



Episode 9-2 - Connections

By: Eydie Munroe
(eydiemunroe@hotmail.com)

Commander Tamarek sat back in the command chair of his warbird, a sardonic smile gracing his face.

The high command had told him his latest endeavor was foolish. They argued that he was deliberately trying to create an incident. It went against the current movement. Anything to get him to change his mind. But he didn't care. The movement meant nothing to him, or to any of his followers. As far as he was concerned, the teachings of Ambassador Spock were simply the ramblings of an old man - a half-breed Vulcan who let his human emotions overrun his good sense.

Though the government didn't know it yet, the commander did indeed have a plan. One that would bring him great glory, and hopefully alter the balance of power in the quadrant for some time to come.

His helmsman broke his introspection when he called, "Commander, we have reached the border."

Tamarek took the opportunity to stretch his legs, and rose from the chair as he ordered, "Drop to sublight speed."

The streaking stars that had previously filled the main screen jumped back into the distance, indicating their drop from warp. The commander clasped his hands behind his back, wishing to hide the adolescent rush of excitement that now filled him. "Full sensor sweep," he called out. "I want to know where that ship is."

A flurry of activity ran through the bridge crew as they carried out his orders. He started to pace, yet another outward sign of his anticipation. He was going to make this mission a success. Success here ensured better access to more powerful contacts back on Romulus. With luck and good planning, he would have his operation running at peak efficiency within three months.

"I have it, Commander," the helmsman finally responded. "Distance sixteen light years, traveling away from us at sublight speed." He paused as he considered his readouts, then concluded, "They have suffered a great deal of damage."

Tamarek grinned again. "Excellent." He returned to his seat, once again settling in against the worn leather. "What is the status of our cloak?"

From behind him his engineer called, "Cloaking shield is operating at peak efficiency, Commander."

He steepled his fingers together below his chin as he drew a deep breath. The apex of all his planning, arguing and persuasion was about to pay off. "Helmsman, set course for..."

“Commander!” The tactical officer turned away from his station, his face an unusual pallor. He was one of the only people that knew the true nature of their mission, and he knew that the news he now bore was not going to bode well with their commander. “An unidentified ship has just appeared off our port side.”

Tamarek spun around. “What?”

The slight shimmer of blackness was all that appeared, but its composition had been altered so that the primitives’ sensor devices would be able to perceive it. A bright blast of light sliced through the vacuum, followed by the quickly extinguished explosion of the warbird as it disintegrated.

The leader of the enlightenment perished with his ideas shared, but unfulfilled.

* * *

Captain’s Log: Stardate 56342.6

After our successful retrieval of Lieutenant Kim, we’ve just made it back inside the Federation border. At Ozymandias’ request, we’ve dropped from slipstream velocity to impulse. He requested this change in speed as he wished to concentrate all his efforts on assisting B’Elanna and Seven with repairs. We took on some heavy damage during our last fight with the Sernaix. My only concern is that we may be left vulnerable in case another Sernaix pack finds us. But despite that, our new Voyager has exceeded nearly all expectations.

Kathryn leaned back in her chair as the computer confirmed the entry to her log, and the movement of her head was immediately rewarded with another sharp pound from her headache. She let out a small groan as she tried to massage the knotted muscles at the back of her neck, soon finding that she was having very little success. It didn’t take her mind long to drift back to the memory of the most intense massage she had ever received, one that was significant in her life for so many reasons.

She sighed. Chakotay seemed so far away now. She had no idea where the Logan was, only that the man that should have been her first officer was there instead. She left the desk and started to pace, soon finding herself staring out of the large window. “What would you do?” she asked the dark image of space.

The question was unnecessary. She knew exactly what he would do. He would make her see all sides of their situation. He would make suggestions that she take a step back from the work, to gain some new perspective. At the very least, he would be there to support her. Kathryn thought back to her meeting with Admiral Paris before she left. She had used every tactic she could think of to secure Chakotay as her first officer, short of begging. But Owen had made it very clear that it hadn’t been his decision - and as he had so often done in the last year, he had reiterated that it was beyond his control, and that there was nothing he could do. Kathryn walked away professionally disappointed, and emotionally devastated. She was so happy to be back in command of a ship, and there was no one she wanted to share it with more than the man she loved.

But now he was first officer on another ship, and she had been given someone who quite possibly made the worst first officer she had seen in her career. Kathryn wondered how Barton could have even been accepted to Command School, let alone be assigned to Voyager-A. Janeway admitted that her experience on the captain side of the commander-executive officer relationship was quite limited. After all, she had only had two - Commander Cavitt, whom she had barely gotten to know, and Chakotay - whom she had gotten to know almost too well. Kathryn tried to look at it from Barton’s point of view, tried to remember what it had been like when she had been a first officer. Tried to remember how she had handled any disagreements with her captain.

Truth was, she couldn't remember ever having as intense a personality clash with anyone as she was having now with Barton. Kathryn had tried to put her disappointment in Starfleet's choice aside, and tried to remain open, as she would be breaking in any new officer. But their first meeting had pretty much destroyed any optimism that Kathryn may have had. And to make matters worse, she now had to contend with the war that was brewing between Barton and B'Elanna Torres.

Command is doing this on purpose, she thought to herself as she ordered coffee from the replicator. There was no other explanation for it. In most cases, captains chose their own candidates for first officers. At the very least, they got to meet a new officer before they set foot on board ship. Kathryn got neither of these considerations. Barton had been shoved down her throat by Admiral Warhol. And after what initially seemed like blatant attempts to anger her, Barton suddenly came up with their winning strategy against the Sernaix. Kathryn wondered what exactly the parting instructions had been before Barton boarded at Utopia Planetia.

The captain stopped suddenly, realizing that she had been pacing mindlessly through her ready room. "Oh damn," she muttered to herself. Here she had been dwelling on the fact that she hadn't completely got her way in this, and was throwing a mental temper tantrum. Cut your losses, she reminded herself, and quit acting like a child. You've got your ship again.

The door chime rang as she headed back toward her desk. A moment of dread ran through her when she realized it could be Commander Barton, but she shook it off. She had just told herself to quit being childish - something that, in light of what she had been through in the last year, was something that she really couldn't have done even if she'd tried. So instead she called, "Come in."

The residual trepidation instantly disappeared when Sam Wildman stepped inside, and it was replaced by a genuine smile. Kathryn realized that what had appeared was a friend, someone she had gotten to know better in the last year than in the seven years before. And despite all the warnings that captains should not get close to their crew, Kathryn was finding it to be a benefit. "What can I do for you, Sam?" she asked as she gestured for the woman to have a seat.

Ensign Wildman crossed the distance to the desk, her expression one of a puzzled scientist. She handed over a padd as she reluctantly announced, "The latest scans indicate fifteen new packs have appeared within our scanning range in the last six hours."

Janeway rubbed at her temple as she looked over the report. "More Sernaix," she mumbled aloud.

Sam reached for the computer terminal and spun it so that they could both see the screen, then pulled up the scans that she had just finished analyzing. "I've run every kind of scan I could think of," she explained. "Spatial distortions, temporal shifts ... nothing. As far as I can determine, there should be no conceivable reason why these ships should be appearing in our space."

Kathryn looked over the scans. "It's like they're appearing by magic. Question is who's?" She sighed. "And why couldn't we find the wand when we were there?"

