



Episode 9 – A Darker Light

By: Mike Ben-Zvi (mbzvi@yahoo.com)

"Hey, Tom," Harry Kim called out excitedly, as he rushed down the corridors of the starship Voyager towards his friend.

"Not so loud, buddy," Tom shushed him, as he gestured to the tiny bundle he carried in the pack strapped to his chest. Little Miral Paris was sound asleep, at least for now. But Harry knew how quickly the newborn could be awoken and brought to tears.

But it was still a strange sight for Harry to see the friend he had once believed so devil-may-care, now a doting and responsible father.

"I just got her to calm down," Tom warned him softly. "I don't care to have to do it all over again."

"Sorry, Tom," said Harry sheepishly. "I was just on my way to do the pre-flight checklist..."

"That's right," said Tom, grinning with interest. "Another away mission. And so soon after your last one was such a raging

success."

"Hey, we got the dilithium we wanted, didn't we?"

"True. I guess I'm just a little protective where B'Elanna is involved," jibed Tom. "Only this mission is being by Lieutenant Harry Kim, if I'm not mistaken."

"Lieutenant *Senior Grade* Harry Kim, if you please," replied the young officer with a proud grin, as he thrust his chest forward, and thumbed at the new pips on his collar.

"But seriously, congratulations, Har," said Tom good-naturedly. "It's been a long time coming."

"You're telling me," Harry joked back. "I was beginning to think that Naomi Wildman was going to be promoted before me."

"Oh, don't take it personally," replied Tom. "Every junior Starfleet officer on board was in the same boat. Janeway just did a little reorganizing of the command structure to make it possible to promote you, that's all"

"I know, and I'm grateful for it," said Harry. "Say, maybe we can do a 'Captain Proton' when I get back? If you really want to congratulate me on the promotion, you can play Buster Kincaid for a change."

"Sorry, pal. No can do." Tom then pointed to the sleeping child strapped to his chest. "B'Elanna's catching up in Engineering, which leaves me on baby detail."

"She stuck you with diaper duty, did she?" Harry teased.

"Believe me, Harry," said Tom with a satisfied look on his face, "it's a labor of love. But you'll find that out for yourself one of these days."

Harry could see the glow of pride on his friend's face as he spoke of his daughter. Things had changed subtly between Tom and Harry after the former's marriage, and it had become even more obvious now that he was a father. Tom Paris had grown up, leaving his younger friend behind.

As the two reached the turbolift, the doors slid open to reveal the aforementioned B'Elanna Torres, whose eye lit up the moment she caught sight of her husband and child.

"Hey, there," Tom grinned at his wife. "We were just talking about you."

"Better be positive, I hope," she smirked at Tom, before casting her eyes downward at her baby. It was remarkable to Harry to see the expression on B'Elanna's face change from driven and ultra-competent engineer to that of gentle and loving mother. There was a peacefulness to her now, something that he noted in her demeanor in particular since her experiences on Caprijen. "And how's our little princess doing?"

"Just like Sleeping Beauty," Tom grinned proudly. "Didn't I tell you I have a way with babies?"

Harry looked at his two friends, seeing father, mother, and child together, remembering fondly the early days aboard Voyager, when the three of them used to pal around in Sandrine's, playing pool, sharing a few synthehol beers, and just as many laughs. Those were happy times, before Tom and B'Elanna had paired off together, just when he had learned to accept his being cut off from his loved ones back in the Alpha Quadrant and held hopes of being able to make a life for himself here on Voyager.

Only it hadn't worked out that way. Tom and B'Elanna ended up making the life of their dreams together instead. All Harry had to show for seven plus years on Voyager was a newly added pip to his collar.

It's funny, he thought to himself. There was a time when a promotion would have meant anything to him. But now that he had received one, he realized just how empty and meaningless it all was, next to having his friends or someone special in his life.

All he could see now when he looked at his friends was a happy, close-knit family. And he was the odd one out, the one that didn't belong.

"Uh, listen guys," said Harry hesitantly, "I've really got to be going now."

"Hey, that's right," said B'Elanna, still buoyed after looking up from her child. "You've got the big mission today."

"I'll tell you what, buddy, said Tom. "Maybe we can meet up for breakfast when you get back. I'm sure I can squeeze you in for five minutes when I'm done feeding the baby."

"Yeah," said Harry, trying to put on a brave face. "That would be great." But of course, it really wasn't.

"I'll see you later, Har," said Tom, as he and B'Elanna stood together proudly. "I've got a tutoring session with Naomi in about an hour, which leaves me just enough time to clean up after this little princess." He gestured down at the sleeping bundle on his chest.

"Right. See you guys later," Harry replied, as he walked down the long and lonely route towards the hangar bay.

* * *

Seven of Nine was striding towards the hanger bay with her characteristic regality and calm. She had downloaded the last bits of sensor data from Astrometrics to the shuttle for the upcoming scouting mission. It was necessary to map the surrounding sector, to give Voyager some indication on the nature and properties of this bizarre region of space, and whether or not it could be penetrated to return them to their normal space and time.

She arrived at the turbolift, ready to meet Ensign... no, *Lieutenant* Kim, she corrected herself. It was difficult to think of the young officer with any other designation than the one she had grown accustomed to these past four years. Change wasn't something the former drone adapted to very well, especially when it came to the people she most closely associated with.

Her attention was roused by the whooshing sound of the turbolift door, revealing Commander Chakotay. The first officer looked up at her, his eyes widened briefly, and then nodded with an air of forced professionalism. She breathed in silently, trying to prepare herself for the conversation to come. She had felt the sensation of discomfort that surrounded their interactions lately, particularly when he had come to give her the final briefing before the away mission. During the first month since ending their dating affiliation, she had tried to distance herself from him, fearing that he would try to make an effort to renew their brief relationship. But Voyager was a small ship, and avoiding him completely had proved impossible.

"Seven," the first officer addressed her as she stepped into the turbolift, the tension in his voice evident as he spoke to her. "Has there been any change in the sensor readings since the last probe survey?"

"No, Commander," she replied tersely, trying to sound as distant as possible. "The data readings have remained consistent. I believe that Lieutenant Kim and myself are as adequately prepared as can reasonably be expected."

"Well, then," he said, equally unconvincing, "I guess there's nothing more that needs reviewing, is there?"

"I suppose not."

Seven recognized the use of small talk, all in order to avoid the tension. The two had never really spoken about their brief relationship since she chose to end it shortly before being trapped in the Time Bubble. Perhaps now, she thought, the time had come to speak of that which she had neglected until now.

"Chakotay," she said, her tone shifting over from the official to the personal, surprising him in the process. "I wish to take this opportunity to apologize to you."

"Apologize?" he said in confusion.

"Yes, for the manner in which I chose to terminate our affiliation. It was never my intention to cause you any harm."

"I..." he started to say, momentarily taken aback by this unexpected turn in the conversation. "I appreciate you telling me that, Seven. But to be honest, I was more than a little hurt. I know that four dates don't make for a relationship, but I still think I deserved better than to just be cut loose like that."

"Indeed you did," she replied, her face reddening with discomfort. In spite of the fact that her safeguards were no longer in place to prevent her from feeling strong emotions, there were still sensations that were new and unfamiliar to her. "I was simply too...uncomfortable...explaining to you that I never should have agreed to your initiation of our relationship in the first place."

"Oh?" he inquired, not sure if he should be offended by this or not.

"Permit me to explain," she urged. "I was...attracted...to you. Physically. But it was based upon a false set of criteria."

"I'm not following you."

"I wished to re-experience the feelings that I developed when I was in Unimatrix Zero, what I felt with Axum. In order to do so, I allowed myself to respond to the one member of Voyager's crew that most resembled him."

"You mean, me?" he said with disbelief. "I reminded you of Axum?"

"Yes," she answered succinctly. "You and he are both leaders of revolutions and men of uncompromising principle. It seemed logical to me that if I were to experience a relationship such as that which I shared with Axum, you seemed like the most likely candidate." Her eyes then swept downward, finding it difficult to face the man across from her. "But I realized that this was a mistake, and then ended matters before things became too...intimate...between us."

"Seven, I...I appreciate you being honest with me about this," he said, trying to make sense of her revelation. "But you have to understand that no two men are alike. You can't just call up one to serve as a substitute for another."

"I realize that now," she said. "Especially considering that I too was a substitute for another."

"Excuse me?" he said. "What are you talking about?"

"I refer to the attraction you feel towards Captain Janeway. I realize now that you have had feelings for her for some time."

"Just a minute, there," he said defensively. "I never pursued you as a substitute or as a distraction for Kathryn...I mean, the Captain. I saw an attractive woman who had made tremendous progress in the growth of her humanity and I wanted to get to know her better, that's all."

"I am not saying that you did anything improper," she replied. Her lips then curled into the faintest approximation of a smile. "I simply wish to point out what I have observed of you. I have seen the two of you grow closer as of late, especially since our meeting with the Ayrethans. Should you and the Captain choose to pursue the matter any further, I would like for you to know that I approve of the pairing."

Chakotay stood speechless, but then in spite of himself, he smiled warmly at her. She smiled back, just as the turbolift arrived at her destination.

"If you will excuse me, Commander," she said, looking back towards him and exited the turbolift, leaving a very nonplussed and somewhat amused Chakotay behind.

The former drone headed down the corridor, with her thoughts focused on how matters had been left between herself and Chakotay. It was her hope that matters had been dealt with satisfactorily with the Maquis first officer, so that both could go onward and

deal with each other efficiently. It was at this point that she heard a familiar voice coming up from behind.

"Hey, Seven. Hold up," Harry called out to her, as she glanced over her shoulder to see the Ops officer quicken his pace to catch up with her.

"Lieutenant Kim," Seven greeted him cordially, but distantly, her thoughts still on personal matters, matters that she did not feel appropriate to share with the young officer.

"Lieutenant Kim," Harry repeated her words with a chuckle. "You know, I was beginning to think that you believed 'Ensign' was my first name or something."

"And why would you think me so ignorant as to confuse a Starfleet rank with a personal name?" she threw back at him casually. "We have an away mission to conduct, Lieutenant. I suggest we proceed."

Other crewmembers might have taken exception to her tone. But Harry Kim held his tongue and said nothing. He never did.

She did not intend to sound so hostile with the Lieutenant, thought Seven upon reflection, but it was important that she maintain a distance with him during the duration of this mission. She had noticed that he showed an uncomfortable tendency to want to communicate with her whenever he sensed any difficulty emanating from her. In fact, he seemed to want to communicate with her all the time when they worked. It was most distracting at times.

Lieutenant Kim possessed many exceptional qualities, she acknowledged, and she did value his presence in her life. She knew that at one point, early in her time aboard Voyager, he had been interested in pursuing a romantic affiliation with her. But he was not like Chakotay at all, nor Axum. He was what humans tended to call a 'nice guy' or a 'boy-next-door.' All admirable traits to be certain, but they lacked the aggressiveness or dominance that she had felt fit her criteria of an appropriate mate. He and she were not optimally suited for one another, she had concluded early on, and so she had maintained a distance from Harry Kim, so as not to encourage the young officer into believing that their relationship was anything other than professional.

Of course, she reflected, hadn't she just finished telling Chakotay that her criteria had been misguided to begin with?

* * *

Kathryn Janeway sat in her command seat on the bridge, watching as the shuttle cleared the hangar bay and departed away from the ship. She had just communicated with Harry Kim her last minute instructions for their mission and wished them luck. Like the Delta Quadrant, this bizarre space was full of unexpected surprises.

The doors to the bridge slid open, and Commander Chakotay strode onto the bridge, following his captain's gaze towards the monitor.

"Looks like they have things well in hand," he commented dryly.

"Perhaps," said the captain, the worry on her face quite clear. "This is our first deep space mission here in the Time Bubble. They'll be a long way off if they run into anything."

"Harry has been on plenty of away missions before," he said, trying to be reassuring, "He'll know to keep matters on track and stay out of trouble."

"I hope so," she answered, still concerned, like a mother letting her children cross the street for the first time. But then wasn't that who Harry and Seven were like to her, he mused. Her children?

He knew that was why his decision to pursue Seven had cut Kathryn so deeply, he thought. Any other woman, and it might not have mattered so much. The fact that it was Seven, someone who had become like a surrogate daughter to Kathryn Janeway...

