

Part I

Heather Jarman

Heather Jarman lives in Portland, Oregon, where she supplements her day job as a tired mommy with her writing career. Her most recent contributions to the Star Trek fiction include the Kira Nerys story in *Tales from the Captain's Table* and *Worlds of Deep Space Nine: Andor*. In spring 2006, her novel *Evolution* will round out the *Star Trek: Voyager: String Theory* trilogy.

By night Heather flies to distant lands on black ops missions for the government, where she frequently breaks open industrial-strength cans of whupass on evildoers.

Inhale...

Within the space of a breath, Admiral Kathryn Janeway had been transported out of her shuttle and into the Borg Queen's lair.

Damn it, Kathryn, you got careless! She offered a throwaway thought in the direction of deity, luck, and whatever other forces might influence Voyager's fate, hoping that she'd given Captain Janeway enough time to execute her outrageously risky plan.

Exhale...

Turning her head, she glanced at her prison: a nest of snake-like conduits and circuitry wreathed in glowing green. The throbbing pulse of the hive mind enveloped her senses. She met the glistening black beetle eyes of the Queen across the room- and wasn't nearly frightened enough. She'd expected that her oldest nemesis would employ this tactic, and for that reason alone her predicament felt like an anticlimax. Ah! The good old days when she could still surprise me, Janeway thought with a twinge of regret. Time for this old campaigner to surrender her post to a less jaded soldier- a flash from her recent days on Voyager intruded- like my younger self: That feisty redhead has a lot of fight left in her. And me...? I have enough fight for this round of combat and that's all I need. Too bad she wouldn't live long enough to see what Captain Janeway would do with her second chance. Unbidden, a memory from a primary school poetry lesson wafted to the fore of her consciousness:

"This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but with a whimper."

Imprisoned in the throne room of a Borg cube, helpless to hold back her inevitable assimilation, Janeway found the poet's sentiment fitting. Acceptance of her fate flooded her.

Exhale...

"Very clever," the Queen said, her tone cutting. "Hiding right on my 'doorstep.' "

At least I knocked before I invited myself in.

The Queen turned toward a floating viewscreen filled with the image of Janeway's shuttle hanging near the Unicomplex's exterior. Any minute, the Borg would assimilate her ship and any chance she ever had of returning home would be lost.

Inhale...

She'd left the future assuming that the change in the timeline would erase her from existence. She couldn't fathom what being erased might feel like. Now facing death, she wished for a less passive end. The Klingons' aspiration to "die in glorious battle" suddenly made a hell of a lot more sense than it ever had before. At least she'd go down with her boots on, and if she succeeded, all the people who populated her future would cease to be; temporally speaking, there wouldn't be anything to miss or anyone to mourn her passing.

Janeway was working her way up to a good wallow until she glanced over at the Borg Queen, whose smug superiority raised her hackles more effectively than any being she'd ever known. She believes she has the upper hand, Janeway thought. Behind that deceptively indifferent facade she glories at the prospect of my demise. She's gloating. But she has no idea what's coming. I'm going to wipe that smirk off her face and I'll live long enough to enjoy it. She repressed the urge to cackle.

Exhale...

"Were you planning to attack us from inside the Unicomplex?" the Queen asked accusingly. Her melodious, soothing voice sliced through the mechanized whir and hum in the background.

Janeway recognized bait when she saw it, and she certainly wouldn't be goaded into biting on this offering. You hate that I've outmaneuvered you so far, that I've piqued your sense of superiority. She sensed that she'd stretched the Queen's patience: stretch a little further and Her Majesty might be provoked into acting rashly-

- and that was exactly how Janeway wanted it. Make her stew a little longer, she thought, refusing to gratify the Queen with an answer. You want it? Come get it!

On cue, the Queen stalked across the deck plating, covering the distance between herself and Janeway in three long steps.

A metallic taste filled her mouth: adrenaline. Janeway's heart quickened; the cold prickle of sweat drizzled down her neck. This is it.

"Not feeling talkative?" Any pretense of humor gone, the Queen thrust her hand into Janeway's neck; assimilation tubules pierced her skin.

In agony, Janeway cried out- groaned- every fiber in her body howling in pained shock. She slowly collapsed onto the floor. Recollections of her previous assimilation stormed to the fore of her consciousness; unconscionable agony unleashed every terror and nightmare she'd ever survived. Waves of Borg technology rippled beneath her skin, tunneling through her tissues like greedy parasites.

The Queen's shadow enveloped Janeway. "You and I don't need words to understand each other."

Janeway heard the Queen's smile rather than saw it. Don't get cocky, Your Majesty. I'll still have the last laugh. Stubbornly, she hung on to the desire to witness the Queen's defeat, refusing to succumb to the invasion ravaging her body. Cell by cell, the nanoprobe cancer spread, searing away the messy "inadequacies" of individuality and rendering her a clean vessel to receive Borg "perfection." An implant sprouted through her skin as the technology devoured her from the inside.

Through pain-induced delirium, she had a vague notion of the Queen circling her like a predator closing in on wounded prey. I will not give in became Janeway's mantra as enduring her moment-to-moment struggle became progressively more excruciating. Denying the Queen the satisfaction of hearing her screams became paramount; she sought strength by clinging to that part of her mind that remained her own. There, she searched for the calm rationality of her scientist self to shore up her will.

Inhale...

Once a cadet had asked what assimilation felt like and Janeway had compared it to an army of billions of nano-sized rotors pillaging and plundering through subcellular passageways. Now she knew that description was wrong. What she felt had more in common with the glacial burn of a neutron star's liquid hydrogen core coursing through her veins. The cold scorching torment ebbed gradually into numbness. Whether by her own endorphins inducing a narcotic-like haze or by her nervous system surrendering and being overrun entirely by the invaders Janeway didn't care: she only knew that whatever scrap of her identity that had thus far eluded conquest was drifting away, disassociating from the drone body being built from her flesh.

Ghostly whispers encroached on her thoughts- the end must be near. Let go, Kathryn. Your time has come. The end is here.

In weak protest, she thought, Not yet! Not yet! Voyager isn't safe!

Though Janeway couldn't comprehend what was being said, she was aware of the voice of the collective filling the Queen's chamber as they acted, presumably on the Queen's orders, to stop Voyager.

The metallic monotone echoed "- redirect vessels to intercept."

Abruptly, a high-pitched whine sliced through the voices; the Queen staggered, Janeway winced. But as the whine died away, the metallic monotone gave way to cacophonous jumble.

"- corridor nine... Voyager... U.S.S.... zero nine... transwarp... intercept... unable to comply.."

Janeway, at last, felt satisfaction.

A console sparked. Lights flickered, dimmed. The whine erupted over the miasma, provoking visceral misery from the Queen, who, reeling from pain, grasped her head and covered her ears. Overcome, she gasped, stumbled forward, and braced herself on a metal beam.

Janeway locked gazes with the Queen. "Must be... something you assimilated..." she rasped, managing a half-smile. For a moment, the sweet satisfaction of leveling her enemy trumped her suffering.

"What have you done?" the Queen demanded.

"I thought we didn't need words to understand each other."

A shower of sparks burst from a console; the Queen shuddered. "You've infected us... with a neurolytic pathogen."

"Just enough to bring chaos to order."

The Queen breathed in sharply.

The Queen's obvious panic permitted Janeway to loosen her iron-clad control just enough to allow a little pressure release; her shoulders slackened, her limbs relaxed. The nanoprobes flooding her systems spilled over the levies she'd erected to protect what was left of her self.

This is the way the world ends, not with a bang...

Though her vision blurred, Janeway forced her gaze up to the floating viewscreen and watched Voyager soar through the corridor of the transwarp conduit. A spread of transphasic torpedoes streaked out behind her like little shooting stars. The fiery explosions began.

No. Janeway smiled to herself. It'll end with a bang.

"Voyager will be destroyed," the Queen stated.

You're not going to get to me now, you megalomaniacal bitch. "They're ahead of the shock wave. They'll survive... Captain Janeway and I made sure of that." Inhale... Crippling fatigue overtook her; Janeway fought the impulse to succumb. Instead, she reached up and, with the last of her strength, pulled herself up so she stood eye-to-eye with the Queen. "It's you... who underestimated us."

The Queen's body, overcome with tremors, quaked. Threads of energy crackled over her malfunctioning cybernetic limbs. Angrily, she yanked the offending arm out of its organic socket and tossed it to the ground.

It's only a matter of time now, Janeway thought. We won. How long before the cascading explosions triggered by Voyager finally destroyed the complex where she was housed was unknown to her- and she didn't care. At last, I've received absolution for all of it... Seven's death, Chakotay's broken heart, Tuvok's insanity... Bleary-eyed, she looked ahead. The view shimmered and shifted as if filtered through a warped lens. Janeway pressed her eyelids together, opened them, and felt her world shift woozily. Her head rolled back. A tightness around her neck- like a vise- she shook the sensation away, wanting to watch the viewscreen as long as she could-

Exhale.

Black.

Let go, Kathryn. It's your time....

Her mind drifted. Deliriously, she wondered if this was what death felt like. She was terribly uncomfortable for someone whose body was supposed to be lifeless. For starters, the squeezing sensation around her neck wouldn't go away. Something in the world outside pulled her toward it, refusing to allow her comfort in this warm, swimming world of syrupy darkness. Her eyelids fluttered open- and widened in shock.

Tuvok's dark face, contorted in anger, eyes blazing with madness, started down at her. What's he doing here with the Borg-

In that moment, she realized it was his hands she felt around her neck. Instinctually, she grabbed at his forearms, trying to wrench them away from her throat. His Vulcan strength was too much to overcome; he squeezed harder. She struggled, kicking at his legs, digging her heels into his thighs and calves. Denied her voice, she swung an arm out to the side and knocked over a tray filled with medical instruments, sending them to the floor with a metallic crash, hoping the noise would draw the staff's attention. She twisted her head to see if she could see anything or anyone that might be useful. She caught a flash of her reflection in the metal cart tipped on its side. A smooth-skinned face stared back at her. Auburn hair streaked with gray. I haven't looked like that for decades. Wait, I must be in Tuvok's residential facility. Where are the damn doctors- anyone? Don't they know he's dangerous and can't be left alone without sedation?

She felt around for anything she could use as a weapon- something sharp to stab him with, something heavy to knock him out. Light-headed from a lack of air, she tried twisting out of his grip enough to allow her to breathe. The lights in the room dimmed; Tuvok became a silhouette.

A door hissed open. A cry of concern. Rapid shuffling across the floor. Janeway's world became darker. She felt Tuvok's weight removed from her body and a gush of air into her lungs. A warm, sticky sensation spread down her arm.

"He's stabbed her... we have to stop that bleeding! Get a transfuser in here stat!" Seska shouted.

Janeway vaguely recalled what she could only assume was a shock-induced hallucination that she'd been having before she roused from unconsciousness. Something about being assimilated by the Borg Queen. This is the way the world ends....

Her eyes closed.

She heard a cry for help.

Let go, Kathryn. The next phase of your existence awaits you....

The darkness returned.

She sighed. Blinked. Looked up to see the dimpled, good-natured countenance of a Nechani temple attendant. What the hell...?! Tuvok? She blinked again, hoping she could muster enough logic to overcome her sense of disorientation. Studying her surroundings, she hoped, would help her recall where she was- what had brought her here. Then she remembered: Kes, the biogenic field, the ritual to find the cure. This ritual testing has sure messed with my head... my mind's wandered to the oddest places. Why would I be daydreaming about the Borg? And what's that about Tuvok being crazy? Must be the stress.

Brushing aside straying hair from her eyes, Janeway felt the clammy warmth of her cheeks, still sticky with sweat. The familiar ache of lactic acid buildup in her limbs reminded her of previous exertions. "I'm exhausted," she said, gratefully accepting a mug of hot tea from the guide. She sipped off the rim, relishing the moisture on her parched lips.

"Your microprobe must be giving your doctor plenty of good data," the guide said amusedly, then turned away to retrieve a waist-high rustic basket, which she placed before Janeway. "It's a Nessel," she said.

The basket rattled, uncomfortably reminiscent of a rattlesnake. Janeway's eyes widened. If this is what I must do to save my crew...

The guide continued, "They're able to travel from this world into the spirit realm; they serve as gatekeepers."

"Gatekeepers..." Janeway whispered. "Then I'm ready to enter the spirit realm?"

"Do you think you're ready?"

She considered the question, contemplating all she'd been through. Finally: "Yes, I do."

"Then you are."

The guide's warm, cheerful tone soothed Janeway's worries, but she couldn't help wishing for the Nechani woman to be more definitive in her pronouncements. Giving her trust so blindly terrified her. Her fears grew as she listened to the guide instruct her to put her hand through the leather folds covering the top of the hissing basket. But she'd committed to do this for Kes and she never backed away from a commitment.

Warily, Janeway knelt before the Nessel, and extended her hand toward the opening. Without warning, the noise in the basket became more agitated: she flinched.

"We can stop right now if you like," said the guide, obviously attuned to Janeway's hesitation.

"No, I'm not quitting," she said, determined to see the ritual through to the end. She shut her eyes, clenched her teeth, and plunged her arm into the basket nearly to her shoulder, tentatively feeling her way toward the bottom. Nearly imperceptible air currents ruffled the hair on her arm. She sensed the thing inside, rustling, slithering.

And it struck.

Screaming, Janeway ripped her arm out of the basket. Just under the elbow, on the fleshy part of her inner forearm, she saw the trio of fang marks. The wound burned like acid pouring over her skin; her breath came hard and short as her throat muscles tightened, pushing the air out of her body.

"Don't be afraid," said the guide placidly.

Her vision swimming, Janeway drifted toward unconsciousness. The electronic hiss and sputter of exploding equipment echoed through the descending gray... the Borg Queen's corpse twitched and jerked. The Borg?

Her eyes flickered open; she'd been moved. Where- she couldn't tell. From somewhere above, she heard the soothing maternal clucks of her guide. Glancing to the side, Janeway saw her reflection in the polished obsidian-like stone. The youthful crown of waist-length hair, tangled, matted with sweat, captured her attention. A stranger stared back at her. I cut my hair years ago. Shorter. More practical for active duty.

Could my life be passing before my eyes?

"I'm dying," she whispered, feeling far, far from home. She sensed life draining from her body... and yet not this body. It was all so strange and frightening but she was helpless to stop it.

"Everyone dies eventually," Seska said matter-of-factly.

Seska? But she died- The confusing thought ended abruptly when the stone doors slid closed above her, sealing tightly with a pop. Abandoned in blackness, Janeway refused to accept this fate. It felt... wrong... surreal. Yes, she was dragged slowly through time, deeper into the past- would her last recollection be the sun-crisped wheat fields of North America? Or the crisp tang of an autumn apple? She couldn't shake the sense of wrongness she had. This didn't feel the way death was supposed to feel. Yet a voice, deeply buried in her mind, kept intruding on her skeptical appraisal. You're so tired, Kathryn. You've lived your life, now you have a chance to give your life for someone else, for Kes. Let go... rest...

Janeway shook off the surrender impulse and returned to logic. This is a holoprogram- that's it. I'm stuck in a loop. I just need to end it.... She tried forming the words "Computer, end program" but no sound emerged. Drowsiness tingled in her fingers, softened her thinking. Why won't that damnable Borg voice go away? The scent of ozone, of smoking circuits, wafted into her nose.

And then she knew.

A dream.

Her eyes opened and she sat up, her Starfleet standard-issue blankets falling away. She rubbed her eyes with her fists, shook her head, and looked down. Her uniform. She touched her collar. Four pips. She looked over her shoulder out her window at starscape. Without warning, the swirling blue throat of the Bajoran wormhole unfurled like a flower and swallowed what she recognized as a Ferengi merchant vessel before snapping closed. The majestic sight never ceased to astonish her. Stretching, she took a deep breath, inhaling the rich scent of percolating black coffee.

Her quarters on Voyager.

Home.

She swung her legs over the side of her bed and dangled her feet over the floor, wary about testing the boundaries of her surroundings. Gingerly, she dropped to the carpet, squeezed her toes into the fiber. At least I had the sense to take my boots off before I took a nap.

"Janeway to bridge."

The comm system chirped. "Yes, Captain."

Stadi. A flash of memory prompted involuntary tears as she remembered the grief that overcame her at Stadi's death, when we were pulled through the Badlands to... the Delta Quadrant? She furrowed her brow.

Now, where would that idea have come from? She might have dreamed Stadi's death. But the Delta Quadrant? What a random bit of flotsam to penetrate her subconscious! A prolonged lucid dream certainly would explain the disquieting sense of disconnection she felt from her surroundings. Must be anxiety about the upcoming mission to find Tuvok and

the missing Maquis ship.

"Where are we, Stadi?"

"Docked at Deep Space 9, Captain. Your briefing with Commander Sisko begins in one hour. All rested and ready to go, ma'am?"

An unshakable nagging feeling pulled at her; no amount of logic or reason could shake her sense of wrongness. At last she said, "I hope so, Stadi, I genuinely hope so. I'll be up to the bridge momentarily."

"Alpha shift doesn't begin for another few hours, Captain. Nothing requiring your attention is pending. Pardon my saying so, but you were so tired earlier. You should rest."

Janeway clasped her hands together, steeled by a determination to find an explanation for her emotional turmoil- or at least a distraction from it. "No time like the present to begin. Janeway out." She rose from her bed, fussed with her hair for a moment, twisting it up into a utilitarian chignon, smoothed her uniform, and ran through a mental checklist before leaving early for her duty shift.

After her cabin doors swished closed behind her, Janeway started down the corridor to the bridge, nodding politely to her crew members as they passed. Some had served with her before, while others had joined her when she took command of Voyager. She prided herself on knowing them all on sight- home planets, previous assignments, personal details like marriages and children. But she wouldn't make the mistake of getting too attached: starship crews were always in flux. Command frequently made transfers based on factors ranging from merit, individual request, skills training, and need to punishment and demotion. Janeway wasn't yet senior enough in her captaincy to have all her requests honored, but she had gained some clout, evidenced recently by a plum assignment to the Intrepid-class's newest vessel-

She paused, narrowing her eyes. Wait...

Ahead of her, she saw, in profile, an unfamiliar Bajoran woman wearing the gold uniform of security and engineering. Her brown hair was pulled tightly back against her skull and twisted into a knot at the base of her head. Dark, arched eyebrows punctuated a severe face- high, angular cheekbones, thin lips, downturned slightly. She studied the Bajoran for a brief second before the woman disappeared around the corner.

I know her... Janeway mused, the realization disturbing her. The disquieting feeling crept back into her consciousness. She shivered and realization struck.

I know you.

Janeway walked briskly after the Bajoran woman, colliding with an unsuspecting crewman as she turned the corner. Muttering a monosyllabic apology, eyes drilled forward, she continued her single-minded pursuit. A flash of dark hair ahead led her onward. The corridor's twists and turns led her into an area of the ship she didn't recognize. For a long moment she imagined that she must be lost, though how that was possible in her ship she couldn't fathom. Voyager might be newly under her command, but she prided herself on knowing every square meter of its corridors. This is ridiculous, Kathryn, she thought. You're chasing apparitions. She pivoted on her heel, pointed in the general direction of the turbolift to the bridge, and took a step forward-

Smack!

Janeway stepped back, startled, "I'm sorry, I didn't see you- "

Before her eyes, the Bajoran in a Starfleet uniform morphed into a Cardassian woman, hair flowing down around her shoulders.

"- Seska," the name a sibilant hiss from Janeway's lips. "What the hell- "

"Think of me as an envoy. And before you ask why me and not someone nice like your father or Justin... let's just say you're your best self with your enemies, and leave it at that."

Janeway placed balled fists on her hips. "Nothing you say or do matters an iota to me."

A self-congratulatory grin split Seska's face, and she laughed. "You're so predictable."

Janeway's impulses warred between knocking down the traitor's obvious gloating a few notches with a swift punch, or ignoring the woman entirely. I'm not going to give her the pleasure, she thought. She pinched her lips into a tight line and turned to leave, shoulders squared. She couldn't resist an aside as she stepped past Seska, saying offhandedly, "Besides, you're dead."

A searing pain burned through the right side of her rib cage; Janeway grunted, and clutched her side with her hands, feeling blurts of liquid warmth erupting against her palms. Wide-eyed, she stared at the bloodstained blade in her attacker's hand.

"And so are you, Captain," Seska said with a sneer.

Inhale...

Command Code

Robert Greenberger

This tale takes place shortly after "Caretaker," the pilot episode of Star Trek: Voyager.

Robert Greenberger

Robert Greenberger has been writing about and for Star Trek since he was in junior high school. Since then, he has moved from the ranks of fandom into the professional realm, editing DC Comics' Star Trek and Star Trek: The Next Generation comics. His proudest achievement was the award-winning graphic novel Debt of Honor. He made his fiction debut with the collaborative novel ST: TNG: Doomsday World and has since gone on to write several other collaborations and solo efforts. Most recently, he wrote Star Trek: A Time to Love and Star Trek: A Time to Hate. Beyond Star Trek, he continues working at DC as a senior editor and has additionally written a handful of short stories and more than a dozen nonfiction titles for young adults on a wide variety of subjects. A diehard New York Mets fan, he makes his home in Connecticut with his wife, Deb, and children, Kate and Robbie.

Tuvok welcomed the silence of the bridge. The automatic systems hummed and chirruped on occasion but they were tranquil compared with the cacophony of the past two days. Standing at the tactical station he noted that all the telltales showed green. With his long,

slender fingers, Tuvok traced down the status board until he reached the bottom. Looking up with satisfaction, he surveyed the emptiness of the Bridge.

It didn't take much to persuade Janeway to allow him to stay behind while she and the others conducted a memorial service for those who had died so far from home. He had slaved helm and operations controls to his tactical board and given the unremarkable readings coming through Voyager's long-range sensors, little trouble was expected.

It wasn't that the Vulcan felt nothing toward those who had died; after all, he had served with both Captain Janeway and First Officer Cavit for a time before the ship, its crew, and a Maquis vessel were all flung across the Milky Way. Now, as the ship and its combined personnel began its seventy-year journey homeward, Tuvok's mind now turned to the challenge of ensuring the immediate and long-term stability of Voyager and her crew. Ignoring the ration pack Janeway had placed at his side when she left the bridge, Tuvok considered the situation. His personal grieving for those lost had been completed the night before, during his meditation period. He now allowed his mind to wander a bit, keeping the status board within his peripheral vision. Several dozen members of the Maquis were expected to fit in with the Voyager crew, adopting- some for the first time- Starfleet regulations and habits. Given the simmering anger several of the Maquis still felt toward Starfleet and the Federation, Tuvok had insured that his security teams remained in place near the armory and engineering, plus he implemented new protocols to restrict replicator usage. He had already anticipated a need to retrain his people given the new status quo. In the meantime, Tuvok was reviewing what he knew of the Maquis from the weeks he had spent among them, undercover, that no doubt made him a target for their anger. Another potential target for Maquis reprisal was the newly recommissioned flight officer, Tom Paris, still seen by some as having betrayed them.

Starfleet regulations made no provision for such an unexpected turn of events, and they would certainly need bending if not rewriting long before the starship completed its journey back to the Alpha Quadrant. But for now, the existing letter of the law was to apply to one and all; he was just going to make certain everyone else knew that, too.

His thoughts were interrupted by the swoosh of the turbolift doors opening, and the silence was shattered with conversation.

"How could you not have noticed Jenny Delaney?" Paris questioned Harry Kim as they emerged onto the bridge.

"I barely got to make a tour of the ship let alone meet everyone before, you know, I got taken by the Caretaker," Kim replied. Tuvok noted the plaintive tone in his voice and reconfirmed his opinion that the ensign would need seasoning before he was ready to accept additional responsibilities.

"She's got a sister," Paris said brightly, taking up his forward position at the helm. "A twin." Kim didn't reply and settled back in at ops.

Also entering the bridge were Chakotay and Seska, both ex-Maquis. Tuvok knew that they had been romantically linked, but their body language implied the relationship had changed, and was likely over. Seska took her post at the auxiliary engineering console as Chakotay, Janeway's choice to succeed commander Cavit, seated himself in the first officer's chair.

Moments later, the doors whisked open again; this time the captain herself emerged, briskly striding to her chair. He admired her determination and the steel nerve required to bring

such disparate groups together and forge a harmony. Well, not harmony as yet, but that was her stated goal. One he found logical, despite its difficulties. The common goal was to get home, and to do that in one piece they would have to bury their differences and work together. Her personal comments, spoken less than forty-eight hours earlier, echoed in his mind: her promise to reunite him with T'Pol and his children.

* * *

Chakotay was still getting used to being aboard a Starfleet vessel again. He recognized the upgrades added since his last posting; they were at once familiar and unique. The sounds and even the smells were comforting in their familiarity, but the provisional rank bar at his collar, despite its size, felt like a huge weight. It was one thing to command a ship full of like-minded freedom fighters, all burning with a special kind of passion. This was different. This was everything he rejected out of anger, and now it appeared to be the only likely solution to the question of survival.

When Janeway broached the notion of combining crews and following Starfleet protocols, he readily agreed. Without structure and some form of discipline, the seventy-year journey would never be completed for either crew. Since he made that agreement, though, the grumbles from his former Maquis team were not lost on him. There'd be time enough to talk to them one on one, he knew. In fact, there was likely to be plenty of opportunity to talk to them two and three times, something that might be required for a few of them, particularly notorious complainers like Dalby and Chell.

What left him feeling uneasy were two of the bridge crew, people he'd be dealing with every day. There was Paris, a Starfleet washout and a failure as a Maquis who then worked against them for his own selfish goals. And yet, mere days ago, Paris rescued him from certain death. Who was this young man?

Tuvok was also something of an enigma. The Vulcan had infiltrated his own cell and provided Starfleet with intelligence that resulted in the Badlands chase, which led to the current predicament. While he respected that Tuvok was doing his duty, Chakotay couldn't shake the notion of having been betrayed- by both Tuvok and Tom Paris- and he remained ambivalent in his feelings toward them.

He turned his attention to the trim woman, his new commanding officer, who said in a slightly strained voice, "Chakotay, the quartermaster indicates all of the Maquis crew have received the requisite personal items to help them settle onto the ship." Clearly, preparing her remarks for the service had once again pushed her toward exhaustion. She had spoken well, choosing her words carefully to acknowledge the loss of life from both crews. His estimation of her continued to rise, and he hoped his fellow travelers saw how special she was.

"Thank you, Captain; I'm sure they appreciate it."

"It's not a kindness, Chakotay," Janeway said wearily. "For them to live and function, they need things beyond clothing. We've seen to that. And not a moment too soon. The entire replicator system seems to be malfunctioning."

"How is engineering coming along?" the new first officer asked, still adjusting himself to thinking ahead, using Starfleet skills he thought he'd no longer need.

"Slowly," she said. "The worst of the damage is cleaned up, but we need to goose those

engines if we want to get home on schedule." She gave him a tired grin and then returned her attention the main screen.

"Mr. Kim," the captain called out, turning to face the young ensign. "See what you can do with the impulse reactors. Maybe we can channel additional power from there."

"Aye, Captain," Kim said brightly, hands already tapping controls. Chakotay wondered what it was like to be so young, so eager for the challenges ahead. For a moment, he envied Kim his naivete.

"We'll have a senior staff meeting tomorrow morning at 1100 hours and see what the first set of priorities is," Janeway added.

Before Chakotay could respond, the ship shuddered and rocked. A bright flare obscured the stars on the main viewscreen. It was a struggle for most of the crew to remain in their seats, especially as a second and then a third discharge rocked the starship. He'd ridden through the worst the Badlands had to offer and was better prepared than crew like young Kim. No doubt Tuvok's superior Vulcan strength allowed him to remain upright and at his post while just about everyone else had tumbled to the deck. The entire ship had automatically gone to red alert, manifested on the bridge by the shift in lighting and hasty evacuation of nonessential personnel.

"All decks show ready," Tuvok noted. "Except engineering."

"Bridge to Lieutenant Carey," Janeway called.

"Carey here," came the reply.

"Why isn't engineering ready for red alert?" the captain demanded. Whatever lethargy had been in her voice before was gone now. Chakotay stole a look at the captain's expression and it likely mirrored his own. Engineering was a definite weak area, one that needed serious attention, maybe with some of his own people taking on larger roles, starting with Torres. But that would have to wait.

"Taking a bit longer than I thought to clear our work. We had a lot of open panels. We're... engineering now reports ready."

"Faster next time. Bridge out." Turning to Chakotay she noted, "We have to start restaffing our departments, then training them. That'll be topic one at the meeting." As he nodded in agreement, she was already looking up at Tuvok and demanded, "What the hell was that?"

"A form of energy," Tuvok began. Janeway snapped around in the opposite direction looking at Kim, who was shaking hair from his eyes. He continued to run through a series of screens, ignoring the impatient captain. Chakotay recognized that eager-to-please look and idly wondered how long it would be before that got rubbed off him.

"Paris, all stop, go to stationkeeping," Chakotay ordered.

"All stop, aye," Paris said crisply.

The agonizing silence was finally broken when Kim, his eyes clouded with confusion, said, "It's unknown, ma'am."

Janeway shook her head in disbelief. Twisting herself the other way, she looked at her tactical officer.

"No vessels appear on sensors."

"Neither did that energy discharge, Tuvok. I want answers."

"Understood." Tuvok once more bent over his station and reran the sensor logs from just before the first explosion to now. He also acknowledged the reports of minor injuries and the lack of structural damage.

"The energy is of a type previously uncatalogued," Kim finally answered.

"I don't understand," Seska said from behind Tuvok.

"Our sensors are calibrated to read only what they're programmed to find. Anything else may as well be invisible," Chakotay explained. She still looked attractive, despite the subdued red lighting, he noted. Their affair had been tempestuous but satisfying, the right relationship at the right time, but it had ended before Tuvok or even Paris entered their lives. She was a trusted confidant and the first to stand beside him in a dispute. That she survived their ordeals to date pleased him no end.

* * *

"Captain, we may have triggered something," Kim started to say. Tuvok looked across the bridge at the young ensign, studying his moves, learning about him more from observation than actual conversation, something he needed to remedy in the days to come. Frustrated by inaction, the captain walked to the upper deck and stood before Kim, restraining herself from actually standing beside him in the cramped space of his station.

"Triggered what, Mr. Kim?"

"It appears that our warp bubble may have triggered a minefield. Now that I know what to look for, I'm reading a chain of linked objects."

"Linked how, Mr. Kim?" Janeway asked, restoring a sense of decorum to the bridge. The panic, for now, had ended, and it was time to investigate before proceeding.

"I'm accessing Mr. Kim's work," Tuvok said. He began reading the new telemetry, adding minute adjustments, refining what it was they were looking at. Everyone seemed to be waiting for him to finish working before they spoke again. To humans, he noted, that would add pressure to hurry the work. He had long since learned not to let such expectations force him to alter his efforts.

Three minutes passed before he once more looked up, and he was not at all surprised to see half the bridge complement looking his way. "Captain, the link is a frequency we normally do not scan for, high on the subspace frequency chart. I've mapped out what is essentially a minefield. Mr. Kim was correct: our warp bubble did trigger a proximity alarm, and a subspace signal activated these mines."

"Why can't we see them?" Paris asked.

"Unknown. We'd have to actually find one and bring it aboard for further study," Tuvok

replied.

"I don't think bringing a live mine aboard the ship is... the logical course of action," Janeway said with a smile.

"Nor do I," Tuvok said, refusing to rise to her joke. He recognized the human need for humor to help cut through the moment's tension but chose not to participate.

"We could go up and over, but that would take time I'd rather not waste. Is there a path we can maneuver through?"

"I believe so. The spacing implies that they are intended to stop vessels larger than Voyager. As a result, we can, with caution, make our way through."

"Transfer data to the helm. Tom, study the optimal course and let's make sure we can get through safely."

"Aye," Paris replied, and swiveled back to the helm, hands rubbing together in anticipation. Tuvok had noted that Paris preferred challenges and that routine work practically bored him. He suspected that Paris might enjoy the unknowns between here and the Alpha Quadrant more than anyone else aboard.

After a short but acceptable interval, Paris looked over his shoulder at the command chair. With a grin he said, "Course plotted. It'll be narrow in spots but should be a fun ride. I have to warn you, the engines are a bit sluggish, so don't expect quick reactions."

Janeway nodded.

"Tuvok, secure from red alert. Keep everyone on yellow alert, inform department heads what we're doing, and let's get started." Tuvok acknowledged the order, and as he complied, Janeway walked to the rear and stood by Seska's auxiliary engineering post.

"Seska, right?"

"Yes, Captain," the Bajoran woman replied.

"Please keep an eye on engine efficiency. If it falls any lower, let me know immediately. Coordinate with Lieutenant Carey to make sure we have maximum thrust and maneuverability."

"Of course, Captain," Seska replied. Once more she stole a look at Chakotay.

"Are we ready, Mr. Paris?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Let's get started. Full impulse for now."

Everyone on the bridge, save Tuvok, seemed to shift their position, settling in for more anticipated jolts. Tuvok merely looked at his board, and then at the main screen. He watched the stars seemingly veer out of the ship's way when the reality was that Paris was moving the ship above, then around, and again above the nearest mines.

For several minutes, the ship performed without flaw. Tuvok watched as people settled into more relaxed poses, except for Paris, who was working at a steady pace. Janeway was leaning forward, her body anticipating the next move, occasionally moving a bit to the left or right as if she were rocking with a boat on a choppy sea.

Tuvok saw a sudden change in readouts, and as he opened his mouth in warning, the ship rocked hard to starboard, dumping everyone once more from their seats. Even the Vulcan lost his footing as the ship continued to list to starboard, sending the crew across the deck and into rails, consoles, or bulkheads. He heard the red-alert klaxon, and once again the lighting shifted. Reaching with one hand, he righted himself, but not without some struggle. And if he had to rely on his stronger muscles, then he imagined how difficult it was going to be for the others.

Although he was concerned about his crewmates, Tuvok forced himself to focus on the tactical board. The ship was continuing to move, veering off course and nearing another mine. Engines, he noted, were down four percent in efficiency, and the hull seemed intact. Whatever the energy was, it didn't seem to pose a serious threat while the shields remained strong.

"Paris, can you steer us?" Janeway called, and then Tuvok looked and saw her on one knee, reaching for Chakotay's armrest. The first officer was sprawled several meters away, just now beginning to rise.

"I'll try," Paris said as he gripped one edge of the helm, helping right himself. Hand over hand, he worked his way to the center and, without pausing to sit, looked at his board and then entered commands. The change in subliminal sound indicated he was cutting propulsion, and he heard a whine as the inertial stabilizers were attempting to right the ship.

"Watch out!" Paris's sudden cry immediately caused Tuvok to grip his station and plant his feet, determined to ride out whatever came next. Despite the warning, the next mine exploded right over the bridge. It did not pierce the shielding, but the concussive force rattled the upper hull of the starship and people once more were bounced around, flotsam caught in a sudden wind. Holding himself in place, Tuvok could only watch as Janeway went tumbling forward, her head smacking into the helm, bouncing her backward and into Paris's chair. Finally, she slumped to the ground.

"Captain!" Chakotay called to her, then crawled over to check her pulse.

Tuvok remained at his post, despite a desire to help his friend. Instead, he turned and ordered Seska to assist the first officer.

"Mr. Paris, keep us moving," Chakotay called as he continued to check the captain's vital signs.

"Bridge to sickbay," Kim called. "Activate Emergency Medical Hologram."

Within a second, a voice replied over the bridge speaker, "Please state the nature of the medical emergency. Oh. Where is everyone?"

"This is the bridge," Kim replied. "We're under fire and the captain's unconscious. She'll be brought down in a moment. Please stand by."

"Understood." And the hologram cut the signal.

"Smart move, Harry," Paris, finally in his chair, called from the helm.

"Cut the chatter," Chakotay snapped. "Seska, you and Lieutenant Baxter take the captain to sickbay."

Tuvok knew that Janeway making Chakotay first officer made a great deal of sense to her, but he suspected even she had not imagined that he would be left in command during a potentially hostile situation so soon after coming aboard the ship. "Commander Chakotay, what are your orders?"

* * *

What were those first orders to be? Chakotay hadn't counted on being left in command during a crisis this quickly. In the short time since moving aboard Voyager, he had barely had a chance to read up on the ship's more state-of-the-art specs. He knew about the neural gel packs which altered the way the ship responded to commands, but little else. He also knew that how he comported himself during this crisis was how he was going to be perceived not only by Janeway's people, but his own.

His next thoughts were interrupted by Tuvok's firm voice.

"We need to leave the minefield as expeditiously as possible," Tuvok said to Chakotay. The first officer narrowed his eyes, disapproving of being told what to do. He blinked and cleared the expression, surveyed the bridge, and then settled back in his chair, leaving Janeway's empty.

"Status, people," Chakotay called out, stalling his first order.

"Shields are stable," Tuvok reported.

"Engines lost six percent efficiency," Paris added. "Lieutenant Carey's trying to compensate. Helm responsiveness is down; it's how we hit that mine. Once off course, it was just a matter of time before we hit another." Torres could have those repaired in a nanosecond, Chakotay mused.

"Tuvok, can phasers destroy the mines from a safe distance?" Chakotay asked.

"Unknown. Each detonation has shown consistent range and yield. However, a succession of such explosions may either increase the energy fallout in the vicinity or possibly trigger a larger chain reaction."

"You mean they may all explode at once?" Kim's voice took on the nervous timbre that Chakotay started to find irritating. Was he ever so young?

"It is one possibility," Tuvok replied dryly.

Chakotay sat back, hands gripping the ends of the armrests. After a few silent moments he leaned forward and asked, "Paris, what's our best course out of the mine field?"

"Long-range sensors indicate they stop at z-plus five-hundred million kilometers. We could go up and over the field."

"How long would that take us compared with going through the field?"

"Since we don't know the length of the field, that's hard to say."

Chakotay struggled to make a decision; there was insufficient data to be comfortable. A sound caused him to turn his head, and he watched as Seska, grim-faced, returned to her post from having delivered the captain to sickbay. She did not even look in his direction.

"We have something, Commander," Tuvok said instantly. All heads turned toward Tuvok, who continued to monitor status from his board.

"Something?" Chakotay asked. "That's awfully imprecise for you." Did he imagine the tone of pique in his voice?

"Five ships approaching at warp six, estimated arrival in eighteen minutes, twenty-five seconds," Kim called out.

First mines, now ships, likely hostile. This was not at all what he expected even when expecting the unknown. No doubt Voyager was going to be outgunned, so what other options existed? He was even uncertain of the starship's top speed, which was no doubt compromised by the engine inefficiency.

Chakotay looked up sharply at Kim and then at the screen, as if he could see the ships for himself. Time to act. He settled himself in his chair and ordered for shields to be activated.

"Commander, the vessels are coming into range," Tuvok announced a few minutes later. Both Tuvok and Kim attempted to refine the data input, but the starships were still too far out. Chakotay had to keep from drumming his fingers along the armrest, force himself to remain in control.

"Any subspace chatter?"

"Nothing I can detect," Kim answered.

Chakotay rattled off questions to Kim, Paris, and Seska, assessing not only the ship's ability to put up a fight, but the crew's ability to function. In the short time they were together, the crew had already been pitted against Kazon Ogla battle cruisers, but that time they were still on two ships, with two different ways of fighting. Janeway would never have sacrificed Voyager to buy Chakotay time. He reflected that she would have found some weakness to exploit, the scientist in her winning out over the warrior in Chakotay.

He had heard enough, letting a portion of his mind absorb the information while another reviewed the options as he saw it. Finally, he was ready to commit the ship and crew to a course of action, one he suspected Janeway would approve when she recovered.

The first officer said, "Paris, full reverse. Get us back into the field where mines have already exploded so we have clear space to maneuver."

"Full reverse, aye," Paris said.

* * *

Tuvok nodded contemplatively. The option was a valid one, if not as sound as the one he

anticipated. It appeared as if Chakotay was preparing for a battle, which was not something the ship and its crew was truly equipped for at this point. After all, there remained key posts unfilled, and the melded crew had barely learned each other's names, let alone drilled together. It was going to be difficult to know how they would perform under enemy fire with an untested captain.

But was Chakotay untested? Before he joined the Maquis, Chakotay had served aboard other Starfleet vessels, and Tuvok had witnessed Chakotay outthink and outfight the Cardassians on more than one occasion. Still, the Vulcan considered a thirty-nine-year-old ship and known enemy to be entirely different than the current situation. The matter merited close scrutiny.

Tuvok's thoughts were interrupted as the turbolift doors opened and Kes, the Ocampa female recently added to the crew's complement, entered the bridge. She seemed on the verge of panic, quite logical considering the unknowns she was facing. With Neelix, she asked to accompany Voyager on its journey homeward, hoping to learn much in the few years she had. Her kind, he was fascinated to learn, averaged only nine years of life, developing rapidly. To an Ocampa- even more than to humans or even the longer-lived Vulcans- every moment counted.

"Can I help you, Kes?" Chakotay asked.

"I was looking for the captain, Mr. Chakotay," she said, in her husky whisper. "I'm not sure where I should be."

"During red alert, every crewman goes to an assigned post," the first officer explained patiently. He frowned in thought. "I guess we haven't gotten around to assigning places for you and Neelix. We'll tend to that another time. Right now, though, the captain was injured and is in sickbay. It's the safest part of the ship, and I suggest you head down there. Help the doctor if you can."

"Thank you," she said softly, and turned on her heel.

As Kes entered the lift doors, Chakotay took a moment to survey the bridge, settled on Kim, and asked him to access the doctor's channel. In moments, a screen by Kim's station lit up and the doctor's stern face filled it.

"How's the captain?"

"She was knocked unconscious by the fall, but it's nothing more than a mild concussion. I have her sedated."

"Any other serious injuries?"

"I don't know. When I can get back to tending them, I'll know better. Sickbay out."

As the screen went dark, Chakotay muttered, "I'd certainly like to know how Starfleet authorized that program. Paris, how long until they're in firing range?"

"Five minutes, twenty-seven seconds out," the helmsman replied. "They're moving in what would seem to be an erratic pattern until you allow for the mines."

"Tuvok, anything from the sensors?"

"I am attempting to refine the input," the Vulcan admitted. "At this distance, it is difficult to be precise about anything beyond their unique warp signature and size. Each of the five appears to be less than one-third the size of Voyager. They are commensurately proportioned for the minefield." He had long ago forced himself to turn his precise measurements into human-preferred approximations. It continued to grate against his natural tendencies, but his little adjustments made his association with humans far more tolerable.

"Are they Kazon?" Chakotay asked.

Tuvok studied the schematic images the computer created from the sensor input and quickly called up scans taken of the two Kazon images from the Ocampo homeworld. "Negative," he said after a moment. "While the Kazon seem widespread throughout this portion of the Delta Quadrant, the warp signatures of the approaching vessels are different."

"What have you learned about the Kazon from Neelix?" Chakotay asked.

"I have not had ample opportunity to ask Mr. Neelix for many details," Tuvok admitted. He avoided the truth, which was the Talaxian annoyed him - not a typical Vulcan response. Neelix stood too close to Tuvok, seemed to share a child's fascination with every facet of starship technology, and, even among humans, seemed overly talkative. Avoiding him, Tuvok realized with chagrin, may have put the ship in jeopardy.

"Neelix to the bridge," Chakotay called and refrained from further comment. He turned in his chair and looked directly at Tuvok. "I want phasers online, Tuvok," he ordered.

"Sir, may I remind you that most starship captains refrain from appearing hostile during first contact? It's covered in General Order Twelve- "

"You may remind me, Tuvok," Chakotay said, an edge creeping into his voice. "But let me remind you that the minefield tells me we need to proceed with caution."

"The field is a defensive tool, not offensive," Tuvok countered. He then added, "Phasers charged and online."

Ignoring the Vulcan, Chakotay turned and said over his left shoulder, "Can you hail them, Mr. Kim?"

"I can try," Kim replied, sounding not at all convinced. Kim's fingers began transmitting a standard Starfleet hail in the Kazon, Ocampo, and Talaxian languages, presuming the nearby aliens might recognize one or the other. Not for the first time, Tuvok reflected that there was still so much to be learned in order to be prepared for dealing with Delta Quadrant unknowns.

"No response," Kim said after twenty seconds. "They're coming within phaser range now."

The ships appeared as large dots in the distance, and their formation did not appear threatening. Nevertheless, Tuvok entered targeting solutions into his console. He then performed the mildest of scans to look for hostile intent.

"No weapons activity that I can detect," he reported.

"They're slowing down to sublight," Paris called. "Now within phaser range."

"Take us out of warp, Mr. Paris. Keep two hundred thousand kilometers between us and them," the first officer ordered.

"Two hundred thousand, aye," Paris repeated. For everything Tuvok had read about Tom Paris, he seemed to be readjusting to his Starfleet career without problem. Still, his actions had caused loss of life and his directionless path did lead to an unsuccessful stint with the Maquis. His performance on the Ocampo homeworld was exemplary, going so far as to save Chakotay's life. Tuvok judged that of the new crew, Paris was going to pose little trouble.

"I'm reading an energy signature," Kim said, his voice rising and in panic, snapping Tuvok from his wandering thoughts. "I don't recognize it!"

* * *

"Get a grip on yourself, Kim," Chakotay snapped. Before he could continue, the viewscreen practically glowed as five bright emerald beams of light emerged, one from each alien ship. Looking up from the deck at his chair screen, it appeared the beams were all aimed on the exact same spot on Voyager's hull, the foremost point of the saucer section.

"Status!" Chakotay called as he rose slowly from the deck, feeling the aches that would later turn black and blue.

"Minor damage to the hull from their coherent energy discharges," Tuvok replied. "It appears to be weaker than our standard phasers but concentrated like that, it will pose a problem if our shields fail."

"Do we fire back?" Paris asked.

"Not yet," Chakotay answered. He managed to make it back to his chair before the light show began again. As the five beams once more struck Voyager, the crew was shaken just as violently.

"They've increased intensity," Tuvok noted. "Shields holding, but another volley will begin to weaken them." His fingers checked the sensor input and added, "If they double the power again, we may sustain damage."

Chakotay heard coughing and turned to watch Neelix stumble from the turbolift, smoke trailing after him. His garishly colored clothes made him easy to spot regardless of lighting. Fire-suppression control had automatically kicked in, fans clearing the acrid air.

"Who are they, Neelix?"

The Talaxian stepped down to stand beside Chakotay, and he stared at the ships, which seemed to hover like dark predators in the night sky.

"Increase magnification, Mr. Kim," Chakotay called.

"Magnification times five," Harry replied, sounding more in control, doing routine things being helpful to the ensign. The screen blurred for a moment and one of the ships dominated the viewscreen. It was smaller than Voyager, designed for speed with its

nacelles set low and well behind the circular main body. Red highlights stood out from the gray hull plating- possibly an alien language, but time did not allow for analysis.

"Are they Kazon?"

"No, Mr. Vulcan, they are not," Neelix said. "I'm not sure who they are. I've never seen that silhouette before."

"Who controls this sector of space?"

"I thought it was the Kazon Ogla," Neelix answered. "Maybe they're new to the region, as you are."

"They're powering up again," Tuvok announced. Chakotay expected he would have to open fire, but he wasn't ready to do that. Not yet. Not without learning more.

"Evasive maneuvers, Paris. Be creative and avoid the fire," Chakotay said sharply, expecting that to keep weapons fire away from the hull.

"Aye, sir," Paris answered. Chakotay saw a smile cross the pilot's features. Clearly, Paris liked being given a free hand to fly the ship and why not, he appeared good at it.

As the starship banked down and to starboard, the five ships belched more green fire at Voyager. While Paris was creative with his evasive maneuvers, certainly not following the book, the engines proved unable to keep up, and the fire concentrated on one of the shields, causing an overload. As systems compensated, the bridge lights flickered and the deck shook.

"They're firing again!" Kim called.

"Damage report," Chakotay called.

Tuvok promptly replied, "Port shield emitters are offline. Repairs are under way. Departments are reporting additional minor injuries."

"We're whole?" Chakotay inquired, somewhat in disbelief.

"Aye, sir," Tuvok replied.

"Mr. Kim, what are those ships made of?"

"From this distance the sensors are not entirely effective, but their hull plating isn't a match to anything in our database. Their shielding system is unusual- layered, like an onion- "

"Can we punch through them?"

"Unknown."

"Any comm activity?"

Kim paused to check his station. "Some, not a lot. I've been running what we have through the universal translator. No luck so far."

"I think it's time we showed them our teeth," Chakotay said. "Mr. Tuvok, fire phasers."

"Aye, sir," Tuvok said. The phasers lanced through the void and struck the nearest ship's shields. The energy field flared illuminating its shape for a split second, the yellow light nearly whiting out the viewscreen.

"Damage?"

"Their shields are holding," Tuvok reported, "though their engine efficiency appears to be down."

"With five ships we can only take on one at a time. We're outgunned," Chakotay said. He paused a moment, running a hand through his close-cropped hair. "Mr. Paris, plot a course, 129 mark 7. Let's put some distance between us."

"Course plotted," Paris answered.

"Execute," Chakotay said. "Put tactical on the main viewer."

The inky, starlit space was replaced with a computer-generated representation of the area. Voyager was represented by the Starfleet emblem while the five alien ships were green silhouettes based on sensor input. The five vessels were in motion, changing their configuration, spreading out.

"They are widening the space between themselves," Tuvok said. "Making it more difficult for us to engage more than one at a time, leaving our flanks exposed."

Chakotay felt like he was being lectured, but it was just a recitation from his tactical officer, nothing pejorative in that. He still chafed at the cold tones.

"How many torpedoes do we have?"

"Thirty-eight," Tuvok replied. "The captain indicated they were to be used only in the direst of cases."

"Doesn't this count?"

Tuvok frowned at the question. "That is not for me to say. You, sir, are in command."

Chakotay stared at the Vulcan and tried to read for emotional hints on his face. He couldn't read the placid expression and devoted his attentions to the pressing matters on the bridge.

"Mr. Kim, any luck with deciphering their communications?"

Harry shook his head and Chakotay nodded, turning his attention once more to the viewscreen. Then the commander snapped his fingers, pointing his index finger at the Talaxian. "Neelix, go listen in with Kim. See if you recognize the language."

Neelix moved to the upper deck and leaned over the station, coming within two inches of Harry's head. Chakotay wasn't sure what to make of the Talaxian. After all, he deceived the crew into helping them rescue Kes from the Kazon, but it turned out for the best since they learned more about the Caretaker and one of the most fascinating, if short-lived, races, he had yet encountered. Neelix also struck him as a jack of all trades, master of none, and

Chakotay wasn't sure how he'd fit in on a crew trained for purpose.

Speaking of purpose, he felt the tension rising on the Bridge and felt the need to cut it somewhat. Twisting in his chair, he addressed his tactical officer.

"Well Tuvok, it's not the first time we've faced such long odds, is it?"

Tuvok seemed to ignore the barb, a reference to their time together aboard the Maquis vessel, and concentrated on his status board.

The first officer once more faced the viewscreen, asking the entire bridge crew for status.

"The five vessels are now moving in concert. Looks to be a classic pincer move," Paris said.

"All hostile shields intact," Tuvok added. "Port shield emitters will be operational in five minutes."

"Not good enough," Chakotay snapped; so much for improving the tension level. "Bridge to engineering. I want those shields back online."

"Understood, sir," Carey's voice said. "It's our top priority."

