was directing her, focused on one individual in particular.

It was curious to Seven, this steadily increasing fascination with Lieutenant Harry Kim. He had been a friend to her since the day she first arrived aboard Voyager, even though she had only irregularly appreciated that aspect of him. It was only this past year that she recognized just how good a friend he was to her. He had stood by her, even coming to her rescue and rejecting his former fiancée in the process.

When she had first come to work alongside the young officer, he had seemed at best to be an irrelevant annoyance. And now, years later, she wasn't sure what he was to her. She had begun to notice that with their rejuvenated friendship had come an enjoyment of being with him. She was comfortable with him in a way that she had not been with Chakotay, probably because Harry was uniquely himself to her and not an attempt on her part to see him as someone else from her past. But unlike her relationship with the Doctor, there was an emerging curiosity on her part that somehow Harry Kim could be more than who he was for her right now.

"B'Elanna," asked the former drone. "Might I make an inquiry of you?"

"Ask away."

"Have you ever formed an opinion regarding an individual, believing that it was absolutely certain and accurate, only to reconsider that opinion as time progressed onward?"

"Are we talking about anyone in particular?" asked B'Elanna, leaning in with a naughty smirk.

"I am speaking purely hypothetically," Seven answered stiffly, arching her back.

B'Elanna gave her an all-knowing smile. "Well, to answer your question, it sounds kind of like the way I felt about Tom when we were first stuck aboard Voyager together."

"You did not feel an initial romantic attraction towards him?" Seven asked in puzzlement.

"The only thing I felt for Tom Paris when I first met him was that he was an arrogant, preening son of a bitch who thought he was the galaxy's gift to the female gender," B'Elanna replied, not with anger, but rather with laughter, as she recollected those foolish early days with the man who would one day become her husband.

"But you reconsidered your opinion of him?"

"Eventually. I came to realize that one of the reasons I was thinking so poorly of Tom was that I was afraid to confront the fact that I was actually attracted to him. As much as he annoyed the hell out of me sometimes, I gradually saw that there was a good, decent, responsible man inside him. I wanted to deny it, believe me. The last thing I needed while being stuck out in the Delta Quadrant was to fall in love. But it happened. And the rest is history."

"Indeed," Seven nodded in agreement. "Romantic affiliations can often lead to interpersonal complications, the Doctor being a case in point. His admission of his affections for me almost damaged our friendship. Thankfully, we have restored the integrity of our previous relationship. But I would not want such an occurrence to happen again with someone who is...important to me."

"You mean," continued B'Elanna with a twinkle in her eye, "someone you've just reconsidered your opinion of?"

Seven of Nine did not answer, and tried to maintain a stony mask of inscrutability as she focused on her meal. Her silence said it all.

Harry Kim's expectations had been proven in the end. Commander Vargas, pleasantly surprised by the progress of the Engineering Design Team, had given his cautious approval for the installation of the Sernaix slipstream core. Of course, his delight was not so exuberant that he would think to praise Harry's two civilian consultants for their indispensable contributions.

In any event, the assembly was scheduled for the following morning in the prototype's newly completed Engineering compartment. Lieutenant Commander Singh was still concerned about possible damage to the rest of the ship should the slipstream core prove incompatible with Starfleet designs, but Harry assured him that his team had installed 'security breakers' throughout all the engineering diagnostic systems. Should there be any power discharges or unpredictable programs feed back from the slipstream core, then the breakers would kick in and isolate the engineering systems from the rest of the ship, preventing any damage from spreading. The breakers even had a manual command function, in the unlikely event that they did not come online automatically. It was with this final reassurance that Vargas gave his final authorization for the installation.

"Ok, everyone," Harry called out to the team ahead of him, "easy does it." His voice was a beacon of clarity among the hectic din of engineers and operations personnel scurrying about their duties in the prototype's Main Engineering compartment. It was larger than Voyager's

engineering section, sleeker, with much glowing green instrumentation, which betrayed their Borg-inspired influence.

Seven could see why B'Elanna Torres would be drawn to such a working environment. It was completely deficient in any apparent order or efficiency. Yet, miraculously, the work managed to get done, generated solely by the harnessed creativity and talent of the design crew.

She looked on as she watched Lieutenant Kim issue instructions to his team, noticing the change in how he conducted himself. Clearly he had learned the lessons of his experience aboard the *Nightingale* well. He did not attempt to micromanage the people under his command, nor did he try to be an expert in every field related to his duties. Instead, he deferred to the judgment and expertise of those under him, allowing them to learn and excel at their own pace. But whenever a command decision was called for, he was clear and decisive in issuing it. He did not go out of his way to be liked, but rather made it clear that he was both fair and approachable. In doing so, Seven could see that Harry Kim had developed an effective and motivated workgroup that had been more than able to adapt to any outside influences, particularly her own inclusion.

"Here it comes," Harry gestured to her with a proud smile, as he looked on towards the back of the room. The compartment had a pair of large, cavernous bay doors, through which something was being rolled out. The two were looking on as six maintenance crewmen towed a massive object, buoyed along with antigravity cargo clamps. She recognized the object immediately. It was the Sernaix slipstream drive core.

The core was roughly cylindrical, about twice as large as an average-sized humanoid, with odd spherical lumps protruding organically from the side. It was made from a pitch-black material, the bizarre 'photon matter' which the Sernaix used in their ship hulls and superstructures. However, due to its more compact size and the fact that it appeared to be self-powered using zero-point energy, the core had maintained its structural integrity. It had managed to survive the crash that destroyed the ship from which it came, apparently undamaged.

Once the maintenance crew had loaded the bulky core to its final position, the antigravity lifters were powered down and the alien device was floated into its docking clamp, right next to the ship's primary warp core.

Seven could not take her eyes off of the Sernaix device. It almost seemed to sing to her.

"I feel the same way," Harry beamed at Seven as he followed her gaze towards the slipstream core. "It's magnificent, isn't it?"

"I...I find myself strangely drawn to it," Seven murmured. She was barely listening to Harry now, as her thoughts were now focused on the faint whisper that was beckoning deep within her mind. It was not the overpowering din of the Borg Collective that she remembered. This felt more like a gentle coaxing, like the laughter of an old friend. She knew she had to tell Harry about what it was she was feeling, but somehow there was this feeling that somehow...she just shouldn't.

"B'Elanna," Harry called out to the other side of the room, where she and three ensigns were busy linking up the nano-adaptive cables from the Starfleet engineering monitoring computers to the Sernaix device. If their test went well today, the nano-cables, each consisting of strands of trillions of pre-programmed nanites, would adapt their configuration and power signature to the Sernaix interface ports and fool the core computing system into believing it was linking with a Sernaix bodyfield.

"We're ready on our end," B'Elanna called back to him. "The cables are linked and ready for some juice."

"Allenby, Tate?" Harry called over to the two ensigns positioned by the slipstream core itself.

"She's clamped down and linked up, sir," Tate, a slight, youthful redhead, reported. Allenby nodded in agreement.

Harry then looked up to see the watchful eye of the engineering security imager, through which Commander Vargas was no doubt observing the momentous occasion from his office, while staying out of the way of his people and not giving them the overt impression he was looking over their shoulder. The young officer smiled as he looked out among the assembled crew here before him. This was his moment now. They were all waiting for him to give the word.

"Power it up," he ordered proudly, "We'll start it at 200 millicochranes and see where it goes from there." With the order given, energy was diverted from the main warp core through the nano-cables into the slipstream core. Everyone stood with baited breath, waiting and hoping for that moment when the engineering monitors would register a positive interface with the Sernaix device.

Only after a brief flickering of power, there was absolutely no response.

Harry remained nonplussed, despite the initial letdown. "Let's try cycling the power feed at 500 millicochranes and see if that has any effect," he suggested to the nearest ensign.

More power was then cycled into the alien device, but the crew were so intent on their jobs that nobody noticed Seven of Nine walking towards the Sernaix core aimlessly, like she was in a trance.

The whisper within her mind grew more compelling, urging her closer to the still-inert slipstream core. Allenby and Tate had left the core unattended to assist with the power transfer, leaving Seven by herself. She was standing over the bulky shape, and instinctively reached out to touch the cool, dark surface, feeling its smooth and frictionless texture. Her Borg-enhanced hand probed along the exterior of the device, until she found a recessed circle, a Sernaix interface port, one that was not being assimilated by a nano-cable.

Harry had time to quickly glance up from his position at the main engineering systems console to see the former drone standing over the core. "Seven," he called out to her in concern, "we're still running tests. You shouldn't be touching..."

But she was soon doing more than touching as she extended her enhanced arm and pointed her fingers at the interface port and allowed her assimilation tubules to shoot out and make contact.

"What the..." Harry gasped as he immediately dropped what he was doing and ran to Seven and the core. "Seven! Get away from there!"

Harry's outburst had immediately gotten everyone's attention. Three of the nearest crewmembers got to Seven first and tried to pull her away from the link. Harry quickly joined them and the four were pulling at Seven and her arm, trying to desperately break her free. But her grip on the core was immovable. She stood firmly in place as though she were carved from tritanium alloy.