No, that was over, he said to himself. Seven had made that clear, especially today. He glanced over to the captain, her attention deliberately looking towards the monitor and not towards him. They used to be so close, before the Admiral had come aboard and revealed to Kathryn the truth of his and Seven's relationship. At first there had been awkwardness, then subtle resentment. And now, with their bizarre recent encounter with the Ayrethans, they were on constant tiptoes around each other, not knowing what to say.

But he knew he had to get things back on track with them again.

* * *

A few hours later, Harry and Seven were deep in space, far from Voyager. The shuttle's sensors gathered much new data with which to correlate the crew's position, some of which might hopefully provide a clue as to how to escape this bizarre space-time anomaly they were trapped inside of.

It had to be the longest shuttle flight of Harry's life. He still felt a bit rankled after his early attempt at humor blew up in his face. He wasn't sure what bothered him more, the fact that Seven seemed to take a particular delight in bursting his bubble whenever he felt a lighthearted moment around her, or the fact that she seemed to be carrying herself as if she were the one in charge of this mission. That was par for the course with him and Seven. Why should today be any different, he thought bitterly?

"Everything OK over there?" he asked.

"The ship's systems are still performing at optimum levels," she stated crisply.

"That's not what I mean," said Harry. "I'm talking about you."

"Me?"

"You seem a bit distracted, Seven," he said, trying to engage the former drone in conversation. He had noticed that her mind seemed to be elsewhere, however subtly she showed it.

"I am not," she replied harshly. "I am... focused on my assigned duties. If anything, Lieutenant, it is you that insists on distracting me with irrelevant conversation."

"Hey, I just thought..."

"I believe, Lieutenant," she interrupted him, "that we would both do well to focus on our mission and disregard all irrelevant conversation."

"Fine," he sighed. "Whatever you say." Why was it that every time she said the word 'lieutenant' it sounded like she was saying 'ensign?' Harry thought indignantly.

It frustrated him to no end. With everyone else on Voyager, he knew exactly where he stood. He was either a friend, or at the very least he shared an amicable working relationship. But Seven was always a complete enigma with him. He had been physically attracted to her when he had first started working with her, but he accepted long ago that

she had no interest in pursuing anything romantic with him. He had consoled himself with the fact that she was simply not ready to feel those kinds of emotions just yet, although from what he had later heard of her experiences at Unimatrix Zero and certain rumors about her and Chakotay, which he didn't entirely believe, she was obviously willing to experience them now. Just not with him.

He could accept that. So instead, he tried to be her friend. And more often than not received grief for his troubles.

Sometimes they worked together and they seemed like just polite strangers. Then there were times she would speak to him with harsh contempt, as if he were something she had found on the bottom of her boot.

But then there were those brief moments, when she showed vulnerability, and she spoke to him like the friend he had tried to be for her these past four years. He recalled the time when she had graciously offered to him her allocated time on the Pathfinder array, so that he could speak with his parents. And there were the times when she had thanked him for helping her with her work, and even when she wished him a speedy recovery after his breakup with Tal two years ago.

Even most recently, soon after they became trapped in the Time Bubble, he fondly remembered the feelings they shared about their fears and hopes for the future. During brief moments like that, Harry actually felt that he and Seven were the friends he had hoped they would become.

But then she would grow distant again and shut him out. Just another day in the life with Seven of Nine, he figured sardonically.

His musings were cut short by a voice to his left. "Lieutenant," said Seven, as she looked at her monitor with some disconcertion. "I am detecting a point of spatial distortion at extreme close range."

"Close range?" said Harry with puzzlement. "We should have spotted..."

He didn't have time to complete his sentence, as a bright flash of light and energy exploded portside of the shuttle.

"Red alert!" Harry shouted, his voice in full authority.

Seven complied with rapid efficiency as her fingers danced across the control panel, trying to locate the source of the disturbance. But before she could provide any new data, another explosion was felt, this one close enough to rock the ship.

"What the...?" Harry tried to speak as the engineering console to his right burst into a shower of sparks.

"We have taken damage to the port nacelle!" Seven reported.

"What the hell just hit us?!" Harry demanded over the din of the chaos around them.

The answer came in the form of a dark irregular shape that swooped across the front viewport, barely discernable against the dark of space.

"Sernaix," Harry muttered softly, viscerally recalling the beating he had received from them during his last away mission.

"Lieutenant," Seven called to him, her eyes riveted to the monitor. Harry followed her gaze to see what had caught her attention.

On visual scan, which were the only sensors they had that could detect these potent starships, and then only at close range, were two additional Sernaix vessels equal in size to the first. The two were moving in formation to join up with their sister ship in the lead.

"Three of them," Harry gasped, trying to maintain a cool exterior. He was in command here, after all. But Voyager had found itself outmatched by just one of the small ships that they had classified as 'scouts.' A shuttle against three such ships?

It was hard not to feel as though he and Seven were as good as dead.

"Recommendations, Lieutenant?" said Seven.

"Obviously they're just toying with us," he said urgently. "Or we'd already be toast."

"And when they tire of playing with us?" Seven asked with an arched eyebrow.

This was still his command, thought Harry with grim determination. And he would not let himself or Seven go out that easily.

"How bad a hit did we take on the nacelle?" he demanded.

Seven did a quick check on the ship's status monitor. "We are venting plasma at a rate which is diminishing the nacelle's output by twenty millicochranes a second."

Harry reached over to his console and began to type in commands.

"What are you doing?" Seven demanded.

He didn't bother to look up at her as he answered her, his eyes focused on the sensor reading showing the three attacking vessels bearing down on them for another pass.

"We can't fight them, so we're going to have to ditch them."

"You are instructing the computer to increase the plasma feed to the port nacelle!" she said with alarm.

"As soon as we vent a big enough trail, you fire the phasers and ignite the plasma. We'll blind their sensors temporarily and go immediately to evasive maneuvers."

"And to what extent do you believe we will be able to evade the Sernaix if we further damage our warp nacelle?" she pressed on.

Harry sighed at her stubbornness as he explained further. "If we're lucky, we'll be able to find someplace to hunker down and hide from their sensors. Maybe then they'll get bored and decide to move on and we can call Voyager for help."

"By damaging the warp nacelles, you are limiting our options," she said harshly.

"We don't have any options!" Harry yelled back, fed up with her constant undermining of his authority. Who was in command of this mission anyway? "We're looking at three ships, a single one of which could grind Voyager into dust. We can't fight them or outrun them. If you have another option, I'd love to hear it. Otherwise, ignite the plasma now!"

Her eyes narrowed at him as she reached over to the console and fired the aft phasers at the plasma stream trailing behind them. As bright flash ensued as the highly charged warp plasma underwent an energy discharge. The shuttle was expecting it. The Sernaix were not.

"They're slowing down," Harry shouted, noticing their approach veering off as the three ships tried to regain their bearings. "I'm implementing a course of five point two mark nine."

The shuttle then veered off sharply from its initial flight path and moved along a completely random course deeper into the heart of the solar system they were surveying.

"Seven," Harry barked at the former drone. "Keep the sensors peeled for something we can hide behind."

"Yes, Lieutenant," she said, the tone of her voice non-committal.

Harry didn't pay any mind to Seven's attitude as he was divided between plotting an evasive path through the densest part of the inner solar system at maximum impulse and eyeing the approach of their pursuers. He knew that soon it would be a moot issue, as the Sernaix appeared to only register on Federation sensors at short range at best. At long range, they were completely invisible.

"They're scanning for us," Harry reported. At this point, Voyager had only the most general inklings as to the full capabilities of the ships of this latest antagonist. But their firepower, maneuverability, and sensor masking properties made them a foe as formidable as the Borg.

"The port nacelle is registering an increasing structural imbalance," Seven stated. "It cannot sustain further high-impulse speeds."

"Just a little bit longer," Harry grunted.

"Have they reacquired our position?" asked Seven.

"It doesn't look like it," said Harry. "Not yet, anyway."

"That will change. The Sernaix are most..." Seven's attention was then diverted by a chime from her sensor array. "Lieutenant, I believe I may have found a possible hiding place. There is a comet at one mark five. It is currently outgassing cold plasma which should mask our nacelle emissions."

"Seven, you're wonderful!" cheered Harry, his earlier frustration evaporated as he set course. Seven only arched her eyebrow at him again.

The shuttle glided in on thrusters into the long gaseous tail of the comet, the hull pinging with the steady pelt of dust and ice globules breaking off from the main body.

"Let's hope we don't have to stay in here too long," said Harry. "I don't know how long the hull can hold out being pulverized like this."

"Approximately twenty nine hours before structural integrity is compromised," she replied. "Lieutenant, you do realize that should the Sernaix decide to take a closer approach to this comet, it will not take them long to discover us?"

"I realize that," said Harry, his earlier annoyance returning. "But we don't..."

And then he fell silent, his eyes transfixed to the viewport before him. Seven followed his stare and echoed his expression.

There was a ship, dark and irregular, floating off the far side of the dark carbonaceous mass of the comet nucleus. The design was unmistakable. It was Sernaix. But it looked nothing like the small but potent ships that were trailing them, or the ones that had plagued Voyager since they were lost in the Time Bubble. This ship was large, easily bigger than an Intrepid-Class starship, like an angry demonic bat. And mostly likely a good deal more powerful.

"Oh, my god," muttered Harry, expecting the end to come.

But nothing happened. The large Sernaix ship made no hostile moves against them. In fact, it made no moves at all. It simply drifted in an unpowered orbit around the comet, emitting no signature or intent.

But that still didn't make it any less frightening.

* * *

Back on Voyager, Kathryn Janeway was entranced as she watched the battle of wits unfolding before her. She was not the only one. At least a dozen crew members were crowding around, eager to see the husband and wife team of Tuvok and T'Pol going head-to-head in a game of Kal-Toh.

"So," she heard a familiar voice behind her, as she turned to see the tattooed face of her first officer, "who's winning?"

Of course, Janeway knew enough about Vulcan culture that Kal-Toh was not about winning or losing, but about what the game brought to the participants in terms of logical enlightenment. But seen through the lens of human competitiveness, it came to be yet another game where one player set out to beat his or her opponent.

"Nobody, yet," she answered Chakotay with an anxious smile. "I think the two of them are pretty evenly matched."

"Well, I'd like to think that after being married to the same person for seventy years, you'd get a pretty good idea of how they start to think," he replied with a smirk. She returned his smile with her own. It felt good to joke again with him.

"Well, it's either watching Vulcan logic games, or I could take my chances with Mr. Chell's bubble fondue," she laughed back in response.

"Maybe we could try something a little different?" he suggested tentatively. "It's been a while since the two of us have had dinner together. Would you be interested?"

Janeway was momentarily startled by his request. She thought about the Ayrethans and what she had felt there. It never occurred to her these past few months just how much she had missed her first officer's companionship. "I...I think I'd like that."

"Tonight, then?"

"T-that would be wonderful," she answered, trying to put on a controlled face, but inside, she felt like a nervous schoolgirl all over again.

* * *

Harry ended up piloting the shuttle underneath the tremendous bulk of what they had termed the Sernaix 'battleship.' He figured that the ship's mass, combined with the mysterious Sernaix ability to block sensor readings would help to mask their damaged ship. It appeared to be a successful strategy, Seven observed, as they sat still for several hours at minimal power, with the three pursuit ships failing to appear. At no point did the larger vessel seem to react to their presence, nor did it object to their futile attempts to scan its interior. They agreed that if the battleship had any hostile intentions against them, it would have exhibited it by now.

But that was all that they agreed on.

"Lieutenant," said Seven to Harry, "I believe that the vessel must be a derelict. How else can you explain its uncharacteristic lack of aggression against us?"

"I don't know," grumbled Harry. "Maybe this is all just another game to them."

"Then it would seem to be a highly illogical one," she replied sharply.

"Nothing has been logical about the Sernaix so far," he said. "They've been yanking us around from the moment we arrived in this place. This whole thing could be another attempt on their part to learn more about us."

"Then perhaps it is time that we learned more about *them*," Seven replied with smooth satisfaction.

Harry looked on at the former drone with anxious uncertainty. "Just what are you getting at, Seven?"

"If this vessel is defunct as I believe it to be," she stated, "then it would be within our best interests to transport aboard and study its technical capabilities."

"What?!" said Harry, incredulous at Seven's reckless suggestion. "We have no idea what's on that ship. There could be an army of Sernaix just waiting for us. And are you forgetting that our sensors can't even penetrate the hull? We might beam straight into a bulkhead."

