



Episode 9-1 - Defenders of the Realm

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"We're surrounded by Sernaix," Tom Paris announced from the helm, his eyes never leaving the sweeping expanse of the main monitor before him as his captain sat in her command chair behind him.

Kathryn felt her heart sink even lower as she gave the red alert order. "Mr. Tuvok," she called to her tactical officer, her eyes as transfixed forward as Tom's. "How many ships are there?"

Tuvok glanced down at his readout, taking in the data as quickly as the sensors could process. "I am detecting at least one hundred and fifteen Sernaix vessels, primarily a mixture of Scout and Battlecruiser classes."

"We're in trouble," Tom mumbled.

"That'll do, Mr. Paris," warned the captain. "Tuvok, raise shields." Janeway tried to maintain her calm in the face of this calamitous news. She had to be a source of strength for her crew against what seemed such insurmountable odds. Reluctantly, she turned to her left, where her new executive

officer sat; the younger woman's face an impassive mask of stone.

"Options, Commander?" Janeway prodded.

"I suggest we turn tail and run, Captain," said Thalia Barton, turning to her captain. "There's no way this ship can take on that many Sernaix. Not even with all our fancy bells and whistles."

"Are you suggesting, Commander, that we abandon our search and rescue operation for Lieutenant Kim?" inquired Tuvok from his station.

"With all due respect to Mr. Kim's crew and friends," Barton replied, "no one man is worth the risk to this ship."

Tom immediately spun around in his seat to respond, but Janeway silenced his protest with a quick glare. She would handle this herself. "Commander Barton," she said to her exec with quiet authority, "consider this from a purely pragmatic viewpoint. The Sernaix went to a great deal of effort to kidnap Harry Kim. Now I don't know about you, but I'm very curious to know why that is. And even if you were to disregard all of that, Lieutenant Kim is still a member of my crew, now and always. And a Starfleet officer never leaves a man behind."

"Then might I recommend at least a strategic withdrawal, Captain?" said Barton, her tone low and even. "We don't even know where we're supposed to look for this officer. We should at least get our bearings and give this ship a proper shakedown before we go charging off into battle."

"I would concur with Commander Barton's request, Captain," added Tuvok, his attention focused on his station. "However, I do not think the Sernaix will permit us the luxury of an orderly retreat."

"Captain!" Samantha Wildman called out from the Science station, "I'm getting more spatial phase disturbances in our sector. At least twenty...no, thirty."

"Additional Sernaix ships are entering the theater of battle," Tuvok reported. "We are being engulfed."

"Tactical view," Janeway ordered. The monitor switched from visual mode to a green on black computer-generated scene. An icon representing Voyager was seen against a dark grid, with dozens of red bogeys converging in a sphere-shaped pattern around her. The bulk of the hostile forces were concentrated in a mass formation in the direction of the galactic center, swarming over Voyager's flight path. Meanwhile, newly arriving Sernaix ships were emerging in the aft direction, limiting their avenues of escape.

"It's an ambush," Janeway muttered. "We're being engulfed."

"The nearest Sernaix vessels will be within striking range in four minutes, Captain," called out a young voice next to Tom. For a second, Janeway was thrown by it before remembering that under this new Voyager's bridge layout, Ops was now positioned next to helm, a return to a more traditional Starfleet design. The officer on duty, Lieutenant Tyrell, was acting Operations Manager, at least until Harry was safely recovered and brought up to speed.

Ever the optimist as always, Janeway thought to herself. Well, she could use some more of that optimism right now.

"We can't go forward, and we can't go back," Tom stated as he nervously watched the battle scene before him. He then glanced back over his shoulder at the center of the bridge. "What's our heading, Captain?"

Janeway thought hard as she studied the tactical diagram on the screen before. The Sernaix engulfment stretched across billions of kilometers, but given the speed at which their attackers were moving, that distance would be closed soon enough. Until then, the snare was not yet complete, as there were still gaps in the Sernaix attack formation. "Mr. Paris," she commanded, "set course on a heading on zero mark 20 by 5, Warp 9. Head for the nearest hole in the Sernaix flank."

"Captain," Sam Wildman called out from her station. "There are three Sernaix ships moving to fill the gap!"

Barton then turned to the captain. "Options, ma'am?" she said sharply, as she looked back again at the screen. Janeway could see that for the first time, the replacement first officer was showing outward signs of anxiousness.

Janeway stood up, her eyes intent on the screen. She then glanced about her bridge, her new bridge. She didn't know this ship, not like she had known her old Voyager. There were so many things about it that she had yet to learn, before it became as comfortable and familiar as her old Intrepid Class ship. And for all the old crew coming back to serve upon her, there were hundreds more new faces on this larger ship that she had yet to learn to trust while under fire, her executive officer being a case in point.

But unfamiliarity aside, this was still her ship, her crew. She was responsible for them, as well as for carrying out her mission. Not to mention she was also responsible for a brave young officer who was having Heaven-knows-what being done to him at that moment. She owed it to all of them to see this matter through, while at the same time carrying out the duty that the President

and the Federation had charged her with. And there was only one way that she could see to all of those needs at once, she thought, as her attention wandered over to the dedication plaque on the wall. A thin smile of bravado came to her face as she turned back towards her first officer.

"Sometimes, Commander," said Janeway proudly, "you have to punch your way through." She then seated herself back in her command chair and called out to her tactical officer. "Mr. Tuvok, I'd say its time we gave this ship a proper shakedown under battle conditions. Bring the new tachyon pulse cannons on line."

"Tachyon cannons are online," Tuvok reported. "Sernaix nacelles are in the deployed position."

"Excellent," Janeway replied. "We'll see how they hold up before engaging any of the heavier weapons."

"Captain," the tactical officer continued, "I would recommend preparing a salvo of quantum torpedoes as well."

"What's the point, Mr. Tuvok?" Barton asked. "According to the briefing I got, those hulls are a lot tougher than Starfleet issue."

"Every little bit helps, Commander," said Janeway, her eyes forward as Tom punched in the heading. "If our new weapons can punch through their shields, then maybe our old ones will be able to do some damage." She tried to put on as brave a front as possible, to give confidence to her crew. Personally, she would have preferred it if they had a few anti-Borg transphasic torpedoes in their arsenal. But circumstances had forced them to leave spacedock before more could be rolled out for assembly. She hoped that a full armory would be available upon Voyager's return to Earth, assuming that they survived this mission.

Then the ship jerked forward as a section of the Engineering console erupted in a shower of sparks. The Andorian ensign on duty, Shiv'rell, leapt to the side to avoid injury. The lights flickered and seemed to dim by half. An unpleasant groaning sound echoed through the hull. At least three auxiliary bridge stations went completely dead.

"What happened?" demanded Janeway. "Did we take a hit?"

"Negative, Captain," Tuvok announced, his eyes still glued to his station monitor. "The Sernaix have not yet fired upon us. However, the tachyon cannons are no longer active."

"Torres to Janeway," came the voice of Voyager's Chief Engineer over the intercom. "We've got a problem. The Slipstream engine is down. And we're getting feedback on nearly half of the new systems we installed."

"What kind of feedback?" Janeway asked urgently. "B'Elanna, we need those cannons working, along with every other Sernaix component on this ship."

"I don't know," B'Elanna exclaimed over the speaker. "My people are running around like crazy down here. Ozymandias is trying to isolate the problem, but..."

"We're being targeted!" Tuvok interrupted. "A Sernaix scout, bearing at two mark zero."

"Evasive maneuvers!" Barton ordered to Tom, standing up from her seat, taking the initiative.

But Voyager could not move fast enough, and a phased energy beam impacted their aft section, sending the bridge crew lurching forward.

“Damage on decks 8 through 10, aft section,” Tyrell reported from Ops. “Shields are still holding at forty percent.”

Janeway’s face went pale at the announcement. With the new trans-spatial shields put in place, the new Voyager stood a better chance of holding on through a battle with the Sernaix than the old Voyager did. But even so, a single shot should not have drained their shields by nearly sixty percent.

“B’Elanna,” said Janeway calmly. “Can you divert any power to the Sernaix beam emitters?”

“Captain,” said B’Elanna over the com system again. “I’d recommend against it. Without knowing what’s draining our power, we could have a catastrophic energy discharge. Those beam weapons were twitchy enough under ideal conditions.”

Janeway sighed, her options being reduced from few to none. Her new ship, for all of the hopes riding on it, was a lemon. Tom Paris might have called it an Edsel, assuming that he or anyone else on Voyager was in a joking mood.

“Tuvok,” Janeway commanded, “fire an aft spread of quantum torpedoes. It won’t take them out, but it might slow them down long enough for us to slip past them.”

“Firing,” the Vulcan officer said.

A dozen torpedoes were released behind them and impacted against two pursuing scout ships. As expected, the Sernaix were able to target three of them with their energy beams. The rest impacted against their bizarre photonium hulls.

“Impact registered,” Wildman called out from his station. “It looks like their shields were weakened slightly. Maybe ten percent at most.”

Janeway’s attention was riveted on the monitor, watching as Voyager moved closer to the closing gap in the Sernaix globe formation. If there was enough space, enough time...

She slapped her combadge desperately. “Janeway to Seven of Nine,” she called out to the young former drone, who was down in Engineering assisting B’Elanna. “What’s the status of the transwarp drive?”

“Captain,” Seven replied over the din of chaos on the bridge. “The Borg components appear to be unaffected by the general systems failure of the Sernaix technology. I believe that we can generate a transwarp conduit safely, assuming that Engineering can divert sufficient power.”

“How far can we go?” Janeway asked. “We’ve never tested the limits of the transwarp coils on a ship like this.”

“I do not know...” But Seven didn’t finish her sentence, as the ship rocked violently once again under the impact of another volley of weapons fire. The crew struggled to stay at their stations, as Janeway clutched her command chair for dear life.

“Status!” she demanded.

“We’ve taken another hit on Deck 8,” Tyrell reported from Ops. “Shields are down to nine percent. One more hit there and we’ll have a hull breach.”

Janeway arched her back with steely resolve and turned towards the Science station, where Sam Wildman was tending to the injured Ensign Shiv’rell. “Lieutenant,” she said, “did we pass near any stellar phenomena that emitted radiation in the omicron band?”

“Yes, Captain,” Sam reported. “There was a planetary nebula twenty parsecs away going through a T Tauri emissions phase...”

“Good,” she answered curtly, “transfer the heading straight to the helm.” She then slapped the combadge once again. “Seven, have B’Elanna divert whatever power she can. We’re going to transwarp!”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Tom,” she spun towards the helm, “as soon as you get those coordinates...”

“Got ‘em,” he replied.

“Then active the transwarp drive on my mark.”

“Captain,” B’Elanna called out, “I can give you an additional thirty percent more power for a few minutes. Any more than that...”

“Two Sernaix scouts are locking weapons,” Tuvok announced. “Targeting in five...four...”

“That’s all we need,” Janeway groaned out loud. “Tom, are the transwarp coils fully charged?”

“Just a...got it!” Tom shouted out. “Transwarp is online!”

“Punch it!” Janeway commanded. And with that, the starship Voyager shook once again as the bridge lights dimmed for a few seconds, illuminated only by the greenish glow of the transwarp control interface at the helm station. But the power quickly returned.

“What’s our status?” Janeway inquired.

Tuvok glanced down at the tactical monitor. “We are in transwarp, Captain. It does not appear that the Sernaix are familiar enough with Borg technology to know how to lock on to our position. I believe we have evaded them.”

“Whew,” said Tom. “Now I know why Starfleet thought to put in more than one drive system.”

“We’ve lost them for now,” Barton grumbled, “but with that many ships, it’s only a matter of time before they can extrapolate our position and find out where we’re hiding.”

“Commander,” Janeway was about to retort to her exec’s flippancy, but held her tongue. Taking a deep breath, she reconsidered her reply. “You have the bridge. I’ll be in my ready room. As soon as we emerge from transwarp, have the ship power down to emergency levels only. I want to hold a briefing at 1500 hours to find out just what the hell went wrong with my ship. Mr. Tuvok, you’re with me.”

“Yes, sir,” said Barton, saying exactly what Janeway did not want to hear. Clenching her jaw, she stormed off the bridge and into the sanctuary of her ready room. Tuvok followed silently.

“I swear, Tuvok,” Janeway said as soon as the doors slid shut, “I don’t know what it is with that woman. It’s like she’s deliberately trying to provoke me.”

“I must admit that Commander Barton is unusually deficient in her interpersonal relations skills for one chosen as an executive officer,” said the Vulcan. “It would seem as if she is intentionally creating distance between herself and the crew. Nevertheless, her record shows an impressive pedigree of combat training, a necessary background given our mission.”

"I don't know what Starfleet was thinking," she sighed. "Assigning her here. Breaking up our...our crew."

"I believe the word that you were about to say was 'family,'" said Tuvok sagely, "was it not?"

Kathryn Janeway slumped into her chair, her face looking weary and drawn. "What are we doing out here, Tuvok? I promised a rescue with full guns blazing, and look at us now. Running like scared rabbits on a ship we've never trained on, one that couldn't even fire her weapons at the first sign of combat." She sighed once again. "Not a very auspicious beginning to this fight, is it?"

The tactical officer arched his eyebrow, not appearing to lose his resolve. "The opening battle is not always a portent to the ultimate victor of a war, Captain."

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"It is done," said Mateth to the Council of Elders. "The Phase has been dissolved."

"We have committed to a dangerous path, Speaker," said the Ayrethan acolyte next to him. "Already the Nodes of the Realm have made the transition to normal space. The packs will be free to roam and destroy, precisely what we were called upon to prevent."

"This day was predestined, Nesoph," said the Speaker gently. "We could not remain as guardians of the phase indefinitely. The path which we set upon those many millennia ago must reach its endpoint."

"But at what cost, Speaker," said Nesoph, as he gestured to the nearest crystal. With a wave of his hand, the crystal shifted its spectral glow and an image floated overhead, showing the ill-fated initial battle between Voyager and the Sernaix. "Perhaps we place too much faith in these beings to rise to the challenge. What we ask of Kathryn Janeway may be too great a task for her to bear."

"Fear not," Mateth replied solemnly, his skin tone shifting from green to a soft bluish glow to match that of the radiating crystal. "These corporeal beings are more resourceful than you know. Her nula is strong, Nesoph, and there is still the wisdom of the Ancient One locked away in young Harry Kim."