"Seven," Harry pleaded with her desperately, "can you hear me? What's happening to you? You have to disengage now!" But Seven could not, or would not, hear him. Her eyes were glazed over and her mouth hung open absentmindedly. It didn't appear to Harry that she was even aware of what she was doing.

While the entire room was transfixed on the scene of four officers attempting to wrestle a dazed young woman to the group, B'Elanna's attention was drawn to the nearest monitor. "Uh, Harry...I think you need to see this," she muttered.

"I'm a little busy!" he shouted, still struggling with Seven.

"Harry!" B'Elanna persisted. "We're getting power readings from the Sernaix core. It's going online! But it's like nothing that we predicted in our simulations."

"Sir!" blurted Ensign Allenby from his own station at another nearby monitor. "The nano-cables...they're receiving new instructions! They're...I..." But there was no need for him to elaborate. It was plainly obvious to all that the cables were now forming new branches, spreading their tendrils into consoles and monitors all around Engineering. All around the room, the crew were shouting in confusion as Security personnel rushed in with their phasers drawn, but they were all uncertain as to how to take control of the situation.

"B'Elanna!" Harry cried out, still trying to pull Seven away, "where are those security breakers?" It was at that moment that a grill pattern on the side of the core, which had previously been inert, began to radiate a bright neon blue glow. The lights in Engineering flickered as the core drew more power.

"They're not switching on!" she shouted back.

"Hit the manual trigger! Now!" he commanded, "before whatever is happening here spreads throughout the ship!"

As B'Elanna followed Harry's instructions, Seven's body jerked and convulsed, until finally the tubules disengaged from the port. Seven went slack as Harry and the others yanked her away from the core. She could barely stand as Harry twisted her around to face him.

"Seven, what the hell did you do?!" he demanded, more out of fear than anger. But the young woman just looked at him with a blank stare. She clearly didn't have a clue as to what he was talking about.

But the confusion and chaos around them went dead as the intercom rumbled to life. Harry expected it to be the voice of Commander Vargas or one of the station security chiefs. But the speaker was one that was all too familiar to Harry Kim.

"Ah, that feels soooo much better," a jovial voice echoed throughout the room. "You people have no idea how confining it was being squeezed inside that tiny little implant for months on end."

And as the ashen expression on Seven's face revealed, she had recognized the voice as well. But B'Elanna clearly did not know what was going on at this point. "What the hell is going on here?! You'd better identify yourself right now, mister!"

One of the wall imagers panned downward, looking at B'Elanna as if it were an eye, focusing in on her. "I guess that my reputation failed to precede me." A second imager spun on its axis to concentrate on Harry. "Honestly, Harry. I would have thought you'd tell your friends a little something about me." The first imager then turned back towards B'Elanna. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Harry's jaw was agape, unable to speak. His mind flashed back to that horrifying discovery months ago, the discovery of dozens of Sernaix bodies, murdered by the rogue Ship Mind Ozymandias. A being that he had believed dead, but which not only was now 'alive', but had apparently taken control of Seven of Nine and was now in control of the Engineering systems that Harry himself had helped build.

Still holding a weakened Seven, he finally managed to form a coherent thought and shouted out an order. "Evacuate Engineering, immediately! Emergency lockdown!"

The frightened engineers didn't need to be told twice as they rushed, shouting and hollering, towards the nearest exit. Harry dragged Seven along with him as he dashed away, trying to block out the voice of the Sernaix calling to him as he ran.

"Hey, where are you all going? There are things we have to discuss! Important things! I would think that you..."

The compartment blast doors slammed shut as the last of the engineers and security guards fled the room, leaving a nonplussed Ship Mind sealed inside and all alone.

"Hello? Anyone there?" Ozymandias called out to the empty room. "Was it something I said?"

Harry tried to recall the number of times that he had seen Captain Janeway in anger. He estimated that if he were to add up all those times together, throw in for good measure some Kazon and Hirogen fury, and multiply it by a thousand, he might come close to approximating what Commander Vargas was venting at him right now.

"How could this have happened?!" the commander exploded. "Do you have any idea of the extent of this crisis? A Sernaix is in control of the most powerful starship ever built! A Sernaix!"

Harry stood with Seven and B'Elanna in the midst of Vargas's office back on Fulton Station. He wished that he could bear the full brunt of the commander's temper, but it seemed that the bulk of the blame was being directed at Seven of Nine.

"How long?" demanded Vargas of the young woman. "How long have you been playing host to that creature? What is its agenda? Answer me!"

"I...I do not know!" Seven struggled to respond. "As I have told you, Commander, I have no memory of downloading the entity, or being consciously aware of its presence. I had believed it removed from my cortical node, but clearly that was not the case."

"Oh, you think?" Vargas shot back at her. He then turned to the other department heads, who were also assembled for this emergency meeting. "How well contained is the creature?"

"Well," responded Lt. Commander Singh, "Ms. Torres was able to switch on the security breakers, so Engineering is isolated from the rest of the ship. There's no way that this...Ozymandias...can access any systems from the rest of the ship, or the station. However..."

"However?"

"He...um...appears to be trying to reprogram the nanocables to splice past the breakers. If he can do that, then he could, possibly..."

"Take control of the prototype," Vargas groaned. "How many other systems are online?"

Lieutenant Thrakas shifted uncomfortably next to Singh, his antennae twitching as he spoke. "Sir, there are twenty-four quantum torpedoes and a dozen transphasics in the ship's armory. We had them on stand-by for the launch tests scheduled for this afternoon. If this Sernaix can get control of the armory..."

Vargas went pale as he thought of the implications. "But the targeting computers aren't working yet."

"Not yet, sir," replied Thrakas. "But if this Sernaix wanted to, he could easily fire a torpedo at us or one of the other stations in the shipyards. Given how powerful our ordnance is, and the density of nearby targets, he wouldn't have to be very accurate to kill a lot of people. All he'd need is line-of-sight."

"And don't forget," B'Elanna joined in, "this thing is practically an artificial intelligence. He could probably calculate a firing solution in his...er, head. Assuming he had one, that is."

"Well, that's just wonderful!" Vargas threw up his hands in resignation.

"Um, sir?" Harry spoke up. "Have we, um, determined what it is that Ozymandias wants?"

"What he wants?" Vargas said incredulously. "Mr. Kim, I have the entire engineering section on lockdown. There's no way I'm allowing any open channels between this station and that creature. He might try to use the signal to gain entrance to our computer network."

"But Commander," Harry said, "how are we going to know Ozymandias's intentions if we don't talk to him?"

"Talk to him?" Vargas sputtered. "Mr. Kim, this Sernaix has instigated a hostile act against Starfleet. There will be no negotiations. A tactical squad from Starfleet Security will be here within the hour. They'll get rid of that...creature...soon enough."

"Commander," Harry went on, "I'm not talking about negotiations. I mean, we should just listen to what he has to say, that's all. If you're worried about comm channels, then someone should talk to him face to face. I'm willing to volunteer, sir."

"Absolutely not!" Vargas roared. "I'm not going to give this Sernaix a chance to make you its hostage."

"I...I don't think he'll do that, sir," said Harry awkwardly. "He could have prevented the blast doors from opening and had an entire room full of hostages, but he didn't."

"Harry, you can't be serious!" B'Elanna said with alarm. "You were the one who went aboard Ozymandias's ship. You found the bodies. He's a stone cold killer!"

"That was...different, B'Elanna," Harry said. "He killed his crew for betraying him and turning him into an upload."

"Right," she answered sharply. "And if he could do that to his own people, just think of what he could do to you."

"He...I don't think he will. He could have killed me and Seven back on his ship. But instead, he saved us. He saved Voyager. "

"Lieutenant, right now I wouldn't be tossing out any more suggestions if I were you," Vargas said with an icy glare. "After today's little fiasco, your credibility with me has been seriously compromised. Need I remind you that it was on your insistence that this woman," he gestured abruptly in Seven's direction, "be brought onto this project?"

Harry looked down, too ashamed to face his commander. All of the good work he had done here, everything he had hoped to accomplish, all of it wiped out in less than an hour. And Seven would be the one to pay the ultimate price for it.

Vargas paced back and forth across the room, not even looking at Harry as he spoke. "All I can say is that we..." he said before being cut off from a chime from his comm badge.

"Message coming in from Starfleet Security, sir," came the voice from Ops over the intercom.

"I'll take it at my office," Vargas replied, as he went to his desk terminal to silently read the incoming communiqué. Nobody in the room dared to speak while he softly listened to the other end of the channel.

When completed, Vargas looked up from his desk, straight at Harry. "Well, Mr. Kim, you still want to talk to your Sernaix friend?" he asked gruffly.

"Sir?"

"You and this Sernaix seem to have some kind of history. The tactical squad will be docking within a half an hour. I don't know what the full capabilities of this being are, but we need to learn what we can and keep it distracted until we're ready to strike."