"We do know that the Sernaix are able to transport from their vessels, so it is possible in principle," she responded. "We could transport a pattern enhancer ahead of us to send back a tight-beam signal for our sensors to lock on to. If we lose the signal, then we will know it is unsafe."

"It's still a huge risk," he replied, still unconvinced. "It might be safer if we try to contact Voyager and bring them into this."

"Lieutenant, our mission is to gather information about the area we are trapped in and make use of it in order to enhance our survival. Surely a greater knowledge of our enemy would fall under such a heading?"

Harry sighed, knowing that her logic was sound. As dangerous as it might be, an opportunity to observe Sernaix technology up close like this might not come again. And if they could learn something about how their ships functioned, it might make the difference the next time Voyager encountered one in a fight.

Assuming he and Seven survived to make it back to Voyager.

"You know I can't allow you to transport into a potentially hostile environment without support," he said

"Then I suggest you accompany me, Lieutenant," she said to him, in a patronizing tone he did not care for. "We can program the shuttle for an automatic beam-out if we encounter any difficulties."

All Harry could do in response was sigh. "Why does this seem so familiar to me?" he said.

"Lieutenant?"

"I just can't help but think of an old story Tom told me once," he said. "Something about two teenagers taking shelter from a storm inside of a haunted house."

"Haunted? As in ghosts?" She sneered at him with a look of impatience. "Lieutenant, surely you are aware that there are no such things as ghosts."

"Of course there aren't," he said, trying to sound convincing.

* * *

As luck would have it, the pattern enhancer Seven beamed over first did not materialize into the heart of their warp core or a section of the hull. It reported beaming into an empty chamber one meter in mid air above the floor. It fell down hard, but was still able to send back the go-ahead signal and provide the necessary telemetry for a safe transport for Harry and Seven.

The first thing Harry Kim noticed once his molecules had finished assembling was the light. The Sernaix seemed to prefer a harsh, neon-blue illumination heavier in ultraviolet. Looking at the light panels hurt Harry's eyes at first, but a few minutes of exposure helped him to gradually acclimate to the level of illumination.

Seven, of course, didn't appear bothered by it at all. She immediately whipped out her tricorder and began taking sensor readings. Harry, by contrast, nervously gripped his phaser on his belt, just to be on the safe side.

"Will you look at all of this," Harry gasped, taking in the sight of the chamber around him.

"Indeed, I am," said Seven, sounding equally impressed, and for the first time on this mission, a little unsure of herself.

They had beamed into a large common room, roughly equal in dimensions to that of Voyager's mess hall. The walls and ceiling both seemed to be made from some kind of glassy black material the flowed into each other, leaving no hard edges or corners. Active energy pulses seemed to dance within the walls themselves, coming together to form icons and shapes that were unfamiliar to Harry. He reached out instinctively to feel the nearest wall. He had expected some kind of warmth, but the wall seemed strangely cool to the touch.

"No one's here to greet us," he observed. "You'd think someone would have noticed that we were on board by now."

"Which would support my hypothesis that the vessel is a derelict," said Seven smugly.

"Maybe," said Harry. "But if the crew is dead, then what killed them? Or if they abandoned ship, then what forced them to leave? In either case, is it really a good idea for us to be here?"

Seven glanced down at her tricorder, taking reading on the environment around her. "I am detecting no anomalous radiation levels, airborne toxins, or bacteriological agents in the atmosphere. Nor am I registering any critical energy discharges from inside the ship that would indicate significant engine damage."

"Seven, we haven't the slightest idea of what powers this ship, never mind if anything might be wrong with it. Once we take a quick look around, we'll beam back to the shuttle, and try and hail Voyager. It'll probably take an entire Engineering team to figure this ship out, anyway."

"Perhaps," she replied curtly, clearly not happy with the idea of minimizing her opportunity to understand this new vessel and chaffing at Lieutenant Kim's unnecessary caution. But whether she liked it or not, he was in command of this mission, and she was required to comply.

"Hmmm," mused Harry as he looked across the dark, smooth walls of the corridors leading out from the chamber. "There doesn't seem to be any access panels or controls anywhere."

"Indeed," agreed Seven. "That would be consistent with the devices that we recovered from the Sernaix at Caprijen. None of them appear to have any displays or obvious means of operation."

"So how do they work?" asked Harry. "Do your scans offer any sort of clue?"

"Not at this time," said Seven, her attention focused on the data scrolling on her tricorder. "We would have to study their bridge and engineering sections to learn more." She then went silent, as she moved closer to the walls, her eyes widening in amazement at the latest readings she received.

"What is it?"

"Lieutenant," Seven gasped, "I am able to get a clear sensor reading of the hull composition from within the vessel."

"Really?" said Harry, his interest peaking. "What's it made of? Is it anything we can fight?"

"I...I am not sure," she said. "The hull consists of a triple layer, the middle of which appears to be a compressed film of plasma chilled to absolute zero."

"A Bose-Einstein condensate?" said Harry, recognizing the phenomenon. "What would that be doing integrated into the hull?"

"Clearly it must..." But she did not complete her sentence as the data returned on the hull analysis. "Lieutenant, the outer hull...it consists of...photonium."

"Photonium?" said Harry with incredulity, remembering his physics classes back at the Academy. "You mean...matter made of photons? Light?! But that's just theoretical!"

"Apparently it is more than theory, Lieutenant," she commented, as she turned to him. "The Bose-Einstein condensate is used to lower the energy level of photons and thus slow down their velocity to that of a motionless state. The Sernaix have obviously perfected a means whereby the standing wave pattern is then bonded into a stable matrix which approximates that of solid matter and can then be harnessed for its physical properties."

"My god," said Harry, as looked on with his own tricorder, shaking his head in bewilderment. He knew the Sernaix has some sophisticated tools at their disposal. But this was something that they wouldn't have anticipated in their wildest of speculations. "I've never seen anything like this. I mean, I've heard of experiments where cold plasmas were used to slow photons down to a crawl. But actually constructing solid matter out of them?"

"Indeed, it is most impressive," said Seven, clearly awed by any kind of technical accomplishment that added to her already impressive base of knowledge. "The Borg have assimilated three species whose scientific research came close to such a feat, but did not succeed in its entirety. Species 953 even managed to construct simple crystalline forms of such frozen light for use in medical applications. Clearly the Sernaix have surpassed even that accomplishment by fashioning entire starship hulls of such material. However, I fail to see the logic of such an expenditure of effort."

"Oh, I can," Harry piped in. "I remember one of my instructors in Theoretical Physics commenting on some of the hypothetical properties that 'photon matter' would have if it could ever be constructed. It would have almost no mass and could alter its refraction index to absorb light and energy at will." The young officer then shook his head again. "God, no wonder our sensors were never able to penetrate these ships."

"Nor could Voyager's weapons ever affect the surface," the former drone added. "And hulls with negligible mass would explain the Sernaix's impressive maneuverability."

Harry just gawked about at the expanse of the chamber around him. It began to dawn upon him just how big a challenge he and the rest of Voyager's crew were up against. Sure, they had been through some tough scrapes, both here and back in the Delta Quadrant. But the Sernaix had come very close to destroying Voyager on several occasions, and even then, it was clear that they were merely being played with, seeing only the tiniest fraction of what their opponents were capable of.

Just how do you fight an enemy that can build starships out of light itself, Harry wondered. Had they finally come up against an enemy they couldn't beat?

* * *

Harry and Seven made their way deeper into the heart of the ship, hoping to find the equivalent of a bridge or control center. The corridors of the Sernaix ship, however, didn't appear to be arranged in any logical pattern as they were on a Starfleet vessel, Harry thought. Nor did the ship seem to be organized in decks that required a turbolift. Everything seemed more organic, like the rooms and halls were tunneled into solid rock. Hallways would curve about, up or down, branch in two, and lead to new rooms that didn't appear any different than the one that they had first beamed in to.

In fact, to Harry's mind, the Sernaix ship seemed strangely unspecialized, not unlike a Borg vessel. But still, they reasoned, there would still need to be something like a bridge somewhere on the ship, if only as a place that could function in an emergency. It was there that they hoped they would find more conventional control stations, where they might be able to access the ship's systems and learn more about its functions.

Or more importantly, they might learn what had happened to the crew.

The two made their way down yet another blind hallway, when Harry turned quickly to follow a blur of motion out of the corner of his eye.

"Did you see that?" he said to his companion.

"I saw nothing, Lieutenant," Seven replied brusquely.

"I could have sworn I saw something move back there," he said as he looked back in the direction they came. "Maybe a rat, or something just like one."

"Is it your supposition that the crew evacuated this vessel because of an infestation of rodents?" she inquired sharply.

"No, it's just..." he tried to explain to her, make some kind of justification, but there really wasn't one. This place just gave him the willies, that was all. But what kind of a mission leader would he be if he admitted that to Seven? Would she have any respect for him if she thought that an apparently empty starship had him spooked? Did she have any for him even now? And why did her respect matter so much to him, anyway?

"I suggest that we continue our search," she said coolly, as she walked past him and on down the corridor. Harry didn't follow right away.

Why did she have to talk to him that way all the time, he thought to himself? Did she truly think so little of him that she thought nothing of how hurtful her words were? There was a time when a kind word or a gentle glance from her would have meant anything to him. But even now, after so much time had passed since those early days of infatuation, she still had an effect on him, even if it wasn't always the one he had once wanted.

As he tarried, he noticed another chamber leading off from the corridor. His curiosity getting the better of him, Harry made his way over, seeing that the room was not illuminated as was the others. The Ops officer craned his head inside, taking out his pocket flash to light the way ahead of him.

And then he saw the bodies.

He gasped as he jumped back from the grisly sight, almost dropping his lamp in the process. "Seven!" he called out to the blond woman, as much to hear her voice and know for certain she was safe.

"Lieutenant!" she called back as she ran back to him, her expression one of concern, as she saw his gaze focused on the direction his lamp was illuminating.

They both stared into the room to see the corpses of at least thirty or forty Sernaix bodies, all neatly laid out, lying peacefully still and quiet. There was no sign of violence or a cause of death on any of them...

All except for one.

While Seven ran her tricorder over the nearest dead Sernaix, Harry followed a stream of thick, dark blood as it lead back to a single Sernaix corpse, propped up separately from the rest of the crew. This Sernaix appeared to be more important than the others, as could be seen from the number of fluorescent tattoos on his arms and face, as well as the jewelry he wore. They had learned that much from their last encounter, that the status of a Sernaix within his pack was marked by their adornment and body markings.

But in contrast to the blissful expressions on the other corpses, this Sernaix had obviously died quite violently. His torso showed signs of being hacked at and beaten repeatedly, his limbs strung up in order to maximize the blood loss. Harry went white with fear and revulsion at the sight of this image of death. Whoever had killed this one had obviously wanted him to suffer before dying.

"Lieutenant," Seven called out from her position near the other corpses. "I have scanned three of the bodies. I cannot be completely certain, but I believe that these Sernaix died from carbon monoxide poisoning."

"This one certainly didn't," gasped Harry, unable to take his eyes off the visage of suffering on the dead Sernaix.

"Yes," said Seven. "Strange that this one should be killed in a different fashion from the others."

Harry then turned back to the former drone, his eyes narrowed in determination. "We're getting out of here, Seven. Now. We can try to hail Voyager and have a security team back us up."

"Lieutenant," she replied testily, "surely you do not think that the killers of this crew are still aboard this vessel?"

"Yes, Seven," he shot back tersely, "I do. Look at these bodies. We know that Sernaix ships don't have large crew complements. If this is the entire crew, then they wouldn't have all been in the same room when whatever happened here...happened. Someone had to move these bodies after they died. Somebody who's probably *very* dangerous if they can do *this*!" he gestured towards the violated body of the Sernaix next to him.

"I believe you are being excessively cautious," she countered.

"And you're being dangerously reckless," he retorted.

"Our mission..."

"...is to survive!" he shouted over her. "And in case you've forgotten, I'm also in command of this away mission! So when I say we're going back to the shuttle, then we're going back. End of discussion."

Seven was silent, far too silent. Her eyes narrowed at him, her expression pinched and clearly displeased. "I will comply," she said with some finality. But it was clear that this was not what she wanted to do.

His expression equally sharp, still glaring at her, Harry slapped his combadge to contact the shuttle computer. "Kim Delta Epsilon. Two to beam over."