Sam chuckled, then asked, "I'd like to request Seven's assistance when she's finished in Engineering. I haven't quite gotten the knack of the new Stellar Cartography lab yet."

"That's what happens when you don't get a proper shakedown cruise, Ensign." Her captain smiled. Then she saw the peculiar expression Wildman was giving her. "What?"

Her friend's expression softened. "That's the first time I've seen you smile since we arrived at Utopia Planetia."

Janeway rested back in her chair. "I haven't had anything to smile about."

Sam nodded, thinking of her teary departure with Naomi a few days before. "I know exactly what you mean."

There was a small stretch of silence, which the captain eventually ended before it could turn into something less professional. She was pretty sure that she couldn't handle any personal discussions right now. "Well, keep scanning for anything that might give us a clue as to why the Sernaix are showing up," she ordered. "I want hourly updates on their numbers. And I'll see if I can't get Seven to give you a hand."

Wildman nodded as she stood. "Aye Captain."

Janeway was all business now, but afforded her friend one small smile. "Dismissed."

She watched as Samantha left, grateful for the little bit of company that had broken up her work. She started a new data file in the computer, in which she would compose her report and recommendations to Starfleet. The first item concerned contacting all the governments in the quadrant. If there was one thing that being in Bubble Space had taught her, it was that if they were going to win this war, they were going to need all the help they could get.

Even with a full day's worth of work, Voyager was not a whole lot better off than it had been when they escaped the Sernaix. Despite all her grumbling and cursing, B'Elanna was truly in her element. Covered in dirt and grime, she was determined to have Voyager in better shape than it had been when it left Utopia Planetia - not only to repair all battle injuries, but to solve all the technical difficulties they had left Federation territory with. Her staff knew it too, and was as eager to finish as she was. The excitement of their reunion had not worn off yet, and it made them work twice as hard.

She moved from her station to take a look at Vorik's work as he tended the EPS relays. "How's it coming?" she questioned.

"Quite satisfactorily," he replied, moving aside so that she could see his progress. "I believe that barring any major malfunctions, the EPS systems should be functioning within the hour."

The chief took a few minutes to examine the readings. When she was finished she told him, "I'm impressed, Vorik. I was expecting at least another three or four hours."

He looked at her, one eyebrow slightly raised. "Clearly you have underestimated my predicted time of completion."

Torres did a double take, not quite sure if she had just heard what she did. She finally said, "Clearly I did." Then her expression softened, and she clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Good work, Lieutenant." She started to walk to the main consoles, casting a glance back over her shoulder to see the clear bewilderment on his face. She knew that emotions were lost on Vorik, but B'Elanna still prided herself on her ability to confound him on occasion.

In the Engineering sub-level, Ozymandias was humming to himself as he worked. He had been inspired by the Doctor, who had casually mentioned opera in their last conversation. This in turn had caused Oz to ask what it was, and when he had the occasion he managed to convince the hologram to play some for him. As minutes wore on the humming turned to soft vowels, and then finally into the deep, hearty voice that they had all gotten to know over the last week.

The singing intensified when the elevator started to descend, bringing Seven of Nine with it. Despite his opinion of her as a plaything, Oz was also beginning to regard her as a friend, and an inside look into the creatures he was now serving. Without stopping the opera he boomed, "Good evening, Seven."

She nearly jumped out of her catsuit at the sound of Ozymandias' overlaid voice. With clear annoyance she corrected, "It is long past zero-zero hours. It is no longer evening, Ozymandias."

The booming voice chuckled. "I stand corrected. Good morning, then." She did not answer him, and his curiosity was immediately piqued. He stopped all sound, and with a verbal, childish pout he asked, "Lieutenant Torres doesn't like my singing, does she?"

She shook her head. "I believe the term she used was 'infernal racket'."

He chuckled. "You think she would cut me some slack after my helping find Harry." He noticed her change in mood when he mentioned the lieutenant. "How is he doing, by the way?"

He immediately knew he'd hit his mark, because she had gone completely silent. She was having an internal argument over whether it was appropriate to discuss Harry's health problems with what equated to an uploaded nuisance. She slid her back down along the wall she had been standing by, and ended up sitting down on the deck. Her tricorder clattered as it hit the plating, rolling and folding back up on impact. Oz waited patiently, and was finally rewarded when she admitted, "Harry is ... not well."

In a momentary flash of sincerity he said, "I'm sorry to hear that. What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing that can be discerned. He is just not recovering as quickly as the Doctor would like." She quickly decided to change the subject. "How did you bypass your safety boundaries to access the musical database?"

"What are his symptoms?" Oz pressed.

"Do you always answer a question with a question?" she snapped.

There was a small pause, and then, "Do you really think I do?"

Seven's head dropped into her hands, her elbows resting on her knees. Though her voice was muffled she asked him, "How did you know where to find Harry?"

"He contacted me."

She thought about it for a moment. "You still have contact with the Realm?"

"In a way."

She waited for more information, but received none. "How are you able to maintain contact?"

He chuckled again. "Now Seven, how do you expect me to tell you all my secrets if you won't tell me yours?"

She was growing angry. "You already know all my secrets!"

If he'd have had lips, Oz would have grinned. "I guess I do, don't I?"

Seven steeled herself against her growing anger. "According to Captain Janeway, there are Sernaix packs dropping into our space for no reason. Do you know how they are doing it?"

"I know a great deal," he told her. "Why isn't Janeway asking me herself?"

"She's very busy. And she thought it better that I ask, because she says you and I have a ..." She had to search for the word, "...rapport."

"Ah."

She ended up waiting again. "Well? Are you going to tell me how the Sernaix are escaping Bubble Space?" she demanded.

"They're not escaping what you call Bubble Space," he finally explained. "Their space is merging with yours."

Now he caught her completely by surprise. "Merging?"

"That's right. It's appearing in your quadrant piece by piece. That's why the packs are appearing. Every time a piece of their space enters yours, it brings everything within it along. Planets, stars, even packs. As a matter of fact, a scout ship just materialized about twenty light years from us."

Seven jumped to her feet. "I have to alert ..."

"Relax," he said. "I already engaged our cloak."

She considered this for a moment, then thought about what he had been saying previously. "How do you know about their space merging with ours?"

"Simple. They told me."

"I don't understand..."

"I'm still linked to the Realm, Seven," he explained patiently. "As soon as those ships appear, I can sense their ship minds."

Now she was putting it together. "So if you can read their minds..."

He completed the thought for her. "They know that I am here."

"Hey Oz!"

Both, figuratively or otherwise, looked up to see B'Elanna Torres glaring down through the transparent floor that surrounded the conventional core. "Why aren't you repairing my ship?"

"I'm taking a coffee break," Oz taunted.

"Very funny," she shot back. "You planning on going back to work anytime soon?"

"I get a full fifteen minutes. Union rules."

While his attention was distracted, Seven made her way to a ladder that would lead back up to the main level. "Wait a minute, Seven," Oz called after her. "You can't honestly tell me that little Harry means nothing to you, can you?"

She looked back at the slipstream core from her place on the third rung, ice in her voice when she said, "Whatever attachment I may feel for Lieutenant Kim is of no concern to you." And with that she left, leaving the ship mind to try to figure out her latest turn of behavior.