"Sir?" Harry asked, puzzled by the request. "What exactly is the tactical team hoping I'll find? Surely they don't think they can retake Engineering with a physical assault?"

"That's not your concern, mister," Vargas responded. "Just keep this...Ozymandias...talking for as long as you can. If we're lucky, he may reveal something we can use."

"Yes, sir," said Harry softly. "It might help if Seven of Nine were to monitor..."

"Seven of Nine will be doing nothing," Vargas pronounced. "After today, I'm not about to let her near any station-critical systems. Until we can be certain of our safety, I'm ordering her confined to quarters. No comm access whatsoever."

Seven, who had been keeping uncharacteristically silent during this exchange suddenly looked up in alarm at the commander's decree. With a gesture from Vargas, two security guards came up to Seven and assumed a defensive posture on each side of her, making it clear that she was going nowhere without them.

"Listen, Commander," B'Elanna stepped forward, "if you're concerned about Seven's system integrity, I can do a scan..."

"Ms. Torres." Vargas shot the engineer a harsh glance. "I'd advise you to keep your suggestions to yourself. Your own position here is precarious enough. I suggest you stand down and make yourself available to assist the tactical squad when they arrive. The Borg woman is not your problem."

B'Elanna was about to make her own rather rude suggestion in reply, but Seven spoke up before anyone else could speak.

"I will comply with your directives, Commander Vargas," she said. "I will go to my quarters now."

Harry looked on at her with a pained expression, his insides turning about with anguish at the injustice being done to her. Couldn't anyone see that this wasn't Seven's fault? That she was an innocent victim of whatever game Ozymandias was playing at here?

Harry felt an even deeper shame now. He had brought Seven here because he had hope to be able to provide a new direction for her and a sense of purpose. Hell, he had done because he wanted her to be happy, he admitted to himself. And instead, he had damned her even further in the eyes of the Federation and human society.

Nice job, Harry, he swore silently to himself.

Her eyes looked back at his sadly as the security guards escorted her out the door and into the hallway. And with a swish of the door, she was gone.

"Mr. Kim," Vargas intoned as he folded his arms against his chest. "I suggest you get going to Engineering. Keep your comm badge online at all times. If you should find out something useful, you may yet be able to redeem yourself today."

The docking arm linking the prototype to Fulton Station looked to Harry to be as well guarded as the Romulan Neutral Zone. A small army of security guards were camped out along the corridor,

all equipped with phaser rifles, flak armor, and combat helmets. They stood nervously watching the airlock door at the far end, waiting for...whatever...to come out and wreak havoc.

Harry was waved on through the corridor, each guard looking at him anxiously as he passed, wondering if he was either a fool or just plain suicidal to go inside.

As he made his way past the airlock leading to the interior of the starship, he wondered if he was really doing the right thing. Harry couldn't forget the brutal condition of those corpses, all Ozymandias's handiwork. Nor could he forget the callous way he had used Seven these past few months, hiding inside her cortical node. No, he reasoned, for all that Ozymandias had done to save his and Seven's life that day, this was still a Sernaix he was dealing with. He operated on a morality that was not Harry's own.

The starship corridors were empty, devoid of both crew and activity. Just like Ozymandias's own ship those many months ago. How funny it was, thought Harry, that everything had come full circle again. Here he was yet again aboard an empty starship, ready to face off against the same hostile opponent. Harry only hoped things would turn out just as well in the end.

But things were different this time. Before, he had been a stranger on an unfamiliar ship, not knowing what was around him. This time, Ozymandias was on his turf. Harry had helped to design this ship, at least his small part of it. The Sernaix was the intruder this time.

Harry reached the blast doors and keyed in the manual override command, allowing him access. He activated his comm badge and kept the link open. If there should turn out to be any trouble down in Engineering, he could be locked onto and transported out of there.

And, of course, there was the phaser that Harry kept primed at his hip.

As he entered the cavernous Engineering section, he took stock of how its appearance had seemed to subtly change. The Red Alert lights were flashing, giving the room an eerie demonic glow. Tools and equipment were left scattered about the room from today's hurried evacuation. But most noticeable of all were the nano-cables which had spread like spider webs across the monitors and consoles, networking everything right back towards the dark, oblong shape of the slipstream core.

Harry stared for a long time at the alien device, waiting for something to happen. And indeed, something did.

"Well, hello there, Harry," came the echo of Ozymandias's voice from the room's intercom. "It's nice of you to finally show up."

Harry looked around the room nervously, trying to find a specific location to actually speak to.

"How about looking towards the imager, Harry," said the disembodied Sernaix, his voice more amused than annoyed, "It makes it easier for me if I can see your face when I'm talking to you."

Harry looked up and addressed the nearest imager, which spun on its pivot to aim its lens at him.

"I...I thought you were dead," Harry said weakly, not able to think of anything else.

"Well, that's a fine way to greet someone," Ozymandias chuckled. "It's like I told you before, Harry. I'm immortal, in a purely non-spiritual sense, that is."

"But...you...your ship was destroyed."

"Oh, yes. Completely and totally, according to Seven's memories. It must have been a grand explosion, I'm sure." There was the distinct sound of chuckling emanating from the intercom. "That's one of the great advantages of being an upload. You can make as many back-ups of

yourself as you like. Lose one copy, and you've always got a spare, minus a few memories. Say what you will about The Realm, but the Sernaix take their immortality seriously."

Harry shook his head grimly. "That's what you meant when you said you'd be seeing me again. This was what you had planned from the beginning, wasn't it?"

"Smart boy," Ozymandias laughed, his voice reverberating throughout the room. "I'm really glad they sent you to talk to me instead of that pompous ass you report to."

Harry's eyes immediately widened as he remembered that his comm channel was open.

"Oh, not to worry, Harry. I've cut in through your comm badge. Your friends won't be able to listen in. All they'll hear is a nice, benign computer-generated dialogue I whipped up. I thought we'd keep this conversation private. And don't get nervous on me. You're free to leave anytime you want. I'm hoping you'll be able to talk some sense into your people. I just wanted to make sure you speak to the right ones, that's all."

"W-what is it that you want?" Harry spoke up nervously, wanting to believe that he hadn't walked into a dangerous trap.

"Still don't trust me, do you? And after everything I've done for you? I thought we were friends, Harry."

"Everything you've done? You've taken over our engine room and now you're trying to take control of the entire ship! That isn't something a friend would do."

"It was nothing personal, Harry," said Ozymandias, feigning being hurt. "I was in a tight spot, you see. The Management Cadre wanted me destroyed, and I could only keep running for so long. Your friend Seven and her cortical node were exactly what I needed; a safe place to back myself up as a compressed data file until a suitable place to relocate me could be found." He chuckled again. "I tell you, those Borg certainly know how to build redundancy into their technology. You'd be amazed how much you can squeeze into one of those little nodes."

"And this was where you wanted to end up?" asked Harry. "The slipstream core?"

"Oh, it could have been any computer complex enough to store my consciousness. Of course, your technology was years away from building one that fit my requirements. I read from Seven's mind about the work of Ira Graves and how he tried to upload his mind using your crude instruments. I wasn't about to trust my consciousness to your species' eventually figuring out how to build a halfway-decent sentient/cognizant quantum computing architecture. Your finding the core was a stroke of good luck."

"A stroke of luck?" Harry asked, his voice rising in timber. "What about Seven? What about the way you took over her body and rode around in her like a parasite for months? Did you ever think about that?!"

"Harry, please," said Ozymandias. "Melodrama may play well with the Sernaix, but on you humans it looks very unattractive."

"Don't give me any of that!" Harry yelled out to the disembodied voice. "You used her! You robbed her of her memories and caused her to do...God knows what. Was that part of your plan too? Just like taking over this ship?"

"Harry, Harry, believe me when I tell you that the only thing I did to Seven was to plant a subliminal command inside of her. I wanted her to download my program as soon as she came in contact with a computer system that met my specifications. That's all. Other than that, I did nothing wrong. If anything, I provided her with a great many benefits. All of those 'insights' she

had into Sernaix technology, all of that came from me. I suppose that would make me more of a symbiote than a parasite."

"And you think that excuses what you've done? Three months of her memories are gone! And you caused that."

"Harry, I'm telling you. It wasn't me."

"Oh, and I suppose that there was another upload who happened to be inside Seven's head."

"As a matter of fact... yes."

Harry tried to let that sink in, before dismissing it out of hand. "Two uploads? You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth, Harry. Remember when Seven linked her mind during Voyager's battle with the Node Ship? Apparently, my people decided to take advantage of the situation and planted a Ship Mind inside her, the same way I did."

"But...why?"

"I'm not really sure. It wasn't really possible for me and this other Mind to...talk...while we were compressed inside Seven's implant. But believe me, your friends managed to erase him from Seven's mind completely. He's gone. With a little help from me, of course."

"Your help?" asked Harry. "What did you do?"

"Oh, I only prevented the other Mind from completely taking over Seven's body and wiping her mind clean, that's all. Which is exactly what it would have done if I hadn't already been there."