But there was nothing. Harry did not feel the familiar envelopment of the transporter. The beam-out did not happen.

He repeated the command to the shuttle computer twice, but both requests went unheeded.

"What the hell?" he swore. "Seven, you *did* program the computer for a remote beam-out, didn't you?"

"I most certainly did," she responded sharply, sounding almost insulted that she would be accused of such negligence. She pulled out her tricorder once again and did a quick scan of the walls. "Lieutenant, the refraction index of the outer hull has shifted."

"Excuse me?"

"We cannot beam back to the shuttle, because the hull is blocking the transporter lock. We are... trapped aboard this ship."

Harry's eyes widened with distress. They grew even wider as the ship suddenly lurched to the side violently, sending the two of them off balance. Loud rumblings were heard, sounding like muffled explosions. If Harry didn't know better, he would have thought that someone was shooting at them. But who? Voyager? Not possible, he thought. Her photon torpedoes wouldn't have made a dent against a ship this powerful.

He looked over at Seven, the alarm on his face evident, not saying a word. Now would not have been the best time to say 'I told you so.'

* * *

Vex, Adimh of Jade Mountain, sat in his command couch on the bridge of his pack's ship. The scene from inside of the comet's head was projected as a wrap-around hologram all about him and his packmates, as he focused on the battle at hand. At least a dozen Sernaix males had duties on the bridge of the pack scout today, their expressions silent as their body fields melded with their interface ports, their experiences manifesting themselves as holographic designs floating about their bodies.

He reached out to take a large mug of *jiopol* from one of the small, bush-like servos that served as an extension of the ship. Vex sipped the foamy brew, relishing in the hearty, spiced flavor, tailored to his specific tastes. It felt good to enjoy a cool drink after the sweat of a long day, especially after...

"There!" he called out with satisfaction, as he spotted the dark patch hovering near the comet's nucleus, past the wispy mists of gas and dust. The Abomination had been spotted. It took a combined sensor sweep from all three ships, but in the end they had triangulated the location of their quarry near the heart of the lone comet.

"We've got it!" said Imesh, his Zvir, standing at the side of the command couch, ever ready to take his place should Vex fall in heat of combat. Imesh was grinning with delight at the thought of the upcoming fight. Vex shared his second's feeling of anticipation. It had been far too long since Jade Mountain had tasted the joy and exhilaration of bloodshed. For the past ten cycles, his pack had been engaged in harmless joyriding and the occasional harassment of other species. The fun had gone from those activities a long time ago, he thought resentfully. The Sernaix were the uncontested masters of this area of space, and the weaker races had long since accepted their fate to be dominated and preyed upon by them. There were few new territories to explore, or new challenges to experience.

At least, not until the Enemy ship, Voyager, appeared in their space.

Vex knew that the Adimhs of Violet Sun and Cobalt Field were linked to his battle sim, as was he with theirs. They each wanted to experience the sensation of the battle from the others' perspective, but as Jade Mountain had been the first pack to respond to The Realm's contract against the Abomination, they were the ones taking the lead in the fight.

So far, the hunt had been everything he and his pack had hoped it would be. After several close pursuits with the Abomination, they had even come across a shuttle belonging to the Enemy. He remembered the whoops of delight when they caught the tiny ship unawares, their primitive detection technology unable to see the Sernaix ships until they were right on top of them. The Adimh of Cobalt Field had been prepared to destroy them, but the Enemy had proven itself clever and managed to blind their sensors briefly and escape. From what they knew of their ships, it was too damaged to have gone far, and was most likely hiding in this same solar system, possibly near the Abomination itself.

Perhaps it was just as well, thought Vex privately. He would not have wanted the fight to be over so quickly. And he relished the idea of the Enemy being formidable enough to overcome their technical shortcomings. It would make the fight that much more challenging, once they had finished up here. He tried to picture where he would place the tattoo, and what pattern he would choose, that would mark the experience of the conflict to come.

"Adimh Vex," came a voice that seemed to echo in the air, one that came from a voice not produced by any of his packmates. It was the Ship Mind, once again trying to get his attention. Vex rolled his eyes in annoyance. The Minds were necessary to maintain their ships, but he wished that they would keep silent and tend to their jobs, and leave the enjoyment of life to those still of the flesh. He found them almost as insufferable as the busybody females and their Cadres back in The Realm.

"Yes," Vex rumbled gruffly, not addressing the Mind with respect as he would a packmate. When Sernaix uploaded, they traditionally relinquished their names along with their flesh and their gender. The Mind had no identity, save that which it created for itself in the vast expanses within The Realm.

"Forgive my interruption, Adimh Vex," said the Mind obsequiously, "but there is something you must see."

Vex shifted the resonance of his body field, so that he and the Mind would be linked in a private conversation, unobserved by the rest of the pack on the bridge. The scene around him shifted to that of his personal virtual space, a lakeside view on the planet Lokiju, a place that had struck him for its particular beauty. An overlay of the battle sim

appeared in his field of vision. The Mind zoomed in on the comet's nucleus, showing the dark, irregular shape of the ship that had once been that of the Silver Sky pack. And there, just next to it, was...

"The Enemy!" Vex exclaimed, both out of excitement and fury. The Enemy shuttle had found the Abomination before them. He had hoped to prolong the hunt for both ships for as long as possible. Now, regretfully, they would both be over at the same time. He spoke to the Mind again. "Have they boarded the ship yet?"

"Yes, Adimh. They have," it answered him in its most passive, unflappable tone. "That is why you cannot destroy the Silver Sky ship."

"What?!" Vex sputtered with incredulity. "How can you say that? We accepted a contract from The Realm to destroy the Abomination..."

"Events have changed, Adimh," the Mind announced. "I have analyzed the scans we took of the Enemy shuttle during our brief encounter with them. I have compared them with the results taken from the samples taken at Caprijen."

Vex's jaw dropped slack as he listened to the voice of the Ship Mind. "Are you saying...?"

"Yes, Adimh," it replied. "The one that was Touched is aboard the Silver Sky vessel. I'm sure I don't have to remind you of the Management Cadre's demand that that individual come to no harm "

An Enemy that had known the Touch of the Gods themselves! When the results of Crimson Stone's mission at Caprijen were experienced across The Realm, the results had taken the entire Sernaix race (or what was left of it) by surprise. The Goddess was a part of ancient history, predating even The Realm itself. But their mark on the Sernaix race was felt even to this day. If one of the Enemy had truly been touched by them...

"Are you certain about this?" he asked.

"I have confirmed it with the Minds of Violet Sun and Cobalt Field. If you like, I can link with The Realm and..."

"No!" Vex shouted, determined not to have the Management Cadre interfere in his battle. He would handle this within the packs. He modulated his body field once again, so that the Adimhs of both Violet Sun and Cobalt Field could be included in the conversation. Adimhs Tokul and Nagewa appeared within his virtual field of view.

"Did you hear?" said Vex to his brother Adimhs on their respective ships.

"We've spoken with our Ship Minds," said Nagewa, Adimh of Cobalt Field. "We can't destroy the Touched One."

"What are we to do?" wailed Tokul, Adimh of Violet Sun. He was a young Adimh, impulsive and still inexperienced, but deferring to the wisdom of his elder compatriots. "Are we to just let the Abomination get away?"

"Can we be sure the Abomination hasn't already killed the Enemy crew the way it did with Silver Sky?" asked Nagewa.

"They're still alive," said Vex, as he rubbed his chin, considering their options. "The sensors show that there are two of them on board. Clearly, our task has been made more difficult. But not impossible. If we can't destroy the Abomination, we will have to subdue and board it."

"That will be risky," said Tokul. "An attack on this ship could still risk injuring the Touched One. The Management Cadre will be furious with us if that happened."

The elder Adimhs snorted at the younger one, disgusted by the deference and fear he showed to those busybodies. How like a child, Vex thought, to be frightened by the displeasure of females.

"We'll have to disable the engines first," said Nagewa, "and send a boarding party across to seize the Touched One."

"We'll send *three* boarding parties," Vex cautioned the Adimh of Cobalt Field, "so that all of our packs share in the experience of bringing the Touched One back to The Realm. Once our teams have left the ship, the Abomination can be destroyed at our leisure."

"Of course, Adimh Vex," replied Nagewa with a curl of his lip.

"In the mean time," said Vex, looking past the two Sernaix to view the projected battle sim behind them, "we should cut off both of their means of escape. The two of you concentrate your fire on the Silver Sky ship's engines."

"And you?" said Nagewa.

Vex smiled at the scene unfolding in the comet head before him. "I will take out the Enemy ship. Keep both of our prizes together, I say."

Minutes later, the three Sernaix scout ships focused their enormous firepower at the two ships orbiting the icy body. A single shot from Vex's weaponry vaporized the unoccupied Starfleet shuttlecraft orbiting near the larger ship. The larger Sernaix ship then came to life, its hull absorbing the ordinance being deployed against it to the limits of its design as it shot away from the comet.

The three small Sernaix ships tore after it in eager pursuit, all seeking the thrill of the hunt.

* * *

"What happened?" a puzzled Harry Kim demanded to know, not necessarily from Seven, but the universe at large.

"I am uncertain," Seven answered him. "I believe we are in motion."

"Motion? How can you tell? I didn't feel any shift in inertia."

"The shift was subtle, but I was able to sense it. It appears that the Sernaix design inertial dampers of far greater sophistication than those of the Federation."

Harry looked about the corridor they stood in, trying to find a direction that would give them some kind of answers. "What I wouldn't give right now for a window," he lamented.

Seven only gave him an unaffected response. "A view of the outside would only confirm what we already suspect, that we are en route to an unknown destination and that we have no means to currently leave the ship."

Harry let out a resigned sigh. "The question is what do we do now?"

"I would think the answer to that would be obvious," she replied testily. "Clearly there is someone aboard and in control of this vessel. We must make an effort to overpower our opponent and commandeer the ship for ourselves."

"That's a laudable goal, Seven," Harry responded wearily, "but just how are we supposed to do that? We don't know how many people we're up against or how to fight

them. And even if we did manage to take them out, would you know how to even fly this ship?"

"What would you suggest as an alternative?" she shot back.

"I think we should make contact," he answered earnestly, "try and reason with whoever is at the controls. At the very least we can buy some time for ourselves until we get a better idea of how this ship operates."

The look on Seven's face was almost a snort of disgust. "A futile effort," she said casually. "Our opponent has killed, quite violently, I might add. There is every reason to suspect he will kill again."

"He could have killed us the moment we came aboard. Or he could have shot down our shuttle. But he didn't."

"It may well be as you said before about the Sernaix. Perhaps he derives pleasure from our suffering."

"Or perhaps he's an enemy of the Sernaix," Harry countered. "You know what they say about the enemy of your enemy."

But Seven was not buying any of it. "To place trust in an individual who has demonstrated a predilection towards violence is both illogical and irrational. Your blind adherence to Starfleet idealism is endangering both this mission and our lives."

"Is that so?" Harry said frostily. "Well, that's not really your decision to make, now is it?"

"I do not think, Ensign, that..."

"Lieutenant!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"My rank is Lieutenant!" he roared at her, his patience with her finally reaching the breaking point. "I spent a long time waiting for that promotion, so you'd better goddamn well remember what my rank is!"

Seven, perhaps for the first time Harry had ever known her, was stunned into silence. She had always believed Harry Kim to be so...predictable. And to Seven, that was a good thing.

"I've had it up to here with your chaffing and your attitude, Seven!" he fumed. "You don't like the way I've been making decisions on this mission, that's fine! You can take it up with the captain when we get back. But you do *not* question me when we're in a crisis situation. I've indulged your curiosity and made exceptions for the disrespectful way you've spoken to me on this mission so far. But ultimately I'm the one who makes the final decisions on things, no matter how superior you think you are to me!"

"I never..." she tried to say.

"You never?" he laughed back at her harshly. "You mean, you never treated me with one ounce of respect! You've taken a particular delight in belittling me, kicking me when I was down, and dismissing every gesture of kindness I ever made towards you! Telling me..." He stopped himself just before he was about to mention the time that Seven had wounded him the most, when she had told him that he 'was not a candidate' to be her first date. But that was way too personal to bring up in this context. That wasn't what this was about, he reminded himself.

"Tell me, Seven," he continued, his voice weary and frustrated. "Is it fun for you? Is the only way that you can feel good about yourself, to make other people feel small?"