* * *

The Logan continued through its search pattern, seemingly looking for any scrap of ship left over from the battle between the Sernaix and Voyager. Chakotay sat at the station he had been summarily dismissed to hours before, and there was no end to his brooding. He knew that there wouldn't be anything to recover, and the more they searched the more frustrated he became. To make matters worse, Captain Grant had suddenly made a habit of checking up on him every few minutes.

He could feel a residual ache setting into his jaw. He hadn't realized until that point in his life that it was really possible for him to lose Kathryn, not to mention a great number of close friends. What hurt more was the fact that he was unable to contact her or to help her. He had briefly considered trying to sneak a communication out to her, just to let her know that he was around. But he quickly dismissed the idea. He had no way of knowing where Voyager actually was at the moment. And judging from the way Captain Grant ran his ship, it would probably be impossible to accomplish it undetected.

Grant eventually turned over control of the bridge and disappeared into his ready room. Chakotay had no desire to take the command chair, having been given the distinct impression that it would not be looked upon favorably. Grant's parting orders, given directly to Marsha Jones and Shari Young, had been to continue scanning and widen the search pattern as necessary.

His patience quickly came to an end, which surprised even Chakotay himself. He was by nature a patient man. But he was consumed by the thought that had occurred to him when he was reviewing personnel files - something was very wrong aboard this ship. Originally Chakotay considered his dislike for his new captain to be a reaction of difference. That the distance being kept by the crew was the result of years of working together in a close group. After all, he knew what it was like to serve with the same captain and crew for eight years. But any doubts he had been having about his own judgment disappeared as he started to observe the interactions of this crew.

He soon tired of scanning for clues to a battle that may as well have taken place a millennium before. It was time to get some answers. So he walked a small, quick loop around the tiny bridge to make sure no one was having any problems, and then stood before the ready room doors and rang the entrance chime.

"Enter."

Chakotay stepped inside the tiny room, unable to avoid seeing the captain entrenched behind his desk. Grant didn't even bother looking up from the padd in his hand when he questioned, "What do you need, Commander?"

The first officer squared his shoulders as he clasped his hands behind his back. In a calm, even voice he said, "Sir, I'd like to know the purpose of our mission here."

"We're to collect all information we can about this area of space," Grant said, still not diverting his attention from his work. "Weren't you paying attention when Admiral Warhol gave the orders?"

"It's been days since Voyager and the Sernaix left the area," Chakotay pointed out. "If we haven't found anything by now, we're not going to."

"These are Starfleet's orders." The captain finally looked up at him, obviously irritated. "Do you have a problem following orders?"

Chakotay didn't flinch. "I have no problems following orders, sir. But I do question them when they don't make any sense."

Grant stood, his eyes hard as steel as he rounded the edge of his desk. He snarled, "I don't appreciate your tone of voice."

"My tone of voice has nothing to do with it," Chakotay countered. Then he added a perfunctory, "Sir."

Grant was quickly racing toward fuming. "Your point, Commander?"

Now Chakotay's eyes finally moved from the spot on the wall to look directly at Grant, his unwavering stare strong enough to unnerve his captain a little. "Staying here taking scans doesn't make any sense. We should be pursuing the Sernaix, trying to find out how they've managed to enter our galaxy. At the very least, we should be reporting our findings to Starfleet Command."

"That's enough," Grant cut him off. He stood directly in front of Chakotay, finding that his first officer was easily a head taller than he was. There was no mistaking his ire. "Let's get one thing straight, Mister Chakotay. This is not Voyager. There are certain pieces of information on this ship that you are not privy to, and I am not about to debate and consult you on every decision that is to be made." Just to add insult to injury, he couldn't help but add, "I know all about you. I am not about to risk our position and our lives just because your girlfriend might get hurt." Before Chakotay could add anything else, he thundered, "Dismissed."

Chakotay could see that he was going to get absolutely nowhere with his captain, and therefore took the opportunity to escape. Back out on the bridge, the chatter that had been flying between the bridge crew stopped suddenly as soon as he arrived. Some risked a glance at him, others simply turned back to their consoles to ignore him. Chakotay thought about it, and used the discomfort to assert his position just a little. In a slightly condescending tone he ordered, "Carry on."

They went back to their tasks, but the conversations did not return. Then in what he knew would be perceived as an act of defiance, he took his place in the command chair.

* * *

Lieutenant Torres sat at the main engineering console, her head held in her hand. "I can't look at this anymore," she muttered.

"Perhaps you should retire for the night," Seven counseled from her place on her right.

"What about you?" B'Elanna asked her as she slowly straightened up.

She shook her head. "I do not require regeneration at the moment. I will be fine. I suggest you go to bed, however."

B'Elanna shook her head, but smiled at her friend nonetheless. "I think that's a very good idea. So I shall leave our repairs in your capable hands." She slowly climbed to her exhausted feet, but stopped dead when the main Engineering doors opened to admit Voyager's new first officer. Torres groaned. "Doesn't she ever sleep?"

Seven turned to see Barton checking progress at the first station she came to. "Apparently not."

"Well, I guess I'd better get this over with." With another low growl, Torres stretched some of the stiffness out of her neck, and then squared her shoulders as she stood upright. She asked, "You sure you don't want to start regenerating now?"

Behind her she heard, "And miss the opportunity to become more depressed?"

B'Elanna turned around in disbelief. "Seven, I'm surprised at that remark."

Her friend smiled, just a little. "I have been spending too much time with you, Lieutenant." And then she sent Torres on her way with, "Goodnight, B'Elanna."

Commander Barton had closed the distance between them, and was standing expectantly just as Torres turned around to leave. Only a quick stop kept the two of them from colliding. The chief engineer looked up to see Barton glaring down at her. In the aggravating tone of voice that she always seemed to use Barton questioned, "Where are you going, Lieutenant?"

Wide eyes and lifted eyebrows were immediate. "Excuse me?"

Barton folded her arms across her chest. "I want to review the results of the structural integrity tests on deck seven."

B'Elanna took up a similar posture. "Can't this wait until later?"

"No Lieutenant, it cannot."

Torres was in no mood to be condescended to. "Commander, I have been working down here for the past twenty-six hours without so much as a break. Not to mention the fact that I have not seen my husband or my daughter in more than that. I am going home to bed. And the only person that could possibly separate me and my pillow in the next eight hours is Captain Janeway. So your review of my work can wait until fourteen hundred hours." With that she blew past the first officer, leaving only the new crewmembers stunned in her wake. Her old engineering staff knew better.

Barton experienced a flash of hot anger that seemed to be becoming a regular occurrence where the chief engineer was concerned. She started off after Torres, though it really was only a step. She was never one to tolerate indiscipline, but her instincts told her to back off for now. There would be plenty of opportunity to settle her score with Torres later. There were now priorities that had to be taken care of.

By the time she turned around, the staff that had been staring at her was already back to their tasks. It brought a small smile of satisfaction to her lips. She appreciated how fear and intimidation were effective motivators for subordinates. So to drive home her point, she started to look over shoulders to examine each crewmember's progress. It produced the intended nervousness she required, and it ensured that they would stay focused on their tasks until well after she had left.

Her only remaining obstacle would be Seven of Nine. Barton wondered how easy it would be to persuade the Borg leftover to desert Engineering for the five or so minutes she needed.

"Janeway to Seven of Nine. Please report to my ready room."