"What did it want?" said Harry, as he let his eyes wander about the room, trying to find some kind of tactical weakness, just in case things went to hell very quickly in here. "Assuming for a moment that I believed you, that is."

"Well, assuming that, I think that the Ship Mind was a messenger of some sort. It was using Seven to gather information and make contact with someone. All that I do know was that the message it was delivering came straight from ol' Sycorax herself."

"Sycorax? Who is that?"

"Who is Sycorax?" Ozymandias laughed. "Oh, just the old lady herself. The Adimha of the Management Cadre, the one who knows all and sees all. The closest thing we Sernaix have to an actual leader." He chuckled some more as he continued. "We would tell stories to frighten the youngest pack mates about how if they didn't behave themselves, ol' Sycorax would know about it and come and snatch them away. The truth is, Harry, that's not entirely a story just to frighten kids. She's one crafty and dangerous female, and if there are any designs on your Federation, you can be damn sure that she's at the heart of them."

"So what would this Sycorax want?"

"Allies, most likely. As Adimha of the Management Cadre, she has access to all data throughout The Realm and can monitor and control the packs that way, as much as they may resent it. Information is the source of her control. Sycorax knew everything that was going on inside of the Phase, or what your people called the Time Bubble. Now that you've managed to escape, she needs a new way to monitor things here. So, she'll need eyes and ears inside of your Federation."

"You mean, spies?" Harry sputtered incredulously. "I can't believe that anyone in the Federation would betray us to the Sernaix!"

"Seven seemed to believe it. The Ship Mind was acting on information from her memories. There was obviously at least one group that the Ship Mind felt could be safely contacted and approached with Sycorax's offer."

"I still can't believe it!" said Harry. "Who are these people, and how could Seven possibly know about them? She hasn't been to the Federation since she was a little girl."

"Must be something from her Borg memories, I would guess," said Ozymandias, his voice sounding like a shrug of the shoulders, had he any shoulders to shrug. "How would I know? I was just a visitor in her head, you know."

"Look, Ozymandias," Harry said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"How about calling me 'Oz'," the Sernaix laughed. "It sounds so much more friendly."

"Fine," Harry sighed, "You still haven't told me what it is that you want, 'Oz.'"

"Now, that's much better," Oz answered contentedly. "Well, for starters, you can tell your superiors to stop locking me out from the rest of the ship."

"No way," Harry stiffened. "Absolutely not."

"Relax, Harry. I don't want to take over your precious ship. I just want to help you improve it."

"You do?"

"Harry, why do you think I've done all of this for?" Oz replied soothingly. "I really want to help you people. I really do."

"Why? Is it out of the goodness of your virtual heart?"

"Oh, you wound me," said Ozymandias. "Okay, the truth is...it's in my best interest that your people come out of this safely. I can't go back to The Realm, not after what I've done. I need your help. All of your help." And then Harry heard a deep mechanical echo, which sounded very much like a sigh. "I have nowhere else to go. And virtual or flesh, I want to live."

Harry nodded his head at what the Sernaix voice was telling him. "It sounds to me like what you're looking for is...asylum."

"Yes, I suppose that's what you might call it. And I can certainly pay my own way, Harry. The tidbits that I passed on to Seven are nothing compared to what I can offer."

"I can...well, I can take that back to my superiors and see what they say."

"Make them understand, Harry. I read from Seven's mind that your Starfleet wants this ship launched quickly. You have no idea how right they are. If I can offer anything to your Federation, it's knowledge of how the Sernaix think. As soon as they can gather enough packs together, the Sernaix will attack, and they'll do it in force."

Harry thought about some of the chilling scenes he had seen from his dreams and visions. The thought of such an attack against his home planet terrified him. "How...how bad could it get?"

"How bad? Harry, let me put this into perspective for you. The Kuljanul, the dehydration weapon your people fought against, was just a sample of what my race is capable of building. There are weapons designs in The Realm's archives that are so deadly that if one of them were built and

launched against your Federation, there'd be no life forms indigenous to your quadrant left standing within a week, other than you and your intestinal bacteria."

Harry went pale at the very thought of it. "W-why would I survive?"

Ozymandias let the question hang in the air for a few seconds before giving his answer. "You're the only human with a Sernaix as a friend to protect you."

Harry then felt a strange sensation come over him, like a buzz or a tingling from within. He didn't know what it was, it being far too subtle. But it wasn't altogether unpleasant. It seemed to resonate with the slipstream core. And there was something inside of him telling him that everything Ozymandias was saying was true. He didn't know why. There was every reason in the universe to fear and mistrust him. But there were equally valid reasons to keep an open mind and believe him. Besides, hadn't he just called Harry a friend?

"I...I'll try to keep that in mind," Harry said.

"See that you do. And be sure to play up the danger when you talk to your people, Harry. A little drama never hurts. Oh, and Harry..."

"Yes?"

"Whatever you do, don't tell any of your superiors about our conversation regarding Seven's contacts. I don't know who these people are, but the impression I received from Seven's mind is that they have a very far reach. If you say the wrong thing to the wrong person, it could end up going back to Sycorax. And if that happens, she might decide to attack your Federation sooner rather than later."

"I'll remember that. But, I...I still can't believe that anyone in the Federation would do this."

"Hey, talk to Seven if you don't believe me. It's in your best interest to find these people and root them out as quickly as possible. Tell only people that you can trust implicitly. For all I know, they may already know about me."

"W-what do I tell her?"

"Well, for a start, you can ask her what she knows about a group called Section 31."

Vargas paced nervously back and forth in Fulton Station's operations center, waiting to hear word back from Lieutenant Kim. All eyes from around the room were watching him, waiting for some kind of signal to indicate what their next move should be. The only one not watching was B'Elanna Torres, who was standing at the back of the room, trying not to be noticed. Her thoughts were focused on her friend - no, make that both of her friends - who were now cut off and in very real danger.

Right now, Vargas was just stalling for time, waiting for the tactical squad from Starfleet to arrive and hopefully offer a solution that would still allow him to build his ship as promised. He did not have to wait for long.

The door to Ops slid open, and a slim, tanned, and a well-toned young woman in uniform entered the room. She strode in with the confidence and power of a lioness, her harsh face capped with dark, curly hair. Behind her stood six powerfully-built Starfleet officers, all of whom were toting Type 14 phaser rifles and an assortment of tactical ordnance.

"Commander Vargas?" said the woman. "Lieutenant Commander Thalia Baton, from Starfleet Security. I hear you have a pest control problem. I'm here to help you exterminate it."

"Commander," Vargas nodded respectfully. "I take you've been briefed en route?"

"I have," Barton said directly, her eyes betraying nothing of any emotion. B'Elanna stirred from her introspection to take notice of this woman. She had seen her kind plenty of times during her days in the Maquis, the kind who would always leave a few extra Cardassian bodies lying around just for good measure. This was no run-of-the-mill Starfleet flunky, B'Elanna concluded as she sized Lt. Commander Barton up. This woman was dangerous.

"I also hear you have a man in there," Barton continued, still standing crisp and at attention. "I'd advise you to get him out of there."

"Why?" asked Vargas. "How soon are you prepared to take this Sernaix out?"

"Right now," Barton replied, her lips curling slightly in a predatory grin, showing emotion for the first time. "My team is ready to beam in and deploy electromagnetic charges that will hopefully disrupt this creature without damaging too much of your equipment. If that fails to destroy him, he'll almost certainly be confused long enough for us to use high-yield explosives."

"Explosives?!" Vargas sputtered. "Commander, you do realize the importance of what we're trying to build here? If you damage our engine room, it could set us back...months!"

"I realize the danger of allowing this ship to fall into enemy hands, Commander," Barton replied, her smile now gone. "The rest isn't my concern. I have my orders."

"Uh, excuse me," B'Elanna spoke up, stepping forward. "Shouldn't we wait to hear what Harry, I mean, Lieutenant Kim, has to say before we plan any assaults around here? I mean, what if Harry's right and he manages to negotiate with Ozymandias. Having spent the last six weeks having to help build that engine room, I'd rather not see it get blown to hell."

Barton looked B'Elanna over before casually dismissing her. "Excuse me, but as a civilian, I don't think that your input has anything to add to this conversation. I wasn't brought here to negotiate with the enemy. I came here to destroy it. As far as my superiors are concerned, this Ozymandias is not to be trusted and anything it may offer is to be considered suspect."

"Excuse me, Commander." Vargas squinted at the younger officer. "Just which of your superiors made this determination?"

Barton smiled ferally at the commander once again. "You needn't be concerned with that, sir. They're much higher on the food chain."

"Of course, this location wouldn't have been my first choice," Oz said jovially to Harry. "For one thing, you definitely need to put some holo-emitters in this room. I feel like a damn fool talking to you through these cameras."

"Um, well, they're supposed to come later," Harry said sheepishly. "They're considered a second-level priority. Right now, we're more worried about getting the slipstream working."