"Ah... Commander Chakotay," Neelix said tentatively from Kim's post.

Chakotay turned and looked at the Talaxian. "Something important I hope?"

"The language, sir, I recognize it." Neelix, seeming unsure of himself, hesitated. Chakotay's eyes narrowed, concentrating their focus on Neelix, making him cringe.

"Who are they?" he demanded.

"The Dresh. Fiercely territorial. I'm not at all surprised they would mine the border of their space."

"And why didn't you warn us about them when we chose this course?" Tuvok asked. Something Chakotay was about to ask himself.

"Well... that is, Mr. Chakotay... Tuvok... the last time I was through this particular region, they weren't here. They were parsecs away. I guess they... extended their reach."

"That's putting it mildly," Paris quipped.

"Neelix, what do we need to know about them?"

"They do not negotiate," Neelix began, his voice sounding firmer as he relayed information he was sure about. "They take what they feel is theirs, scoffing at weaker races."

"Sounds a bit like your Klingon girlfriend, Harry," Tom added.

"That's enough, Paris. Keep your comments to yourself," Chakotay snapped. The reference to B'Elanna Torres was innocent enough, but he felt fiercely protective of her. She was, after all, a gifted engineer and he owed her his life more than once or twice. Still, he had to watch

his tone before things resembled a Maquis bridge more than a Starfleet command crew.

"Paris, continue evasive maneuvers, buy us some space and some time," Chakotay ordered, then returned his attention to Neelix. "What have you made out from their communications?"

"Well, sir, it seems they're confused by Voyager. It looks like no ship they know, and that concerns them. Also, we're not surrendering, something else that surprises them."

"We're being scanned," Kim called. "It's fairly passive, but they're looking for something."

* * *

"A weakness, Mr. Kim," Tuvok explained patiently. "They are having difficulty piercing the shields, so they want to make each barrage count. We are as much a mystery to them as they are to us." For a brief moment, he questioned the thoroughness of Kim's Starfleet education but dismissed it as an overly harsh assessment since he himself was years removed from actually being an Academy instructor.

"But," Chakotay said, a small smile on his face, "we have Neelix to give us an edge. I want to use that. Kim, open a channel. And Neelix, help us start a dialogue."

As Kim acknowledged the order, Neelix returned to stand by Harry's elbow. In fact, as he watched the youthful officer enter commands, he leaned a bit too closely. After a moment, Harry stopped his work and looked at Neelix. It took the Talaxian a moment to realize he needed to step back. Harry gave him a short smile and returned to his task. Tuvok, watching the moment, was oddly pleased to see that he was not the only one so bothered by their new passenger.

"Channel open, Commander," Kim said.

"Dresh vessel, this is Chakotay, commanding the Federation starship Voyager. We mean you no harm."

Seconds passed, which Tuvok used to perform his own more deeply penetrating scans of the ships. Like the Dresh, he was seeking weak points, making note of enemy weapons emplacements as well as engine exhaust ports, estimating what it might take to disable even a single ship. He was also estimating the odds Voyager would be able to outlast the five ships, and his results were not at all comforting.

"We're receiving a signal," Kim finally said. "Audio only."

"Let's hear it," Chakotay ordered and he sat back in the chair. Tuvok noticed he balled both hands into fists, forcing himself to remain calm while talking to their adversary.

"Voyager, we know no Federation. We recognize no Federation. You invade our space, and you will suffer for it."

Chakotay looked at Neelix, who nodded to confirm the accuracy of the translation.

"We are crossing this section of space, heading for home. We do not wish a fight. Is there some accommodation that can be made?"

"Voyager, we know you not. Your home may lie this way or it is a falsehood. You may be an advance scout and we must protect our borders. You cannot be allowed to leave and we outgun you. I suspect we can outrun you. Surrender is your only option."

"I disagree. We could be allowed to go back the way we came, we could be allowed over your space, or you could escort us to the far edge of your border. As you say, you outnumber us so we hardly pose a threat."

Tuvok nodded to himself, pleased with the restraint Chakotay was showing. Janeway herself would no doubt approve. He also noted that the universal translator was quickly picking up the Dresh language.

"Voyager, we have no grounds with which to trust you. You're an unknown and I don't like unknowns. I especially don't like starships just showing up out of nowhere. You're a potential hostile and I don't think letting you deeper into our space is wise. Do you? Surrender or be destroyed."

"I would prefer neither option. Maybe we can find something you need, barter for our safe passage?"

"Voyager, we don't know you. We don't trust you and certainly are not going to allow you greater access to our people. What could you possibly have that we want or need?"

Chakotay shrugged and turned towards Neelix, looking for an answer. Neelix seemed deep in thought and finally looked back and slowly shook his head. Clearly, nothing occurred to him, since he didn't know what the ship could spare. When they first met the Talaxian, water had been the source of barter, but now even that was a precious commodity, especially with the replicators down. Tuvok, like Chakotay, could not imagine what to offer the people.

A telltale on Tuvok's console shifted from red to green. "Port shields have been restored," he told Chakotay.

"So far, your combined efforts haven't left much of a mark," Chakotay said to the Dresh, his voice shifting tone. "For all you know, we're not even using our harshest weapons. We're only defending ourselves. Trust me, we will not allow the attack to continue. Don't be foolish and don't let yourselves be needlessly destroyed. Think about that." With a gesture he had Kim cut the signal. He looked about the bridge, seemingly seeking input from the crew. Tuvok met his gaze and spoke first.

"Sir, is antagonizing them a wise course of action?"

"Right now, Tuvok, I'm matching them. I won't blink and I won't concede. I want this to end as peacefully as possible. It could be that, like the Klingons, they respect force."

"Or not," Tuvok replied. "Mr. Neelix, your opinion?"

"Well, Mr. Vulcan, I have always been told to steer clear of Dresh ships. They don't deal in good faith and I really haven't spoken to that many of them. Too intense for me."

Chakotay said, "I need to go with my gut on this, Tuvok. I'm thinking matching their belligerence may be our best bet for avoiding a fight we can't possibly win."

"They're signaling," Kim said, interrupting the exchange.

"Go ahead."

"Voyager, you clearly won't leave so you must want a fight. One you can't possibly win. I don't know your people and can't tell if you're stupid or insane. Which is it?"

"Neither," Chakotay responded. "We don't go looking for fights, but we don't run from them either. If you really think your five ships can handle mine, then fine. All we want is to head home. If you stand in our way, well, we've tried to be reasonable."

"Voyager, you've tried to talk your way out of a fight, a fight you can't possibly win."

"Are you so sure?"

"Voyager, we took one of your shields down once. We can knock the rest down just as easily. We have time and numbers on our side. This is your final chance to surrender. After this, the fight is on your head."

Chakotay motioned for the signal to end and then stood, moving toward Paris. "Plot us the least predictable course, prepare for a five-second warp burst. I want distance."

"Aye, sir, though it's tricky with the mines," Paris said. "Also, with the engines balky, the burst may be tough."

"Quickly," Chakotay ordered. He swiveled around and addressed Kim. "Harry, find me a way to trigger those mines from a distance. I want to clear a path or lure the Dresh within range, maybe catch them off guard."

"Aye, sir," Kim replied, fingers already at work.

"Your tactics are not logical," Tuvok counseled Chakotay. "You have too many variables and could be putting the ship at risk."

Chakotay stared at him, his eyes hard. "I may have to do exactly that to get us clear. Keep phasers locked on the lead ship and be ready to fire on my signal."

"I've already targeted their exhaust ports," Tuvok said calmly.

Chakotay blinked with some surprise, nodded once, and returned his attention to the screen.

"Course plotted," Paris said.

"Everyone stand by," Chakotay ordered. Seconds ticked by with no movement aboard the bridge or among the Dresh vessels. Tuvok scanned the area with long-range scanners to make certain reinforcements were not sneaking up on them. He was uncertain if Chakotay would get them away unscathed; the man was not following standard procedures and seemed to be growing increasingly desperate.

Twin lights flickered to the Vulcan's right, catching his attention.

"Commander, the two outer ships have begun to move, closing the pincer," Tuvok said.

"Fire phasers! Paris, execute!"

Voyager corkscrewed to starboard as the phasers fired, and the stars streaked as the warp burst carried the starship away.

"Dresh ships have fallen back but are in motion," Tuvok advised.

"Any damage to them?"

"No, sir," Tuvok said. "The phaser salvo was too brief. We'd need a longer, sustained barrage to be effective."

"Next time," Chakotay said, ignoring the look of concern crossing Tuvok's features.

"Here they come," Paris called. "They're matching our speed!"

Chakotay looked at the screen and then ordered, "Evasive maneuvers; get us close to the edge of the minefield."

"We're still sluggish," Paris complained.

"Improvise. Tuvok, get ready for that barrage. I want one ship taken down to prove we can."

"Understood," Tuvok said. To him, it seemed Chakotay wanted to fight instead of run, which was endangering the crew. He began to turn events over in his mind, looking to determine if the actions were reckless enough to relieve Chakotay of duty. If so, he would assume command and warp out of the region, plotting a new course when they were safe and the captain was recovered. While Chakotay wasn't following the rule book to the letter, he also wasn't violating it with enough disregard to justify removing him.

Janeway had told him and the rest of the crew that this was to be a Starfleet ship. Even the Maquis crew members would be required to follow Starfleet regulations until the ship was safely back in the Alpha Quadrant. To that end, he would have to wait and see if Chakotay stepped over a line that would effectively force the Vulcan's hand.

"Return fire at will, Tuvok," Chakotay ordered. "Paris, keep distance between them and us."

The ship rocked gently as several shots hit the shields. Damage reports started coming in to the commander. To the tactical officer, that would be signal enough to leave the area. Instead, Chakotay ordered Paris to turn the ship about, flying between several Dresh ships in order to force a wedge and keep them scattered.

As the ship maneuvered between three ships, the shields were hit again and again with concentrated weapons fire. Tuvok gripped his station, watching as others were shaken badly. He also noted that even though the damaged shield emitter had been restored, another was about in danger of overload.

"Tuvok, I think we too need to improvise," Chakotay said, a twinkle in his eye. Tuvok tried to imagine what they experienced together with the Maquis could apply to these circumstances. Nothing occurred to him.

"Bridge to engineering."

"Engineering to bridge. Carey here."

"Keep a crew on the shield generators. Meantime, I want you and B'Elanna to rig the warp core to begin an overload. A nice and slow buildup."

"Sir?"

"That's an order, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. We'll need your command authorization."

"Computer, this is Commander Chakotay. Authorization Chakotay Alpha Tango Five Eight Nine."

"Authorization denied."

* * *

Chakotay stared in disbelief. "Computer, is my command code accurate?"

"Commander Chakotay's authorization code is accurate but is currently disabled."

Looking around the bridge, Chakotay couldn't keep his features schooled. Instead, his eyes were wild, seeking answers. "Janeway..."

"It was not the captain," Tuvok said, his voice cutting through the silence on the bridge.

Chakotay stared at the security chief, his eyes narrowing. He was seething.

"Explain, mister."

"When the captain named you first officer, we adjusted the computer programming to recognize your new rank. However, as security chief, I had your authorization disabled... temporarily."

Paris and Kim exchanged surprised looks while Chakotay just stared, the anger building inside him. It was just days ago he was betrayed by Tuvok and now, to his utter disbelief, he was being betrayed again by the Vulcan.

Tuvok continued, "We should withdraw from the area and discuss this elsewhere, commander."

Chakotay put his hands on his hips to avoid clenching his fists. "No, Tuvok, here will be fine. After all, we're only being fired upon." While waiting for a response, he looked over a shoulder at Paris. "Keep evading them- go for distance over style."

"An act that need not have happened," Tuvok said.

"Let's get back to your act," Chakotay said, biting off each word. "When was my authorization going to be restored? What moment exactly?"

Tuvok looked steadily at the First Officer, remaining calm while the other man seethed. "The moment when it was decided you were to be totally trusted with the fate of the crew."

"A moment to be decided by whom?"

"I was going to discuss it with the captain."

Chakotay remained stunned. All he could hear around him were the various automated systems at work. No doubt, all eyes were on the two men but all the commander could see was the steely resolve of the man placed above him, on the bridge's rear level. His nascent authority was being challenged in a bold way and he needed to defuse the situation, regain command authority and do it without seeming weak. Without looking, he knew Seska, the lone Maquis on the bridge, was watching and would no doubt spread the word of his actions. He couldn't appear weak to the Starfleet officers or his former freedom fighters.

"When? After the Dresh destroy the ship? It'll be a little late by then. Restore the codes." His voice rose, its baritone carrying across the still bridge.

"No, sir."

"That's a direct order, Tuvok."

"And one with which I cannot comply."

The ship shuddered as more shots hit the shields, but the impact was mild. Everyone remained in place, Chakotay shifting his weight to compensate. He could not yield, physically or emotionally, to the situation. Yet, each second wasted was one bringing the Dresh closer to a victory he could not allow them.

"You're disobeying the commanding officer's direct order!"

"I am, sir, but I have my reasons."

"I don't give a damn about your reasons," Chakotay snapped, feeling control slowly ooze from him. "Activate the code so I can save the ship." Another volley rocked the bridge but he again shifted his feet and remained upright. Somehow, through the chatter from the com system and the bridge operations, he could hear his heart pound. He looked over his shoulder and briefly noted that Paris was working quickly, coaxing the ship to spin, dive or tilt to avoid direct fire.

"Your actions indicate a desire to fight rather than preserve the ship. We are outnumbered and outgunned, and they appear to be at least as fast as we are. The odds are stacked against your performance."

"My performance?" Chakotay thundered. "I think I've shown you what I can do against bad odds."

"That was with a different ship," Tuvok countered. "Voyager has capabilities you have not experienced and are not trained on. When the captain placed you in your current position, it was not anticipated you would be called upon to command before you were fully rated."

"Rated? That's awfully presumptuous! I have to pass some computer test in a simulator before you give me the codes? That's absurd, Tuvok. You know what I can do!"

* * *

Tuvok heard a sound from behind him, noting that Seska seemed on the edge of her seat, almost ready to spring in his direction. She was going to prove an ally to Chakotay, and Tuvok tensed himself for the attack. However, reacting to a calming signal from Chakotay, her expression went blank and she nodded once.

"I know what you think you can do and a bluff the magnitude of which you are suggesting puts us entirely at risk," Tuvok continued. "Should the Dresh pierce our shields as the warp core builds to critical, we may all perish."

"Tuvok, I am in command," Chakotay reminded him, controlling the anger in his voice. "I have the captain's authority and her trust."

"Do you?" Tuvok countered. "The decision was logical at the time, to provide harmony between the crews, but as our present circumstances demonstrate, it may have been made in haste."

"Do you want command? Is that what this is about, Vulcan? Jealous I'm sitting beside her?"

Tuvok shook his head. "No. However, your actions to date suggest a reckless approach to problem solving, more Maquis than Starfleet. We would not be in this predicament had you followed Starfleet regulations."

Again, they all shook as another shot found the shields. Tuvok heard Paris curse at the helm for not reacting fast enough. They clearly had to settle the argument quickly, but no clear solution presented itself while Chakotay's emotions were this naked.

"I know when it's time to run," Chakotay said. "I also know when it's time to stake our place in the ground and not get pushed. Even Neelix has no idea how far the Dresh's reach extends. We bloody a nose or two now, then maybe we'll be left alone."

"The mines and the Dresh's current actions prove that to be an erroneous conclusion."

"We don't have time for a debate," Chakotay said, holding firm with his convictions. He was clearly set on his singular course of action. "I want the authorization restored... now!"

The repetition was tedious. Tuvok silently sighed and then said, "Starfleet regulation 104 section D provides for the security chief to act when the ship's best interests are being compromised. I have done that, and your current orders indicate it was the correct move."

* * *

"This is mutiny, mister!" Chakotay yelled, clearly at his wits' end.

"One could make that argument. I would not."

Chakotay remained stunned by Tuvok's calm resolve as well as the reasoning. Were there time, he'd happily engage in a debate over rules, regulations, and issues of trust. Instead, he had to regain control and keep Janeway's ship out of danger. Oddly, he was putting things in her terms, imagining her actions and reaction to the insurrection on her bridge. He barely knew her, with no real frame of reference for how she'd act or perceive things, but he felt it was important. He had to do things her way to win the day.

"Starfleet regulation 104 gives me complete authority in this case," Chakotay countered, glad he could recall the basics from his school days.

"Unless section C was to relieve you of command."

Chakotay laughed mirthlessly. "I'm not about to leave the bridge so a hologram can declare me fit for command."

"I also believe you did not fully carry out Directive 010. Your actions continue to run counter to standard guidelines for commanding officers."

"Tuvok, while we're dancing around the rules and regulations, five enemy ships are trying to peel us apart like a grape. Give me the full authorization to do my job so I can save the crew."

The two men stared at each other; no one else on the bridge dared make a sound. For the moment, the ship was quiet. Chakotay was quickly sifting through an avalanche of conflicting thoughts and feelings. His distrust of Tuvok, mirroring Tuvok's obvious feelings toward him, his concern over how Seska would report this to the other Maquis, his worry over Janeway's medical condition, whether or not Carey would let Torres help in the engine room, and his need to review all the rules and regulations he thought he left behind when he first entered the Badlands.

Finally, rising to the surface, a bubble of rationality burst and things fell into place. He took a breath, hoping this last gambit would work. He had nothing left after this except retreat and disgrace.

"Since you're set on quoting all the rules, Tuvok, including section 104, let me remind you about section A. The one that says the ranking officer is obligated to take command and do everything in his power to preserve the ship and its crew.

"What do you think I've been doing? I tried doing it peacefully, I tried following General Order Twelve, I offered to barter, and I offered to allow them to escort us. I did just as the rules demanded. Now I demand the rest of the orders be followed. Give me full command of this ship!"

* * *

Tuvok looked deeply into Chakotay's eyes. They were clear, lucid, and certain. Quickly, he mentally reviewed the first officer's actions, allowing for inexperience and having not been retrained in battle scenarios. The man was right in his own mind; he was following the orders, the very orders being quoted.

The security chief had allowed preconceived notions and suspicions cloud his normally logical thinking. This was not acceptable. But that was something for another time. Right now, he had to make a choice. It was his turn to act in the best interests of the crew.

"Computer, this is Commander Tuvok. Restore full operational authority to Commander Chakotay."

"Authorization code?" prompted the feminine mechanical voice.

"Tuvok Four Seven Psi Seven Four."

"Acknowledged. Full authorization restored."

"Chakotay to engineering. Initiate warp-core buildup again."

"Ready for your code, sir."

"Computer, this is Commander Chakotay. Authorization Chakotay Alpha Tango Seven Seven Nine."

"Warp-core alterations approved."

"Nice and steady, Carey. Kim, open a channel to the Dresh."

"Channel open."

"This is Voyager. You have continued to prove hostile to our attempt to go home. You've left us no choice, and I must now engage our ultimate weapon. Disperse and give us passage or your five ships will be annihilated."

With a slashing move, he had Harry cut the signal.

"We're being scanned again," Tuvok noted, his voice calm and resolute, as usual.

"Of course, they want to see I'm right."

"You're bluffing them," Paris said.

"Absolutely right, Paris. They'll see the slow, steady buildup and think we're readying to fire a weapon they know nothing about. Since we're a mystery to them, they have to decide if it's worth the risk."

"It is a gamble," Tuvok noted, feeling obligated to still advise Chakotay; he owed that much to Janeway.

"Absolutely," Chakotay admitted. "Once they scatter, Paris will go to warp, put us above the mines, and get us away from them."

"And what of other Dresh ships?"

"I'm hoping they will warn the others. Why tangle with someone more powerful?"

"What if they demand proof of your weapon?"

"We've already withstood their own fire so they know we're not weak. And maybe we do have something even more powerful. They're going to have to decide."

"Course plotted and laid in, sir."

"Stand by for warp, Paris."

"Aye, sir."

Chakotay settled himself back in his chair and then looked behind him. His expression was one of self-satisfaction, but Tuvok could also read in them the enmity that remained. "You told me, Tuvok, that I wasn't following regulations. Neither did a lot of captains that bluffed their way out of danger over the years. None are in the regulations but all are covered in Starfleet courses. It's something to keep in our arsenal."

"That is something I had not considered," Tuvok acknowledged. He avoided the command track and the lessons that came with it.

The first officer nodded in agreement. Then, with a smile, he added, "Vulcans, I'm told, don't bluff."

"Generally."

"Pity." The look in his eyes did not match the sympathetic tone of his voice. Tuvok recognized that in the coming days and weeks, he would have to find a way to work with the former Maquis leader. Plans for that, though, would have to wait.

The commander's next comment was interrupted by Paris who cried out, "They're backing off!"

Chakotay glanced briefly at Tuvok, a look of triumph on his features. He then called out, "Execute!"

The ship dipped and then seemed to bank as it accelerated. Tuvok felt the inertial dampeners compensating, then he glanced at his board to note that the five Dresh ships had fallen out of phaser range.

"Bridge to engineering."

"Engineering, Carey."

"Secure from warp-core buildup. Stabilize the engines and keep us at warp."

"Tricky at high speed, sir."

"Have B'Elanna show you how we did it on our old ship. Bridge out."

"Distance now seven hundred fifty thousand kilometers and gaining," Paris called from the helm, a tone of delight in his voice.

"We atop the field, Paris?"

"Aye, sir." He looked over his shoulder and flashed a big grin at the commander. Chakotay just nodded, his face still grim.

"Kim, did you ever determine a way to set off the devices at a distance?"

The ensign hesitated before answering. "Ah, no sir, it was a little distracting back there."

"So it was. Sorry for the noise," he said, looking directly at Tuvok. The Vulcan read no friendship in Chakotay's expression, no apology for following what the commander considered the proper course of action. Tuvok had much to consider once things returned to

normal.

* * *

That turned out to be six hours later as Tuvok, finally relieved at his post, visited Janeway in sickbay. She had recovered and was resting, eating a bowl of soup that Kes managed to turn up. The holographic doctor was nowhere to be seen, which boded well for the rest of his visit.

"Captain, you are looking well."

"Since Vulcans don't lie, I'll take that for the truth." She smiled warmly at him. "Thank you."

"Of course."

Then her face changed, shifting from relief and friendship to one he recognized as a captain about to do something unpleasant. He remained impassive, waiting for her to begin.

"Chakotay was here before and filled me in on what I missed. We have a problem, Tuvok." She held up a hand, cutting off his reply. "Don't say a word right now. I gave the situation a lot of thought before making Chakotay an offer to merge crews. You should know me well enough by now to know I wouldn't make such a decision lightly or hastily. He split from the Federation over something that he believed, to the core of his being, was wrong. He's a man of principle and has always followed his beliefs. When Chakotay rejoined Starfleet by rejoining this crew, when he accepted the position of this ship's first officer, he renewed that oath to our principles. I gave him my trust. And I expected you, of all my crew, to follow my lead."

She adjusted herself on the bed before continuing and to his eye, she still seemed in need of rest. The steel in her voice belied any exhaustion. "I need to count on my command crew to work together, especially in times of crisis. What you and Chakotay engaged in undermined our authority with the rest of the crew. By now they've all heard of the argument and will look for more cracks, some looking to use them as wedges against us. The animosity between some of the Maquis and the Federation isn't going to vanish overnight just because we're forced to live together. It's going to take time, years perhaps. And until we're all in this together, heart and soul, then it's up to the command crew to lead by example.

"I never would have allowed you to disable his command codes. That's not only disrespecting him but me. I thought you knew better, Tuvok."

"Captain, I apologize for showing a lack of faith in your trust. Having served with the commander, I knew he was a tenacious fighter, and I knew he would fight for his beliefs. I was less certain if those beliefs as yet included the whole crew. I acted in what I thought was in our best interests until the commander had refreshed his skills and was truly ready to act as first officer. It never occurred to me that he would need to lead this soon."

"Captains don't choose first officers simply to help them run the ship. They choose the precisely because they may be required to take command at any moment."

She smiled at him, the stern expression leaving her eyes. He watched her continue to consider his words and finally, with a wan smile, she spoke again. "Tuvok, my friend, we have a long journey ahead. It's going to be a challenge for all of us. You will find your logic

may not be enough with all the unknowns. You have to see people for what they are and not overly analyze them. You kept looking for motives in his actions, still thinking of him as Maquis. That's in the past. He's one of us now, a man with the crew's best interests at heart."

"I have begun to reassess him, Captain."

"Good. Now, let me rest. We have the staff meeting tomorrow with a lot to cover."

"Indeed. Rest well, Captain."

* * *

"Commander, if you have a moment."

Chakotay seemed to stiffen at Tuvok's voice, but that was to be expected. The last twenty-four hours had taken a toll on everyone involved in the Dresh incident. The first officer barely slept, running the scenario over and over again in his mind, seeing if there were truly better options. In hindsight, one or two things did occur to him. Tuvok may have been right, he needed to refresh his command skills and the holodeck was already reserved for such work.

Additionally, he called up the complete set of Starfleet rules and regulations, downloaded them to a padd and, over breakfast, began rereading them from the beginning.

However, the padd being handed to him was something different.

"What's this?" Chakotay thumbed it to life and saw a series of bullet-pointed items that seemed to go on for at least a dozen screen pages.

Tuvok paused for a moment before replying, a clue to Chakotay that this was difficult for the Vulcan. "Suggestions on upgrades to our security protocols. I wanted your approval before presenting them to the captain at the staff meeting."

Chakotay eyed him, first with suspicion and then with a touch of surprise. The first few items made a lot of sense and he recognized the effort being expended by Tuvok. Apparently, he was not the only one with an uneasy night. The seconds passed and the silence was quite obvious to all; clearly the crew was uncertain what was going to happen between the two men.

Finally, Chakotay handed over the padd and actually smiled at the Vulcan. "Looks fine to me. Good work, Tuvok. I think the captain will approve these."

* * *

"Thank you, sir," Tuvok said and withdrew to his station. Once there, he entered the code acknowledging he was now present and on duty. As he checked over the routine diagnostic, he considered what had transpired and the need to reconsider his next project. In his quarters was an unfinished holodeck training program- one hypothesizing that Chakotay would lead a Maquis mutiny- designed for Starfleet security personnel. He had only gotten through what he assumed to be a quarter of the scenario. When he was next off-duty, he would have to either abandon it or rewrite the training scenario entirely.

Chakotay had shown him it was time to reevaluate the Maquis, from Seska, seated directly

behind him, to Chell, working belowdecks. He had no idea how long it would take to get home, but Tuvok concluded that he was going to learn a lot from the experience. The first lesson had just concluded.

Winds of Change

Kim Sheard

This tale is set during the weeks following the third-season episode "Warlord."

Kim Sheard

Kim Sheard earned a bachelor of science degree in chemistry in 1991. After several years working as a chemist, she segued into the technical-writing field, where she has stayed for more than ten years. Among other things, she writes instruction manuals for spectrophotometers (color-testing instruments) and hopes to someday use her knowledge of this technology in a story.

The first fiction she ever submitted to an editor, the short story "Touched," was published in Pocket's Strange New Worlds II anthology. She won second prize and a spot in Strange New Worlds III, as well, with "Ninety-three Hours." Her nonfiction has appeared in A Cup of Comfort Devotional from Adams Media and Today's Christian magazine.

In addition to working at her writing, Kim is out almost every night at one rehearsal or another (singing and playing flute and hand-bells) or communing with the Paneranormal group of Strange New Worlds writers in Northern Virginia. She thanks her husband, Henry, for his patience, and for answering the numerous carpentry questions that arose during the writing of "Winds of Change."

She was relentless and merciless. Drawing blood with only a thought from those who dared question her. Seeing crimson run from eyes, drip from noses. Firing a thoron pistol into the chests of unarmed men from point-blank range. Causing immediate death. Spitting accusations at a downtrodden prisoner until the spirit in his eyes disappeared and he wearily agreed to confess. Sealing his fate. The images tumbled over one another until she was no longer sure if they were real or imagined. Memories or ambitions.

Finally, with concentration, she became sure of some of it, at least. The eyes watching the action were her own. The will behind it hers, too. She feared she was seeing her future.

Kes ducked away from Tuvok's dark, slender fingers where they rested on her brow, her cheek, and her chin, dots of fire that suited her mood better than the relative cool of her own skin. "No!"

She sprang from her chair, narrowly missing Tuvok's still outstretched hands, and paced the length of her quarters. To the head of the bed, past the dresser, back to the desk chair. The sapphire tones surrounding her had lost their usual calming effect.

Why wouldn't they, when it was here she had battled Tieran, the Ilari warlord?

At the end of her second lap, she noted a muscle working in Tuvok's jaw and rushed forward to explain. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant; this just isn't working. I'm sure you can tell I'm not any calmer."

Kes interpreted the twin creases between his eyebrows to mean that he was perplexed, disappointed, and maybe even disapproving. She perched on the edge of her chair again and tried to concentrate solely on Tuvok's response.

"You have been restless and conflicted since sharing your consciousness with Tieran," he said. "You observed firsthand an existence that was different, and very much more violent than your own, and are dwelling on your participation in it. Confusion is an understandable state, but a reconcilable one. The logical course of action is to use meditation and the meld as a means of clearing your mind of such unsettling thoughts."

Unsettling? Clear her mind? He made it sound so simple, her problem so innocuous. Kes wanted to laugh. With effort and the gritting of her teeth she managed to say only, "What if I don't want to follow the logical course of action?" She couldn't keep the sarcasm from her tone. "Yes, I observed the aggression of a warlord, but it was more than that. I matched it. I fought him, and I grew stronger. In the end, I beat him, and I felt powerful. I liked that feeling. I don't want to suppress it."

"You have many strengths, any one of which offers you power over others who lack it. I fail to understand your surprise."

"I've always considered my strengths to be intelligence, and determination, maybe. Not strength to win a battle, or the rush of adrenaline that makes you forceful." The orange flame of Tuvok's meditation lamp flared higher on her desk, as if in response to her agitation.

"I know that in Tieran's case, he'd gone mad with the power and was willing to do anything to keep it, including torturing and killing. But do strength and aggression necessarily have to be bad? Isn't there a way they can be used for good? I have to find out, Tuvok. I'd like to do more. To be more than the Kes who helps out in sickbay and manages the airponics garden. But I have to make sure that I'm not going to be like him now."

He cocked his head. "And your aspiration is?"

Kes rose again, spinning around behind the chair and leaning, hands down, on its back. "I don't know. I really can't see myself switching from sickbay duties to your security department and specializing in hand-to-hand combat. But then, I have these feelings and they don't seem to be going away, so maybe something different would be good for me."

Tuvok gazed at her over steepled fingers, exasperatingly calm. "You have already weathered several changes in recent weeks- your separation from Mr. Neelix in addition to your experience with Tieran- so I would advise caution. Give yourself time to ponder the new elements of your personality and fully integrate them before you make any decisions that may be irrevocable."

Kes nodded. She'd told herself the same thing, but still hadn't managed to accept it.

As if he'd read her thoughts, Tuvok continued, "In the meantime, I believe you need to find an outlet for your restiveness." He rose in one swift movement. "Perhaps in lieu of my help at this time, you would consider speaking with another crew member who also struggles with an aggressive side."

A few minutes after Tuvok left her standing alone in her quarters it finally occurred to Kes whom he must have meant.

* * *

B'Elanna Torres was sitting alone in the mess hall, studying engine efficiency diagrams on a padd and ignoring her cooling cup of pejuta, when Kes approached her table.

"Lieutenant, may I ask you something?" She looked even more timid and apologetic than usual.

"Sure, Kes, what is it?" B'Elanna lowered her padd.

"It's a personal question."

Oh. She couldn't remember ever having discussed anything personal with Kes before. Did she want to? She looked into the Ocampo's earnest blue eyes and made a quick decision, gesturing to the chair opposite hers. "Maybe you'd better sit down, then," she said.

Kes did, her hands fidgeting in her lap. "I've been experiencing some strong emotions lately- aggression and anger, mostly- and I'm looking for a way to deal with them. I've heard you complain about your Klingon side, but I can see you've learned ways to handle it. I was hoping for some suggestions."

B'Elanna blinked, then blurted a chuckle. "You're kidding, right?" She swiveled her head around to search the rest of the room. "Did Tom Paris put you up to this?"

"No. I'm serious," Kes said in the most emphatic voice B'Elanna had ever heard her use. What was going on with her? Did this have something to do with that warlord guy that had inhabited her body?

"Okay...." B'Elanna shook her head. "I don't know how successfully I've learned to handle my Klingon side. Sometimes I think I should take lessons from you, not the other way around."

"Really, I think you can help me. What do you do when you can't sit still and you just want to yell and throw things or you might wind up hurting somebody?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "Lots of times I yell and throw things. If I'm mad enough."

"You're able to keep your anger at a manageable level most of the time, though, aren't you?"

"Well, sure, I don't have a choice if I'm going to get any work done," B'Elanna said. "I can't just go belting every ensign who drops a coil scanner and makes me realign it." Anymore, anyway. She thought for a minute. "I guess I use physical activity to help me stay on an even keel," she finally said. "I play a sport regularly, or lift weights, or run the decks. Does any of that sound good to you?"

Kes cocked her head. "Something I could do with other people might be nice. Could you teach me a sport?"

Whoa. She hadn't been offering anything. Apparently her distress didn't show on her face, though, because Kes was looking at her expectantly. She tried not to sigh. "Um, okay," B'Elanna finally said. "Do you have any idea what game?"

"I'll leave that up to you," Kes said, and she smiled. It was the first time she had during their entire conversation, come to think of it. "Whatever tires you out enough that it quiets the

aggression. Hopefully it'll work for me, too."

B'Elanna supposed it couldn't hurt to try. "Okay. I'll set it up. My holodeck time is tomorrow at 1500. Holodeck one. Does that work for you?"

"I'll be there. Thank you, Lieutenant." Kes stood, whirled, and left the mess hall, a slight bounce in her step.

B'Elanna shook her head. Great. Teaching Kes a brand new sport was just what she needed for her own workout time. She doubted she'd even get to break a sweat.

Well, one quick session and hopefully Kes would find whatever it was she needed. Then B'Elanna could go back to her usual schedule. She tapped the tabletop with her fingertips. Now she just needed to choose the right game....

* * *

"Computer, reset match. Stay with level-one opponent."

Kes flipped up the blind on her helmet as Torres came closer to the anbo-jytsu ring. "You're doing okay," the engineer said. "Just keep listening to the proximity detector."

Kes leaned on her staff, wishing it could hold all of her weight. "If I'm doing okay, why does he keep blasting me out of the ring? I feel like a photon torpedo."

"Brace for impact. Yeah, I know you've hit the floor more than your fair share of times." Torres smiled. "At least you can treat your bruises yourself without getting a lecture from the Doctor."

When Kes didn't smile back at her, Torres jumped into the ring and borrowed the staff. "Maybe this will help. When you're ready to strike, try holding it down at the end of the handle." She slid both hands all the way down and then swung the staff in a long arc. "That way, you get the benefit of its full length and weight. If you choke up too far, you can really only rely on your own strength."

"And I sure don't have much of it," Kes said, crossing her arms and massaging both biceps. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so sore and so tired and so sweaty. She'd replicated clothes in a breathable fabric more appropriate for exercise than her usual attire, but still she was soaked across the chest and back of the gray sleeveless tunic she wore under her armor, and the tight black shorts were, she was sure, permanently welded to her legs.

It wouldn't be so bad except she wasn't getting anywhere. Far from relieving her aggression, her failure at anbo-jytsu was making her feel more frustrated than ever. Her head felt like it might explode with the pressure at any moment.

"The game isn't all strength," Torres encouraged, showing more patience than Kes would ever have thought possible. "You're making some good contact points, and you stay away from him most of the time."

"But then he catches me and pitches me out of the ring; match over." Kes shook her head. "I don't think this is my game."

"Maybe not," Torres said, "but try one more time. Use the staff like I showed you, and see if that doesn't help." She handed Kes her staff and backed out of the ring.

Kes resisted the urge to groan. "All right. One more try." She grasped the end of the staff with both hands and faced the frozen hologram, spreading her feet about shoulder-width apart. She flipped down her blind and nodded that she was ready. Torres called for the computer to begin.

The hologram must have moved forward immediately, because Kes heard the soft whoosh of his staff just to her left. She jumped right and jabbed straight forward with her staff as if with a sword. Its tip found her opponent's armor and slid off, and the computer registered a point to Kes. She immediately backed up. The hologram followed with a barely audible step, and she squatted just in time to miss his head-high slash. Still near the floor, Kes swept the staff from left to right, but missed her opponent's legs entirely. Where was he?

Staying low, she crept around the edge of the ring circle until she thought she must be behind him. She raised her staff above her head with both hands, hoping it was high enough to clear the hologram's helmet, and swept it slowly from side to side until her proximity detector sounded. Muscles shaking with the effort to keep the staff high, she took a deep breath and let the head of the staff fall. It took longer than she had expected to make contact; she must have hit a shoulder or hip instead of his head, but the point was hers. The sense of accomplishment was short-lived, however, as her opponent raised his staff, locking it with hers and pushing it up and back. She slid one hand down the shaft so that her hands were spread wide, and shoved back with a growl. She managed to maintain her grip, but could not counteract his force. With one huge thrust he threw her backward out of the ring, and she landed on her bottom with a thud that made her teeth rattle.

She lowered herself the rest of the way to the floor, closed her eyes, and groaned.

* * *

Kes pressed a button on her hover suit and plummeted toward the floor and the ball. She was able to scoop it up with one hand, but then pressed the hover control too hard and shot upward, banging her head on the ceiling. The impact caused her to lose her grip on the ball, and though she batted it toward a blue marker on the wall, it missed by several meters and bounced straight into Torres's arms.

After Kes had blinked back her tears of pain, she fumbled for a wall. As her opponent sped toward one of her own red markers, Kes pushed off the wall with her feet. She headed right at Torres, but was not quick enough. The engineer dodged and hit her marker, while Kes's momentum kept her moving forward until she rammed the opposite wall with her shoulder.

That was one bruise too many. She touched the hover suit's keypad again and managed to lower herself to the floor with a little more finesse this time. Settling cross-legged, she yanked off her helmet and flung it away from her with enough force that it clattered across the floor and hit the far wall. Torres touched down beside her.

"I'm not doing this any more," Kes told Torres from between clenched teeth, her shoulders heaving with her breath. "It's not helping."

"Sometimes it takes practice to get the hang of it."

"No! No hoverball, no anbo-jytsu. They just make me feel worse."

Torres's eyes narrowed. "Well, I wouldn't want to make you feel worse," she said. "This was your idea, you know."

"Well, it was obviously a bad one. I can't believe you went along with it."

Torres jumped up. "You asked me to help you!" She crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes. "I was trying to be nice."

"For a change." Kes had said it under her breath, but apparently loud enough for Torres to hear. Hurt flitted across the engineer's expression, replaced quickly by anger again; she shook with it. Kes rose.

"I'm sorry. I didn't really mean that." She was almost pleading. "See? That's what I'm up against. I have trouble controlling what I say and how I act." She was interrupted by the chirp of Torres's combadge.

"Chakotay to Torres."

Torres turned away from Kes. "I'm here, Commander."

"We've picked up a ship at the limit of the sensors' range. Can they be optimized to tell us more?"

"Probably," Torres answered. "Give me five minutes to clean up, then I'll work from the bridge."

"Acknowledged," Chakotay signed off.

Torres strode from the holodeck without a word or a backward glance. Kes sank to her knees and buried her face in her hands. How many more people did she have to hurt before she learned to control this beast that had invaded her?

* * *

Two hours later, B'Elanna burst into holodeck two, a bag containing her swimsuit and towel flung over her arm. She stopped short at the sight of Tom Paris, dressed in grimy coveralls, bent under the open hood of his light blue and white automobile. Next to the car, on a clean white sheet, sat hundreds of oily engine parts in neat rows.

"What's this?" B'Elanna asked.

"It's my fifty-seven Chevy," Tom answered, pride in his voice.

"I know what it is," B'Elanna said. "But Neelix's resort program is usually running in here. I was hoping to swim a couple thousand laps."

Tom straightened and looked at her for the first time. "That's quite the workout. What's the problem?"

"Who says there's a problem?" Tom always thought he knew everything.

Tom wiped his hands on the rag he'd had draped over the side of the car. "Your tone of

voice, for one thing. Then there's the look on your face."

"What look?"

Tom took two steps toward her. "Oh, the look that says ripping someone's arm off and eating it for dinner might be a fun thing to do." He raised a hand as if to assure her he wasn't judging. "Just as long as it's not my arm."

"I've been spending time with Kes," B'Elanna said, surprising herself for actually telling him that.

"Well, that's enough to make anyone tense," he answered in his infuriating sarcastic voice.

B'Elanna clenched her fists. "She had the gall to say that I'm not nice."

Tom finally looked concerned. "Really? That doesn't sound like Kes. What were you doing at the time?"

"Trying to teach her to play hoverball."

"I take it it wasn't going well?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "It was too early to know. She hadn't put any practice time in." She looked down at the floor. "Okay, she was pretty awful. Somehow that ended up being my fault."

"Really?" Tom said, his head cocked. "You were such a terrible teacher that you actually hindered her amazing innate athletic talents?"

"Kahless, no! I'm not sure she has any athletic talents at all."

"I guess I'm not surprised," Tom said, leaning back against the body of his car. "With the mental abilities Ocampá supposedly have, why would they need physical skills like that?"

"So she knew she'd be terrible?"

"Not necessarily. Why did she want to play hoverball, anyway?"

"She says she's been having trouble controlling her anger. She wanted the 'big, bad Klingon' to try and help her with that. Anbo-jytsu had already flopped, so..."

"Ah." Tom suddenly seemed to understand everything. "I guess she's having trouble getting rid of that Tieran fellow."

"I told her that I stay balanced through exercise."

"But that didn't help her."

"No, and I'm sorry about that, but there's nothing else I can do." She turned to leave the holodeck. Tom's voice stopped her.

"She asked you to help her, B'Elanna. You. She does a lot for this crew. Can't you give her one more try?"

B'Elanna wanted to scream. "I don't know how!"

Tom's hand on her shoulder turned her back around. She shrugged off his touch. "Let's think about this," Tom said quietly. "Anbo-jytsu and hoverball are pretty intense. Violent and competitive. Obviously, that's not going to work for Kes." He wandered over to his sheet of car parts.

"You know something?" he asked. "I took the engine completely apart."

"Why?" B'Elanna asked, bewildered by the sudden change of subject. "Wasn't it running?"

"Yeah, it was running," Tom said. "But I didn't like the way it sounded. It would knock every couple of minutes. So I started tinkering with it and eventually," he gestured at the parts, "I needed to rebuild the whole engine."

"And this is what you think of as fun?"

"Oh, yeah," Tom answered. "Building something from scratch, all by myself? You bet. Creativity can be just as rewarding as playing hard and winning."

B'Elanna stared at him. He looked expectant, waiting for her to make a leap of intuition. "So, you're saying we should rebuild an engine?"

"Well, maybe not an engine, but do something productive that you can cooperate on rather than competing with each other. Something where Kes won't be either a winner or a loser." He paused, probably trying to think of a way to completely convince her. "Consider it a challenge."

"I haven't got time to build a new holoprogram," B'Elanna insisted, still doubtful.

"Check out Chakotay's programs. He's got some wilderness-type ones there that might work. Stuff like log cabins and boats." He shuddered, then went back to his car's open hood. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I only have this holodeck for another twenty minutes and I promised myself I'd clean out the engine frame by then."

Well, she guessed the least she could do was look and see what Chakotay had.

* * *

Kes paced her quarters, remembering the pain she and Tieran had caused and the pain she might still bring if she wasn't careful. When her door chimed, she sped to the manual release, thankful for the diversion. The door swooshed open to reveal Lieutenant Torres, back in her black and gold uniform.

Kes had just opened her mouth to apologize again when the engineer asked, "Having a rough evening?"

Kes froze, alarmed that it was so noticeable. She cleared her throat. "How can you tell?"

Torres tilted her head and placed one hand on her hip. "Well, you're flushed and a little bedraggled." She nodded at Kes's hair. She was right; Kes had been running her hands through it just moments before.

"Most of all, though," Torres continued. "You're not in your usual resting position: posture straight, head high, hands clasped behind your back." She smiled slightly as though afraid to give offense.

Kes blinked hard. "I didn't realize you'd ever paid that much attention to me." B'Elanna pursed her lips. "You have to admit we've never really spent any time together before."

Torres looked down at the floor and then back up into Kes's eyes. "I know. Frankly, I didn't think we had much in common. You're good with people. I'm good with equipment, engines. I'm half Klingon, and you're always so... serene."

"Serene," Kes echoed. "It certainly isn't the case now, if it ever was."

Torres smiled. "I know. I kind of like it. It's as if you've fallen to my level of imperfection."

Kes just stared at her until Torres laughed, then handed over a padd she'd been holding.

"Here," she said. "A new idea. If you like it, we could try to make it on the holodeck."

Kes looked at her in wonder. "You're not giving up on me, even though I was so nasty to you? Thank you, Lieutenant."

Torres shrugged. "Oh, and anybody who picks a fight with me deserves to call me by my first name. Let me know if you're interested in the project and I'll arrange it." She patted the side of the door frame and was gone.

Kes went to the bed, sat down, and turned the padd on. Scrolling through the pages, she realized it was a set of building plans. It contained diagrams, measurements, and directions for a project, but it was the photograph of the finished construct that captured her attention.

She didn't know what it was, but it was beautiful. On a small rise in the middle of a field of tall grass stood a wooden structure: the skeleton of an elongated pyramid with a lattice of supports crisscrossing it and a ladder running up one side. Metal blades bloomed at its apex like the petals of a flower. According to the accompanying description, she was looking at a device called a "windmill." There were several different kinds, but this one was like those that had been used on Earth's North American continent near the end of the nineteenth century to pump groundwater. The circle of blades- it was called the wheel- rotated when the wind blew and turned a gear that moved a shaft- the sucker rod- up and down, pumping water up from the ground for drinking, washing, and irrigating crops. How handy a windmill would have been on Ocampa!

She sent a quick "yes, thank you" message to B'Elanna through the companel, then headed to bed. As had been typical for several weeks, she had difficulty dropping off. But this time, her thoughts were of windmills and clear, clean water rising from the ground, rather than of anger and blood. Sleep, when it finally came, was met with a smile.

* * *

Two days later, Kes met B'Elanna outside holodeck one, where the engineer had the program ready and waiting. "This is Tom's holodeck time we're using" was the first thing she said. "He lost a bet." Her mouth quirked upward in a smile. "It's going to take a while for us to finish, so we're going to have to beg, borrow, or steal some extra timeslots."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I always have extra replicator rations because I actually eat Neelix's cooking. I'm sure I can arrange some trades," Kes said.

B'Elanna nodded, then gestured that Kes could enter the holodeck.

The doors opened to a wonderland. The first thing Kes noticed was the sky. It showed as much white as blue; puffballs of clouds, their top sides glowing gold in the sunlight, hung low enough to cast shadows on the knee-length grass that billowed as far as the eye could see. To her right stood a white wooden house flanked by a bright red barn. About a hundred meters away, in a mowed area to her left, sat stacks of lumber and a wooden chest with a closed lid. She walked toward them, B'Elanna on her heels.

The first thing Kes did was kneel and open the chest. It was filled with hand tools, each of which B'Elanna identified for her. Saws, hammers, a metal tape measure, coils of braided rope, and a level were among them, and a pickax and two shovels were invisible in the higher grass until B'Elanna pointed them out. "They're all appropriate for the nineteenth-century time frame," she explained. Indicating the boards, she said, "Thankfully they had sawmills, so we don't have to plane the boards ourselves." She led Kes to a flat span of earth nearby that was covered with several planks. "They also had steam engines for drilling wells." She squatted and lifted one of the boards so Kes could peek inside. "Ours is already dug."

B'Elanna stood and wiped her hands on her pants, khaki-colored ones that were wide through the hips and thighs and tapered close to the ankles. Kes straightened, too, and asked, "How do you know all this?"

B'Elanna grinned. "I did an eighth-grade history presentation on building these mills. I hated history, but once I realized the project I'd picked was more about physics and construction than history, I got really into it. Earned an A. It seems to have stuck with me, too."

"It's wonderful, B'Elanna. Thank you."

"Don't thank me until you see if you enjoy it. Which reminds me- how do you feel about heights?"

"They don't bother me." Kes smiled. "But maybe I should rethink that given the hoverball disaster. Why do you ask?"

"Because there are two ways to put up the mill. We can build it flat on the ground and then pull it up with a block and tackle and some horses, or we can build it upright, climbing and building as we go."

"How about we put it up as we go. That way we can do it all ourselves."

"All right. We'll keep it small, though, since neither of us has ever done this before. Plus, the boards can get heavy if they're really long." B'Elanna consulted a copy of the plans. "About six meters high, maybe, instead of the usual minimum of nine. And, hmm, a one-and-a-half-meter wheel." She moved toward the pick and shovels. "But that's the last you'll hear of standard units on this project. The old-fashioned ones are more authentic." She grinned. "If you'll grab the tape measure, the first thing we need to do is measure and then dig the holes for the anchor posts."

As Kes helped B'Elanna measure four equal distances from the center of the well and mark them by piercing the earth with the pick, B'Elanna asked her, "How have you been doing these last few days? Since I couldn't start working on this with you any sooner, I was afraid you'd be feeling anxious."

"I guess anxious is a good way to describe it." Kes clutched her hands over her chest. "I feel tight here. But more in an anticipation kind of way than an angry kind of way, thanks to this project."

B'Elanna marked the last spot with the pick, leaving it stuck in the ground. "I'm glad you've been looking forward to it, but this first part is less than glamorous. I'll break up the ground with the pick to start each hole, and then we start digging with the shovels."

Once B'Elanna started hacking with the pick, Kes was grateful that the half-Klingon had offered to perform that task. The steel pick weighed over four kilos, and Kes could see B'Elanna's arm muscles strain to heft it over her head and throw it to the ground. Her breathing came hard and loud, almost like grunts, but she was smiling as though she enjoyed it.

Once B'Elanna had broken up the first section of grass and topsoil, Kes moved in with a shovel. There was a cool breeze that rustled her hair and billowed her shirt, and though she was perspiring within five minutes of turning her first shovelful of dirt, she found herself pleasantly damp rather than hot and sweaty.

When B'Elanna finished picking and started digging her own hole, Kes asked her, "Were you able to adjust the sensors to find out more about that ship they'd detected?"

"Yes," B'Elanna answered, turning over the earth as if it were no effort at all. "But it didn't do much good. We were able to tell that the ship is about half the size of Voyager and that it is moving toward us, but that was about all. It didn't have an ion trail, and its warp field was of a configuration we've never seen before. Neelix didn't even recognize it."

Kes settled into a satisfying rhythm with her shovel: plunge it into the dirt, stomp it down, rock it back, lift and throw. The task somehow managed to completely occupy her mind. There was room for nothing but earth and rocks, and moving them from one place to another.

They dug their post holes wide enough to stand in and deep enough that they were in the ground up to their chests. By the time Kes finished with hers, she realized that B'Elanna had completed two and was halfway through the last one. "I'm fine," the engineer said. "I'll finish this one up if you'll grab the tape measure and level and check that the other three are exactly the same depth and flat. Stomp down the dirt until it's packed hard before you check."

Kes did so, removing a little more soil from two of the holes to even them out. When B'Elanna finished with the fourth hole, they checked that one together. Then they said good night and went to their quarters.