"I fear for him as well, Speaker," Nesoph said as his skin darkened with sadness. "The dark mistress of the Sernaix will surely destroy him in her mad quest for power and immortality."

"Do not despair yet," said Mateth. "I sense that our young key will soon be made aware of his full destiny. The knowledge that he brings will be Kathryn Janeway's most potent weapon to bear against the enemy which threatens us all."

"But how will it end, Speaker? For once, the kuh-vah-nula tells us nothing. It all could end so terribly wrong!"

"Perhaps, but it could also end so terribly right! For now, we must allow events to unfold as they must. When the moment is right, then we will intervene directly and come to the aid of Voyager."

* * *

I am not going insane, Harry Kim repeated to himself against the wall of pitch black that enveloped him. I am not going insane!

At first, Harry had been grateful for the respite from Sycorax's tender mercies. After hours of torment with images plucked from his memory, the Sernaix leader could see that he would not - or could not - tell her the secrets that she wanted from him. So instead of overloading his senses, she chose instead to cut him off from sensation entirely. Harry remembered reading of experiments going back centuries in which test subjects were placed into tanks of warm water in a state of complete sensory deprivation. After several hours without sight, sound, or touch, the minds of the subjects would have nothing outside to focus on. In that case, their minds would turn inward, desperate to create a new reality where an external one did not exist. In some of the experiments, mere hallucinations would degenerate into full-blown madness.

Was this Sycorax's strategy, Harry struggled to wonder? To drive him insane, and then glean the truth from his mad ramblings?

If only he knew what the truth actually was, he tried to think. These Sernaix seemed convinced that he had been somehow 'touched' by one of their gods, probably somewhere in the Delta Quadrant. But who was this god? Where and when had this happened? Wouldn't he have remembered something like that happening? And if it had, what knowledge would this being have passed on to him?

Harry tried what he could to keep his mind focused. He pictured Earth and how beautiful it looked to him just as Voyager was on approach to return home. He thought about the faces of his parents, wondering how worried they must be for him to have gone missing after being back with them for such a short time. He wondered about his friends and crew, what they must be doing to try and find him, but knowing full well that he was beyond their reach here...wherever 'here' was. And then his thoughts turned to Seven of Nine, his memories sharp with the recollection of the night he was taken, when they had shared their first kiss. He remembered how lovely she had looked, how...perfect. Why was fate so cruel to him, to snatch him away just as he was on the brink of discovering such a wonderful new relationship with this exotic young woman? He could almost see the glimmer of light that reflected off of her crystal blue eyes when she...

A glimmer of light? No, it was more than just a memory. From the depths of the darkness and silence around him, Harry could actually...see...a bright glow coming towards him. It had no defined shape. It simply grew from a tiny point off in the distance to once that grew like a blindingly bright corridor, pulling Harry within. And he could swear that he heard the faint sound of birds chirping somewhere in the background. At first Harry thought that he was in the depths of sensory deprivation induced dementia, but the tingling sensation that permeated his body told him that this phenomena was no illusion, at least not one created by his mind. His next instinct was that this was yet another one of Sycorax's twisted mind games, another Realm generated fantasy. But the light that now engulfed him did not evoke the feeling of dread that those earlier illusions had created for him. On the contrary, Harry felt strangely at peace the longer he basked in the warm gentle light around him. He couldn't explain it, but somehow he felt as though he had come home once again.

And then a third possibility came to him, one that jolted him into full awareness. A white light, a tunnel-like sensation...could it be that he was...dead?

But before he could consider and dismiss that possibility, the glow of the light began to fade. In its place, Harry felt the warmth of natural sunlight. He was no longer floating in limbo as before, but instead felt the sensation of solid earth beneath his feet. Harry looked down and saw...himself. He could see his own body once again, standing in his Starfleet uniform on a field of soft grass. He looked up and around him. Blue skies were above him, with a warm, yellow sun like that of old familiar Sol. There were birds chirping, a gentle breeze blowing, green hills on the horizon, and the bleating of sheep.

Sheep? Where did they come from?

Harry looked up and could not believe what he saw. It was a familiar sight, one that he had seen many nights in the past few months. It was a barn, the same barn that had appeared in his dreams so many times before, just fleeting moments before waking up. But this was no insubstantial night vision. The barn and the farmhouse just next to it were as real as any place Harry had seen before.

Nervously, Harry made his way over towards the farmhouse. The last few times he had seen this place in his dreams, there had been one constant, one thing that he would see each time just before being jolted awake.

And there he was, sitting in an old wooden rocking chair on the farmhouse porch. The old man himself. He saw Harry approaching, and smiled at him, as though he were a long lost relative. He was frail, but with a steadiness in his eyes that conveyed great wisdom and experience. Ever so shakily, he lifted himself out of his chair and stood as, just as Harry reached the porch steps.

"Hello there, son," the old man greeted him. "I've been waiting for you."

And then Harry remembered. He knew this man. He had been to this farm before, eight years ago, and thousands of light years away. It had been so hazy in his dreams before, but now, in the light of day, he could now see who it was who had been visiting him in his sleep. But there was no doubt that it was he, the one who had started it all.

Harry was looking upon the wizened face of the Caretaker.

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The sparkling silverblue lights assembled into the sterile gray of a typical Fleet transporter bay. Chakotay glanced around quickly, feeling like a stranger in a strange land. A young blonde Ensign smiled out over the control panel. "Welcome to the Logan, sir."

Chakotay stepped from the raised pad and extended his hand. "Thank you, Ensign Russell."

For a moment, surprise stilled David Russell. He hadn't expected this new Commander to know his name. He took the proffered hand in a firm shake.

"Just doing my job, sir. They are waiting for you on the bridge. I'll move your belongings to your cabin."

Chakotay entered the rear of the bridge. Its cramped confines and foreign odor an inimical reminder this was not Voyager and Kathryn wasn't here. Four officers manned stations, each color of Star Fleet vocation represented. He didn't get a chance to report formally.

Captain Grant leaned to the side in the center chair, craned his neck around to get a glimpse of Chakotay. Grant gave a curt nod in recognition of the large Indian yet addressed the helm. "Take us out Shari."

Lieutenant Shari Young grinned, her fingers dancing on the console. "With pleasure, Carl."

Chakotay grabbed the railing as the ship lurched forward. The informality of the crew caught him off guard. Voyager had been a family, yet Kathryn still insisted on the formality of rank on the bridge. Perhaps he could find a new home among this group.

Young swung the Logan hard to port. Chakotay gripped the railing once again in an effort to keep his feet under him.

"Commander, sit at that station, it's vacant." The soft voice to his left was a command not a request. "Before you fall on me." Lieutenant Commander Marsha Jones pointed to Tactical II.

The Logan jerked one last time. Shari threw both arms in the air and spun around in her chair to face command. "We're all set, skipper. Course laid in and cruisin' on autopilot."

Grant surveyed the people waiting for their attention. "Now that we're underway, let me introduce Mr. Chakotay. He is joining us as an advisor. We're the forward scouts. Our mission is to find the Sernaix, determine their position and number and report back. We are not to engage the enemy. We will stay cloaked, no outgoing communications unless by my expressed order."

Lieutenant Barry Bruner was seated opposite Chakotay at Tactical I. "Oh, Skip, that's no fun. Can we fire if fired upon?"

Grant's head snapped around at light speed, his eyes expressing his displeasure at the remark. "There will be no provoking a fight, Barry."

"Hear that, old girl?" Said the wiry guy sitting at the Engineering Console, as he affectionately stoked the bulkhead. "Maybe we can get home without these fat-fingered officer types getting you all banged up." Chief Michael 'Mickey' Mool, given the chance, would rather spend time with his engines than the crew. In his opinion, the life forms aboard were there solely to damage his precious 'little lady' and make his job more difficult.

Shari Young laughed. "Come on, Mickey, you're not foolin' anyone. We all know you love us more than this tin can masquerading as a runabout." She puckered up her lips and blew the sour face engineer a kiss.

And so it went, an entire shift filled with wise cracks, off color jokes and stories punctuated occasionally with a well-timed insult. For all their camaraderie, not once was Chakotay included. He had never felt so alone as in this crowd.

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The Voyager-Class prototype, after a launch of such fanfare and hope, floated ingloriously among the dust of a planetary nebula in the shadow of a malformed asteroid clump. The static outbursts of the newborn sun at its heart showered the nebula with omicron radiation, shielding the crippled starship from any prying sensor sweeps, while her crew valiantly tried to get her into fighting shape.

"Damned geniuses back at Command!" B'Elanna Torres grumbled to no one in particular as she hopped from one open access panel to the next. "Rushing us out of spacedock without even a proper shakedown! What did they think was going to happen?"

Lieutenant Vorik, as the new Deputy Chief Engineer, looked on at his superior with an arched eyebrow. To him and those of the engineering crew from the original Voyager, her moods were an expected constant. But none of them would have wanted anyone else but her in charge at this critical moment.

"Is it true what they say, sir?" a soft voice spoke up next to Vorik. The Vulcan officer turned to see a young Andorian ensign with a dermal bandage wrapped about his right forearm. Vorik remembered him as Shiv'rell, one of the new engineering officers who normally monitored propulsion from the bridge.

"To what are you referring, Ensign?" Vorik asked.

“About the chief, that she’s not even a real officer. They say she only received her commission because of a presidential order. She never even graduated from the Academy.” The disapproval was evident as the young Andorian’s antennae stiffened along with his sour expression.

“Ensign Shiv’re’ll,” the Vulcan answered coolly, “what Lieutenant Torres may lack in professionalism, she more than compensates for with her talent for improvisation in a crisis. Given our current situation, I would say that is a far more desirable quality than the ability to quote regulations.”

“I...yes, sir,” Shiv’re’ll replied, somewhat shamefacedly, his blue skin turning a darker shade of cobalt. “I meant no disrespect. It’s just...this ship, the way things are done here. There’s such casualness to everything. It’s not at all what I expected starship duty to be like.”

“Ensign,” Vorik continued, somewhat more openly, “I realize that you may find the protocol aboard this vessel to be somewhat illogical, especially in light of the fact that you are a recent graduate. Many of the crew, including myself, have been through much together during our journey through the Delta Quadrant and the Time Bubble. We are all aware of our respective talents and qualifications, regardless of our backgrounds. I can assure you that Lieutenant Torres, despite her formidable demeanor, is a most capable engineer. Do not judge her solely by her credentials. I know that she would not do the same to you.”

“I...understand, sir. I’ll try my best. It’s just that there’s so much here that goes against everything I was taught at the Academy. For instance, that woman over there...”

Vorik looked to where Shiv’re’ll was pointing, over the railing down towards the lowest level, where the Sernaix slipstream core was kept. “You are referring to Seven of Nine?” He could see Seven hunched over the slipstream core, no doubt talking to the Sernaix upload Ozymandias once again.

“Yes, the Borg woman,” the young Andorian replied. “She doesn’t even have a rank, yet she was giving me orders and assigning repair duties like she were an officer. She was upset enough to bite my head off,” he said incredulously. “The Academy never prepared me for this.”

“It may appear confusing at first glance, Ensign,” Vorik answered with a Vulcan attempt at sympathy. “But if this new Voyager comes to be anything like her predecessor, a logic of its own will soon become apparent.”

Shiv’re’ll nodded in acceptance, showing a weariness that went well beyond his young age. “I suppose it will. Assuming that we all survive this.”

“If anyone is capable of leading this ship at this moment, it is Captain Janeway. In the meantime, Ensign, I would give Seven of Nine a wide berth for now,” Vorik added, as he glanced over the railing, watching the former drone’s dutiful attention to the Sernaix device. “She clearly has much on her mind to occupy her.”

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While Engineers scurried about trying to make repairs, Seven of Nine was engaged in her own repair efforts. Only her actions did not involve the use of tools.

“Your explanation is unacceptable!” Seven bellowed at the large cylindrical shape before her. “The enhancements made to this ship were done on the basis of your guidance! And your advice proved utterly ineffective!”

“Now, take it easy,” came the voice of Ozymandias from the slipstream core computer. “I warned you people that retrofitting your clunky starships with Sernaix technology was going to be difficult.

It was your Federation that insisted on moving your ships into battle before you were ready. Most of your engineers aren't even trained in how to operate this equipment."

"Training is irrelevant if the equipment is not even functional," Seven retorted.

"Well, I suppose that's to be expected, what with the interference of the other Sernaix ships," said Ozymandias.

"What interference?"

"Well, I'm sure you know that all Sernaix vessels are interconnected through a link to The Realm," explained the upload. "A fleet of pack ships is an ever shifting web of subspace communication, exchanging data, battle simulations, personal observations of the battle..."

"Make your explanation brief," Seven hissed.

"What I'm trying to say is that the Sernaix components on your Voyager were probably caught in a feedback loop attempting to establish a link through to The Realm, something your Starfleet system procedures wouldn't allow. It must have triggered an automatic security shutdown of the affected areas, which conflicted with the power discharge subsystems, and so on, and so on. You get the idea from there."

"And you did not anticipate this?" Seven asked harshly.

"Like I said, you never know these things until you test for them," Oz answered, his voice sounding like a satisfied smile in the process.

"Can you compensate for this the next time we are integrated into another Sernaix combat situation?"

"I think so," said Oz. "Provided that your captain allows me override access to your security subsystems."

"I...I do not think that will be possible," Seven answered hesitantly, already anticipating Janeway's reaction to allowing a being they still did not entirely trust access to the ship's security protocols. "You must consider another alternative."

"Well, I could also modulate your shields to create a refractory subspace blackout," said Oz, "but then, if I had done that during our last meeting with my brethren, I wouldn't have been able to open a backdoor to their link to the Realm and locate Harry."

"Harry?" Seven sat up, taking notice, her voice reaching a slightly higher and gentler pitch. "You have found him? You...you must tell me where he is. Please."

"Oh, so it's please now, is it?" he chuckled. "Is this what it takes to get you to be nice to me?"

"Do not play games with me, Ozymandias!" Seven raised her voice at the Sernaix. "You must tell me where he is. I must tell the captain, so that he may be rescued."

"Okay, I'll tell you," Oz said to her, sound more compassionate this time. "But believe me when I say that if you go there, you may end up the ones needing to be rescued."