Seven was absolutely taken aback. She never would have suspected such a litany of fury from Lieutenant Harry Kim of all people. She had always believed him to be one of her closest of associates on Voyager, someone whose behavior was always dependable and predictable. Was this how she appeared to him? Was this who she was whenever she spoke to him? She always spoke her mind when she was around the young officer. It simply never occurred to her that what she considered to be familiarity and candor would come across as rudeness and disrespect.

"I...I do not know what to say," she responded softly.

"Why have you been resisting me this entire mission, Seven?" he demanded, his tone more urgent than angry now. "Do you have so little faith in me after what happened on the Nightingale mission? Do you feel you have to criticize me again?"

Seven immediately stiffened in response to his accusation on that particular issue. "My actions were entirely justified in that instance," she replied defensively. "Your errors in judgment were placing our lives in jeopardy. Do you not deny that you were in the wrong on that mission?"

"Maybe so," he growled at her. "But you didn't have to sound as if you enjoyed it so much."

"I...did not enjoy pointing out your mistakes," Seven said, her voice almost sounding vulnerable. "If I felt anything at that moment, it was...disappointment."

"Disappointment? In me?"

"Yes," she looked at him, her voice softening. "I knew you could do better."

Now it was Harry's turn to be speechless. What was this effect that Seven of Nine had upon him? She could positively infuriate him one minute, belittle him the next, and then turn around and melt his heart?

Get a grip, Harry, he cautioned himself. Remember where you are.

"I..." he tried to say, as he collected himself. "Look, we need to stay focused. We can deal with our personal problems later. Right now, we have to find a way off this ship."

"You are correct," her voice sounding milder, sufficiently humbled. "You are the mission commander. I will comply with your recommendation for peaceful negotiations."

"Thank you," he muttered silently. "What we have to do first is make our way to the bridge. Whoever's pulling the strings on this ship is obviously holed up in there. Whatever happens, contact or conflict, it's got to happen there."

"A logical supposition," she nodded, the aftershock of Harry's cleansing rage still lingering in the air. "But how are we to find its location?"

Harry pondered the question. "Have you been mapping the corridors we've traveled so far in relation to the ship's dimensions and layout?"

"I have."

"Let's assume that the Sernaix have laid their ship compartments out in the same way most other races do," he continued. "We'll move towards the topside bow until we come across whatever looks like a control center." Seeing the puzzled look on the blonde's face, he went on. "Yeah, I know it's a wild-ass guess, but it's all we have right now."

"Indeed," she stated, as she reached for her tricorder. "However, there is something we must consider. According to my scans of the way ahead, the corridors branch off into two separate hallways before converging at a center point near the bow of the ship."

"Hey, that's probably the bridge," Harry said excitedly. "That's exactly what we needed to know."

"But consider this, Lieutenant," Seven added seriously. "If our opponent is able to monitor our whereabouts on this ship, as it seems most likely, then for the two of us to approach together would make us both vulnerable."

"What are you saying, Seven?"

"One of us must survive to reach the bridge and stop this ship, should events turn hostile," she answered. "I believe we should proceed separately."

"Absolutely not," Harry said immediately. "Without someone to back us up, we'd each be at risk."

"Perhaps," she said, "but we would be equally at risk if we were attacked at the same time. By dividing, we would increase the odds of one of us reaching the control center."

"And facing the opponent alone?" he said directly.

"I agree that there is risk," she said solemnly, "but I believe our chances will improve if we remain dispersed. Even if one is lost, the other may survive. And as you yourself have stated, our primary mission is survival. Even if it is only one of us that survives."

Harry took in a deep breath and considered the options they faced before them. There were none. This was perhaps the hardest aspect of commanding any mission, as he had learned from the debacle of his command of the Nightingale mission. Sometimes a leader had to make choices that would almost certainly get people killed. Even people that he knew and cared about.

"OK," he nodded glumly. "We'll each take a separate corridor and stay in constant communication with each other. Keep your tricorder set to monitor all bio-readings at all times. If we're each going to go it alone, then we're not going to let anything sneak up on us. Is that understood?"

"Understood, Lieutenant," she answered him. It almost sounded like she was answering him with respect this time.

It was a welcome change.

"And Seven," he called out to her, just as she was about to go down her fork of the corridor.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I..." He tried to speak, wanting to tell her how sorry he was that he had lost his composure earlier. But now was not the time. He would see her later, once they were both safe, and make amends with her. Instead he smiled at her, and then patted the phaser that hung on his belt. "Don't be afraid to use this if you see anything."

"I assure you I will take every effort to protect myself," she answered him. "Be certain that you do the same." Her stance then softened again, and she seemed to...was she smiling at him? "I will see you on the bridge, Lieutenant Kim. Good luck."

"I thought you told me that you didn't believe in luck," he quipped.

"I am adapting," she replied. Her smile seemed to grow more pronounced as she walked away.

* * *

Adimh Vex was not happy. And neither were Tokul and Nagewa. Despite the punishment they had meted out against the Abomination's ship, they had failed to disable her warp engines. Although they were fairly certain that the slipstream drive had been damaged, thus preventing their quarry from outdistancing them, the battleship proved to be a formidable opponent. The Abomination had fired back on them, damaging the Cobalt Field ship, which provided the opportunity for it to make evasive maneuvers and escape.

The Abomination had eluded them again, and this time it had taken the Touched One with it. Vex had made a strategic gamble, and it had failed. Now both of their prizes had eluded them.

"Keep them together, you said," Nagewa snarled at Vex. This time, their minds were linked into Nagewa's private virtual space, a fiery volcanic plain with an ugly red giant star flaming on the horizon. Vex shuddered at whatever thoughts passed through the mind of the Adimh of Cobalt Field as he could consider such a volatile place a zone of private contemplation. "Now, we have nothing to show for our efforts!"

"This isn't the time to start casting blame," Vex warned Nagewa, his voice concealing a threat.

"Oh, now is the perfect time," Nagewa shot back. "Especially if this brings the Management Cadre into the fray! You've made things difficult for all of the packs now!"

"You're overstating the matter," he said back, tired of the other Adimh's histrionics.

"Am I?" Nagewa retorted. "Just suppose that the Abomination should kill the Touched One? Or worse? Suppose it finds a way to acquire the Touched One's knowledge for itself? Can you imagine the catastrophe that would lead to?"

Vex didn't let his nervousness show through. But Nagewa's words did indeed worry him. What if...?

"Perhaps there's a way we can still save face for ourselves," Tokul spoke up, his voice more certain than it had been before, now that events had turned against Vex.

"And what do *you* suggest?" Nagewa turned his fury from Vex to the younger Adimh.

"Voyager," said Tokul with simple satisfaction. "The Management Cadre has demanded that they not be destroyed outright, correct?"

"Of course!" Vex blurted out angrily, furious that Tokul was bringing up something so irrelevant to their current situation. "What has that to do with anything?"

"They've been placed off limits because they can't allow the killing of the Touched One, am I right?" said Tokul, his virtual eyes gleaming as he spoke.

"Well, yes. But..."

"But the Touched One isn't on Voyager anymore," he concluded, the corner of his mouth curling with delight.

Vex and Nagewa smiled to mirror that of Tokul. Yes, they agreed. The destruction of Voyager, killing the first ship of the Enemy to be encountered in millennia, observed and

experienced by all across The Realm, they would gain much status indeed from such a feat.

"Excellent thinking indeed, Tokul," Vex congratulated the young Adimh. "But can we find Voyager?"

"That should be no difficulty," said Nagewa craftily. "We can extrapolate their flight path from Caprijen, and correlate it with the coordinates of where we encountered their shuttle. If they expect their crew to rendezvous with them, then they probably won't stray too far."

"You do realize," added Tokul, "that they won't be able to stand up to one of our ships for very long, never mind all three."

"Don't worry about that," said Vex. "We can find a way to draw it out for everyone sharing in the experience. Perhaps we can even board Voyager once she's been subdued and start killing the crew one by one."

"Yes," said Nagewa. "But only if all three of our ships get the chance to participate, of course."

"Of course," laughed Vex in agreement.

The killing of Voyager would indeed be a novelty, thought Vex proudly, something new for the entire Sernaix race to share in. It would be a tantalizing taste for what was to come, especially when the Sernaix finally escaped from the Phase and destroyed the homeworld of the Enemy.

* * *

The lone walk along the corridors of the Sernaix ship had to be the longest of Harry Kim's young life. Lit only by the harsh neon glow of thin luminescent strips overhead, the hallways leading towards what he hoped was the bridge seemed to grow narrower and more constricting the further he went on.

Of course, he knew it was only his imagination, but then that was all he had for companionship at this point.

He glanced down at his tricorder again, relieved to see that the screen revealed no moving or organic objects approaching him. It would have been better if it were able to detect Seven's presence in the other branch of the corridor. Unfortunately, as the two branches diverged further, the distance between them grew, as did the thickness of the walls separating them. Shortly after splitting off, the two had lost the ability to scan each other.

Fortunately, he and Seven had agreed to hail each other every twenty meters, just to be safe. The walls did not seem to affect their com signals to the same extent as their scans, and they had each come through loud and clear for the other for the first thirty meters or so.

But as they moved farther along their respective paths, the signals would grow more intermittent, the reception increasingly noisy. Until finally...

"Seven," he called out over his combadge, "you're breaking up. What's your status?"

And he heard nothing.

He tried hailing her three times, but to no avail. The connection was dead.

He was at a loss as to what he should do next. Should he double back the way he came and go after Seven, try to reassure himself that she was safe from harm? Or should he simply proceed along his pathway to the bridge, and hope to meet his teammate there? And just what were they supposed to do when they arrived there?

Harry had always tried to reason with himself that his botched command of the Nightingale mission was never a fair test of his command abilities. That was what Captain Janeway and Commander Chakotay had tried to reassure him of when he made out his post-mission report. But he had known the truth. He had failed, not because he was unable to recognize that he had been duped by the Kraylor, but because of how he had conducted himself as a captain. He had been so eager to prove to everyone, including himself, that he was not the 'eternal ensign' that he ended up overcompensating, micromanaging everyone's duties and being heavy handed in his dealings with the crew. He had vowed to himself afterwards that he would not make the same mistakes again, that he would trust people under him to do their jobs properly and make command decisions only when his responsibilities called for it.

This was one of those times. He had to trust Seven to take care of herself, as much as it pained him. His duty was to survive and reach the bridge.

Harry stomped towards the bow of the ship, frantic with worry over Seven. His emotions were in a jumble over his recent interactions with her. Her brief display of vulnerability towards him had him confused as to what their relationship was. Were they colleagues? Friends?

He finally reached the end of the corridor and followed it as it snaked upwards into a large lit chamber. Strangely enough, the doors appeared wide open, as if he were expected. Harry didn't know what he would find here, but he loosened his phaser from his belt clip all the same. His approach was unimpeded. He crouched at the entrance, waiting for the right moment to take his opponent unaware, and then, at the count of three, leapt onto the bridge, his phaser drawn, prepared to confront their mysterious captain in a foolhardy display of bravado.

His eyes darted around. He saw nobody. Nobody except Seven of Nine, propped up on some kind of lounging chair that occupied the same position that a command chair would on a Starfleet bridge.

Her eyes looked glazed over. She appeared alive, but in some kind of fugue. A cable was linked from her tympanic implant to a large blue and white radiating sphere hanging from the ceiling of the bridge. A dozen small robots, each looking like a cross between a large sea urchin and a tumbleweed, surrounded the former drone, acting like they were guarding her.

"Seven?" he called out to her, but she did not appear to be aware of his presence. He moved towards her, hoping to free her. One of the bush-like robots moved to intercept him. It rolled into his path, extending itself on its spines, all of them sharp and menacing.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a deep resonant voice spoke up, echoing all around the bridge. "Those manipulators can be quite effective as cutting tools. I could easily direct the servos to gut you open from neck to groin if I wanted to."

The sphere dimmed slightly as it projected a life-size hologram before him. It was a broad-shouldered Sernaix, over two meters tall, with many gold and crimson markings on his dark blue body and face. His skin was literally a living storybook, detailing pictures and icons that danced across his flesh. And his face was the familiar demonic horned

visage that he had come to expect from Voyager's encounters with the Sernaix. But the expression seemed different. This Sernaix seemed to be...smiling at him, even if it was a deeply menacing and creepy smile at that.

"Welcome to the bridge, Lieutenant Harry Kim," it said to him in the same deep voice he had heard before, only now it was emanating from the hologram's 'lips' directly.