Kes slept well, bone tired, but satisfied from the day's labor.

* * *

It took a week of their free time to secure the anchor posts in the ground and build the windmill's tower, platform, and ladder. Kes was impressed by the ingenuity of the humans

who had developed the procedure five centuries earlier. Though her human friends always referred to the nineteenth century as a primitive time, it seemed to Kes that it took more skill to make do with so little than it did to build using the vast technology Voyager's crew had at their disposal. After all, it would have taken a couple of days of painstaking labor from dawn to dusk for those earlier teams (usually pairs or trios, according to B'Elanna) to raise their mill and set it in motion, whereas they could now speak just a few words to blink a windmill into existence on the holodeck. Where was the challenge in that?

Kes would rather do it traditionally, measuring each board twice and then sawing it, carefully burying each four-by-four leg in the ground, cooperating to hold and nail the smaller girders and diagonals in place, then climbing up on long, loose planks placed horizontally over what they'd already built to do it again for the next higher level. The tower quickly became recognizable as an authentic structure rather than a jumble of boards, and it made her heart soar to look at it. She was certain B'Elanna was pleased with their progress, as well.

They fell into the routine of working for an hour or two and then, when they needed a rest, lying down in the grass for a bit to look up at the sky, which was programmed to change over time. At first, they examined the clouds, pointing out when one looked like a fork, a flower, or a phaser. After a few days, heavier winds blew the clouds away and they gazed at a masterpiece of solid cerulean.

"What is this place called?" Kes asked one day.

"I don't think it's any place in particular," B'Elanna answered, "but the geography is called 'the plains' and they're like the ones you would find smack-dab in the middle of the northern American continent."

"Are the plains always so beautiful?"

"Well, from what I gather, it didn't rain very much before climate control was developed, which is why they needed to bring up groundwater. We're experiencing late spring, but by the end of the summer it would be hot enough to scorch all this grass. Prairie fires were a big problem, too."

Kes sat up and threw out her arms. "The risk might be worth it to stay where there is so much life." Contrary to her first impression, the billowing grass wasn't homogenous, but a happy mixture of several different varieties. Within their blades, insects of many colors and sizes crawled and leapt. There were usually at least two or three broad-winged birds in the sky, urgent cries contradicting their lazy gliding. Once, B'Elanna had even pointed out a small mammal poking its head out of an impossibly tiny hole in the ground.

As they assembled the sheet-metal blade wheel, which B'Elanna assured her could be ordered as a kit from something called "The Montgomery Ward Catalog," Kes asked, "Is it true that Voyager's being followed? I haven't spent much time in the mess hall lately, but I did hear mutterings in the corridors."

B'Elanna made a face that was usually reserved for Neelix's leola root stew. "Yes. That ship we detected last week has come right up behind us. Captain Janeway keeps hailing it, but it doesn't answer."

"We don't know who they are or what they want?"

"No." B'Elanna sounded bitter. "The ship has some kind of reflective shield around it that

doesn't let our sensors see inside. I've tried everything I can think of to adjust them, but nothing works. It's just too different from anything I've seen before."

"You're not admitting defeat, are you?" Kes allowed a bit of teasing to come through in her tone.

"Never. I'm hoping something will come to me while we're working in here. Sometimes if I relax, inspiration strikes." She gave the bolt she was working on one final tightening tug with her wrench. "It just doesn't usually come fast enough for me."

"I'm lucky you were inspired to suggest building the windmill."

"It's helping, then?" B'Elanna reached for another metal blade and a handful of bolts.

Kes nodded. "Yes. I still think rather... black thoughts sometimes." Yesterday she'd avoided telling Neelix his main lunch dish looked like the Bolian colon only because Ensign Lang had interrupted to confirm the time of her sickbay appointment. "It would be very easy to hurt people. But then I remember how I feel when I'm here on the holodeck working on the windmill and I can usually settle myself down." She wasn't sure whether to sigh or chuckle. "I just wish I could prevent the bad feelings and thoughts entirely."

"Good luck. I've been trying to do that my whole life."

Kes cocked her head. "You don't think it's possible?"

"Maybe if you're a Vulcan." B'Elanna paused to hold Kes's blade in place for her. "I think we each have a dark side. Maybe it took a while for yours to show itself, but it's natural that it's there. Try not to beat yourself up over it."

Kes grinned. "I got enough of a beating playing anbo-jytsu and hoverball."

"Good point." B'Elanna smiled back.

* * *

Two days later, the alien ship was still following Voyager. B'Elanna had told Kes that the ship, a windowless construct with a smooth, mirror-like surface, stayed five hundred meters to Voyager's stern even though the position meant it was constantly buffeted by her warp eddies. In addition to constant hails, Captain Janeway had ordered numerous rounds of evasive maneuvers and changes of speed, but nothing deterred it. The little ship didn't activate weapons or appear overtly threatening, so Janeway didn't order a full stop- that would seem confrontational- but Kes didn't need telepathic abilities to sense her worry each time she caught a glimpse of the captain.

Nor did she need them to observe the changes in routine in almost all areas of the ship. A steady stream of engineers came into sickbay for stimulants to help them through long duty shifts, and the pilots, normally a sturdy bunch, were all treated for tension headaches. Several batches of her Talaxian cabbage and Hosi cucumbers went to waste; apparently most of the crew was sticking with replicated "comfort food" rather than their Delta Quadrant substitutes. And the noise in the corridors was subdued, more quiet whispers than the usual chatty gossiping and planning for off hours. It was eerie.

B'Elanna spent more and more time in Engineering and less and less time working on the

windmill. Once they'd raised the blade wheel in quarters to the top of the tower with rope and a couple of pulleys, Kes suggested that they take a break for a few days.

"You're too busy to enjoy the process," she said. "Plus, the next thing we have to do is make the mill pump water, and I'd like to do some reading about it. I don't understand how it works, and I want to."

B'Elanna rewarded her with a weak smile. "Thanks. All I want to do when I'm not fiddling with the sensors is sleep and forget there's any alien ship out there."

"I'm sure it won't last forever, and then we'll get back to work."

They parted then, but met again unexpectedly the next morning when Captain Janeway called Kes to the bridge.

The captain moved toward Kes as she emerged from the turbolift. Taking her arm, she guided the Ocampa toward the view screen, where the highly reflective exterior of the now infamous alien ship, bouncing slightly in Voyager's wake, was displayed. The nearly perfect surface was marred in several places by what looked like scorch marks, but they didn't seem to affect its space worthiness.

"I'm sure you've heard about that," Janeway said, pointing to the screen, "and that they won't respond to our hails."

"Yes, Captain."

"What you might not know is that the whole time it's been on our tail, the power levels of the ship have been increasing. That's about the only thing our scans can tell us."

Kes grimaced. Janeway's tone left no doubt about that being a bad thing. "What would you like me to do, Captain?" she asked.

The captain put her hand on Kes's shoulder. "Would you try to make contact with them telepathically? Even if you can't speak mind-to-mind with them, maybe you could get a feeling for their intentions."

Kes nodded. "Of course I'll try."

"Trying is all I can ask." Janeway turned briskly, pointed Kes toward the captain's chair, and then moved back to stand with Tuvok at his tactical station, apparently deciding Kes needed solitude to make her attempt.

As Kes moved across the bridge, B'Elanna, who was sitting at one of the engineering monitors, flashed her a supportive smile. She settled into the big chair, happy for the engineer's increasingly comfortable presence. But then she had to block such thoughts- all thoughts, really- from her mind.

She closed her eyes and lowered her chin to her chest, concentrating on breathing slowly and deeply. Breathing was the only thing she would allow her mind to settle on. Any other thoughts rolled off her consciousness like water droplets off glass until, once again, the breath was all.

When the stray thoughts abated, she raised her chin and reached out with her

consciousness. She searched for the sense of other minds, starting with those closest to her. To her left, she could feel Chakotay looking away, trying to give her privacy with less than a meter of distance between them. His presence was warm and gentle, like bathwater. Tom Paris, in front of her, had an aura that was constantly changing. Kes wasn't reading his thoughts, but if she had been, she supposed they would be jumping from the status of the conn to anticipation of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich he wanted to replicate for lunch to wondering how he could make B'Elanna lose another bet so he could get some of his holodeck sessions back. Afraid she would laugh, she focused elsewhere, landing in Tuvok's familiar, structured psyche, which she always pictured as a spice rack, neatly organized alphabetically, each vial clean and full. The concern she detected on the surface of his mind had been swept up and placed in one of those vials, but the lid hadn't been screwed on yet. Drawing on his control, she stretched toward the unknown.

She pictured tendrils of her mind leaving her body, passing through Voyager's hull and the darkness of space, and into the alien ship. For several minutes she cast about for the feeling of other minds, but detected nothing. Reminding herself that these minds could be different than any of the others she'd experienced, she tried to relax, staying open to familiar or unfamiliar, but not actively scanning. She did this until Captain Janeway came up beside her with a purposeful gait that broke her concentration. Kes didn't know how long she'd been trying, but it had been long enough to make the bridge crew restless.

"Nothing, Captain. I sense nothing from over there."

Janeway's hands went to her hips. "Is it because of that shield they've got up, or that their minds are too different, or that there's no one there?"

"I have no way of knowing that, Captain." Kes sighed. "I'm sorry." She hurried off the bridge and back to her quarters before she could see the look of disappointment in the captain's eyes.

The renewed sense of worry from her crew mates before she left the bridge had been overwhelming, and she curled up on her bed to recover from it. She racked her brain for another way she might help, but unless someone got hurt and landed in sickbay, she couldn't think of anything. She doubted extra vegetables from the airponics bay would make anyone feel better. Where was that strength she'd learned from Tieran now? Of course, Tieran's way of dealing with this problem would likely be to blow that ship out of space which, thankfully, wasn't the Voyager crew's way.

After a few minutes, she crept off her pillow and brought a padd back with her to the bed, where she stretched out on her side to do her research on the mechanism that would make her windmill work. Maybe if she focused hard enough on that, she could separate herself from the emotions of the rest of the crew.

She studied the gears at the mill's head, one that rotated with the circular motion of the blades and another that, interlacing perpendicular to the first, changed the motion from circular to up and down. It was the sucker rod, which stretched all the way from the windmill's head into the pump that lay below the water level, that was moved up and down, forcing water up a pipe and into crop fields or a holding tank for later use. There was also a valve to keep the water from running back down the pipe once it was pumped up. She continued to be impressed by the so-called "primitive" technology.

Once she felt that she understood the basic concepts, Kes continued to read some of the related topics the computer recommended.

She was amazed to find that not only had windmills once been used to pump water, but they had also ground grain and stone, and a special kind, called wind turbines, had, as the text said, "harnessed the power of the wind to generate electricity." How wonderful that, kilometers from any neighbor or town, these human settlers had been able to use wind energy, otherwise wasted, in order to power, well, whatever they wanted to.

She drifted into daydreams, thinking about the kinds of things they might do with their power. They could use it to run a saw mill, like the one that had cut the boards she and B'Elanna had used in building their tower. They could add electric lights to their houses. Maybe they could even power the engine of one of the automobiles Tom Paris was always raving about. Or was it too early in human history for that type of vehicle?

Kes sat up, wide awake again. "Parsecs from any planet or space station," she amended her previous thought out loud, "these aliens have been able to use wind energy, otherwise wasted, in order to power their vehicle." Could it be possible? Could it be that simple?

She slid off the bed, calling, "Computer, current location of Lieutenant Torres?"

"Lieutenant Torres is in engineering."

* * *

B'Elanna glanced up from the sensor control terminal to the odd sight of Kes entering engineering. "Thank Kahless, a distraction," she said, meeting Kes halfway. "I've been going around in circles down here, trying the same things with the sensors I did days ago. It's like I'm stuck in some sort of feedback loop."

"Maybe this will help," Kes said, handing Torres the padd she was carrying. The device displayed a schematic for a wind turbine and Kes began to talk so quickly that B'Elanna couldn't act on her first impulse to complain that the mill project wasn't their top priority.

"I was doing some more reading on windmills. Did you know that there are several different types?" She pointed at the padd. "This one takes wind power and uses it to generate electrical energy. I got to thinking. Our warp eddies are like wind currents that Voyager creates, right? Could the alien ship be using them to generate power somehow, and that's why they're staying so close to us and their power levels are increasing?"

B'Elanna considered it. Then she brushed past Kes, racing back to the sensor controls. By the time Kes approached, she'd already examined several screens.

"The rate of their power increase has stayed exactly constant, even when we've slowed down to try to shake them off and then sped back up again." She scrolled the display forward in time and then pointed. "Until here. Two days ago at 0200 hours, their rate of power growth decreased by point two three percent and has stayed at that rate since then." She switched to the Engineering status screen and her heart rate sped up. "Here it is. Two days ago at 0158 hours we adjusted the warp coils as part of normally scheduled maintenance. That increased the efficiency of the warp drive from ninety-six point five percent to ninety-seven percent even." She grabbed Kes by the wrist. "Let's go see the captain."

B'Elanna and Kes didn't speak as they jogged toward the turbolift, but B'Elanna's mind continued to work. Who would have thought to compare the routine maintenance schedule to

the limited sensor readings they'd gotten from the alien ship? Maybe they should tweak the artificial intelligence settings so that the computer would alert them when such "coincidences" appeared in seemingly unrelated systems. If she'd received such an alert this time, she would have immediately realized what the power rate decrease with warp efficiency increase meant.

As soon as the turbolift doors opened onto the bridge, B'Elanna called, "Captain," and strode across the expanse of carpet toward the captain's chair. Kes hung back near Harry Kim's ops station. "I think I might know why the alien ship is following us so closely." She proceeded to explain Kes's eddy-to-energy conversion theory. When she finished, Captain Janeway narrowed her eyes and then nodded.

"It's a good hypothesis," she said. "So you think they'll eventually go peacefully when their power stores are full?"

B'Elanna smiled. "I was thinking we might help them along."

"Tune the warp field out of phase to make the eddies more powerful?" Janeway guessed, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Exactly," B'Elanna said. She loved it when she and the captain operated on the same wavelength. "The trick will be to find the balance between giving them power as quickly as possible and not making the eddies so powerful that they'll knock the ship off its course."

The two women went to the engineering station and fussed with calculations for a short time. Then B'Elanna nodded and Janeway said, "That should be close to the optimal adjustment. Do it." Then she added, "Good work."

"It was Kes who figured it out," B'Elanna said, turning to smile at her.

Captain Janeway looked only mildly surprised. She also turned and nodded to Kes. "Good work." She gestured to her own seat. "Why don't you wait with us while we see how it goes?"

Kes sat, and B'Elanna turned back to the engineering station. The captain hovered at her shoulder, but did not interfere with her work. It wasn't long before B'Elanna was able to report that the warp field had been tuned out of phase by zero point seven two percent. She was sensitive enough to her engines to feel the deck shake just a bit but doubted anyone else noticed it. From ops, Harry called that the alien ship's power was increasing at a rate ten percent higher than either of the previous recorded levels. After only thirteen minutes, the alien ship dropped back, its power stores apparently saturated.

"Captain!" Harry cried. "They're hailing us!" Stunned looks were exchanged around the bridge.

"Put them through," Captain Janeway ordered.

Harry did so, and a short squawk reached their ears, rapidly replaced by a computerized voice stating, in Standard, "Thank you." Another squawk and Harry reported that the channel had been closed. They could see on the view screen that the little ship immediately sped away.

Captain Janeway smiled first and, having been given tacit permission, Harry, Tom, and

Chakotay began to smile and cheer. B'Elanna looked over at Kes and the two of them grinned at each other. Some of the sparkle had returned to the Ocampa's eyes.

It seemed the windmill project had been a good idea in more ways than one.

* * *

"Computer, add wind from the northwest at ten knots," B'Elanna called. Kes stood with the engineer beneath their windmill. They had finally completed the pumping mechanism and removed the wire that had kept the wheel from turning until they were ready. The resulting breeze was enough to ruffle their hair and rustle the long grass, but it was the shiny blades of the windmill that held their attention.

The fan tail attached at the back of the wheel did its job and turned the wheel a third of the way around until it was facing into the wind. Then the wheel began to rotate. Soon the blades were only a blur. They squinted at the gears, far above their heads, until the sucker rod began to move up and down, slowly at first, then at a steady, clicking tempo. In about a minute, the ground gave forth a soft sigh and water trickled, then spurted, out the curved pipe they had connected to the pump. The two women grinned at each other.

B'Elanna jogged over and stuck her hand under the flow, then turned and splashed Kes with it.

"Hey!" she cried. It was surprisingly chilly. She joined B'Elanna at the area of ground where water was quickly pooling. B'Elanna jumped into the puddle, splattering both of their clothes with mud.

"Come on," B'Elanna said. "Celebrate!" She kicked water from the puddle onto Kes's shoes. Kes bent down to the pipe and cupped her hands under the water. Then, she turned and threw the water into B'Elanna's face.

B'Elanna shook her dripping hair and then, with a wicked grin, kicked the backs of Kes's knees and swept her legs out from under her so that she fell on her bottom into the puddle. Kes's eyes widened in shock, but then she laughed. B'Elanna sat down beside her, picking the driest spot in the grass she could find.

"Well, Kes, we did it," she said.

"Yes, we did."

"How does it feel?"

Kes swirled a finger in the pool of water surrounding her. "Cold," she joked. Then she got up and moved to a dryer patch of ground. "It feels wonderful. Thank you." She wanted to elaborate, but couldn't find the words. The physical labor had helped soothe her aggressive feelings or, rather, channel them into a productive path. One that Tieran surely would have scoffed at. Yet the task had included enough cerebral elements that she could excel at it, rather than fail. And then, of course, it had helped her to solve a ship's problem that had nothing at all to do with healing or vegetables or psychic powers. Who knew what other hidden talents she might find? Who knew where they would take her? Forward, certainly, rather than backward or sideways. After all, a third of her life had already been lived.

Not seeming concerned that Kes didn't share her thoughts, B'Elanna ordered the computer

to add a round wooden vat under their faucet, and the water pattered noisily into it. "I'm almost sorry we're finished," she said, then stretched her arms backward and cupped the back of her neck with her hands.

"Surely there's something more we can do here," Kes said.

B'Elanna looked up at the mill. "We could paint the tower," she suggested. "What color do you think?"

"How about a bright, sunny yellow?"

"Yellow it is," her friend agreed.

For the moment, though, they just enjoyed the water and the sky and the breeze. They would continue their work, but there was no hurry.

Talent Night

Jeffrey Lang

This tale is set shortly before the third-season episode "Coda."

Jeffrey Lang

Jeffrey Lang is the author of the novels *Star Trek: Voyager: String Theory*, Book 1- Cohesion and *Star Trek: The Next Generation- Immortal Coil*, as well as the coauthor (with David Weddle) of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine- Section 31: Abyss* and (with J. G. Hertzler) the two-part *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine- The Left Hand of Destiny*. He also wrote the short stories "Dead Man's Hand" for *The Lives of Dax* anthology, "Foundlings" for the *Prophecy and Change* anthology, "The Wake" for *Star Trek Special* published by Wildstorm Comics, and (with Heather Jarman) "Mirror Eyes" in the anthology *Tales of the Dominion War*. He's currently working on an original novel, which hopefully will see print sometime before the turn of the next millennium.

Lang lives in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, with his partner, Helen, and his son, Andrew, all under the watchful authority of Samuel the cat.

"One last thing before we finish up," the captain said as she swung her chair around, making brief eye contact with everyone at the table, ending with Tom Paris. The hairs on the back of Tom's neck stood up like hairbrush bristles. He knew that look, the "a bee in her bonnet" expression. Captain Janeway had something on her mind, but not a shipwide concern or breach of protocol or she would have brought it up during the meeting. In a way, though, this was worse: whatever it was the captain was obsessing over, it concerned only some cross-section of the people in the room: Chakotay, Tuvok, B'Elanna Torres, Harry Kim, the Doctor, Neelix or him, Tom Paris.

Paris didn't like the way the captain's gaze lingered on him. He reviewed his activities of the past week, searching for something he might have done that would warrant public reprimand, but nothing came to mind. He had even managed to look alert during the staff meeting, despite Tuvok's needlessly detailed description of why the Nekrit Expanse was so empty. Otherwise, everyone had been as brief and to the point as possible, including the usually chatty Neelix, a change that Tom attributed to the Talaxian's relief at finally finishing his work detail in the exhaust manifolds following his transgressions at the Nekrit supply

depot. All was calm, peaceful, and quiet.

"I'd like to mention a topic Chakotay and I have been discussing," the captain continued, pulling herself up onto her feet. Uh-oh, Tom thought. She's standing up. Never a good sign. Captain Janeway patrolled the perimeter of the room, touching the backs of chairs, letting everyone know precisely where she was the way a good groom reassures a horse by touching its flanks as she moved around the stall. "This is a direct response to Tuvok's excellent report about the Nekrit Expanse and the relative quiet I think we may expect for the next while. Having left Kazon space behind us, I think we may... is 'anticipate' too strong a word?" She looked around the room for reassurance and, feeling the need to be agreeable, Tom nodded.

"Very good," the captain continued. " 'Anticipate' some peace and quiet for a stretch. There's only one problem there that I can see." She searched the senior staff's faces. Tom noticed that Chakotay was attempting to stifle a grin. Obviously, whatever it was that the captain had on her mind, it wasn't a life-or-death topic.

"Supply stops," Neelix responded immediately. "I'm starting to wonder how we're going to maintain a steady supply of fresh vegetables and fruits."

"An excellent answer, Neelix," Janeway said. "And a significant concern, but that's not what I was thinking about just now. And, besides, I'm quite certain you and Kes will be able to coax whatever we need out the airponics bays." The Talaxian grinned widely at the captain's praise.

"We can either replicate or manufacture whatever we need for the engines," B'Elanna said, "so you shouldn't be worried there, either."

"And, as I stated earlier," Tuvok added, "long-range scans do not indicate we'll be forced to travel through areas claimed by hostile civilizations."

"All worthwhile concerns, but not what I was thinking about," Janeway said as she walked around behind Tom's chair and he felt the weight of her hand on his seatback. "No, something more fundamental, closer to home." She paused and Tom felt the captain waiting for a response. He sneaked another look at Chakotay, but the commander had once again assumed his blandest expression. "Anyone? No? All right, then. Chakotay, what is it we're worried about?"

"Boredom."

"And why is that?"

"Because bored people get sloppy," the first officer said. "They lose their edge. They become careless."

"Exactly." The captain resumed her walk until she was standing behind Neelix, the last chair in her cycle except for Chakotay. "So what do we do about that?"

"I could increase the number of drills per month," Tuvok said, though, to the Vulcan's credit, Tom sensed a dubious note in his voice.

"Not exactly what I had in mind," the captain said. "I think we need something a little more..." She lifted her hands in an open, welcoming manner. "... distracting."

"Ah!" Neelix said and leapt up out of his seat. "My suggestion!"

Captain Janeway set her hand on the Talaxian's shoulder and gently shoved him back into his seat. "Yes," she said. "Several weeks ago, Mr. Neelix proposed we might have a talent show, not only for entertainment's sake, but as a way to get to know one another better. For example, how many of you know that our Mr. Kim is a fine clarinetist?"

Everyone at the table raised his hand.

"All right. Bad example. How many of you know that Tuvok writes- if I'm any judge- very fine poetry?"

All eyes turned to Tuvok, who was- if such an emotionally laden word could be used- glaring at Captain Janeway. No one raised his or her hand.

"There you are!" the captain said. "I expect that this is only the tip of the iceberg, too. Who knows what other talents and common interests crewmen might share?"

"This all sounds fine, Captain," Tom said, "but if this is Neelix's idea, then why doesn't he just run with it? I can't help but think that your bringing it up during staff meeting doesn't mean, uh, something...?"

"Very astute, Mr. Paris," the captain said. " 'Something,' indeed. I have concerns that if the crew doesn't see senior staff supporting this initiative, then they might not treat the event with the respect and enthusiasm it deserves."

Ah, Tom thought. Now I know where that premonition of creeping dread began.

"So," B'Elanna said, her rising voice tracing a parallel path to Tom's spiraling panic. "You're ordering us all to be in the talent show?"

Captain Janeway rocked back on her heels in what Tom considered to be a convincing parody of surprise. "Ordering you to be in the talent show?" she asked, though she was not able to completely suppress a smile. "Of course not. I'm strongly suggesting that you participate in some fashion. As my old dance instructor used to tell me, not everyone can be the dying swan. Somebody has to pull the cord that opens the curtain."

"That was your job?" Tom said, unable to resist the urge to ask.

"No, I was the dying swan," the captain said. "But that doesn't mean I didn't appreciate the cord puller."

Tom did manage to suppress the urge to ask, "And her name was...?" It was a long walk home, after all.

"So," the captain said, clapping her hands. "In conclusion, I expect to hear every one of you has found some way to participate, either onstage or behind the curtains. Does anyone of you think that's too much to ask?"

Tom warily studied the faces around the table, their expressions ranging from delighted (Neelix) to amused (Chakotay) to neutral (Tuvok- surprise!) to simply dubious (Harry, the Doctor) until he settled on the expression he expected most closely mirrored his own, which,

surprisingly, was B'Elanna's. Her expression said simply, Kill me now. Please.

* * *

"So, Harry," Kes said settling into the seat across from his, "what do you plan to do for the talent show?"

Three days had passed since the staff meeting and this topic had come up on several occasions, which meant that the captain's initial goal had been satisfied: the crew was interested. The only problem was that no one had told Harry what they planned to do, but only asked him what he planned to do. Apparently, Captain Janeway's requirement that the senior staff participate had circulated.

"Hi, Kes," Harry said as he set aside the padd he had been skimming. "I haven't decided. I might just ask Neelix if he needs a hand with the stage. You know... paint some backdrops or help with lighting."

"I don't think Neelix will need much help with either of those things. Tom has already volunteered to program the holodeck to create any scenery or lighting effects we'll need."

Good idea, Harry thought. Wish I'd thought of that.

"Besides," she continued as she began eating her yogurt and fruit, "wouldn't you rather perform? I've been told you play beautifully. What's the instrument called?"

"The clarinet," Harry said, warming to Kes's interest. "It's a wood-wind instrument. Who told you I played... uh, beautifully?"

"Tom mentioned it."

"I can't remember ever playing when Tom was around."

"No?" Kes asked. "Maybe someone told him and he was just repeating what he'd heard."

I don't remember ever playing for anyone, Harry thought, then realized that perhaps this was the point. Music had been a large part of his life before he had come aboard Voyager. In the years since being drawn to the Delta Quadrant, he had found it more and more difficult to find time to practice, let alone enjoy his gift. "Huh," he said. "Well, then maybe I'll pick out a couple pieces and start rehearsing."

Kes said, "That would be wonderful," then smiled broadly, which, Harry thought, was almost reward enough right there.

* * *

"That bastard," B'Elanna said. "I wish I'd thought of that."

Harry nodded, then shrugged as he knelt down beside the repair drone he and B'Elanna had been attempting to program to scrub the exhaust manifolds (Neelix had only managed to scratch the surface of the work that needed to be completed). "Yeah, but I wouldn't envy him too much. I get the impression the job is turning out to be more demanding than Tom expected."

"Why?"

"Because Neelix can't say no to anyone. I think the problem started when Dan Fisher- you know him?"

"Delta-watch commander. Yeah, our paths have crossed once or twice."

"Well," Harry said as he popped the maintenance cover off the drone, "when Neelix asked him if he had any ideas for the talent show, Dan said he wanted to do the speech Theoden gives just before the Riders of Rohan charge the Morgul horde..." Harry must have sensed the complete and utter blank stare B'Elanna was giving him because he stopped in midsentence and asked, "You've never read The Lord of the Rings, have you?"

"No."

"Or watched the movies?"

"No."

"Or played in the holonovel?"

"No."

"Or..."

"Assume the answer is no."

"Philistine."

"Geek."

"Touche," Harry said, and pulled out his tricorder. "Anyway, this was all meant as kind of a joke. Dan was just trying to fake out Neelix, get out of the show, but Neelix just said, 'Great! Wonderful! Let's do it!' "

"And Fisher couldn't back out."

"No," Harry said. "Worse. He started getting into the idea. Now he has Tom programming in the backgrounds and characters for five hundred horsemen."

"So Fisher's a geek, too?"

"I think that's a yes."

"Wow," B'Elanna said wonderingly. "How's Tom going to find the time to do all that programming?"

"I don't know," Harry said as he dumped the revised code from the tricorder's memory into the drone's. "But if he wants to stay behind the stage, he'll need to figure out something."

* * *

"So you're going to be helping Tom?" Chakotay asked.

"What?" B'Elanna said looking up from the engineering console.

The first officer had been making a tour of the bridge, stopping and having a quiet word with everyone on duty. Chakotay did that kind of thing, B'Elanna knew; his way of keeping his finger on the pulse. Most of the time, he didn't ask about whatever the crewman was doing at the moment, seeming to prefer to hear about off-duty projects or hobbies or even gossip. Somehow- B'Elanna didn't know precisely how- from these little bits and pieces he managed to diagnose the mental health of the crew. "Helping Tom," he said. "With the holodeck programming for the talent show."

This was three days after her discussion with Harry and B'Elanna had been wondering if it would be Chakotay or the captain who would first inquire about her plans for the show. She had been considering her options: perhaps she would say she had something planned- for some reason, baton twirling came to mind- and then make sure there was a disaster in the engine room the night of the show. A small disaster, but something that would require her immediate attention. She had considered offering her services to Neelix, though with Tom working on the holoprogramming, she hadn't been able to think of anything she could do. "Who said..." she began, but turned that into, "I mean, what? When... when did you talk to Tom?"

"This morning," Chakotay replied and cocked an eyebrow. "Unless I misunderstood him. You're not helping him? He sounded like he could really use it."

"No. No, that's fine. I just wasn't sure what you were talking about there for a second. Of course I'm helping him. Some interesting, uh, lighting effects he needs."

"All right," Chakotay said suspiciously. "Good."

"Too bad, though," B'Elanna continued, her mouth running ahead of her common sense. "It'll probably mean I'll be too busy to do... you know, anything else."

"Oh," Chakotay replied, maybe a touch too dryly. "That is too bad. You were going to do... what was it?"

"Oh, uh, baton twirling, I thought. Something I used to do when I was a kid."

"I'm having trouble picturing that, B'Elanna."

"My mother hated it."

"Less trouble now."

* * *

"You told Chakotay I was helping you with lighting effects," B'Elanna said, raising her voice to be heard over the echoing din. Despite the fact that most of the effects would be virtual, the holodeck hummed with beehive-quality levels of activity. B'Elanna had dashed out of the bridge as soon as Chakotay's back was turned to confirm the first officer's news.

"That's right," Tom said. "I did."

"You lied to Chakotay? That's pretty risky behavior even for you."

"Did I?" Tom asked, sounding like he was about to launch into a legal argument. B'Elanna, sadly, didn't get the chance to hear what else he was going to say because he was interrupted by two ensigns carrying a large storage container between them. "What is it, guys?"

"Where do you want this?"

"I don't know," Tom said irritably. "What is it?"

"Something Neelix said you wanted," the younger of the two- a biologist named Girroux- said. "They're lights. You know, the kind we'd set up at a work site."

Tom wearily lifted his padd and scanned through a list until he found the item he sought. "Right," he said. "I remember now." He pointed towards a corner of the large, blank room that looked as if it had been set aside for equipment storage. "Over there."

As the two ensigns wrestled their load away, B'Elanna said, "Lights? Why not just use the holomatrix?"

"Draws too many computing cycles," Tom said. "I've only got so many processors to work with over the length of the show and if we pull too much, the whole grid shuts down. It's the same kind of problem we'd get with elaborate scenarios."

B'Elanna was familiar with the problem and knew Tom usually worked around it by cleverly limiting the size and complexity of his holographic constructs. For example, Sandrine's, his reproduction of a Marseilles waterfront bar, was essentially limited to two or three rooms, most of which were usually shrouded in shadow. The net drain on the holodeck's power allotment was relatively small.

"Ah," she said. "I begin to see the light... you'll excuse the expression. You need someone to hook the lights into the grid."

"And make sure they're safe," Tom explained. "The technical term is 'gaffer.' "

B'Elanna snorted derisively. "Okay. That still doesn't explain why you told Chakotay I'd do this before you checked with me."

"Didn't I say?" Tom asked distractedly as he watched a pair of jugglers inexpertly throwing bowling pins back and forth in an uneven arc. "Neelix and I were talking when Chakotay called in to see who had signed up to perform. I noticed you weren't on the list and..." Here he laughed. "I remembered the look of dread on your face back in the meeting when the captain first announced this whole ridiculous affair. I figured you were stalling, hoping the whole thing was going to fall apart."

"And it's not?" B'Elanna asked.

"I don't think so," Tom replied. "I mean, I hope not. I've already got a lot of time in. There's even a couple good acts coming together." For the first time, Paris looked her right in the eye and grinned. "And, you know, this might even be fun. If nothing else, I'll get to hear Harry play clarinet."

B'Elanna covered her mouth with her hand to conceal her grin. "Right," she said. "I'll go take

a look at the power grid."

"Thanks. It'll probably help if I send you the schedule and my notes. I don't think we'll need real lights but for one or two acts, but any time you could give me..."

"All right," B'Elanna said, finding herself strangely pleased by this opportunity to participate in a manner that did not offend her. "Anything else?"

Tom considered, then shook his head. "Not really. Just keep this in mind: 'There's no business like show business.' "

"Really?"

"Like no business I know."

* * *

"It was an uncommonly decent thing he did," B'Elanna said to Neelix, who was supporting the work lights while she bolted the unit to a tripod. "I mean, especially for Tom."

"Oh, I don't know," Neelix said. "Tom is usually a decent fellow."

"I'm a little surprised to hear you say that," B'Elanna said. "I had heard that you two have had problems." Though she had never talked to the Talaxian about the temporary triangle between him, Tom, and Kes, she had certainly heard about it from Harry.

"Oh, well," Neelix demurred. "That's all in the past. Tom and I are the best of friends now. Look at how much he's helping me with the talent show." The Talaxian's efforts at bonhomie sounded a little forced to B'Elanna. Though she was fairly certain nothing had ever happened between Tom and Kes, there had definitely been some heat between them for a while and the subsequent cooling between Kes and Neelix couldn't be coincidental.

B'Elanna tightened the last bolt, then stood and looked around the holodeck. All around them, she saw men and women scurrying from edge to edge. As she watched, pieces of scenery and characters- an armored horse here, a front porch swing there- flickered into and out of existence. Squarely at the center of this whirling, chaotic scene stood Tom Paris, pointing, directing, cajoling, and even shouting when necessary. Not so much "helping" as doing everything, B'Elanna thought. "Yeah," she said. "He seems to have really taken an interest."

"And not just in the production aspects, either," Neelix added while wiping his hands on a cloth that dangled out of his suit pocket. "Tom has brought a couple of acts to my attention. Do you know Ensign Lauren MacTaggart?"

B'Elanna searched her memory, but couldn't put a name to the face. Shaking her head, she said, "Can't have been one of the Maquis."

"Oh, goodness, no. Lauren was just out of the Academy. She's probably the youngest member of the crew if you don't count Kes." The Ocampan was, if B'Elanna was counting correctly, between three and four years old, though because of her speeded-up metabolism, she looked much older. "There she is over there."

B'Elanna glanced in the direction Neelix pointed, half-expecting, from the way the Talaxian

described the ensign, to see a gawky, awkward girl. She was surprised, therefore, to find herself looking at an elegantly slim young woman with long red hair pulled back into a thick ponytail. Lauren had high, angular cheekbones, a pert nose, a spray of freckles across her cheeks and nose, and piercing green eyes. How have I missed her all these months? "I can't remember ever seeing her," B'Elanna said.

"She works gamma shift in the airponics and environmental sections," Neelix said. "You two probably sleep when the other one is awake."

"How does Tom know her then?"

"How does Tom know anyone?" Neelix asked. "He's an outgoing soul."

Right, B'Elanna thought spitefully. "Outgoing." Is that the new word for it? "And Tom brought her to your attention?"

"Absolutely," Neelix said, speaking rapidly, as he did when he became excited. "He said she has a lovely voice. 'Great set of lungs' is what I believe he said. She's very shy, he says, so she won't sing when anyone else is in here. I expect he's going to have a difficult time getting her to perform in front of the whole crew, but he said he'll do his best to coax her on stage."

"Good for him," B'Elanna said as she saw the pert little redhead approach Tom. Smiling shyly, Lauren stood with her feet close together and her hands clasped behind her back. Almost half a meter shorter than the pilot, she had to stand with her head tilted back to look Tom in the eye when she spoke. He never took his eyes off her face, either, B'Elanna noticed. "What a guy."

"Isn't he?" Neelix asked.

* * *

"He's such a pig."

"Eat your dinner, B'Elanna," Harry said.

"And no one seems to notice it. Everyone forgives him because he's so... so charming. He smiles and everyone does whatever he says."

"B'Elanna, we have ten minutes before we have to go back on duty. I, for one, would like to have some warm food in me." Harry was doing his best to make sure that was true, spooning up soup and swallowing as fast as he could. "And, you know, he is my best friend, so give me a break."

"Ah," she continued, ignoring her fish sandwich. "But would he be your best friend if you weren't on Voyager? Under any other circumstances, would a guy like him and a guy like you become so close?"

Harry stopped eating and considered the question. Finally, he said, "Well, no, possibly not. But there's another question you should ask."

"What?"

"Under any other circumstances, would you and I have become friends?"

The question had flitted through B'Elanna's mind a half-millisecond before Harry had asked it. "Well, you have me there, Starfleet."

Harry snorted. "You haven't called me that in a couple years. Ah, Maquis, it takes me back to the good old days."

"What was good about them?" All she remembered about the first few weeks of their life on board Voyager was stress and fear. Despite what the captain and Chakotay claimed now, B'Elanna was convinced that no one had truly understood what was going on. The shock about the truth of their situation had only settled in slowly over a period of weeks and months. No one had trusted anyone else and the two crews, Maquis and Starfleet, had only grudgingly shuffled toward an accommodation, one group becoming more rigorous, the other loosening up on unnecessarily strict policies.

"We had bigger replicator rations."

"If we had kept that up," B'Elanna said, "we'd all be fat." And dead in space, she added mentally. No way the warp core could have continued to meet the demand. Everyone had eaten a lot those first few weeks- a response to stress, probably. "You want to stay trim so that Libby will recognize you when we get home."

Harry rolled his eyes, then replaced his spoon in his bowl. B'Elanna knew she was the only person allowed to talk about Libby, and only ever in a slightly mocking manner. The thought of his lover mourning and, likely, moving on nagged at Harry and she felt it was her job to occasionally remind him that Libby might still be, if not waiting for him, then unattached. "Fine," Harry said. "I'll stop eating if you'll start." He poked her sandwich with the tip of his finger. "It's stone cold."

"I like them cold." She took a bite and talked around the mouthful of food. "Mmmmm! Delicious."

"Yuck. Thanks, B'Elanna. There goes the rest of my appetite."

Sniggering, a thought struck the engineer: Is there anyone who I have as much fun with as Harry? The answer was, of course, no. So, she wondered, why are we just friends? Why isn't there something else going on here? Why don't we... She looked over at Harry, who was staring off into the middle distance, absorbed in the hustle and bustle of the dining room, half-listening to a half-dozen conversations around them. He must have sensed her attention because he turned to look at her. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"I don't believe you. What is it?"

"Nothing," she said. "I was just thinking about something."

"What?"

I was just thinking that whatever you are to me, whatever I am to you, we're not that thing to each other. I was thinking that kissing you would be like kissing my little brother if I had a little brother. That you're probably thinking about Libby and I'm not thinking about anyone at all in

particular....

"Tom!" Harry called out and waved as his friend entered the dining room trailing his new little best friend, Lauren. "Hey! Over here."

"We have to go," B'Elanna said. "Duty calls."

"We have five minutes," Harry said. "I haven't seen him in days."

"I have to go," B'Elanna said and gathered up her tray. "He can have my spot."

* * *

"I'm sorry about all this, Tom, really I am, but, oh... Urh! He's such a jerk!"

"I know. You told me," Tom said, then let his eyes slide over to Harry, who was eating as fast as he could without actually pouring the soup from the bowl into his mouth. He wanted to mouth the words, "I'm sorry," to his friend, but there was no opportunity. Lauren wouldn't take her eyes off him. She was like that, he had discovered. When those green orbs were fixed on you, you felt like you were the center of the universe, which might be one of the reasons she and her boyfriend Michael had stayed together so long despite the fact that they seemed to spend most of their time arguing.

"I know, I know," Lauren moaned. "I'm going to shut up now. I promise. Thanks for being such a good friend. It's just..."

"I understand," Tom said, though, truly, if pressed, he would have to admit he didn't. Relationships like Lauren and Michael's baffled him. What was the point in being involved if every day was a new battle? He wanted to ask Harry if he understood, but there wouldn't be an opportunity.

"I have to go," Harry said, scooping up his padd and tray. "How's the show coming along?"

"Okay, I guess," Tom began. "I could really..."

"Hey, that's great," Harry said, cutting him off. "Let's try to have dinner soon."

"Okay," Tom said and deflated. "Hey, was that B'Elanna sitting here earlier?"

"Yeah," Harry said as he headed for the door. "She says hi."

"Really?" Tom asked, surprised and strangely pleased, but Harry didn't hear him.

"It's mostly just that he doesn't understand why I need to rehearse so much," Lauren continued, obviously having forgotten her promise to end the Michael monologue.

"Well, tell him it's been a while since you've sung."

"I did," she said, her voice moving uncomfortably into the upper registers. "I told him I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of, well, everyone. And he said, 'Then don't do it. You don't have to do it. Nobody's making you.'"

Uh-oh, Tom thought. Danger sign. "But you said..."

"I said that of course I had to. I'd already promised you and Michael said, 'Who's more important? Me or Tom?' "

Tom felt the axis of the conversation shifting and, despite the distractions of the dining hall, the magnetic pull of Lauren's green eyes drew him in even farther. And what might this mean? he wondered, but said only, "And your reply?"

"I didn't say anything," Lauren replied, "because I was too busy leaving the room."

"Ah," Tom said. "Well, good idea. You don't want to say anything that you might regret later."

Lauren leaned forward, put her forehead against his arm, and said, "But sometimes I do. He drives me..."

"Crazy. Yes, you said." Tom hadn't been close enough to Lauren before to notice, but her hair smelled nice. Clean. Maybe a little perfumey, but what was wrong with that? The dining hall was beginning to empty out and Tom was keenly aware that he and Lauren were two of the few who weren't clearing up and moving toward the door. "Don't let him bother you too much. Michael will come around when he sees you perform. Do you think you'll want to rehearse tonight?"

"Maybe," Lauren said straightening up, her ponytail flopping back down over her shoulder. "He's going to be on duty during gamma. You want to come to my quarters and give me notes?"

Do I? Tom asked himself and was surprised the answer was not immediately forthcoming. The moment stretched out uncomfortably until he finally said, "Sure. Okay. See you then." Nothing wrong with that, he decided. After all, it was my idea for her to be in the show in the first place.

* * *

"Kes?" Neelix called as the Ocampan exited sickbay. He had attempted to affect as casual a tone as possible, but knew his effort was probably futile. He knew he was unskilled at concealing his emotions, even the mildest, and where Kes was concerned... well. The fact that he had been loitering in the corridor outside sickbay didn't help much, either. Though the word "stalker" wasn't in the Talaxian's vocabulary, he understood the concept of unwanted attention, especially where old lovers were concerned.

"Neelix," Kes said, blessing him with a genuine smile of welcome. "How are you? It seems like ages since I've seen you."

Six days, twenty-two hours and... hmmm, fifteen minutes, give or take. "I've been busy," Neelix said. "My duties in the dining hall, studying the security protocols..."

"And the talent show," Kes said breathlessly. "It's all anyone talks about. The Doctor is thrilled that you're letting him perform the aria from Otello. He's been practicing every free moment. He even asked me if I would be Desdemona so he could practice his throttling."

"Oh," Neelix said. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Kes laughed. "It's quite fun. You should see his expression!"

"Does that mean you're going to be in the show?" Neelix asked, "because if you weren't, I was wondering..."

"Since the Doctor is performing," Kes answered before he could continue, "I might have to stay in sickbay. If nothing is going on, no patients or tests running, I'll try to come down to see. Otherwise, I'll be watching on the monitor and I know Tom plans to record the whole thing so everyone who's on duty can replay it later."

"Oh," Neelix said, and found it impossible to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "I see. Well, yes, that makes perfectly good sense."

Kes cocked an eyebrow and regarded him skeptically. "Neelix," she said. "What? You had something on your mind."

"It was nothing," Neelix said with a wave of his hand. "Just an idea I had. A little something in case there was a pause in the proceedings. Sometimes the holodeck sets don't change as quickly as we'd like and Tom thought it would be a good idea to have a few more 'live' acts ready just in case."

Neelix felt Kes trying to look him in the eye, but studiously avoided her gaze. Finally, a handful of sweat-inducing seconds later, he felt her touch his arm lightly, ever so lightly, and say, "Neelix, you wanted to sing the Starlight Song."

The Talaxian shrugged ever-so-slightly, but when he felt the grip on his arm tighten, he found the courage to look his former love in the eye. "I just thought..."

"You just thought it would be fun," she said and, leaning closer, grinned appreciatively. There were, Neelix noticed, tiny wrinkles around Kes's eyes where there had been none the last time he had been this near her.

"We did harmonize so well together."

"We did," she said. "Though I think half the reason it sounded so nice was because your ship was so tiny."

"Cozy," he said. "The word was 'cozy.' "

"Right." She sighed and her smile faded. "I'd like to, Neelix, but..."

"I understand. Duty calls." He tried to sound cheerful. "Mine, too. I have to get back to the holodeck before Tom loses his temper with some unsuspecting crewman."

"He's feeling some strain?"

Neelix was surprised by the question. "You haven't talked to him?"

"Not in days. More than since the last time I talked to you."

"I assumed you were... seeing each other occasionally."

"Tom?" Kes asked, surprised, perhaps even amused. "No, I think he has other interests right now."

"Really?"

"You two don't talk?"

"Only about the show."

"You should," Kes said and patted him on the arm. "I think you could become good friends."

"Well, if you think so..."

"And Neelix," she added as she removed her hand from his arm. "We're still good friends."

"We are?"

"We are." She grinned again and this time Neelix could see her back teeth which meant she was truly happy. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek so that he could smell the slight citrus-and-vanilla scent of her skin. The tips of Neelix's ears tingled and he closed his eyes, relishing the moment. When he opened them again, Kes was gone, having moved away so quietly it was almost like she hadn't been there at all.

* * *

Later that night- much later- Tom stood waiting for a turbolift in a dim, otherwise deserted corridor. The rehearsal had gone pretty well, though he was finding Lauren's flirtations... But that was unfair. She hadn't flirted with him, not exactly. She was just one of those kinds of girls who had to touch people when she talked to them. She and Michael were a couple... more or less. Clearly, the girl was attracted to Tom and was trying to figure out what she wanted to do about her feelings. While he didn't wish to flatter himself, Tom had seen this sort of thing happen enough times to know the signs. He sighed. If only there was a chance Harry was still awake, he would drop by for a chat. For someone who had been involved in precisely one relationship, his friend had remarkable insights about the best things to do in these circumstances. And not just the best thing to do: the right thing to do.

The turbolift door opened and B'Elanna Torres stomped out, Tom's presence obviously barely registering on her. She wore an expression he recognized: frustration. Against his better judgment, he said, "Hey, B'Elanna."

She stopped in her tracks, spun and regarded him warily. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Good to see you, too," Tom replied through gritted teeth, stepping into the car. "And good night!"

"No, wait, Tom," B'Elanna said, holding the door open with her arm and shaking her head. "It's been a terrible night. The matter-antimatter intermix chamber has been acting up and I've been down in engineering all night trying to track down the problem."

"But no joy."

"No, none," she sighed. "And I have to be back on duty in five hours, so I'm a little on edge."

Tom felt the knot in his gut unkink a loop or two and he wondered what it was about this

woman. No one could wind him up the way she did. "Sorry to hear that. I know what you mean. I have to get up in..." He looked at the chrono in his padd. "Yeah, five hours."

B'Elanna muttered something about "Real job," but Tom decided to let it pass. "Thanks for coming down and setting up those lights. It's been a big help."

"How are those working for you?"

"Pretty good," Tom said, aware that they were having a conversation while B'Elanna held the door open. What if someone was waiting for the car? "Most of the time. We've had problems with getting the right intensity when we narrow the focus. I know you showed Neelix how to do that, but he can't seem to get it right. Maybe you could come down and show us again?"

"Well, sure, I'll try to fit that in between my morning massage and the visit to the spa."

"Hey, don't be snotty. It was a simple request. If you have time, you have time. If you don't..."

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes, but did not release the door. "Sorry, sorry. Again. I'll see what I can do. Like I said, a crappy night."

"I know how you feel. Mine wasn't so great either." He nodded back down the corridor. "Rehearsals."

"Who lives down there?"

"Lauren MacTaggart."

"The redhead?"

"That's her."

"On my corridor?"

"Since forever apparently."

"I had no idea."

Tom saw a strange look in B'Elanna's eye, but didn't know what to call it. Surprise? "Does it matter?" he asked.

She shook her head, but she stared at him. "Not a bit."

"Okay. Well, then good night."

"Good night." B'Elanna continued to stare up at him and he continued to stare back until, finally, he pointed at her arm.

"Arm," he said.

"What?"

"Arm. The door."

"Oh. Right." She withdrew her arm. "Sorry. Good night."

The doors slid shut and the car asked him where he wanted to go. Tom stared at the spot where B'Elanna's face had been for several seconds before he answered.

* * *

Two hours before curtain, in the midst of frantic last-minute preparations, Tom's combadge beeped. He expected the call to come from one of the crewmen who had volunteered to help set up chairs, then failed to show up, but instead it was Joe Carey. Surprised (since Joe was neither in the cast or crew), Tom cautiously asked, "What can I do for you, Joe?"

"Uh, nothing," Joe replied. "For me. In fact, I'm calling for B'Elanna."

An icy chill crept down Tom's back: his overactive premonitory sense at work again. "Why?"

"Because she's the boss."

"No, I mean, 'Why did she tell you to call me?' "

"Because you're about to lose most of the power to the holodeck."

"I hate you." The words were out of Tom's mouth before he knew what he was saying.

"B'Elanna mentioned you might say that," Joe said. "She advised me to tell you to hate the matter-antimatter intermix chamber instead."

Through the shroud of panic that was settling down over him, Tom managed to recall the conversation from a couple nights before. "She was trying to track down a problem," he said aloud.

"Well, we found it. More accurately, it found us. I have to shut down all nonessential systems in the next twenty minutes or we'll be without the warp drive for several weeks."

"I thought the holodecks had their own power supply," Tom said searching for alternatives.

"Holodecks have a dedicated power supply, Tom. Not at all the same thing. Everything comes from the engines one way or another and, I'm sorry, but the holodecks aren't essential."

Mind racing, Tom asked, "How long will they be down."

"As long as it takes for us to rebalance the load. I'm figuring at least a week."

Tom sagged. There was no way he could push everything off another week. Most of the performers were either so wound up or so frightened that delaying that long would spell disaster. Damn it! Tom thought, but then another concern filtered in. "But otherwise we're okay?" he asked. "B'Elanna's okay?"