* * *

"But...it's impossible," Harry stammered. "You're dead!"

"Indeed," said the old man, his face still looking amused at his young visitor. "If you're seeing me now, then yes, I am dead. At least, my original is."

"No...I...this has to be a dream, right? I'm hallucinating right now. That has to be it."

The Caretaker smiled at him warmly. "No, Harry Kim. What you're seeing right now is an interactive recording, inserted directly into your DNA. It's a message I left for you once you are ready to assume your new duties." The old man stepped closer to him from the porch, the look of pride on his face apparent. "I've waited a long time for you to come, young man. I knew that you were the one."

"Duties? The one? What are you talking about?"

"My duties, of course. I've chosen you, Harry Kim, out of all those who came before me, to succeed me as Caretaker to the Ocampa."

Harry's jaw dropped in shock. This was all just too much for him to take at once. "The Ocampa?!" he stammered, trying to speak.

"It will be a huge responsibility, I know. But it could be a very rewarding one, I assure you. The Array will provide you will all the information you need to know, as well as provide most of your biological needs. I..."

"Now, wait a minute," he struggled to speak, trying to get some control over the conversation. "The Ocampa? The Array? Mister, your information is way out of date. What you're talking about happened over eight years ago!"

Now it was the Caretaker - or rather, his image - that was speechless. "Eight years? No...that's impossible. Surely the information would not have remained dormant for so long. The Array would have given you everything..."

"God, don't you get it?" Harry shouted in exasperation. "The Array was destroyed years ago! My captain felt that the Ocampanians were ready to stand on their own. They didn't need a caretaker!"

"Stand on their own?! How...how could she do that? They're only children. They need my guidance, my protection. They need your protection, Harry."

"Hey, right now it's my people who need the protection!" Harry shouted back. He started to pace anxiously, still trying to take in everything that he was hearing. Everything that was happening to him, all of this trouble...and it was due to the Caretaker of all people. "I just can't believe any of this. You're the one who did this to me? You caused all of those dreams?"

"Those dreams, as you call them, was the knowledge I implanted inside of you manifesting itself. You were being informed to your true destiny, Harry. I only regret my implantation process was so imperfect. I was so ill...my faculties were decaying. I had to hurry..."

"Implantation?" Harry sputtered. "You mean that disease you gave to me and B'Elanna? You damn near killed us! If our doctor hadn't cured us, you'd have had another dead Caretaker on your hands!"

"Yes," the old man sighed. "Just like the others before you. But you survived so much longer than the others. I just knew that you were the one who would succeed. I'm surprised that when my message didn't appear to you right away, it didn't come to your mate."

Harry jolted upwards in surprise. "My mate?!" Was he talking about...Seven?

“Yes, the one I chose for you,” said the Caretaker. “She should have received the same message I gave to you. I can’t believe that she didn’t...”

“Wait a minute?” Harry spoke up. “You mean...B’Elanna?! You chose her as my mate?” Harry had to contain himself from bursting out in laughter. Him and B’Elanna Torres? What was this...person...even thinking when he came up with that?

“I...don’t understand,” the old man said, looking confused at Harry’s reaction. “My study of your species showed that you need companionship from a member of the opposite sex. That loneliness can be unendurable for you.” There was almost a sadness in his voice as he spoke, like he was reflecting on his own memories.

“That may be true,” said Harry, still chuckling at the absurdity of it all. “But still...me and B’Elanna? We’re totally wrong for each other. She’s married to my best friend, for heaven’s sake!”

“You mean you and her weren’t...compatible?” said the Caretaker incredulously. “But, I chose her to complement your own qualities! I was so sure that she would be right for you. I can’t understand how my calculations could have been so wrong.”

“Well, you were wrong about that, and about a lot of things,” said the young human.

“I’m deeply sorry for any discomfort that I caused you, Harry,” said the old man, who slowly stepped down from the porch until he was standing at eye level. “But you have to understand. I needed to find a biologically compatible species to pass on my legacy to.”

“Pass on your legacy?” said Harry with an increasing sense of dread. “What exactly did you...put in me?”

“Oh, a number of useful talents. I gave you the ability to make use of the Array, for one thing. Not to mention, the knowledge and experience of my people.”

“Your people?”

“Yes,” the old man smiled proudly. “Nine million years of the recorded history, memories, experiences and accomplishments of the Nacene species.” He then looked across at the young human, who suddenly felt so very much smaller right now. “My gift to you.”

* * *

Chakotay looked around his new lodgings, a little larger and it could be called cozy. He made a mental note not to get confined to quarters. Voyager’s brig was bigger. At least he had a window. The stars looked different from inside the cloaking field, like being inside a transparent balloon.

He picked up his bags and plopped them on the single bunk. It was a good thing he packed light. One small closet was quickly filled. The bathroom wasn’t a room at all more like a closet. Just as well Kathryn was not here, she’d never survive without a bathtub.

The thought of Kathryn made him pause. He lowered himself onto the bed and opened the second bag. Lifting out the picture of Kathryn he cradled it in his big hands gently stroking his thumb across her image. “I miss you, my love.” He looked around for a place to put her. The desk doubled as a dinner table and was on the opposite wall to his bed. There was a shelf running above the bed head but he wouldn’t be able to see her as he drifted off to sleep. Running out of options, he propped the frame up on the window ledge.

The next item in the bag was his medicine bundle but he couldn't bring himself to lift it out. Instead he closed the bag and stuffed it into the bottom of the closet. The simple act of unpacking presented a sense of permanence he was not prepared to face.

Chakotay ordered dinner from the replicator, mushroom soup and a vegetable pasta, placed them on the desk and snapped on the terminal. He thought back on his day. Star Fleet orders stated he was First Officer on the Logan but the ship's Captain introduced him as an observer. It had been an uneventful ride thus far, just trekking through space heading to the war zone. He expected more, to be asked about the Sernaix, consulted on their assignment, but no, he may as well have been invisible.

When a crew is together for a long time they develop their own rhythm, certainly this was the case for the Voyager crew. He wondered if the new crewmen on Voyager felt out of step with the veterans. He should be there, to ease their integration, not stuck on some ugly runabout, holed up in his cabin feeling sorry for himself.

No one seemed interested in smoothing his way into the Logan crew. Maybe they didn't expect him to be around for long. Privately he hoped that would be the case, but still, he felt the need to connect with these folks if only in a professional capacity. Chakotay called up the files of the senior staff curious to see just how long this team had been together. His brow knit as he flipped back through first Grant's history then Jones and Young. Instinct was telling him something was amiss.

* * *

The senior staff assembled in the briefing room at 1500 hours as ordered, all tired and weary from their labors. For the last six hours, the crew had been frantic to get their ship ready for a fight, one that many of them weren't even sure they could win.

All eyes were on Kathryn Janeway, who looked even wearier than the rest of them. Sitting a few seats over was Commander Barton, not looking exhausted in the least bit. She seemed relaxed, but alert at the same time, like a cat ready to pounce. B'Elanna kept a close watch on her, her warrior's instincts not relenting for a second ever since their new first officer came on board. She didn't trust Barton, certainly not after her actions on Fulton Station had nearly gotten Harry killed.

"B'Elanna," Janeway spoke up, distracting the engineer from her musings. "What progress have your people made in Engineering?"

"Oh, uh...we think we may have solved the power feedback problem with the tachyon beam weapons. I've been going over some suggestions made by Seven and Ozymandias, and..."

Barton snorted with disgust at the mention of the Sernaix's name. "Are you sure that following any of his recommendations is such a good idea? He was supposed to be helping you when you built this ship, and look at how wonderful that turned out."

"Are you implying, Commander Barton, that Ozymandias may be deliberately undermining our efforts?" asked Tuvok, sitting to Janeway's left.

"He betrayed his last crew, and now we're expected to rely on him should we go into battle against his own kind," Barton replied sharply. "I think I'm justified in being apprehensive, Commander Tuvok."

"We really haven't any choice in the matter, Commander Barton," said Janeway, tired of her exec's continuous negativity. "Which is why I want Seven of Nine to double check every bit of technical assistance that Mr. Ozymandias offers us."

“Oh?” came the playful voice of Ozymandias over the intercom. Everyone in the room jumped up at his unexpected outburst. “So I’m a Mister, now? Should I consider that a promotion?”

Janeway’s eyes narrowed as she looked upwards towards the nearest com speaker. “It was intended as a term of respect, something that you aren’t helping with your actions at this moment.”

“Oh, I do hope this doesn’t mean that you don’t trust me anymore.”

“Ozymandias, if you intend to be a part of this ship and her crew, then trust is something you’re going to have to earn. And you won’t get it by bypassing a security lockout that was agreed upon as part of the terms of your asylum.”

“Point taken, Captain,” said the disembodied voice. “Consider me chastised. I just thought that Seven would have told you about my having located our friend Mr. Kim.”

“We were about to get to that,” said Janeway, still nonplussed by Ozymandias’ casual interruption of their meeting. “But since you have the floor anyway, please proceed.”

“Thank you,” he replied, as the lights automatically dimmed slightly and the table’s holographic emitters were switched on. “The good news is, I know where he is. The bad news is...I know where he is.”

An image of the galaxy floated in mid air over the table, with the view zooming into one region in particular. Over the region, bright dots flashed into being, each one gradually linked to one another by sharply defined lines, until a dense network pattern began to emerge. And slowly, as the image was drawn before them, the sound of music could be heard. An orchestra, playing the unmistakable overture of Gustav Holtz’s ‘Mars, the Bringer of War.’

“This is The Realm!” Ozymandias intoned in a deep baritone as the scene zoomed in even faster. Over twenty thousand space habitats and starships, linked together in a continuous subspace network, generating a virtual space with a calculating coefficient of...”

“Mr. Ozymandias,” Tuvok snapped, his Vulcan control pushed to the extreme. “A proper briefing is all that is required of you. This dramatic flourish is neither necessary nor appropriate.”

“Oh, but your Starfleet briefings are so boring!” Oz wailed, like a wounded child. “On a Sernaix ship, a meeting like this would be an occasion for song and drink. A status report would be like an epic poem, and...”

“This is not a Sernaix vessel,” Janeway said evenly. “Now tell us where they’ve taken Harry, if you don’t mind. And be succinct about it. His life may depend upon it.”

“Oh, fine!” The scene then resumed with the focus on the linked Realm habitats. “As I was saying. With the Phase - or Time Bubble as you people call it - merging with normal space-time, the area occupied by The Realm is now manifesting itself over the area that borders what you call the Delta and Beta quadrants.”

“An impressive volume of space,” commented Seven. “It rivals the territory assimilated by the Borg Collective.”

“Anyway,” Ozymandias went on. “I was able to track the transmission link of the vessel that was transporting Harry from your Federation. It met up with a pack vessel somewhere about here.” A small circle lit up just outside the area of the Beta Quadrant now occupied by The Realm. “From there, he was shipped to this location,” he continued as a bright red line went out, following his narration. “Then here, then here, until finally he was unloaded...here.” The hologram then

zoomed in closer to the point in question, displaying a large space structure, dark and willowy, with spiky growths emerging at twisted angles in typical Sernaix fashion. "To the private habitat of old Sycorax herself."

Janeway leaned in to get a closer look at the eerie looking construction. "My god," she whispered.

"This Sycorax," Tom spoke up from the other end of the table. "She's your head honcho, right? What could she want with Harry?"

"Something to do with his knowledge, I would guess," said Ozymandias. "All I know is that if Sycorax wanted him, then this is no ordinary interrogation. It's personal."

"But...he is still alive?" Seven spoke, her voice trembling ever so slightly.

"I'd imagine so," he answered. "For now, anyway. But from the tales I've head about Sycorax, he might wish that he were dead if we don't get to him soon."

"What of the tactical capabilities of this habitat?" Tuvok asked.

"Hard to say," said Oz. "Sycorax takes her personal security very seriously, mostly to protect herself from any packs that might go rogue. The habitat has got a full network of tachyon pulse and beam defenses, multiple Kep'Tak'Nel cannons, and polyphasic disintegration torpedoes. She'll be at least five times as armored as a Node ship, and can scan out to forty light years away. Not to mention that Sycorax will probably have at least one or two packs on retainer acting as security."

"Man, they're gonna know we're there before we do," Tom lamented.

"Well, you people do have a few things going for you," said Ozymandias. "For one thing, our security procedures are pretty lax compared to yours. It's been thousands of years since the Sernaix have had a peer competitor; so most packs have become complacent. For us, there's really no difference between fighting and playing games. That and the fact we've become so dependent on our technology to give us our edge."

"And this...Realm," Tuvok asked, "It represents the communication infrastructure of the Sernaix civilization?"

"Mr. Tuvok, The Realm is the Sernaix civilization," said Ozymandias.

"Indeed?" Tuvok said with a furrowed brow. "What of your home worlds and colonies? Surely they must be the seat of your society's government."

"Planets?" Ozymandias scoffed. "Who cares about them? The Sernaix abandoned planetary living thousands of years ago. For us, planets are just pretty places to visit and claim as trophies."

"In favor of the habitats and nodes of this Realm of yours?"

"Oh, The Realm is more than just a place to visit and spend time. It's the heart of who we are. It's the source of our knowledge, our history, and our entertainment. The packs defend it, and the cadres maintain it. And in the end, when we tire of life in the flesh, it's where we spend our immortality. A trillion, trillion private universes, which cater to our every need and whim."

"Fascinating," said Tuvok. "Mind transcending the limits of the body. There are a great many Vulcan spiritual practitioners who avidly seek what your people have managed to attain."

"I can assure you, Mr. Tuvok, that there's nothing spiritual about The Realm."

Janeway sat there, considering the information before her. The hologram of the Sernaix habitat hovered before her like it was taunting her. They had faced down Borg armadas and hostile empires before. So why did this one space station make her so nervous. Perhaps because things were different now. This was no longer their old Voyager, but a new one that needed to be mastered. And a new crew, whose abilities were still untested. Not to mention their family was still so incomplete.

After much thought, Janeway looked up and addressed the room. "B'Elanna, how soon do you think we can be underway?"

"Another six to eight ours should do it," replied the engineer.

"Good. As soon as the work is far enough along, I want you to report to Sickbay."

"Excuse me?" said B'Elanna. "Captain, I feel fine. What do I need to see the Doctor for?"