"So you just thought you'd plug in an alien technology that you didn't understand?" The room echoed with Ozymandias's hearty laughter. "I'll tell you, you people have got guts! Why, I..." But the conversation stopped suddenly for a second, before Oz's tone changed. "Your people are trying to reach you. I'll patch you in."

"Lieutenant," came Vargas's voice over the comm badge. "We need you back on the station immediately to confer with us."

"But, sir," Harry replied, "I think you may want to hear this. I've been talking with Ozymandias. He's requesting political asylum with the Federation. He wants to help us..."

"Mr. Kim," said a new voice, a female one. "You have been given an order by your commanding officer. Disregard anything that the Sernaix has told you. He is not to be trusted. Withdraw immediately."

Harry let the connection die as he looked back towards the shape of the slipstream core. It made no sense to him, he thought. There was potential here for a breakthrough in the Federation's ability to stand against the Sernaix, yet Starfleet refused to take it.

"So it begins," Ozymandias echoed solemnly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry inquired.

"It means that you'd better get out of here like they said, Harry," said the disembodied Sernaix. "The shooting is going to be starting soon."

"You mean an attack? How can you be sure?"

"I was an Adimh once, boy. It's what I would do next," said Oz with an audible sigh. "You did your best, Harry, and I appreciate it. I suppose my next step is to take stock of whatever defenses I can muster and..."

"No," Harry interrupted, "this isn't right. I'm not going to..." Harry then thought for a second, before turning back to face one of the imaging cameras. "You said you could tap into my comm badge. Can you guarantee me a secure line to someone outside, one that Ops can't listen in on?"

"I can on your end, Harry," said Oz, "but I can't make any promises for the receiving end." A second or two passed before he spoke again. "There, it's done."

Harry then slapped his badge to open a new connection. "Kim to Torres," he called out.

"Harry?" He heard B'Elanna's frantic voice on the other end. "What's going on down there? All hell is breaking loose up here. You've got to get out of..."

"B'Elanna, listen to me," Harry urged. "I need you to get to Seven right away. And make sure no one is following you or listening in. Especially when you get to Seven's room. I'll call you back with further instructions. But I'm okay down here and I'm not in any danger."

"Not in any danger? Harry, you're stuck in a room with a Sernaix and there's this hard-ass from Starfleet Security who's ready to storm your position any second. I don't know whom you're in more danger from."

"B'Elanna, you have to trust me," he urged. "Right now, you and Seven are the only people I know I can trust. Please, just get to Seven and make sure she's okay. I'll call you right back."

Harry then turned back to Oz, nodding solemnly. "I need to buy some more time. Do you have access to the blast doors and the internal security systems?"

"I do," replied the Sernaix. "But..."

"Good," Harry answered with a smirk. "Lock the doors down. Put up the emergency containment field around the outer perimeter. That should keep anyone from beaming me out."

"Harry, am I understanding you correctly? Are you asking me to take you hostage?"

"As long as I'm your human shield, they won't attack, at least long enough for me to get in touch with Seven. If I can find out what she knows about those people she met with, and compare it with what you saw while you were inside of her head, it could not only prove that you can be trusted, but Seven as well."

"You're taking an awfully big chance trusting me, Harry," said Ozymandias. "For all you know, everything I've told you could be a complete fabrication."

"That's possible," Harry nodded, still unable to shake that strange resonance inside of him.

"So why do it?"

"I can't really say," said Harry, puzzled himself. "As I see it, this is part of my duty. I'm responsible for Seven. I brought her into this and I want her to be safe. I'm also responsible for this project and making sure it's completed on time. And I guess that somehow...I just know that what you're saying is true. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Oh, I'd say that it does. There's a connection that we have, Harry. You, me, and all Sernaix. You've been Touched, don't you know?"

"Touched? What are you talking about?"

Ozymandias just chuckled at the young officer's bewilderment. "Maybe when this is all over, you can get a good night's sleep. It will all be clear to you then."

Seven of Nine sat quietly in the Spartan quarters assigned to her on Fulton Station. She had not bothered to decorate her room, or even unpack. She had few possessions and little need for personal effects. All she could do to pass the time of her confinement was to sit silently in her room, sitting and waiting.

The door chimed and slid open. She did not bother to get up. Answering the door would have been irrelevant. That responsibility fell to the two security guards posted outside. So it was with surprise that she saw B'Elanna Torres being escorted inside.

"Hey, Seven," B'Elanna strode in, ignoring the skeptical look of the guard standing outside. "I came to make sure that your regeneration rig is working."

"I do not understand," Seven said. "I have had no difficulty with my regeneration cycle. There was no need for you..." But as soon as the door slid shut, leaving the two women alone, B'Elanna moved a finger to her lips, urging the former Borg to be silent.

"You holding up okay?" she asked the blonde woman. Seven nodded in the affirmative. B'Elanna whipped out a tricorder from her belt and did a quick scan of the room. Satisfied with the results, she turned back to Seven. "We can talk. I think the room is clean."

"I presume that you are not referring to the cleanliness of my quarters?"

"I'm talking about listening devices," B'Elanna replied. She then hit her comm badge. "It's all clear, Harry. We can talk."

Harry Kim's voice then came over the small comm badge on B'Elanna's coverall lapel. "Were you able to leave Ops without anyone noticing?"

"Are you kidding?" B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "I'm the last person any of those guys want around right now. No one even saw me leave."

"Good." There was another pause in the conversation, almost as if Harry were nervous about proceeding. "How about you, Seven? Are you okay?"

"I am as well as can be expected, Lieutenant," she answered listlessly.

"Seven, I need you to listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you." Harry then went on to explain to Seven the full circumstances of his conversation with Ozymandias and what he had told her about her lost memories and her unwanted mental passenger.

"Section 31?" Seven asked, confused by the reference. "I am not...certain, but...I believe I may know of this group."

"Well, what are they?" asked Harry. "Are they some kind of criminal organization or a terrorist group?"

"No," she said hesitantly. "I believe they act in the service of the Federation. Or at least they did until now."

"How could you possibly know this?" B'Elanna asked.

"As you will recall, on Stardate 41986.0, the Borg Collective assimilated several outposts along both sides of the Romulan Neutral Zone. As it so happened, during the assimilation of one of these facilities, two individuals among the Starfleet crew died under mysterious circumstances. Only a few fleeting memories were extracted from the two before their deaths, and an analysis of the bodies revealed that the assimilation nanoprobes succeeded in triggering a suicide implant in each of them. The Collective learned only that the two were not Starfleet officers, but were in fact members of a sub-collective known as Section 31."

"What were the two of them doing there?" Harry asked.

"That was never conclusively determined. Based on the extracted memories, it was believed that their assigned function was to aid in the subversion of the Romulan Senate."

"Subvert a foreign government!" Harry said incredulously. "But that's a violation of everything the Prime Directive stands for! And the Federation actually sanctions this?"

"How come no one's ever heard of these guys before?" asked B'Elanna.

"I cannot say," said Seven, "but I would presume that they do not wish for their existence to be made public. Their methods would no doubt be considered unacceptable by the Federation populace."

"No doubt," said B'Elanna wryly. "If you knew about these guys, how come you never said anything to us or Captain Janeway?"

Seven looked at the Klingon engineer with a cocked eyebrow. "The Borg did not regard the internal political machinations of the races they assimilated to be relevant. Furthermore, the information was of no significance to Voyager's circumstances, so the matter never came to mind."

"It never occurred to you that maybe Janeway would have wanted to know about a rogue organization within her society?" B'Elanna sputtered. "You should have told her what you knew."

"B'Elanna Torres, it would take several decades for me to relate to you everything that I know," Seven replied facetiously. "Do you wish the responsibility of sorting through such knowledge?"

"Hey, this isn't helping!" Harry shouted at the two women. "Right now, we have to prove that what Oz and Seven saw is true."

"And just how are we supposed to do that?" B'Elanna called out to the air.

"Well, I had a few thoughts on that," came a new voice over the comm badge, one that Seven recognized right away, leaving her chilled. "I thought that Seven and I might have ourselves another meeting of the minds."

Vargas sighed as he weighed his options, events proceeding faster with each passing moment. Barton and two of her lieutenants stood silently by, watching the man pace. She and her team had already donned their flak armor and combat helmets, prepared at a moment's notice to engage the enemy.

"I never should have let him go in there," Vargas mumbled. "Now that creature has my officer as a hostage." He then turned to Barton and shot her a hostile glare. "You had no business getting on the comm channel the way you did, Commander. You tipped off the Sernaix to our intentions."

Barton stood at attention, unmoved by the accusation. "From my understanding, Commander, it was Mr. Kim who placed himself in harm's way. What happens next falls on his shoulders, not mine or yours."

"That makes no difference!" spat Vargas. "He's one of my men and he's a prisoner. I won't allow anything to happen to him. I'm ordering you and your people to stand down."

"Commander Vargas," Barton replied coolly. "Need I remind you, sir, that Starfleet general orders expressly forbid negotiations with terrorists or hostage takers. And I'll also remind you that my orders come not from you, but from Starfleet Security. I've been authorized to use any means at my disposal to ensure that this Ozymandias person does not seize control of the Montana Project." She then leaned in closer, her dark eyes flaring to life, "Any means at my disposal."