"What have you done to her?!" demanded the young officer.

"Not to worry, boy," said the hologram, "She's not being harmed. In fact, she's gaining quite a bit from the experience."

"Who...who are you?" Harry asked nervously as he approached the projection

"Who am I?" the hologram laughed heartily, as he swung his arms out in a grand, dramatic gesture. "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings! Look upon my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

That was not what Harry expected to hear at all. "You're quoting Shelley?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes," the hologram chuckled. "Fascinating stuff, your poetry. Words almost like music. We have no equivalent art form in our culture, you know."

"And just how is it you can quote human poetry at me?" Harry asked, trying to hold his own and not wanting to be toyed with.

"Oh, we've been aware of a lot of things about your people," said `Ozymandias'. "Ever since we came across your ship, quite a few foolhardy packs have been sneaking alongside while under cloak and tapping into your computer logs to learn about you. It really isn't too challenging. Your sensors aren't all that sophisticated."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. How many times when Voyager had thought itself alone in space had there been a Sernaix ship silently flying alongside them, spying on them, able to take them out unawares with but a single shot.

"Then how come you haven't destroyed us?" Harry demanded.

"Let's just say, we were requested not to by our...I guess you can call them our leaders," said Ozymandias. "And leave it at that."

Harry snorted at the picaresque hologram and stormed closer to Seven, in spite of the entourage of spiny robots. He held up his phaser, trying to appear threatening, even though inside he was really scared to death. "I'm not looking to play games here. Just who are you really? And don't quote any poetry at me!"

The Sernaix hologram chuckled at the young man. "Well, aren't you the impertinent one? You come on to *my* ship, and start making demands of me, knowing full well I could slice you up faster than you can point that weapon of yours. Oh, not that it will do you any good. The entire command center is shielded. Your energy beams would just be absorbed.

"As for who I am...well, I'm nobody. That's what an upload really is, you know. Nobody. Who I used to be, though, that's a whole other story. I was once Ozama, Adimh of Silver Sky. But I think I like 'Ozymandias' better. It suits me, don't you think? It's more dramatic."

Harry mulled over the hologram's words. "Adimh. That's like a captain, isn't it?"

"Captain, leader, priest, elder brother," Ozymandias railed on. "Your language doesn't fully capture the nuances of our culture."

"So how does a computer become a captain of a ship? Did you take over after the crew was killed?"

The look on the hologram's face then shifted from mercurial to furious. Harry knew right away that he had said the wrong thing.

"A computer?!" Ozymandias roared. The ship itself seemed to shake in a sympathetic response. The interface cable registered feedback, causing Seven to jerk about like a puppet. "I'm no piece of dead metal like your dimwitted starship computers! I was flesh, once! I lived! As alive as you, boy! Even more so."

"I...I'm sorry," said Harry, as much shocked by its words as he was concerned for Seven's safety. "Just...just don't hurt her. Please." Waiting until the holographic image had calmed down, he tried to communicate further with him. "Are you saying that someone...did this to you?" he says, trying to be sympathetic.

"Did this to me?!" Ozymandias laughed. "Oh, I suppose you could say that. Every Sernaix makes the transition to immortality and life within The Realm when the thrill of youth and mating has passed. Didn't you know this? Doesn't your race feel the same longing, the desire to live and experience at the expense of all else?" it asked him.

Harry didn't know what to make of this information, or even to believe it or not. To 24th century humanity, the idea of eternal life as a computer program, no matter how vivid the environment, seemed like an appalling prospect.

"And no," Ozymandias continued. "I didn't take control of the ship after the crew was killed. I was always in control here."

Harry went silent with fear. "It was you, wasn't it?" he gasped. "You killed your own crew."

"Oh, absolutely," said the hologram, not displaying the least bit of shame. "In my previous life, I was the Adimh of my pack. I had a powerful zest for life. There was nothing I couldn't do. The adventures, the thrills, the hunts, the battles..." he mused, gesturing to the tattoos that adorned his arms and exposed chest. "Each one tells a story, boy, a new experience. I was the best of the best, once. But how quickly the admiration of others turns to embarrassment."

"I don't understand," said a puzzled Harry Kim.

"Time, my boy, time," said Ozymandias. "The true enemy of the Sernaix. When a male grows older, the passions fade. They relinquish their life in the packs to settle down and mate, but not me. I felt young and vital. I wanted to stay on as Adimh. I didn't want to give it up. I *couldn't* give it up. I craved the flesh too much.

"This didn't sit well with my pack," he continued. "Especially with my Zvir. He wanted me to move on so he could claim his role as Adimh of Silver Sky. My pack grew ashamed of me, that their Adimh was...well, an old man."

Harry looked at the image of the Sernaix before, unable to judge anything about his age from his alien visage. "Just how old were you?"

"In human years?" mused Ozymandias, "forty three."

"Forty three?" he blurted in astonishment, "That's considered old for a Sernaix?"

"It is for the flesh. Once the flesh is given up and one becomes immortal, age doesn't mean anything anymore."

"So...how did you end up...?"

"As a computer?" the hologram teased. "When our previous Ship Mind's contract with us ended and it returned to The Realm, the pack rose up against me. They tied me down and had me forcibly uploaded. They even received the blessing of some of the other packs before betraying me, maybe even The Realm itself, for all I know. My ever-so-loyal former Zvir then assumed the role of Adimh. He thought it would be amusing to have me implanted as the new Ship Mind, figuring a few decades of service would tame me into accepting my fate." Ozymandias then leaned in close to Harry, revealing a smile on his demonic face that sent shivers down his spine. "Well, he doesn't look so amused now, does he?"

"He's the one that you...?" Harry stammers.

"Carved up? My former Zvir," he laughed. "I was so hoping that someone would find him like that."

Harry's blood went cold at hearing this Sernaix rail on so casually about murder, no matter justified it might have seemed. Uploading, ship minds, eternal life...it was all just so *bizarre* to him. But he could see that this entity was not someone to be trifled with.

"Those three ships out there," muttered Harry. "They're hunting you, aren't they?"

The holographic face nodded. "After I dished out my private justice against the Adimh, the rest of the crew tried to disable me. So I..."

"You suffocated them," Harry finished his sentence.

"I had to protect myself," he replied defensively. "But I wasn't fast enough. One of them got a signal out to The Realm before he succumbed."

Harry said nothing, his eyes quickly darted about the room, seeing where Seven was sprawled out on the couch, seeming barely conscious of her surroundings.

"We're a self-absorbed people," Ozymandias went on to lament, more for his own amusement now than Harry's edification. "We crave excitement and new challenges, but we shun the very responsibilities necessary to sustain our race! In the flesh, we seek thrills and stimulus. And when we shed our bodies, when our passions have faded, we lapse into the mindless stupor of The Realm. I never wanted this! I wanted to be young and vital forever!"

"Look," Harry said, "I...I'm really sorry about what happened to you. It wasn't right. But what does this have to do with us? What do you want from us?"

"You want to know if I'm going to kill you both?" The holographic interface chuckled again. "Relax, boy. I have no grudge against you two or your ship. In fact, I need you."

"Need us? For what?"

"The truth is, Harry, I have nowhere else to go. I'm an Abomination. A Ship Mind that turned on its crew. They won't rest until I've been destroyed. I need to go where they can't reach me."

"What can we possibly do for you?"

"I need new skills, new abilities. Your Seven of Nine here may just have exactly what I need. I'll return you to Voyager, but I'm going to need to make use of her for a while."

"Absolutely not!" Harry said feverishly. "She leaves with me!"

"Oh? And what is she to you?!" Ozymandias demanded of Harry.

What is she indeed, Harry thought for a moment. "She...she's my friend!" he shouted back in finality. It was the only answer he could give. And it was an honest one, in spite of everything. "I won't leave without her!"

The hologram went silent. Its facial expression was difficult for Harry to read, but it seemed that Ozymandias was actually...confused...by his answer. "That's strange," said the Sernaix. "Very strange, indeed."

"What's so strange about friendship?" asked Harry, puzzled by his captor's reaction.

"You don't understand," said Ozymandias. "Among my people, males and females don't live or socialize together. We only come together when its time to mate. I've certainly never heard of a male and a female being...friends...with each other. If it weren't for our biological urges, we probably wouldn't have anything to do with each other. The truth is, Sernaix men and women don't even particularly *like* each other that much. We're just too different. We tend to get on each other's nerves."

Harry couldn't help but laugh at the other's comments, regardless of how inappropriate the situation. "Believe me, sometimes my species isn't too different in that area. But somehow, we find a way."

Ozymandias shook his holographic head sadly in response. "It's too bad we can't find a way. Fewer and fewer Sernaix are willing assume the burden of parenting anymore, in lieu of the pleasures of the present. Our population is declining, did you know that?" Harry shook his head in the negative. "Of course, who am I to judge?" the Sernaix went on. "I didn't want to give up my freedom either. So I suppose I'm as much a part of the problem as anyone."

Then a chime sounded out across the bridge, and the hologram of Ozymandias winked away. Harry spun around to see what was going on. In place of Ozymandias, the entire chamber was now filled with a huge, ring-shaped hologram of the exterior of the ship. Three Sernaix vessels, no doubt the very three that had been pursuing them, were shown moving in formation.

"I've been following them," came the voice of Ozymandias from all around the room. "We've been trailing our friends there just outside their sensor window. One of the advantages of flying a battleship like this is that we can see farther than they can."

But from what Harry could see, this ship was no longer their target. Instead there was another ship, a very familiar one, drifting innocently along their flight path.

"Voyager," Harry gasped, as he saw his ship floating at the heart of the simulated battle scene.

"I'd say your people are in trouble," chuckled Ozymandias' disembodied voice. "They can't even spot those three coming."

"Will they attack Voyager?" Harry asked desperately.

"Oh, most definitely," Oz answered. "They won't be able to resist. They couldn't find you two or me, so destroying your Voyager will be the next best thing to them."

"But I thought you said your leaders wouldn't allow it," said Harry.

"Things have changed," said Ozymandias. "The thing they want isn't on board anymore."

* * *

The Enemy didn't appear to suspect a thing, thought Vex smugly as he reclined back in his command couch, watching the starship Voyager loom larger in their battle sim. Less than an hour before they would be within firing range. Already the three packs had decided on how they would surprise them and then divide up the damage they would cause. Once Voyager's shields had been sufficiently weakened, each ship would transport an attack team over to run wild through the corridors and slaughter as many of the crew they could find. Any survivors would then be divided up and taken back to each of the ships, so that the remaining packmates could each have their turn at the kill. Of course, everything would be recorded so that all of The Realm could share in the experience.

"Is it true what they say, Adimh?" said Imesh next to him, interrupting his thoughts.

"Is what true?" said Vex sourly, annoyed at having this savory moment marred with mere words.

"That the Adimh of the Enemy ship is a female?" chuckled Imesh. "Isn't that...strange?"

"Don't get too aroused, Imesh," Vex laughed back. "I ran the sim of the report by Crimson Stone. Their women are hideously skinny and pale."

"I wasn't..." Imesh answered defensively, before realizing that his Adimh was just teasing him. The Zvir of Jade Mountain accepted the joke in the spirit in which it was meant. Of course, had anyone else other than his Adimh made such an insinuation about wanting to mate with a female while still in his prime, especially one of the Enemy, he would have been challenged and gutted for his trouble.

"Try not to be too curious about the Janeway woman," cautioned Vex to his second. "She'll bleed just like anyone else once I take the knife to her."

"Of course, Adimh."

The best part of this situation, thought Vex, was that in spite of his earlier tactical blunder, he had drawn the lot for the right to kill the Enemy's Adimh, the woman Janeway. It would certainly be intriguing, he chuckled, as he considered the prospect of killing a female for the first time.

And the fact that he had infuriated Nagewa in the process was simply foam on the *jiopol*.

* * *

"You have to warn them!" pleaded Harry, as he watched the trio of ships come closer to Voyager.

"And just why would I be interested in doing that?" Ozymandias asked skeptically. "I'd give away my position."

"You said you needed Voyager's help," Harry countered.

"I need to survive. What else could I want beyond that?"

Harry thought for a minute, before coming up with an answer. "You said you crave new experiences! You wanted to see something new! Help us, then! You've fought your own people to protect yourself. Now do it again to protect others!"