"Well, for one thing, Lieutenant," said the holographic physician from his seat across the table from her, "I'm just dying for the opportunity to break in my new Sickbay and medical staff."

"Captain," B'Elanna continued. "I really don't think I have the time for this. There's so much to do in Engineering."

"I wouldn't concern myself too much, Lieutenant Torres," said Barton, eyeing her down and affecting a cruel smile. "I'm sure your deputy can take over the work. He's a very competent Starfleet trained engineer."

B'Elanna's eyes seemed to flame at the subtle taunt. She was ready to offer a sharp reply of her own, but wisely held her tongue, remaining silent as the captain spoke. "I've been thinking about what Ozymandias told you," said Janeway, "about how you might have had this same meeting with the Sernaix gods that Harry had."

"Captain, I've been going over every away mission record that Harry and I went on," said B'Elanna. "I can't think of a single incident that could account for what this 'touch' might have been."

"Nevertheless," Janeway continued, "if there was some sort of transfer of knowledge, I want to know what it is. If we can discover something that the Sernaix want, it might give us the leverage we need if we find ourselves having to bargain for Harry's life." She then turned to face the room. "That is all. Dismissed everyone."

As the assembled group got up to leave, Janeway couldn't help but see the devastated look on Seven's face. The poor thing was truly worried about Harry's abduction. She knew that their friendship had grown closer this past year, between Harry feeling left out after Miral's birth, and Seven's breakup with...

No, best not to think about that, she thought. Seven and Chakotay were ancient history now, a fling that he had pursued because she wouldn't allow herself to be available. Unfortunately, the one remaining casualty of that brief relationship had been the special bond she and Seven had once shared. Between the hurt she had once felt and the chaos of their return home, it had been too long since the two of them had shared a truly intimate conversation of the kind they had in the past. Seven had obviously found others to discuss her emerging humanity with, people like Harry Kim. Perhaps it was time the two of them talked about it. It certainly seemed as if Seven could use a shoulder to lean on at this time.

Janeway's gentle reflections were jarred as she looked up to see her first officer leaving. "Commander Barton, could you remain a moment, please?" Barton turned away from the door and stood before her captain, while Janeway remained seated.

"Commander, I'd like to know what you were thinking with your conduct at this briefing?" she asked her frostily.

"I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"You know exactly what I mean!" Janeway growled as she got to her feet. "I'm talking about those unconscionable remarks you made to Lieutenant Torres. It was behavior unbecoming an officer and I won't have it!"

"Captain, with all due respect, I think you're a little too close to Lieutenant Torres. The way she runs Engineering is a disgrace. I felt it was necessary to remind her that this ship isn't lost in the Delta Quadrant and that there would be some accountability for her performance."

"She gets the job done, Commander," said Janeway. "If you would just lighten up on her and get to know her better, I'm sure you'll see that."

"Captain, that isn't why I'm here," Barton replied curtly.

"Oh? And just why are you here, Commander?" Janeway replied sharply. "You've made it quite clear that you disagree with the goals of this mission."

"Permission to speak freely, Captain."

"You've done just fine until now," Janeway seethed.

"I was assigned here by Admiral Warhol, Captain," said Barton, her tone defiant and without fear. "Starfleet was concerned, quite reasonably, that you view your crew a bit too much like family, and that after being isolated from home with them for so long, you may not be capable of seeing things with the right degree of perspective."

"And that's what you're here for, Commander? To provide a different perspective?"

"You tell me, Captain," Barton said brazenly. "You were the one who convinced the President to veto Starfleet Command and give you back a starship. And not just any ship, but the most powerful and advanced ship in the fleet, one with which you and your crew haven't had a lick of training with. Not to mention ordering commissions to a bunch of civilians who by all rights ought to be doing prison time. And on top of that, you take advantage of the Sernaix threat in order to do it. All of this to keep your family together."

Janeway's eyes narrowed at the impertinent first officer. "You see the devotion and familiarity my crew shares as a weakness, Commander. I see it as a strength. A pity you never formed such a close bond with those you served with at any of your previous assignments. You're the poorer for it."

"I'm a soldier and a professional, Captain, first and foremost," said Barton, standing crisply at attention. "There's a time to get close, and then there's a time to keep the proper distance."

"Chakotay was a soldier also," said Janeway. "He understood that family was something worth fighting for."

"I guess we'll have to agree to disagree on that, Captain," Barton replied, her dark eyes cold and unmoved. "And for the record, Captain, I'm not Chakotay. I have my own way of doing things. But

I'm still your first officer and I will serve you to the best of my abilities, regardless of our difference of opinion." After a moments pause, she looked across at her commanding officer. "Will that be all? I have a ton of work to do to get this ship ready for our mission."

Janeway sat silent as she looked across at her first officer. "Dismissed, Commander."

As the door slid behind Barton, Janeway reflected on the words of this cold-blooded woman who she was forced by circumstance to rely upon in the crisis to come. Indeed, Thalia Barton was not Chakotay, Janeway thought. She wasn't in his class.

* * *

Lieutenant Barry Bruner's terminal beeped. "Transmission coming in from 'Fleet Command, Skipper. Where do you want it?"

"On screen," replied Carl Grant.

The brief moment of static cleared to reveal Admiral Warhol in what appeared to be his office at Headquarters. Warhol smiled briefly as his set eyes on Captain Grant. "Signal secure at your end?"

Grant looked over at Barry who acknowledged confirmation with a nod.

"We're clear, Admiral."

"We're detecting over fifty Sernaix ships popping up all across sectors 104 to 238. Voyager reported engaging the enemy but was forced to withdraw after a systems failure. I want to you proceed to these coordinates immediately, and see what you can determine. Under the circumstances, you are authorized to exceed warp 5, Captain," the Admiral grunted.

Chakotay couldn't help but feel there was an alternate clandestine conversation happening between Warhol and Grant. There wasn't anything specific, just a feeling they were talking in code. He listened carefully to each word, watched each body movement. There was something there, he was sure of it.

"Stay concealed, this mission remains recon only. Do I make myself clear?" said Warhol.

"Very, Sir," was Grant's response as he closed the communications channel? Turning to Shari Young, he added. "Do you have the course, Helm?"

"Aye"

"Proceed, best speed."

Shari's eyes lit up. The bridge crew grabbed for hand holds. "Punching it, Skip!" Shari yelled as the Logan shot forward leaving star streaks in her wake.

* * *

"Can I ask you a question?" Harry asked the old man. He didn't know how much of the time he had spent inside of this consensual.

"Of course you can," said the Caretaker. "That's what I'm here for. To answer your questions."

"Okay then," he looked at him earnestly. "Why me?"

“Excuse me?”

“There were over 150 people on my ship. Out of all the people on Voyager, hell, out of all the people in the universe, why did you have to choose me?”

The Caretaker looked at the young man with sympathy, and eased himself down onto the steps of the porch. “It wasn’t an easy decision. I had gathered ships from all across the galaxy, taking samples wherever I could. It wasn’t until I found a ship that came from your part of the galaxy that I found a species that came even remotely close to being compatible with implantation.”

“Humans,” Harry muttered. “You’re talking about the Equinox, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said the Caretaker. “Humanity was a close match, but none of the individuals I scanned had the right qualities I needed to assume my responsibilities. So I kept trying to grab ships from that same region, hoping I’d find the right one. And in the end, I did. I found you.”

“But what was so special about me?”

“Truth be told, Harry, it was a close decision between you and your captain. You both had the right qualities I was looking for. You were loyal, idealistic, and capable of empathy for those less fortunate than you. But most importantly, I wanted someone who was willing to sacrifice himself and his happiness for others in need. All of my tests showed that the two of you were the best choices for my needs. Ultimately, I went with you, Harry. I had a good feeling about you. That, and the fact that you were younger meant you stood a better chance of surviving the implantation process.” The old man then smirked at Harry as he went on. “Of course, if I had chosen your captain instead, then I’d have picked the captain of the second ship as her companion instead of your friend B’Elanna.”

“You mean, Chakotay?” Harry shook his head, almost laughing at this being’s unmitigated gall, even if it technically was only a recording of the original. “And that was it? Everything that happened to me in the Delta Quadrant, all because you were looking for a boy scout?”

“You should be flattered, Harry,” said the Caretaker. “It’s not everyone who can receive such an honor...”

“An honor!” Harry snarled at the old man, eight years of fury, grief and frustration finally coming to the fore, feelings that had never had a target until now. “Did you ever give any thought to the lives you ruined because of what you did? Friends of mine have died! Families have been devastated! Good people who might have otherwise had excellent careers were disgraced! And those are just the people I know! God only knows what you did with all your other ‘samples.’ All to find a caretaker that your ‘children’ were better off without to begin with!”

“I did what I thought I had to do!” the old man said defiantly, as he stood up abruptly. “The Ocampanians needed a protector. I make no apologies for taking my responsibilities seriously.”

“So the ends justify the means, is that it?” Harry sneered.

“If you care about something enough, then yes!” said the Caretaker. “I was responsible. I had to make it right, whatever the cost. You’ll understand for yourself when it’s your time.”

“No, I won’t!” said Harry. “No cause is so righteous that it justifies the harm to innocent people! I’d have never done what you did, no matter how necessary it might have been.”

The old man sighed. Weary and tired, he slumped back down to his seat on the steps. “Then I hope you’ll be a better Caretaker than I was.”

"I told you I don't want..." Harry tried to scream. He wanted to make him understand, scream at him, make him feel some degree of remorse for all the lives he uprooted and destroyed by his single-mindedness. But he knew he couldn't. This wasn't the real Caretaker. It was just an echo, an afterimage. It could only say whatever the original Caretaker would have believed and felt. Frustrated and angry, Harry sat down next to the old man on the steps.

"When I was a cadet," said Harry, "I would always imagine what humanity would become as time went on, as we explored more of the galaxy and learned more about the universe. I thought we'd become so wise, so powerful, that one day we would know everything. That we'd become so evolved, so perfect." He then gave the old man a contemptuous stare. "I guess that's not how it works at all, does it?"

"No, Harry, it doesn't," said the Caretaker with a heavy, heartfelt sigh. "A race is just a race. Older isn't necessarily wiser, just older. And more power just means having more power to keep making the same stupid mistakes all over again. I've seen races far younger than my own show much greater wisdom at times."

Harry understood a little better now why a being as powerful as the Caretaker had chosen such an unassuming persona as an elderly gentleman farmer wasting away on a barnyard porch. Despite his alien trappings, that's really all he was, just a tired old man brought down by disappointment and waiting to die.

"Look," said Harry softer, managing to find a modicum of sympathy for the being next to him. "None of that really matters now. What's done is done. The fact is I'm not much of a Caretaker to anyone right now. I have to find a way to signal my ship and get out of here before the Sernaix decide to..." But a gasp from the old man stopped him short, as he looked at Harry with a stare of utter astonishment.

"How...how could you know about them? Have you...are you accessing the knowledge I gave to you?"

"What?" said a confused Harry Kim. "How do you know about...?" But then it hit him, the connection. Was the vision he was experiencing the knowledge that Sycorax was torturing him for? The secrets that the Caretaker had given him the 'touch'? If that was so, then...

"My god..." said Harry, quite literally.

* * *

The Logan was eight hours away from Voyager's last known coordinates. Chakotay sat in the command chair for the first time since coming on board. There wasn't much to do. A skeleton crew kept her moving forward at high warp while the majority of the crew slept. He was sharing the bridge with Commander Marsha Jones and the relief pilot, Ensign Ra'tun.

Jones hadn't uttered a word in two hours. Chakotay tried again to engage her in conversation. "Anything on long range scans, Marsha?"

She looked him straight in the eyes, cool crystal blue piercing warm brown. "Nothing out of the usual, Commander." She emphasized his rank sending a clear message.

Jones' file showed the most overlap with Commander Grant. She had served with him on at least a dozen occasions over ten years. She also appeared to be his confidante on this particular mission. Chakotay prided himself on knowing what the crew got up to on Voyager he saw no reason to be any different on the Logan. Consequently he had noticed Jones' nocturnal trips to Grant's cabin. Initially he wondered if they were lovers but rejected that theory by day three, their body language didn't support that premise.

He had been looking for the opportunity to chat with Jones to see if he could glean more information about their mission from her. He was coming up blank in his efforts to speak with Grant. If the head honcho won't play ball, perhaps the next in line would talk. Unfortunately he wasn't making any ground with Jones either.

Chakotay stroked his chin and stared at the view screen, not really seeing the stars as they streaked by. Kathryn had told him his smile was a killer. She'd teased him about being able to get any female crewman to do his bidding with those dimples. Even suggested they made her knees weak at times. It was worth a try. He walked up to the Science station and stood behind Marsha. He noticed her shoulders tense as he leaned forward to feign a look at the console.

Minutes passed, Jones concentrated on the readouts. Chakotay stood close, holding his ground. In the end Marsha flinched. She spun in her chair but Chakotay was so close she was forced to lean backward to look up into his face. His smile was genuine and full dimpled. Gotcha he thought as her eyes widened in surprise.

Her lips threatened to break into a reciprocal smile. "Can I help you, Commander." She said as cover.

"Actually, I was just thinking about getting a cup of tea. Can I get you something?" His voice was smooth as silk.

"Um. Sure, tea would be fine."

Chakotay moved to the back of the bridge where a small table and chairs doubled as a workbench. He ordered the tea from the nearby replicator. It was an interesting design for a bridge and allowed the captain to hold a meeting and not miss a beat. It was also far enough away from the helm to offer some privacy.

Jones joined him pulling up a chair. "This is good." She said taken unawares by the soothing aroma.

"It's a traditional blend, goes back generations in my family." Small talk he thought but a start in the right direction. "I find if I take a break, move out of my chair, sip some tea, it clears my mind." Jones concentrated on her beverage.

"What are you looking for, perhaps I can be of assistance?" Marsha looked at him, thinking over his offer. Come on he thought, open up. "There's not much for me to do at the moment," he added.

"I am scanning the spectrum of photon frequencies against background levels."

"Trying to pick up a trail?" He surprised her again.

"Yes, the Sernaix make extensive use of photonium."

"And you think they might lose the odd photon here and there?"

"Exactly!"

"What have you found so far?"

Jones shrugged. "Not much, statistically I can't attribute any frequency with a significant variation from background."

Chakotay pulled up the Science station readouts on the desktop terminal. "Let's take a look." His fingers moved over the pad altering the search parameters.