Barton watched with some amazement as fate played into her hands when Seven departed for her meeting with the captain. She was now able to move freely through Engineering. Confidence filled her posture as she moved around the conventional core and into the room where the communications array was housed. With one eye on the door, she started tapping a series of commands into the consoles.

* * *

B'Elanna arrived home a few minutes later, so exhausted that she couldn't let go of what was really just a small incident with the first officer. She was fuming by the time she stepped through the door, but her anger disappeared in a second. She found her husband crawling underneath the end table next to their couch, his rear high in the air as he conducted a desperate and curse-filled search. Every time he uttered words he wasn't supposed to, Miral giggled with delight from her place in the high chair. She clapped her hands together, which was a sound that fascinated her as much as her father's commentary.

When she'd heard enough B'Elanna called out, "You're going to get it if she starts repeating what you're saying."

He straightened abruptly, catching his head on the edge of the table. "Ow!" Miral let out another squeal of delight. Rubbing his head as he got up he said to her, "Oh you think that's funny, do you?"

“What are you doing?” his wife asked, still standing in front of the doors.

“I’m looking for my pips.” He headed across the room, starting to examine the living area of their quarters. “I know I left them on my night table last night.” He looked underneath the throw pillows on the couch. “I’m due on the bridge in five minutes. If I’m late, Barton’s gonna have my head.”

“Well she’s in the right mood for it.”

Tom looked at her, his expression filled with compassion. “What happened now?”

She filled him in on the altercation in Engineering. The story ended with, “She lives to make my life hell, Tom.”

He came over and gave her a strong hug. “It’s not just you,” he consoled. “She wants to make all of us miserable.” Suddenly over her shoulder he exclaimed, “There they are!”

B’Elanna was spun out of his arms as he lunged for his rank insignia, proverbially tossed aside in pursuit of something more important. “Why are you making such a big deal out of all this?” she demanded.

“Because I don’t need Barton running off to report me to the captain,” he explained as he affixed the pips. “Kathryn’s having a hard enough time without Chakotay around, and the last thing she needs is her new first officer tattletaling to her about her senior staff.” B’Elanna groaned, and he took her into his arms again. “Don’t worry about it. Kathryn already knows that we can’t stand her. What more is there to do?”

“I know, I know,” she mumbled. “I just hate that woman so much.”

“Me too.” He gave her a kiss. “I have to go. Will I see you at all tonight?”

She playfully ruffled his hair. “Depends on how much gets done while I’m asleep.”

“Okay. I love you.” He gave her one more kiss, then headed out the door.

B’Elanna looked to Miral, who was busy playing with some of the spilled food on her small table. “Hey you,” she grinned, reaching for her daughter. “What say we get you cleaned up before Sam comes to take you for the day?”

“Dammit!” Miral giggled as she was lifted her out of the chair.

Her mother groaned, her eyes rolling high. “I’m going to kill him.”

* * *

Thalia Barton was stretched out on the couch in her quarters, fighting off her own exhaustion as she worked on her report for Admiral Warhol. The modifications she had made in Engineering were minuscule, ones that would only be found if Torres was specifically looking for them. But most importantly, they were sufficient for her purposes. She was to keep Section 31 apprised of any and all events taking place on Voyager while it was on assignment. It was, after all, the reason she had been assigned there.

And if she just happened to destroy Janeway’s career for good, so be it.

She glanced over what she had written so far.

I have observed many instances of this crew’s lack of respect for Starfleet regulations. Captain Janeway tends to favor the members of her old Voyager crew, not to mention misfits such as former Maquis and Borg. Incidents of blatant insubordination are overlooked, and I believe on

some levels encouraged. Only when faced with no other option will she listen to the opinion of someone who is not a member of her elite group.

The door chimed, prompting her up into a sitting position. She quickly tucked the padd down between the couch cushions, straightened her uniform and took on a professional pose when she called out, "Enter."

The doors hissed open to reveal Captain Janeway, who quickly glanced around the room before she stepped inside. After spying Barton she said, "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all," the other replied, conservatively resting her hands down in her lap. It was quite clear that she wasn't about to stand when this superior officer entered the room. Thalia realized that the captain's little visit was a good indication that perhaps she was willing to extend an olive branch. Most likely the result of the first officer's brilliant tactical suggestion the day before. Barton intended to thrash her with that branch later on. But she was perfectly pleasant when she asked, "What can I do for you, Captain?"

"I'd like to see your report about this last battle with the Sernaix," Janeway said. "I'm compiling my report to Starfleet Command, and I'd like to have your input before I send it off."

Barton regarded her skeptically. "You would?"

The captain nodded. "The quantum torpedo barrage was your idea." She handed Barton another padd. "I'll need your report by nineteen hundred hours." Then she started for the door.

Barton looked at the padd, then to the departing captain. "I'll get right on it." Then with a lot of effort she painfully added, "Ma'am."

The attempt to play nicely did not go unnoticed. Janeway stopped and turned around, seeing that for once there was no sense of malice about her first officer. An idea struck her. "Commander, would you like to join me for a late breakfast?" she offered.

"No thank you, Captain," Barton replied. "I'll have to dedicate all my time to this report if I'm to have it ready for you in time."

Janeway nodded and left, stopping again when the doors to Barton's quarters closed. She turned back toward them, half-expecting Barton to follow her out into the corridor carrying something to hit her with. But she never appeared. Kathryn slowly moved away, her brain grinding to figure out why her first officer had suddenly started behaving with such civility. And why she had looked like she'd been caught in the middle of something.

Inside, Barton breathed a sigh of relief. She waited to see if the captain would return, and when she didn't, retrieved the padd from the cushions. She wondered how Janeway could have suddenly made her paranoid. When she replayed the scene over in her mind, again and again she got stuck on 'ma'am'.

It helped build her determination to bring Janeway down - for good.

* * *

The close quarters of the Logan did not allow for many luxuries. Common rooms such as the mess hall were little more than a small cargo bay that had been converted to hold replicators and a few sets of tables and chairs.

Chakotay had come here after his shift on the bridge ended, not in the best of moods. Grant had gotten to him, more than he would have liked to admit. But Chakotay knew there was more to it. He loaded some more personnel reports into a padd and carried them with him, settling down to read them as he ate an early lunch.

“May I join you?”

Chakotay looked up to the pleasant but expressionless face of the ship’s security chief, Lieutenant Morgan. Of all the records and people he had studied on board, this man was the one he had the least suspicions about. Chakotay had figured it was because he was so young. “Please,” Chakotay said, gesturing toward the other chair with his padd.

He watched as Morgan took great care in setting down his tray so he wouldn’t spill, then dropped down into the chair in five-year-old fashion. Chakotay suppressed a small smile as the security chief attacked his meal. Then he turned his attention back to his padd.

The silence between them was neither tense nor companionable. Morgan was so engrossed in his eating that he hadn’t realized that asking if he could sit down was the most conversation he had ever had with Chakotay. So he put his fork down and said, “I guess we haven’t been properly introduced.” He quickly wiped his hand on the leg of his uniform and offered it to the other man. “Lieutenant Sam Morgan.”

“Chakotay,” the other said as they shook hands. “I’ve been meaning to meet with everybody one-on-one,” he explained. “I really didn’t get introduced to anybody when I came on board.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. We don’t get a lot of crew turnover here.” Morgan returned to shoveling food into his mouth, but still managed to say, “Must be a lot different here than it was on Voyager, huh?” Chakotay nodded. Morgan continued with, “I was meaning to tour her before I left Earth, but my leave got cut short.”