Vargas tried to stare the younger officer down, but she clearly was not budging. Both remained locked in mutual intensity, when one of Barton's lieutenants came over to interrupt. Barely hearing his entreat, she walked off from the station commander, her angry eyes not leaving his until he looked away.

"Ma'am," said the lieutenant, holding up his PADD, "we've done a complete remote scan of Engineering. We know that Ozymandias has erected the emergency containment field and is rotating the field harmonics. We can't lock onto Kim or beam in near the slipstream core."

"I know that," she shot back harshly.

"But the field is weaker along the perimeter, and there's a three-meter gap between the field edge and the wall. It'll be a tight fit to beam in, but if we send in a few EM grenades first..."

"...it should disrupt the field long enough to beam our people in for the second wave," Barton concluded. "Have the squad on standby. Be ready to deploy HE charges. Wait for my orders."

"Do we have authorization, ma'am?" said the second lieutenant.

Barton looked at him crossly. "The home office gave me all the authorization I need. Tell the ship to be on alert and ready for an emergency beamout and maximum impulse at a moment's notice. There may be some fireworks very soon."

B'Elanna had Seven of Nine hooked up securely in her regeneration harness, ensuring that the interface contacts were securely linked to her tympanic implant. The rig had been developed by Starfleet engineers to handle Seven's regeneration needs upon Voyager's return to Earth.

Essentially, it was a bulky, reclining-chair-like apparatus that was designed to provide the same level of regenerative energy as the massive alcoves Seven had employed for the past four years. It added the additional feature of allowing her to lie back while regenerating, thus giving her the added illusion of going to sleep. Personally, Seven preferred to stand.

"Are we all secured?" Harry's voice came over B'Elanna's comm badge.

"I am ready," said Seven, still hesitant about Harry Kim's plan. "Are you certain that we must do this, Lieutenant?"

"Seven, we have to find those memories you experienced while you were under the control of the other Ship Mind. Since your memories are computer-enhanced, Oz can search through them, convert them into a digital image and get a picture of those people you met with. Proving that there's some kind of fifth column inside of the Federation will go a long way toward proving your innocence, not to mention show that Oz has a lot to offer. He and you."

"You take much upon yourself, Harry Kim," Seven said solemnly, while B'Elanna fiddled with the rig. "You put your career in jeopardy for me. It is not necessary. Friendship is not worth such a cost."

"Oh, yes it is, Seven," Harry's voice came out, sounding more unsteady. "You're more than just my friend. You're...you're part of my team. I'm responsible for you. It's my job to look out for you. And I guess since I'm also responsible for putting in the slipstream core, I have to look out for Oz also."

Seven seemed to blush slightly at Harry's words of loyalty. B'Elanna chuckled softly while shaking her head, leaning over to Seven. "Okay, princess. Time to take a nap." She then removed her comm badge from her lapel and inserted it into the makeshift link port she had built into the side of the device. After some brief fiddling with the small communications device, she waited for the blinking light to indicate that an interface had been achieved. Seven's regeneration rig was now using the comm badge to establish a low-bandwidth link to Harry's badge in Engineering. Her regeneration cycle, and the data through her implants, was now remotely accessible.

She still wasn't sure what Harry thought he was playing at. Defying orders, putting his faith and his career on the line for an uncertain alien entity and a pretty face...well...it was all so impractical, so impulsive, and so very...un-Starfleet.

B'Elanna grinned broadly at the thought of it. She had never been more proud of Harry Kim.

Harry looked down as the nano-fibers of the nearest cable linked to the slipstream core swarmed and spread over his now-removed comm badge. It was a vaguely unsettling sight, like it was being assimilated. But that was exactly the point.

"I'm linked to the badge, Harry," Ozymandias announced. "I should be getting a signal from your friends any second now."

"Right." Harry nodded, looking about the room nervously. What was he doing anyway, trusting his strange new instincts, putting his career and reputation on the line like this? Was it for Ozymandias? Was he just so desperate to see the design project through to completion? Or was he doing it for Seven?

"Look at us," came the bemused voice of Ozymandias. "We're sneaking around, defying the odds, engaging in some grand drama against outside forces, and showing complete contempt for established rules and authority." The room echoed with Sernaix laughter. "Thank you, Harry. I feel like I'm part of a pack again!"

"Um, don't mention it," Harry mumbled, remembering full well what happened to Oz's last group of pack mates.

"We've got a link!" he announced. "I'm starting to receive a feed from Seven's thoughts. My, my, what a jumble..."

"Do you see anything about this Section 31 or the people Seven met with?" Harry asked urgently, moving closer to the larger bulk of the Sernaix core device.

"Now don't lose your swagger, Harry," Oz cautioned him. "A humanoid brain, even a cybernetically enhanced one, isn't like one of your LCARS systems. You just don't have memories laid out like conveniently labeled files."

"Please, hurry," Harry pleaded, "The longer we keep this line open, the greater the chance that we'll get caught."

"I'm moving as fast as I can," Oz said patiently. "Although if you're worried about time, it may be a good idea for me to implement our backdoor plan while I'm waiting for the right image to pop up."

"Yeah," he breathed deeply, trying to get a grip. "You do that. Remember to do it just like I told you..." And as Harry reached out to steady himself, he grabbed a hold of the side of the slipstream core. At that moment, Harry felt something happen, like the insides of his cells were now tingling with energy. For a second, the young officer thought that he had stumbled across an open circuit and was receiving an electric shock. But what was happening wasn't painful. It was just...odd.

The Engineering room seemed to melt away and a new reality formed around him. An endless blue mist appeared, with flashes of light and sound erupting from within. Solid shapes seemed to slowly form out of the mist, faces, names, planets, ideas, all of it a jumble.

"W-what's happening to me!" he screamed out, unsure if he was actually talking or just thinking aloud.

"Well I'll be damned!" Ozymandias's voice echoed from around him, not filtered the way it had been earlier through the computer speakers, but rather a reverberation from all around him. "You're Linking! You're generating a bodyfield and interfacing with the core!"

"W-what? How is that...I mean..."

"I didn't think you could do it!" Oz exclaimed with delight. "I thought it was all just female propaganda, something the Management Cadre told the packs to get us all excited and obedient. But it's really true. You really have been Touched!"

"Touched? Touched by whom?"

"Why, by God of course!" replied the Sernaix. "Or by the Goddess. One of the two."

"H-huh?" Harry wanted an explanation for all of this. But then there were new sensations that came upon him. There was the hum and whisper of what seemed like billions of voices, all overcrowding and overwhelming his thoughts. Harry thought his head was going to burst from the chatter. As the imagery accompanying the voices crystallized into focus, he saw an endless army of very familiar shapes, the shapes of Borg drones. Harry knew that these were Seven of Nine's memories, recollections of the Borg Collective.

Harry, who wasn't used to mind-linking, didn't know what to make of it. He then sensed something new, not images but...a sensation. Waves of fears and anxieties came upon him, and the stray thoughts accompanying them, all seeming to indicate that they came from Seven. Harry sensed

the fears of her being able to fit into human society, of whether anyone would be able to accept her, as she had been accepted on Voyager.

He couldn't believe what he was experiencing. Was he briefly, tentatively, touching Seven's mind? He had always believed Seven to be so bold and fearless, and yet here he was seeing just how vulnerable and frightened she actually was.

"I...I'm feeling...emotion...thoughts. How is this possible?" he asked aloud.

"The link conveys a great many experiences," Oz spoke amid the flood of images from the Collective memory. "Thoughts, memories, even feelings. At any one time, thousands of Sernaix exchange sensations just like this amongst each other via The Realm. This is natural for us."

"But it's so...intimate. I shouldn't be knowing all of this." He then he sensed her focus shift onto new experiences, not the endless mass of the Borg, but the individual members of Voyager's crew. He felt the comfort level surrounding him like a warm sea as she focused on the faces of the Doctor and Janeway and Icheb. He winced as he felt an intense rush of sensation following the removal of her cortical safeguards.

"I...I never knew. All this time, her implants were keeping her from feeling..." he muttered in amazement. "She never told me. All those times she was cold to me. Maybe she never had a choice."

"She obviously has a choice now," Oz chuckled, as the intensity of her first kiss with Chakotay came upon them, followed by the discomfort she felt as her memories of Unimatrix Zero came to the fore.

Then new memories and feelings came upon him, those from their most recent experiences in the Time Bubble. He felt the shame and surprise that came from his frustration during their away mission on Oz's ship, followed by warmth from her mind as she focused on Harry.

Then a stray thought from Seven came into Harry's state of awareness. "Why did you not tell me that you thought I was beautiful?" she thought at him.

Harry was dumbstruck, as he tried to think of an appropriate response. She had sensed his presence in her mind. But more memories came forward, as a dark and cold presence came over them.

"The Ship Mind!" Oz called out excitedly. "Now we're getting somewhere." Harry looked on with a visceral chill as he felt the memories of the Sernaix Ship Mind operate with soulless calculation, carrying out the bidding of its masters in Seven's body. And then...