"You're lengthening the focal point and narrowing the beam." Said Jones catching on to his reasoning. "Adding a larger directional element."

"There!" Chakotay pointed to a thin blue line on the viewer. "Let's see where that leads."

Marsha took over the terminal tracing the path forward then backward in space. Finally extrapolating the path. It was ahead of them moving in roughly the same direction.

"It could be a Sernaix vessel. Question is, what do we do if we catch up with it?" asked Chakotay casually.

Nice try Commander Jones thought. She had underestimated this renegade, assumed he was more brawn than brain and he had caught her off guard with his relaxed manner. She would have to watch him more carefully.

"That's a question you'll have to ask the Skipper, Commander." Commander Marsha Jones placed her cup in the replicator and resumed her seat at the science station.

Oh well, thought Chakotay as he eased his large frame into the command chair. Tomorrow's another day, he'd try a different tactic.

* * *

Sycorax, Adimha of the Management Cadre, watched with delight as the universe unfolded around her. She was floating among a gigantic holographic display of the galaxy, the stars dallying past her like the revesa fish from her simulation of the seas of Nesaqa. Angry red dots, each one a pack vessel, scurried about the surrounding sectors, in an effort to find the trail of the starship Voyager. She had managed to escape them using a form of transwarp propulsion unknown to the Sernaix, but it was of no consequence. With the packs spread out in search formation through the surrounding sectors, and with the full processing power of The Realm to support them, it was only a matter of time before Janeway and her people were found and slaughtered.

The delay was frustrating, thought Sycorax, but it did serve a useful purpose, in that it only whetted the appetites of the packs for more violence and destruction to come. Voyager would be the appetizer, before the main course that was their Federation.

With that, Sycorax waved her meaty hand and a new image materialized within her galactic viewscape. The human Harry Kim hung inside the spherical interrogation chamber, the neural link cables snaking about his arms and legs. With a single thought, she zoomed in on his face, searching it for details that might tell her something. And then, there it was. His eyes twitched while clenched shut, muscles spasms going off every few seconds.

She grinned with satisfaction at the sight. Things had worked even better than she had hoped. With his sensory input cut off entirely, the human had retreated into his own mind. He was dreaming. And within his dreams, the knowledge that may have been placed within his subconscious might be made available.

Now the time was right for extraction.

"Habitat!" Sycorax called out to the Mind that controlled her personal space dwelling, "establish a link with Adimha Bessavel of the Medical Cadre! At once!"

“Yes, Adimha,” the Habitat Mind meekly answered. Within seconds, the connection was made and the personal avatar of Bessavel materialized within Sycorax’s viewscape. She appeared in the form of a radiant column of flame, out of place in the coldness of space that surrounded her.

“Adimha Sycorax,” Bessavel greeted her. “I trust your health is in good order. Surely you could have spoken with one of my Satikas if you...”

“This is not about me,” Sycorax growled at the younger Adimha. Even though she oversaw the Medical Cadre, Bessavel was not an immediate rival for her position, so there was no need to regard her as a political enemy. Nevertheless, it was necessary to instill just a subtle amount of fear, enough for her to be reminded that the authority of the Management Cadre was not to be dismissed lightly. “I’m sure you have been monitoring the interrogation of the Touched One. I believe the time is right for the extraction we discussed.”

“A destructive scan of the brain?” said Bessavel. “Adimha, I must tell you that such a process is ill advised. We are still uncertain of the medium the Gods used to instill this human with their knowledge. We failed to decode the information implanted into his DNA. We also know that the means of access is not stored within his conscious mind. If we dematerialize him now and still fail to access the information, he will be lost to us forever.”

“I am convinced that the secret lies in his subconscious,” Sycorax replied. “He is dreaming even as we speak. My sources among the humans have told me that he has had visions from the Gods in his dreams before. If there is a time to perform such a scan, now is the time.”

“As you wish, Adimha,” said Bessavel. “I will instruct my Satikas and your Habitat Mind in setting up the necessary equipment at once. We should be able to perform the scan in a matter of hours.”

“Excellent,” Sycorax smiled with glee. Soon the knowledge she craved would belong to her. The immortality and power of the Gods would be hers for the taking.

“Adimha, you do realize that the scan will leave very little of the body left for study afterwards?” Bessavel said.

“It is of no consequence,” said Sycorax, her eyes narrowed as she spoke. “Once we have taken from him what we need, the rest of him will be useless to us.”

“As you wish,” said Bessavel, before her avatar faded away.

* * *

“Now, Lieutenant,” the Doctor admonished his difficult patient, “if you would just please hold still, we can get this over with.”

B’Elanna Torres groaned at the hologram’s persistent nagging while he tried to scan her vitals. “Doctor, this is a complete waste of time. I’ve got engines to tend to.”

“And Vorik and Seven said that they’re working just fine,” said her husband, who was hovering behind the Doctor, making sure everything went well with his wife’s checkup. Voyager had gone to transwarp over an hour ago, making the long journey to the farthest reaches of the Beta Quadrant where, according to Ozymandias, was now the location of Sycorax’s habitat, and their missing friend.

“Tom, the Doctor scanned me inside and out the other day and he found nothing wrong with me,” sighed B’Elanna. “I don’t see what the Captain thinks will turn up a second time around.”

"Look, you never know," said Tom. "And if it can help Harry as well as making sure that you're okay, then I'm in favor of it."

One of the Doctor's medical staff, a young girl with short blond hair who looked barely old enough to graduate the Academy, came over to B'Elanna's side, offering a mug with a warm beverage inside.

"Maybe you should have some of this, Lieutenant," said the medical assistant in a softy gentle voice. "It will help to relax you, as well as help the Doctor with his work."

"Well now, that's most considerate of you, Ensign Drey," the Doctor beamed proudly at the girl. The youngster blushed in response to the physician's praise. "Wouldn't you agree, Lieutenant?"

"What do you mean?" B'Elanna snapped instinctively. "Do I look like I need to relax?" If there was one thing that put her on edge, it was people that were overly...nice.

"I think, Lieutenant, that Ensign Drey was only trying to help you, as are we all," said the Doctor, before turning to her husband. "You see what a real medical assistant can do? Now why couldn't you have been more like her when you worked here, Mr. Paris?"

Tom was about to offer a clever retort of his own, when a large instrument adjacent to the biobed began to chime.

"Doctor," said Drey as she went over to the apparatus, "the genetic scan is finished."

"A genetic scan?" Tom looked on with puzzlement.

"Yes, Mr. Paris," the Doctor replied. "After I failed to detect anything unusual after your wife's last checkup, I went over the medical records from Mr. Kim's last exam at Fulton Station. As you might expect, the physicians there failed to find anything wrong with him either. So I suspected that a conventional physical exam might be overlooking something. On a hunch, I had a conversation with our friend Mr. Ozymandias."

"My condolences," B'Elanna smirked.

"Oh, he's not such a bad fellow, even if his musical tastes are a bit ostentatious," said the Doctor. "In any event, based on his information, I modified a standard DNA sequencer to resonate along the scan frequencies used by the Sernaix. What I found when I studied Mr. Kim's most recent genetic profile was this..." The Doctor then activated his monitor, which displayed a magnified view of a human genome. The view then zoomed in closer until more of the nucleotide strands became visible.

"I don't see anything," Tom commented.

"Look closer," said the Doctor, as the view grew larger. "There appears to be some highly dense molecular bonds encoded along these strands here. As you can see, these patterns are far too organized to have occurred naturally. It falls completely below the threshold of a normal medical scan. I doubt I would have ever found it if I hadn't known what to look for."

"But what is it?" B'Elanna asked.

"If I'm not mistaken," said the Doctor, "there is your so-called Touch. As to what the patterns mean, I couldn't even begin to speculate."

B'Elanna's face went ashen as she saw the image of her friend's DNA on the screen. "Are you saying...I have that in my body?"

"Let's find out," said the Doctor, as he typed in a new command. The view then shifted to a different genetic structure, one with a differing number of chromosomes, indicating a hybrid genome of two different species, that of B'Elanna's mixed heritage.

"I see it!" Tom called out as the image zoomed in. "The patterns look different, not like the ones in Harry at all. They look random, like they're garbled."

"The touch was tainted," echoed B'Elanna. "That's what Ozymandias said to me."

"Hmmm," said the Doctor, studying the image while scratching his chin thoughtfully. "I believe I recognize those surrounding genetic markers. They were used in the genetic therapy process I developed when I needed to integrate your DNA together after..." he then turned back towards his patient on the biobed with an embarrassed look on his face. "Well, after your unfortunate encounter with the Vidiians during our first year in the Delta Quadrant. I'm sure you remember that."

"Being split into my human and Klingon halves isn't something I'm likely to forget, Doctor," B'Elanna snapped at him. Drey moved over to B'Elanna and offered her a gentle smile of comfort. The engineer did not appear receptive.

"Strange," the Doctor commented. "I wasn't able to accurately date the age of those molecular patterns. But if the biological decay around those genetic markers is accurate, then I'd have to say that those encoded patterns had to have been put in place some time before your encounter with the Vidiians."

"Jeez, Doc," said Tom. "Do you think that maybe being split by the Vidiians was what caused those patterns to get scrambled in the first place?"

"That's very likely the case, Mr. Paris. If there was any useful information encoded in those molecular patterns, the transporter experiment would have most likely disrupted them." The Doctor then turned back towards B'Elanna. "Consider yourself fortunate, Lieutenant. If it hadn't been for the Vidiians, then it might well have been you the Sernaix would have taken instead of poor Mr. Kim."

"Yeah," said B'Elanna sourly. "Remind me to send the Vidiians a thank-you note."

"Well, I'm grateful, in any case," said Tom as he walked away from the monitor and back to his wife's side. "But that still doesn't tell us when this information was inserted there in the first place. If it happened before our encounter with the Vidiians, then it would have had to be during our first year in the Delta Quadrant."

"I just don't know," said B'Elanna. "I can't think of any away mission during that first year where it was just me and Harry, otherwise someone else would have gotten this divine love tap also. And I would have remembered running into anything that looked like a god. I mean, the only time Harry and I were even..." And her voice trailed off just as it came to her. "Of course!" she said as she bolted upright in the biobed, surprising poor Drey in the process.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" asked the Doctor. "Do you remember which mission it was?"

"Yes!" B'Elanna exclaimed. "It's the only thing that makes sense. The one mission that Harry and I were on together that first year. The first mission, before it officially even was a mission. Ocampal!"

"You mean..." Tom tried to say, but an elated B'Elanna finished it for him.

"I mean," she said, "the Caretaker is the God of the Sernaix!"

* * *

"You're the God of the Sernaix!" exclaimed Harry in disbelief.

But the old man still had that terrified look on his face. "How could you have known about them," he gasped. "They should be locked away in the Phase!"

"What do you know about them?" he demanded. "What's your connection with them?"

The Caretaker seemed to age even more and he bowed his head low. "It was a long time ago, long before I came to Ocampo. A very long time before that. Over a hundred thousand years ago..."

"You were in our galaxy before?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Oh yes," said the Caretaker. "The Nacene have visited this corner of the universe many times over the millennia. When my mate and I first explored your galaxy, well over 100,000 years ago, there were very few warp-capable species about. The Sernaix were just on the brink of moving out among the stars. They were a promising species, but my mate and I were shocked by how violent their culture was. We had been observing them from a distance for many centuries, you see, studying their development, but always maintaining a distance."

"Like the Prime Directive," Harry commented.

"Yes," said the old man. "We were both very idealistic at that time, not unlike your own species today. But my mate and I realized that if we sat by and did nothing, the Sernaix would sooner or later encounter other species. Their technology back then was crude, even more so than your own, but against a species without warp travel, they could do terrible things to them. But even so, after watching them for so long, we had grown rather fond of them. We wanted to see them grow into their full potential. And so, we decided to help them out."

"You did what?" Harry sputtered in alarm.

"We contacted them," said the old man matter-of-factly, "and offered to share with them a small fraction of our knowledge and experience, just enough to help them get by."

"You gave them technology?" Harry was stunned into disbelief that race as old as the Caretaker's could have done something that even humans had long ago learned was a foolish mistake. "Let me guess. They made you both their gods."

"We tried to explain to them that we weren't divine at all, but they just didn't understand. They could only see us through the lens of their own mythology. The God and the Goddess. Male and Female. Separate but together. We never even considered what the long-term impact might be. So my mate decided that the communication gap could be crossed by allowing them to communicate as the Nacene do, by direct biological interface."

"The bodyfields!" exclaimed Harry. "You gave them that ability?"

"That's how they knew you had encountered a Nacene, Harry. They can feel it. My mate taught our Sernaix friends a few biological tricks, such as how to alter their mitochondria DNA to generate biological fields, in order to facilitate a direct communication with their technology and each other. She believed that it was the best thing to do for them, that it would eliminate miscommunication and greater understanding between them."

“Let me guess,” said Harry. “She was wrong.”

The Caretaker nodded sadly. “We didn’t want to influence things any worse than we had. So we departed. We figured that the Sernaix could take things from there. Instead, they used our technology to carve out a brutal wave of expansion. Even if their ships weren’t quick enough, they had extreme physical prowess and were able to overthrow most of the backward cultures in the surrounding sectors. They acquired new technologies as they went, building a mighty empire for themselves. They even stole what was the beginnings of the frozen light technology they now use - and they had all this time to develop it to where it is now.”

“So you made them what they are today,” said Harry coldly. “You’re responsible.”

“I know, I know,” wailed the Caretaker. “But I tried to make it right. My mate and I knew that the Sernaix had to be contained, but someone was needed to watch over them. There was another race in that region of the galaxy, one that had been equal in development and technology to the Sernaix. But they were peaceful, spiritual beings. Against the wishes of my mate, I made contact with them. Once they understood what I was, I made them an offer. In exchange for new technology that would push them years beyond the Sernaix, they would agree to watch over them while the Sernaix and their empire was phased outside of normal space-time.”

“The Time Bubble,” Harry now understood. “It was you who created it. We just assumed that it was the Ayrethans who had...” But then he stopped in mid sentence, as all was becoming clear to him. “They were the race you cut the deal with, the ones you conned into serving as your watchdogs.”