“Well you aren’t missing much,” Chakotay told him, showing his first public sign of dissatisfaction with the museum. “There isn’t much left after you remove the people. Just a bunch of static displays with some inaccurate information.”

Morgan reached for his glass of milk. “Like what?”

Chakotay thought back to his tour through the ship, and immediately thought of the disappointing scene with Kathryn in the ready room. Even though they had progressed so far since then, it still hurt a little. He couldn’t figure out why. In part it inspired him to follow her to Lake George. They were together now - there was no doubt about that. He wondered if it was maybe just the uncertainty of being away from her now.

The sound of a throat being cleared broke him from his thoughts. Morgan sat before him, wondering about the commander’s soundness of mind. “Sorry,” Chakotay said, his head ducking to hide the light blush on his cheeks. “Got lost for a minute.”

“Don’t worry about it. It must be hard being here when all your friends are on the new Voyager.”

“Let’s just say ... it hasn’t been the most pleasant aspect of my career.”

The lieutenant nodded. “My best advice is to just play along. They’ll start to open up eventually, ‘cept for maybe Captain Grant.”

Morgan nodded his understanding, and returned to his meal. Chakotay read for a little while, but found it difficult to concentrate on rereading the bridge crew’s personnel files. He turned the display off with his thumb, and set the padd down on the table when he asked, “How long have you been on board, Lieutenant?”

The other waved him off and shook his head. Once the food was gone from his mouth he corrected, “Please - call me Sam.” He took a moment to swallow a residual amount of his spaghetti. “I’ve been serving under Captain Grant for just over a year now. This was my first assignment after graduating from Advanced Tactical Training.”

The first officer didn't hide the fact that he already knew that. "Being security chief on the Logan would seem to be an odd assignment, especially for someone with advanced tactical training."

"You would think." Morgan avoided elaborating by taking a long swallow of milk. Then he said, "I understand that you used to teach it." Chakotay nodded. "What made you leave?" Chakotay looked at him for a moment, not really sure whether he wanted to say why he had left Starfleet or not. Before he could formulate a response Morgan added, "I know the official reason, Commander. I just wondered what the real answer was."

When Chakotay found his voice again he warned, "You seem to know a lot of my history for somebody who only graduated the academy three years ago."

Morgan reached for the padd and activated it as he held it up between them. "As security chief, it's my business to know exactly who is serving aboard this ship."

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Chakotay broke into a small smile. "Point taken."

They were interrupted by one of the security staff, who brought a report to his superior that couldn't wait. Morgan quickly dismissed her and sat back in his chair as he read. Then he passed the padd over to his own superior. "Word from command is that there are nearly a thousand Sernaix ships reported in Federation space."

Chakotay grimaced as he read. "And all of them virtually undetectable."

The security chief nodded. "To be honest, they scare the hell out of me."

Chakotay shuddered inwardly at the thought. "They should."

* * *

The sound of many voices filled Sickbay when the captain entered, produced by a discussion between the Doctor and his staff. More like a lecture, Kathryn observed from her place at the door.

"I want to see instruments back in their cabinets once patient treatments are completed," the Doctor droned, reminding Kathryn of the many tiffs she had seen between the hologram and Tom Paris over Sickbay procedures. A couple of his staff visibly flinched at the reprimand as they followed him through the ward, while others silently suffered through knowing that they hadn't done anything wrong. The ship's other doctor, Tomas Landry, was the only one of the staff to be spared - he sat hidden away in the main office filing medical reports.

The Doctor stopped short when he saw Captain Janeway. She had continued to unobtrusively observe him, and judging by the expression she wore she was not entirely impressed. At that point he ended his lecture by telling his staff, "Please return to your stations. I look forward to better results." Then he walked over to her. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

"That seemed rather harsh for toys that didn't get put away," she told him, her arms folding over her chest.

He frowned. "It has been my experience that in a situation like this, a firm word from a superior will prevent further repeated behavior."

She glanced at the half dozen staff members that were now heading to their respective departments. "Why the collective lecture?"

"I have read that it is an effective method," he told her confidently. "If one person makes a mistake and everyone else has to experience my 'lecture', as you call it, then they will make sure that the person who made the mistake will not do it again."

Janeway shook her head. "Arbitrary punishment is a method used in the Academy on first year cadets," she said quietly. "It's also a great way to create resentment between your staff when you should be encouraging them to work together. Talk to them. As you get to know them, you'll learn each of their capabilities and weaknesses." His face dropped, and she rested a hand on his shoulder. "It's not easy being in charge of a department, is it?"

He shook his head. "I admit that having a staff is more of a challenge than I had anticipated." Then he gave her one of his most sincere looks. "I will try to do better, Captain."

"That's all I ask." She stepped past him and into the ward. "Has Harry made any progress?"

"Very little." They made their way over to the only occupied bed, where Lieutenant Kim was dozing. "The invasion into his body was quite extensive."

"Is it possible that they filled him with a drug or toxin that we can't identify?" she questioned.

"Nothing that I've been able to detect." He ran a tricorder over his patient, again not pleased with the results. "He is recovering," he reminded her, "but very, very slowly. I think it's being hampered by the changes to his DNA. His body is so busy rewiring itself that it's focus is not on healing at the moment."

"Drey to the Doctor."

He tapped his commbadge with some hesitation. "Go ahead, Ensign."

"I have the test results that you asked for," she reported. "Can you please come to the lab to take a look at them?"

"I'll be right there. Doctor out." He was about to set his tricorder down on the edge of the bed, but then remembered what had just happened with his staff. Instead he started toward a storage cabinet.

"Problem?" Janeway asked.

"No, no problem." He slid the cabinet drawer shut. Before leaving the ward he told her, "Just getting to know one of my staff members." With that he left, leaving Janeway standing at Harry's bedside.

Harry was not really asleep, but still not lucid enough to notice her arrival. She was about to leave when he started awake, a small rush of adrenaline ensuring that he was not going back to sleep anytime soon. "You alright, Harry?"

The lieutenant now saw his captain standing next to him, and his pale cheeks flushed slightly with embarrassment. "I'm fine," he said quickly, glancing down his body to make sure that everything was alright. He let out a held breath as his head fell back against the pillow.

"Nightmare?" she asked softly. He nodded. "Well that's certainly understandable," she said as she pulled a chair over and sat down. "It may not seem like it now, but they will go away eventually."

He looked to her, suddenly seeing a kindred spirit. "Really?"

She nodded. "Can you tell me what happened, Harry?"

He thought about whether or not he wanted to relive what happened. He knew he wasn't ready to admit that he had been held captive by Sycorax and tortured for the information that she had never been able to get. He finally said, "She kept telling me that I had information that she wanted." After filling the captain in on all the life experiences that the Sernaix leader had used against him, he gave her the missing piece of the puzzle.

"So he left you with no instructions?" she breathed with some astonishment.

He nodded weakly. "He told me I'd have to figure it out on my own."

"Well, one thing's for sure," she murmured. "Sycorax isn't going to let up until she gets hold of you again."

He shuddered. "I've had more comforting thoughts."

Janeway smiled a little, and laid a hand on his arm as she stood. "Believe me, Harry - you are in what is most likely the safest place to be right now. We're not going to let you go again."