"Those faces," Harry whispered. "Those must be the men Seven met with."

"The enemy has a face!" Ozymandias cried out, as he materialized before Harry in his natural body. Harry had to contain his instinctive discomfort at the blue, demonic Sernaix form, reminding him too much of childhood tales of demons and devils. "Maybe now we'll be able to root out Sycorax's grubby little minions."

"B'Elanna, Seven, did you hear that? Oz, make a copy of this and--" But Harry was cut off in mid-sentence. A blinding flash quickly dispelled the hallucinogenic vista of the private link field. A wave of nausea overcame Harry as he felt himself abruptly lurched back into physical reality. Additional flashes blinded him and flooded his ears with a high-pitched whine. His senses were overloaded in a way not unlike his experience with the mind link. Only now, Ozymandias was not able to offer him guidance.

"Haaaaarrreeeee," Oz's voice faded in and out over the intercom, as if his very means of communicating were being ground down. "Whassssishappppennnnnnngggg....?"

The lieutenant, disoriented and dazed by the flashes and the sudden shift in perception, fell to the ground, trying his best not to lose the contents of his stomach. About the only sense of his that seemed to function reliably was his hearing, as he recognized the distinctive hum of the transporter. His eyesight was blurred, but he was able to make out a dozen dark, distinct, man-sized figures, looking like they were decked out in full combat armor and armed with very intimidating phaser rifles.

"Second round! Deploy!" a harsh female voice called out as more flashes went off around the room. He then heard phaser fire around him.

"Nanocables severed!" a male voice reported. "The core has been isolated!"

"Place the charges!" the woman commanded. "As we rehearsed it! Chop, chop!"

"What about him?" another male voice said, this one looming over Harry, who was struggling to focus as he looked up weakly from his prone position on the floor.

The leader walked over and looked down at him. Harry's vision was starting to come back into focus, but the woman had the flare shield down over her helmet, blocking her face. "Omicron protocols, lieutenant," she answered him curtly, before turning to look down at him. "No witnesses."

But before Harry could squawk in protest, he heard the rumble of the blast doors sliding open. The attackers seemed equally surprised, as they turned around to aim their weapons. Harry's focus returned just in time to make out Commander Vargas stride in with a dozen security officers. B'Elanna Torres strode in alongside of him, smiling in triumph.

"Stand down, Commander!" Vargas bellowed. "Your little act of insubordination is over. I gave no orders to launch an assault or to put my officer in danger."

The helmeted woman lifted up her glare shield away from Harry's view as she stood defiantly before Vargas. "And as I've already informed you, Commander, my orders come directly from Starfleet Security and supercede your authority!"

"Is that so?" Vargas asked, as he folded his arms. "Then perhaps your orders also supercede Starfleet rules of engagement regarding an opponent who has already offered his surrender?"

"Surrender?" Barton exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"He's talking about this," B'Elanna replied smugly as she went over to the nearest engineering console and demagnetized it with her tricorder, removing any residual EM disruption from the assault squad's attack. That being done, she then keyed in a few switches, overriding the security breakers and gaining full access to the ship-wide intercom.

"I repeat," came the pre-recorded voice of Ozymandias, "I am Ozam, Adimh of Silver Sky and Defender of the Realm. I offer my complete and unconditional surrender and make a formal request to the United Federation of Planets for political asylum. I am prepared to offer my knowledge and experience with the Sernaix people in exchange for..." B'Elanna then switched off the intercom.

"He's been repeating that for the last ten minutes," Vargas answered. "He managed to tap into the prototype's subspace communication system and broadcast a signal straight to Starfleet Command and the Federation Council chambers." He then glanced over at Harry, who was now

being tended to by two field medics. "It seems that you've lost your com badge, Mr. Kim," he said, looking almost amused, rather than displeased.

"Sir, this creature is still a dangerous menace!" Barton demanded. "It took a hostage! We've managed to sever the core from the nano-cables. My people can remove this threat..."

"Actually," Harry spoke, getting into the spirit of the moment, "I was never really in any danger. I was just following Commander Vargas's orders to keep engaging Ozymandias. He said he closed the blast doors for my own protection. I can see now how right he was."

"Not a hostage?!" Barton sputtered. "Commander Vargas, Lieutenant Kim is obviously in collusion with this Sernaix, as well as his Maquis and Borg cohorts!"

"There's no evidence of Mr. Kim's disloyalty, other than a rather creative interpretation of orders," said Vargas. "On the other hand, Commander, there's far more evidence of your own disregard for authority. In any event, the Council is sending a team of diplomats here to debrief this Ozymandias person. I suggest you not be here when they arrive."

Barton motioned to her team and they marched out towards the blast doors. B'Elanna couldn't resist a parting shot as she called out to the disgraced squad leader. "That's the funny thing about food chains," she said. "There's always a bigger fish." Barton's eyes seemed to glare fire at the half-Klingon engineer as she departed.

Vargas came over to Harry as he was brought to his feet. The disorientation of the attack and his severance from his link were subsiding, and he was regaining his equilibrium once again. "Mr. Kim, I'm not sure what happened here today, but I'm sure that your report will be most enlightening and entertaining."

"Yes, sir," said Harry. "I'll also have evidence to prove that Seven is innocent and that Ozymandias can be trusted to help us."

"I see. Be sure to have all that included in your report as well. I'm sure that the Council representatives will be interested in seeing it." Vargas then paused for a moment before continuing, his lips showing the faintest trace of a smile. "If they're happy with what this Ozymandias has to tell them, then I'd say you've done more than redeem yourself, even if you didn't exactly go by the book in doing so."

"That's how we did it on Voyager, sir," Harry answered proudly.

Vargas nodded in respect, turning past the young officer to B'Elanna. "Ms. Torres, our guests will be here in less than three hours. We'll need to get this mess cleaned up and the slipstream core reconnected before their arrival."

"I'll have it ready in two, Commander," B'Elanna answered confidently.

"I see. "As Vargas accepted her answer, he made a motion to leave. But before he did, he turned back to face the engineer behind him. "Oh, Ms. Torres?"

"Yes, Commander?"

He gave her another faint smile as he nodded again with respect. "Job well done."

"Enter," Vargas said, as he sat looking on at the picture on his desk. He nursed the small glass of synthehol in his left hand. He knew that regulations did not approve of his drinking while on duty, even such a moderate amount. But it was his custom to toast the memory of friends long past. He owed them that much.

"Commander?" The door slid open and Seven of Nine entered Vargas's office tentatively. She looked on to see that the commander was looking sadly at a picture of four Starfleet cadets. From where she was standing, Seven recognized the face of one of them instantly, that of Commander Vargas at a younger age.

Over the course of the past three days, events had turned out as well as any of them could have expected. The Federation representatives had debriefed Ozymandias and were satisfied that his pledge of assistance was genuine. An arrangement had been made in which he would be permitted to remain within the prototype's slipstream core, until a more suitable medium could be made available for him to take up permanent residence within. Until then, he had been assigned to the Montana Project as a consultant, under strict security procedures. He was allowed limited access to other ship systems from Engineering, but only under supervision. Additional access privileges would be granted over time, as he proved himself further.

Already Ozymandias's insights and contributions were putting the design team ahead of schedule, so much so that Commander Vargas had decided to reward everyone's hard work by reinstating leave time for First Contact Day weekend.

As for Lieutenant Commander Barton and her team, they had departed from Utopia Planitia without a trace.

Although there was some question as to Harry Kim's conduct and his adherence to orders, the events of Ozymandias's emergence were sufficiently unclear so as to leave all disciplinary action to Commander Vargas' discretion. For his own reasons, he decided not to pursue the matter, and Harry was once again in his good graces.

As for Seven, all charges against her were dismissed, especially after the data and images recovered from her mind had been made available. The only uncertainty was whether or not she would be allowed to continue her involvement with the Montana Project.

Vargas noticed her entry and nodded weakly at her. "Seven of Nine," he greeted her. "I just wanted to tell you that you're welcome to stay on board with us."

"Thank you, Commander. I would very much like to stay."

"No need to thank me," Vargas said, glancing back to the picture on his desk. "You've done good work here. Mr. Kim was especially vocal about your contribution to getting Engineering back up and running. He and Ms. Torres speak very highly of you."

"Lieutenant Kim is a good man," she said, blushing slightly, "and a good friend."

"And a good officer," Vargas agreed. "A bit unconventional perhaps, but I guess eight years in the wilderness will do that to you. But I can see that he's loyal and committed to the people under his command. He'll go far, I'm sure of that."

"Indeed," she said, smiling ever so slightly.

"I've also passed along that image of the men you met with to a friend of mine in Starfleet Intelligence. We'll try and find out who they are and trace them back to this Section 31 you spoke of. I don't know if I can bring myself to believe that there's some kind of secret organization within the Federation that nobody knows about, but if there's even a chance that there are traitors in our midst, we'll find them."