“There was no deception involved, Harry,” said the Caretaker. “The Ayrethans entered into the bargain freely and with full knowledge of the consequences. They would have full control over the Phase and would be trusted to judge the Sernaix and release them when they felt the time was right.”

“So you just phased that whole part of the galaxy out of existence and you and your mate went on your merry way, washing your hands of the whole thing!” Harry stomped away, infuriated by this being’s frivolous misuse of his power and experience. For a being so ancient to be so blind to the consequences of his actions, especially considering that his current predicament was one of those consequences...

It reminded Harry about something Tom Paris had told him, something he had read in a 20th Century tale about mythical ‘superheroes.’ With great power comes great responsibility, according to the tale that Tom had told him. What a pity that the great and powerful Caretaker didn’t show a fraction of the wisdom of young Peter Parker.

He looked up from his pacing across the lawn to see the Caretaker standing before him, having magically shifted locations, belying his frail appearance. “Believe me, Harry, no one ever meant for any of this to happen. I always tried to do the right thing.”

“And thousands of years later, you make the same mistake again at Ocampa,” said Harry contemptuously. “Only that time you had to clean up your own mess. No one else around for you to dump the responsibility on, was there?”

The old man said nothing, his face anguished, bowing his head in shame.

“You gave me the same abilities your mate gave to the Sernaix,” said Harry.

“Yes,” said the old man. “To allow you to interface directly with the Array. It would have taught you everything you needed to know to access all the knowledge I gave to you. But if the Array is gone as you say it is, then you’ll have to learn how to access that knowledge on your own.”

"But the ability to interface with the Sernaix technology," said Harry, an idea forming in his mind. "You could show me how to do that right now, couldn't you?"

"I...suppose. But why?"

"To help me escape! Right now, the very people you helped create and then abandoned are threatening my people. If there's even the possibility that the knowledge you've given me can give us a fighting chance, then I have to get out there and share it."

"More killing," sighed the Caretaker. "More violence."

Harry's fists balled in fury as he stood within inches of the old man's face. "Listen to me! You owe me this! You said you always tried to do the right thing. Well, this is it!"

"But I'm just a recording," said the old man. "I'm not the real Caretaker."

"But you're here to answer my questions," said Harry. "So I'm asking you a question. How do I use the power you've given me to escape?"

"I..." the Caretaker slowly spoke. "I'll show you what to do."

* * *

Kathryn Janeway looked down in mock disgust at the blob of applesauce on her chest. The spoon-wielding culprit sat at the opposite end of the dinner table.

"I'm so sorry Captain!" B'Elanna lamented as she wrestled the spoon from her daughter.

"Let me help." Tom moved his napkin towards Janeway's left breast.

"No!" cried Janeway and B'Elanna in unison. Tom's hand froze as he realized what he was about to do.

"Here," said B'Elanna as she passed Miral to Tom. "You get her cleaned up and we'll fix this mess."

When Tom returned to the living room with a freshly dressed and diapered Miral, the women had moved to the sofa with fresh coffee in hand. He placed his little girl on the floor and pulled out the building blocks Chakotay had made. Once she was occupied he grabbed his own coffee and sat on the chair.

"Barton is more trouble than she's worth. I don't want her in Engineering," B'Elanna was saying. "That crack she made about me at the staff meeting was just way out of line!"

"I can hardly restrict the First Officer's movement just because you don't like her, B'Elanna," countered Janeway.

"How about for her own safety?" Tom jumped into the conversation. Kathryn shot him a questioning glance. "She's likely to get spaced! She has no people skills."

"Tom's got a point there," added B'Elanna. "Barton is always making condemnatory remarks about the Maquis. I'm sure she's doing it on purpose, trying to push us."

"Can't you get her transferred off Voyager?" asked Tom.

Janeway sighed. "No, I can't. The Admiralty assigned her. She says that she'll serve me to the best of her abilities, but the truth is she's here to keep tabs on me. I have no doubt that everything she sees on this ship is being written into a report for Admiral Warhol. If I had a choice, Chakotay would be here now, not Barton." Kathryn sank back into the sofa.

B'Elanna picked up the Captain's hand in her own. "I wish he were here too."

Miral had managed to crawl to the far side of the room. She looked back at the adults. They had not noticed her escape. Spurred on by a sense of impending freedom, she scurried the last few meters into the Captain's bedroom.

The bed was neatly made, the blanket pulled taught across the mattress. Miral reached up to clasp the blanket and pull herself up. Standing on wobbly feet, she looked around. On top of the dresser was a picture of Chakotay. "Totay! Want Totay!"

Miral looked back towards the living room, she expected an adult to appear and present her with the picture. She could hear the raised voices in the outer room, but no one came.

"Want Totay!" she demanded. Her tiny fists balled and her brow furrowed making her look the miniature of her mother.

She looked up at the picture, concentration evident on her face. The frame wobbled, threatened to topple, then stilled.

Miral took two steps closer to the dresser. She raised her hands up. The frame inched toward the edge then stopped moving. "Want Totay!" she said putting a fist on each hip. This time the picture lurched forward and fell to the floor with a thud.

Alerted by a noise in the other room, Kathryn and B'Elanna hurried to the bedroom where they found Miral holding Chakotay's picture.

"How on earth did you get that?" asked Kathryn as she scooped Miral into her arms.

"Totay," said Miral happily.

"Yes, that's Chakotay." B'Elanna laughed. "She misses him too."

"Let's put Chakotay back." Kathryn put the picture back on top of the dresser and handed Miral to B'Elanna. "I don't know how she managed to get it," said Kathryn looking around. "There's nothing for her to climb on."

"I don't know either," agreed B'Elanna. "She's been into everything in our cabin the past few days." B'Elanna, not giving the strange event another thought carried Miral out of the bedroom.

Kathryn shook her head once more in wonderment and followed them out.

* * *

Harry focused his mind, trying to imagine the boundary that separated his body from the rest of the universe melting away. As he did so, he felt that same tingling sensation that he remembered from that one incident months ago at Fulton Station.

"Yes," said the voice of the Caretaker, who was beginning to fade away as Harry's focus increased, reaching out past this internal hallucination and into the larger universe of the Sernaix habitat. "The technology the Sernaix currently has diverged greatly from what my mate and I gave

them so long ago. But at its heart, it operates along the same basic principles. Reach out and your body and mind will connect.”

“It...it’s starting to burn,” Harry groaned, feeling the tingle become an awkward, almost painful itch, which soon spread through his body like a warm bath. Then the heat became like a burning fire, threatening to consume him. “It hurts,” he cried out.

“Don’t be afraid, Harry,” the Caretaker’s aged voice called out to him. The barn and landscape had faded from his mind and into the recesses of Harry’s DNA patterns. “The pain isn’t real. Your nervous system isn’t used to this kind of stimulation without your senses to filter it out. Give yourself some time to adjust.”

“I may not have the time,” Harry called out to the darkness that Sycorax had imprisoned him in before. “I have to reach out...”

And then, a sharp jolt went through Harry’s body, like he had just stuck his finger into a live EPS power conduit. Bright light flared across his vision, blinding him with a glow of white noise. At first he thought it was the Caretaker and another of his hallucinations. But the burning throughout his body told him something different. The white light faded away, only to be replaced by...vastness.

There was no visual that could adequately describe the expanse that surrounded him. It was not just space, but infinite space, which seemed to go on forever. Harry was vaguely aware of the trillions of bubbles of different realities around him, of minds awakening to his presence, some curious, most not. All were separate, yet intimately connected at the same time.

“I know this place...” Harry gasped, feeling himself lost within the vastness. “This is The Realm. I’m connected to everything.” He then focused inward to seek out the Caretaker recording. “What do I do now?”

“Now, it’s up to you, Harry,” said the voice, fading ever so softly away. “I’ve shown you what I can. I’ve reached the limits of what I was created for. I don’t know this place. This is something the Sernaix created for themselves. But you’re connected to it now.”

“Will I...speak to you again?” Harry asked, feeling more than a bit lost in all this vastness.

“Probably not,” said the recording. “My purpose was just to show you the way. The Array was supposed to do the rest. With it gone, you’ll just have to get by on your own. Just use your gifts more wisely than I...my original did.”

“I’ll try my best,” he said, realizing just how lost he really felt.

“Take care, Harry Kim,” said the elderly voice, before fading away into a whisper, leaving Harry floating in the expanse of The Realm by himself.

Alone and silent, Harry tried to reach out, thinking of something familiar, something that was his own. But he could hear nothing. His only hope was that Ozymandias, or someone in Starfleet who could tap into Sernaix link frequencies, was seeking him out. He didn’t even know what to say. He had no idea where in the universe he was physically located, so he couldn’t give directions. All he could do was call for help, and just hope that someone would home in on him.

Harry softened his focus, and the expanse of The Realm retreated away from him. He felt his mind grow smaller as he retreated back into his body and...

His body! Harry looked around and saw that he was back in the spherical prison room that Sycorax had placed him. The sensory block that had isolated him was lifted. No, not lifted, he realized, but bypassed. He had severed the crude link that the Sernaix had crafted for him, he

noticed, as he glanced down at the grotesque link cables plugged into his arms and legs. With the link severed, Harry reached over, touching one the cables, dimly aware of their activity. He tugged at one cable protruding from a socket on his right forearm. At first it would not budge. Harry thought to force it, but feared what might happen if he did. Was the cable linked to his blood vessels? Would he bleed to death if he pulled it out?

No, his senses told him as he ran a finger along the cable length. The cables just linked into the socket. If he disengaged...

And with a single thought, the command was sent. There was a twist on the end of each cable, severing the connection. Each cable popped out of their respective sockets, leaving Harry free. With the cables loose, his pockmarked arms exhibited a dull ache accented by pinpoint lances of pain at each socket. Ignoring the pain, which unlike the one he felt from his bodyfield was very much real, he untied himself from the harness that suspended him, proceeding to let himself down.

* * *

The turbolift doors opened and Janeway stepped in. It was occupied. Seven of Nine stood off to the right looking tired and dejected.

"Captain," she acknowledged the senior officer's presence.

"Deck five" Janeway gave the computer instructions then faced the former Borg. "When was the last time you slept, Seven?"

"I am sufficiently regenerated to function optimally."

"Perhaps, but you look tired. Sometimes we need to take a break. A little downtime just for a few minutes can help clear your perspective."

Seven studied her former mentor, her eyes flashed momentarily. "Words I would expect to hear from Chakotay. I find it ironic to hear them from you, Captain." Seven watched the look of hurt flicker across Janeway's face and immediately felt regret.

"Sage advice doesn't become less so just because the person is absent." Kathryn took a deep breath and reminded herself to stay objective. Seven was hurting and sometimes people lash out when wounded. "Have you eaten recently, Seven?"

"I do not require nutrients at this time."

"Well I do and I would like you to join me." The turbolift came to a stop. Janeway linked her arm through Seven's and pulled. "Come." They traipsed the distance to the Captain's quarters in silence.

Seven moved her food around the plate with her fork. She looked up as Janeway spoke. "We both have the same problem, you know. Perhaps we can help each other."

"I do not understand."

"Friendship is a precious commodity, Seven. Sometimes we take that for granted when our friends are close at hand, but in their absence the true gift of companionship is felt most emphatically."

Seven raised her eyebrow in consideration. "I believe the old Earth saying is absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Yes," agreed Kathryn.

"You miss Commander Chakotay."

"I was not referring to my situation, Seven. And yes, I do miss Chakotay more than I am capable of expressing. I feel like I'm incomplete without him by my side. But I was more concerned about you. I think you are missing Harry much the same way I do Chakotay."

"I do not like these emotions. I am concerned my judgment is clouded by my desire to see Harry's safe return." Seven pushed the plate away from her. Finally giving up on the pretense of eating. "I have lost friends before but this is different. I was not afflicted with these human emotions." Seven spat the last words out in distaste.

Its called love, thought Kathryn.

"You have lost people you care about. Is this why you kept a distance between yourself and Commander Chakotay while on Voyager, Captain?"

Kathryn felt they were venturing onto thin ice. Seven and Chakotay's brief fling had hurt her. She did not want any reminders of that old wound. Nor did she want to revisit what could have been.

"No, Seven, there were other considerations." She shook her head. "The challenge is to not let your anxiety about Harry control you. You need to find a balance. It is important to acknowledge your feelings. Locking them away from the light of day can do more damage than shedding a few tears. I just wanted you to know I'm here if you want a shoulder to lean on." Kathryn leaned forward and placed her hand on top of Seven's.

"Thank you, Captain," said Seven looking up at Janeway. "I have missed these talks that we once had. It will be good to return to our prior candid relationship. I have felt so alone these past few days."

"Oh, Seven," said Janeway as she squeezed the young woman's hand. "You were never alone."

The chime of Kathryn's combadge interrupted the gentle conversation. "Vorik to Captain Janeway."

"Janeway here."

"Captain, forgive the intrusion, but Ozymandias was most insistent that you and Seven of Nine be reached."

"Why?" asked a concerned Seven. "What is so urgent that demands our immediate attention?"

"It would appear," said the Vulcan officer over the intercom, "that Ozymandias has detected a distress call from Lieutenant Kim. He is indeed aboard the Sernaix habitat. And he is calling for help."

* * *

"Adimha," the Habitat Mind reported to its mistress. "I have lost all connection to the human subject in the interrogation chamber."

"Lost all connection?" Sycorax lifted her head from her private observations of the hunt for Janeway's ship. "Are you saying that the human is dead?"

"I am saying that there is no link to him anymore. The reasons are unknown."

"Then find out what's wrong!" Sycorax bellowed at the open air. "Send two drones to take a look. It may just be problems with the link apparatus."

"Yes, Adimha."

The massive Sernaix snorted disgustedly. "I don't see why I need to give you instructions on this. Have you become bored servicing my habitat already?"

"I must admit that I am no longer finding interacting with the physical world to be rewarding as I once did, Adimha. I believe that I will migrate to The Realm when my contract has expired."

"So be it!" she snapped in disgust. "Just have those drones fix the problem. It's not as if he was actually able to escape."

* * *

Harry's feet touched the smooth glassy floor, causing the pain in his legs to shoot up through to his back. The fact that the spherical room was made of that nearly frictionless glassy coating made the situation even worse, as it was barely possible for him to stand.

He considered the possibility of climbing back up the harness that was elevated towards the center of the chamber, and then grabbing one of the cables to swing across to one of the exits. But his limbs ached too badly - he doubted that he would have the strength to do it.