"Sure," Joe said, sounding a little surprised by the question.

"Right. Okay. Thanks for the warning."

"You bet. I hope you can figure out something."

Me, too, Tom thought and went in search of Neelix.

* * *

Neelix understood precisely why they had to continue. "The show," he said, "must go on."

"Right," Tom said. "Where did you hear that expression?"

"What expression?"

" 'The show must go on.' "

"I didn't know it was an expression," the Talaxian said. "I just assumed it was true."

The captain agreed with their decision and gave her blessing for the show to continue.

"It's going to be shorter," Tom explained.

"Probably a good thing," Captain Janeway replied.

"Probably," Tom agreed, remembering school shows that dragged on and on. "It doesn't make a good statement to have the captain front and center in the audience stifling a yawn."

The captain raised an eyebrow then and asked, "Who said I was going to be in the audience?"

* * *

Bereft of effects technology, a handful of acts had to be scratched and one or two participants felt they simply couldn't bring off their performance without visual aids. Dan Fisher was disappointed about the loss of his holographic horse, but decided simply to read the scene from the novel sans costume or crowd. Fortunately, Dan had a deep, resonant voice and practically brought the holodeck ceiling down with his command to "Ride now! Ride now! Ride for ruin and the world's ending!" Tom noticed that the captain (who was waiting in the wings of the makeshift stage) flinched when she heard these words.

Fortunately, many of the musical acts were unaffected by the power outage, though, less fortunately, not all of them were up to the newly stripped down presentation. The Delaney sisters' violin/viola combo number fell flat without the orchestrated score, though they gamely persevered through to the last note. In other instances, the lack of effects had a positive result. Tom didn't think the audience would have put up with the expanded version of the Doctor's Otello, but his a cappella version of the closing solo stunned everyone, including Tom, who had heard the full-blown (some might say "overblown") rendition in one too many rehearsals.

Two other surprises rounded out the musical program. The first was Harry's clarinet recital. Since his friend had insisted in practicing in private, no one, not even Tom or Neelix, had heard him play, but only set aside a ten-minute block. Harry, dressed in a white tie and tails, took the stage, and was picked out by the single spotlight B'Elanna had provided. He announced that he would begin with the second movement from Mozart's clarinet concerto in

A major, then explained it was "a piece I learned when I was at Juilliard." With a nervous little laugh, he wet the reed and began a lovely tune that made Tom Paris think of both the beauty and sadness of autumn.

When Harry finished, the audience seemed to exhale as one, catch its breath, then unleashed a torrent of applause that rocked Harry back on his heels. He grinned foolishly, then bowed. When the cries of "Encore," began, Harry actually blushed, and seemed ready to walk off the stage, but a warning look from Tom kept his friend in the spotlight. After searching his memory, Harry finally said, "I don't have anything else prepared, but this is one of the first songs I ever learned. If you want to, you can sing along." Then, Harry launched with brio into a peppy tune that every human (and most nonhumans) instantly recognized. Tom was surprised to find that he knew the song's words, even the part about "a penny for a spool of thread, a penny for a needle." Seventy-five people in a room the size and shape of the holodeck singing "That's the way the money goes, POP goes the weasel!" must have made the ship's beam vibrate.

The second surprise came when Ensign Garber had a last-minute attack of nerves and decided that the juggling act just wasn't going to work. His partner, Ensign Chell, took him aside and tried to calm him, but the unexpected delay left Tom with an empty stage and the next act unprepped. The long pause (broken only by Garber and Chell's hissing whispers) stretched on and on until finally Kes quietly rose from her seat, took Neelix (who was standing in the pit) by the hand, and guided him up the short stairway to the center of the stage.

Kes said, "Back on Ocampa, this is a song taught to children to teach them the names of the stars. I taught it to Neelix a long time ago. We used to sing it in his ship because I liked the echoes." With nothing more than shared glances and a short countdown, the pair began a slow, syncopated song that, as far as Tom could tell, was nothing more than a list of Ocampan names (nonsense to anyone else's ears) followed by the chorus, "Starlight, starlight, rain down on my home tonight. With the morning you'll be gone, but for now we'll sing the starlight song."

With the second stanza, in addition to singing, Kes and Neelix began clapping their hands together, then exchanging pats, first on each other's palms, then forearms, then upper arms and shoulders. Their movements were quick, graceful, and perfectly timed. As the list of names grew longer, their motions became quicker and the slaps and pats louder until the words and the sounds mingled. By the fifth chorus, both Neelix and Kes were panting furiously, neither one able to sing the lyrics anymore, but determined to finish the final round of gestures before they broke down in fits of giggles. The performance concluded with a final rendition of the chorus and then an exhausted slump onto the stage, which was greeted by laughter and grateful, astonished clapping.

If only the same could have been said about Tuvok's poetry recital. Vulcans do not express emotion, or so Tom had been told many times. But if the look on Tuvok's face at the conclusion of his three selections wasn't disappointment at the polite smattering of applause, then he knew nothing about show business. "Maybe next time," Tom whispered as Tuvok paused at the edge of the stage, "you should use the translator."

"But the translations," Tuvok protested, "would be so dry."

Tom couldn't help but say, "Drier than that?"

"Much."

"Then don't use the translator next time."

Tuvok only cocked an eyebrow in response. Tom resolved that future shows (should he be pulled into assisting at another, which he would resist with all his might) would not feature senior officers. Their egos, in general, were much too fragile.

* * *

To wit: as the moment the captain would go on crept closer, Tom found it more and more difficult to maintain his mask of detached professionalism. What was she planning? And why hadn't she warned Tom beforehand? For that matter, he thought, had she really been planning on this all along or was the last-minute insertion simply a response to the power going out? The fact that she had been wearing a floor-length robe indicated she was wearing some sort of costume, but it was impossible to know what until the moment came.

When it arrived, as she had instructed, the spotlight picked out the captain center stage, dressed in a simple white dancer's leotard (no headwear or tutu), frozen and silent in her pose until the familiar strains of Tchaikovsky's theme began. Tom held his breath as the captain began to move, then slowly released it and allowed himself to inhale again as she made her way first around the stage, the spotlight her only companion. She made, he decided, a lovely Princess Odette, and though the movements were simple- little more than the dance movements taught to a child- so too were they unhurried and graceful.

As the captain's performance continued, Tom felt relaxed enough that he could study the audience's reaction and was relieved to see that they seemed as pleased and receptive as he had been. He found his gaze lingering on Chakotay, who, seated in the center of the first row, seemed entranced by the sight of his commanding officer. With every one of Captain Janeway's gestures and footfalls, Tom imagined he saw another line of care erased from Chakotay's face to be replaced by wonder and an unfamiliar sadness. Then, out of respect or courtesy or some emotion he could not accurately name, he looked away.

* * *

It took B'Elanna a moment to get over the surprise of seeing the captain onstage, but she managed to keep the dancer in the spotlight throughout most of her act. When the captain finished and skipped offstage (to more than polite applause, B'Elanna thought), she powered down the spot and began to bring up the house lights working on the assumption that no one would want to follow the commanding officer's act. She was wrong.

Before any of the spectators could rise, Tom was standing on the lip of the stage with his arms extended, asking everyone to remain seated. "Hold on, folks," he said in the near dark. "Can I get a spot, please?" Against her better judgment, B'Elanna obliged. "Thanks for coming everyone," Tom continued. "Thanks for being so gracious. I just wanted to extend my gratitude to the cast and crew, but mostly to make sure everyone knew who really pulled the show together. Neelix, come on up here." The grinning Talaxian joined Tom on stage a moment later, where he thanked everyone, bowed to the applause, grinned some more, bowed some more, then backed out of the spot, indicating that Tom should receive praise, too.

B'Elanna expected Tom to milk the moment, but instead he again indicated everyone should settle down and such was the power of a spotlight that everyone complied. "If you don't mind, I have one more act I'd like to bring up here. She wasn't sure if she wanted to do this,

so we didn't have her on the official slate, but I don't think I want to give her a choice." Indicating a form near the back of the stage, Tom called out, "Lauren? Come on up here. I told you I was probably going to do this, so don't act surprised. Harry- don't let her get out the door."

There was a shuffling commotion near the holodeck exit, but a moment later Lauren climbed the steps to the stage carrying an eccentrically shaped case. She was wearing a skirt, B'Elanna saw, some kind of sash that at a distance appeared to be a mottled green, but when the spotlight hit her resolved into a complex plaid.

"Lauren's family," Tom explained while Lauren opened her case, "comes from the Scottish highlands. When we first announced this show, she came to me and explained that they have a tradition of playing and singing. When she came aboard, like a lot of us, we didn't expect to be gone for so long (a little wry laughter here), so she didn't have her instrument with her. But, with a little ingenuity, over the past couple weeks, we've been working on that." Lauren stood then and lifted out of her case what to B'Elanna looked like an octopus crossed with a modest-sized chunk of plumbing.

Speaking softly, Lauren said only, "These are my pipes," and B'Elanna was surprised by the tiny crack in the girl's voice. When she made a tiny adjustment, the pipes released a sound that was something between a honk and a purr. "They're new so I don't know them well yet." She bobbed her head, then continued, "I'd just like to apologize to my neighbors who have had to listen to me practice the past few nights." Laughter. B'Elanna found herself smiling against her will. "And especially to Michael who had to sleep down the hall. Sorry, sweetie."

Another small adjustment produced a plaintive, strangled blurt, then Lauren continued, "This is a song we used to sing back home. I'm going to do the opening and then, well, then I'll do the rest. Usually someone else would play while someone sang, but since there aren't any other pipers here..." She scanned the audience. "Are there?" No one responded. "All right, then," she continued, then took the mouthpiece between her lips and set her fingers on the chanter. "If you want to," Lauren finished, talking around the mouthpiece, "you can sing along with the chorus. That's the part that comes around more than once."

B'Elanna had, of course, seen pictures of bagpipes before and had even heard recordings of them, but she was unprepared for the explosion of sound released when the petite Lauren blew into the reed and began to squeeze the bag. The sound was at once civilized and primal, sonorous and chaotic. It made B'Elanna's eardrums ache and her eyeballs vibrate. Under the shrill drone, Lauren began to pick out a tune that was both mournful and cheery. When it came to an end, the girl let the bag swing to her side, inhaled deeply and sang in a high, sweet voice:

Ev'ry road thro' life is a long, long road,

Fill'd with joys and sorrows too,

As you journey on how your heart will yearn

For the things most dear to you.

With wealth and love 'tis so,

But onward we must go.

Keep right on to the end of the road,
Keep right on to the end,
Tho' the way be long, let your heart be strong,
Keep right on round the bend.
Tho' you're tired and weary still journey on,
Till you come to your happy abode,
Where all the love you've been dreaming of
Will be there at the end of the road.
With a big stout heart to a long steep hill,
We may get there with a smile,
With a good kind thought and an end in view,
We may cut short many a mile.
So let courage ev'ry day
Be your guiding star always.
Keep right on to the end of the road,
Keep right on to the end,
Tho' the way be long, let your heart be strong,
Keep right on round the bend.

And, with the final repetition of the chorus, many of the audience did join in, not without some stumbling and a sour note or two. The captain- still dressed in her dance costume- surprised everyone by repeating the final line one last time solo, but her clear, strong voice easily filled the holodeck and when she finished the entire room broke into applause. From her vantage point, B'Elanna witnessed more than a few tears wiped from the corners of more than a few eyes.

With the show now officially concluded, the house lights came up and the performers and audiences mingled to exchange congratulations and exclamations of pleasure. B'Elanna turned off her spotlight and watched as the crowd moved in complex Brownian waves back and forth across the floor, first stopping to pay homage to one, then another actor or singer or dancer. She was gratified to see Harry and Neelix both get many pats on the back and even found herself smiling when someone- presumably Michael- grabbed Lauren MacTaggart and swept both her and her bagpipes into an embrace. The only person she didn't see was Tom Paris. His absence puzzled her, but not as much as the fact that she was disappointed he had disappeared. She felt like she wanted to say something to Tom, thought she wasn't certain precisely what that would be.

* * *

Only after the last performer and spectator had walked out did Tom feel it was safe to emerge from his hiding place under the spotlight platform. He had just stuck his head out from between two folds of the black cloth that concealed the base when he felt the whole structure shake rhythmically. Someone, he realized, had remained up on the platform and was climbing down. This surprised him- he had expected the stage crew to flee with the spectators and performers- but not as much as whom he saw. "B'Elanna. Was that you on spotlight all night?"

"That was me," she said alighting.

"Nice job," he said and meant it. He had assumed Neelix was on the platform for most of the night and so had been surprised when the Talaxian and Kes had taken the stage for their impromptu duet. "I figured you'd be down in the engine room with the warp core."

"We got the problem more or less sorted out a couple hours ago. Now it's just a question of bringing everything back online. We'll have to do it slowly because of the possible cascade effect if we..." She tapered off. "You don't really care about this, do you?"

Tom shook his head in the negative. "But I'm still surprised to see you. Pleased," he added, "but surprised."

"I felt a little guilty about messing up some of the acts."

"Wasn't your fault."

"I'm the chief engineer," she replied. "If something breaks down, ultimately it's my fault."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Now you sound like the captain. Is everyone on this ship hyperresponsible?"

"Everyone but you, apparently."

"Hey!" Tom said, though he knew she was teasing (mostly). "I got this show together, didn't I?"

B'Elanna looked at the now empty stage and nodded. "Yes, you did. And it was pretty good, too. Everything came together. I have to admit I especially liked Lauren's number. The song was really appropriate."

Tom found himself smiling, since the song had been his suggestion. Knowing that B'Elanna approved of it made its success even more satisfying.

"I saw Lauren leaving with... what's his name? Michael?"

"Right."

"They seem like a nice couple."

He shrugged. "If you say so. They argue a lot."

B'Elanna seemed to consider this, then said, "I've heard that. I guess I'm a little surprised that you two didn't... hit it off."

A little surprised by the change of topic, Tom found the only response he had ready was the truth. "I considered suggesting the idea," he admitted. "But when the moment came, I decided it would be a little like... Well, if I had a sister, it would be like dating my little sister. You know what I mean?"

B'Elanna wore a startled expression for a moment, but then she laughed loudly. "Yes," she said. "I understand exactly what you mean." Then, she looked around the holodeck, which was littered with props and production debris. If anyone was going to use the deck anytime in the near future, someone would need to shift around the physical artifacts that lay strewn about. "You need some help cleaning up?"

Tom seemed mildly astonished by the offer. "Don't you have to get back to the engine room?"

"Eventually," B'Elanna said. "But Joe is on the job. I doubt if I'd be able to do much more than get in the way." This sounded to Tom like a lie, but he didn't feel inclined to make her tell the truth.

"To be honest," Tom said, "I was going to pull up Sandrine's before I got started and play a game of pool."

"I would consent to stay here and kick your butt in pool before we got to work."

"Oh, really?" Tom asked dubiously.

"Really."

"Pretty sure about this, aren't you?"

B'Elanna grinned and Tom saw in her eyes that, yes, she was. Oddly, so was he.

Letting Go

Keith R.A. DeCandido

This tale is set across the second, third, and fourth seasons of Star Trek: Voyager.

Keith R.A. DeCandido

This is Keith R.A. DeCandido's second piece of Voyager fiction, the other being the first half of *The Brave and the Bold Book 2*; amusingly enough, neither story takes place in the Delta Quadrant. He has written many Star Trek novels (from 2001's *Diplomatic Implausibility* to 2004's *A Time for War, a Time for Peace*), novellas (from 2001's *Horn and Ivory in Gateways: What Lay Beyond* to 2004's *Ferenginar: Satisfaction Is Not Guaranteed in Worlds of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, Volume Three*), eBooks (from 2000's *Fatal Error* to 2005's *Security*), short stories (from 2003's "Broken Oaths" in *Prophecy and Change* to 2005's "loDnI'pu' vavpu' je" in *Tales from the Captain's Table*), and comic books (1999's *Perchance to Dream* four-issue miniseries) covering all five television shows, as well as the prose-only series *S.C.E.*, *I.K.S. Gorkon*, *The Lost Era*, and *New Frontier*. His most recent Trek novel, *Articles of the Federation*, fits none of those categories: it chronicles a year in

the life of the Federation president. His original novel Dragon Precinct was published to great acclaim in 2004, and he's also written novels, novelizations, short stories, and nonfiction in the universes of Resident Evil, Serenity, Farscape, Andromeda, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena, and Marvel Comics. Find out far more than anyone really needs to know about Keith at his official Web site, DeCandido.net.

Mark Johnson prepared for the onslaught of Irish setter.

Sure enough, Molly leapt up at him as soon as the door slid open, front paws on his chest, barking enthusiastically, and generally treating Mark's arrival home as an event worthy of commemorating with several licks of his chin.

Giving her a big scritch behind the ears, Mark smiled. Molly's ritual greeting was about the only thing that got a smile out of him these days.

When Molly finally calmed down enough to get back on all fours, he entered the house. Molly ran circles around him as he stepped into the living room, dropping his duffel bag unceremoniously on the red wool rug that took up most of the living-room floor. There were items in the bag from work that he knew he had to deal with, but he didn't have the wherewithal to do so.

He looked up at the display on the wall that showed the date and time. Eleven months. Today is the eleven-month anniversary. In one month, it'll be a year.

The couch sat in the room, staring at him dolefully- which was, Mark thought, a neat trick for a piece of furniture.

That was the couch he was sitting on the last time he talked to Kath.

"Mark, you've got to take her home with you." Kath's face was pleading with him at the news that Molly was pregnant.

Unable to resist teasing her, Mark protested. "With me? I just got the rugs cleaned."

"She's with child! I can't leave her in a kennel while I'm- "

"Is this another love-me-love-my-dog demand?" It wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation, after all....

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly.

He shook his head. "How could I ever refuse you?"

"Thanks, honey." And she meant it, he could tell.

"When do you leave?"

"As soon as I approve these system status reports."

Ah, the exciting life of a starship captain. "All right, I won't bother you anymore."

At that, she looked up and put her hand to the viewer, as if trying to touch his face. "Hey. You never bother me- except the way I love to be bothered. Understand?"

He smirked. "Aye, Captain."

"See you in a few weeks. Oh, and Mark? Go by my house and pick up the doggie bed. She'll be more comfortable."

He let the other shoe drop. "I already did. An hour ago."

That was the last he'd heard from her.

Mark's eyes went over to the doggie bed in question, looking like nothing but a huge wicker basket with a flannel blanket covered in Irish setter hair draped over it. But Molly loved it.

The couch was also where he was sitting when he got a message two days later from Deep Space 9, the very same space station where Voyager had been docked. A dark-skinned man with close-cropped hair and a serious demeanor appeared on the screen. He wore a Starfleet uniform just like Kath's, except he had only three pips. If he remembered right, that meant he was a commander.

"Mr. Johnson, my name is Benjamin Sisko. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Sisko told him that Voyager had apparently disappeared in the Badlands- just like the ship they were going to the Badlands to find- and that search-and-rescue operations were under way, and any number of other things that Mark could no longer remember. Mark did recall that Sisko was very kind and full of empathy, so much so that Mark suspected he had gotten a like message or two of his own in his day.

Mark had been unable to bring himself to sit on the couch since then.

Within two months of Kath's disappearance, Molly had had her puppies, and Mark had found homes for all of them. Although it wasn't intentional, placing the puppies was made easier by what Mark was going through. People were more than happy to take a new pet out of sympathy. Nobody had found any debris, so Starfleet had yet to declare the Voyager crew actually dead, but there was no sign of the ship, either.

Looking down at the floor, Mark saw that the setter had completed the ritual jumping, licking, and running around in circles. She now padded over to the doggie bed, plopped herself down into it, folding her front paws in front of herself, and plunking her head down on those paws, looking at Mark with her friendly eyes.

I don't know what to do.

He'd continued going to work, but his heart wasn't in it. Ramiro, Holland, and Taisha, the other botanists in his section, were covering for him, but they wouldn't do that forever. Sooner or later, he had to get on with his life.

Normally, when he was in such a state, he'd turn to Kath for advice. They'd been friends for years before they became lovers, and he could barely remember a time when she wasn't around to give good advice- or, more often, a kick in the tuchas whenever he moped around. That was what attracted him to her in the first place.

The combined noise of the comm unit on the coffee table beeping and Molly barking in response to it snapped Mark out of his reverie. To his embarrassment, he'd been standing

in the middle of the living room just staring into space for at least a full minute.

Shaking his head, he walked over to the coffee table- standing on the opposite side of it from the couch- and activated the viewer, even as Molly wandered over to see what all the fuss was.

The display indicated that the message was from Deep Space 9. However, the Starfleet officer on the screen wasn't the human Sisko, but rather a Ktarian man Mark didn't know. He had only one pip, which meant he was fairly low ranking. What's this about?

"Uh, hello?" Mark said.

"Greetings. Is this Mark Johnson?" The Ktarian had a soft voice, and spoke in a very hesitant tone, as if not entirely confident he'd chosen the right words to use.

"Ah, yeah, it is. And you are- ?"

"My name is Ensign Greskrendtregk. You don't know me, of course, Mr. Johnson, but you and I, we have something in common."

"Okay." Mark had no idea where this was going.

The Ktarian hesitated. "My wife is Ensign Samantha Wildman."

Mark blinked. The ensign had spoken as if that name should mean something to Mark, but aside from Kath and one or two others he knew through her, he didn't know anybody in Starfleet. That name certainly didn't ring any bells. "Uh, all right. I'm afraid I don't know- "

Shaking his head, the ensign let out a small laugh. "Of course you don't, I'm a fool. My apologies, Mr. Johnson, I just assumed that you would- Samantha serves on the Voyager."

Mark's face fell. "Oh God, sir, I'm so sorry. I'm- I'm afraid the only member of Kath's crew I really know is Tuvok."

"Perfectly understandable, Mr. Johnson. In any case, the reason why I've contacted you is quite simple. As I'm sure you're aware, the one-year anniversary of Samantha's- of the Voyager's disappearance is approaching. I have been contacting the families of the crew in the hopes- in the hopes of gathering all of us here on Deep Space 9."

Mark's first instinct was to reject the notion out of hand. He'd been spending eleven months wallowing, the last thing he wanted to do was get together with a bunch of other people who were doing the same.

But then he thought for a moment. Maybe this is just what I need. Maybe being around other people who are going through what I'm going through will help.

Because the fact of the matter was, beyond taking Molly's offspring, nobody had really been able to help. Most of his friends and colleagues were other scientists, and his family, although they liked Kath just fine, never really understood the whole Starfleet thing. They lived happy, safe lives that usually didn't involve armed ships going into plasma storms and disappearing.

And so, after only a few moments' hesitation, he said, "I think that's a wonderful idea,

Ensign- ah..."

Again, the short laugh. "You may simply call me Gres, Mr. Johnson. It is usually the best that human tongues can do with my name." His tone grew more wistful. "Samantha was the only human who was ever able to pronounce it properly."

"Of course. And please, call me Mark."

"Very well, Mark."

They quickly worked out the specifics. Gres promised to have quarters arranged on the station, and then he signed off.

Deactivating the viewer, Mark reached down and gave Molly a little scritch behind the ear. That got her to raise her head- she was always willing to make it easier for Mark to scritch her.

To his delight, Mark found himself looking forward to something for the first time-

For the first time in eleven months, really.

* * *

Mark stood facing a difficult decision.

Do I go for the meat, the fish, the fruit, or the vegetables?

Before him was laid out an impressive display of delicacies, most of them apparently Bajoran. Since Deep Space 9 was technically a Bajoran station, though Starfleet administered it, the choice of foodstuffs made sense.

Mark had arrived late- the transport he took had had several delays- so the gathering was in full swing when he arrived. The attendees were a wide range of people, some Starfleet, some not. A small group stood quietly next to the window. Mark noticed that they all had deep black eyes, and deduced that, since they were not speaking yet all stared at each other attentively, and since one of Kath's bridge crew was a Betazoid named Stadi, these were her family.

A group of about half a dozen Vulcan civilians were all gathered around in one corner. Mark had recognized one of them as Tuvok's wife, T'Pel, and the young man next to her- My God, he had realized with a start, that's Sek! The boy had grown quite a bit since Mark had seen him last. T'Pel had given him a brief nod when he had come in before returning to her conversation.

A Ferengi was flitting about the place, holding a tray of drinks, making sure everyone was happy and comfortable. He had steered Mark to the hors d'oeuvres table and encouraged him to sample everything.

"Having trouble deciding?" a voice asked next to him.

Mark turned to see a woman in a Starfleet uniform. It was just like Sisko's, so he figured she was also a commander. She had olive skin, a huge mane of brown hair hanging loose about her shoulders, a thin face, and a disproportionately wide mouth. In response to her question,

he said, "Actually, yeah. Decision-making was never my strong suit. I usually need about three weeks' notice." Kath was always the big decision-maker, he thought wistfully.

"Well, I recommend the kava fruit."

"Which one's that?" Mark asked, peering at the part of the table that had the fruit.

The woman pointed at the bowl at the upper-right-hand corner. "That."

"Okay." Grabbing a toothpick, Mark speared two slices of the pale fruit and popped them into his mouth. The fruit was quite watery with a soft texture and a taste that reminded him at once of both cantaloupe and oranges, but with an oddly salty aftertaste. "This tastes- very confusing."

Laughing at that, the woman then offered her hand. "Dina Voyskunsy."

"Mark Johnson," he said, returning the handshake.

She squinted. "Okay, you're too young to have a child on Voyager, so you've got to have either a spouse or a parent."

Mark grinned. "We haven't quite made it to the spouse stage yet. I've been with Kath-Captain Janeway- for a while now. In fact, we're not even at the living-together stage- though we are at the I'll-keep-an-eye-on-your-dog-while-you-go-to-the-Badlands stage."

"Well, that puts you one up on me." Dina shook her head and grabbed one of the vegetables. "Kind of fitting we met, actually. I'm sorta-kinda with Janeway's first officer, Aaron Cavit."

" 'Sorta-kinda'?"

Still holding the vegetable, she said, "We weren't even at the dog-swapping stage. In fact, until a year ago, we weren't at the speaking-to-each-other stage. We had a thing a few years back, but it went sour. Then we crossed paths again on a mission, and we decided to get back together- after he went with Voyager on a trip to the Badlands."

"Ouch." Mark winced.

"Yeah. Honestly, I didn't even know about this little shindig until the Hood docked for repairs, and I heard about it at Quark's. Gres was kind enough to let me come along."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

Dina paused to eat the vegetable before finally answering. "Not really. Honestly, I don't know what Aaron was doing for all the years between when we broke up and when I saw him last year. The whole point of getting together was to catch up."

"I'm afraid I didn't really know him. I mean, Kath told me about him- said he was a good, solid officer who'd make a fine XO- but that was pretty much it."

"Yeah, that sounds like Aaron."

A short pale man in a Starfleet uniform and a tall dark woman in civilian clothes approached

the table. The man, who seemed to be about thirty, was speaking. "- weird thing is the tetryon emissions they detected."

The tall woman let out a breath. "Davey..." Mark recognized her tone, as it was the same one Mark himself used with Kath whenever words like "tetryon" or strange abbreviations like "ODN" or "EPS" entered the conversation. To be fair, she also used it on him whenever he went off on a botany rant.

"Sorry, I- " Davey looked up at Mark and Dina. "Oh, uh hi. Davey Honigsberg."

"Mark Johnson." He indicated Dina. "This is Dina Voyskunsy. We're with the captain and first officer."

The woman smiled, though Mark noted that the smile didn't quite reach her brown eyes. "Abhaya Parekh. We're both with engineers. Davey's father is Alexander Honigsberg, the chief engineer, and my husband is Joe Carey, Alex's assistant."

Davey was picking through the meats while he spoke. "I was just telling Abhaya that there's a really good chance that they're okay. You see, there wasn't any debris- they didn't find any at all- and, while it's true that sometimes the plasma storms are bad enough that they won't leave any debris, I've been studying the patterns in the Badlands, and there weren't any storms in that area big enough to do that kind of damage to a ship Voyager's size on the day they disappeared. Besides, there's the tetryon emissions."

Mark smiled. "I'm afraid I'm in the same boat as Abhaya- I don't know what that means."

Dina said, "It means that something was in the Badlands that shouldn't have been. Tetryons aren't found naturally there."

Abhaya gave Davey- now stuffing several bits of reddish blue meat into his mouth- a mildly reproving look. "Now see, Davey, if you'd just said that in the first place, I probably would've understood quite a bit more of what you were saying." She looked at Mark and Dina. "Davey's like his father- and my Joe. They talk in jargon constantly. Drove me crazy whenever Davey or Alex visited."

Mark covered his urge to laugh out loud by eating more of the kava fruit. Alexander Honigsberg had been a thorn in Kath's side for most of the shakedown cruise. Apparently he didn't like to give detailed reports, saying that the captain should just trust him. Mark had laughed when Kath told him that, prompting Kath to give him one of her penetrating stares. But soon she laughed, too, knowing, as he did, that she didn't take that sort of thing from subordinates.

However, Mark figured it wouldn't be politic to mention that to the engineer's son. Instead, he said, "So you're in Starfleet also, I see."

"Yeah- just enlisted, though. I'm with the S.C.E. My term's up in a month, and I doubt I'm gonna re-up."

Abhaya turned to look at Davey in surprise. "You're not reenlisting? This is the first you've told me- why not?"

"Because I don't think Starfleet's doing enough. Dad's out there, and we need to find him. Starfleet's just given up, if you ask me."

"Starfleet doesn't give up on people," Dina said in a tight voice. "If Voyager's out there, Starfleet will find them."

Davey shook his head. "I hope you're right, Commander." With that, he turned on his heel and walked off.

Abhaya looked at both of them with an apologetic expression. "Truly, I'm sorry- Davey's always been a bit high-strung, and, well- "

"He's not taking this well?" Mark prompted.

"Are any of us?" Abhaya shook her head. "I'm just glad I left the kids home."

"Kids?" Mark winced. All Kath left behind was a pregnant dog. Tuvok also had children, of course, and apparently so did Joe Carey. He wondered how many others on Voyager were in that boat....

"Yes, two boys- Devraj and Michael."

Abhaya, Mark, and Dina talked for a bit longer, then Mark decided to start mingling. Kath had given him a vague precis of the crew, and he wanted to place family to those descriptions. He spoke for a bit with two elderly humans whose son, Harry Kim, was Kath's ops officer. Mark told them that Kath spoke very highly of Harry, although she hadn't actually met him when last they spoke; still she had been impressed with the young man's service record. In addition, he spoke to Emmett Rollins, whose brother was a bridge officer, and a Bolian named Epp, whose relationship with one of the science officers was still unclear to Mark, even after Epp explained it.

He exchanged brief pleasantries with T'Pel and Sek- if the word pleasantries could apply to conversation with Vulcans- and was introduced to the father and brother of T'Ral, the ship's nurse, and the fiancée and parents of Vorik, one of the ship's engineers. Mark knew nothing about T'Ral- she had come along with the ship's doctor, whose name Mark couldn't even remember- but he was able to say that Kath thought very highly of Vorik. "In fact," he said, "she said she was very lucky to have him on board."

Vorik's fiancée, a slight woman named Selmar, raised an eyebrow and said, "It is very unlikely that chance factors had much to do with Vorik's posting to Captain Janeway's vessel. However, it is understandable that the captain herself would express it in such terms, and her respect for my bonded one's abilities is appreciated."

Mark supposed that was the closest he'd get to a "thank you" from her.

At one point, Mark noticed that there was a Starfleet admiral, an older human, standing apart from everyone else. He looked about a million parsecs away and wasn't talking to anyone, not even the other Starfleet people. Mark wandered over to where Dina was standing and talking to a couple; who introduced themselves as Renee Delaney and Asano Takahashi- they had two daughters, both serving on Voyager- and asked if she knew who that was.

"That's Owen Paris," Dina said with a certain amount of reverence.

Mark could understand why. Although he'd never met the admiral, Kath certainly had spoken

enough about him.

Renee almost dropped her drink. "The Owen Paris? How's he connected to Voyager?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest," Dina said.

"I am," Mark said, taking a sip of a thick drink that the Ferengi said was called kanar. "He was Kath's mentor early in her career, and she served with him on the al-Batani. I should go say hi- excuse me."

Renee and Asano both inclined their heads, and Asano said, "Of course."

"Mind if I tag along?" Dina asked. "I've always wanted to meet him."

Mark shrugged. "Sure."

Admiral Paris was a large, imposing man with thinning white hair, a round nose, and looked like he was carrying the weight of several worlds on his shoulders.

"Excuse me, Admiral Paris?"

Paris blinked twice, and looked at Mark as if not sure who or what he was. "Hm? Oh, yes- ah, what can I do for you?"

Offering his hand, he said, "I just wanted to introduce myself, sir. My name's Mark Johnson. I'm- "

Returning the handshake, Paris smiled, though like Abhaya's, it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Of course, you're Kathryn's beau. It's a pleasure, Mr. Johnson. Kathryn talked about you often."

Mark chuckled. "All nice things, I hope. Uh, this is Commander Dina Voyskunsy."

She shook his hand as well. "It's an honor, sir."

Paris frowned. "Voyskusny- I know that name. The Hood, right? You serve with Bob DeSoto?"

Dina's eyes widened, apparently thrilled to be recognized. "Yes, sir, I've been Captain DeSoto's first officer for a little over two years now."

"I'm surprised to see you, sir," Mark said. "I mean, it's good of you to be here for Kath- "

Paris shook his head. "It's not just for Kathryn- my son was on Voyager."

That surprised Mark. "I didn't know."

"You couldn't have- his involvement in the mission was classified. Technically, I shouldn't be telling you about it, but it's been a year, and it just- " Paris got a faraway look in his eyes, then muttered, "Excuse me," and left the room.

Mark stared after him. "Well. That was weird."

Dina snorted. "Weirder than you think. His son was a Starfleet washout. Actually, he was worse than that- he caused an accident, got some people killed, and then lied about it. He came forward eventually, and got cashiered out. Last I heard, he'd been arrested working for the Maquis." Dina shook her head. "I wouldn't be surprised if the admiral pulled some strings to get the kid to help Janeway out when she went on her little Maquis hunt. That's probably why he's so wrecked."

Mark nodded. "Probably."

Dina wandered off, and then Davey walked up to Mark. He was passing a piece of meat back and forth from one hand to the other without actually eating it. "Excuse me- Mr. Johnson, right?"

"Mark is fine."

"Right. Look, I'm sorry if I was rude back there, I've just been very agitated- I know Dad's okay out there, I just- I just know it. I mean, Voyager was built specifically to withstand the plasma storms, it can't just be destroyed without any kind of trace like that- especially with the tetrayon emissions."

Before Mark could reply, Gres spoke at as loud a volume as his soft voice would allow. "May I have everyone's attention please?" The Ktarian stood in the middle of the room, holding a glass of what looked to Mark like Saurian brandy, and had to repeat his request several times before the room quieted down.

"I would like to thank all of you for coming. I would also like to thank Quark for his fine catering job." The Ferengi bowed slightly. Gres continued: "The pain of the separation from our loved ones, of not knowing their true fate, is a difficult one that we have all had to bear. Today, for the first time in a year, that pain is lessened a bit for being able to share it with all of you. I have felt very much alone this last year, without my dear Samantha, but today I feel a good deal less lonely. I also convey a message from Captain Sisko, who could not be here today."

Mark blinked in surprise, both at the message and at Sisko's apparent promotion.

Gres went on. "He wanted me to reassure all of you that Starfleet has not given up the search and has not given up on the Voyager, and that they will do everything in their power to find our families and friends and return them to us."

Mark raised his glass. "Hear, hear!"

Several others in the room, including Davey next to him, repeated that.

* * *

"Mark, I'd like you to meet Carla."

Mark looked up from his workstation in surprise. He hadn't heard Ramiro come into his office. He'd been so engrossed in the annual report that he probably wouldn't have noticed if the sun went nova. "What was that?" Then he registered that there was someone else with Ramiro, and she was named Carla. "Uh, hi, Mark. I'm Carla."

Ramiro laughed. "And the sad thing is, 'Carla' here is one of the finest minds on the project."

He stood up from his workstation, rubbing his eyes free of the sand that really should not have been there in midafternoon. "I'm sorry, Carla, I've been caught up in this annual report, and it has to be perfect or- "

"I know," she said. "I'm here to help implement the new phase of Taisha Mifflin's project."

It took Mark a moment to process this. "Wait, she's a molecular biologist?"

"Nah," she said, "I'm just a janitor, but I lie real well on my resume." For the first time, Mark noticed that she had a dazzling smile. Then he noticed the rest of her- her porcelain skin, her blond hair, her sky-blue eyes, her perfect cheekbones- and he decided that she was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life.

Patently, Ramiro said, "Mark, I said at the last staff meeting that we were gonna bring in a molecular biologist regardless of whether or not we got the go-ahead on Taisha's project."

"I forget, was that the meeting I was late for, the meeting I missed, or the meeting I slept through?"

Ramiro sighed. "It was the meeting where I told you you didn't have to kill yourself writing the report because we were going to bring in- "

"- a molecular biologist regardless of what happened with the project, I remember now."

"Really?"

Now it was Mark's turn to sigh. "No, but I'm perfectly willing to take your word for it that you said it in my presence."

"Good enough. She won't be starting until Monday. Try to sleep some time between now and then."

"If you really feel I must."

"I do." Ramiro led Carla toward his office door. "Come on, Carla, I'll introduce you to the coherent people on the team."

"Okay." Carla then hit Mark with another of those dazzling smiles. "It was good to meet you, Carla."

Mark chuckled. "Same here, Mark."

After they left, Mark looked down at the words on the screen of his workstation, which he had theoretically written, and were just as theoretically coherent. Well, all the words are English, I'll say that much. I've got to take a break from this.

Unfortunately, work had been the only thing to keep him going these past nine months. The gathering on Deep Space 9 had done little to alleviate his worries about Kath- in fact, in a lot of ways it made it worse, because now he wasn't just worried about her, but the entire crew. So instead of being a zombie at work, he decided to throw himself into everything, including the hybridization project that Taisha had put forward.

Obviously I've gone too far in the other direction.

Then his comm unit beeped. Activating it, he said, "Johnson."

Dina Voyskunsky's face appeared on the screen. "Surprise."

Mark blinked. "Dina? I wasn't expecting to hear from you." Dina was one of two people Mark met at the DS9 gathering that he stayed in touch with, the other being Davey Honigsberg. The former was because he genuinely enjoyed her company, the latter more because he worried about the engineer. As promised, Davey had ended his time with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers and now dedicated every moment to trying to find out what happened to Voyager. He had even hired a ship to take him to the Badlands so he could scan them himself. Davey read every report he could get his hands on, not just from Starfleet, but from Federation civilian reports, as well as those of Bajorans, Cardassians, and Klingons- the latter being a neat trick, since the Klingons had pulled out of the Khitomer Accords. He was determined both that Starfleet wasn't doing enough and that he himself could learn the truth.

Dina said, "We got into it with some Klingons last week, so we had to come back for some repairs and restaffing. I figured since I was in town, as it were, we could catch up in person instead of over subspace. You free tonight?"

He smiled. "Actually, it's a funny coincidence- I'm having lunch with Davey Honigsberg tomorrow. Want to join us?"

Dina shook her head. "Can't- I'm getting together with my aunt in Estonia tomorrow, and then we're shipping out on Sunday." She chuckled. "Besides, Honigsberg gave me the creeps."

Mark found he couldn't argue with that. "All right, then, how about dinner tonight?"

"Okay. I know just the place- Captain Sisko recommended it when we were at DS9."

* * *

That night, Mark sat in a lovely restaurant in New Orleans called Sisko's- owned and operated by the station commander's father- eating the best gumbo he'd ever had. Dina was eating crawfish, and telling him all about what the Hood had been doing for the past nine months.

"The Klingons are getting to be a real problem. They're scary enough when we're their allies, but it's really no fun to be on their bad side." She chewed some crawfish, then swallowed a great deal of water. "So what about you?"

"Well, I've been kind of throwing myself into work. We're trying to get a new project started, but whether or not it flies depends on our annual report- which I'm writing." He told her about the project, trying not to get too bogged down in botanical technobabble, and then told her about Carla.

"She sounds nice."

"Yeah, and she's probably convinced I'm a complete imbecile."

"You should ask her out."

Mark almost choked on his gumbo. "What? Are you nuts? First of all, I made quite possibly the worst first impression in the history of the human race. Second of all, Kath- "

"- is missing," Dina said sharply. "And she's been missing for almost two years now. And she'll probably stay missing, assuming she isn't dead."

"Dina- " Mark couldn't form words beyond that- it was as if Dina had kicked him in the stomach.

"Listen to me, Mark," she said, "I just came out of a firefight with two Klingon birds-of-prey that we almost didn't make it out of alive. Fifteen people, including our operations officer, didn't make it out alive."

"I'm sorry," Mark said softly.

"Thank you, but the point is, life's too short. I've spent way too long moping over Aaron and wondering what might have been, and wishing I could've gotten together with him one last time before Voyager went poof. But I didn't, and we're fighting Klingons and the Dominion is still a threat and the Cardassians are falling to pieces and the Borg could come back at any moment and I can't waste my time worrying about what might have been. And neither can you. Ask this Carla person out. Live a little."

Mark thought over her words as he ate more gumbo. "Okay, fine, maybe you're right- but that doesn't address the crappy first impression part of my problem."

Dina had the widest smile Mark had ever seen, and she favored him with one now. "Ah, don't worry, most women would think that was cute."

"Really?"

"Well, okay, I would. But I'm weird."

"Got that right," Mark muttered.

"I heard that." She laughed.

"You also walked right into it." He sighed. "I promise to think about it, okay?"

"Fair enough." She ate the last of her fish. "Hey, speaking of not getting on with your life, how's Honigsberg doing?"

Mark shook his head in dismay. "He cancelled our lunch. He said he had to go off-planet to investigate another theory."

"Theory about what?" Then she slammed her fork down. "What, about finding Voyager? I don't believe it. Starfleet has done- "

Mark held up a hand. "I know, I know, but tell him that. I've been trying to convince him that if Starfleet can't find anything, he isn't likely to, but half the time when I talk to him, I don't think he entirely registers that I'm there."

* * *

The next day, Mark got two messages. One was from Kath's mother Gretchen, checking up on him and wishing him well. She'd contacted him periodically to see how he was doing- she hadn't been able to make Gres's get-together on DS9, but she had been grateful to hear Mark's report of it.

Speaking of whom, Gres had sent the other message. He was back on Ktar, having taken a six-month leave of absence. "The worry about my Samantha has affected my work," he said. "However, I feel it is important to commemorate the second anniversary, and so I am inviting everyone from the first one. Will you please join me, Mark?"

Mark decided to go. Maybe it'll help me move on like I obviously need to.

* * *

Three months later, he was in a large house on Ktar with Gres, Davey, T'Pel, Abhaya, the Kim family, and a few others. Absent were the families of T'Ral and Vorik- according to T'Pel, Selmar married another man three months earlier- Dina, Admiral Paris, Stadi's family, Epp, Emmett Rollins, and most of the rest of the people who were on DS9.

"Most of them told me," Gres said when Mark commented on this, "that they have moved on with their lives. For myself, I cannot do that. I just know that my Samantha is out there somewhere waiting for me." He let out a sigh. "We were planning to have a baby, you know. We had been seeing Dr. Bashir on DS9 to make sure we were compatible, and then..." He trailed off.

Finally Abhaya spoke up. "I wish I had your confidence. It just gets so hard. Michael and Devraj don't even ask where Daddy is anymore. I can't imagine that they wouldn't try to let us know if they were alive."

Davey said, "They wouldn't have if they weren't able to. It's possible that they got sent very far away."

Mark looked at Davey with a certain amount of distress. It had been months since Mark had last seen him, and it looked like Davey hadn't eaten since then. Already pale, he now looked almost as white as a Borg drone. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and Mark feared he would have been able to make out his rib cage in detail if he took his shirt off, he was so skinny. "What do you mean?"

Taking a quick drink of his Altair water, Davey said, "There's this monograph that a Cardassian scientist published about tetryons that they could be used for an intergalactic transporter. You just need to provide the right power source. Now the Badlands, they'd make a great power source, and that would also explain why the storms were so weak in that area during that time- if someone built that intergalactic transporter and designed it to draw power from the area around it, then it could be used to send ships to another galaxy!"

The room was quiet for a moment. Finally, Mark said slowly, "Uh, Davey- don't you think that's a little far-fetched?"

"Honestly, I thought so at first, but if you think about it, it fits. It explains the tetryons, the low-energy storms, why there was no debris- and why we haven't heard from them."

Gres shook his head. "I hope you are right, my friend."

"That's all well and good," Abhaya said, "but what if you're wrong? What if they really were destroyed, and we've been hanging on like idiots for two years?"

"I don't think it's that idiotic to think that my father's still alive," Davey said tersely.

"I agree with Mr. Honigsberg," T'Pel said. "I believe that my husband is alive. Many times over the years he has gone on difficult missions and he has always returned to me. I choose to have faith in his ability to do so again. It is not logical- but the feeling remains, and it would be the height of illogic to deny its existence."

Smiling wanly, Gres raised his glass and said, "Then I propose a toast to the height of illogic. Long may it sustain us."

Someone else said, "Hear, hear." This time, though, Mark couldn't bring himself to say it.

* * *

Mark stared at Carla from across the lunch table. Ramiro, Holland, Carla, and Taisha were carrying on about current events.

"So Cardassia's part of the Dominion now?"

"That's what they said on FNS."

"I don't get it. I mean, why would the Cardassians do that?"

"Who the hell knows? But it looks like we're allied with the Klingons again."

"Oh sure, now we're all friends again. Bastards."

Mark found himself fascinated with the way Carla chewed her food. His own food, though, remained untouched.

"I'm just wondering how President Zife is gonna react."

"God, you don't think there'll be martial law again, do you?"

"Nah, Zife wouldn't do that- Jaresh-Inyo, he ain't."

"Yeah, well, I didn't think Jaresh-Inyo would do it, either, and he did."

"And promptly got voted the hell out of office. And good riddance to him. Zife, I trust."

"What worries me is having Jem'Hadar this close. I hear they can change shape."

"No, that's the Founders. The Jem'Hadar are just nasty-ass soldiers."

"You sure? I could swear they were shapechangers."

"Nope. Ask Mark- his girlfriend's in Starfleet."

Suddenly, Mark realized that everyone was looking at him expectantly. "What?" was all he could manage to say as he thought, What the hell am I doing? Staring at Carla like some

kind of lovesick teenager. What would Kath say if she found out? Which then prompted the thought, How the hell is Kath going to find out?

"Isn't your girlfriend in Starfleet?"

Ramiro hit Holland on the arm. "You jackass."

Holland winced and said, "Oh, damn, I'm sorry, Mark, I just forgot- "

"It's okay."

"You have a girlfriend?" Carla asked.

"Yeah- sort of."

Carla smiled impishly. " 'Sort of,' huh? That sounds like most relationships with Starfleet people."

Mark shifted in his seat. "Not exactly- I mean, we don't- " He took a deep breath. "Kath's a captain, and her ship went missing over two years ago."

Carla's face fell. "Oh, God, Mark, I'm so sorry!"

Waving it off, Mark said, "That's all right, you couldn't know. It's not something I talk about all that much." Shooting Holland a look, he added, "I guess I should more often."

"I really am sorry, Mark," Holland said emphatically.

"That's okay." Mark got up, not having eaten any of his lunch. "I need to get back to work."

He headed out toward his office. A voice sounded out from behind him. "Hey, Carla!"

Smiling, he turned around and looked at Carla. "Yes, Mark?"

"I wanted to apologize again. I just- " She hesitated, which surprised Mark, as the impression she'd created over the four months since she'd joined the project was of someone who was completely forthright.

"Just what?" he prompted.

She took a breath. "If you ever want to talk, I'm here. Just say the word."

With that, she turned and walked back toward her own office.

Mark stared after her for several seconds before finally retreating to his own workspace, completely confused about his own feelings.

* * *

Mark went home that night to be greeted first by Molly, then by the voice of the house computer. "You have four messages."

Scratching Molly behind the ear, which got her to stop running in circles around him, Mark

said, "Who from?"

"One official message from Starfleet Command. Three personal messages, one from Gretchen Janeway, one from Commander Dina Voyskunsy, one from David Alexander Honigsberg."

Bile started to rise in Mark's throat. His stomach felt like someone was going at it with a phaser drill. Four messages, all of them connected in some way to Starfleet and Voyager. It was, of course, perfectly possible that it was good news, but Mark knew that was a forlorn hope.

"Computer- " He hesitated. What do I listen to first? he wondered as he walked over to the coffee table. Then: "Play messages in order of arrival."

He activated the viewer and the Starfleet logo appeared, which meant it was either the official message or Dina.

When the logo was replaced by the image of Owen Paris, the phaser drill went on overload.

"Mark, I hope this message finds you well. Normally, you'd be informed of this by someone else- this isn't really under my purview- but I thought it was important that I be the ones to tell the families. Especially- especially after seeing you all at DS9, I- " The admiral looked away for a moment, then looked back at the viewer with a steady gaze. "Starship Voyager has officially been declared missing and presumed destroyed. The search has been exhaustive, but nothing has turned up. And now, with the Dominion having a foothold in the Alpha Quadrant, and with Starfleet still recovering from the Borg attack, and the trail being two and a half years old- the resources simply aren't there, and the truth of the matter is that there likely isn't anything to find. I'm sorry, Mark- I know how much you and Kathryn meant to each other."

Mark's legs felt like lead weights. For the first time in over two years, he sat on the couch.

The computer, having received no instructions to the contrary, moved on to the next messages. The one from Kath's mother went on for several minutes about how ridiculous it was, and how could Starfleet do that, and back when her late husband Edward was in Starfleet, they didn't give up on people, but the Dominion and the Borg had everyone in a tizzy. Mark barely paid attention to that, or to the one from Dina, which was much shorter, and mostly was a condolence call.

Davey Honigsberg's ragged voice, however, broke him out of the half-reverie he was in. "Can you believe those bastards? They're not 'missing and presumed dead,' they're just missing, and we can find them! I just got back from Bajor, and I found something interesting. That Cardassian's theories were completely trashed, but I think a lot of that was political because of the whole Dominion thing. I've been studying it, and, yeah, he was wrong about the intergalactic transporter, but because of that political crap, they're throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I think he's on the right track, he just went too big with it. I think it might've been a shorter-range transporter, something that could send them a few thousand light-years. That would still explain the lack of debris and why we haven't heard anything!"

Frowning, Mark turned the viewer back around toward the couch so he could see the image.

What he saw scared the living daylight out of him.

Mark didn't think it was possible for someone to look worse than Davey did on Ktar, but he did. He'd lost even more weight, his eyes had more red than brown, and his hair was longer, uncombed, and looked like it hadn't been cleaned in weeks.

"Anyhow, I just wanted to let you know that I haven't given up on Dad yet. Talk to you later."

Mark frowned. "Computer, return message to Davey Honigsberg."

* * *

The following Saturday, Mark sat in Felinity, a Caitian restaurant in downtown Toronto. It was around the corner from Davey's home, so Mark figured he'd have an easier time tearing himself away to meet up.

Davey was late, of course, but that didn't surprise Mark. This was the fifth time they had actually managed to make a lunch date since they met on DS9, and Davey had yet to show up on time for any of them. Mark had hoped that the proximity to his apartment might aid in his punctuality, but that was, he had to admit, a small hope.