* * *

A senate office was not usually the place for a riot.

Senator M'Akar sat behind his well-appointed desk, listening somewhat impatiently as those around him fired accusations back and forth at each other. He particularly watched the reddened face of Tomalak, who was a warmonger if he had ever seen one. "It had to be a Federation ship," he shouted across the room. "There is no other explanation."

His main adversary, Toan Kassar, shot back at him, "No Federation ship has the firepower to do this. You of all people know that, Tomalak."

"What about this new Voyager?" the other shot back.

"It is of no consequence," she replied. "Even with all its new weaponry, it still is not capable of destroying a warbird in a single shot."

"Where did you get your information from?" Representative Aylen charged sarcastically.

Kassar whirled around. "What do you mean?"

Aylen was leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest and a sardonic smile on his face. "According to my sources, that ship was built specifically to battle this new enemy to the Federation. It would be more than capable of destroying Tamarek's ship."

"Even if it is," she warned, "it doesn't mean that they actually destroyed it. We should be looking at this new species that they brought back to the quadrant with them."

"What are you proposing?" M'Akar questioned.

"Preemptive contact," she said as she turned to face him. "Create an alliance with these creatures before anybody else does."

The senator's assistant interrupted with, "The last thing we need to do is get dragged into another war."

Tomalak spat, "You are the only person I know that doesn't see the death of her son defending the Empire as an honor." He then turned his attention to the senator. "We should destroy the Federation now, while we have the chance."

The assistant couldn't resist. "Perhaps we'd be fortunate enough to lose you this time as well."

"That's enough!" M'Akar thundered as he jumped to his feet. "Get out! All of you!"

Kassar protested, "But Senator...!"

"I said out, Kassar!"

She snapped to attention, giving him a curt bow as all the others did before they left. Once the room cleared and the door was locked, M'Akar opened a secret communication centre in the wall panel. When the object of his transmission appeared on his screen, he simply said, "There has been a new development."

* * *

The Doctor was at his desk, pouring over all of Harry Kim's scans since his return from the Sernaix. He was starting to make some headway on establishing the new DNA patterns when a familiar face appeared in the doorway.

"Doctor," Mayala Drey interrupted with her overly-cheery voice, "I finished compiling the lab results for you."

He held out his hand, which invited her in to turn over her padd. A quick glance at the results told him what he needed to know. "Thank you, Ensign. This will help me a great deal."

Without missing a beat she asked, "Is there something else I can tackle for you, Doctor?"

The hologram glanced at the chronometer embedded in his desk. "Wasn't your shift supposed to end half an hour ago?"

"It did," she said with a small nod. "But I knew how important those test results were, so I worked late to compile them."

He let out a small sigh. "Sit down please, Ensign." The exuberance that had filled her before disappeared instantly, replaced by trepidation as she settled in front of him. The Doctor rested his hands down on the desk, and gave her a reassuring smile. "Mayala, I realize that this is your first assignment since nursing school. But you're going to run yourself ragged if you continue to keep up this pace."

"But ... I need to," she responded, a little more eagerly than she had intended.

"What do you mean?"

She knew retreat was no option now. So she clasped her hands together to keep from fidgeting and told him, "This is my first assignment. I have to prove myself - to you, to Doctor Landry, to the captain..."

"Wait a minute," he broke in. "If you spend all your time trying to impress everybody on this ship, you're going to end up shooting yourself in the foot."

This time it was her turn to ask, "What do you mean?"

"It's one thing to be good at what you do," he advised. "But it's entirely another to try and make sure everybody knows that you're good at what you do." He relaxed back into his chair. "You're a

good nurse, Mayala. Your work here in the last week speaks for itself. So I don't want to see people pass you over because they think you're overzealous."

She thought about it for a moment. Eventually she timidly surmised, "You're saying that I'm trying too hard ... right?"

He nodded, relieved that she had seen his point. "Exactly. You're doing an excellent job. If you hadn't, I'd have mentioned it to you by now." Then he smiled. "Go spend some time for yourself. That's what off-duty time is for."

Drey now smiled, her body filling with relief. "Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate the advice."

She started to leave, but before she did she extended her hand to him. He shook it warmly, then watched as she left the ward. In her he could now see certain aspects of himself, and that was a new experience in itself. And when he sat back down, he felt just a little bit better about his management skills.

* * *

A lounging chair on a warship was a rarity, but with the little clout that she had left, Captain Janeway was able to secure one for her quarters. Hers was plush and comfortable, a replica of the chair that had sat in her father's office when she was a child. It was a welcome sight at the end of a very long day, and her boots hit the floor with a thud when she pushed them off her tired feet.

Amelia jumped up into her lap immediately, sensing her owner's exhaustion and frustration. The pup gently stood up against Kathryn's chest, and gave her a tentative lick on the chin.

Kathryn couldn't help but smile. "I missed you too, girl," she laughed, scratching Amelia behind the ears. Beside her on the table was a small container with treats. Kathryn retrieved one and held it before the dog, with her other hand holding the hungry Amelia in place. "Stay," she commanded. Amelia tried to jump for the morsel, but was pushed back to Kathryn's knees. "Stay," she said again. After another attempt at thievery, Amelia recognized what she was supposed to be doing. She remained standing over Kathryn's knees, whimpering and treading her feet the entire time. Kathryn waited a few seconds more to make sure Amelia had learned the command, then handed over the treat. "Good girl," she praised.

She let Amelia sniff around for a little while as she searched for any more possible treats. Eventually she settled down, wedging her body in between Kathryn's leg and the arm of the chair. The temptation to close her eyes was overwhelming, but Kathryn knew that there were padds demanding her attention.

For a while she concentrated on progress reports, but she really wasn't interested in them. Instead she cleared one that had contained notes already used, and started to write.

Dear Chakotay,

It's hard to believe that it's already been so many days since I saw you. You have no idea how hard it is to run this ship without you. If there was anybody that I would have chosen to be by my side now, it's you.

Then again, you already know that, don't you?

I wish I could say that being back in command is everything that I expected it to be. Don't get me wrong - this is always what I wanted. But something is just not right. And it's not the fact that you're not here, or that my new first officer is a first rate pain in the ass. Or even the fact that

we're at war. Something is going on here that I can't put my finger on. But if I don't figure it out, I feel that something catastrophic is going to happen.

I just wish my instincts could give me actual facts instead of just a bunch of uneasy feelings.

Red alert klaxons caught her attention. They were followed by Tuvok's calm voice saying, "Red alert. All hands report to battle stations."

Kathryn leapt to her feet, forgetting about Amelia for the moment as she raced out the door. The pup managed to stay close on her heels, playfully following along and thinking they were simply going for a run. She stopped when the doors shut behind her, and then found herself alone when Kathryn disappeared around the bend in the corridor. Her nose went into overdrive, floating close above the carpet until it led her to the closed door of the turbolift that her mistress had disappeared into.

People continued to fly by, none of them paying attention to the puppy that was wandering alone through the ship's corridors. A blast rocked the ship, tossing Amelia across the corridor and sending her rolling past a few more crewmembers. She eventually regained her footing and shook herself off, then picked up another scent that she started to follow in the opposite direction.

"Report!" Janeway shouted above the din that filled the bridge when she arrived.

"A Sernaix scout ship has appeared off our port side," Tuvok reported as he relinquished the command seat. He stumbled as they were again hit by Sernaix weaponry.