At that point, one of the exit ports dilated open and Harry heard the clicky-clack of hundreds of spiny legs march into the room. Two servo drones trudged inside, each one looking like a bio-metallic sea urchin. The two immediately focused their sensors on Harry and darted towards him. He held up his hands to protect his face, fearing the rending spikes at the tip of each of the tiny arms. But before they could attack, the two stopped dead in their tracks and paused as if they were waiting for something.

Harry's body was still tingling, as he realized that he was still unconsciously projecting a bodyfield. The two drones were no doubt responding to it, possibly believing that he might be a Sernaix himself. Taking advantage of the situation, Harry considered the idea. He noticed how the two servos were easily able to navigate the curved slippery slope of the walls. Perhaps he could take advantage of that. On a complete whim, he reached out and enveloped his arms around each of the two drones. Trying to visualize the exit and projecting it outwards from his body, the servos went into motion, dragging him up along the sides of the sphere. His arms lanced out in pain, especially at the sensation of the spiny limbs playing and resonating against his tender limbs. But it was worth enduring. What amazed Harry was that as yet there was no alarm sounding, nor were there any security guards showing up. Other than the two servos, it didn't appear that anyone in this facility knew he had gotten loose.

Now he just needed to find his way out, steal a ship, and then miraculously know which heading to navigate towards home.

Not a challenge at all, he thought sardonically.

* * *

"Captain on the bridge!" Tom announced, as Janeway stepped from the turbolift and made towards her command chair. As expected, Commander Barton was already in her seat. Somehow she always managed to arrive before her, she thought.

“Report,” she said to Tuvok, while her eyes were focused on the viewscreen and the eerie green tunnel of the transwarp conduit they were traveling through.

“We are some fifty light years from the coordinates provided by Ozymandias, just outside of the habitat’s sensor range,” Tuvok stated. “Preparing to exit from transwarp.”

Janeway nodded and turned to Tom at the helm. “Mr. Paris, we exit on my mark. As soon as we make the transition, engage the cloaking device.” There was a part of her that didn’t feel entirely right about that. Years of habit and training had reinforced in her mind that Starfleet vessels didn’t sneak around like Romulans, that when it came to a fight, they fought fair and up front. But in war, idealism was sadly the first thing to be sacrificed. And the Judge Advocate General’s office claimed that Voyager’s cloaking system did not technically constitute a violation of the Treaty of Algeron, as it was based on entirely different principles borrowed from the Sernaix, rather than those used by the Romulans. Even so, it made her feel dirty to give the order.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Tom.

“Will we be going at standard warp the rest of the way to this fortress we’re attacking?” asked Barton pointedly. “Even cloaked, there’s a risk the Sernaix sensors could spot the resonance patterns of our warp fields. Those fifty light years could turn out to be one dangerous haul.”

“We won’t be using conventional warp, Commander,” Janeway announced. “As soon as we’re cloaked and our weapons are deployed, we’ll be flying the rest of the way via quantum slipstream.”

All eyes turned to her in surprise. Even Barton’s hardened detached expression seemed uncharacteristically nonplussed. Slipstream was something one used to span vast spans of several thousand light years in reasonable time periods. But a cosmically tiny hop of fifty light years? “Captain,” Tuvok spoke up, his tone showing subtle concern, “considering how little experience we have with piloting vessels in slipstream, will we be able to navigate at such extreme velocities over such a relatively short distance?”

“It’s a risk, I’ll grant you,” said Janeway. “But we’ll be taking an even bigger risk trudging along at regular warp in the middle of hostile territory while there are hundreds of Sernaix ships out there hunting for us. Our best hope of rescuing Harry is to take Sycorax by surprise before fifty pack ships show up to defend her.”

“Captain,” said Tom, “I trained with hundreds of hours of slipstream flight simulations during our trip in the Delta Quadrant. If this ship can hold together better than the old Voyager, then I think I can get her to stop on a dime for you.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” said Kathryn with a proud smile. The crew around her seemed determined. It was a risk, but they would make it work if she asked them to.

This, she thought triumphantly in Commander Barton’s direction, was what family was all about.

* * *

“He what?” Sycorax shouted out as she floated in her comfortable virtual simulation of Nesaqa once again, bobbing up and down in the gentle sea currents.

“The human has escaped, Adimha,” the Habitat Mind reported. “He is no longer in the interrogation chamber. I am currently attempting to locate him.”

“Attempting?” she sputtered, as she conjured up a schematic of her habitat in front of her, showing the breakdown of the corridors and chambers within. “How can you not know where he is?”

“He is masking my sensors in the corridor outside the spinward quad of the habitat. I cannot explain how he does this. My attempts to dispatch servos to intercept him have not succeeded. The servos do not report back.”

“That’s impossible! How can a mere human have gotten loose from his linkage and wander the halls freely? Send more servos to sequester him! Call in pack support for the search! If I have to have males tromping through my halls, then so be it! But I want that human found alive and...”

“Adimha,” the Mind interrupted her. “I have a sensor contact outside of the habitat. They are currently engaging your security force.” Sycorax spun around as her viewscape shifted to reveal an exterior tactical grid. A new ship had emerged from slipstream, completely undetected, and was rapidly decelerating just fifty thousand kilometers away.

“Voyager!” she spat, as she saw the ship magnified before her. She studied this new vessel with its recognizable Sernaix influences and her weapon assemblies extended. “Arm all exterior defenses!”

“Adimha, we are being hailed,” the Mind reported blandly. An image popped into the middle of the viewscape, that of a sickly-looking human woman, Janeway herself.

“This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the starship Voyager,” the human announced herself proudly. “I presume that I have the honor of addressing Adimha Sycorax? You have taken one of my officers. I’ve come to take him back. I know that he’s aboard your station. Lower your shields and allow me to transport him over.”

Sycorax dropped her heavy jaw in astonishment. For millennia, the Sernaix had been the uncontested masters of their pocket universe, causing weaker races to tremble in fear of them. And this twig of a female in her rickety starship was making threats to her? Unbelievable! This sort of bravado might have amused males, but the Adimha of the Management Cadre was most certainly not.

“You dare come to my domain and speak to me as though you were my equal?” Sycorax yelled back at her. “You are nothing, Janeway! And you will receive nothing from me!”

Janeway appeared unmoved by her words. “Adimha, we’ve faced down bigger bullies than you and your attack dogs. If you don’t lower your shields, then we will come for our man, and we won’t be in a good mood when we do.”

Infuriated, Sycorax immediately severed the transmission. She turned to address the Habitat Mind. “How close are the nearest pack ships?”

“There are six who appear to have detected Voyager’s deceleration and are now changing course to intercept.”

“Put them on tactical!” she commanded. Sycorax smiled with glee at the sight of six red marks moving sharply towards their position. Soon they would make short work of Janeway and her ship. But before that happened...”

“Find Harry Kim,” she ordered. “Assuming Voyager is still in one piece when we are done with him, be certain to transport his remains over to them.”

“As you wish, Adimha.”

* * *

“Fire the tachyon canons,” commanded Captain Janeway, as the bridge went abuzz with activity, as the ship came under attack while the Red Alert klaxon blared in the background.

The starship Voyager, her slipstream spikes unfurled, let loose a barrage of bright blue bolts of energized tachyons at the attacking Sernaix scout. The impact temporarily weakened its shielding, long enough for the next phase of the attack.

“Quantum torpedoes away, captain,” said the tactical officer, as a spread of energy projectiles struck the confused smaller ship, inflicting significant damage on the hull.

“Their condensate hull is destabilizing in three sections,” Sam Wildman announced from the Science station.

“Fire again,” Janeway commanded. “Target the weakened areas. Type-II phased beams at maximum.”

The bridge cheered as their newly enhanced weaponry targeted the crippled scout, rupturing the photonic hull material, and releasing a destabilizing energy discharge that overwhelmed the entire ship. Their first successful solo engagement against a Sernaix ship, thought Janeway proudly. The enemy had proved to be vulnerable after all.

But a bright flash of energy on the viewscreen disrupted the celebratory moment. “The habitat is firing. Polyphasic torpedoes incoming at three mark two and closing.”

“Evasive maneuvers,” Janeway commanded.

“Captain,” said Lieutenant Kruger from the Stellar Cartography station. “I’m detecting six slipstream displacement waves emerging at two zero mark five.”

“Reinforcements,” Tom observed wryly, as he tried to dodge the volume of fire coming from the ominous-looking space habitat.

“Let’s not stay around longer than we have to,” said Janeway. She turned over to the science station. “Sam, do you have a fix on Harry yet?”

“I’m deploying the new Sernaix sensors, Captain,” the lieutenant said. “It’s nice to be able to finally see inside of these things.”

“Do you have him?”

“I’m getting two organic life forms,” said Sam.

Only two, Janeway thought with surprise. The habitat had to measure well over two kilometers across. By Federation standards, it was odd to think that such a huge structure would be built solely to serve as someone’s private home, even if it were completely automated. But then the Sernaix population was spread very thin, and they didn’t form communities in the human sense of the word.

“One is definitely Sernaix,” Sam Wildman continued. “The other...it’s Harry! He’s on board and he’s alive!”

“Thank god for that,” exclaimed Janeway. “Can we beam him off of there?”

"Their shields are up, Captain," reported Lieutenant Tyrell from Ops. "Transporters can't touch him while they're shielded."

"Captain, the six Sernaix vessels are closing," Tuvok said. "I'm reading two battleships and four scouts. They are arming their weapons."

"Prepare to engage," Janeway commanded. "We have to punch a hole through the habitat's shields if we can. In the meantime, we hold off the attackers as long as possible."

"Six ships?" said Tom. "Easier said than done. I can do evasive maneuvers for only so long."

Then an unexpected voice piped up among the chaos. "You might try launching a quantum torpedo barrage in a delta pattern," said Commander Barton, "then as they split off fire a high volume beam spread along both axes of approach."

Janeway spun to her left in surprise as she took in Barton's advice. Was her executive officer, after creating so much discord this entire mission, actually trying to suggest something helpful? "I'm listening," said Kathryn.

Barton glanced over, her expression cool and collected. "The Sernaix are following an attack strategy similar to one used by the Breen during the Dominion War. According to the physics of such a high velocity approach, there are only a limited number of vectors they have available once their formation splits in two. Use the torpedoes to drive a wedge between them..."

"And then fire the tachyon beams once they're lined up," said Janeway, finishing her thought, reluctantly impressed by her tactical knowledge. "Commander, I thought you were opposed to the idea of this mission."

"I still am," replied Barton smugly. "But even so, I certainly don't want to die out here."

Janeway nodded, still not liking her first officer, but at least acknowledging that she could be worked with. "Mr. Tuvok, launch quantum torpedoes as per Commander Barton's directives." There was no guarantee this would stop the enemy, but at least it would slow them down.

"Firing," said Tuvok, as the viewscreen showed the torpedoes being fired. As predicted, the attack wing split in two to avoid the wedge-shaped launch spread. As they split, the twin phased beams emitted from Voyager's phaser arrays targeted the lead ships. The one on the left - a battleship - rumbled under the impact as her photonic hull released a violet flash, signifying impact. The right vessel - the scout - took a much harder hit as it flared over most of the hull and spun about. The remaining ships had to quickly veer off to avoid a high-speed collision.

Yet again, another victory, Janeway thought proudly. The tide was turning their way.

Then the turbo lift doors opened and Seven of Nine stepped on to the bridge. Her face showed worry, but also a determination, and the possibility of hope.

"Seven, I thought you were in Engineering," said Janeway.

"Lieutenant Torres and Ozymandias have matters well in hand," said the former drone. "Is Harry...?"

"He's alive and on the habitat," said Janeway. "But we're going to have to expend a lot of firepower to bring their shields down."

“Precisely what I wish to discuss,” said Seven. “I believe I know a way to accomplish just that. Perhaps it is time we finally demonstrate to the Sernaix how we have improved upon the Kep'Tak'Nel.”

* * *

Harry was sweating, the burning and itching spreading all throughout his body. He didn't know how long he had been continuously running his bodyfield, but the effort was wearing him down. He was desperate for food, drink, sleep, or just plain anything. Only adrenaline and a desire to escape kept him fueled.

He ran the corridors of the empty habitat, staying ahead of the scuffling of servo drones. He remembered how the corridors of Sernaix facilities seemed to wind about without any rhyme or direction. But this time, things were different. With his bodyfield active, Harry could see things that had been invisible to him during his away mission aboard Ozymandias' ship so many months ago. Control pads floating over the walls, rotating directional icons, abstract images that appeared to Harry's eyes as works of art, all standing out in vibrant color against the dark, smooth curved walls lit by harsh neon light.

For a brief second, he wondered if Seven, with her enhanced vision, would have been able to appreciate any of this. Thinking about her only made his desire to escape that much stronger. Could the two of them have a future together? Who could say? But it was a possible future worth exploring, one that caused his heart to race at the thought of being with her again.

Glancing at the information-rich environment hovering around him, Harry tried to see if he could interpret any of it. Sycorax had left him his combadge with its built-in universal translator, figuring that there was no one around who could home in on it. Seeing the flood of data that lined the walls, he wondered how the Sernaix were able to filter out such a glut of information. Like all things, it would be a skill that he would have to learn over time. Accessing it carefully, Harry could see that much of it was irrelevant, dealing with readouts concerning the status of the habitat, news from around The Realm, medical data from Sycorax, and so forth. None of it seemed particularly well organized or specialized to him, but then he probably didn't know how to read or access it properly.

As he focused, one bit of pertinent information became available to him. Voyager! She was here, in a pitched battle just a short distance outside. If only he could contact them, tell them that he was still alive. But his thoughts were interrupted by the shuffling noises of dozens of multi-armed servos coming up from behind him. Harry tried to...well, whatever he did before. But they were no longer swayed or fooled by his bodyfield projection. Sycorax was on to him and was coming to collect him. He tried to run around the bend of the corridor, but stopped short when he saw the passageway closing up, forming a dead end.

From both sides she had cut him off, forcing him back towards a sharp bend in the hall." The toll of the bodyfield made him weaker and more exhausted, until finally he collapsed to his knees, trying to breathe and ignore the aches and burning that permeated his body. Harry Kim was near his physical limits.