While he waited, he rehearsed the speech he was going to give Davey about how he needed to let go of this obsession with finding his father, and how he was killing himself, and how he needed to get on with his life. Basically, the same speech that Dina hit him with in New Orleans.

Right, and then he can look at you with those bloodshot eyes and ask you why the hell you haven't done the same. And why the hell haven't I?

He sighed. Because every time you come home and brace yourself at the doorway, it's not Molly you're expecting to leap at you- it's Kath.

After an hour had passed, Mark started to worry. Davey was never this late. He rose from his table and decided to go to the apartment and drag Davey out kicking and screaming if he had to.

When he got to the modest walk-up and rang the door chime, he went through the speech again in his head. Maybe I can convince myself, if not him.

There was no answer.

He rang the chime again.

Nothing.

"Davey, you in there?"

Still nothing.

The door wouldn't open unless someone inside acknowledged the chime, so Mark wasn't sure what to do. He was about to head back downstairs to use a public com terminal in the hopes that Davey would answer that, at least, when he heard a low moan from the other side of the door.

Apparently that was enough for the computer that operated the door, as it slid obligingly

open.

The first thing Mark noticed was the smell. The air was stale, and dust seemed to choke the air. Paddles were strewn about the floor and furniture, and the latter was also caked with dirt, stains, and dust.

Then he saw Davey lying facedown on the floor. Drool puddled near his mouth.

"Oh no." Mark ran over to kneel by Davey's prone form and immediately moved to check for a pulse- except he had no idea where to check. He knew it was on the neck somewhere....

Then he noted that Davey was breathing, albeit shallowly. Standing back up so quickly it made his head spin for a moment, he looked around the room for the comm terminal. After a moment, he found it, amid half a dozen paddles and three glasses that had dried-up liquid stains in them. He immediately put in a call to the nearest hospital.

* * *

When he went to work the following Monday, he headed straight to Carla's office.

She looked up from her desk when he came in. "Hey, Mark, what- Oh man, you look like hell."

He grinned raggedly. "So kind of you to notice. I had a bit of a rough weekend. A friend of mine missed a lunch date. I went to his house, and found him collapsed on the floor. Turns out he was malnourished. If he'd actually shown up for lunch, it would've been his first meal in weeks."

"That's terrible."

"Yeah. I met him a couple years ago at a little semi-reunion thing for people related to Voyager crew members. Most of us have been dealing with it in our own way- but for Davey, it was an obsession. The reason he hadn't eaten is because he was too busy trying to find out what happened to the ship- and it only got worse when they officially ended the search and declared them missing last week."

"I- I didn't know that. I'm sorry, Mark, I know you- "

He held up a hand. "That's all right, it's just- the reason why I'm telling you all this is- well, I've been thinking about you a lot. And I felt guilty every time I did, because of Kath- but then I saw Davey lying there on the floor because he couldn't let go of what happened to Voyager, and I- I don't want to turn into that."

"I don't think there's any danger of that." She smiled. "I've seen you in the dining room."

That got a chuckle out of him. "Yeah, good point. Still, I- I need to get on with my life, too, which is why I'm here right now. I was wondering if you were doing anything after work tonight."

"Well, I had planned a whole night of moping around wondering when you were going to get up off your ass and ask me out, but that's what I've been doing for the last few months, so it might be nice to do something different, yeah."

Mark let out a bark of laughter. "Well, you could've just asked me."

"Right, and then you would've gotten that aghast look and then you would've stammered for five minutes, and then you'd have thought you'd be betraying Kath, and then you'd hate me for bringing it up. I figured it would be better to wait until you were ready."

Mark at once was amazed at her perspicacity and irritated at his own lack of same. "Well, then, it's a date."

* * *

Three months later, Mark was happier than he'd been in a very long time.

No, I know exactly how long it's been- almost three years.

Carla was completely different from Kath, and their relationship had also been completely different. With Kath, it was a slow burn- they'd met at a conference, and had been close friends for years before they finally took it to the next level. But with Carla, it all happened at once. The months they'd been together had had an intensity, a passion, a joy like nothing he'd ever felt.

He loved everything about her: her smile, her cheekbones, the way she always wore big floppy hats when it was sunny, the way she always rubbed Molly on her tummy whenever she came to the house, the fact that she always put things back in exactly the same place all the time (Mark was more the type to just drop things where he happened to be standing when he was done using it), her habit of always drinking rose-hips iced tea, the way she always put her right index finger to her chin whenever she was thinking about something, the way her mouth formed a near-perfect O whenever he gave her something, the fact that she only still called him "Carla" whenever she wanted to get his attention, how wonderful she looked in shorts, the way she rolled her eyes whenever he asked a dumb question, and her habit of always sleeping curled up next to him.

They went to Betazed for a combination of work and pleasure. The annual Federation Botanical Association Conference was there that year, and they both attended (and both gave presentations and participated in panel discussions), then followed it up with a week's vacation.

On their last day, they were having a picnic lunch in the park next to Lake Cataria. She asked him for another sandwich, and he smiled and reached into the picnic basket and pulled out a small black box.

"That," she said, "isn't a salami sandwich."

"Your powers of observation remain intact, my love. No, this is not a salami sandwich. I think you'll like this better."

She took the box, opened it, and then her mouth formed that O when she saw the diamond ring.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. His heart soared.

Upon their return home, there were a dozen or so messages, but the one that caught Mark's eye was from Gres, who was having another anniversary gathering shortly, this one back on DS9.

Mark found he couldn't bring himself to go. How could he show up there with his new fiancée and face Gres and Davey and Abhaya and T'Pol and the Kims and the rest of them, all of whom were still hoping for the return of their loved ones?

He never returned Gres's message.

* * *

"I'm going to kill her."

When Ramiro entered Mark's office and made that pronouncement, Mark had been absently fiddling with his left ring finger. The wedding ring didn't weigh all that much, but Mark couldn't help but be hyper-aware of its mass. The wedding had been a month and a half ago, and he was still getting used to the idea.

Mark didn't even need to ask who "her" was- it had to be Taisha. "What is it this time?"

"She pulled the rug out from under us again. 'The war effort,' she said. Ever since she got that promotion after her pet project was such a success, she's turned into a complete martinet."

Mark sighed. "You know, Ramiro, there is a war on. Right now, people are a lot more concerned with the Dominion and a lot less concerned with plant hybridization." When Dominion forces took over the Bajoran sector, it started the war that everyone had been fearing for years. It actually compelled Carla and Mark to accelerate their plans, getting married several months sooner than they originally intended.

"I guess." Ramiro lightly punched the wall of Mark's office. "I'm just so sick of it, you know? For years we've been worrying about the Dominion, and now this- it isn't supposed to be like this, is it?"

"What isn't?"

"I don't know. I'm just babbling."

Chuckling, Mark said, "That's nothing new." Then his comm beeped.

Before Mark could say anything, Ramiro said, "I'll let you take that. Talk to you later."

When Ramiro departed, he activated the viewer, only to see Gretchen Janeway's face. "Mark, you're not going to believe it- they're alive!"

Mark blinked. "What're you- "

"They found Voyager ! Well, sort of. I didn't get all the specifics- apparently it involves something classified- I swear to you, this war has turned Starfleet crazy, it wasn't like this in Edward's day- anyway, they got some kind of message from Voyager's Emergency Medical Hologram. Apparently, Kathryn was able to use some kind of alien communications array to send the hologram through."

The phaser drill started in on Mark's stomach again. "Kathryn- you mean, she's alive?"

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to tell you! According to the hologram, they got sent to the Delta Quadrant by some kind of array four years ago. They've had some losses, but they've integrated with the Maquis crew they were chasing- they're all working together, and trying to get home!"

Mark shook his head. "She's alive..." he muttered.

But she was also impossibly far away- the Delta Quadrant was at least twenty thousand light-years away, possibly more. It would take decades for them to get back to Federation space.

That night, when he and Carla got home, there was a more formal message from Starfleet waiting for him. Steeling himself, holding tightly onto Carla's hand, he sat down on the couch- since proposing to Carla, he had been able to sit on the couch regularly again- and played it.

It was from some admiral he didn't know. He told him a lot of what Kath's mother said, plus some more details, including a full list of who survived- and who didn't. He was pleased- both for Kath's sake out there in the Delta Quadrant as well as that of T'Pol and their children- that Tuvok was among the survivors. Aaron Cavit was not, sadly, nor was Stadi, nor the entire medical staff- which was why the EMH was in use in the first place. However, Joe Carey, Harry Kim, Tom Paris, and Vorik were among the survivors. So was Samantha Wildman and, to Mark's surprise and glee, Samantha's daughter Naomi- and Gres was the father. She discovered that she was pregnant very soon into their Delta Quadrant sojourn. I guess those trips to that doctor on DS9 did the trick....

Kath had also made Chakotay- the Maquis captain she was chasing- her new first officer to replace Cavit and had indeed integrated the members of Chakotay's cell into her crew. It was a gutsy move, and a risky one, but just the sort of thing Kath would do.

The admiral also stated that Starfleet was going to attempt to use the same alien communications relays that Voyager used to "send" the EMH to transmit letters from family members back to them. That distressed Mark somewhat- God, he wondered, how do I tell her about Carla?

However, there was one piece of news that distressed him even more: One of the names on the casualty list was Lieutenant Commander Alexander Honigsberg, chief engineer.

"Davey," he muttered.

Carla looked at him. "You don't think- ?"

Mark shook his head. "I don't know what to think. But he probably got this same message. Who knows how he'll- " He got up. "We've got to get to Toronto, make sure he's okay."

Without even hesitating, Carla also rose from the couch. "Let's go."

Half an hour later, they materialized in the public transporter station closest to Davey's apartment. Hurriedly, Carla barely keeping up with him, he dashed up the stairs and rang the door chime. "Davey?" he called out. "You okay?"

The door slid open to reveal Davey. He was still pale, still appallingly thin- but he'd shaved this morning, and his eyes were only a little bloodshot. More impressively, though, he was smiling. "Hi, Mark- glad you could come by." He looked at Mark's wife. "And it's Carla, right? Mark's told me a lot about you. It's good to finally meet you."

Mark couldn't believe this; he'd never heard Davey use so many short sentences in all the years they'd known each other. "Are- are you okay, Davey?"

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. And I have you to thank for it."

"Me? What'd I do?"

Davey chuckled. "You saved my ass. God, Mark, I was a mess when you got me to the hospital. And, honestly, even after that, despite almost dying. But today, when I got that letter from Starfleet- I guess I was finally able to let go. Yeah, Dad's dead, and I do plan to mourn him- I was just talking with my aunt about doing some kind of memorial service- but now I know what happened." He took a long, deep breath. "And I think I'm okay with that." He shook his head. "Damn, I'm sorry, you guys want to come in? The place is a bit of a mess...."

* * *

That night, they had a very pleasant dinner with Davey at Felinity, where they chatted about his father and Kath and Tuvok and Gres and any number of other subjects- including Davey's plans for the future, which included reenlisting in Starfleet as an engineer. When they got back to Davey's apartment, a call from Gres, who was also concerned about Davey, came in. All three of them were able to congratulate Gres, both on Samantha's survival, and on the birth of their daughter. The Ktarian was beside himself with joy. He also said he planned to organize another gathering- but this time on the anniversary of this day, because this was the day that he wanted to commemorate now. Mark, Carla, and Davey all promised to try to attend.

Finally, Mark and Carla bid Davey good night and returned home.

As they entered the living room, having been thoroughly greeted by Molly, Mark said, "I need to get in touch with Dina, see how she's doing. It's terrible about Aaron."

"Later," Carla said bluntly. "You have to write a letter to Kathryn first."

Mark took a long, deep breath of his own. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I do. It's funny- never thought I'd have to write a Dear John letter."

He sat down on the same couch where he'd learned of Kath's disappearance four years ago and where he'd learned of her survival last night, and he stayed up all night composing the letter. First he told her about Molly and her puppies- she loved that silly dog, and she'd want to know about that. Besides, he preferred to ease into the bad news by starting off with some good.

Then he told her about Carla. Then he told her how much he still loved her. Then he signed it and sent it to Starfleet.

Then he went on with his life.

Closure

James Swallow

This tale is set early in Voyager's fifth season.

James Swallow

James Swallow is proud to be the only British writer to have worked on a Star Trek television series, creating the original story concepts for the Star Trek Voyager episodes "One" and "Memorial." His other associations with the Star Trek saga include scripting the video game Star Trek Invasion and writing over 350 articles for twelve different Star Trek magazines around the world.

Beyond the final frontier, as well as a nonfiction book (Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher), James also wrote the Sundowners series of original steampunk westerns (Ghost Town, Underworld, Iron Dragon, and Showdown), the Blood Angels duology (Deus Encarmine and Deus Sanguinius), The Butterfly Effect, and novels based on characters from 2000 AD, Britain's longest-running SF comic book (Judge Dredd: Eclipse, Rogue Trooper: Blood Relative, and Judge Dredd: Whiteout). His short fiction appears in the anthologies What Price Victory, Something Changed, and Silent Night, and his other credits include scripts for video games and audio dramas.

James Swallow lives in London, and is currently at work on his next book.

Neelix tried to take a breath and almost choked. Instead of air, his lungs filled with stone dust and powdered earth, snatching away his gasps into strangled wheezes. The shock of it made him drop to his knees. He coughed and spat, one hand pressed to his chest where the cavern's atmosphere cut him inside like razors. The Talaxian blinked dust motes from his eyes, and presently the pain beneath his ribs ebbed. He got up and took some careful steps, puffing like an old man. The rumble was dying away, an echo of the sound fading into silence down the tunnels. The ground beneath his feet seemed solid again; seconds earlier it had shaken like the deck of a boat on high seas.

"Oh," he managed. The lining of his throat felt like it had been run through a cheese grater and stuffed back inside him. Gritting his teeth, Neelix forced himself to stave off the daze that threatened to overcome him and move forward. His boots made broad prints in the layer of pumice-like sand the tremor had deposited on the ground. Patting his pockets brought a sour grimace to his usually pleasant and open face. His tricorder was gone, probably having fallen out of his coat when the rockslide had begun. There was a pile of glittering fragments near his feet, all that remained of the device shattered beneath a flat boulder. He sighed; the mix of peculiar ores in the cavern walls played havoc with the delicate sensors, anyway. Beyond anything but point-blank range, the portable computers had proven useless down here in the deeps.

Best to search the old-fashioned way. "Seven!" Almost instantly Neelix was coughing again, the shout irritating his lungs. "Gah," he snarled, and then called her name once more. He was rewarded by the sound of something shifting on the rocks, and then a groggy, weak noise- less a voice, more a feeble mew.

Not far. The Talaxian's hearing was perfect for this sort of thing, the minute perturbations in the air tickling the lobes of his ears and the whiskers of his beard. "Seven?" he repeated, and this time she spoke.

"Here," There was a faint glow coming from the palm beacon she had dropped, and Neelix took it up, turning the beam on the Borg drone. He was briefly glad that she couldn't see his expression behind the bright light. The grotesque gash across the woman's pale face was wet with blood, her skin ripped around the silver comma of her optical implant. The wound was messy and it turned his stomach.

"Are you all right?" he asked, and instantly regretted the obviousness of his question. Neelix quickly set to work moving a pile of small stones from where they had buried Seven's right leg.

The woman ran a hand over her face and torso, a very human gesture for someone who had so long been inhuman. "My..." She seemed to be struggling to find the right words. "My function is impaired...."

Neelix's hand closed around something square among the rubble and he seized it eagerly. The casing on Seven's tricorder was broken but the device was still operating. He waved the sensor head over her body, watching the march of data as the unit scanned her.

"I... detect levels of neural damage in my neocortical processor," she said thickly, "Isolytic leakage in my bioregulation moderator and preomenor."

"Ah," said Neelix, in what he hoped would be a calming, of-course-I-understand sort of way. The tricorder beeped as its diagnostic cycle ended and presented him with the same report, albeit phrased in terms the Talaxian could better grasp. "Your leg is broken in two places," he said gently, "and there's some internal bleeding." He forced a smile. "I'm sure your nanoprobes will be on the job! You'll be fixed in no time!"

Seven's gaze was unfocused. "I was struck directly by several large stones," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone, "I require- " Without warning, her head lolled, like a sleeper on the edge of a doze. The tricorder chirped out a warning, but in the next moment she was awake again. She pointed into the gloom. "There is a medical kit in my equipment case."

Neelix found the backpack and the blue plastic box embossed with the Starfleet caduceus, recovering a hypospray and a vial of anti-infective. Seven's ragged breathing eased as he discharged the injector at her neck. "I'm going to try to contact the captain," he told her, gathering up the torch and getting to his feet. Neelix swept the lamp across the breadth of the cavern, tapping the communicator on his breast. "Away team to Voyager."

The combadge made a desultory click and stayed silent. He tried again, his face forming a frown as the torchlight illuminated the entrance vent they had used to descend to this level. The rock tunnel was gone, hidden beneath a mound of stone and earth that even hand phasers would be ill suited to breach. He tapped the badge over and over, rephrasing his message as if that might somehow help it get through to the starship orbiting high overhead.

"You are wasting your effort," Seven said flatly. "Signals will not penetrate the strata of this area." She indicated the rocks. "The veracite ore and yurium present here block all energy transmissions below- "

"Yes, of course," snapped the Talaxian, irritation flaring inside him. He smothered the feeling quickly and gave the former Borg drone a wan smile. "Not to worry. I'm sure Captain Janeway is aware of the situation. If you just sit tight and wait- "

"I have little choice," Seven responded. Her hand strayed to her head and she blanched. "I will require medical assistance quite soon."

"I'll do the best I can." Neelix rooted inside the medkit and recovered a handful of devices; he'd taken the Doctor's emergency first aid refresher course just like the rest of Voyager's crew, but half the gear in the case was alien to him. You're the wrong man for this job, said a voice in the back of his mind. She'll die if you don't get her out of here. He forced the thoughts away with another smile and gave the drone another dose of detoxin and stimulant. "This should help you." He glanced at the tricorder and hesitated. "How... how long do you think you can, uh..."

When Seven replied there was a line of anxiety in her voice that Neelix had never heard before. "My internal diagnostics indicate that neural shutdown will occur in less than nine hours. Brain death will commence approximately ten to sixteen minutes after that."

"Oh," he said. "Some doctor I am, asking the patient for the diagnosis, eh?" The attempt at levity was as weak as his grin. Neelix touched Seven's hand and gave it a warm squeeze, the metal of her implants cool against his skin. "Don't worry, Seven. We'll get out of this long before... I mean, we'll be all right."

"Your optimism is appreciated, if not actually beneficial."

He fumbled inside the backpack and recoiled when his fingers touched something damp and mushy. "The ration packs were crushed.... They've all burst open and spoiled."

Seven eyed him. "I think it unlikely that we will starve to death."

"That's it!" Neelix replied, "Think positive!"

"We are more likely to perish in another earthquake before that occurs."

"Well, those Starfleet edibles are poor excuses for food, anyway. 'MR-E,' Meals Ready to Eat indeed. Do you know what Mr. Kim told me once? He said the name actually stood for Meals Rejected by Entarans, and you know that species, they'll eat anything..." The Talaxian's voice trailed off. Suddenly he felt worn out and useless. "Will you be all right if I leave you here alone?"

"As I said, I have little choice in the matter."

Neelix frowned at her dour tone. "I'm going to scout around and see if I can find another exit from the caverns, perhaps another channel to the surface."

Seven blinked slowly. She was finding it difficult to stay awake. She offered him the tricorder. "You should take this."

He shook his head. "You need it more than I do. If there's fresh air coming in anywhere down here, I'll smell it." He tapped his nose. "I'll sniff it out." Neelix moved off into the dark, leaving the woman alone in her pool of artificial light. He glanced over his shoulder just once, and the look of almost childlike dread he saw on Seven's face made his blood run cold.

* * *

Neelix passed through the throat of the tunnel and into the cavern proper. There was light in

here, after a fashion, a myriad of glittering flecks of yellow-green matter threaded throughout the strata of the rocks. Neelix was no geologist, but he'd seen enough of the ore in his time to recognize the element the humans called veracite. The planet was rich with it. An exotic substance laced with energy, veracite was used by many pre-warp civilizations as a power source, but the side effects of proximity to it- mainly the disruption of any technology with a duonetic field- made it anathema to most spacefaring species. Not that there was anyone on Nyma IV to be concerned with that... at least, not anymore. From space, the unremarkable brownish green planet seemed exactly like the hundreds of other life-bearing worlds that dotted the wilds of the Delta Quadrant, and on the surface Voyager's survey teams had found nothing but a few higher order primates and the expected panoply of flora and fauna. It was only on the eighth day, when the crew had just started to grumble about "a wild-goose chase," that things had become much more interesting. Performing a low-altitude sweep of Nyma IV's eastern savanna region, Ensigns Duarte and Chell picked up something on the sensors of their shuttle that read like refined, starship-grade metals.

And there it was; a dolmen, Chakotay had called it, a structure akin to burial stones left behind by some of Earth's precursor civilizations. The marker concealed the entrance to the tunnel network, and soon they were inside the long-dead arteries of the world, passing through lava tubes that crossed in a broad web. Just as Janeway predicted, people had lived down here. The tunnels were rife with pictographs and drawings, and in the caverns there were the cities.

Millions of years ago, vast basalt bubbles hardened into stone vaults hundreds of feet tall. The people that had come to Nyma IV mirrored their civilizations on other worlds and forged communities underground. They lived and loved and died under the constant glow of their veracite sky. Neelix entered the huge natural atrium and felt the same emotion he had the first time he had seen it, a mingling of awe and sadness. Voyager's crew had been the first sentients to set foot in here for centuries.

They had only mapped about a quarter of this cavern's interior when the tremors began. He wondered about the others; Tom and B'Elanna were working the next cavern over- had they made it out in time, or were they just as trapped as Seven and he? Neelix shook his head to rid himself of the black mood lingering about him. No. I have work to do. I have find a way out. He threw all thought of caution to the wind and began a quick circuit of the cavern's inner wall. This was not the careful survey he had been sent to do; this was an emergency.

Neelix found her at the plaza of red stones where he'd left her before the quake. He was pleased to see that the tremor had done little to disturb the buildings; it seemed that only the tunnels were prone to cave-ins like the one that had injured Seven.

As it always did, her face lit up when she saw him; even now, the brilliance of her smile stung him inside like some bittersweet joy. "Neelix! I was worried!"

He returned the smile as best he could. "Kes, thank the Forest you're all right."

She saw his concern instantly. "What's wrong?"

"Seven of Nine has been wounded."

Kes's hand flew to her mouth in surprise. "Oh no. But she's- "

"She's badly hurt," Saying it made Neelix feel tired. "I've tried to stabilize her, but I thought you might- "

"You did the best you could?" Kes asked.

He nodded. "Yes, but I'm not really that experienced with medicine."

"You did the best you could," repeated the girl with a nod of complete certainty, "That will be enough."

"I hope so."

She stepped closer to him, and Neelix caught the intoxicating smell of her hair, the same mix of fresh flower oils that always sparked thoughts of their first meeting. "... I was afraid something might have happened to you..."

Kes shook her head. "I took shelter in one of the temples when the ground started shaking, I was fine," she soothed. "These buildings have withstood these quakes for millennia, they're sturdy enough to protect me. And besides, you had to think of Seven's welfare first."

"Yes..." Neelix swallowed hard. "We should start looking for another tunnel, sweeting. If there's an aftershock we could all be buried alive down here."

She smiled again. "That won't happen. Come on, this way." Neelix followed two steps behind Kes as she led him to the empty moat that ran the perimeter of the cavern. She was so light-footed before him she made him feel big and clumsy. Her pace was almost playful, as if they were skipping across the sands in a resort holoprogram and not the perpetual twilight of this cave-city. Kes's vitality was always infectious, but here and now it seemed to leave Neelix behind. He felt strangely dislocated from the girl.

They moved quickly. Without the need to document and scan every inch of the rock face as away mission protocols demanded, Neelix and Kes felt their way past the dry aqueducts and ancient channels. Everywhere along the border of the cavern complex there were more and more of the carvings and decorations. Vast friezes and mosaics made from differing shades of veracite covered swaths of the walls, disappearing into the dark above them. Neelix paused to sniff the air, but there was nothing but the scent of aged stone. It reminded him of the museums he had visited on Talax with his sisters as a boy, the vast dusty halls full of old relics; it was the smell of antiquity.

Kes touched one of the mosaics, her slender fingers tracing the shapes. A smile broke out on her face as she found the image of a dancing woman. "See, Neelix. She could almost be my mother."

He followed her look, for a moment seeing the murals on the walls instead of just the walls themselves. There were Ocampas everywhere, frozen in what seemed to be a depiction of a festival of some sort. Children and adults played and laughed, frolicking in a glittering river made from chips of mica. Kes looked into the mosaic eyes of the people in the mural, almost as if she were searching for something.

"It's very beautiful, but we really don't have time to sightsee," said the Talaxian. "We have to keep searching for another tunnel."

She threw him another grin. "Yes, of course."

They moved on, Neelix scanning the rock face for anything that resembled a channel or vent,

while Kes stopped and stared at every new piece of stone art or statue. He could hardly blame her- how long was it since she had been in the presence of her own species, even if it was just their relics? Neelix felt a pang of familiar guilt. She had given up so much to join him on Voyager's journey, leaving her homeworld behind, turning down the chance to remain with Tanis and the other Ocampanans they had encountered months later.... At times he felt unworthy of her friendship. He clamped his teeth shut with an audible snap. This train of thought was insidious and he made a physical effort to push it away.

Kes didn't seem to notice; she was absorbed by the unfolding story written across the rocks. The initial surveys of the murals indicated that they were a pictorial record, the odyssey of a group of Ocampanans that had left their planet around the time the alien known as the Caretaker had arrived in their system. Tom Paris had found a frieze that showed their rattletrap starship falling into a funnel in space- most likely a wormhole, Mister Vulcan had opined- and emerging close to the Nyma system. It seemed that the Ocampanans had taken this good fortune as a sign from their deities and made the fourth planet their home. Neelix was struck once more by the loneliness of the place, something that seemed completely lost on Kes. He could not look at the old, silent city without musing on what had befallen these vital and happy people, while she saw only the wonders they left behind.

His mind drifted back to Seven; it had been she who had discovered the first clues about the Nyma colony, rooting through the databases of a derelict Vok scoop-ship. The name "Ocampana" had instantly raised flags in Voyager's computers and started a search that lasted for several weeks, backtracking the piecemeal navigation charts from the Vok craft and filling in the blanks with spacer hearsay. All of them had known from the start that they were pinning their hopes on a very slim chance, but it was a possibility that Janeway could not afford to ignore. The Ocampana's ersatz Caretaker had been the one to drag Voyager unceremoniously across the entire galactic disc from the Alpha Quadrant, and the prospect that the Nyma colony might hold some clue- any clue- toward reversing that jaunt had to be investigated. Neelix's adult life had never been tied down, always rootless and free, but on some level he had always felt at home out in the void. Not for the first time, he found himself thinking of his alien friends and pondering what it must feel like to be so far from their places of birth. The cities in the caves here hinted at great secrets concealed in their depths, and he could imagine the anticipation of the crew, each of them hoping that this time they would find the way home, but also afraid that Nyma IV would be just another in a long line of disappointments. One more distance marker on the endless road back toward Federation space.

Any question of investigating the ruins would have to wait, however. Seven's life was the priority now. They had almost completed their circuit of the dry moat and all the watercourses and access channels visible were either filled with rubble or far too high up the walls for them to reach. Even able-bodied with ropes and tackle, it would have been nearly impossible, and there was no way Neelix would be able to haul the crippled Seven up the sheer, glittering fascia.

He smelt air.

Neelix's whiskers went tight with surprise. Yes! There, in the shadows ahead, there was an oval mouth cut in the rocks, decorated with veracite discs. It was wide enough to get a brace of Rinaxi sand-oxen down it, and the distinct scent of surface air was seeping through. Kes caught his enthusiasm and ran with him. The Talaxian fumbled to activate his wrist beacon and turned the bright dual beams on the channel entrance. The pumice powder was slick across the floor of the tunnel.

"No," he said aloud, pushing himself up into the yawning cave. Neelix virtually threw himself into the dark, the torch beam darting about him like a mad lighthouse. "No!" His denial rebounded off the slick basalt walls. Perhaps twenty or so meters further up the tunnel there was a broad cairn of fallen rocks, deposited there when the ceiling had given way in decades past. Stones the size of shuttlecraft had landed in wild disorder and there were gaps between them where thin traces of air could still move freely. The faintest of breezes found their way through, teasing the Talaxian's delicate senses with the false prospect of escape. "No, no, no!"

Neelix was rigid with frustration and anger, casting out a fierce kick at some loose pebbles. His hand curled into a fist and for long seconds he hovered on the edge of smashing the wrist beacon against the cave wall in impotent fury.

In the dimness, he felt Kes's hands on his arm and her touch made the hot rush of emotion subside. "Neelix, don't worry. You'll find another way out."

"There isn't another way out," The words tumbled out of him. He'd been denying it to himself but now it was staring him in the face. "I surveyed the other parts of the moat before the tremor. There are three tunnels in each cavern, and the other two are blocked, just like this one." He let her guide him back out into the city-cave, every footfall heavy and leaden.

Kes gave his wrist a squeeze. "You have the strongest survival instincts of any person I've ever met, Neelix. I know you'll get Seven to safety. There's no doubt in my mind."

His frustration ebbed under the calm surety of her voice, but still the Talaxian felt tired and melancholy. "Kes, I..." He ran his fingers over her face, touching the delicate curves of her ear. She was so very beautiful. It made him sad to think that Kes was entombed here along with him, but there was also some secret, selfish part of Neelix that wanted her company more than anything in the world.

She caught his hand and took it in hers. "What's wrong? Talk to me. You know you can tell me anything."

The words would not come. They lay inside his chest like rough-hewn lumps of metal, refusing to rise and be spoken aloud. He worked so hard to maintain his good humor and personable aspect aboard Voyager. Neelix had taken it upon himself to become the ship's good soul, to be the person that kept the spirits of those star-lost people buoyant. To the best of his abilities, he made sure he kept a warm smile for everyone on the vessel- but some days it was so hard. The captain, Commander Chakotay, Harry and Tom and B'Elanna, little Naomi, even Mr. Vulcan and the Doctor... they were all such decent people, their hearts so close to the surface. In a way, he felt responsible for them. They'd been dumped in his backyard, and like any good neighbor, Neelix wanted to help them find their way home again.

But some days it was so hard. So hard to be the happy guy when inside he was crowding out with regrets and unsaid things. He took a shuddering breath and looked into Kes's pale, elfin eyes. How could he tell her the truth he felt at that moment? Neelix knew that the chances of rescue from the caves were now practically zero. This far down, Voyager's transporters would not be able to penetrate the rock to recover them even if the ship's sensor grid could actually peer through the layers of interference; if they tried something radical like phasering their way in, the energy-conductive veins of yurium would dissipate the beams and likely cause another, fatal collapse. A cold ball of ice formed in Neelix's stomach as he accepted the reality of the situation in its full, awful truth. They would not be found in

time. They would die down here.

"The captain's going to do all she can to mount a rescue," said Kes, reading his thoughts in the expression on his face. She didn't need to delve into his mind to do it, she knew the tautness around his eyes and the thinning of his lips.

Neelix studied her and again he felt the distance between them; it hurt more than the grim fate he was afraid of. This could be your last chance, he told himself, the last opportunity you will ever have to open your heart to her. "Kes, I wanted to say something to you, but I don't... I'm not sure of how to..."

She became quite still, watching him carefully, letting him find his way.

"We were so close once.... It wasn't easy for me," He looked down. "I'm just worried that I wouldn't be able to tell you how I feel, before we..."

Kes silenced him with a touch of her hand. "Neelix, don't think that way. I know that Voyager is coming." There was such certainty behind her words that he blinked and stuttered to a halt. She smiled again. "Come on, I have something I want to show you." Kes beckoned him after her and he followed her up from the dry moat and into the ruined township. He walked on through the arches and plazas of the Ocampa community, the faint glow of hope the girl gave him warring with his morose mien.

* * *

At first he thought it was an arena or perhaps some kind of theater-in-the-round. Set at the bottom of a progressive set of tiers, the hexagonal atrium seemed to be little more than a bare expanse of marbled stone. There were large pillars, also hexagonal in cross-section, one at each point of the geometric shape and a lone pillar in the middle of the arena. Kes nimbly skipped down careworn steps in the tiers and Neelix picked his way after her; the place had been built for dainty Ocampan, not the larger feet of a Talaxian. The marbling in the rock was peculiarly regular, he noticed, and it was only when he was standing on it that Neelix realized the stones and pillars were actually covered with writing. He could read a little Ocampa and recognized some words in the scrolling cuneiform texts, radiating out from each of the columns like rays from a star.

"These are names?" he asked, receiving a nod from Kes. "Are these the people who lived in the city?"

"I think so. This is a mnemosia."

"I don't know what that is."

She gestured at the pillars. "We never had any of these on Ocampa... but I saw pictures of them in our histories and... and other places." Kes knelt and ran her finger along a line of words. "The ancient Ocampan, the ones who had stronger mental abilities, they used to build these in their cities. People would visit to hear stories from their elders."

"So it is like a theater, then? Or a library?"

Kes walked over to the central pillar. "A little of both, really."

Neelix indicated the carvings. "Where are their stories?"

"Here, in a way. These are the names of the people who remember the stories."

"I still don't understand."

She laid her hands palm down on the pillar and let them flow over the inscriptions. "My people could influence the structure of the stones. They... imprinted them. They placed telepathic patterns in the rock, like a recording." Kes's eyes sparkled as she marveled at the idea. "The Ocampo who came here must have rediscovered the talent. They used the veracite to create a... a psychic cathedral, I suppose you could call it."

"Can you..." Neelix gulped. "Can you, uh, hear anything?"

She smiled back at him. "Not yet. But I can feel them."

The Talaxian looked around; at any other time he might have been awed by the majestic scope of the atrium, but the thought of vast tracts of history left behind by a dead population brought him back to his own- their own- predicament. He tried to keep the morose tone from his voice. "Kes, perhaps we should go back to Seven. We've been gone quite a while and she'll be concerned. I don't like leaving her alone too long."

"She would say you are being irrational," Kes said lightly, "and Seven would never admit to being worried about anything."

"Still," said Neelix, walking away, "we should go."

"I want to stay a little longer." Neelix turned back to argue with her, but he saw the look of determination in her eyes. "This is important to me. Please."

He frowned again; he knew her well enough to know that no amount of talk would change her mind once she had it set on something. "All right, but promise me you'll be careful. And if you feel another tremor coming on, make sure you get to cover."

"I promise." She blew him a playful kiss and settled to her haunches, losing herself in the carvings.

His misgivings building, Neelix made his way back toward the other tunnel.

* * *

Seven's eyes snapped open as he pressed the cold nozzle of the hypospray at her neck, her hand instinctively coming up to block him. "It's all right, it's just me!" Neelix said. "You were passed out when I came back."

"What... What is that?"

"Corophizine, just a booster shot." Her hand dropped and Neelix discharged the hypo. "There. How do you feel?"

"Your question is redundant." The Borg retorted, and Neelix gave a quick smirk. That was the Seven of Nine he knew and loved. She blinked and ran a finger over the star-shaped implant at her ear. "My chronometer has ceased to function. How much time has elapsed?"

"Not much, less than an hour...."

Seven scowled. "Some of my internal mechanisms are dark. They may be shut down by damage or lack of input. I have numerous warning flags from my subprocessors calling for an immediate return to my regeneration alcove." She looked away. "I dislike this sensation. I feel... useless."

"You're far from that," Neelix insisted, "you're the very model of Borg efficiency!"

She arched an eyebrow. "You may desist in your cheerfulness, Mister Neelix. I do not require it."

"Everyone needs cheering up sometimes," he replied, but the confidence in his voice faltered. Do I mean her, or me?

"That is an overly irrational statement."

"Huh," Neelix said with a nod, "Kes said you'd say something like that."

Seven's eyes narrowed. "Kes?"

"She wanted to look over some of the ruins, a temple I think, I didn't see any harm in it- "

The Borg halted him with a raised hand. "You spoke to Kes? Recently?" Suddenly she was looking at Neelix with a level, measuring stare.

"Well, of course!" A chuckle escaped from his throat. "I told her to come back with me, but she's just so hard to say no to."

"Neelix," said Seven, and her tone was deadly serious, "Kes... the Ocampa female... she is not here."

"No, she's in the cavern," he jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "I just said that." From out of nowhere, Neelix felt a cold, creeping sensation crawling up his spine. Seven's expression told him something was very, very wrong.

The Borg shook her head. "You misunderstand me. Kes left Voyager over a year ago, shortly after I joined the crew. Her psychokinetic powers became unstable.... She became a noncorporeal life-form."

"What are you saying?" The words seemed flat and dead in his mouth. "I saw her! I spoke to her!" Neelix flashed a look back down the tunnel, "She's in there!"

"Perhaps you suffered a head injury in the rockfall- " began Seven.

"No! I know what I saw! You must be mistaken...." He staggered and sat down heavily. "I..." The mind of the Talaxian reeled with the shock of Seven's bald statement. Kes, gone? It's not possible!

And yet, it was. When he concentrated, Neelix could clearly recall the moment; the sudden flash of golden light, the strange wash of turbulent emotions that flowed through him as Kes had... well, as she had ascended into something impossibly distant from a physical form. He could taste the brisk sweetness of the moon-ripened champagne he had shared with her on

the day she had changed, that flower scent of her hair returning all over again. She was gone. She's been gone for months! It came back to him in a sudden torrent of memories, the last smile from her before she merged into the stars. The moment slipped back into his mind with potent, damning force and his stomach turned over with sick dread.

"How could that happen?" he said aloud, "I accepted her as if it were perfectly normal. I didn't forget about her leaving the ship, I just... I just didn't remember it."

"You must listen to me carefully," said Seven, her ice-blue eyes never wavering from him, "What you think you saw in the cavern is not Kes. You may have encountered some sort of shape changer, or an illusory projection. In large quantities, the minerals in these caverns have been known to produce hazardous psychoactive effects in some humanoid species- "

"What are you saying to me?" Neelix snapped back at her, his face coloring. "That I've gone mad?"

"Who or whatever you spoke to is not what it appears to be. It may only seem to be your former companion."

He rose angrily to his feet. "You weren't there, you don't know what I saw!"

"Neelix, you must be rational."

"I am rational!" It was practically a shout, the harsh words rebounding off the walls of the tunnel. "I'll prove it!" He turned and strode away. "I'll bring her back here!"

"Neelix, no!" Seven called after him. "You are endangering yourself!" Her words died as a faint sound reached Neelix's ears, the most minute of twitches in the rock corridors- there one moment, gone the next.

Far off in the caverns, stone moved on stone. Another tremor was building.

* * *

It was like a storm raging inside his mind, a tidal wave of feelings and confusion churning everything in his heart into an overpowering flood. Neelix almost tripped over the stones of a fallen obelisk as he dashed into the city streets. Suddenly disoriented, he turned in place, starting down one pathway before turning back and trying another. The temple, where was it? The idea of the place slipped away from him like some half-remembered dream, and he clung on to it, desperate not to let it fade.

Kes; her face filled his mind's eye, that eternally calm expression she wore, the laughing eyes and the perfect mouth. The memory of her stabbed him. At that instant all he wanted was just to see her once more, to feel her lips on his again. The emotions were raw and passionate, as fresh as they were on the day she had departed Voyager and taken with her all the things that made her his. No one had seen Neelix that night as he returned to his ship in Voyager's shuttlebay. None of his friends had been there to watch him close the hatch behind him and lock himself in with his sadness and regret. They had not seen the tears he shed for her, poor Kes, dearest Kes, gone and transformed into something so far removed from the crude matter of his flesh and blood. He could not have stopped her- he would not have dared, as her burgeoning powers had begun to endanger them all- but that realization did little to ease the pain.

Neelix paused and propped himself up on a wall, panting. He tried to call out to her, but the cry died in his throat. Even giving voice to her name was a colossal effort, the emotions tied to it too heavy for him to carry. Seven's warning rang in his ears and he pushed himself off the wall and kept walking, his face twisted in turmoil. He refused to accept the Borg's narrow-minded, suspicious conclusions; how could she hope to understand the connection that existed between two lovers? The joyless drone knew nothing of empathy, and Neelix knew Kes- by the Guiding Tree, I know the woman I love! He had seen her, he had touched her and spoken to her, not some shapeshifting monster. Kes wasn't a figment of his fevered imagination, she was as real as he was...

He so desperately wanted her to be real. More than anything, even at the cost of his life, at that moment Neelix wanted Kes to be real.

The mnemosia appeared from behind a group of mushroom-shaped habitats as he rounded a corner. He recognized the structure at once, the tips of the marble columns just visible over the lip of the staggered tiers. The stones were different now. Before, their placid gray-white forms had reflected the dull glow of the veracite roof; now they glittered with an inner luminosity the color of Kelodan roses. Neelix felt a subtle vibration through the soles of his boots, a quiver that throbbed and faded; he ignored it and pressed on, slipping into the open arena and on to the uppermost tier.

"Kes!"

She was laughing, her hands cupping an ephemeral mist drifting in the air in front of her- but no, not mist, something else. Neelix started down the ledges toward her and the shape gained definition as he came closer.

It was a face, a ghostly head disembodied and floating like a summer cloud. This was no harsh phantasm from one of the captain's gothic holonovels, it was a smiling man, animated as he whispered to the Ocampá girl. Neelix saw the man's ears, the same turned flower of skin that Kes bore- the ghost was someone from her species. He could see better now; there was more than one, and they faded in and out, gaining color and definition as they approached Kes. Lines of letters on the floor and the pillars glowed each time they spoke to her. She was communing with the spirits in the stones, the telepathic imprints of Nyma IV's populace speaking to her from across the ages.

Neelix felt the rumble flicker once more beneath his feet as he stepped on the glowing stones. Slight glimmers of dust disturbed by the motion wafted into the air from the tops of the pillars. "Kes," he said again, and she blinked at him, that smile emerging again like a dawning sun.

"Neelix, there's so many of them here! Isn't it incredible?" When he didn't respond straight away, the innocent gaiety on her face faded. "Neelix? Please tell me what's wrong," She stepped out of the circle of ghosts, and one by one the apparitions melted back into the stones.

He forced out the question. "Who are you?"

Kes's brow furrowed and she cocked her head in confusion. "You know who I am, Neelix- "

"Say it!" he demanded fiercely, "Say your name! Tell me who you are!"

She padded over to him and took his hand. The touch of her skin sent an electric thrill

through the Talaxian's nerves. "I'm someone who cares about you, more than you will ever know."

"You can't be Kes," he breathed, "Kes is gone, changed. She... left me."

"I never left you," said the Ocampa, "there's a part of me that will always be connected to you, Neelix. You were my first love, and you opened my heart to the stars."

The vibration returned, and this time it did not fade. Distantly, rocks ground against one another in a sullen rumble. It's coming, Neelix told himself, and it's too late to escape it.

"I miss you so much," he said, his voice thick with emotion, "I'm not going to get out of here alive, and I'll never have the chance to tell you again."

"Neelix, no- "

He shook his head. "I want you to be real. I want you to be Kes, but I can't be sure..."

Kes ran her hands over his face, mirroring the touch he had given her before. "Yes, you can. You know Kes better than any living being." Neelix looked into her blue eyes and felt like he was falling in love with her all over again. "What does your heart tell you?"

His eyes prickled. "I lied to you," he told her, in a quiet and steady voice. "After what happened on Ilari..." Kes broke eye contact for a brief moment. It had been their third year on Voyager when the Ilarian warlord Tieran had perished in Kes's arms, transferring his psychic essence to the Ocampa woman. Under Tieran's presence, buried emotions had come to the surface in Kes and she had brought her relationship with Neelix to an abrupt end. "You told me you wanted to move on, to find your own path."

She nodded. "I didn't want to hurt you.... But it was the right thing to do."

"Yes," said Neelix, and then he broke away from her, "No. I won't lie again. I told you then that it was all right, but that wasn't true. It was never true."

Confusion crossed her face. "I don't understand."

"I never told you the truth because I wanted you to be free, sweeting. I have always loved you, Kes. I never stopped loving you. When you told me you wanted to end it between us, it broke my heart. I kept hoping that it was that fiend Tieran, that it was just some remnant of his cruel personality left over, but I was wrong. I thought you would come back to me, but you didn't."

Tears formed in her eyes. "I never knew."

"Of course not," He tried and failed to keep any bitterness from his tone. "I made sure that nobody did. I buried my feelings deep." He gave a mirthless chuckle. "Tuvok would be proud of me."

Kes watched him with a mixture of pity and sadness. "Why didn't you tell me? After all we've been though, we are still friends. You could have said- "

"Said what? I know you, Kes. If I had told you I wanted you to stay with me, what would you have done?"

She looked away again. "I would have stayed."

"Yes. And you would have been sad, but still you would have stayed with me because it was what I wanted... and you would have hidden your sadness just like I hid mine." He took her hands in his. "All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. When I first saw you in the Kazon camp... you were like some delicate orchid growing in a wasteland. I knew I had to take you away from all that. You deserved better."

She blinked back a tear. "Oh, Neelix, my poor Neelix..."

"I let you go because that was what you wanted. You were happy. Even though it cut me like a knife every time I saw you laughing or smiling with someone else, or when I caught sight of you in a corridor... As long as you were happy, it was worth it." He took a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry I couldn't be honest with you."

She smiled up at him and he felt his heart swell. "Thank you for telling me now." Gently she led him toward the central stone column. "You gave me your honesty, Neelix. I want to give you something in return."

The quake hummed at the edges of his hearing. "But the tremor," he began.

Kes silenced him with a look. She placed a hand on the pillar and the inscriptions around her fingers glowed blue-white. "Come with me," she said.

"Wh-where?"

"Everywhere," Kes replied, and suddenly Neelix was falling into her eyes, losing himself in the glow. His hand tightened around hers and he surrendered himself to the moment.

* * *

The light was passing through him; he was a prism for time, rays of past and present passing through him and splitting apart into their component colors. Neelix saw nows and thens and never-had-beens, might-have, should-have, could-have before and after-

- the hot yellow sun on her face, the bruises tightening her young skin, taste of coppery blood on her lips; but hope, exploding inside her as she sees him, his eyes afire with anger and passion. Neelix brandishes the weapon in his hand and bellows at the Kazon warriors to back away, the strange new people in their red-and-black uniforms look on in surprise. She is so tired and yet so elated to see him. Kes knows she is safe now, safe with Neelix, rescued and free-

- in the arching corridor, he is there with his hand pressed to the clear viewport, sad and hopeful all at once. Kes leans into Neelix and they envelop one another in an embrace, two faces turning to watch the stars. Voyager wheels and turns as it departs Suspiria's Array and they say their goodbyes to the human ship, knowing that neither of them will ever see their Federation friends again; but they have each other, and nearby Tanis waits patiently, ready to open a new chapter in Kes's life-

- pain lances through him, a rage and sorrow so great it dwarfs anything he has ever known before. Neelix stumbles, his leg gashed and bleeding, no phaser, no communicator, no escape, no future. From out of the dark green steel of the walls, the machine hybrids come, Borg upon Borg reaching for him with chattering fans of silver probes, red laser light licking

his face. He cries out but they do not heed his weak organic fears. The drone reaches for his arm and he looks into a face patterned with plastic and iron, those delicate elfin blue eyes turned dead, rendered into a metal horror-

- uncertain, she watches him enter the lab, his face set and troubled. Neelix talks about how things have changed, his eyes drifting to the Nekrit Depot station where it hangs outside the window; his friend Wix is there waiting for him. Kes struggles at the words, they've drifted apart, it's all different now, but they're still close. He cherishes what they have; there's more he wants to tell her but he can't voice it. Suddenly she knows that he is saying goodbye to her. He will leave the ship and take up his old life, never come back-

- he has never been afraid of her before, but he is now. Kes looks at him and he can find so very little of what she used to be. There is some glimmer of the woman of his dreams but it has been worn down by terrible sights, by the pressure of evolving too soon, too fast, her humanity hanging on by the thinnest of threads. Neelix wants to take her and hold her, to soothe the age-hardened face that was once so smooth and so perfect; but she isn't that woman anymore. With every step she takes toward the warp core, a wake of disruption and fire is at her heels-

- Earth welcomes them as if they were its own, Tom's father and good old Reg shaking their hands and offering them the friendship of the whole quadrant. They are the first of their kind to venture here; the captain, now she's an admiral, she promises them a place to live and a bright future for all of them, for Neelix and Kes and both of their children, his darling Linnis and her little brother Tixa. At last they have a home, and it is here among their friends, their real, true family-

* * *

He gasped and staggered back a few steps, the sudden shock of the visions fading away like passing sunlight. The air vibrated around him, dust motes shifting in chords.

"There isn't much time," said Kes, her voice sounding as if it was coming from somewhere very far away, "the caverns are unstable. The mnemosia's energy is disturbing the crust. That's why they left, Neelix. That's why Nyma is silent..."

The Talaxian shook of the fog of memory from his mind. "Kes, we have to try and find shelter."

"Yes, you must," she said. Her hand seemed ghostly now where it touched the stone pillar, like the phantom Ocampa. "This tremor will be the worst yet."

His blood ran cold at the tone in her voice. "You're not coming with me." It was a statement, not a question.

Kes turned her face to his and kissed him. Her lips brushed his and it was like a shadow falling from his soul. It was all the answer she would give him.

"Goodbye, Kes." The words left him of their own accord, escaping from his mouth, fading, gone. They took with them the heartache, the void inside his heart that had threatened never to heal; in their place they left a bittersweet glow, something evanescent and flawless.

"Let me go, Neelix," she whispered, "and don't look back. You're going to find someone to share your life with someday... Sooner than you think."

A cracking snarl from breaking rocks snatched Neelix's attention away from the stone column for a fraction of a second, and when he turned back she was gone. With the ground moaning beneath his feet, the Talaxian sprinted out of the atrium and ran for the tunnels.

* * *

Seven slapped her communicator again, calling out to Voyager in what she knew would be a futile effort. Part of her was angry at herself for succumbing to something so human as panic, trying in vain to reach the starship even though she knew the veracite interference would not have suddenly ceased just because Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero-One, was facing imminent decease. She coughed out a mouthful of dust from the churn of powder in the tunnel, her mind filling with a sudden, unbidden storm of regrets and troubles. The utter unfairness of it all struck her like a slap in the face. All the things she would never have considered as a member of the collective, that she would never again try a new food in the mess hall or listen to the Doctor sing, all these petty little human thoughts swirled about her. She struggled and failed to get to her feet, her deadened legs denying her even the chance to meet her end standing up. Seven's eyes prickled with hurt and frustration; she felt an odd kind of amazement that she might actually begin to weep. Such a human thing to do, she thought.

"Seven!" Neelix's shout preceded the sounds of his crashing, stumbling run and the Talaxian hove into view, coated in rock dust, choking down gulps of thick air. "Seven! Are you all right?"

"No," She hardly recognized the voice as her own. It seemed so feeble. "I... do not want to die here."

He knelt at her side, taking her hand. "Neither do I."

"What happened to your... to Kes?"

"She's gone," Neelix replied, an eternity of weariness in his words. "Just us now." He managed a smile, and through that simple gesture Seven saw warmth and friendship that was as welcome as it was unexpected.