"Transporter systems have been knocked out!" Lieutenant Tyrell called out. "Also additional damage to decks seven and eight."

"Return fire!"

The orange lines of the new phaser banks erupted from the upper saucer, their impact point disappearing on the frozen light of the Sernaix ship. "No damage," Tuvok reported, now firmly entrenched at his station.

"Evasive maneuvers," she called to the helm.

The now Lieutenant Baytart tried to follow the order, but didn't get a response. "Impulse engines are fluctuating, Captain," he called back. "I'm having trouble maneuvering."

"Bridge to engineering. B'Elanna, what's going on down there?"

"This is Seven of Nine," came back from Engineering. "Lieutenant Torres has not yet arrived at her station."

In their quarters, Tom and B'Elanna had been enjoying some much needed and deserved family time with their daughter. When the red alert was sounded they both raced for the door, Tom in the lead as B'Elanna had to snatch Miral up in order to take her to Sickbay. He ran headlong into the doors, which didn't move. "What the ...?" He stepped back and tried again, but they still didn't open.

She punched the button beside them with her free hand, rewarded only with the infuriating buzz of non-response. Then she called out, "Torres to Transporter Chief. I need you to beam Tom, Miral and I out of our quarters."

"Transporters are down," the chief responded. "The Sernaix got them already!"

"Oh fabulous," Torres growled as she handed Miral off to her husband. She tore off the panel that hid the manual override for the door. Tom and Miral were getting thrown around by each shot the

Sernaix landed on Voyager's hull, but B'Elanna managed to hold onto her position in order to work. Miral, much to Tom's surprise, did not start crying. In fact, she seemed to be fascinated by her mother's work.

"Bridge to Paris and Torres!" Janeway's voice thundered from above. "Where the hell are you?"

"We're stuck in our quarters," Paris replied immediately, instinctively steering Miral's hand away from his commbadge. "B'Elanna's working on it now."

"Make it fast," the captain ordered. "We're going to need you two if we're going to get out of this one."

"I'm almost there," B'Elanna told her. She was starting to grin as she reached her goal. "This should do it." As soon as she crossed the circuits, they exploded in a shower of sparks that singed her eyebrows.

Tom yanked her back. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She glared at the offending panel, then was distracted by Miral as she reached for her mother's reddened face.

"What happened?" Janeway demanded.

"My hot-wiring didn't work," Torres reported. "We're gonna have to get out through the emergency hatch."

"Understood. Make it quick."

"Aye Captain. Torres out."

Tom started them toward the bedroom, where their emergency hatch to the Jeffries tubes had been installed. He readjusted his grip on Miral, who was now reaching up over his shoulder and watching the scenery as it passed behind them. She cried out, "Door!"

They managed to get as far as the entrance, and then the sound of the doors opening stopped them cold. Both turned around, resisting a string of curses when they saw the wide-open exit and the corridor beyond.

Then they ran for it.

* * *

Oz was keeping relatively quiet as he worked along with B'Elanna, and was shocked when he heard the significantly weakened voice of Harry Kim call out, "Oz, you there?"

"Harry? What are you doing down here?"

"I had an idea." A lurch of the deck underneath his feet threw him into the slipstream casing. With a great deal of concentration, he started to merge his hand into the cold black surface.

"We've sustained heavy damage to the port nacelle," Torres called from Engineering. "One more hit like that and we're going to really be in trouble."

"We've got to find a place to regroup," Barton suggested.

Janeway glared at her, sure that that could have quite easily been the most useless phrase she had ever heard. "Tom, see if you can put some distance between them and us. Tuvok, what's the scout ship's weapons status?"

“Sernaix weapon systems have sustained minimal damage,” he reported.

“It figures,” Tom grouched.

“Launch a spread of quantum torpedoes.”

“Aye Captain.” A half dozen torpedoes sailed through the space between them, impacting and dissipating against the photonium hulls. Tuvok announced, “Minor damage to propulsion and weapons systems.”

“They’re gaining on us!” Paris interjected. “Ten thousand kilometres ... nine thousand...”

The ship shuddered again as the Sernaix returned fire. Before Janeway could decide their next move Tyrell suddenly shouted, “Captain! I have two ships closing at three-two-nine mark six.”

“Confirmed,” Tuvok calmly added, as only he could. But even he was a little astonished when he said, “Two Romulan warbirds - sixty thousand kilometres and closing.”

“They’re hailing us!” Tyrell called out, his volume a clear indication of his anxiety level.

Kathryn couldn’t help but wonder what fate had in store for them now. “Let’s see it.”

“I am Commander Setal,” the stern man on the viewscreen announced. “Do you require assistance?”

“We’d love some assistance,” Janeway told him, still being buffeted in her chair. “My tactical officer will send you coordinates to concentrate fire on.”

A few seconds passed before the commander confirmed, “We have them. Standby.”

The viewscreen winked off, showing the scout ship bearing down on them. “Standby for what?” Tom mused aloud.

“Just be ready to turn this ship around and head back toward them,” Janeway told him. “Tuvok, have a full spread standing by.”

“Aye Captain.”

“Wait a minute,” Barton said, her nose buried in her console. “The Sernaix ship has stopped firing.”

Tuvok announced, “Sernaix power levels are dropping to minimal, Captain.”

Janeway read the information on her own screen, her jaw dropping just a little as her eyes returned to the viewscreen. The warbirds moved into attack formation, moving down into position behind the scout ship as they opened fire. They managed to make some impression, the side of their target lighting up under green disruptor fire.

“Reverse course!” Janeway snapped. “Fire at will, Commander!”

Voyager turned a full one hundred eighty degrees, speeding back toward the scout ship. Tuvok let loose a barrage of torpedoes and phaser fire, all concentrated on the forward end of the ship. It exploded in a massive fireball, sending Voyager swinging madly off its course as it took the brunt of the explosion.

“Tom?” she called out.

“I’m working on it!”

The view on their screen finally stabilized after a minute or so. Voyager was now floating quietly in space, amongst Sernaix debris and a pair of Romulan warbirds.

Kathryn rose from her chair, stretching some of the residual tension out of her shoulders. After taking her usual place in the centre of the bridge she ordered, "Hail the lead Romulan vessel."

Commander Setal appeared on the screen again, very calm but unmistakably curious about what had just happened. "You have survived," he concluded.

She couldn't help but smile. "We have - thanks to you."

"Indeed." He acknowledged her with a small nod. "We are not able to stay and assist you with repairs at the present time. However, we are willing to summon another vessel if you wish it."

"I appreciate the offer, but it's not necessary."

If Setal was surprised, he didn't show it. "Very well. Safe journey to you then, Captain." With that the transmission ended, and the warbirds disappeared under cloak.

The bridge crew sat there for a moment, stunned. Eventually it was Tom Paris who commented, "Well that's an interesting turn of events."

The captain stared at now-empty space, confusion filling her. Romulans had just appeared out of nowhere, saved them from destruction, and then disappeared just as quickly. Mirroring the word of her counterpart, Janeway only said, "Indeed."

"Torres to Janeway."

Expecting the worst, the captain responded, "Janeway here."

All B'Elanna could say was, "Captain, I think you'd better come down here."

* * *

"They're going into warp, Skipper," Barry Bruner reported as the pair of warbirds disappeared from the viewscreen.