"You've been complaining to me about your people's self-absorption, but how are you any different? Do you think killing your crew in revenge makes a difference? Prove to me that you can rise above that! Prove it to yourself!"

"Besides," Harry concluded with a forced glee, "it might be fun!"

Ozymandias went silent, as he seemed to consider the young man's words. After a minute had passed, the air was broken with the booming heartiness of laughter. "You might well have a bit of Sernaix blood in you after all, Mr. Kim," said the Sernaix. "Your posture just like one of us."

With that, Harry could see the holographic scene above him shift, as the ship seemed to move forward, and the three Sernaix scouts zoomed larger.

The interface link to Seven then suddenly snapped loose, and several of the servos jumped over her, helping her up. Her body slumped down in the command couch and Harry immediately rushed over to catch her.

He held her for a few minutes, waiting for her to awaken. Slowly, he watched her, feeling her come to life again as he held her by her arms. As her eyes fluttered open, he realized that he was holding her just a little too intimately. He relaxed his grip on her, allowing her to sit up on the couch.

"Are you OK?" he asked with concern. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"I am...fine," she said in confusion. "I...was beamed directly to the bridge and incapacitated."

"You're sure that you're OK? Ozymandias' link...it didn't..."

"I do not feel damaged," she answered him, her voice still unsteady. "I...remember fleeting images, scenes and simulations of various Sernaix, but they are all a blur to me. I suspect that the uploaded intelligence was attempting to link with my cortical implant, most likely for the purpose of extracting information." Regaining her composure, she looked about the room, seeing the large holographic display overhead. "Lieutenant, what has happened?" she asked.

"Ah, you're awake," Ozymandias greeted her jovially. "Welcome to the pack."

* * *

Janeway and Chakotay were enjoying their dinner together in her quarters, a lovely repast of fettuccine Alfredo and fresh asparagus, when the intercom chimed.

"Bridge to Captain Janeway," came the steady voice of Lt. Commander Tuvok.

Annoyed at the interruption, Janeway slapped her combadge to respond. "Yes, Tuvok?"

"Captain, we are receiving a transmission from an unknown source. But the caller claims to be Lt. Kim."

"Transfer it down here," she instructed, as she got up from her seat and moved over to her desk, turning the screen around to face her. Harry's worried face appeared on the small monitor.

"Harry," she said to him. "Where are you calling from? We can't get a fix on your position..."

"There's no time, Captain," the young officer blurted quickly. "You've got to go to Red Alert immediately. There are three Sernaix ships that are about to converge on your position."

"Three?!" Janeway's face went pale. Chakotay sat up immediately from his position on the couch. They were thinking the exact same thing. What could Voyager possibly do against three such formidable opponents?

"Engage in whatever evasive maneuvers you can," he urged. "I'm almost there. Help is on the way!"

"Harry, where are you...?" But the link went dead.

Janeway immediately slapped her combadge. "Mr. Tuvok. Go to Red Alert."

"Aye, Captain," the Vulcan responded.

Chakotay looked at his captain as the two of them straightened their uniforms and headed out the door while the Red Alert klaxons began to sound.

"Looks like we'll have to take a raincheck on dinner?"

"Let's hope we can collect later," she replied, worried if she and her first officer would ever get that second chance.

* * *

Janeway and Chakotay dashed onto the bridge, just in time to see the three ships 'appear' from nowhere, as only the Sernaix could manage. The rest of the bridge crew, including Tom Paris at the helm, had already assumed their stations.

"Three of them," the first officer mumbled as he shook his head. "Just once, I was hoping that Harry wouldn't be so on the ball."

"Raise shields," Janeway commanded to her tactical officer. "Bring the ablative armor on line." Tuvok complied, even though he knew that against Sernaix weapons, this sole line of defense would not protect them for very long.

"Arm transphasic torpedoes," she commanded, knowing that their supply of these potent weapons provided by her alternate future counterpart were in limited supply. But it was the only weapon that had seemed to even slow the Sernaix down.

But then, just as she could see the bright white hardpoints of their beam emitters starting to form, Tuvok called out again from his station.

"Captain," he said, "a fourth Sernaix vessel has appeared on our sensors. It is larger than the others, equivalent to Voyager in size."

"A fourth ship?" Tom called out from his station. "As if three weren't enough to clean our clocks?"

Janeway stood up and turned towards the pilot's station with urgency. "Tom, set a..." But before she could complete her command, a bright flash appeared on the monitor. The fourth Sernaix was firing its weapons. Only it wasn't targeting Voyager. It was striking at the lead of the three ships.

"My god," said Janeway, watching the blinding purple flashes of light that seemed to burst from the damaged scout's hull.

"I'm guessing that Harry and Seven hitched a ride along the way," Chakotay remarked from his seat.

The other two Sernaix ships scrambled in response to this unexpected attack. Voyager was now forgotten, as this new, unexpected threat now had to be dealt with.

But the two ships were not quick enough to save their beleaguered companion. Because with a blinding volley of fire, the third ship seemed to crumple under the impact and then...vaporized...in a blinding flash that was almost painful to look at. It wasn't an explosion, like when a normal starship was destroyed, but simply a white-hot burst of light that flared out, and then was gone.

The crew of Voyager stood stunned, not believing that it was possible. For the past few months, the Sernaix had seemed like such invulnerable bogeymen, impossible to hurt or slow down. Janeway couldn't hold back a thin smile of satisfaction. Although her ethical side knew it was wrong to take pleasure in the destruction of another, even an enemy, there was a part of her that felt pleased to know that the Sernaix were not all powerful, but could in fact be hurt and defeated.

It gave her a sense of hope, that Voyager might yet survive this strange new place after all.

"Well, I'll say this about the Sernaix," said Tom from the pilot's seat, "Their ships blow up real pretty."

"Mr. Tuvok," said Janeway fiercely. "Ready those transphasic torpedoes. Target the weakest ship as soon as it looks like its taken enough damage."

"Our weapons have not been effective against the Sernaix until now, Captain," said Tuvok.

A smile spreading across her features. "Somehow, I get the feeling the Sernaix aren't quite as invulnerable as they used to be."

* * *

Harry and Seven watched on as the battle raged across the holographic field around them, trying to steady themselves against the pounding their ship was receiving. There were two attacking ships left, one of which was taking heavy damage from Ozymandias' weapons.

Unfortunately, so were they. It humbled Harry to realize that the firepower these three ships were exchanging would have been enough to level nearly half of Starfleet.

"I think it's time the two of you left," said Ozymandias, amidst the chaos of the battle sim. "It's not safe for you two here. I'll transport you as soon as you're ready."

"But..." Harry tried to speak as Seven looked on. "Voyager still has her shields raised."

"Not to worry, boy. The Sernaix know how to compensate for that."

"I..." Harry looked up and around the chamber, trying to find something equivalent to a face, something he could speak to. "Thank you. I'm sorry we couldn't give you what you wanted."

"Believe me, Harry," said the Sernaix voice, "you've both given me exactly what I need."

Harry and Seven looked at each other strangely, not certain of what their benefactor had meant.

"And I have to confess," he added, "I left a little something with Seven of Nine, something that I know Voyager will find useful."

"Images...data," said Seven breathlessly, as the flood of information all started to come to her, forming a coherent structure where there had been only a jumble from before.

"Technical specifications for this vessel."

"One of the advantages of being a Ship Mind," said Ozymandias. "You get to know the insides of your ship in intimate detail."

"Indeed," said Seven, still awestruck by the knowledge she had now acquired. Harry smiled at the look of satisfaction on the former drone's face. It looked like she found exactly what she had been looking for from this mission.

But then something occurred to Harry, as he turned to face the blue-white sphere over the command couch. "Wait," he called out. "What did you mean before, when you said the Sernaix wanted something on Voyager, something that wasn't there now? What do they want?"

"Now, now," Ozymandias laughed, "why would I want to spoil all the fun of you finding out for yourself?"

Just then the Sernaix transporter beam enveloped them, sending them back to Voyager. But through the ultrasonic whine, Harry could hear the upload's final words to him. "I'll be seeing you again, Harry. Real soon."

* * *

Vex looked around at his damaged ship. His left side ached with pain. The command center was a shambles. The battle sim was flickering. Packmates lay injured and dead. Among them was Imesh, Zvir of Jade Mountain. His second. His friend. He could have lived forever, all of them. Instead, they were dead, and would stay that way forever.

Violet Sun had been the first to be taken out by the Abomination. Poor Tokul had never even seen it coming. None of them had. They had all been distracted, so focused was their attention on the Enemy, on Voyager...

Voyager! Vex could see that the Enemy ship was arming its weapons, targeting Cobalt Field. Nagewa's ship was heavily damaged, never having completely repaired from the fighting at the comet, and had now taken an even worse beating here. But even a crippled Sernaix ship could still withstand the primitive weaponry that Voyager employed.

He called over the link to Cobalt Field, trying to warn them. But their sensors must have been damaged during the fight, because they couldn't see the four transphasic torpedoes locked on to their position.

Impact! The first did only minimal damage. It shouldn't have done any damage at all. But Cobalt Field's hull refraction had been pushed beyond the limit already by the Abomination. Each subsequent torpedo hit weakened the hull further cumulatively, until the final breaking point of the plasma-bonding matrix was reached. Photons trapped in a frozen standing wave returned to their natural energy levels and burst forth into motion. First at one localized spot on the hull, then spreading across the ship within a fraction of a second, until the entire solid mass of the ship decayed into energetic light particles in a single instant blaze.

He could not believe it. Their weapons were primitive, their technology far behind theirs. And yet this ship, albeit with the help of the Abomination, had beaten a pack ship, a Defender of the Realm.

If there was one consolation, it was that his ship's hull was still strong and active. Voyager's weapons could not hurt it. And judging from the damage it had taken, neither could the Abomination. Cobalt Field's final shots had apparently taken out its weapon systems. There was still a chance to emerge victorious from this.

"Adimh Vex?" the Ship Mind responded to him, acting as if nothing had gone wrong.

"Do we still have weapons control?" Vex demanded.

"Yes, Adimh. Our offensive systems are still operational."

Vex looked about the tattered remains of his command center. The survivors of his pack were all looking to him for guidance and leadership, a display of bravado that they would relish. And indeed he would provide.

"Target the Silver Sky vessel," he ordered, adding as much flourish to the command as he could. "I will deliver the killing shot personally!"

"Yes, Adimh," said the Mind obsequiously. "Attempting to gain a targeting lock now."

"Attempting?"

"Yes, Adimh. The Silver Sky vessel has accelerated in our direction. This trajectory makes no strategic sense, as they are no longer able to generate weapons fire."

Indeed, agreed Vex silently, it made no sense. The Abomination had no weapon with which to fight him, except...

Vex, Adimh of Jade Mountain realized the truth just as the Ship Mind reported that the Abomination's acceleration was growing as the distances between the two ships grew smaller.

In the final seconds before impact, he displayed no outward reaction, even though within his body was wracked with the greatest fear a Sernaix could know.

The fear of death.

* * *

Janeway watched as the two remaining Sernaix ships engaged in their final dance of destruction. The smaller vessel tried to shoot the larger one down, but its momentum was simply too great. The two ships collided in a eruption of light and radiation that everyone had to turn away from the glare.

Everyone on the bridge turned back to the monitor in stunned silence as soon as it was safe to look.

"My god," mumbled Tom. "Harry and Seven..." Everyone seemed to feel the same way. But their collective moment of shock was interrupted by a voice over the intercom.

"Sickbay to the bridge," said the voice of the Doctor.

"Janeway, here," the captain responded. "I hope we haven't taken any casualties, Doctor." Any additional casualties, she meant to say.

"Thankfully, no. But at some point during the fighting, Mr. Kim and Seven of Nine were mysteriously beamed to the corridor just outside of Sickbay. Oh, and they appear to be perfectly healthy, albeit a little exhausted. I thought you'd be interested to know."

* * *

Captains Log. Stardate 55279.2:

We've survived yet another encounter with the Sernaix, only this time, I feel confident that we've come away with more than just confusion.

Based upon the data brought back by Lieutenant Kim and Seven of Nine, our sensor readings of the Sernaix battle, and some remarkable insights that Seven seems to have developed regarding Sernaix technology, I believe that we may now have the means to develop a weapon with which we can defend ourselves against the Sernaix.

Today, we came out ahead with a little help. The next time we find ourselves in a fight, I'm hoping we'll be able to stand on our own.