Her voice threatened to break as she spoke. "I do not want to be alone again."

The Talaxian smiled, his snaggle teeth baring in a real, honest grin. "Me neither."

The quake released its fury on the cavern and the tunnel shifted, throwing them about like dice in a cup. Neelix struck a rock and felt his vision darken. There was a moment of brightness, a tingling golden glow; then nothing.

* * *

"Gently," said the voice. "Gently now. Try not to move too quickly."

It was difficult for him to blink, but after a few attempts Neelix managed to open his eyes and keep them that way. His vision swam; large black blobs against a pale background wavered and floated before him, resolving by moments into people-shapes.

"Captain?" He connected the name with the voice and Janeway's face was there at his side.

She gave him an easy grin. "How do you feel, Mr. Neelix?"

"Like... like a bag of Aboran Til Cats."

"I'll assume that's a good thing," The arch response came from the Doctor. The medical hologram leaned in over Neelix's shoulder and ran a sensor over his head. The Talaxian became aware of a stim-heal patch on his temple. "He's going to be fine," the EMH told Janeway. "I'm going to check on my other patient."

Neelix watched him drift away and blinked. "Seven... How is she?"

"Safe, just like you," the captain replied. "Her injuries were more severe, but the Doctor is confident she'll be up and around in a few days. That's Borg resilience for you."

He nodded and winced. "How did you find us? We thought we were isolated down there."

Janeway's brow furrowed, and Neelix recognized the expression immediately. He'd seen it before on the captain, at those times when her keen scientific mind discovered something that left her stymied. "Frankly, that's a bit of a mystery. I hate to say it, but we had exhausted almost every option in the search. Tom and B'Elanna tore the sensor grid apart trying to squeeze every last gigawatt of capacity out of it, but we just couldn't read your life signs through the mineral strata..." She frowned. "We detected the beginnings of a large earthquake and then... something quite peculiar happened."

Unbidden, a smile came to Neelix's lips. "You found us."

Janeway nodded. "There was an energy surge in the scanner. For one split second, we had a thousand times the power we normally had. Logically, it should have burnt out the system, but it didn't. Harry was quick off the mark and tied in the transporters, and we snatched you out." She eyed him. "You wouldn't happen to have an explanation for that, would you?"

Neelix gingerly slid himself off the sickbay's biobed. "I'm sure you're going to find the answer soon enough, Captain." He had no doubts that sooner or later Lieutenant Torres would find a distinct correlation between the pattern of energy in the freak surge and the psychokinetic signature of one of Voyager's former crew. "I'd like to speak to Seven, if I may."

The Doctor gave him a nod. "I'm sure there's no harm in that." As the EMH spoke to the captain, Neelix leaned close to where Seven lay beneath a medical support frame.

"It seems we were not alone after all," said the former Borg.

"I guess not," Neelix said quietly. "Seven, about what happened down there. About what I saw- "

"If you do not wish me to speak of it, I will not. I do not pretend to understand the nature of your relationship with Kes, but I will respect it."

"It's not that," he replied, "I don't have anything to keep secret... not anymore. She was there, Seven, and she saved our lives."

"You doubted your own perceptions before," she said. "You do not doubt them now."

"No."

Seven studied him, considering. "And yet, it was only you who saw her, who spoke to her. You alone witnessed this phenomenon, and you have no real evidence that Kes was ever actually there. How can you be sure that what you encountered was not simply the creation of your own mind, influenced by the veracite concentrations?"

"I'm sure," he said, with absolute conviction. "I don't know how, perhaps it was the temple in the ruins, perhaps it created some sort of link to her. Whatever it was, it let her come back to me." A distant smile crossed the Talaxian's face. "So I could say goodbye."

The Secret Heart

of Zolaluz

Robert T. Jeschonek

This tales takes place sometime between the fifth-season episodes "Infinite Regress" and "Bliss."

Robert T. Jeschonek

Robert T. Jeschonek wrote "Oil and Water," a Burgoyne adventure in Star Trek: New Frontier: No Limits. Robert's story "Our Million-Year Mission" won the grand prize in Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VI. His credits include the prize-winning "Whatever You Do, Don't Read This Story" in Strange New Worlds III, "The Shoulders of Giants" in Strange New Worlds V, and original fiction in publications ranging from Abyss & Apex to The Loyalhanna Review. Robert's work can also be found in comic books, including War and Silent Screams from Saddle Tramp Press. In addition, he wrote about Star Trek comics for Amazing Heroes magazine. Currently based in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Robert spent over a decade as a television producer/director and has written news and feature stories for many newspapers and magazines. He is a graduate of the Oregon Coast Professional Fiction Writers Workshops conducted by Dean Wesley Smith and Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Robert's wife, Wendy, helps to make his fiction writing possible by supplying inspiration, encouragement, laughter, editing support, and other contributions too numerous to mention.

Visit Robert on the Web at www.robertjeschonek.com.

The rough shouts of a gang of soldiers awakened Seven of Nine in the middle of the night.

Holding herself perfectly still, she listened from her hiding place in the ground, the secret crawlspace beneath the shack that had become her refuge.

Boots stomped on the floorboards over her head. Menacing voices laughed cruelly.

Seven's heart pounded as she heard the voice of her protector, Zolaluz, who was up there among the soldiers. Calmly, Zolaluz denied knowing the whereabouts of any fugitives and pleaded with the men to pass without harming her.

In response, one of them struck her.

Tensing, Seven glared up at the floorboards and prepared to abandon her hiding place. Withholding help from someone in need went against her grain... though, in fact, she would

be of limited help against armed soldiers because she had broken her right leg in the shuttle crash that had deposited her on the surface of Saladana. She had lost all weapons in the explosion that followed the crash... an explosion that she had escaped only with the help of Zolaluz. Seven still wore her combadge, but Voyager was far away and had not responded to her calls for assistance.

Captain Janeway was not answering Seven's calls, either. She, too, had been aboard a crashed vessel, and her fate was uncertain.

Seven was alone, injured, and unarmed. She believed that her duty was to preserve herself long enough to locate and rescue Janeway. Nevertheless, as the soldiers continued to hurt Zolaluz, Seven gathered her strength to heave up the trapdoor and fight.

A soldier laughed, and Seven heard another blow connect. It sounded like a hard slap across the face, and Zolaluz cried out this time.

Seven heard the impact of a body dropping to the floor, and Zolaluz's voice was now just inches overhead.

"No, please," she said softly. "I promise, I will come to you if I hear or see anything."

From the cold, packed dirt of the crawlspace, Seven listened intently, gauging the number and positions of the men and calculating the best angle of attack. She felt the rush of adrenaline, mixed with the tingling of Borg nanoprobes swirling like snowflakes in her bloodstream.

As if she could see Seven poised for action below, Zolaluz directed her voice downward. "Please, show restraint," she said. "There is no need for violence."

Realizing that Zolaluz was right, Seven reluctantly held herself back. She knew that she was in no shape to put up a fight against five armed soldiers.

If Seven died, Zolaluz would surely follow, and Captain Janeway's life would be forfeit. All because of one heroic gesture. All because of Seven's refusal to recognize her limitations.

Zolaluz knew about limitations. She knew all about life with one leg.

* * *

Seven of Nine kept a secret heart in a place no one could see.

On the surface, she seemed as cool as any Borg, as rigid and efficient and machinelike as the drone she had been for most of her life. Seemingly fazed by nothing, she radiated strength and poise and iron will.

But deep, deep inside, her secret heart beat softly. It was the one part of her that no one, not even the Borg, had been able to touch... and yet, in many ways, it was stranger to her than any Borg implant had ever been.

Even when she had been ripped from her parents' arms, it had not stopped beating. Even when she had been cut open and drilled into, her screams drowned out by the whirring of machinery and the voices in her head.

Even when she had stalked, expressionless, through bloody battlegrounds, cutting and drilling into shrieking victims of her own, some no older than she had been when first taken by the Collective. Even then, it had not stopped beating.

It beat with hope. It beat with tenderness.

It beat with regret. It beat with jealousy and self-pity and shame. With fear and despair.

It was no wonder she let no one see it, for she could barely stand to look at it herself. It gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

As small as it was, as deeply buried and tightly held, that secret heart was strong enough to overwhelm her. She knew it.

And knowing was itself enough to make it stronger.

* * *

The morning after the soldiers came, Seven sat at the single rickety table in the shack and chopped vegetables for the day's soup.

It was something she did well, though she could not remember ever having done it before in her life. Skillfully, she reduced each root and gourd to a pile of tiny, perfect cubes, all identical in size.

"I am sorry I did not bring you up from the cellar last night," said Zolaluz, out of breath as she hobbled in the front door with a kettle of water from the well. "I was afraid that more soldiers would come." Zolaluz was stooped and twisted between her makeshift crutches. Her golden, feline eyes were hidden behind thick glasses, and her skin was neon pink. Her short snout resembled that of an anteater- slender, tubular, and ending in a black button nose and down-curved lip.

Walking was a struggle for Zolaluz, so hauling the kettle required a titanic effort. Her left leg was gone from the knee down, replaced by a primitive wooden prosthetic, little more than a peg leg.

"Apologies are unnecessary," Seven said evenly, dicing an orange pod with the knife.

"They come every night and every day now," said Zolaluz. "They say that you are dangerous. Each militia thinks you are working for its enemy."

Seven nodded. No one but Zolaluz had seen her, but the militias had guessed correctly that someone from the crashed shuttle had escaped into the jungle.

"The rumor is," said Zolaluz, "what they really want is for you to show them how to use your sky-ship."

Seven had crash-landed her shuttle while pursuing the Hazari bounty hunters who had kidnapped Captain Janeway from a research station in a nearby system. Though Seven had brought down the Hazari ship before crashing, her shuttle had been badly damaged. "What little is left of my ship," said Seven, "is of no use to anyone anymore."

"They do not know that," said Zolaluz. "They will be back. I am afraid to bring you out of the

cellar for even a short time now."

"Do not be," said Seven. "I am recovering rapidly." Indeed, her broken leg would soon be repaired, thanks to the work of the busy nanoprobes that constituted her Borg heritage.

A day and a half, and she would be able to walk unaided again. Another day after that, and she would regain one hundred percent of the function in her leg.

Zolaluz, on the other hand, would never heal. At least, not with the level of medical care available on her technologically primitive world.

Afflicted in childhood by a ravaging illness, Zolaluz had been left permanently debilitated, her muscles withered and weakened. Not only had she lost her lower left leg, but the one that remained intact wasn't so good, either; she had to walk with the aid of crude crutches, and even that was accomplished only with great difficulty.

Most of the time, when she was moving, she seemed on the verge of collapse. Painstakingly, she inched the crutches forward, then dragged her body after them, step by unsteady step. Her progress was like that of an old woman, though she was actually younger than Seven.

And yet, in spite of her limitations, Zolaluz had pulled Seven from the flaming wreckage of her shuttle. She had helped Seven, with her broken leg, to struggle across miles of jungle in the middle of the night to the safety of the shack. Watching her now, Seven was still surprised that Zolaluz had accomplished all that.

Crossing the shack, Zolaluz hefted the kettle of water onto the table with a thud. Silvery sweat rolled down her face, shimmering against the neon pink skin that was another mark of her illness. Unafflicted Saladanans were covered in coats of light fur whose color varied between individuals... but Zolaluz's illness made the fur fall out and left the coppery flesh underneath scarred a deep pink.

Zolaluz grinned down at the perfect piles of diced vegetables. "Bite-sized," she said, nodding at the tiny cubes. "Perhaps I won't ask you to chop the firewood after all."

"I assure you, the firewood will be cut to appropriate specifications," Seven said briskly. "Perhaps, if you assigned more tasks to me, your housework would be accomplished with greater precision."

Zolaluz laughed her little snuffling laugh. "I think maybe you would turn my entire home into those little cubes."

Seven appreciated the joke but gave no indication. Instead, she asked the question that had been burning in her mind all morning, and every morning and every night since her arrival. "Is there news of Captain Janeway?"

Smiling from behind her thick eyeglasses, Zolaluz nodded. "Yes," she said, her smile widening. "I have found her."

Seven's head swung up. "Where?" she said simply, unblinking.

"A militia camp," said Zolaluz. "There were men in the sky-ship with her. They fought back, and the militiamen killed them. I heard mention that they believe her to be some kind of zola

because of her strange appearance."

Seven felt some relief that the Hazari bounty hunters who had kidnapped the captain were dead. "Describe her condition," she said tersely.

Zolaluz sighed; her smile melted away. "I believe she is alive, and they are questioning her. At least, that is what I overheard, and you know I cannot ask questions myself."

Seven nodded. The disease that had crippled Zolaluz in childhood was no longer contagious, but it had forever marked her as a zola, an outcast on her world. Her name labeled her: Zola, meaning outcast, forever preceded her birth name, Luz.

As a zola, she lived in isolation, away from any settlements. When she did venture near a village, she was shunned; she learned only what she could overhear from the conversations of others, from a distance... and then, only when they didn't whisper or move out of earshot.

Seven had been lucky that a zola had found and rescued her; Zolaluz's isolation improved Seven's chances of remaining undiscovered. It also helped that Seven's skin tone was a pale cousin of the neon pink skin of a zola. To explain her alien facial features, she could always claim that the disease had disfigured her. Seven had a better chance of blending in with a zola than among the fur-covered non-zolas of the general population.

Unfortunately, looking like a zola also drew the attention of undesirables. Soldiers of the militias embroiled in the local civil war were the only ones who would speak to Zolaluz... but that contact brought with it the likelihood of abuse.

"What is the location of the militia camp?" asked Seven, tightly gripping the handle of the vegetable knife.

"For me," said Zolaluz, "it is the journey of a day and a night."

"We will assemble supplies," said Seven, "and leave immediately thereafter."

Zolaluz shifted on her crutches and stared thoughtfully at Seven. "You have said that your leg is healing fast. Perhaps you should wait a little longer, and you will be better able to help your captain."

"No," said Seven. "My leg will heal en route." This was the third day since she had arrived on the surface of Saladana in pursuit of the Hazari and their captive. Until now, Seven had not even known if Captain Janeway had survived the crash of the kidnappers' ship, let alone the militia battle into which the ship and Seven's shuttle had been dropped.

It had taken nearly three days to get word that the captain was alive... and word traveled slowly through the jungles of a backward planet without advanced communications technology, without even simple radio or telegraph. Janeway could very well be dead already.

It was imperative that Seven move quickly. Given time, Voyager might finally render aid, but that aid could come too late. The last time that Seven had seen Voyager, the ship had been fighting for her life at the research station from which Janeway had been taken. Seven Hazari cruisers had been pounding the starship with a relentless barrage of weapons fire, leaving Seven's shuttle the only ship free to chase down the abductors' getaway craft. Seven did not think that the odds of a quick Voyager victory and race to the rescue were all that

good.

Seven knew that she had to assume that help was not coming. Waiting was not an option.

Placing her palms on the tabletop, Seven pushed herself up, taking care to keep her weight off the broken leg, which Zolaluz had bound in a splint. "I will assist you in gathering supplies," said Seven.

Zolaluz reached for a spare crutch that was leaning in a corner. "That will be easy," she said, handing the crutch to Seven, "for I have little in the way of supplies."

"I will bring the vegetables," Seven said with a perfectly deadpan expression. "Fortunately, they are, as you say, 'bite-sized,' and will not occupy much space in a pack."

Zolaluz laughed. Together, the two of them proceeded to limp around the shack, cobbling together supplies for the trip... crutches thumping and feet scuffing in matching rhythms on the floorboards.

* * *

Sometimes, Seven of Nine wished she could walk the corridors of a Borg vessel again rather than those of the Starship Voyager.

Usually, the aloof self-assurance she displayed to those around her was reflected by equal measures of confidence, control, and detachment within.

Sometimes, though, her secret heart would pound in the darkness and the inside and outside were no longer the same. Sometimes, there was no resemblance at all.

It might come when she was walking down a corridor, as Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres strolled past on their way to a date in a holodeck.

It might come in the mess hall, where friends shared stories and jokes while Seven sat alone, reviewing sensor logs. Or during a duty shift in astrometrics, when Naomi Wildman came to visit.

Or in the middle of the night, in her alcove, with no one else around.

Loneliness was irrelevant. So too was envy and resentment.

Happiness was irrelevant.

But to her secret heart, these were the only things that were relevant.

Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres were happy. They had love unmarred by memories of assimilation and brutality, memories of atrocities committed upon them by others and upon others with their own hands.

Shipmates in the mess hall were happy, enjoying friendly camaraderie. But then, they hadn't been conditioned to think about the best ways to assimilate each other, the best insertion points for implants, the optimal procedures for severing limbs.

Then there was Naomi Wildman, full of the happiness of childhood, of carefree play and

innocent exploration and imagination. Sometimes, Seven hated to see her coming, smiling and unscathed, a living reminder of what had been stolen from her.

And so, envy flourished in her secret heart, entwined with anger and self-pity and regret at the way her life had gone. And then shame for feeling the way she did about people who had taken her in and befriended her.

To look at her, defiant and self-possessed, you would never guess what was going on inside. That her secret heart was taking over.

Lately, its beat had grown stronger. Like a dormant implant programmed to awaken and systematically undermine its host, it expanded its influence in a steady, subtle pulse that the host wouldn't notice until it was too late.

Having spent most of her life as a drone with no conscious emotional life, Seven was less equipped to subdue a darkness rising from within than an army of fellow Borg attacking from without.

* * *

Seven and Zolaluz had hobbled barely a half-mile into the jungle when Seven noticed the smell of smoke. Leaning against a thick red tree trunk, she sniffed at the heavy tropical air.

As Zolaluz continued along the overgrown trail, Seven pulled back the hood of the ragged black cloak that concealed her Starfleet uniform. According to Zolaluz, all zolas wore identical black cloaks as a warning to the uninfected that the disease was present.

With the hood out of her way, Seven peered into the dense green canopy of treetops in the direction from which they had come. Her keen vision lighted on a gap in the overhead cover, and she glimpsed a dark gray plume curling upward.

She calculated that its source was a half-mile behind them.

"Zolaluz," she said, calling out to her traveling companion. "I believe there is a fire in the vicinity of your home."

"Yes, yes," said Zolaluz, pausing to hack with the foot of a crutch at a thorny yellow vine spanning the path at knee level. "My house is on fire. It is not the first time."

A frown creased Seven's brow as she pushed away from the tree trunk. "You knew?" she said. "I was not aware that your people possessed such a heightened sense of smell."

"They don't," said Zolaluz. "But I do. Thanks to the duluzola. My disease." Taking a last whack at the thorny vine, she resumed her halting progress along the trail. The bulky knapsack strapped across her shoulders weighed her down, complicating her struggle to haul herself forward.

Seven lingered behind her, turning for another glimpse of the smoke through the jungle canopy. "If we turn back, perhaps we can still salvage some of your possessions."

"That is what the soldiers want," said Zolaluz. "That is why my home happened to catch fire so soon after we left."

"You believe it is the soldiers' doing?"

"I know it," said Zolaluz. "I heard them coming when we were leaving."

Surprised, Seven moved to follow her, using her crutch to stagger along the rough path. "I heard nothing," she said evenly.

"But I heard everything," said Zolaluz. "Again, thanks to the duluzola." Puffing from her exertions, she paused to catch her breath. "This gift comes in handy," she said with a little laugh, "when I must eavesdrop on conversations from a distance because no one will speak to a zola like me."

As Zolaluz recovered and lumbered forward again, Seven stole a last look back. Soon, she guessed, the shack would be mostly smoke and cinders.

It made her uncomfortable to think that someone who had already lost so much should be called to make another sacrifice.

"Zolaluz," said Seven after a moment. "What did you mean when you said that this wasn't the first time your house was on fire?"

"It happens all the time," said Zolaluz, panting as she forced herself forward. "All my houses have been set on fire."

Seven frowned. "All your houses?" she said. "Why?"

Zolaluz stopped and turned to smile at Seven. "I am a zola. There is a war on. Sometimes, I think, for no reason at all." She shrugged. "But I'll tell you, I am such a poor housekeeper and each home was such a wreck that the fires only improved them." She laughed, sunlight glinting from the giant lenses of her eyeglasses.

"Now come on!" she shouted, resuming her course along the barely visible trail. "We shouldn't be waiting around for those soldiers to track us down! I don't think the two of us have much hope of outrunning them, do you?"

Seven followed on her crutch without reply.

Three days ago, Zolaluz had rescued her from the flaming wreckage of a shuttlecraft. She had steered Seven safely through a militia battle, then led her across miles of jungle through the night to shelter.

For days, she had fed and protected Seven and tended her broken leg. Now, she guided her through the jungle again, in search of Captain Janeway.

All this for someone who had drawn the soldiers who had burned down her home. Someone who had done nothing but take since her arrival.

Annoyed at her inability to balance the scales, Seven decided that a small gesture was better than none.

"Your pack," Seven said, a little further along the trail. "Give it to me."

Zolaluz argued, but her resistance was futile. Lifting it from her back, Seven tied the straps

at her own waist, adding the burden below the pack that she already shouldered.

Plenty of grumbling from Zolaluz ensued, punctuated with pleas to give the load back... but Seven noted with satisfaction that from that point on, her fellow traveler moved with greater ease.

Seven, paradoxically, felt lighter as well.

* * *

Little by little, darkness spread like ink from the secret heart of Seven of Nine. There came a day when its effects were no longer confined within her.

On that day, she remained in her alcove for four minutes and ten seconds after the completion of her regeneration cycle. The regeneration matrix deactivated and she just stood there with her eyes closed, awake but unmoving.

For reasons she could not explain, she was reluctant to face the day. There was no impending danger that she was aware of, no stressful duty scheduled... but a feeling of dread settled over her like a blanket.

After four minutes and ten seconds, she forced herself to emerge from the alcove... but the feeling of dread stayed with her for the rest of the day.

And the next day, too. And the one after that.

It persisted so long that she wondered if it might actually be a warning sign alerting her to a threat. She decided to probe further, and examine every component of the environment in and around Voyager.

Oddly, she never quite got around to it.

It was just as well, for she would have found no hostile influence or immediate danger... though the feeling of dread was indeed an indicator of trouble to come.

One day, for instance, she stayed at her post for only twenty-two minutes after the conclusion of her duty shift... an unprecedented reduction in her daily overtime.

Similarly, she completed a report only three days before it was required... and found this dramatic tardiness to be acceptable.

On another occasion, she realized that she had been staring at the same sensor log for fifteen minutes and twelve seconds without actually reading it.

Then there was the day when she made Naomi Wildman cry.

While it was not unusual for Seven to avoid a social event, her absence from Naomi's birthday party was beyond unexpected. Even more surprising was her reaction when the little girl left the party and came to find her, worried that something was wrong.

"Birthdays are irrelevant," Seven said coldly from her alcove. "Parties are irrelevant."

Naomi stood there and scowled, her lower lip quivering. Watching her, Seven briefly

experienced an unfamiliar feeling... a twinge of petty satisfaction at having hurt someone who cared about her.

Then Naomi broke into tears and ran away, and Seven immediately regretted what she had done.

But it wasn't enough to bring her to her senses. Unfortunately, regret was one of the fuels that best powered her secret heart.

And her secret heart told her that she deserved to be miserable, which was exactly how she felt when Naomi stopped coming around after that.

* * *

Well after nightfall, after many hours of torturous travel along the jungle trail, Zolaluz stopped and turned to Seven.

"We're near a safe place," said Zolaluz. "We can rest there awhile, if you like."

Seven's first instinct was to announce that she needed no rest and would prefer to reach Captain Janeway without delay... but she caught herself before she could say it. "A period of rest is acceptable," she said instead, noting the visible weariness on Zolaluz's face.

"The place we are going is safer than any other," said Zolaluz. "Even a soldier will not go there. But I must tell you the reason for this. There is a risk if you go there."

When Zolaluz explained, Seven told her that she was willing to take the risk.

As they continued onward, the sound of voices rose from the jungle's nighttime tumult of animal cries and insect chirps. A dim radiance filtered through the trees, increasing in concert with the voices.

When they emerged from the tree cover into an open space, Zolaluz smiled back at Seven. "We are safe now," she said in a half-whisper. "Welcome to Bahuzola."

Through a gap between ramshackle huts, Seven glimpsed faces around a fire. Figures drifted in the flickering light, large and small, young and old, male and female.

Each and every one of them had neon pink skin and was damaged in some way, scarred or deformed or missing a limb. Not one of them moved without a limp or a hunch or a stagger.

In Bahuzola- "zola town"- everyone was a zola. Only those infected with the duluzola would dare enter this place of exile... though Seven expected that her Borg nanoprobes would protect her own system from the contagion.

As she and Zolaluz started forward, a man shambled over to meet them, slumping between crutches. "Luz!" he cried out, pure joy flashing from his toothy grin and one good eye. "To what do we owe the honor? Did they burn your house again?"

Zolaluz laughed. "Perhaps I will build the next one underwater. It would not be so easy to set fire to, and I would no longer have to carry cooking water from the well."

"It appears you've brought us another zola," said the man, staring at the Borg implant above

Seven's left eye, "though I've never seen a growth like that before."

"She has not contracted the duluzola," said Zolaluz.

The man pushed his snout toward Seven and inhaled deeply. "You are right," he said. "She does not smell of the duluzola."

"And that is not a growth," said Zolaluz, pointing at Seven's implant.

"It is meant to be decorative," said Seven. "My name is Seven of Nine."

The man nodded. "I'm Zolacroy," he said warily. "I hope you realize, coming here, you might not remain free of the duluzola for long."

"I am aware of the risk," said Seven.

"Then you are welcome. All zolas are welcome here." Zolacroy grinned at Seven, then Zolaluz. "Even the World Traveler, the only zola to leave Bahuzola, who comes back only when her house is burned down."

"But since my house burns down so often," laughed Zolaluz, "I am practically a full-time resident."

"Let's sit by the fire. You'll feel right at home there," said Zolacroy, and then he led them to the center of the village, where they were met with enthusiastic greetings by the zolas gathered there.

* * *

Before long, it seemed that the entire population of Bahuzola had joined Seven and Zolaluz by the fire. As they dined on bowls of sweet stew, the travelers were bombarded with questions, laughter, flattery, stories... and the touch of dozens of hands, sometimes all at once.

Each time someone new joined the group, they went straight to Seven and sniffed for whatever scent the duluzola emitted. Apparently, the scent was detectable only by the enhanced senses of victims of the disease, for Seven could not catch a trace of it from any of the zolas who surrounded her.

Later, when the excitement had faded and only a few people remained around the fire, Zolaluz asked for volunteers.

"I have a plan," she said, "to rescue the friend of my friend."

"I was not aware of a plan," Seven said sharply.

Zolaluz did not acknowledge Seven's comment. "Like Seven, she rode a sky-ship that fell in the jungle. Unfortunately, she was taken prisoner."

"I had heard that there were two sky-ships," said Zolacroy. "Who has her?"

"She is being held by the Riga Militia," continued Zolaluz, "at Ramana."

Grim looks were exchanged around the fire. "Oh, Luz," said Zolasova, a middle-aged woman whose arms were both paralyzed. "Of all places."

Zolaluz shrugged. "If only it could be Eshy or Vod Scola or some other camp where there are ten times as many soldiers."

"You say it as a joke," Zolasova said sympathetically, "but for your sake, I know we all wish it were any place other than Ramana."

"What does it matter how many soldiers there are?" said Zolacroy, wrinkling his snout in disapproval. "What can we zolas do against even one soldier with two legs, two arms, two eyes, and a gun?"

"I call for an oshozola," said Zolaluz. "I call for an oshozola at Ramana tomorrow."

Around the fire, everyone nodded and murmured approval... except Seven. "Explain," she demanded.

"Oshozola is the only time the unclean are welcome among the unspoiled," said Zolacroy. "When it is time to go and get a new zola and bring them to their new home in Bahuzola."

"Oshozola terrifies the unspoiled," Zolasova said with relish. "Especially if they do not know who among them is marked for exile."

"Who will join me in the oshozola to Ramana?" Zolaluz looked around the fire, meeting each zola's gaze in turn.

"That's my cue to call it a night," said Zolacroy with a smirk, getting up and stumbling toward one of the huts.

"You must be crazy, Luz," said Zolasova, struggling to her feet. "What a plan!"

Zolaloris, a young woman with one hand and uncontrollable tremors, also got up to leave. "Don't look at me," she said with a shaky smile.

One by one, the zolas limped away into the night. "None of them will assist us?" said Seven, consternation in her voice.

Zolaluz rocked her head back and laughed. "All of them will!" she said, nudging Seven's arm with her elbow.

Seven frowned. "I do not understand."

"To be a zola," said Zolaluz, "you must develop a sense of humor. A big one."

Seven thought about it, then decided that another matter was more troubling. "Explain the significance of Ramana," she said. "Why would they wish you did not have to go there?"

Zolaluz's smile turned sad. She gazed into the fire for a long moment... then reached up to draw a black pendant from under the neckline of her cloak.

"My mother gave me this," she said quietly, raising the pendant for Seven to see. "It is ironic that I have always kept it with me, because she tried to get rid of me all my life."

With a sigh, she let the pendant fall at her breast. "When I came down with the duluzola as a little girl, she and my father arranged for me to be brought here... but I would not stay. Young as I was, I found my way home through the jungle.

"When I was brought back here for the third time, they moved away." Zolaluz shook her head and laughed her snuffling laugh. "You should have seen the looks on their faces when I turned up at the front door of their new home, one-legged, on crutches and all!"

Removing her glasses, Zolaluz rubbed her eyes. In the dying firelight, her bright pink skin took on a reddish glow. "They moved many times after that, but I found them wherever they went. They left me because of the duluzola... and the duluzola left me with strong hearing and smell and touch and taste that allowed me to track them down.

"They wanted nothing to do with me. I was never permitted to come indoors, and I was always sent back to Bahuzola. Still, I could not stay away from my flesh and blood."

"They made it clear that your presence was not desired," said Seven. "They told you to remain here. Why did you refuse to comply?"

"Love," said Zolaluz. "On my part, anyway. And I did not like it here.

"I was first in my village to have the disease. There are those in Bahuzola who lived in my village and fell ill after I did. I gave them the duluzola.

"How would you like living among people who had received a terrible sickness from you? Whose lives had been ruined by you?"

Seven stared into the night. "I would not like it," she said simply.

Zolaluz nodded. "There came a day when I wished I had stayed, though," she said. "When I wished I had not gone after my parents."

Zolaluz reached for the onyx pendant and thoughtfully rubbed it with her thumb and forefinger. "I could not see them, but I could hear every cry as they were tortured to death.

"Every breath and heartbeat, right to the last, was like thunder to me. I could smell the blood as if I were drowning in it.

"All thanks to the duluzola," she said distantly, watching the fire. "The soldiers kept me away... but the duluzola let me hear everything. Smell everything."

Zolaluz closed her fist around the pendant. "That is what happened at Ramana," she said quietly.

Seven sat silently, remembering the screams of her own parents as they were assimilated by the Borg. "You are not required to go to Ramana," she said finally.

"But I am your secret weapon," said Zolaluz. "I know the place by heart."

"I no longer require your assistance," said Seven.

Zolaluz smiled and put on her glasses. "Do I seem like the kind of person who can be left

behind?" she said wryly.

Seven frowned. "Stubbornness is irrelevant."

"Then I am irrelevant," said Zolaluz as she struggled off to bed.

* * *

When the barrel of a Hazari blaster swung up to greet them, Seven knew that they had come to the right place. If soldiers at Ramana were holding Hazari weapons from the crash site, they were likely holding Captain Janeway as well.

Zolacroy, at the head of the group, aimed a devilish one-eyed look at the young, gold-furred soldier pointing the blaster at his chest. "Why are you afraid, my child?" he said slowly. "Is it possible the oshozola has come for you?"

"Never!" snapped the soldier. His brows, which were a lighter gold than the rest of his fur, were knit together in an angry glare. "The closest I ever come to you diseased vermin is when I shoot you in the jungle for target practice!"

"You do realize why we're here, don't you?" Zolacroy said with a chuckle. "Someone here at Ramana carries the duluzola. We could smell it all the way from Bahuzola."

The blaster barrel twitched. "Maybe we should leave without taking the zola with us," said Zolacroy. "Do you know, there are no visible signs of the duluzola in the disease's early stages, yet it is highly contagious?"

The soldier hesitated only a moment more before stepping aside, though he never lowered the blaster. Zolacroy paused and sniffed in the soldier's direction on his way past... then smiled ominously. "See you later," he said to the soldier as he started forward again.

As the group hobbled into the militia camp, Seven lowered her head and pulled the hood of her cloak further forward, hoping to hide her Borg implants. To complete her disguise as a zola, she leaned heavily on her crutch and exaggerated her stagger, which had been lessening as her broken leg healed.

Stumbling along beside her, Zolaluz also wore a hooded black cloak, as did the others. Stitched on front and back with the red "X" symbol of the oshozola, the cloaks eased passage through the camp, which came as a relief after the laborious trek through the jungle to get there. Seeing the ominous cloaked figures approach, worried soldiers were eager to get out of their way.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Zolasova. "They're scared of us. We have the run of the place!"

"Take care!" hissed Zolaluz. "Every one of them would rather kill us than be taken to Bahuzola."

As the six of them shuffled forward, all on crutches but Zolasova, soldiers stopped what they were doing and watched silently. If they weren't armed already, they laid hands on rifles and drew pistols from holsters without taking their eyes off the unwelcome visitors. When Zolacroy, to heighten the suspense, led the procession closer to one man or another, every soldier held his breath and tightened his grip on his weapon.

Some of the soldiers along the way held out stubby candles that sent up acrid, black smoke. When Seven asked about the candles, Zolacroy explained. "The men hope that the smoke will mask the scent of the duluzola, if any is present. They should know by now that nothing will keep us from sniffing out a fellow zola."

When they had gone a little farther, Zolaluz touched Seven's arm. "Your captain is alive," she said softly. "I can tell."

A wave of relief washed through Seven, but she gave no hint of it. "What else?" she said.

"They are torturing her," said Zolaluz, and then she reached for Seven's hand and squeezed it. "But I know just where she is."

Shambling between rows of tents and soldiers, the band of zolas began a low chant... and the militiamen along the way became visibly more uneasy.

Some soldiers actually fled as the chant grew steadily louder. Those who remained raised their weapons and trained them on the zolas as they passed.

The five voices continued to climb... and then, all at once, they stopped, as did the procession.

Zolacroy raised a finger to point at a black-furred man whose red uniform was heavy with medals and badges. The man in red looked around at his entourage of officers and bodyguards, trying to figure out which one the zola had chosen.

He was in for a surprise.

"General Krozar," Zolacroy said solemnly. "The oshozola has come for you."

The man in red looked stunned. "Excuse me?" he said.

Zolacroy stepped toward Krozar, raised his snout, and drew a deep breath. "Yes, the duluzola is within you," Zolacroy said, nodding. "You will be taken to Bahuzola, where you will live for the rest of your life."

Krozar glared indignantly. "You are very mistaken," he said... but his entourage didn't look convinced. His officers and bodyguards were casting nervous glances in his direction.

"You are zola now," said Zolacroy, spreading his arms wide. "We were alerted that you were in need of deliverance."

"Alerted?" Krozar said suspiciously. "By whom?"

At that, Zolaluz tugged on the sleeve of Seven's cloak. "That's our cue," she whispered. "Come with me."

As they separated from the others, Seven saw that a crowd was gathering. With so many bodies around and every eye focused on Krozar, it was easy to slip away unnoticed.

As she and Zolaluz hobbled off on their crutches, Seven heard Krozar shouting behind them. "I'll ask again, zola! Perhaps this gun at your head will loosen your tongue! Who alerted

you?"

"Colonel Ulo," said Zolacroy, and a murmur rushed through the crowd.

"There ought to be some fireworks now," said Zolaluz. "Colonel Ulo is his second in command."

She was right. By the time the two of them reached their destination, gunfire had erupted... not the systematic shots that might signal the execution of the four zolas whom they had left behind, but the chaotic exchanges of a militia at war with itself.

The distraction had its desired effect. As Seven and Zolaluz approached a windowless building, both soldiers who were posted at the entrance bolted off in the direction of the shooting.

At the doorway, Zolaluz hesitated, listening. "There are three men with your captain," she said. "They are in the back room."

So close to her goal after days of waiting, Seven ached to press forward... but Zolaluz continued to linger at the threshold. Seven frowned, wondering if she had detected some fresh danger that would complicate the rescue.

Then, she noticed that Zolaluz was holding onto the onyx pendant, and she thought that she understood.

"Your parents were here," said Seven. Swinging her crutch over the threshold, she began to move past Zolaluz. "You are not required to go inside."

Silently, Zolaluz pushed past her.

Inside, the walls were hung with implements of torture... and the dirt floor was strewn with Hazari technology salvaged from the crash site. Spotting Janeway's combadge on a worktable, Seven snatched it up; someone had cracked open the outer shell of the device, which was why the calls from Seven's own combadge had gone unanswered.

Light shone from beneath a closed door, and Zolaluz approached it. "Oshozola," she shouted. "The oshozola has come for one among you!"

There was movement behind the door, and then it swung open to reveal two soldiers with rifles raised.

Zolaluz leaned toward the men and inhaled deeply, snout twitching. "One among you is unclean," she said solemnly.

"Go away, zola filth," snarled one of the men.

"We have come for Lieutenant Aglar," said Zolaluz. "We have been summoned to accompany him to Bahuzola."

Surprised to hear Aglar singled out by name, the men looked at each other.

Zolaluz seized the moment. "Aglar!" she howled, staggering toward them. "Do not resist the oshozola!"

Throwing herself forward, she tumbled against them, pushing them back through the doorway. Well enough to do without the crutch, Seven tossed it aside and rushed after them.

As she charged forward, Seven caught a glimpse of Janeway, shackled to a chair, head slumped forward... and Aglar, standing over her with some kind of instrument in his hand.

Zolaluz kept one soldier occupied on the dirt floor, wrestling for his gun... but the other man had stayed on his feet and was swinging his rifle toward Seven. With cold efficiency, she grabbed the barrel and wrenched the weapon from his grip, then plowed the butt of the rifle into the side of his head.

As he dropped, the other man untangled himself from Zolaluz and leaped up, firing in Seven's direction. The shot missed and she dove at him, slamming her shoulder into his chest and driving him back into a wall.

It took only an instant for her to render him unconscious... but it was time enough for tragedy to occur.

Alerted by quick footsteps from behind, Seven spun to see a machete flashing toward her, wielded by red-furred Lieutenant Aglar. Even as she saw it, she realized that it was coming too fast for her to get out of the way.

It was in that space of time that Zolaluz toppled into the path of the blade.

Pitching herself in front of Aglar, she caught the full force of the blow intended for Seven. The machete plunged through the sleeve of her cloak and deep into her upper right arm.

"No!" Seven howled, lashing out, striking Aglar with enough force to hurl him across the room.

As a Borg drone, Seven had witnessed countless atrocities. Still, the sight of Zolaluz lying there with her arm nearly severed shook her to the core.

"Your captain," gasped Zolaluz. "Her breathing is weak but steady."

Seven dropped to her knees. "You should not have done this," she said harshly, tearing a strip from her cloak to use as a tourniquet. "I would not have asked this of you."

Zolaluz grinned. "What makes you think I did it for you?" she said, clutching the onyx pendant at her throat.

* * *

With the help of Zolasova and the other zolas, Seven managed to stanch Zolaluz's bleeding and revive Janeway. Under cover of the battle that Zolacroy had started between factions of the militia, Seven, Janeway, and the zolas escaped from the camp and made it back to Bahuzola.

A day later, Voyager arrived, on the trail of the energy signature of the downed Hazari ship. At last, the crew had managed to outfight and evade the Hazari fleet that had hounded them since Captain Janeway's abduction.

Homing in on the signal from Seven's combadge, Commander Chakotay led an away team to Bahuzola. The rescue did not go exactly as Seven had hoped, however. Despite Seven's protests, only she and the captain were beamed aboard Voyager.

Though she argued forcefully that Zolaluz should be treated in sickbay, where it might be possible to replace her limbs and undo the damage wrought by the dyluzola, the idea was overruled by Janeway as a violation of the Prime Directive.

The cultural damage done by the appearance of spacecraft, alien beings, and high-tech weapons among the Saladana had been confined to a small, war-torn region. Explanatory cover stories could be planted, and all technological artifacts left on the planet's surface could be recovered or destroyed by Voyager away teams. In Janeway's opinion, however, leaving behind living, breathing evidence of miraculous medical technology could dramatically alter the development of Saladana.

To counter this opinion, Seven reminded Captain Janeway that without Zolaluz, they both would be dead. Seven pointed out that Zolaluz had given a limb and would have given much more, would have given her life, to save Janeway, someone whom she had only just met in the line of fire.

But in the end, Seven and Janeway had left Zolaluz in Bahuzola, waving goodbye with her one remaining arm as they walked off toward the beam-up site. More experienced at removing limbs than reattaching them, Seven had been unable to save Zolaluz's other arm... to do even that one thing for her.

Not that it seemed to matter to Zolaluz. Her smile as she waved to them was as bright as ever.

Once aboard Voyager, Seven again spoke to Janeway on behalf of Zolaluz. An appeal to Chakotay bore the same fruit.

With next to nothing to call her own, Zolaluz had done everything for Seven. With all the resources of a starship at her disposal, Seven could do nothing at all for Zolaluz.

Days later and light-years away, as if she had not done enough, Zolaluz managed to give her one more gift.

* * *

Before Zolaluz, the secret heart of Seven of Nine had not been much of a secret.

Fueled by regret, self-pity, resentment, and despair, it had gone from deeply to barely hidden, from dormant to dominant. It had begun to color her every perception, erode her concentration, persuade her to withdraw.

Darkness had filled her and begun to spill over. Her shipmates had helped it along by avoiding her.

For the second time in her life, she was being assimilated.

That changed after Zolaluz.

At first, after leaving Bahuzola, Seven felt worse. Her secret heart thrived on the guilt that she

felt for not helping Zolaluz after all that she had done for her.

Then, one day, she found something in the bottom of a pack of rations that Zolaluz had insisted she take with her.

Now, when she had a bad day, she took it out and looked at it and thought of Zolaluz.

Who could live such a hard life without harboring regrets or self-pity? Who could be so scarred and not resent those who were free of damage?

Who could forgive herself for being the cause of suffering that would last a lifetime? Who could witness unspeakable acts and still have a sense of humor?

Who could lose everything and everyone they'd ever loved and somehow still find more to give?

If Zolaluz could do it, then so could Seven.

When she gazed at the onyx pendant that Zolaluz had sneaked into her pack, Seven's secret heart was filled with light.

* * *

Zolaluz kept a secret heart in a place no one could see.

On the surface, she seemed upbeat and resilient, optimistic and unflappable. Whatever life threw at her, she seemed to accept it without remorse or complaint.

But all the while, deep inside, her secret heart kept beating. It was the one thing that had never been taken from her... though it had become as painful and deformed as any part of her body that had been attacked by the duluzola.

Its beat had grown stronger when her parents had sent her away... and when they had been tortured to death while she heard and smelled and felt every moment, unable to save them.

The beat had grown stronger when her leg had been sawed off and her houses burned down. When villagers had refused to speak a word to her or even acknowledge that she was alive.

It beat with sorrow. It beat with pain.

It beat with anger and fear and self-pity. It beat with loneliness.

As small as it was, as deeply buried and tightly held, that secret heart had begun to overwhelm her. It had pulsed out darkness, like waves of deadly duluzola, transforming her a little at a time.

One day, finally, fueled by a lifetime of horror and loss, her secret heart had become the strongest part of her. On that day, she had put on her onyx pendant and gone into the jungle to end her life.

Instead, she had found Seven of Nine.

It was Seven, hurt and hunted and needing her help, who had given her a reason to live a little longer. It was Seven whose kindness and friendship for a lowly zola had made her feel like someone worthwhile.

It was Seven whose strength and poise and determination in the face of struggle had inspired her anew to strive to embody the same virtues.

And it was Seven who had given her the chance, on a rescue mission to Ramana, to make up for failing to save her parents so many years ago.

An arm was a small price to pay for all that. She thought it wasn't nearly enough.

Neither was the last gift she gave Seven, the pendant from her mother... though its significance, and that of giving it away, were enormous to Zolaluz.

Her mother had given it to her when she was very young, just before she was first taken to Bahuzola. Every day since, Zolaluz had worn it like a millstone around her neck.

Not a day of her life had gone by when Zolaluz had not considered putting the pendant to its intended use.

Before she sneaked it into Seven's pack, she popped the hidden catch behind the onyx stone and dumped out the poison pill, grinding it into the dirt beneath her heel.

Isabo's Shirt

Kirsten Beyer

This tale is set a few weeks after the fifth-season episode "Bliss."

Kirsten Beyer

In addition to contributing "Isabo's Shirt" to this collection, Kirsten Beyer wrote Fusion, the second installment of the Star Trek: Voyager tenth-anniversary trilogy entitled String Theory. Kirsten is currently hard at work on several other projects, including her first Alias: APO novel, Once Lost.

Kirsten lives in Los Angeles with her husband, David, and their very fat cat, Owen.

Hope... which whispered from Pandora's box only after all the other plagues and sorrows had escaped, is the best and last of all things. Without it, there is only time.

- The Rule of Four

It was definitely one of Neelix's more successful parties. There was plenty to eat and drink, though afterward Chakotay couldn't remember the name or taste of even one of the dozens of fragrant and inviting dishes that were placed before him throughout the course of the evening.

Three hours earlier, he'd been wearing a hole in the floor of his cabin waiting for Neelix's emergency call to reverberate through the comm system, asking him to hurry to the mess hall. He already knew the "emergency" was a ruse. For the first time in five years, Voyager's crew was throwing a surprise, no-holds-barred bash to celebrate their first officer's birthday.

He should have been looking forward to it.

He wasn't.

But life had a way of flipping expectations on their head in the space of a heartbeat. Five years ago he'd been staring down the business end of a Cardassian torpedo tube one minute, and the next, found himself staring in disbelief at a sensor scan indicating that his ship had traveled seventy thousand light-years from its previous position. Three hours ago he had been filled with anxiety as he pondered the passage of time, only to feel that anxiety released in a breathless moment when he had unwrapped her birthday present.

Though the shock of the moment he had first laid eyes on the gift had begun to fade, what came next was not the calm, steady flow of thought that Chakotay usually associated with his brain function. His mind danced erratically about from one barely coherent fragment to the next until he caught her eye, or heard her voice rising above the din, and it would hit him again like a sharp blow to the gut.

She loves me.

Not that this was a bad thing.

He was actually enjoying the sensation, perhaps because he couldn't remember the last time a feeling of such intensity had knocked him so far off his pins.

The evening's entertainment had been planned by Tom Paris and Harry Kim, an old Earth tradition called a "roast" wherein several of his fellow officers and crewmates would publicly relate the most embarrassing and painful moments of his past for everyone's amusement.

Chakotay said a silent prayer of thanks when he discovered that Tuvok had been selected as master of ceremonies for the event, knowing full well that whatever his personal, albeit suppressed, feelings about Chakotay, the Vulcan would keep a tight rein on the proceedings. But even when Tom was recounting the infamous, oft-repeated, and mostly apocryphal story of the transporter malfunction that had left Chakotay facing Admiral Nimembeh wearing nothing but his combadge, which definitely got the biggest laugh of the night, Chakotay could barely force his mind to stay focused on the present moment.

He wanted to take her hand and lead her back to his cabin. He wanted to hear her relate every thought that had entered her head from the moment she had realized that she wanted to take this step until the moment she had given him her gift. He wanted to apologize for not taking her in his arms then and there and showing her exactly how much he appreciated the courage of her gesture. He wanted to see and know and cherish every part of her that she so carefully guarded from others, and assure her with words and gentle caresses that she had chosen well. He was a man, standing at the gates of a fiery paradise, anxious to be consumed.

Standing completely unengaged in conversation with the Doctor, he watched, fascinated, as across the room, she took her first bite of the Jibelian fudge cake that Neelix had prepared as the culmination of the evening's feast. When she licked her lips appreciatively he couldn't stop himself from imagining equally delicious and far more tantalizing places her tongue might soon be exploring....

"Commander Chakotay, are you unwell?" the Doctor's voice knifed into his head, scattering

the image and demanding his attention.

"I beg your pardon," he heard himself say. "I'm fine. Just a little distracted."

"Your pupils are dilated by nearly a millimeter, and blood flow has increased to your facial capillaries," the Doctor continued.

"I think I've had a little too much Anterian cider this evening," he replied.

"I would recommend several glasses of water before you retire this evening, Commander, and perhaps a light analgesic," the Doctor offered conspiratorially, simultaneously creating a short subroutine that would add Public Intoxication, Dos and Don'ts to his list of Seven of Nine's social lessons.

"Thank you, Doctor," Chakotay replied, his eyes wandering again about the room, finding her now in conversation with Ensign Kim. "I think I'll take that suggestion right now, if you'll excuse me."

But Chakotay never made it across the room. As he was looking for an opening to the right of Tuvok, who was headed straight for him, to add his stiff congratulations to the chorus of those he had already endured, Neelix flanked him at port, offering him a slice of birthday cake. A small contingent of his Maquis crewmates, countered to starboard, obviously hoping he had taken their account of his first attempt to escape a Cardassian scouting party that left him covered in refuse and face to face with a Peroghian pig-lizard in the friendly spirit that it was meant. By the time he had assured them that there were absolutely no hard feelings, Kathryn was tugging gently on his right arm.

"I must say, Commander," she began, "I've had my share of awkward conversations with Admiral Nimembah, but nothing that compares to yours."

He turned, smiling. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

Her gleeful smile was all the answer he needed.

"I'm glad to see it. I'll make sure we add a roast to the agenda for your next birthday."

Her eyes narrowed playfully. "Really, Chakotay, if you're bucking to be stranded in the Delta Quadrant, there are easier ways to go about it."

They shared a laugh as Seven of Nine caught his eye, raising her glass to him from across the room. As he acknowledged her in kind, Janeway continued.

"Is it true that Seven is the one who ruined the 'surprise' part of this party for you?"

"It is," he replied.

"I think I'm a pretty tolerant person," she went on, "especially where Seven is concerned, but I might just have to throw her in the brig for this."

"Stand down red alert," he said. "She honestly didn't mean to. She was preparing her weekly efficiency report..."

"Always one of my personal favorites," the captain interjected without missing a beat.

"... and felt it was necessary to highlight the fact that Neelix had gone over his replicator rations by almost 69% in the last three days," he continued.

"And because she's Borg, she simply couldn't regenerate until she got to the bottom of it?" Janeway asked.

"I think she felt awful about it, in her own way," Chakotay offered. "You should have seen Neelix trying to convince her to drop the subject when she confronted him in my presence. I put two and two together and managed to get us both out of the mess hall before Neelix resorted to whacking her over the head with a frying pan. I had to explain to her what a surprise party is, which led to a fairly lengthy conversation about human celebration rituals."

"A model of inefficiency?" Janeway supposed.

"I think her exact words were 'The date of one's birth is irrelevant.' "

"Are you sure it wasn't 'Birthday parties are futile'?" she asked.

"You might be right," he smiled in reply.

Across the room, the faint tinkling of a spoon tapping gently against a glass ended further discussion. Turning toward the sound, they joined the others in giving their full attention to Neelix.