At the second tactical station, Chakotay could do nothing but grin. He beamed with pride for many reasons, not the least of which was that she had survived. And if he knew Kathryn like he thought he did, then he also knew that she had just managed to lay the skeleton framework for an alliance with the Romulans.

In the command chair, Carl Grant could only nod. He was not happy, though Chakotay couldn't say why for sure. But he did make his position clear when he ordered, "Shari, get us out of here."

"Captain," Lieutenant Morgan interrupted from his security station, "shouldn't we offer Voyager assistance with repairs?"

Grant turned to glare at him, which happened to coincidentally also be in the same direction as the first officer. "Captain Janeway is a big girl," he snarled at Morgan. "I'm sure she and her crew are quite capable of conducting repairs themselves."

Suitably chided, Morgan's only response was, "Yes sir."

The captain turned back toward the helm. "Let's go, Shari."

"Aye sir." She punched the commands into her console, and though everybody instinctively grabbed for handholds, there really wasn't any need. Their departure from the battle site was subdued, just like the mood on the bridge.

Chakotay looked to each one of them, trying to see what was causing it. Most of them concentrated on their stations or watched the viewscreen as they jumped to warp. Anybody that he did make eye contact with made a point of being unsympathetic before they turned away. Only Morgan offered him some kind of expression, which was one mixed with understanding and some elation that Voyager had survived.

He turned back to the tactical screen, going back over the readings and replays of the battle that they had just witnessed. Chakotay's joy at Voyager's victory quickly faded when another thought crossed his mind. Captain Grant's reaction to this battle convinced him that there was something going on. Something that had been planned long before he had been dumped here. And it made him more determined than ever to find out exactly what.

A twinge from his stomach reminded him that his lunch wasn't entirely agreeing with him. But the new rush of purpose pushed that discomfort aside without a second thought.

* * *

Janeway entered Engineering a few minutes later, and as soon as she spotted B'Elanna she questioned, "What happened?"

"You're not going to believe this," Torres told her as she handed over a tricorder.

The captain looked from the readings to her chief engineer while they rode down in the elevator. "Harry shut that ship down?"

They entered the lower level, where Harry sat propped against the slipstream casing. He was pale and exhausted, but there was a spark in his eyes that had been absent since they rescued him. The Doctor was crouched beside him, and judging from his expression, he actually had some good news. Seven hovered on the other side, looking as if she were not quite sure of how she should be acting.

"Ah, Captain," the Doctor greeted when he saw her come in. "I thought you might like to see for yourself."

"I heard, I heard," she said with a smile. "B'Elanna tells me that you shut down that scout ship so that we could destroy it."

Harry shrugged a little. "I just happened to think of it." He could see that Janeway wanted a better explanation, but he didn't have one. "I wish I could tell you more, Captain."

"He did have some help, Captain," Oz boomed around them.

"Well that help is definitely appreciated," she assured the ship mind, stroking his ego just a little.

"Harry has become most efficient to work with," he added. "Much more than the rest of you."

B'Elanna glared at the casing. "Don't you have something you should be working on, Oz?"

The Doctor finished his scans and announced, "Lieutenant, you are fit enough to return to your quarters." Then to Seven he said, "I leave Mister Kim in your capable hands." To Janeway he said, "Captain, will you please join me in Sickbay?"

They left, and Harry turned to Seven and saw the peculiar look she wore. "What is it?" he asked gently.

“That is the second time someone has used that phrase with me today,” she replied.

“What? Leaving things in your capable hands?” She nodded, and he chuckled as he took those hands into his. “It’s because people trust you.”

She fixed him with a funny look. Eventually she said, “Do you trust me enough to walk you to your quarters?”

Now he laughed. “More than anyone else.” He let both Seven and B’Elanna help him to his feet, and leaned heavily against Seven as they started to leave Engineering.

Janeway saw them emerge onto the main level just as they entered Engineering’s turbolift. She commented, “He seems to have made quite a sudden recovery.”

“I would tend to agree,” the Doctor told her. “But I can’t even begin to explain why.”

The moment they entered Sickbay, a pair of high-pitched noises caught their attention, and as the Doctor led her through his office he explained, “I had a stranger wander in earlier.”

Kathryn stopped when she saw two small figures on the floor, gleefully playing with one another. Miral seemed to have no fear of Amelia, who would chase the toddler’s hands as they waved through the air. Miral’s giggles were infectious, and Voyager’s iron-willed captain soon found herself laughing. “How long has she been here?” she asked.

The Doctor crouched down with the younger visitors. “About an hour or so. I didn’t see her come in, but my guess is that she wandered in with some of the wounded.”

“Doc!”

Kathryn noticed a certain amount of paternal pride in the Doctor. “Yes Miral?”

She was pointing behind him. “Ball!”

He reached for the inflated ball that had rolled out of Miral’s grasp earlier, which she immediately reached for. “Here you go,” he said as he handed it to her.

Miral grabbed onto it with both hands, and without a second’s thought tossed it across the office. Amelia dashed after it, barely stopping in time before she would have plowed into the wall. It took a moment for her to figure the mysterious object out, and then her memory kicked in. The ball was bigger than she was, so she started pushing it back toward Miral by butting it with her head. As soon as it was within the toddler’s reach, the pup then obediently laid down and rested her head on Miral’s leg.

The scene repeated itself twice more, and Kathryn couldn’t believe her eyes. “Where did she learn to do that?” she wondered aloud.

The Doctor looked up at her. “You mean you didn’t teach her that?”

She shook her head. “I’ve only taught her the basics so far.” Kathryn watched as Miral rolled the ball away one more time. Amelia did as she had somehow been instructed and returned it to her immediately. When the pup laid down against Miral’s knee again, she murmured, “I’ll be damned.”

“Barton to Janeway.”

The captain stopped herself a split second after her eyes started rolling. The Doctor flashed her a sympathetic smile but said nothing. With a small grimace she replied, “Janeway here.”

“I require your assistance in Engineering at once.”

Kathryn felt a sudden pang of exhaustion, and her eyes closed briefly as she shook her head. "I'll be there in a minute. Janeway out."

Now the Doctor felt the need to contribute. "Maybe B'Elanna's got her caged somewhere and she wants to be let out."

The captain shot him a reproachful look. "Officially, that is not funny." Then her glare dissolved into a genuine smile. "But unofficially, I can't say that I'd blame her." She briefly gazed down at Amelia. "Do you mind if Amelia stays here with Miral until I can pick her up later?"

The CMO nodded. "Not at all. Miral seems to be keeping her entertained."

* * *

Sycorax floated in her habitat, her surroundings changing with each spike in her anger. She was still infuriated about Harry's escape, and over the fact that despite all their efforts they hadn't managed to get any information.

With a thought she brought up the scene of Voyager's last battle with her scout ship, and watched with great interest as they managed to obliterate it with the help of two other ships. "So, they have friends," she wondered to herself. "This is going to prove interesting."

The tactical display appeared again, showing her the circling packs as they pulled at the ends of their leashes. They filled what the humans called 'the alpha quadrant' now, just waiting for her to give the word.

She extended her reach to all of the packs and cadres. "It is time to achieve our true glory." Then with a truly evil grin she ordered, "It is time for all out attack. Destroy them all."

Written by: Eydie Munroe

Beta: Judy

Producers: SaRa, MaquisKat and Coral