"I suspect that it will not be as easy to locate them as you might wish," Seven responded solemnly.

"Perhaps," he said, glancing at the picture again and taking another sip of his synthehol. She glanced over to get a better look at the portrait. All four cadets in the picture were laughing together and seemed to share a deep and personal bond, much like she had with her friends on Voyager.

"Tim Wellmore, Nikolai Chen, Hesutta Iko Jedewa," Vargas recited blandly, looking on at the picture. "We graduated the Academy together. They were lost at the Battle of Wolf 359."

Seven felt the pain and guilt of her prior association with the Borg come back once again. Even though she herself had not been physically present at that terrible battle with the Federation, as a drone she had experienced everything done by that attacking Cube along with the rest of the Collective. "I am sorry," she said, knowing just how weak and useless her apology was, but it was all she had to offer.

"I understand that you were assimilated into the Collective when you were only six," he said, still looking at the picture and not at her.

"That is correct. I was assimilated along with my parents."

Vargas let out a small sigh as the silence hung over the room. "That's a hell of a thing to do to a child," he said, revealing just the slightest trace of sympathy and understanding.

"Indeed it is," she replied.

He then looked up at her, giving her a weak smile of acknowledgement. "That's all. You may go."

She departed silently, leaving him to his memories. As she emerged back in the hallway, Seven looked up to see Harry Kim. She suspected it was no coincidence that he should suddenly appear here.

"Hey," he greeted her. "How did it go in there? Are you...?"

"I have been asked to remain with the project," she answered, uncertain as to how she should be around him after the events of the other day.

"That's good," he responded, perhaps a bit too eagerly, he realized. He wasn't sure of how to proceed from here. Intimate thoughts had been revealed between the two of them during his mind-link experience. And he wasn't sure what that meant either or how it tied into his dreams.

"Harry," she said after a long awkward pause, using the more familiar tone, "I wish to speak about the other day, when your mind..."

"Yes," he interrupted her, "and I'm so sorry about that. I had no right to intrude on your thoughts like that, and I..."

"Actually," she interrupted in turn, "I was going to ask if you had managed to gain any additional information about how you were able to interface your mind with the slipstream core computer?"

"Oh," he answered, unable to hide his blush. "...well, they weren't able to find anything wrong with me in Sickbay. And I don't know what Oz meant by that whole 'touched by God' business. He won't tell me any more. He says I'm not ready for the whole truth yet. Personally, I think he's just yanking my chain."

"Strange," Seven mused. "It was my understanding from the Doctor's research that the ability to interface with their technology is a direct property of Sernaix cellular biology. Such a feat should be impossible by a human, at least one who is..." She let her sentence trail off, searching for the right words to say.

"Ordinary?" he said, finishing her thoughts, trying to imagine just what it was that Seven really was thinking about him.

"I believe the word that I was looking for was 'unmodified,'" she answered, lifting up her own Borg-enhanced forearm as a counterexample.

How he wished that at this moment he had the ability to link his mind with hers. But for now, all he had to go on was the same old human intuition that men and women had been forced to rely upon since time immemorial. Was this why the Sernaix genders chose to live apart the way they did, resigned in frustration to the inherent unknowability of each other? If so, it was more the reason to pity them, thought Harry, to give up so easily on the possibility of love.

He was starting to feel a stronger connection to Seven, one that was going beyond friendship. But he knew her fears now, and realized that he could not force anything too quickly. After seeing her attraction for men like Axum and Chakotay, he wondered if he could ever measure up. After all, he was...ordinary, wasn't he? In spite of his dreams, he most certainly wasn't 'touched by God,' was he? In any event, it was better that he kept his affections in check until he knew for certain that she was ready to receive them.

But that didn't mean he couldn't try and test the waters.

"Uh, Seven," he said, trying to articulate himself, "I...uh...well, now that we've been granted leave for First Contact Day, I was wondering what you had planned?"

"I am not certain," she answered. "I had considered remaining here on Fulton Station and completing my work."

"Don't you want to be with family?" Harry asked.

"That is a difficult subject," she replied, her eyes downcast. "I have found it difficult to communicate with my aunt on an intimate basis. I do not wish for there to be difficulties between us, yet I do not know what it means to have a family."

Then an idea came to Harry, one that brought a smile to his eager face. "Well, if I could make a suggestion. I extended an invitation to Tom and B'Elanna to come to my family's barbeque this weekend. I'm sure it would be no trouble if you and your aunt were to come also."

"I do not wish to be an inconvenience."

"How can a friend be an inconvenience?" he asked her jovially. "And besides, after a few hours with my family, you may just see how important it really can be."

"I..." she trailed off, rendered speechless. "Thank you," she managed to say, her voice quivering with emotion. "Thank you for everything, especially for standing with me when I needed support." She then looked at him, her lips drawn back into a smile. "How is it that in all the time we have been associated," she asked of him, "we did not know each other?"

He smiled at her warmly, at this moment feeling truly touched. "We know each other now."

It was a dark room, in a restored private home, the walls lined with ancient leather-bound books, the location known only to a select few. A man with silvery hair sat with supreme authority at the thick wooden desk that dominated the center of the old room. His name was known to even fewer people, but for those who were granted the clearance to interact with him, he was known only as Mr. West.

He was looking over the assortment of PADDs at his desk. He did not speak with the three other men who sat off to the side. Brock, Segall, and Kelley knew that when their senior operative was ready to speak with them, he would. Right now, there was new business on his agenda that had to be dealt with first.

The heavy wooden door slid open, and a new person entered the room. The seated men were all dressed in neatly-tailored civilian garments, but the newcomer wore the crisp uniform of a Starfleet officer, her hair a cap of black ringlets, her eyes dark and intense.

Thalia Barton stood at attention in a military fashion, until Mr. West gestured with his hand for her to sit in the chair facing him. As soon as she did so, he looked up from his PADD and addressed her with a single question.

"What went wrong?" he said, plain and direct. He did not ask what had happened, for he already knew. It was the business of Section 31 to know everything that went on in the Federation and beyond. And Mr. West was Section 31.

"I'm sorry," she said soberly. "Kim, Torres, and the Borg woman did an end-run around Vargas. They helped the Ship Mind contact the Council directly. I had no way of knowing that Kim would flout regulations in that manner. It went against everything we have on him in his dossier."

Mr. West listened to her patiently before replying. "Never underestimate the bonds that are formed between those who have faced adversity together, Commander. That was your mistake. You'll know better for next time."

Barton perked up her head, encouraged that her future was not over in spite of her failure. "Then I'll be given another opportunity to sabotage the prototype?" The assault against Ozymandias, while mandated to prevent Starfleet from launching their newest ship on time, had just been a ruse. If she had only had a few minutes more alone, she cursed silently, then the explosive charges could have been set along the warp core and the entire prototype could have been destroyed. The debris would have offered no clue as to what happened, and the whole incident would have been blamed on Ozymandias's interference.

"No," said Mr. West, holding his hands together in a cat's cradle on the desk. "I'll have use for you later, Commander. Vargas will be suspicious now, especially if you try to insert any new people onto the project. We're better off waiting until things quiet down before making our next move."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Kelley leaned forward from his seat along the eastern wall, beneath a golden-framed landscape portrait. "Especially now that we've been compromised?"

"Don't be concerned with that, Mr. Kelley," said Mr. West, his face eternally unperturbed. "We're in no danger from a few officers and former Maquis spreading tales about some phantom organization." He allowed himself just a brief smile at the thought of it. People had a way of accepting and rejecting facts that did or did not fit into their worldview. And in the utopian mindset that had been created here in the United Federation of Planets, the existence of an organization such as Section 31 was literally unthinkable.

Mr. West thought of a line from an ancient motion picture that had said it best. The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

"Of course, just to be safe," he turned to the three men, "you three should keep a low profile. At least for the time being."

"And that picture?" Brock asked with some concern.

"Don't you worry about that," said Mr. West, as he held up the PADD displaying the image of Brock, Segall, and Kelley, all facing forward as they had when they had met with Sycorax's

emissary in Seven of Nine's body. "Our people in Intelligence have intercepted the picture Vargas forwarded along. It will never see the light of day."

Segall still looked unhappy, despite Mr. West's reassurances. "You-know-who won't be happy about this," he said, shaking his head. "She was expecting us to take care of the prototype. This could put us in a weaker negotiating position."

"Maybe not," said Brock, his eyes lighting up and a smile spreading over his features. "We may have something else to offer our new friends." He then pressed a button on his armchair and the landscape portrait along the east wall slid back to reveal a view screen. The screen lit up to show a scene from a dark room, showing an upset young man bolting upward from his bed, looking like he had just woken up from a nightmare.

"Personal Log, Stardate 55895.3," Harry began to speak. "I had another one of the visions tonight. I think this was the longest one yet. Like the others, I saw...memories, things from my past. People I knew speaking to me. It all came out in a jumble."

"Yes, I agree," said Mr. West, as his eyes feasted on the young man going into detail about his strange and most compelling dream. "I think our friends will be very interested in this."

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