"My friends, I would like to propose a toast," he began as the group dutifully began to raise their glasses in preparation. "We've all enjoyed a lot of laughter over the past few hours at our guest of honor's expense. But I think I'd be remiss if I didn't also point out how important he is to all of us. I owe him my life..."

"So do I," Tom called out, trying to keep the moment light. Most of the crew chuckled appropriately. It was fairly common knowledge that Chakotay had taken Tom under his personal "protection" at the start of their journey, when several of the Maquis still begrudged Tom's presence on board. Tom had briefly been a member of Chakotay's Maquis cell, which had landed him in prison. Helping Captain Janeway track them down as part of his "rehabilitation" was a betrayal that some had not been quick to forget.

When the laughter died down, Neelix continued forcefully, "As do many of us. I ask you now to raise your glasses in celebration of the fact that many... many, years ago..."

Chakotay rolled his eyes, but couldn't help smiling a little.

"Careful how many 'many's you include in that thought," the captain chided playfully.

"... the man we all think of as more than our first officer, but also as a wise and compassionate friend, was... born!" Neelix finished with a flourish.

After a brief pause to insure that Neelix was actually done, glasses were raised amid cheers of "Hear, hear," and Chakotay felt a slight blush rising involuntarily to his cheeks.

As he turned back to the captain, he was surprised to find himself face to face with Crewman Chell. Chakotay allowed his mind to wander to more pleasant themes as the portly Bolian began his diatribe extolling Chakotay's many virtues.

The moment he disconnected most of his consciousness from Chell's running discourse, the question that surfaced abruptly was "Why now?" It's a good thing Bolians rarely have to pause for breath, he thought with an inward smile.

Though she was technically free to pursue a romantic relationship, he'd always believed that it was doubtful she would ever do so. Her choices were limited at best and it would be somewhat awkward for her to attach herself to any member of Voyager's crew. Back home, this wouldn't have been such a hurdle. Husbands, wives, and lovers regularly found ways to separate their personal and professional lives while serving aboard the same vessel. But Voyager's circumstances were unique. It was too small a ship for any two people to avoid one another for long should a relationship turn sour.

Chakotay had ultimately accepted the fact that until they were home, there was very little chance that anyone would breach the walls she seemed to have constructed around her heart. Though he had promised himself that the minute they reached the Alpha Quadrant, he was going to be the first in line to find a way over those walls come what may.

But something had obviously changed her mind. She had been thinking about it for weeks. He thought back over that time, but try as he might, he couldn't pinpoint even one moment where she had seemed in any way out of the ordinary. Though, maybe, that's to be expected, he reasoned. Once she had made her choice, she would have guarded carefully against exposing herself to the crew in any way.

It was a gamble she was taking. But it was not at all out of character. The woman had the highest tolerance for risk of anyone he had ever met.

Impossible to believe, but Chell was still bending his ear; something about a chocolate-like substance that would have made the cake that was still untouched in his hand both richer and lighter. Chakotay found himself encouraging Chell to pursue this passion to bake the perfect chocolate cake as he scanned the room and found that the party had all but ended. B'Elanna was guiding a very willing Tom Paris out the nearest door. Neelix could be heard singing softly to himself amidst the unmistakable clang of pot washing. Two other crewmen had found a dark corner where they "conversed," oblivious of their surroundings. And she was nowhere to be seen.

He briefly allowed himself to imagine how wonderful it would be to return to his quarters to find her waiting for him there.

A brisk good-night to Chell and a genuine hug of appreciation for Neelix later, Chakotay walked as quickly as he could back to his cabin. But when the door opened, he found himself very much alone. He toyed with the idea of calling her over the com system, or at the very least asking the computer to locate her, but they were due to start their next duty shift in less than four hours. We have plenty of time, he decided. There's no reason to push it tonight.

Instead he allowed his mind to linger drowsily over every moment of the conversation they had shared just a few hours earlier.

* * *

Two full hours of velocity on the holodeck at the end of his shift had exhausted his body, but not his mind. On any other night, he would have grabbed a quick snack from Neelix's

makeshift kitchen and settled in for a long night of reading. He even had the perfect material ready and waiting, an old Terran novel, *Moby Dick*.

A few weeks earlier, while fighting to free themselves from the clutches of a strange space-dwelling creature that had swallowed the ship whole, Voyager's crew had met an alien called Qatai. Even after Qatai's small vessel had escaped along with Voyager, he had intentionally reentered the belly of the beast. Chakotay had found Seven of Nine's incident report strangely troubling when he learned of the alien's choice. It was one thing to fight a battle in self-defense, but to go looking for such a fight? Chakotay was seeking insight into this particular brand of lunacy, and Tom Paris, their resident expert on all things relating to Earth's pre-Federation civilization, had suggested he might find it in the writings of Melville. Unfortunately, thus far, he hadn't met with much success. It would help if he could manage to stay awake for more than three or four pages of the novel at a time.

But he wouldn't be making another attempt tonight. Neelix was going to call for him any minute now, and he was trying to summon a shred of enthusiasm for the night of celebration that lay ahead of him.

Lately, he was more acutely aware than ever of the passage of time. He didn't mind growing older. He certainly couldn't complain about the life he had fallen into aboard Voyager. But there were a lot of things he wanted out of life that he wasn't going to find in the bridge's second seat. His birthday had become a difficult reminder that a journey, however exciting, was less than fulfilling, if you weren't actively engaged in building a life for yourself along the way. Somewhere along the course that Voyager was traveling from the Delta Quadrant to the Alpha Quadrant, he had lost sight of priorities that had been near the top of his to-do list five years earlier. Reflecting on the passage of another year, they had begun to resurface, like a child you've ignored too long who finally makes his point by drawing in globs of bright finger-paint all over your walls.

Early on, Voyager's crew had been divided squarely into two camps; those who still held out hope that the life they had left in the Alpha Quadrant would be waiting for them when they returned, and those who didn't care if Voyager ever got home. Many of those in the second group were his Maquis crewmates. Upon their return, they expected to be tried and probably imprisoned by Starfleet for their participation in the resistance. In the meantime, they were learning new skills, finding friends and lovers, and committing themselves to making the most of each day that passed, knowing full well that it might be all they had.

Though Chakotay hadn't shared his colleagues' initial pessimism... there hadn't really been time for that... he had found himself falling squarely into their philosophical camp. He certainly hoped they would see their homes again in their lifetimes, but in the meantime, he planned to live as fully as he could in the moment.

He couldn't pinpoint the moment that marked his subtle transition from the "Alpha Quadrant be damned" group to the other, but it had been fairly recently, probably right around the time they had encountered Qatai and the creature that had lured the ship into his gaping maw by projecting visions that promised fulfillment of the deepest desires of the crew. He had seen himself teaching at Starfleet Academy after receiving a full pardon. Only his personal log knew that he had also seen himself married, and raising a family. Though the vision had been a fantasy, it had been pulled from his psyche. He had been forced to acknowledge that good as his life was on the surface, deep down he ultimately wanted much, much more.

He should have remembered his father's gentle admonishment when Chakotay had expressed similar sentiments on more than one occasion as a child.

Do not ask the spirits to bless you with more... for they surely will.

The sound that halted his paces a few moments later was not, in fact, the emergency call he was expecting. Instead, it was a chiming at his door.

"Come in," he called curiously. He knew where everyone on board was supposed to be right now, and it wasn't his quarters.

"I hope this isn't a bad time, Commander," she said as she entered with a slight smile on her face.

As the door closed behind her, he noticed that her hands remained clasped behind her back, though she stood before him very much at ease.

"Why aren't you in the mess hall helping Neelix and the others prepare for my party?" he asked smiling.

She decided to play along. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. Why would the crew plan a party for you? Is this some sort of... special day?"

"Is that humor I'm hearing?" he asked.

"It is," she replied.

As he gestured for her to take a seat with him along the low bench that ran beneath the windows of his cabin he said, "What can I do for you?"

She seemed to struggle for a moment, looking for just the right words. "I have something for you," she finally stated simply. She continued as she pulled a small wrapped package from behind her back, "But I didn't want to give it to you in front of everyone."

Chakotay felt his face flush ever so slightly as he said, "You didn't have to..."

"I know," she cut him off. "But... you always seem to find a way to... I just wanted to you to know..." She was searching for words that simply wouldn't come. Finally she handed him the package and settled for "I think you'll understand when you open it. Happy birthday, Chakotay."

The package was only slightly larger than the palm of Chakotay's hand. Maybe it was her sudden uncharacteristic self-consciousness, or the way she was absentmindedly fiddling with her combadge, never a good sign, but part of him was reluctant to open it. He decided he was being ridiculous.

"Thank you," he said sincerely, finally tearing into the gift wrapping.

He couldn't help but notice that she leaned slightly forward once the paper was removed, probably searching his face for a reaction.

And he was certain that unless total shock was the reaction she had anticipated, what she was reading on his face right now probably wasn't what she wanted to see.

His stomach was simply no longer where it should have been. It had plunged toward the

general vicinity of his ankles, headed rapidly for the lower decks. The space in his chest that his heart had once occupied was now filled with a strangely pleasant burning sensation, which crept up his neck and continued all the way to the top of his head. Also unexpected was the faint buzzing in his ears that only grew louder as he tried to make out whatever she was saying.

He finally heard her words: "Do you know what it is?"

Of course he did.

But just to be absolutely certain, he gently grasped it around its edges and turned it slowly, committing to memory in an instant each of the symbols carved on its edges.

Eternity.

Commitment.

Fidelity.

Two spirits joined as one.

And above them all, the symbol his forefathers had used to identify love.

But not just any love. This symbol of three connected circles was reserved for the kind of love shared between two people who had made the irrevocable choice to bind their lives together in a permanent committed relationship.

The gift that she had given him, the indescribably beautiful treasure that he now placed firmly on his palm as he struggled to remember how to breathe, was a Bonding Box.

The Bonding Box was traditionally given by a man to the woman he intended to marry, during the ceremony in which their new relationship was announced to the tribe. Although it was not unheard of in modern times, a woman rarely made this kind of overture. Especially when there was not an understanding of some kind already present between the two interested parties.

But even as he struggled to remain calm and take this one step at a time, part of him poured accelerant onto the fire that now threatened to consume him when it reminded him this is no ordinary woman.

Though she might be ignorant to the specifics of the rituals surrounding the presentation of a Bonding Box, she would never have misconstrued its significance. Nor, given their circumstances, would she have felt any compunction about giving it to him rather than waiting for him to give it to her. He had struggled to subdue the feelings of deep attraction he'd felt for her almost since the day they'd met. She had to have known for some time now that one word from her and he would willingly have endured any challenge presented in developing a more intimate and fulfilling relationship with her. But he would never have dared broach the subject without a definitive sign that she was willing to go there.

And now here it sat, in the palm of his hand.

"I don't know what..." he stammered, struggling to find his own words.

But because the universe is hard wired with a wicked and perverse sense of humor, that was all he had a chance to say before Neelix's voice rang out over the com.

"Neelix to Commander Chakotay."

"Chakotay here," he responded automatically, before he realized that he had failed to tap his combadge and open his side of the connection.

Neelix didn't wait to hear his reply.

"Please report to the mess hall at once. There is an urgent matter that requires your personal attention."

This time, Chakotay managed to raise his free hand and activate his communicator before saying, "I'll be right there."

Finally, he looked directly at her. She was still smiling, but her eyes were now tinged with worry, and a small voice in his head was whispering insistently...

Idiot.

You're making an idiot out of yourself right now.

SAY SOMETHING, the part of him that was still lucid demanded.

But he didn't get a chance. Placing her warm, gentle hand on his, she asked with genuine concern, "Are you all right?"

He nodded immediately, still searching for words, yet unable to stop focusing on the newly electric sensation of her hand resting on his.

The words wouldn't come. There were too many... and no time to even begin.

"Is it... do you like it?" she was asking.

"I love it," he said honestly, taking his first full breath since he'd unwrapped the box. He was further calmed when he saw the worry lines that creased her brow relax.

"I wanted to find... just the right..." Now she was the one having difficulty speaking.

He couldn't blame her.

"It's beautiful," he said, taking the hand that rested on his and grasping it firmly. "You obviously did some extensive research," he added, going for a game chuckle to dissipate the tension.

"I believe I could pass a test on the gift-giving traditions of almost every Native American tribe in the Federation database," she replied.

"Then this is something you've been thinking a lot about?" he asked, searching her face.

"For some time now, I haven't been able to think about anything else, Chakotay," she answered, smiling faintly. "I've seen the agenda planned for the next few hours, and though

this evening may be more fun for the rest of the crew than the guest of honor, maybe this will..."

"Give me something to look forward to?" he asked.

A loud pounding echoed through the cabin, and as he turned, startled, toward the door, he missed the confusion that flew briefly across her face at his last statement.

"Commander Chakotay!" Neelix called urgently from the hall, still hammering on the door.

Placing the box on the low table in front of him, Chakotay rose, releasing her hand.

"You'd better go before he breaks it down," she suggested.

Turning slightly, he extended his arm.

"As long as you're with me," he said.

She smiled, almost playfully threading her arm through his.

As they crossed the threshold Chakotay was unable to refrain from laughing at the mixture of alarm and annoyance plastered across Neelix's face as he admonished them vehemently before turning to lead them toward the mess hall.

* * *

Chakotay was late for duty the next morning. He overslept, ignoring the programmed wake-up announcement that called him to duty three times before he realized that it was, in fact, time to get up. Even so, on any other morning, he might have managed to make it to the bridge on time, had it not been for the ten extra minutes he had spent studying his face in the mirror, making sure his unruly hair was appropriately tamed before leaving his cabin.

He needn't have bothered. She didn't come to the bridge once during the next seven hours. She spent her entire shift working with B'Elanna in engineering as they completely overhauled the ship's magnetic constrictors.

Not that there was much to do that day. He dutifully entered into the logs the details of the newest uninhabited system they were passing near, forwarding the appropriate planetary profiles to astrometrics.

He spent the better part of an hour helping... no, forcing... Harry to enhance his scans of the planets, hoping against hope to find something useful they might safely add to Voyager's reserve supplies. But nothing worthy of calling her from engineering was found, and he resigned himself to planning a romantic dinner for the evening, assuming that she wasn't going to choose to work an extra shift.

He found himself genuinely missing her, which would have been ridiculous on any other day. That, in and of itself, was troubling enough. But he was significantly more disconcerted by two other things that happened that day.

The first was courtesy of Tom Paris.

He met Tom in the turbolift en route to the bridge. After they exchanged perfunctory

good-mornings, Paris clapped him on the back good-naturedly as he said, "Well, done, Chakotay. I didn't know you had it in you."

And Chakotay froze.

He knows.

Even on a ship as small as Voyager he couldn't imagine how it was possible, but somehow, at least some of the crew was already aware of his new relationship.

Forcing himself to smile he turned to Paris and managed to ask, "To what, exactly, are you referring, Ensign?"

Tom paused for a moment, obviously puzzled at the chilly tone that underlined Chakotay's use of the word ensign. Tom had been demoted a couple of months earlier, but no one, least of all Chakotay, had ever intentionally rubbed his nose in it. "I was referring to you and Captain Grant."

Chakotay immediately realized his error. At the beginning of the roast, sections of his Starfleet record had been read aloud. Captain Grant had been first officer when Chakotay had served under her as a lieutenant aboard the U.S.S. Heritage. For reasons that completely eluded him she had chosen to add a note to his file indicating that the two of them had been intimately involved at the time. This delightful piece of trivia had been met by a raucous round of applause and several less than appropriate comments by all of the men in attendance at the party.

"I see," Chakotay answered, hearing a slight tremor in his own voice. "I guess you're not the only person on this ship with a colorful past, Mr. Paris."

Paris's eyes narrowed. Pulling the commander aside, as the doors to the bridge slid open, he asked quietly, "What did you think I was referring to, Chakotay?"

"Stations, please, Mr. Paris" was all Chakotay replied before assuming his own place next to the Captain's chair.

The second moment came by way of Tuvok, and it was in this exchange that he realized that if this relationship was going to have any future at all, he was going to have to get a grip.

Tuvok had evidently observed Chakotay's merciless hounding of Ensign Kim for exactly fifty-one minutes before he requested a few moments in private with the commander. Adjourning to the conference room off the bridge, Tuvok began by asking, "Is it your intention to undermine the efficiency of the senior staff?"

Again, Chakotay stood frozen in suspended animation, wondering what Tuvok might or might not know. It was one thing to assume that somehow the crew had gotten wind of what was happening, but Tuvok was one of her only real friends. She might have sought his counsel before choosing to share her feelings with Chakotay. As he mentally catalogued the number of times he and Tuvok had butted heads over the years, he had to allow that though she would certainly do as she pleased, he couldn't count on Tuvok to support the idea of their new relationship.

"Of course not," Chakotay answered.

"Then might I suggest that you allow Ensign Kim to do his job?" Tuvok asked without a trace of irony. "It would be far less tedious for both of you, unless you would rather relieve him of duty and assume control of ops yourself."

"Point taken," Chakotay replied.

Tuvok turned toward the door with a stoic nod, as Chakotay muttered a faint, "Thank you, Tuvok."

As the doors hissed shut behind Tuvok, Chakotay found the nearest chair and took a seat. Less than twenty-four hours had passed since she had made her overture, and already he questioned his ability to handle it. The crew was unaware, but soon enough, that would change. He had nothing to be embarrassed about. They were both consenting adults. And no one could doubt their devotion to their respective duties.

So what's the problem?

Once the door marked "potential problems" in his mind was opened, it was a veritable smorgasbord. In the first place, they had yet to do anything remotely resembling consummating their relationship, and he had spent more than a few minutes... okay... hours... imagining that long anticipated moment. It seemed likely that once their relationship became a matter of public consumption, others might spend some time doing the same. He didn't like the thought of that, not so much for his sake, but certainly for hers. Nor was he interested in fielding questions from any of his subordinates who might find the guts to ask after either of their respective "abilities." There wasn't a disproportionate ratio of men to women aboard Voyager, but he had spent enough time in the testosterone trenches to know that when men found time to congregate in the absence of women, talk could turn explicit. Defending her honor was one thing, in theory, but in practice he knew himself well enough to know that it could easily end with the Doctor mending broken bones.

Crew morale was another issue. Would people really believe that he was still making impartial duty assignments and shift schedules if any portion of those left the two of them with the time he knew they would both want to explore their new relationship?

Setting the crew aside, there were their own occasional conflicts to consider. They rarely found themselves not of one mind. But when they did, it wasn't pretty. Past disagreement had been complicated enough as fellow officers. As lovers? Voyager's very survival might hang in the balance, and the thought of judgment clouded by sexual politics at such a moment...

It took him a full five minutes before he could return to the bridge with a semblance of composure.

* * *

By the time his shift had ended, Chakotay was willing to rebuild the entire warp core himself if it would buy him a few hours alone with her. He entered the turbolift bound for the deck where his quarters were situated, already rehearsing in his head the speech he had begun to prepare detailing the many issues they would have to discuss before taking this one step further.

But when the turbolift paused at deck six, and she entered, flushed and bright-eyed, the speech was forgotten.

"Commander," she said, "how was your day?"

"Obviously not as exciting as yours," he replied.

"It isn't often I get the opportunity to... get my hands dirty," she said. "It's actually quite satisfying."

"I see," he said. "Perhaps you'd like to tell me all about it over dinner? My cabin?" he suggested.

Her smile widened. "It's a date."

"Say, half an hour?" he asked.

The turbolift doors slid open, admitting Ensign Brooks and Crewman Henly. Chakotay barely had a chance to catch her nod of acknowledgement before she exited the lift.

Nonetheless, there was a definite spring in Chakotay's step as he approached his own cabin, until Neelix's voice came screeching over the com system.

"Neelix to Commander Chakotay!"

This isn't happening. Something had better be on fire.

"Chakotay here," he answered, dismayed, as on cue, the loud clanging of Voyager's internal smoke alarms began to echo through the halls.

"CREWMAN CHELL!" was all Chakotay could make out over the din before reluctantly turning his steps toward the mess hall, assuring Neelix that he was on his way.

What he faced when he arrived were forty hungry people who had reported to the mess hall for dinner at the end of their shift, an infuriated Talaxian, and a disgruntled Bolian.

Apparently Chell had taken Chakotay's innocent remarks about "baking the perfect cake" too seriously the night before. Neelix, who always put crew morale first, hadn't hesitated to offer Chell a chance to use the kitchen. Unfortunately, he quickly realized that Chell had more enthusiasm than talent. The end result was that the well-intentioned crewman had managed to keep Neelix busy most of the afternoon until all Neelix had a chance to throw together for dinner was a large vat of plomeek soup and some undercooked meat loaf. The fire alarm had been triggered in an altercation that included the aforementioned plomeek soup meeting with Chell's forceful elbow, a stew-pot lid, Neelix's midsection, and a pan of Cretalian chocolate sauce, all of which were now covered in flame-retardant compound.

Chakotay quickly quelled the slightly mutinous murmurs coming from the hungry crewman by ordering Ensign Molina to distribute ration packs to anyone short of replicator rations before turning his attention to Neelix and Chell.

"I don't think I'm the only one around here who needs to go on a diet!" Chell was bellowing as Chakotay stepped firmly between them, raising his arms to separate them at least that far within the enclosed space.

"Chell," Chakotay ordered, "apologize to Neelix immediately."

Chell withered slightly beneath Chakotay's steely gaze. Pulling at the strings of the spare apron he had donned, he muttered quietly, "Sorry, Neelix."

Neelix was, by nature, fierce in a battle, but equally quick to forgive and forget. "Don't worry, Chell. Cooking is as much art as science. It takes years to master, and you shouldn't expect miracles on your first day in the kitchen."

"But this isn't my first day," Chell whined. "I was chief cook aboard the first freighter I joined. Look, Commander," he said, addressing Chakotay, "Neelix has a lot to do. He's training with security... he's the ship's morale officer... he's going on diplomatic missions. I just think it's time that he had a backup for his duties in the mess hall."

Though Chakotay could certainly see the wisdom in Chell's point, he wasn't at all convinced that he wanted to know who Chell was about to propose to fill those shoes.

Chell continued. "I haven't had a chance to really find my place on this ship. Sure, I do what I'm told, but I want to feel that I am making a real contribution."

"And you believe the mess hall is the place to do it?" Chakotay asked warily.

"I do," Chell replied, puffing his chest ever so slightly and refusing to meet Neelix's gaze.

"Fair enough," Chakotay said simply, wishing to end any further discussion for the time being. "Report to the mess hall tomorrow morning where you will spend the next month observing Neelix. If at the end of that time Neelix feels that you're ready to assume some of his responsibilities, you'll have my blessing."

"But Commander," Neelix stammered.

"Yes?"

"With all due respect to Crewman Chell, feeding one hundred and fifty people every day is a huge task, and frankly, I don't think this kitchen is big enough for two people," he said sincerely.

Chakotay shook his head. "Then what do you suggest?"

Neelix gave the matter some thought then offered his compromise. "The Cretalian chocolate was a disaster, but that's a pretty complicated dish, so I don't think it's fair to judge Chell's abilities based on that alone. If we were to take something simple, say, for example, these baba roots... and give him the opportunity to do a basic stew. If he could manage that, I'd say it would be worth the time to train him further."

"My mother used to ask for seconds, sometimes thirds of my baba-root stew," Chell countered defensively.

"Oh, really?" Neelix tossed back. "That's amazing, since baba roots are only indigenous to one planet in the Delta Quadrant."

Chakotay didn't like where this was going at all, and he had his own dinner to worry about.

"Fine," he tried diplomatically. "Baba roots it is. Dinner seems to be taken care of for the

evening, so why don't you two take some time to cool off and clean up this mess, and Chell can try his hand at the stew tomorrow?"

"There's no time like the present," Chell offered. "But if my skills with the baba root are going to be tested, I think it's only fair that an impartial judge be empaneled to compare my stew to Neelix's. That is, unless he's afraid...."

"Why, you..." Neelix began, tearing off the chef's hat that had been resting askew on his head since the altercation began and tossing it on the floor as he lunged at Chell screaming, "You don't know the difference between a ladle and a spatula!"

It took the better part of the next twenty minutes for Chakotay's frustrated but much calmer head to prevail upon the two men to settle their differences over a stew pot rather than with their fists. Since by that time she had stopped by on her way back to engineering... damn those magnetic constrictors... to tell Chakotay that she wanted to postpone their dinner until the next night so she could go over a few modifications that B'Elanna had devised to enhance the constrictor's efficiency, he decided that the best course of action would be to allow Neelix and Chell to resolve this situation sooner rather than later.

An exasperated Chakotay found himself removing all but two knives from the kitchen, stationing Neelix and Chell as far apart as the limited space would allow, and monitoring their every move as they divided a pile of Baba roots between them and set to work on their respective stews.

Three hours, and more spoonfuls of baba-root stew than Chakotay liked to think about, later, it was settled. Neelix's stew was richer and spicier, but Chell's concoction was certainly edible, and with no love lost between the two of them, Neelix had magnanimously agreed to allow Chell to function as his official culinary observer for the foreseeable future.

* * *

The next day was equally torturous for Chakotay. She dropped by the bridge four times to make sure the engineering station located there was calibrated properly to the new constrictor specifications, but she barely had more than two words to say to him all day. By the time he had returned to his quarters for the evening, he had all but decided that somehow he had made a mistake. Duty was one thing. But he couldn't help feeling that she was intentionally trying to avoid him.

Maybe she's had second thoughts, he worried. Since she wasn't the only one, he couldn't fault her for that. But typically, she wasn't one to avoid confronting a difficult situation.

Either way it was pointless for him to try and unravel it on his own. She was spending her second night in a row in the company of B'Elanna and her engineering staff studying the stability of the warp core that had come back online just a few minutes before the end of his shift.

He was torn between consulting his spirit guide and hoping Moby Dick would have its typical anesthetizing effect when he was interrupted by a soft chime at his door.

"Come in," he called, hoping against hope that she had finished her work in engineering earlier than expected. But it wasn't her. It was Tom Paris.

"Good evening, Commander," Tom said courteously as he entered.

"Tom."

"I have the shuttle test reports you requested," Paris continued, offering Chakotay a padd.

"I requested them six days ago," Chakotay said with mild annoyance as he gave them a cursory glance.

Tom considered Chakotay carefully before deciding to simply change the subject. "I see you replicated a copy of Melville," he said kindly. "How's it coming?"

"Slow," Chakotay huffed. "Have you ever actually read this book, or were you just having a little fun at my expense?"

"I played the entire holonovel, Chakotay. It was excellent," Tom replied.

When Chakotay didn't answer, Tom seemed to take this less than subtle hint and started for the door, but apparently decided to give it one more try. Turning back, he asked simply, "Who is she?"

Chakotay's head snapped abruptly up from the padd he'd been pretending to read, revealing the full measure of alarm in his eyes.

"I beg your pardon?" Chakotay said, trying to keep his voice even.

"I've known you a long time, Chakotay. And I've never seen you like this. There's only one person who can make me as testy as you've been the last few days, and that's B'Elanna. So I'm asking again, who is she?"

Chakotay considered carefully before replying. Obviously he had no intention of getting specific, but Tom was the only other male senior officer currently involved in an intimate relationship with a fellow officer. Finally, he decided he needed to talk about this, and though Tom might not have been his first choice, he knew he could count on his understanding and discretion.

"If it's all right, I'd rather not say," he began.

"No problem," Tom answered, taking a seat across from Chakotay and settling in. "No names."

"And our conversation doesn't leave this room," Chakotay continued. "That's an order."

"Understood," Tom said. "I've already been demoted once this year. I'm not looking to make crewman before we get home."

Chakotay smiled.

"It's complicated," he finally said.

"When isn't it?" Tom asked. "I mean we are talking about a woman, right? You're not considering dating that far outside your species?"

"Very funny."

"So what's the problem?"

Chakotay rose and crossed to the windows where the sight of the stars Voyager was passing at warp speed calmed his frayed nerves a bit.

"I think I know how she feels. She's all but... come right out and said it. And I know how I feel," he said, finally turning to face Tom, grateful for the patience he saw on his face. "But I honestly don't know if this can work. I don't know if we can function in our respective capacities and still... have the relationship we want. And at the moment, I'm really not sure which one is more important to me."

"I see," Tom said.

"So how do you and B'Elanna do it?" Chakotay finally asked.

"We're both too stubborn to quit, and too selfish to care much what other people think," Tom replied. Rising to stand face-to-face with Chakotay, Tom paused then went on. "It's not easy. We can't just get away when we're on each other's nerves. The ship's too small for that. And, yes, people talk for a while, but eventually they move on to more interesting topics. The thing is, we only live once. I knew I was crazy about B'Elanna for the better part of a year before I got up enough guts to approach her. And we might still be dancing around the inevitable if we both hadn't almost died on that mission to recover the warp core. That's what it took to knock some sense into us. It's not the opportunities we take in life that we usually regret. It's the ones we walk away from. If you want this woman, and she feels the same, you'd be insane not to at least try and make it work. And you may as well do it today, because tomorrow is promised to no one."

Chakotay took a moment to enjoy how the troubled young man who had joined his crew six years earlier, intent on putting as much distance between himself and life as possible, had grown into the confident officer who now stood before him. "When did you get so wise?" he asked honestly.

"I fell in love with the smartest woman I've ever met," he said. "And I make it a point to listen."

"Today, huh?" Chakotay mused.

"Why not?" Tom asked.

"She's otherwise occupied for the rest of the evening."

Tom looked thoughtful for a moment before saying, "Then you're in luck. I've got four hours reserved on the holodeck tomorrow night. B'Elanna and I were planning an evening in Venice. It's yours if you want it."

"You don't think B'Elanna would mind?" Chakotay asked.

"I can handle it," Tom smiled. "The holodeck is a great way to set the proper mood, but it isn't the only way."

"Thanks, Tom," Chakotay said.

"My pleasure, Commander."

* * *

Tom didn't have much time the next day to reflect on his conversation with Chakotay. He'd spent most of the day focusing on the helm's responsiveness to the warp core modifications and reporting hourly to B'Elanna. He was on his way to engineering to present his final analysis to her when he stopped short, dropping several padds to the floor at the sight of Chakotay standing at the entrance to holodeck three pausing to allow Captain Janeway to enter before him.

"Well, call me Ishmael," he said under his breath, as he bent to retrieve the padds, and then added, "Good luck, my friend."

To his credit, he didn't say a word about what he had observed, even to B'Elanna as they lay nestled in each other's arms later that night, pleasantly spent and spinning their own hopes for the future in soft breathless whispers.

* * *

Chakotay hadn't seen much of Kathryn that day either. Their "date" had been agreed upon in a brief discussion that morning in the mess. Otherwise, it had been a day of normal duties. Apart from a slight twinge of nervous anticipation when she met him at the entrance to the holodeck, Chakotay found that he was finally at ease.

Because he had finally made a decision.

It wasn't just what Tom had said, although his words had helped focus Chakotay's thoughts. It was simply that despite the fact that he was Voyager's first officer and Kathryn was the captain, he had finally accepted that this didn't mean they were required to abdicate any right they had to a personal life. Certainly, it would be difficult at times to separate their personal and professional needs. That would have been true in the Alpha Quadrant as well. And yes, the crew might take some time to adjust. But he had never walked away from a challenge out of fear, and he wasn't about to start now. He had asked the spirits for more, and they had answered him. He knew what he wanted, so let them do their worst.

Tom's Venice program had needed relatively few adjustments, mostly involving the deletion of several superfluous characters meant to give the simulation a little more authenticity than Chakotay required for the evening.

There was a cafe with a private table for two on a secluded patio, a violin playing softly in the background, a half-moon to give the warm spring night a serene glow, and the gentle lapping of the canal not too far in the distance.

Dinner was what it always was between the two of them, a calm space of time to let their minds and thoughts roam freely through the events of the day. They shared a laugh as Kathryn recounted B'Elanna's reaction to a few last minute alterations in the warp-field that Ensign Vorik had made, almost destroying the past three days of work. They gave careful consideration to a few personal requests made by the crew for duty transfers or schedule changes. In short, apart from the decidedly more romantic nature of their surroundings, it was just a normal dinner.

Kathryn seemed relaxed, enjoying the synthetic merlot Chakotay had chosen to accompany the eggplant parmesan. She had even complimented Chakotay on his outfit, certain she'd

never seen it before, though he insisted it was nothing new. For his part, he had noticed a new perfume she was wearing, a gift she had received shortly before leaving Earth from her sister, and one she admitted to using sparingly.

Things were going so well, Chakotay almost hesitated to risk spoiling the mood. But finally, during a peaceful lull in the conversation as they were both enjoying a cappuccino, he decided the time had come. They had exhausted every topic of conversation imaginable, except the one that had weighed so heavily on his mind for the past three days, and it seemed she was determined to continue avoiding it. He had already considered this eventuality, and knew exactly how he wanted to play the ball that she was leaving in his court.

Reaching under his chair, he removed a wrapped package, roughly the size and shape of one of the dinner plates, and placed it on the table before her.

"What's this?" she asked.

"With all of your research, I'm surprised you have to ask," he replied.

She was still smiling, but he could see in her eyes that she honestly didn't know what he was talking about, so he continued.

"Traditionally, when one is presented with a Bonding Box, it is customary to give a gift of equal significance, to show that you are willing to accept it."

"Really?" she replied, gently picking up the package, but hesitating to unwrap it. "I guess I missed that part."

"Open it," he suggested.

"I feel bad," she said, sitting back, still holding the package.

"Why?"

"I didn't realize you would have to..." she began.

"Just open it," he said, putting an end to any further discussion.

The battle between reluctance and curiosity that played across Kathryn's face was brief. Smiling mischievously, she carefully pulled at the paper, opening one of the ends wide enough to extract what lay within. Her playful spirits were instantly transformed to genuine wonder. In her hands she held a mirror, large enough to reflect her entire face, edged with irregularly shaped stones polished to a high sheen.

"Chakotay... it's beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it."

As her hands ran gently over the stones that surrounded it, she asked, "Where did these come from?"

Indicating an oblong translucent purple stone that sat near the peak of the oval he explained, "That one's from Napinay."

Janeway had to think for a moment before it hit her. "Wasn't that the planet where Neelix found our first stores of..."

"Leola roots," they finished together, smiling at the shared memory.

"And this green one," he went on, "is from the Sakari colony."

"Really?" she said, still marveling at the beauty of the mirror. Finally she asked, "How long have you been collecting these?"

"Since we began our journey home," he told her. "Each stone is from a planet we've stopped at along the way. I hadn't decided exactly what I was going to do with them, but I guess I was... inspired by your gift." After a moment he reached for the mirror and turned it over in her hands.

He could see a hint of a tear welling in her eye as she read aloud the words he had inscribed on the back.

"When in doubt, look here."

She didn't meet his even gaze for a few moments. She was simply overwhelmed, not only by the beauty and thoughtfulness of the gift, but also the many layers of meaning it conveyed.

When she finally looked at him, she was smiling through her tears. "I guess that'll teach me. For your birthday next year I'm giving you a toaster."

"A toaster?" he asked, laughing.

"Didn't you have a toaster, growing up?"

"No," he replied.

"Well, my traditionalist mother insisted on one in our kitchen. They're actually critical if you want just the right texture of the bread for a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich."

"Then I'll look forward to it," he smiled.

She reached for his hand and, grasping it gently, said, "Thank you, Chakotay. I will treasure this, always."

He nodded, basking in the warmth that radiated from her eyes.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked.

It wasn't a difficult decision at such a moment. Rising from her seat and stepping a few paces from the table, she offered him her hand.

For a few quiet minutes, they swayed to the music, finding a gentle rhythm, his right arm guiding her in the motion with a slight pressure on her back, as he held her free hand softly in his.

Finally, she sighed deeply and looked directly into his eyes. "Why has it taken you five years to bring me to Venice?" she asked with a decidedly alluring hint of playfulness.

He wanted to answer her honestly.

Because I wasn't sure you would say yes.

But as he stared into her eyes, wanting only to lose himself in their clear blue depths, he decided that since he had failed over the last three days to give her any sign that he understood and accepted her gift in the spirit that it was meant, this was as close to an invitation as he was likely to get.

In the space of a few seconds, that seemed to draw themselves out into one eternity after another, he bent toward her, softly touching his lips to hers. The spark that ignited sent pleasant electric waves arcing through his entire body. Releasing her hand, his fingers gently grazed her cheek. Firmly guiding her face toward his, the arm that encircled her waist drew them closer. As their bodies pressed together, his unmistakable desire rose to match the heat and intensity generated when their lips met again.

* * *

When Kathryn placed her hand in Chakotay's as their dance began, she hadn't considered where it might lead. She had been thinking of the mirror and its message. She believed in herself. Voyager's survival depended on it. But that belief could be a cold and stony companion. It meant little without the assurance that others believed in her as well. This was hardly the first time Chakotay had found just the right way to lift her spirits and touch her heart at the same time.

As they moved to the gently lilting melody, she had relaxed into his arms, not really surprised at how comfortable she felt there.

She told herself later that she didn't see the inevitable coming until it was much too late. But secretly she would always wonder if maybe she hadn't intentionally ignored it.

Five years of unfulfilled possibility burned between them, and Kathryn found her body responding automatically to his as she tasted from his lips the first sip of real passion she had known since the night Mark had asked her to become his wife. Though she had always taken pride in her self-discipline, she was a woman, not a saint. Before her higher brain functions had a chance to kick in, she found that her hunger equaled, if not surpassed his.

For a few moments that could have been hours, they stood suspended in a desperate storm of physical pleasure that was every bit as satisfying as it was chaotic.

His hand was firmly moving from her waist, seeking out the delicious and dizzying sensation of roaming free about the rest of her body when, somewhere inside a distant voice began to call in her head...

I...

Can't...

Do... this!

When she finally pulled away, placing her hands firmly on his shoulders and putting at least a bent-arm's-length between them, the first words that came from her mouth were "Computer,

end program."

They paused for a moment as the spell of the moonlit night was broken, catching their breath in a cold gray room crisscrossed by a regular pattern of holographic generators as the mirror clattered to the floor, miraculously not shattering.

She saw the confusion on his face, and silently cursed herself. Obviously she had led him here, though she wasn't sure exactly how. And she was truly sorry, because she knew she was about to injure him in a way that their friendship might not be able to endure. More than that, she knew that part of her didn't want what they had just begun to end, and she could see in his eyes that he hadn't missed that piece of information.

And then it hit her. Forcing its way through the confusion of the moment came a vivid image of Chakotay, seated in his quarters, holding the Bonding Box and saying it would give him... something to look forward to.

He was speaking. Calmly. Softly. But demanding an answer.

"Kathryn, I don't understand."

"I don't know if I do either," she said.

But they both needed a better answer than that.

"I thought," he began, "when you gave me the Bonding Box... that was your way of telling me..."

"Telling you what?" she snapped too defensively.

"You're the one who did the research," he said, trying to hide the wound she had just inflicted. "The Bonding Box is a symbol of a person's intention to share their life with another."

"No it isn't," she said uncertainly, as the light slowly began to dawn.

The look on his face plainly read: You're going to tell me the significance of a gift that is specific to my culture?

She continued, unsure of her footing. "I mean, obviously it can mean that... if two people are already engaged, but otherwise it's supposed to be a symbol of a commitment to a relationship, whatever the nature of that relationship may already be. Boxes are exchanged among family members, good friends, comrades who have fought together in battle. They can even symbolize peace between two warring tribes that have chosen to make... peace."

Chakotay paused before answering. "Not among my people."

Janeway stood back, holding her face in her hands to hide the blush burning on her cheeks.

"Chakotay, I'm so, so sorry."

He seemed to sense the pain and confusion she felt; the conflicting anger and embarrassment in his face dissipated, replaced by something like relief. Moving toward the mirror that sat on the floor, he called out, "Computer, resume program."

As the Venice cafe shimmered back into existence, he placed the mirror on the table and gestured for her to sit. When she didn't move immediately to join him, he said, "I think we ought to talk about this. And as long as we are, we might as well be comfortable."

Nodding slightly, she settled herself across from him, and began the conversation part of her had always known they would have to have eventually.

"All right," she said. "Let's talk."

"Obviously the Bonding Box was a misunderstanding," he said. "But I don't think I was reading anything into that kiss that wasn't there."

Her smile tipped her hand as she had to acknowledge, "No, you weren't."

He gave her a moment to sit with this before taking the bull by the horns.

"So what's the problem? If you ever wondered how I feel about you, I'd say that issue is resolved. And your gift to me aside, I think it's pretty clear now that I'm not the only person here who would enjoy exploring the potential of this relationship."

She had always admired his honesty, even when she didn't want to hear it, and this moment was no exception. She knew he deserved no less than he was giving.

"Of course it's crossed my mind," she said simply. "And yes, I enjoyed what we just...."

He nodded, eliminating the need for her to end that thought.

"But it doesn't change the fact that we both have a responsibility to this ship and this crew that has to supersede our other... interests."

"I've already fought and won this argument in my head at least a hundred times in the past few days," he said. "But you should have a chance to make your case. Why?" he asked. "Why can't we do our job and still have a life that is our own, apart from that job?"

"Because we can't," she offered with a slight shrug. "At least, I can't." She took a moment to gather her thoughts, needing more than anything to be clear. "Every day I have to make choices... choices that mean risking my life, and yours. If I loved you more, or differently than I do now, I would no longer be able to make those choices with only the best interests of Voyager in my heart. I owe more to this crew than I owe myself. The decision I made five years ago came with a price."

"Maybe," he said, "but you're not the only one paying it. Every time your back is against the wall, you retreat to the same place. 'I'm alone. It's all my fault... all my responsibility.' It's certainly one way to run a starship, but it's no way to live a life. And for as long as we're here, I think we should try to do both."

He took a deep breath before he continued,

"I know it's a lot to risk. And sometimes I think that you honestly believe that sharing your burdens is some sign of weakness. But it doesn't have to be. If I'm wrong, and this turns out to be a monumental disaster, I'll take full responsibility. I'll walk the plank. Or you can make good on your threat, drop me off at the nearest Class-M planet, and I'll live the rest of my life

knowing that the time we had together was worth spending the rest of my life alone."

She tried to imagine the rest of their journey in the Delta Quadrant, another five years or fifty, without him. It was an unbearable thought.

"Do you know why I chose to give you the Bonding Box in the first place?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"For five years, you've been a very capable first officer."

He rolled his eyes and almost laughed. "Talk about damning with faint praise."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"I'm not saying just anyone could fill your shoes. But worst-case scenario, there are at least a few officers on board who could assume your position on this ship."

She was choosing her words extremely carefully.

"But there is no one who could do it better. Because there is no one on this ship, not even Tuvok, who knows me the way you do. I've never met anyone who could so effortlessly walk the line between fellow officer and compassionate friend."

"I don't think the two have to be mutually exclusive, Kathryn," he replied, "especially under our circumstances. I think you hold yourself at a distance from me and the rest of the crew because it's easier that way."

She paused, considering this. Finally she replied, "I guess it is. I know there are times when I wish I could be more like you. But there are also times when I wish you were more like me."

"Why?"

"Because in my perfect world there are right and wrong answers. I didn't spend most of my childhood studying quantum mechanics because I'm antisocial by nature. I like knowing the boundaries of my universe. When I can see the lines clearly it makes the choices more certain... more absolute. When I looked at the Bonding Box, that's what I saw... a clear simple object that would convey not only the depths but also the limits of my affection for you."

"Boxes are nice, but they were never meant to contain a human heart, Kathryn."

He was pushing her. And they both knew it.

"You're asking for something I'm unable to give, Chakotay."

"Unable, or unwilling?"

"Maybe both."

"You've always had my respect," he said. "You know that. But it isn't because your uniform

has four pips on it. What I respect is the woman who wears that uniform... the strong, fearless, compassionate, and fallible woman I have come to know on this journey. Up until a few days ago, I hadn't given any of this much thought in a long time. While you were still engaged, even during those months we spent alone on 'New Earth,' I felt I had to respect your commitment to Mark. But that obstacle no longer exists, and I know for a fact that no matter what you intended when you gave me the Bonding Box, your heart shares my feelings, even if your mind is holding you back. What I still don't understand is why. What are you so afraid of? What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"I could lose you," she admitted. "Voyager might survive the rest of this journey without you, but I wouldn't."

He stared at her, speechless.

"It's a big universe," she went on, "and bad things happen in it. I don't doubt that we could sustain a relationship. The crew would understand... most of them would probably be thrilled for us. But if something were to happen to you on my watch..." She let the thought trail off.

"That's a risk you take in any relationship."

"Maybe, but some risks can be calculated with more certainty than others." She paused, feeling her resolve starting to slip, if only a little. "Mark wasn't the first man I was engaged to marry," she said softly, as his eyebrows lifted in involuntary surprise.

"He wasn't?"

Her gaze shifted to a faraway point beyond his left shoulder as she continued in her soft, dusky voice.

"Mark and I practically grew up together. He was always so good and kind. But sometimes I think the only reason I let myself fall in love with him was because it was a safe choice. He shared my passion for science, without the need for adventure. He was going to spend the rest of his life working patiently in his lab, breaking all kinds of new theoretical ground, while I roamed the galaxy putting those theories into practice. And there was no question that the 'balance' of our relationship was tipped ever so slightly in my favor. It was something I could control, and it was hard to imagine anything, short of Earth's destruction, that could jeopardize his life or the life we would have together. I wasn't going to lose him, like I lost Justin."

Chakotay's eyes narrowed. "Who's Justin?"

"Justin Tighe was a Starfleet officer, and a pilot. We met not long after I'd graduated from the Academy. Justin and I were equals. We complemented one another, but every day of our relationship was a struggle for dominance. He was the only person I'd ever met who made me want to feel out of control. It was a relief, and absolutely terrifying at the same time. Shortly after we were engaged, there was an accident..."

Chakotay's reassuring gaze told her in no uncertain terms that he knew how much this revelation was costing her. He remained silent, letting her take the time she needed to explain.

"I lost my father and the first true love of my life on the same day. The three of us were testing a new shuttle. I was the only one who survived the crash. But for a long time, I didn't think I

would. I didn't think I wanted to."

"Kathryn, I'm so sorry," he murmured softly.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him.

"After I lost Justin, I never expected to feel what I felt for him with another man. And I didn't, not even with Mark. I could accept that. Love doesn't have to be an overwhelming force of nature to be worth building a life around. But then I met you. The way you make me feel... the things that move in me when I let myself imagine everything we could have... it isn't a safe love... a love I can control. It's the other kind. It's what I had with Justin. I lost that once. It wasn't my fault, and it still almost destroyed me. That's what I'd be risking, for a soft place to rest my head at night. So you tell me. You still think it's worth the risk, while I'm trying to get this ship home?"

She started to choke on her tears as she went on, "I'm not saying never... I'm saying not now... not until I'm no longer responsible for your life."

Finally, he reached for her hand. She didn't pull away, accepting the comfort they both found there.

When he spoke, his voice sounded disconnected, as if the ties that bound his heart to hers were already beginning to unravel.

"There's a legend among my people..." he began, noticing that she raised a skeptical eyebrow at his words.

"Is this a real legend?" she asked.

"This one is," he replied. "I promise. I never really understood it, until now."

"A warrior loved a woman called Isabo. He asked the spirits to help him win her heart. The spirit who answered him was the trickster, the coyote. He gave the warrior a beautiful shirt to give to her. The coyote told him that once she put it on, her heart would burn forever with the fire of the love he felt for her. But the coyote also told him to take care, because once she put it on, there were no human hands that could remove it. Isabo took the shirt, and agreed to wear it. The moment she put it on, she felt as if her heart were being consumed by flames. The pain was unbearable. The only way the warrior could save her, was to love her less. But he couldn't. Unable to endure the pain, she threw herself into the fire of their camp, and he watched in agony as her body began to burn, along with the fabric of the shirt. The only relief she could find was in death. The warrior never forgave himself, and never loved again."

Kathryn sighed deeply. "Charming story," she finally said.

"Isn't it?" he answered.

They sat in silence for a few moments, the weight of unavoidable acceptance hanging heavy between them.

Chakotay finally broke the silence. "Are you still glad I brought you to Venice?"

Her face softened with a hint of a smile. "Actually, I am. I think it's good for two people who mean as much to each other as we do, to know exactly where we stand."

He nodded, then asked, "Have you ever seen the real thing?"

"No," she replied.

"Then I'll take you there, after we get home," he said with a smile.

"I'll look forward to it," she said.

As she rose to go, she considered the mirror that still sat between them. Picking it up to admire it one last time, she handed it back to him.

"I can't accept this... at least, not now."

He looked as though he wanted to take issue with that decision as well, but then answered resignedly, "I know," and accepted the mirror from her.

* * *

Chakotay sat staring into the mirror for several minutes after she had left, the faint scent of her perfume still lingering on his hand as he pondered the wisdom of the spirits and anyone who decided to ask for more than they had already been given.

* * *

Two weeks later, Kathryn sat in her quarters in the small hours of the night sipping a cup of oolong tea. Ensign Kim had introduced her to the dark coffee substitute, and she found that from time to time she truly enjoyed the fact that it was just bitter enough to keep her alert without totally overworking her nerves.

She hadn't exactly been avoiding Chakotay. In fact, they had immediately resumed their normal comfortable working relationship, and managed to survive yet another close brush with death in a tug-of-war with the Borg Queen where Seven of Nine had been the prize. But at no time since their dinner in Venice had they managed to share the same relaxed time off duty that she had come to look forward to at the end of each day. She had found one polite excuse after another to avoid Chakotay's repeated dinner invitations, even when circumstances hadn't demanded it. She knew she was being ridiculous, and she wasn't at all certain whose feelings she was really trying to protect. But the simple fact of the matter was, she missed him, and she was now losing sleep trying to figure out what she was going to do about it.

It was not unexpected that the first thing she felt when Chakotay requested entrance to her quarters a few minutes later, quite calm and poised, was a hint of alarm.

"Good evening, Commander," she said simply.

"Captain," he replied evenly.

As casually as she could, she put some distance between them, crossing to look out the long bay of windows with a low shelf beneath it, decorated with several of her mementos from her years in Starfleet.

"I've been thinking," Chakotay said, coming right to the point, "and I've come up with a

solution to our... problem."

Oh, no.

"Really, Commander?" she attempted, turning to face him. "What problem is that?"

The table that sat in her personal dining area was empty. Chakotay stepped forward and placed the Bonding Box in the center of it as he said, "I think you should have this back, for now."

Before she could protest, he continued, "I reviewed the ship's database, and I think I know exactly where we ran into trouble. Although my tribe has almost never used the Bonding Box to indicate anything other than a desire to enter into an exclusive loving relationship, it turns out you were right."

"I was?" she asked, her defenses crumbling a bit as she stepped toward the table. "I mean, of course I was."

Chakotay smiled warmly. Kathryn could see that he had been much more successful than she at putting their situation into some kind of perspective that brought him a measure of peace that was eluding her.

"A number of other tribes have similar traditions but a much greater variety of uses for such a box. And to my surprise, I found that so does mine." He paused to let his words sink in, noting gratefully that she seemed to be growing more at ease by the minute.

"Where you made your mistake was in the symbols that you used to adorn the edges, particularly in the symbol you chose for love."

Finally, her curiosity overwhelmed her desire to be right. She crossed to the table and picked up the box, focusing on the symbol that she believed represented love, and for a moment, she thought her eyes were playing tricks on her. It didn't look the same.