At that moment, the door chimed in Kathryn Janeway's quarters. "Enter," Janeway instructed the door computer as she put away her log recorder.

Chakotay came into the room, holding both a PADD and a picnic basket. It was impossible not to notice the broad smile on his face.

"Is that for us?" she inquired curiously.

"I figured now would be as good a time as any to collect on that raincheck," he said, as he put the basket down on her desk. He held up the PADD in his right hand. "I've been reading the preliminary report from Harry and Seven's away mission. It's fascinating stuff from an anthropological point of view."

"Not to mention, scientific," replied Janeway, as she reached for a PADD of her own on the table across from her. "Did you know that according to those technical specs that Seven brought back, the larger Sernaix ships are actually equipped with Quantum Slipstream drives?"

"It's a pity we didn't have this info back in the Delta Quadrant," Chakotay remarked. "It would have made quite a difference then. But now, I don't think that a Slipstream drive will be enough to get us out of this Time Bubble."

"It wouldn't do us any good anyway," she said. "Apparently, an Intrepid-Class starship doesn't have the necessary power output or hull configuration to generate a stable slipstream. But at least we now know its possible in principle."

"They did good out there," said the first officer with a proud smile, "Harry and Seven."

"That they did," Janeway replied warmly. "Perhaps we should team them up together more often, unless you have an issue with that."

"No, of course not," he looked at her curiously. "Why would I have an issue?"

Why indeed, she thought. She felt that twinge of jealousy and hurt again, but she quickly cast it aside. That part of Chakotay's life was over now. He had moved on, and apparently so had Seven. And so should she.

"So, Commander," said Janeway curiously, "what have you brought for our meal this evening?"

"An old family recipe that Tom Paris told me about. How do you feel about synthetic Southern fried chicken, corn on the cob, and cole slaw?"

The captain of the starship Voyager smiled with delighted anticipation. It sounded wonderful to her. After all, the most important part when dining was the company.

* * *

"Now, Seven," said the Doctor, as he ran yet another tricorder scan over her cranial implants, "you mustn't move while I'm performing a systems diagnostic."

"You have already performed two diagnostics on my Borg subsystems, Doctor," the former drone complained, as she sat up on the biobed in Sickbay. "As you well know, I am functioning perfectly well, both biologically and technologically."

"And the same goes here, Doc," Harry called over from the next biobed. "We're getting bored already."

"Mr. Kim," the EMH huffed, "as someone who has been through Sickbay more than his fair share of times before, you should know that special precautions have to be taken when one is exposed to an untested alien environment."

"Whatever," Harry sighed. This was the Doctor's turf, he acknowledged silently, and there was no arguing with him here. Besides, there were other matters that were on his mind.

"I'm so glad you understand," the hologram replied facetiously. "Now, if you'll both excuse me, I'll need to go over these latest results before I feel confident enough to release you."

As the Doctor left to retreat to his office, Seven glanced over to see the young officer sit quietly, lost in his own thoughts.

"Lieutenant," she said to him. "It would appear that *you* are now the one that is focused on other matters."

Harry sighed again, turning to face the former drone. "I don't know. I still can't figure it all out. Ozymandias. Why did he end up saving us and Voyager in the end?"

"I believe it was due in part to your persuasion, Lieutenant."

"That shouldn't have been enough," he said, still bewildered. "Not for him to sacrifice himself."

"The Sernaix are a race that craves novelty," Seven suggested. "Perhaps Ozymandias came to believe that an act of selfless generosity would be the greatest novelty of all."

"Maybe," sighed Harry. "I don't know. Between uploading, frozen light, packs and tribal warfare... I just feel like the Sernaix are a stranger people than we can possibly imagine."

"They appear no stranger to me than many of the human subcultures that I have studied," she said. "Perhaps that is where the key to Voyager's survival in this area of space may lie."

Harry said nothing, allowing a long moment of silence to settle between them. Ordinarily, Seven of Nine was not bothered by silences, but there was something about this one that left her unsettled. There were still some things that needed to be said. "Lieutenant," she spoke up after a long pause, "about what was spoken between us aboard the Sernaix ship..."

"Yeah, about that," he groaned, "Seven, I want to apologize."

"You?" she replied with confusion. "You wish to apologize?"

"For the way I spoke to you," he replied. "I shouldn't have lost my cool like that. I was the away mission leader. I should have acted more professionally and not let personal issues get in the way. I guess you think I blew it again, don't you? Well, you'd be right."

"On the contrary," she said, still astonished by his contrition. "It is I who should apologize to you, Lieutenant." Her tone then softened as she slowly continued to speak, the words

obviously coming forth with some difficulty. "I accept that I was...insubordinate...and endangered the mission and our lives with my actions. I will understand if you choose to note my conduct in your mission debriefing to the captain."

Harry Kim couldn't have been more astonished if had been told that he was about to be made Commander in Chief of Starfleet. "Seven, I..." he stammered, "I don't know what to say. I don't think you ever apologized to me before. What brought this on?"

"Your words to me regarding my treatment of you," she managed to speak with some difficulty. "I did not realize that my treatment of you caused you such anguish. You claimed that I do not respect you. I will admit that when I first became a member of this crew, I did not. Your status aboard Voyager did not seem to warrant such treatment. It was only over time, as I came to work with you, that I recognized the value that you add to this crew."

"I..."

She held up her hand to silence him. "Allow me to finish," she said. "When I first joined this crew, I was not accepted by very many. You were among the first to treat me as though I were welcome. I have not forgotten that. I have always regarded you as one of my closest of...associates. Even if I have taken you for granted and not always shown it."

Seeing that he now had leave to speak, Harry felt at a loss for words. This was another one of those moments, he realized, when the two of them actually had something meaningful to say to each other. But this was also something more. A threshold had been reached here. "I...that's kind of you to say, Seven. And I accept your apology."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"You're welcome," he answered with a nervous smile. "Of course, you realize that I'm still going to have to inform the captain about everything that went on during the mission."

"I understand," she said demurely. "No doubt the captain will disapprove of my actions to acquire knowledge about the Sernaix at all costs."

"Well, it I suppose it did pay off," Harry shrugged. "I mean, look at what we managed to learn by boarding that ship. And we did survive."

"Only by happenstance."

"Well, maybe so," he answered affably, before leaning over with concern. "But seriously. What happened when you were...well, you know..."

"When I was linked to Ozymandias?" she answered. "I am not entirely certain. I know that he imparted much data to me on his vessel and its technology. I also saw many images, much of it incomprehensible, like that of a hallucination. I believe it to be scenes of this...Realm...that Ozymandias spoke of."

"Do you know what any of it means?"

"I do not. But I suspect that Sernaix civilization may be much grander than we have suspected. There are segments of the population that extend beyond these 'packs' that we have encountered up to now."

Harry smiled at her. "I'm just glad to hear that you weren't...well, too badly hurt, like you were with the Cardassians."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she answered, finding herself...touched...by his consideration.

"Do you remember anything else?" he asked with concern.

"I do remember one other thing," she said. "I was vaguely aware of events in real time happening about me. I recall your telling to Ozymandias that I was your friend."

"Well, you are," he said, blushing slightly. "Aren't you?"

"How can that be?" she asked, bewildered, "in light of the way I have treated you?"

"That's the great thing about friendship," he answered with a broad grin. "You can forgive a friend just about anything."

"I am...comforted by that," she answered, her eyes looking downcast. "And that you regard me as a friend. In truth, Lieutenant, I have been somewhat lonely of late."

"What do you mean?"

Seeing somewhat anxious, she leaned in towards Harry, glancing to the side to see that the Doctor was not listening. "Lieutenant, I wish to take you into my confidence on a specific matter. Do I have your promise that you will not repeat what I am about to tell you?"

"Of course," he answered with rising concern.

"You are no doubt aware of certain rumors that have circulated among the crew of the existence of a relationship between myself and Commander Chakotay."

"Oh, sure," he laughed, "I heard that one going around. But I never pay any attention to those. It's all just gossip."

"In this case, Lieutenant, it is based upon truth. Such a relationship did take place."

Harry's eyes widened in surprise...no, the word 'surprise' would have been an understatement. "You? And Chakotay?" He controlled the volume of his voice, so as not to alarm the Doctor in the next room. "I...how long has it been going on? I mean, how...?"

"We are no longer affiliated," she added hastily. "We participated in four dating rituals, just prior to Voyager's return to the Alpha Quadrant. I ended the relationship shortly after our arrival in the Time Bubble."

"I see," he said to her, still thrown for a loop by this revelation. "Wow. I mean, I know it's none of my business, but...I never even knew the two of you...well, *liked* each other that way. I mean, I figured if you were going to have a relationship, it would be with...well, you know..." He then casually tipped his head in the direction of the Doctor's office.

"Yes," she said sadly. "I recall you being present when the Doctor revealed his affections for me. It has been very difficult for the two of us since then, when he learned that I did not share his affections. He and Captain Janeway are the only other individuals who know of my...affiliation. Other than Mr. Neelix, of course."

"Neelix?" Harry sputtered incredulously. "You told Neelix about your love life?"

"Only via the Pathfinder communications array," she stated calmly. "I needed someone in whom I could confide, the Doctor of course not being an option. Mr. Neelix had already departed from Voyager at that point and seemed unlikely to spread any gossip to anyone here."

"Yeah, I see your point," Harry said with a smirk, "But knowing Neelix, your romantic life is probably the hot topic of conversation of the Talaxian colony by now."

"No doubt," said Seven with cold comfort, "However, the rest of the crew has been kept unaware. I would prefer it remain that way."

"Oh, I won't tell," he said earnestly, and then held up his arm in mock seriousness. "Starfleet word of honor."

Seven looked at the Ops officer and seemed...amused by his action, as well as touched by his sincerity. And then she found herself puzzled by her reaction to him. In the past, she might have regarded his antics as...irrelevant. Indeed, she might not have even given his hurt feelings a second thought, except to consider how they might affect the efficiency of their working relationship. But now things felt strangely different. She wondered if perhaps the removal of her cortical safeguards had in fact done more for her than just affect her ability to experience strong emotions. Perhaps the subtler feelings were also intensified, allowing her to explore...friendship...in a new light.

"In the past," she went on to explain, "I would confide on personal matters with either the captain or the Doctor. Although I still maintain a close relationship with both of them, I feel that my interactions with them have been... strained... by my brief association with Chakotay."

"I'm sure it's not as bad as you make it, Seven," he answered helpfully. "The Doctor is obviously still interested in being your friend. And so is the Captain, I'm sure."

"Perhaps," she said wistfully. "The reality, Lieutenant, is that both friendships had a strong mentor/student component to them, as opposed to being a companionship of equals, just as my relationships are with Icheb and Naomi Wildman in turn." She then looked up at him, her face wan and uncertain. "I have often watched your interactions with Lieutenants Paris and Torres, and have greatly envied the friendship you share with them. In all the time I have been aboard Voyager, I have never formed a true camaraderie with one I consider a peer."

Harry sighed softly at her mention of his two married friends. "Well, to be perfectly honest, Seven, things aren't quite the same with Tom and B'Elanna as they once were. What with the baby and all, we just don't have time for each other. I mean, when the two of them first hooked up, I used to feel like a third wheel. I guess now that Miral is born, that makes me a fourth wheel." He then looked over at Seven, his smile growing broader. "Maybe things can be different now," Harry suggested merrily, "seeing as we're both in need of new friends."

"I believe that would be acceptable to me," said Seven, her tone more relaxed than he had ever known her to be. "How are we to proceed from here?"

"Well," Harry pondered impishly, "I was hoping to put in a little holodeck adventure time with Tom at one point, but I know you're not into that. I hear you play a pretty mean game of Velocity."

"Indeed," she answered him, her face lighting up in interest. "At one time I would play against Captain Janeway quite regularly. I have not done so for some time. I believe my skills are in need of refinement."

"Well what a coincidence," said Harry jovially. "I just happened to be the team captain for my graduating class. Funny how we've never played each other before."

"Yes," she said, sounding quite pleased. "Perhaps we should proceed to rectify that oversight." Harry couldn't help but smile back in response. It looked to them both like the beginning of a beautiful friendship. "And I was correct," she added.

"What are you talking about? Correct about what?"

"About you as a leader, Lieutenant Kim," she said to him, just showing the barest hint of a smile. "You did much better this time."

Written by: Mike Ben-Zvi

Beta: Cimorene

Producers: Thinkey, Anne Rose and Coral