As the servo drones merged around him in a menacing circle, a few of them began to glow from the tips of their limbs. A holographic projection field was generated in mid air above them, shifting into focus, until the smug and satisfied face of Sycorax appeared before him.

“Did you really think you could run from me, boy?” she sneered at him. “Where would you go? Where could you hide? This habitat, everything you see, is an extension of my will.”

“That doesn't include me!” Harry cried out defiantly. “I'm nobody's puppet anymore!”

“Oh, it especially includes you,” she added cruelly. “I don’t know how you removed yourself from the link, but you won’t be escaping a second time. Now don’t force me to direct the servos to hurt you, Harry. I can make your death very painful. If you come submissively, I will make certain that the neural scan is quick and without any sensory input of pain.”

Then Harry’s fists tightened and his jaw clenched in fury. He thought of nothing but pain, to get back some of the dignity that this sadistic monster had taken from him. He remembered his time aboard the prison ship of the Akritiria, and the pain implants they had given to him and Tom for the express purpose of driving them insane. It had been the most intense sensation of pain he had ever felt. He called up his most intense memory of that enduring agony, and focused into a sharp mental lightning bolt, and looked up at the holographic face with fierce resolve.

“That’s the thing about The Realm,” he said fiercely. “Everything is possible!” He then quickly reached out to two of the nearest servos and clutched a dozen of their spindly arms below their sharp tips. “And everything’s connected!” And with that, he let loose his memory of pain, and shared it via his bodyfield back to Sycorax using his last ounce of strength.

The bloated tyrant screeched an inhuman whelp of pain, her holographic image briefly flickering before regaining its resolution. As she recomposed herself, Harry was on the verge of passing out. But he had enough energy to look up and see the flames of fury in her eyes as she stared downward, rendering her judgment.

“Vile little rodent!” she hissed at him. “First I slice you, then I scan you! Your dying agony will be my...”

But a chirp from Harry’s combadge silenced her in mid sentence. “Harry, grab hold of something,” came the sweet voice of Seven of Nine.

And the entire universe shook just before Harry Kim passed out.

* * *

“Fire again!” Janeway ordered.

And the Kep Cannon, the Federation-improved version of the Sernaix Kep’Tak’Nel weapon and the mightiest weapon in Voyager’s arsenal, fired a bright beam of radiance toward the Sernaix habitat, closely followed by three quantum torpedoes. The structure was armored well enough to stand up to the repeated impacts without taking significant damage. But it was just enough to disrupt the shielding over part of the habitat, long enough for Voyager to lock on to Harry’s combadge and initiate transport.

As Sycorax lashed out with the combined fury of thousands of sharpened servo limb blades, there was nothing left there to dice.

* * *

“Transport successful,” reported the Doctor over the intercom. “He’s unconscious, but alive. I’ll start work on him right away.”

Both Janeway and Seven looked at each other with expressions of relief and gratitude. But the respite was short lived as the Red Alert sirens wailed.

“Captain,” said Tuvok. “The four undamaged Sernaix ships are grouping for another pass at zero mark zero two.”

"I have an energy signature!" Lieutenant Wildman called out. "The habitat is arming her Kep cannons!"

"They're locking on target," announced Tyrell.

Janeway thought fiercely as she focused on the viewscreen, showing the aft view of the four attack ships, a single battleship escorted by three scouts. "Mr. Paris, set course at zero mark zero two, warp nine. Stand by to jump to transwarp."

"Ma'am?" Tom looked up in bewilderment as he punched in the new heading. "That's practically a collision course with our attackers."

"Zero mark zero two, Lieutenant," she repeated firmly. "Prepare to open a conduit on my command."

"The habitat is preparing to fire!" Sam shouted. "They're sending out a spread of polyphasic torpedoes."

"Zero mark zero two and closing," Tom reported. "We're at warp nine."

"Battleship is locking on," said Tuvok, loud but steady.

Janeway waited just a fraction of a second, and then, when the moment was right, she gave the order. "Tom! Transwarp now!"

It took less than a second, but as the habitat fired its mighty Kep cannons and torpedo spread, the intended target disappeared into a twisted green tunnel into the depths of transwarp space. Instead, the volley of weapons fire ran straight into the oncoming attack fleet. Two of the scouts managed to veer off their approach vector in time, but the third was not as fortunate, impacting against one of the torpedoes. The battleship took the full blast of one of the Kep'Tak'Nel beams and shattered in a violet flash of sparks and energy.

* * *

Sycorax floated in her observation bubble, her mind a seething cauldron of fury and rage. She had been beaten, made to look like a fool here in the heart of The Realm itself. Her plans, oh so carefully laid out, were beginning to unravel. Word of Voyager's improbable victory had spread throughout The Realm to all the packs. It was growing into a legend, with the rescue of the Touched One and the accompanying battle growing more exaggerated with each retelling. And each retelling made Janeway out to be ever larger than life, while her own stature grew more diminished. If there was one thing that males loved more than fighting, she thought disgustedly, it was a good story.

Earth, the Federation, and the Enemy were all of secondary priority. The hunt for Voyager was now of primary importance to the packs, who now wanted to take on and defeat the legendary starship that had bested the Adimha of the Management Cadre. That there would be no rest for Janeway was of small comfort to Sycorax, who had suffered a humiliating loss of face in the process. The formidable aura of invincibility she had woven these many years had been dispelled. She would be weakened now, and those who sought her power would take advantage of the situation. She would fight back, of course, and she would win. But it would take time to rebuild what was lost.

How had it happened? It was all the fault of that human Harry Kim, she swore internally, and his mysterious knowledge. Somehow he had managed to exploit it for his own benefit, and in doing so had distracted her, just at the moment when ultimate knowledge and power could have been hers.

She would not let the packs get to them first, she pledged. She would find Voyager herself if she could. And the results would be seen all throughout The Realm. Then they would fear her, as they never had before.

* * *

Harry groaned as he stirred slowly back to consciousness. His body ached all over, though not quite the same way that it did before.

"Take it slowly, buddy," he heard a friendly familiar voice as his eyes regained their focus and adjusted to the lights around him. "You've had a rough couple of days."

"T-Tom?" Harry strained to speak. "W-where...?"

"You're on Voyager, Harry," said Captain Janeway. "And we're all glad to have you with us again." Harry awoke fully, to see Janeway, the Doctor, and more Starfleet personnel scurrying about. Tom and B'Elanna were there, and in Starfleet uniforms to boot.

"Voyager?" he said in confusion. "H-how? I thought...I...Tom, how did you and B'Elanna...?"

"There have been several changes since you were taken, Harry," said a throaty and lovely voice next to B'Elanna, that of Seven of Nine. His heart skipped a beat as he saw her, and he could not help but smile, even if it did make his face muscles ache.

"Seven, I..." he tried to sit up, but his body ached all over when he tried.

"Now, now, Lieutenant," cautioned the Doctor. "You've been through quite an ordeal as it is. Your body needs time to heal. We managed to remove those neural sockets the Sernaix implanted in you, not to mention restoring your nutrient levels. You were nearly starved and dehydrated when we found you." He then leaned in and smiled mischievously. "But not to worry, Mr. Kim," he continued. "I'm sure you'll be in good health soon enough, at least until the next time you end up in Sick Bay."

"Uh, thanks, Doc," he said. He then slowly looked about the room, gauging his location. "Say, this is the new ship, isn't it?"

"The new Voyager," said Tom proudly. "She still has a few bugs that need shaking out, but she's still a pretty sweet piece of work."

"We'll all be glad to show you around, once you're up and about," said B'Elanna.

"I...I just...thanks, all of you," said Harry. "I mean...I can't believe you all came together just to come after me."

"A captain never leaves one of her crew behind," Janeway said warmly. "Especially when they're family."

Harry smiled at the captain's words as he looked on at these people who had been such a large part of his life. Yes, he thought, that's exactly what they were. Family.

"Captain, I..." he tried to speak. "There's so much to tell you. What happened to me on that..."

"Take it easy, Lieutenant," said Kathryn with a smile. "Save your strength. There'll be plenty of time for you to make your report when you're well. You just concentrate on healing in the meantime."

At that moment, someone entered into Sick Bay, someone in a command uniform that Harry did not immediately recognize. "Pardon me, Captain," said Commander Barton as she handed Janeway a PADD. "Here are the latest sensor reports on Sernaix sightings."

As Janeway took the tablet and glanced it over, Harry sat up and stared at the dark haired woman. Somehow he had known her from somewhere...

But the new face beat him to the punch, turning to him and addressing him. "Mr. Kim. Welcome back. Your crew went to a lot of trouble to find you. I'm looking forward to seeing if you're worth the effort."

And then he remembered the voice. It was all a daze to him, but he was certain that he had heard her before, back on Fulton Station during the crisis with Ozymandias' emergence. And he distinctly remembered hearing something about 'no witnesses.'

"Ma'am," said Harry tentatively to Barton, "I think we've...met before."

"That's right, Fulton Station," said the first officer, one step ahead of him. "You were in quite a state when my team tried to rescue you. I'm surprised you were able to hear anything at all. With those EM grenades going off, your senses must have been playing all kinds of tricks on you." And with a parting smile that sent shivers down his spine, Commander Barton turned on her heel and left.

"Excuse me, Captain," said the Doctor, looking somewhat uncomfortable. "But there are some things we need to discuss. Not to mention that Mr. Kim needs to catch up on his rest."

"Quite right, Doctor," said Janeway. "Harry, I'll be back later to check in on you."

As the hologram gestured for everyone to leave, Seven of Nine looked at him with some urgency. "Doctor, would it be permissible for me to remain with Harry for a short time. There are some...personal matters...that need to be discussed."

The Doctor smiled affectionately at his young former protégé, unable to resist her innocent request. "Very well, Seven. Just a few minutes, mind you. Mr. Kim does need his rest."

"Yeah, so don't go tiring him out," Tom said with a chuckle as he exited, before being silenced by a warning glare from B'Elanna.

As the two were left alone, Seven came closer to Harry, kneeling beside the biobed in order to be closer to him. "I was worried for you, Harry Kim."

"And I..." Harry tried to say, fighting his own exhaustion, just to spend a few more minutes with this wonderful woman. "All I could think about...while I was held captive...was getting back to you."

Seven blushed at hearing his words. Instinctively, she reached out her Borg-enhanced hand and ran it along his cheek, feeling his warmth. For a second, she was concerned that he might be repelled by such an obvious display of her unique nature. But rather than disgust, Harry seemed genuinely taken by her show of affection, and reached up to caress her hand with his own.

"I must admit, Harry, that at times during your disappearance, I questioned the wisdom of forming emotional attachments to another. I feared the consequences of becoming emotionally damaged. These new feelings are intimidating at times for me."

"I understand," he said, his voice soft and gentle. "They can be frightening for most of us, Seven."

“As I have observed,” she added. “I have come to see that my fear of loss should not keep me from exploring my potential for happiness.”

“I feel the same way,” Harry grinned at the lovely blonde woman, his smile mirrored in her crystal blue eyes as she was drawn closer to him. Even though it taxed his muscles, he didn’t care. When she was near him, he felt lighter, more energized. “I want this to work for us, Seven,” he said, “I’ll...take things as slow as you feel comfortable.” He paused, trying to breath in, finding the strength to speak. “It took...four years for us to get... to this point. Wonderful things...like this...are worth the wait.”

And with that, the he lifted his lips up to meet hers. His hands stroked her cheek drawing her closer to him, while she cradled the back of his head to support him. Her kiss was like a jolt of electricity, a connection to another more vital than anything he had sensed while joined to The Realm.

Ever so slowly, the two of them parted. Her cheeks were flushed with warmth as Harry’s breathing was rushed with excitement. But then fear came across him. What right did he have to drag Seven into the confusion his life had become, considering everything the Caretaker had revealed to him about who he now was?

His face strained as he tried to speak. He was so very tired, but he needed to tell her the truth. “Seven, there’s something... you have to know. I...that is, something happened to me out there. I’m...changed, Seven. I don’t know...what that’s going to mean for me, or for us.”

Seven of Nine leaned close to Harry, almost to the point where he could feel the warmth of her breath upon his face. It was a wonderful sensation, one that he hoped he would experience many times to come. “Harry, you need not be afraid. In all the areas that are relevant, you have not changed, nor can you be changed. And as for any difficulties that are to come, know that you will not face them alone. You stood with me as my friend and colleague during my transition into humanity. I will stand with you, Harry Kim, in whatever manner the future unfolds.”

And in that moment, at least between two young lovers, all things were truly connected.

* * *

Outside of Sick Bay in the corridor, the Doctor looked anxious as he spoke with his captain. Tom and B’Elanna were there beside her, their expressions reflecting Kathryn Janeway’s own alarm.

“Doctor,” said Janeway, “are you absolutely certain about this?”

“I wish that I weren’t, Captain,” said the hologram regretfully. “But the data from my genetic analysis is quite clear. Whatever happened to Mr. Kim during his captivity has induced a series of remarkable physiological changes in his body. The molecular patterns inscribed onto his DNA have now begun issuing new instructions to the proteins in his cellular make-up. The structures of his cellular mitochondria have been completely reworked. They’re doing things that no human cells should be capable of. Not to mention that there are now three extra base pairs becoming apparent within his genome. I wouldn’t be surprised if this was a contributing factor to the metabolically exhausted state we found him in.”

“But is he...healthy?” asked B’Elanna, her expression one of growing alarm. “Is he in any sort of immediate danger?”

“It doesn’t appear that way, Lieutenant. But considering that I’ve never seen a condition quite like this before in a human being, I can’t make any promises. If I were you, captain, I’d be very interested in what Mr. Kim has to say about his experiences aboard that habitat.”

“What about B’Elanna?” Tom asked anxiously. “Is she at any risk of becoming...like Harry?”

“I don’t think so,” said the Doctor. “As I indicated before, the molecular information in her DNA was irreparably unraveled. I think there’s little risk of any coherent information being found there anymore.”

“But for Harry?” asked Kathryn. “Bottom line, Doctor. Will he be well enough to be completely whole again?”

The Doctor took a deep sigh of regret before answering. “Bottom line, Captain? Once he gets his strength back I see no reason for him not to return to his duties. His health is not the issue.”

“Then what is?” she asked.

“The issue, captain,” said the Doctor grimly, “is that from a strictly genetic standpoint, Harry Kim is no longer entirely human anymore.”

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