Looking at Chakotay skeptically, she went to her desk and pulled up her file on the Bonding Box. She studied the image on the screen and compared it to the box in her hand. There was nothing wrong with her eyes. The series of conjoined circles that had run above the other carvings was now a series of three separate circles. Chakotay had changed the box.

"What is this symbol?" she finally asked.

Chakotay cleared the space between them and gently lifted the box from her hand. Indicating the symbol, he explained, "My people have dozens of different symbols for different kinds of love. The one commonly used on a Bonding Box is that of the three joined circles. Two of the circles represent each of the individuals, and the third, the one in the middle, is the new unified whole that they become by virtue of their commitment to one another. But we also understand that there are times when duty or distance can divide two people, who nonetheless share a powerful bond. When you separate the circles, as I've done, it means that two people recognize that for the present time, their union cannot be fulfilled. The potential is there in the three circles, but a conscious choice has been made to honor the relationship without formally creating a more intimate bond. As long as the circles are separated, either of them are free to follow their heart, should it lead them in a different direction, but if they choose to come together when their circumstances no longer divide them, they are also free to transform the promise into a bond."

Kathryn nodded silently. With a palpable mixture of sadness and relief, she took the box and stared at it until a question furrowed her brow.

"So this symbol... it's another word for love?"

Chakotay answered her quietly. "Actually, it means 'hope.' "

Lifting her eyes to stare fully into his, she felt warm tears beginning to form, but refused to allow them to fall. Placing her hand on his arm, she managed a quiet "Thank you, Chakotay."

"You're welcome," he answered honestly.

As he turned to go, Janeway opened the drawer in her desk where the silver watch he had given her for her last birthday sat, and placed the Bonding Box next to it. When she was satisfied that she could address him without faltering, she found voice to say, "You realize what this means, of course?"

He paused at the door, his back to her.

"What's that?"

"I still owe you a birthday present."

He turned, smiling.

"I think there's plenty of room in my quarters for a toaster," he suggested.

She laughed, dissipating the tension.

Much better.

"Chakotay," she asked, "have you ever tried oolong tea?"

"It's one of my favorites."

"Would you care to join me?"

"I'd love to."

They fell into easy conversation for the next few hours, catching up on everything they'd missed in the last two weeks. Janeway laughed so hard she almost fell out of her chair when Chakotay told her the story of Neelix and Chell's culinary conflict.

When Kathryn was alone again, curled in bed, she decided that she was more determined than ever to reach the Alpha Quadrant as soon as humanly possible. She had always wanted this for her crew, absolution for all the years they had lost because of her choice. Finally, she wanted it just as much for herself. She would get Voyager home. And when that was done, maybe she and Chakotay would have a chance to find out whether or not the bond they had forged in the crucible of their circumstances was meant to become something more.

* * *

Alone in his cabin, after he had bid her good night, Chakotay managed to finish the first three chapters of Moby Dick. He was still more anxious to return home than he had been at the start of their journey. But he refused to waste one more moment regretting the life he had or the passage of time.

He had been thinking of time as an indicator of what he had accomplished or accumulated in his life. But focusing on its unassailable pressure only forced him forward and away from those things. If all matter exploded forth from some original indefinable whole, time was the measure of the distance that grew between those particles. Ultimately all things might be meant to diverge in the vast ocean of time. But solitude was only one potential destination. He would trust the spirits to show him the others, when he was truly ready for more.

The fuel that would sustain them both was hope.

Brief Candle

Christopher L. Bennett

This tale unfolds in the weeks immediately following the sixth-season episode "Survival Instinct," before, during, and after "Barge of the Dead."

Christopher L. Bennett

Christopher L. Bennett, a man barely alive, was rocketed to Earth from a dying planet. Searching for a distant star, the weather started getting rough, and the tiny ship was tossed where no man has gone before. He was in a coma for six years, in a dimension not of sight and sound, but of mind. Pressured to prove his theories or lose funding, an accidental overdose of gamma radiation altered his body chemistry. Now he can control the horizontal and the vertical, and is not a number, but a free man. He also watches far too much television.

Meanwhile, Christopher has authored "Aggravated Vehicular Genocide" in the November 1998 Analog; "Among the Wild Cybers of Cybele" in the December 2000 Analog; Star Trek: S.C.E. #29: Aftermath; "... Loved I Not Honor More" in the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Prophecy and Change anthology; the critically acclaimed Star Trek: Ex Machina; and the upcoming Star Trek Titan: Orion's Hounds. More information and cat pictures can be found at home.fuse.net/ChristopherLBennett/.

Lieutenant Marika Willkarah stood in Voyager's crowded mess hall, a lively celebration going on around her, and marveled at how quiet it was.

She had thought, now that she was free of the Borg collective- and of the three-member subset thereof into which Seven of Nine had forced her eight years ago- that she would want to embrace solitude, to avoid crowds and noise like this. But she realized she should have known better. The raucous conversation and laughter all around her were nothing next to the invasiveness of a forced mental link. In fact, Marika found that she relished the company of others- especially other Starfleet officers. It felt so right to be part of a Starfleet crew again, however briefly.

It was such a comfort to know she'd die in uniform.

When the Doctor had awakened her, when she'd known solitude within her mind for the first

time in nearly a decade, he'd gingerly told her the bad news. The brain damage she, Two of Nine, and Four of Nine- no, she, Lansor, and P'Chan- had suffered when their interface with Seven had collapsed meant that they would live for only weeks, a month at most. But the alternative had been to return them to the collective. Marika couldn't forgive what Seven had done to them in the past, forcing them into the triad link to keep them from escaping the hive mind after their sphere had crashed; but she was grudgingly grateful to Seven for making the right decision on their behalf now. As Seven had told the Doctor, survival was insufficient. Better a month as a free Bajoran than a lifetime as a drone. And better to give her own life than to be forced to enslave or destroy anyone else's ever again.

The rest of Voyager's crew wasn't coping so well with her situation, though, giving her more furtive, pitying stares than friendly overtures. In fact, this whole party had begun rather awkwardly. That odd Mr. Neelix had decided that since the starship had just gained six new crew members- first the five survivors of the Equinox, and then Marika, late of Excalibur by way of Cube 45208- it was necessary to throw a mixer for the newcomers' benefit. But the crew had been even more uneasy with the Equinox five than with her, given the criminal actions they'd committed against Voyager and against an innocent alien species. As a Bajoran, Marika understood what desperation could drive good people to do, so she could understand the Equinox crew's actions; but as a Bajoran she could also understand holding a grudge.

At first there had been a heavy pall over the proceedings, despite Neelix's best efforts. But then Tom Paris and Harry Kim had taken on the role of goodwill ambassadors, making a point of talking with the newcomers and helping them feel welcome. With that, the ice had broken. It was an interesting dynamic of individuals which Marika was starting to rediscover- if only one person tried something, others simply watched, but if just one or two more people joined in, others would follow. Even free humanoids had their own collective urges.

But that thought had given Marika pause. Why was she content to watch while others took the initiative? That was the way of a drone, not a Bajoran. Especially not now. She had a life to rebuild, and not much time to do it in.

So she threw herself into the heart of the conversation. She spoke to everyone, seeking to catch up on news from the Alpha Quadrant. It still amazed her that Bajor had been freed from Cardassian rule only a couple of years after her assimilation. A child of the offworld refugee camps, she'd never set foot on her ancestral world, and it saddened her that she'd never get to visit a free Bajor. But she grilled the other Bajorans in the crew, eager to experience it vicariously through their memories. Of course they only had a couple of years' worth of firsthand information, now five years out of date, and told of a world still struggling to heal from its scars. But at least Bajor had its freedom now, and that, Marika knew, was worth any price.

Naturally the Voyager crew grilled her in turn about how her triad had escaped the Borg. "Our neural link let us think independently from the collective," she explained, "if not from each other. Over time we grew more and more independent. But we knew what happened to a nonresponsive drone, so we played along and bided our time. We tried to avoid hurting innocents when we could, but often there was nothing we could do." She shuddered at the memories. That wasn't the whole truth; in retrospect, she saw so much that they could have done but didn't dare try. If there was a drawback to her mental solitude, it was having to cope with the guilt alone.

"A few months ago our scout sphere encountered a ship belonging to Species 7690- the Ankari. The sphere tried to assimilate them, but we were ready to make our move. We

triggered the self-destruct, beamed ourselves to the Ankari ship and asked for asylum. We'd rigged a device to mask our signals from the collective." She paused. "Well, I guess I rigged the device; I was the engineer in the group." It felt good to take individual credit, individual pride in something after so long. "And Ankari ships travel fast and are hard to track. They were grateful for our help, so they took us far away and did their best to remove our Borg implants." Her hand unconsciously went to her thigh, feeling its new smoothness. Voyager's doctor- a sentient hologram, of all things- had improved on the Ankari's work, removing most of her remaining implants and healing the surface scars. She now wore a tight dermal sheath like Seven's to protect and nourish her new-grown skin; but unlike Seven, she didn't consider modesty irrelevant, so she wore her Starfleet uniform over it. "They're a good people- gentle, spiritual. They were a comfort."

Some of the Equinox crew members winced, and Marika remembered that the aliens they'd been killing had been sacred to the Ankari. "Uhh, so how did you finally track Voyager down?" Harry Kim asked her, evidently sensing the mood and wishing to change the subject. She gave him an appreciative smile and continued- though she noticed the way his eyes lit up in response to her smile.

"We had the Borg's knowledge of your last encounter, the transwarp core you stole. They computed how far you'd be likely to get with it, so we knew you were somewhere in the Three-Kiloparsec Arm. And the Markonian outpost is a major hub hereabouts," she went on, gesturing toward the massive space station to which Voyager was docked. "Once you arrived here, the news spread quickly."

"It's a pretty impressive place, all right," Harry said, and launched into a discussion of the diverse species and sensations he'd encountered on the outpost- still trying to guide the discussion away from the Ankari. Marika watched him with interest. Neelix may have been the nominal morale officer, and Tom Paris was clearly the life of the party hereabouts... but as she watched the crew interact, Marika sensed that Harry Kim was the true heart of Voyager, a stalwart, gentle, optimistic anchor keeping the crew from losing faith or growing embittered, as their counterparts on Equinox had.

So it surprised her when he confessed to participating in a recent brawl on the outpost. He and Paris had apparently been confined to quarters ever since, though Captain Janeway had let them out to attend the mixer. "Brawling, Ensign?" she challenged with a broad grin. "You don't strike me as the type."

"Well, I didn't start it!" he protested, his eyes going wide in a very endearing way. "The Kinbori attacked us- we were just defending ourselves!"

"Right," B'Elanna Torres scoffed. "And then you 'defended yourself' against a whole Morphinian cafe- furniture and all."

"Things got a little out of hand," Harry admitted sheepishly. "I tried to reason with them, but nobody was listening. And then... well... it kind of became about defending the crew's honor."

"Oh, of course," Marika laughed, clasping his shoulder. "Young Mr. Kim is a paragon of Starfleet honor, isn't he?"

Tom Paris clapped Harry's other shoulder, and the ensign looked uncomfortable in between them. "Oh, he's our golden boy, Lieutenant. Honest, loyal, clean-cut, good to his mother..."

"Stop it," Harry said, blushing. It made him even cuter. When he noticed how Marika was looking at him, he blushed deeper. "Uhhh, I'm gonna go get a refill," he muttered, wriggling out from the group.

But Marika followed him over to the buffet. "Fruit punch, of course," she said, grinning at his drink selection. "Sensible choice. I'll have one too." She waited, and naturally he did the polite thing and filled a glass for her. She clasped his hand against the glass when he gave it to her. Their eyes met for a moment, and there was so much potential there... but then he looked away and pulled his hand free to clear his throat.

Marika grinned. "You're adorable when you blush, did you know that?" Which of course deepened his blush. "You remind me of- well, of Starfleet, I suppose. Of humanity. So young and idealistic, so unscarred and brimming with confidence in its ability to do good."

Some fire showed in his eyes, but it was a warming fire. "I'm not some naive kid. Not after five years out here, all I've been through."

"Of course not. But you've always had your crewmates, your friends to support you. Whatever you've been through, you still had this ship, something stable and comfortable to fall back on. You never grew up in a refugee camp, never had to sell yourself for a meal, never had to spend nine years as a Borg puppet."

He fidgeted, unable to meet her eyes. She lifted his chin with her hand. "Don't worry, Harry- I mean it as a compliment. Talking with you, seeing your innocence and purity, it reminds me of the way I felt when I finally got to Starfleet Academy. When for the first time in my life I could see people living in peace and equality, surrounded by beauty and wealth and a community that cared for them, and realized I could share in that life.

"In the past nine years I've seen such horror, inflicted so much evil... I'd almost forgotten what innocence and idealism were. It's so comforting to feel them once again. It's healing. And that's something I really need right now, Harry Kim. I'd really like to explore those feelings with you."

His expression wavered between emotions- compassion, attraction, embarrassment, anxiety. "But... I thought you were married."

She lowered her eyes. "I was declared dead a long time ago. According to Voyager's records, my... ex-husband remarried two years after I was assimilated. And I'm never going to see him again. I accepted that a long time ago." Marika shook off the somber mood. "By any realistic standard, I'm available. How about you?"

"Lieutenant- "

"Call me Karah."

"Umm, I'm very flattered, really. You're a very attractive woman, don't get me wrong. And you have my sympathies for... what you've been through. But... this is just going a little fast for me."

"Unfortunately," she said, "I don't have the luxury of time."

Finally he settled on an expression. To Marika's regret, it was pity.

* * *

When they left the mixer, Harry kept looking expectantly at Tom Paris, waiting for the inevitable. He'd seen Tom watching him with Karah- with Lieutenant Marika, and he knew the helmsman had seen his reaction to her. But as the moments stretched on without a word from Tom, Harry grew more and more edgy, until finally he could take it no longer. "Well?"

Tom looked back with an attempt at an innocent look- something he was never very good at. "Well what?"

"Where is it? Where's your wisecrack about poor Harry, falling for the wrong woman again? A hologram, Tal, the wrong twin, and now- " He broke off. The look in Tom's eyes made him angry. "You can't say it, can you? You feel sorry for me. Sorry for her."

"Well, what do you want me to say, Harry?" Tom asked. "You want me to make light of her situation? Would you like it if I were that callous?"

"I just don't want your pity!"

"Look, what are you complaining about? You're not the one with a month left to live!"

Harry winced at that, clenching his fists. He whirled and pounded them against the corridor wall. After a moment, he felt Tom's hand on his shoulder. "She really has gotten to you, hasn't she? I mean, I could see you were interested, but this..."

"I don't know how to explain it. She's... I mean, she's smart and strong and attractive, of course. But..."

"But there's more."

"There is. I guess... knowing what she's been through, what's- what's going to happen to her, it... I don't know."

"It makes you care," Tom said softly.

"Yeah."

"Even though- "

"Yeah."

"Damn." There was a long silence. "So what are you gonna do about it?"

"I don't know. Nothing. What can I do?"

Tom nodded. "Good idea. That's probably best. Just try not to think about it. Concentrate on your duties, practice your clarinet, play Buster Kincaid on the holodeck..."

"And in a month it'll be over and I can forget she ever existed?" Harry shot back.

"Something like that," Tom said after a moment.

"That's pretty cold."

"Maybe. But it's the easiest way out of this. The safest way. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Harry had no answer.

* * *

Chakotay looked around wistfully as he strode through the Markonian outpost for the last time. It was indeed a remarkable place, this vast cosmopolitan trading town floating in the void. The Markonians had once been a refugee people, fleeing the destruction of their world and forced to adopt a nomadic life- not unlike his own ancestors or his fellow Maquis. But they'd flourished in that life, becoming ubiquitous as traders, explorers, and diplomats. Without a homeworld, they were generally seen as a neutral party, and had proven valuable in defusing territorial conflicts and building bridges of trust. Now they were at the vanguard of a flourishing interstellar community which could well be a new Federation in the making. He regretted that he couldn't stay around to watch it happen.

Not that it would be easy, Chakotay was reminded as he rounded a corner and nearly collided with a party of Voth. He stepped aside, trying not to stare. Even knowing the Voth had transwarp, it was still surprising to see them here, over forty thousand light-years from the site of their first encounter.

The Voth had been one of Voyager's most remarkable discoveries in the Delta Quadrant, though ironically they came from home- the descendants of an intelligent dinosaur species which had left or been removed from Earth before the Cretaceous/Tertiary extinction. Their civilization had endured here for millions of years, owing its stability to a rigid social and political structure which cracked down brutally on original ideas- such as the idea that the Voth were not native to the quadrant. Voyager's presence had threatened that dogma, and the ship had only survived through the sacrifice of the Voth's most original thinker, Professor Gegen, who had voluntarily suppressed his Distant Origin theory in exchange for Voyager's freedom.

The deal still rankled with Chakotay, but there had been little he could do about it. There was certainly nothing to be gained by confronting them now; it was just fortunate that these Voth seemed content to leave Voyager alone, so long as it continued its journey away from their space. So he simply did his best to avoid eye contact as he passed by.

A moment later he was surprised to hear a tentative voice call his name. He turned to see a solitary Voth gesturing to him from a dim side corridor. He approached slowly, on his guard. A number of Voth had visited Voyager over the past few days, courtesy of Janeway's open-door policy, but Chakotay couldn't remember meeting this one. "Yes?"

"I bring greetings... from Ninhursag."

It took him a moment to place the name- the Sumerian Earth goddess! "How do you know... her?" he asked.

"From a mutual acquaintance. You introduced him to her."

Chakotay's eyes widened. Perhaps the little he'd been able to do had borne fruit after all. "The globe?" he whispered, coming closer.

The hadrosauroid gestured him into an empty room and placed a familiar device on his arm.

The room seemed to shimmer. "I have cloaked us. We can speak freely."

"You know Professor Gegen? His work?" Chakotay asked.

"Yes. The Distant Origin theory lives on, thanks to you. The orthodoxy does not hold absolute sway. It is why we are here- the state fears the weakening of its control, so it sends fleets all over the quadrant, reasserting its dominance and stability. It has no real interest in any other species' affairs, though, and once we have gained their token allegiance we will return to our usual isolation," the Voth said with distaste.

Chakotay nodded, recognizing the pattern. Ming China had launched and then scuttled Zheng He's mighty trading ships- the original "Star Fleet"- for similar reasons. "I'm gratified. But- I'd prefer to have my involvement kept quiet." The Voth leadership had dictated that all of Gegen's research, all knowledge of Earth, must be destroyed. Giving Gegen a globe of Earth- particularly one concealing a copy of Starfleet's database files about the planet- was iffy at best from a Prime Directive standpoint. But Chakotay had still been Maquis enough to do it anyway.

"For now," the Voth agreed. "Change takes much time, particularly for my people. When the Voth do finally accept this truth, you and I will be long gone. I simply wished you to know that the truth has not been destroyed, and that there are those among us who are grateful for the fact. Those who would call you humans our cousins- and our friends."

Chakotay was moved. But he was also a practical man, and a possibility occurred to him. "You know... it might help bring out the truth if you could actually make contact with Earth. With your transwarp drive, you could get there in weeks. And if you really want to show your gratitude, you could take Voyager with you."

The Voth grimaced. "That would be a very bad idea, I fear. Do not overestimate the underground's strength. The rulers will still not hesitate to destroy any evidence which threatens orthodoxy. That would include the Earth, if we attempted to contact it. I am sorry."

Chakotay patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. It was just a thought."

"However," the Voth said thoughtfully, "I recall from my tour of your ship that you have a multispatial probe."

"Yes, we do."

"Our ship will depart the outpost tomorrow evening. We will draw energy from a nearby star prior to transwarp entry. If your multispatial probe were monitoring the proper subspace domains at the moment of entry, you could perhaps gain the knowledge you need to perfect transwarp for yourselves."

Chakotay thought it over. "Perhaps we could at that. I'm very grateful. Just let me know the right bands to scan," he said, taking out his tricorder.

The Voth provided the information, then said, "I must go, or I will be missed. Wait here a moment, so we are not seen leaving together. And... good luck in your endeavors."

"You too," Chakotay told him. "I hope it isn't too long before our species meet again."

The Voth paused as he reached to deactivate the cloak. "Hope it is not too soon- for your

species' sake."

* * *

Captain's Log, Stardate 53058.8. After discussion with the senior staff, I've decided to proceed with Commander Chakotay's proposal to scan the Voth ship as it goes into transwarp. I'm still considering how to deal with the commander's revelation of his unauthorized "gift" to the Voth; yet given how much more advanced they are than us, I doubt whether the Prime Directive could apply here. Besides, he's not the only one of us who's made questionable choices on this voyage, myself included. I'm content to let Starfleet decide on any disciplinary action, whenever we manage to get home. Hopefully the crew won't have to wait much longer for our collective court-martial. I hear New Zealand's nice this time of year.

Chief Engineer Torres informs me that our multispatial probe will require modifications to scan the simultaneous subspace domains indicated by our Voth friend. I've made the assignment top priority for our engineering and science staffs. Several of our new crew members- Crewmen Gilmore and Morrow and Lieutenant Marika- have volunteered to assist with the project, in order to prove their worth to the ship. Torres informs me that Marika's experience with subspace engineering should be helpful. The lieutenant seems determined to make good use of what little time she has among us, and I'm pleased to accept her assistance.

* * *

"I'm still not convinced that Voth of Chakotay's was on the level," B'Elanna Torres grumbled as she and Harry stood over the multispatial probe, performing surgery on its innards. "Scanning on all these different domains at once, mixing three- and four-dimensional modes- the interference patterns should reduce it all to so much noise!"

"I think the interference is actually constructive in five dimensions," Harry said. "If I'm following this right, it'll be like adding a new sensor band on top of the others. It'll give us a whole new level of analysis!"

Marika came up beside Harry, chuckling. "You're having fun with this, aren't you?" she asked, clasping his shoulder.

"At least one of us is," B'Elanna grumbled before wandering off to another part of the engineering deck.

Harry almost cried out for her to stay, but realized he had no excuse. He cleared his throat and tried to step away nonchalantly. "It's why we're out here, right? To learn new things."

"That Starfleet sense of wonder," Marika sighed. "I had that once, before one of those new things grabbed me and... well. That's the past now. Maybe you can help me find it again."

He moved to the other side of the probe to tune one of the collector vanes. "You don't need me for that. Just being out here, you're bound to see wonders. Umm, have you got those brane resonance figures yet?"

"Here." She handed him a padd, and he tried to bury himself in its data. But Marika came around to stand by him. "So what's an Ops officer doing on this project? Seems like more of a science officer's gig."

"We've never really had a science officer as such. With all the crew losses, most of us have had to double up, adapt to new duties."

"Well, you fill the science officer's shoes very well. Hell, you fill the whole uniform pretty damn well," she added with a leer.

Harry cleared his throat. "Lieutenant- "

"Karah."

"This really isn't the time."

"I have to take what time I have."

He winced. "Look- I understand that. But- "

"Do you? Can you? Can any of you?" She shook her head. "I look around at this ship, this crew, and do you know what I see? Missed opportunities. You've been together five years, and nobody's gotten married; nobody's started a family, except one ensign who was already pregnant when you left; nobody's even left the ship to settle down somewhere. You're all living your lives on hold, maintaining a cozy status quo. You're so fixated on this remote future, this dream of getting home, that you're not living in the present! You're not letting yourselves commit to anything, take any chances on anything other than getting closer to the Alpha Quadrant. You're treating life as a goal instead of a journey!"

She gathered herself. "All my life, Harry, I've had so few opportunities for happiness, for success, for anything. I grew up starving and miserable in the refugee camps. In the Academy I was shy and lonely, afraid to trust anyone, to reach out and make friends. Afraid to trust myself enough to do really well, to earn any honors. Then finally on the Excalibur I met a man who loved me, who gave me happiness and confidence, and for the first time in my life I was flourishing, discovering my strength and value- but less than a year later I had it all ripped away from me by the Borg. I didn't even have the luxury of oblivion, not after Seven forced us into that triad. I knew what I was doing to innocent people, but I felt too helpless, too afraid to change it, and let it go on for eight long years before we finally did something about it. And now I'm finally free of that hell, and I've got a month to live. Only a month, to make up for a lifetime of emptiness and wasted chances."

She took his hands into hers. "And I want to spend it with you, Harry Kim. I feel a connection between us, a real potential. I literally can't pass up that potential. That's what I need you to understand, Harry."

Harry could hardly bring himself to meet her eyes. His own eyes were too blurred with the threat of tears. He pulled away. "Karah... I wish I could give you what you need. I really do. But... I'm just not strong enough." He got a little distance from her, enough that he could bear to look at her. "I would love for you to be part of my life, Karah. But- but all I can think about when I look at you is how soon you're going to be gone from my life forever. It just hurts too much. I can't... I can't stand to let you get too close."

He quailed at the look in her eyes. "I know it's selfish of me, and I feel terrible about- about having to let you down. But... I just can't stop thinking about what's going to happen. So I couldn't make you happy. I'd just make you miserable. Believe me, you'd be better off giving up on me and finding someone else. I'm... I'm really sorry."

Marika studied him grimly. "I'm sorry too, Harry. Sorry for you. It's so easy to think up excuses not to live your life. Believe me, I know from experience. But I also know... how much it costs you."

* * *

A short warp hop brought Voyager to its destination star comfortably ahead of the Voth cruiser, using the star's L4 asteroid cluster as a "duck blind." The star was a young, hot B9 giant, a good candidate from which to "draw energy." Janeway was curious to see how the Voth would do this. And they didn't leave her waiting long. The cruiser popped into the system on conventional warp drive, closer to the star than Janeway would risk with a Starfleet drive. "I'm reading gravimetric and EM fluctuations," Harry reported as the cruiser swept in toward the star. "Increasing turbulence in the photosphere- a vortex is forming, Captain!"

But Janeway could see it happening on the viewscreen. They were light-minutes away, but the ship's subspace sensors revealed it in real time. As the Voth cruiser soared over the star, a tightly spinning column of blue fire rose up behind it, trailing it like a kite's tail. "That's one fancy ramscoop," Tom observed.

"It's more than that," Harry said. "It's like the magnetic and gravimetric lines of force are getting drawn into the ship as well as the plasma. As if the star's gravitational potential energy is being siphoned off."

"Sounds like a plausible first step in opening a transwarp conduit," Janeway observed. "Begin the multispatial scans."

The telemetry from the probe supported Janeway's conjecture. Over the next few moments, space and subspace near the star began to distort in complex ways. "Why go to all the trouble?" Tom wondered at one point. "We've seen them go to transwarp without needing a star."

"This way probably saves energy," Chakotay said. "The Voth are a conservative people; they wouldn't like to expend more resources than they need to."

"Besides," Janeway added, "forty thousand light-years is a long trip."

It soon became evident that the Voth ship was indeed taking gravitational energy from the star to power the conduit. The loss of energy meant that the star would fall into a lower orbit around the galactic center, but that wouldn't be noticeable for a few million years.

"Uh-oh," Harry said. "I'm getting feedback from the probe- the Voth may have detected it."

"Keep it scanning. We need whatever data we can get. Tuvok, yellow alert, ready on shields."

But as Chakotay had said, the Voth were disinclined to waste energy by coming after Voyager, especially when they were so close to completing the conduit. Instead they chose a more efficient form of attack. "They're doing something new to the star," Harry reported. "There's- they've launched a coronal mass ejection! An ion storm, heading right for the probe!"

"Try to maneuver the probe away. Maintain scans."

But it proved useless. The outer edge of the ion storm caught the probe, scrambling its transmissions just moments before the Voth ship leapt away into transwarp. Harry worked his console frantically, only to shake his head and report, "No good, Captain. Nothing but static."

"Damn. All right. Retrieve the probe."

A beat. "It's not responding."

"Tom, take us to transporter range. We'll beam it out."

"There's too much interference," Harry said.

"Let me go get it with a shuttle," B'Elanna requested from engineering. "It may have gotten some useful data after all. And it's our only multispatial probe- I don't want to lose it."

Janeway weighed the risks. Any other probe could be replaced, but the multispatial probe incorporated unique components, results of the technological alchemy which had created the "twenty-ninth-century" Borg drone called One. (Seven had actually recycled them from his body, citing the inefficiency of waste, though Janeway suspected it had been more about wanting a part of him to live on.) It was an irreplaceable tool in the search for spatial anomalies which might shorten Voyager's journey home, or end it if they weren't detected. "All right. But if it gets much deeper into the storm, I want you to abort. It's not worth your life to get it back."

"I'll be careful, Captain."

The look Tom threw the captain showed what he thought of the likelihood of that.

* * *

Captain's Log, Supplemental. We recovered Lieutenant Torres's shuttle from the trailing edge of the storm, but it was badly damaged. Its life-support had failed and Torres was in a coma. We transported her to sickbay, and the Doctor was able to treat her injuries and awaken her. He reports that she suffered disorientation and mild hallucinations, but assures me this is normal under these conditions and that B'Elanna will be fine after a night's rest. I'll recommend a reduced duty schedule for the next few days, but knowing the lieutenant I doubt she'll accept it.

As for the multispatial probe, sensors detect no sign of it. I can only conclude it was destroyed in the ion storm, taking any useful transwarp data with it.

* * *

"Excellent!" the EMH said as he waved his tricorder over Marika. "You're continuing to heal very nicely. I'd say you're ready to start back on solid food now."

"Thank the Prophets," Marika sighed. "I tell you, Doctor, delayed gratification is not my cup of tea these days."

"Yes," the holographic healer said with careful neutrality. "However, your serotonin levels

seem a little low. Are you under much stress? Is there anything you'd like to talk about? I've upgraded my programming to include counseling subroutines- although," he added with a scowl, "the crew seems oddly reluctant to take advantage of them."

"No, that's all right, Doctor," she said with a smile.

"If you say so, but- "

Just then the door opened and Lieutenant Torres came in, looking determined. "Doctor, can I have a word with you?"

The Doctor looked to Marika, but she nodded her assent. "Very well," he told her. "You can get dressed now."

As the EMH led Torres into his office, Marika wondered if she should take him up on his offer to talk. She wasn't really finding the answers on her own. Okay, so Harry had turned her down. Why waste precious time moping over that, when there were dozens of other men aboard Voyager? But good prospects were hard to find. The Maquis were all too preoccupied with her past in the camps, with treating her as a symbol of Cardassian brutality even though she'd rarely met a Cardassian. And of the Starfleet men, what were the options? Paris was involved, Tuvok and Vorik were Vulcans, Carey and others had wives back home... and frankly a lot of them were rather boring. And Neelix... she didn't even want to go there.

Besides- she wasn't looking for a random partner. If she just wanted sexual gratification, there was always the holodeck. There was a real spark between her and Harry, something she'd felt with only one other man in her life. And she knew he felt it too- his refusal was a denial of himself as well as her. So there was more to lose here than her own fulfillment. And Harry would have to live with that loss far longer than she would.

Her reverie was broken by a shout from the Doctor. "You want me to do what?!"

Torres raised her voice in response, and Marika was paying attention now, so she could follow the conversation fairly clearly. "Re-create the coma. The conditions aboard the shuttle. Whatever it was that let me visit the Barge of the Dead, I need to do it again."

"B'Elanna," the Doctor said patiently. "I understand how real the experience must have seemed to you, but hallucinations like this are common in cases of neural trauma. You're asking me to put your life in danger for something that may not have been real."

"And what if it was real? We've seen too many amazing things in this universe to assume it was just a hallucination. What if I have a chance to save my mother's soul from damnation and I don't take it? How can I live with myself if I don't do that for her? If I don't do something to make amends for what I've cost her?"

"Remember Captain Janeway's near-death experience? That wasn't a hallucination- it was the creation of an alien parasite that wanted to feed on her neural energy."

"This isn't the same. They didn't even want me."

"So it seemed to you. But now you're feeling an intense compulsion to go back."

"You have my medical scans- was there any sign of a neural parasite?"

"Well... no," he said grudgingly. "But that doesn't mean I'm willing to do this. You'd be risking your life, and for no medically valid reason. It goes against the core of my programming: First, do no harm."

"You brought me out before. And this time you'd be supervising every step of the process. I'm sure you could revive me again."

"It's not that simple. The brain is too complex an organ; it's impossible to be sure it would respond the same way again. I'm sorry, B'Elanna. I'm not willing to perform a procedure that could end your life."

"But you already did that for me," Marika said, stepping forward. "Pardon my eavesdropping- but it's true. You could've prolonged my life indefinitely by sending me back to the Borg. But instead you performed a procedure that cut my life expectancy to a few weeks."

"That was for a very different reason."

"I don't think so, Doctor. What it basically came down to is that the most important thing in life isn't how long it lasts- it's what you do with it while you've got it." She moved to Torres's side, gave her a supportive smile before continuing. "Believe me, Doctor, there are worse things than dying. One of them is living with missed opportunities- knowing that you'll never have something you could've had if you'd just been brave enough to take the chance."

"B'Elanna's asking you for a chance to make peace with her mother- at least in her own mind, whether it's objectively real or not. If you deny her that chance, if you condemn her to live the rest of her life not knowing what she could've had, aren't you doing her more harm?"

The Doctor met her eyes thoughtfully. "Survival is insufficient," he murmured.

"Damn straight."

After a moment, he sighed. "Well, I suppose I could dredge up some precedents from Klingon medical practices- therapy by ordeal, that sort of thing, though it goes against my better judgment. But I'll only consent to the procedure if Captain Janeway approves it."

B'Elanna grinned and gave him a quick hug, surprising him. "Thank you, Doc! I'll go talk to her right now."

"Very well," the Doctor called to her as she ran out of sickbay. "But next time someone asks me to shorten their life expectancy, I'm putting my foot down for sure!"

* * *

Neelix surveyed the mess hall crowd, judging their mood. A lot of people were congregating here, but they were unusually quiet. No doubt they were concerned about the ordeal B'Elanna was undergoing in sickbay. They wanted each other's company, but were unsure what to make of this strange undertaking, or what to say about it. They were just waiting for it to be over, for their friend and colleague to be safely restored to them- as Neelix sincerely hoped she would. He also hoped B'Elanna's expedition to the other side would prove fruitful. When he had briefly died two years ago, before Seven's Borg nanoprobes had revived him, he had experienced nothing but oblivion. On some level he was jealous of B'Elanna for

having such a clear vision of her people's afterlife, or tempted to dismiss it as a delusion. But that was no way for a friend to think, and for the most part he was happy for her. Or would be once she was back among the living.

The one exception to the subdued behavior of the crowd was Harry Kim. He paced up and down the mess hall, looking nervous and angry at the same time. Concerned that the ensign's mood might infect the others, Neelix moved toward Harry, intercepting him by the windows. "You look tired, Ensign," the Talaxian said. "Maybe you should sit down, have a bite to eat."

"How can I eat at a time like this?" Harry shot back, then shook his head. "I can't believe the captain agreed to this. I can't believe the Doctor agreed to this! She could be throwing her life away for nothing!"

"I'm sure the Doctor will take good care of B'Elanna. He's brought a lot of us back from worse."

"And sometimes he hasn't. Sometimes people just can't be saved! I'm sick of it, Neelix. I'm sick of losing people I care about, and knowing there's nothing I can do!"

Neelix looked around. "Ensign, listen to me," he said softly. "There are a lot of people in this room who don't need to hear someone saying things like that right now. Besides, I think you and I both know that it isn't really B'Elanna you're talking about, is it?"

Harry looked abashed, and let Neelix lead him to a seat. "Lieutenant Marika's really gotten to you, hasn't she?" the Talaxian asked.

"She's certainly tried to," the human replied. Harry told Neelix about Marika's advances, and how he wished he could respond in kind but couldn't bear to let her close. "And so I feel guilty about rejecting her, when she has so little time left- but that just reminds me of how little time she has, and that's too painful to deal with."

Neelix pondered for a moment. "You know something, Ensign? When I first met Kes- when I fell in love with her- she told me she'd only have seven or eight more years to live, but at the time it didn't really bother me much. Not that I liked the idea, of course. But you see, back then I was a scavenger, living hand to mouth, getting by one day at a time. I never really thought much about the future. Eight years or eighty, it all seemed equally remote, so I didn't worry about it.

"But once I was living on Voyager, not having to wonder where my next meal was coming from or whether I could keep the life support running another day, I started to think more about what the future held. And I started to realize that I might have to spend more of my future without Kes than with her. And the prospect just terrified me, Mr. Kim, I don't mind telling you. It was something I spent a lot of time worrying about. That's why I was so insanely jealous about Kes back then- because I was desperately afraid of losing her. And because I knew that eventually I would lose her and there was nothing I could do to change it.

"We finally talked about it- I suppose it was just after our encounter with Suspiria's array and the Ocampas who lived there. I was so excited by the idea that they could maybe extend Kes's life, so I got rather depressed when they turned out to be, well, as disagreeable as they were and we had to leave them behind. Kes confronted me about what was bothering me, and I finally put it in words for the first time."

He paused, long enough to lead Harry to ask, "And what did she say?"

Neelix smiled. "Something very wise and very simple, like always. She pointed out that if we only had a finite time together anyway, it was foolish to waste even more of it by dwelling on how little of it there was. She looked at me with those huge, beautiful eyes and said... she said, 'Neelix- don't mourn me before I'm gone. It isn't fair to either of us. Save the mourning for when it's needed- but now is the time for joy.' "

After a pause, he went on. "The ironic thing, of course, is that Kes broke up with me a year later, and then she went off to... well, greater things. So we had even less time than I thought. But because of what she said to me that day, the rest of the time we did have together was very full. And when she left- both times- I was sad, of course, but I was... satisfied. I thought more about what I'd gained than what I'd lost. So I had no regrets."

Harry sat quietly, absorbing Neelix's words. Then he stood. "Excuse me, Neelix. There's someone I need to talk to."

* * *

Harry found Marika climbing down out of a Jefferies tube on deck twelve, tool kit in hand. She stood expectantly, waiting for him to speak. "I've been thinking," he began, "about what you said. About making the most of the time you have. And I've decided- that is, I'd be willing... Oh, hell." He pulled her against him and kissed her. Neither of them heard the toolkit hit the floor.

"You're learning," she finally gasped when they came up for air.

"If we've only got a few weeks, then let's make it the best few weeks of our lives," Harry said. "I want to know you, Karah. I want to know everything about you, share everything I can with you. So that... so I can remember you."

Marika grinned. "I can't wait. Unfortunately, I'm on duty. But once my shift ends..." She returned the kiss, with interest. "I'll give you plenty to remember."

* * *

The next few days were a whirlwind. Harry and Marika spent every free moment together, coordinating their shifts to maximize their time. Their physical passion for each other warred for time with their eagerness to learn about each other, to share all they could. They talked for hours, exchanging their life stories in detail. Harry learned what it had been like to grow up lean and hungry in the midst of desperation, while Marika learned what it had been like to grow up nurtured and protected in the midst of paradise. They compared notes on their Academy professors and their Starfleet adventures. They offered each other tips on engineering and ship's systems. They argued passionately over politics and philosophy, and had great fun making up afterwards. They burned up every holodeck ration they could beg, borrow, or trade for, seeking to share every experience they could think of. Behind closed doors, she showed him techniques he'd never considered and he showed her a sensitivity she'd never known. After less than a week, Harry was feeling drained and exhausted; yet he was determined to keep going, to make the most of every day.

Fortunately, one experience Marika sought to sample was sunbathing on the beaches of Bajor's Rennekal Archipelago, her ancestral home. It was a chance to let her experience her heritage while taking some time to relax and recover- although Harry realized he wouldn't be

relaxing much once he saw what the traditional Rennekal idea of a bathing suit was. Or wasn't.

However, Marika was content to swim, sunbathe, and talk for the moment. Her narrative had gotten through the Academy years, and as Harry rubbed tanning lotion onto her bare back she recounted how her family had received her upon her return to the refugee camps. It was an effort for Harry to keep her back muscles relaxed, but he wasn't complaining. "... So finally I just stood up to my big brother and told him calmly, 'No, Sinadah. I don't have to prove anything to you. I don't have to earn the right to be treated as an adult. Because you don't have any authority to decide that. I am an adult, and your opinion has no bearing on the matter.' "

"And did it work?"

"No," she laughed. "He kept on treating me like a child. But I stopped letting it get to me. I just felt sorry for him, because he hadn't grown."

"Hmm. Maybe I was lucky being an only child after all."

"Maybe. But the truth is, I learned a lot from Sinadah when I was growing up. I'm grateful to him for that- which is why it was such a shame that he hadn't grown enough to see how much I'd grown."

Harry grew thoughtful. "My mom and dad always treated me like their little boy- and I always liked it. It made me feel safe and comfortable. But I've grown so much in the past five years... will they be able to see it once we get home?"

She rolled over to face him. "I'm sure they will. Maybe they won't want to, but they will. They're good people. I know- because they raised you." She kissed him. "I wish I could get to meet them."

Harry looked away; the mood was broken. Marika sighed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to- "

"It's okay." He cleared his throat. "Hey, I could go for a hot dog, how about you?"

She stroked his arm. "Harry... when the time comes..."

"Please, Karah, I don't- "

"I just wanted to say... you don't have to be there. I'll understand."

He didn't know how to respond. And he didn't want to think about it. Luckily, she brightened, pulled him against her and kissed him playfully. "Now what was that about a hot dog...?"

"Chakotay to Ensign Kim."

Not good timing, Harry thought. "Kim here."

"Briefing in Astrometrics, ten minutes. We've gotten a call from the Markonians- it looks like our multispatial probe wasn't destroyed after all."

Harry blinked. "That's great news!"

"I only wish it were."

* * *

"In order to scan the necessary subspace domains, the probe used a low-level static warp field to extend itself partway into subspace," Seven of Nine declared, while displaying a simulation of same on the massive astrometrics viewscreen. "Apparently the ion storm intensified the field, causing it to submerge the probe entirely in subspace. It also caused an alteration in the probe's Borg components, causing them to emit increasing quantities of subspace radiation. These emissions are apparently powered by the energy differential between domains, and thus can intensify indefinitely."

Janeway, Chakotay, Torres, Kim, and Marika looked on as she lectured. Marika studied Seven, puzzling over her. The human ex-drone understood that freedom from the Collective was worth dying for, yet she still embraced the cold, haughty precision of the Borg, and refused to reclaim her human name. Marika couldn't understand that. Then again, she reflected, maybe she could. Seven had been assimilated as a child, and in many ways, perhaps, that childish fear still drove her. It had driven her to force Marika and the others into the triad to prevent them from escaping- from leaving her alone in the dark. Now it held her back from embracing her humanity wholeheartedly, and limited her to baby steps. Marika almost felt sorry for her, almost wanted to give her a good talking-to. But after what Seven had done to her, Marika couldn't quite find it in herself to try.

"The radiation," Seven went on, "has now reached sufficient energy density to reopen the mouth of the subspace pocket containing the probe. The radiation is pouring out into normal space, and due to subspace tunneling it is affecting the region for light-years around."

The narrative was picked up by the Markonian station manager, whose signal was displayed on one of the side monitors. His blue-skinned, ridge-crested features were framed by a dark chador which covered his head and shoulders in keeping with his people's modesty customs. "It has already become a navigation hazard for many of our visitors. Our models predict that within a week it will grow intense enough to endanger the outpost itself. But the radiation at the source is too intense to allow anyone to approach the probe, and the subspace distortion prevents any missiles or energy weapons from reaching it." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "We have attempted to contact the Voth for assistance, but they appear to be out of range."

"Or else," Chakotay put in, "they have a vested interest in not helping. If the probe survived, it may still contain some useful data on their transwarp technology."

"You think they'd endanger countless lives just to keep their secrets?" Harry asked.

The station manager replied. "If our historical records of the Voth are accurate, they will go to any lengths to preserve their desired status quo. And they can rarely be roused to exert themselves on behalf of others. We only tried asking because they were the ones most likely to know how to cope with this crisis. Instead we turn to you- since the probe is yours, hopefully you will have insights our scientists lack."

"We promise we'll do everything we can," Janeway told him.

Indeed, the brainstorming went quickly. Whatever else Marika might feel about this crew, they were certainly skilled at solving technical problems. No signal or phaser could reach the probe; it would take active navigation to compensate for the twisted subspace geodesics.

Could Voyager go in? No, the tidal stresses would tear it apart. A shuttle could get closer, but not into the rift itself. A probe's systems would be fried, and a remote-navigated torpedo couldn't get clear telemetry through the interference. Even the Doctor's mobile emitter couldn't withstand the subspace radiation.

Marika was the first to admit where this was inevitably heading. "The only way is if someone goes in there to shut the probe down manually. Get as close as possible in a shuttle and spacewalk into the rift itself."

"But the radiation would kill them in minutes, even in a rad-hardened spacesuit," B'Elanna said.

"That's long enough to get the job done."

"It's a suicide mission!"

"Yes, it is. Which is why I have to be the one to do it."

Everyone stared. Harry was most horrified of all. "Karah, no- you can't be serious!"

Steeling herself, she pulled him aside. "Harry, it's the only decision that makes any sense. I've only got a couple of weeks left to me anyway. Besides, my leftover Borg components might give me an edge, let me survive longer."

"If the radiation doesn't fry them!"

"They aren't electronics, mostly. Structural reinforcements, that sort of thing- ohh, Harry, the mechanics don't matter! The point is, I'm dying anyway. At least this way it serves a purpose. And it'll be quick. No lingering, no slow decay. It's better this way... for both of us."

"But..." He struggled for words.

Marika sighed, and turned to Janeway. "Captain, could we be excused for a moment?"

The captain nodded. Marika led Harry out into the corridor, and hugged him close. "Harry, I have to do this. Aside from all the other reasons, this is a way I can make amends for everything I did as a Borg. A way that I'm uniquely suited to help people. Something that gives my death meaning- and maybe gives meaning to everything in my life that led me to this point."

"And what about us? Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Ohh, Harry. You know it does." She kissed him, stroked his cheek. "These past six days have meant more to me even than ten months of marriage did. But that only made a difference to you and me. This will make a difference for countless other people. Wouldn't you give your life for that?"

He fell silent, unable to counter that. But he was still struggling with it, resisting the truth. "Harry, you knew this was going to happen soon enough."

"I know. I know. But- I thought we'd have a few weeks, at least. It's only been six days! There's still so much we haven't done, haven't said."

"I know, my love. But isn't that the whole point? Happiness... it's a finite thing. You never know how long it's going to last. So you have to celebrate each moment of happiness that you get, cherish it, and not value it any less because of its brevity." She kissed him again. "If we'd only had one night... one hour... one kiss... it would've still meant just as much. Because sometimes that's all you have."

"That's something these Voth don't seem to understand. They think they can keep things the way they are forever, and they're willing to destroy people's lives and happiness for it. They sacrifice their own present and others' to the myth of a certain future. Everything we've done, Harry, everything we've shared, has been a refusal to make that sacrifice. But it means nothing if I don't stand against them now."

He returned the kiss, passionately, desperately. It was almost a goodbye, but he wasn't quite there yet. "But I wanted to know everything about you," he sighed.

"The Borg knew everything about me," Marika said. "I was a puzzle they'd solved completely, so they'd had no reason to be curious, to give me a second thought. It's what we don't know that excites us, captivates us. Sense of wonder, Harry. That's what you've given me. Keep wondering about me, and you'll keep me alive." Their lips met for several more moments, and for a moment, it felt like eternity.

* * *

Harry wanted nothing more than to hide in his quarters, bury his head under the pillows and try to forget what was about to happen. Marika had given him leave to do so. But he realized that he couldn't. He loved her- so he had to be with her to the end.

When she stepped into the Delta Flyer and saw Harry at the controls, Marika paused for a moment, staring wordlessly, and then embraced him in silent gratitude. After that, they were all business, though their hands often met as they flew toward the rift. They couldn't do much more, since they were both in spacesuits for maximum radiation protection. And they'd already said their goodbyes in private.

Harry brought the Flyer as close to the rift as he could manage, and then Marika stroked his cheek one last time before heading aft to the exit. Harry turned the ship to watch as she fired her jets and vanished into the searing Cerenkov light pouring out of the rift. "I'm insi... ift," he heard her say through the static. "Looking fo... robe... see it!" A pause. "Having to adjust... istortion in here mak... rd to navigate... compensating." Harry occupied himself with trying to clean up the signal. Finally her voice came again. "I've reached the probe. I'm going..." This pause had nothing to do with static.

"Are you all right?" he called.

"Feeling weak... nauseous... vision starting to blur. Have to work fast." Harry winced in pain, then tried to steel himself. "Okay, the panel's open. Entering self-destruct code... there, it's done. Counting down from sixty."

"Karah..."

"Wait- as long as I'm here, I'm going to... to upload what's left of the data core to you. Maybe... there's still some data you can use. Maybe I can hand the Voth one more defeat- and help you get home."

"You've already done more than enough, Karah," Harry told her, his voice unsteady.

"So, what, I should rest now? Save my energy? For what? Carpe diem, young Mr. Kim!" Her breathing was growing ragged. "There. Upload complete. Did you get it? Is it any good?"

Harry examined the data readout on the console before him. There was nothing there but noise. "It's- it's great, Karah. This will really help us. You've given us... something precious."

"Thank you," she sighed. "Maybe... you can walk on the beach at Rennekal... and remember me."

"I'll never forget you, Karah. Never."

"You'd better get some distance, love- because I'm about to go out with a bang you'll never forget. Ten... nine..."

Harry put the thrusters in reverse. He didn't want to look away. His eyes were filled with tears, blurring his view, but he would look, he would witness, he would remember Marika Willkarah. "I love you," he told her quietly.

"Always."

The light exploded outward, blinding, furious, the multispectral scream of wounded spacetime. Infinite colors blazed across the sky, bursting outward in concentric rings and spikes and streamers. It was the most beautiful thing Harry had ever seen. The eruption itself would die down in minutes, but Harry knew that light would continue traveling outward, a pyre so radiant it would be seen on distant worlds for hundreds of light-years around- a monument that would endure long after Harry and everyone he knew was gone. Harry smiled with transcendent joy, even as he grieved. "Marika Willkarah was here," he declared to the universe. "And we will remember."

Eighteen Minutes

Terri Osborne

This tale is set during the sixth-season episode "Blink of an Eye."

Terri Osborne

Terri Osborne is a writer, award-winning costumer, and unrepentant fangirl. Her professional fiction debut was the critically acclaimed "Three Sides to Every Story" in 2003's *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Prophecy and Change* anthology. She also wrote the more lighthearted story of Dr. Selar's encounter with the Q, "Q'uandary," in 2003's *New Frontier: No Limits* anthology. Her most recent adventure in Trek fiction was the landmark fiftieth *Star Trek: S.C.E.* story, *Malefictorum*.

Her next foray into the Trek universe will be *Star Trek: S.C.E. #61: Progress*. Outside of Trek, she is currently working on several original fiction projects, set in places as near as Dublin, Ireland, in 1940 and as far as the surface of Mars in the year 2035. Visit Terri's official Web site at www.terriosborne.com.

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- Stardate 53501.3002296456

Subjective time: Day 7

Something's wrong.

Voyager was supposed to have beamed me back four days ago.

I appear to be stranded here on Tahal-Meeroj. Cast adrift on an island of savages might be more like it. For how long is anyone's guess. The planet's tachyon core- as well as the resultant accelerated temporal displacement- is quite likely keeping them from being able to beam me back to the ship. For every minute that goes by on Voyager, fifty-eight days go by here on the planet. Even if it only takes Voyager five minutes to solve the problem and beam me out, that would be almost a year by the calendar on this world. It looks as though I'll be here for a considerable amount of time.

As if spending the better part of three days tucked away in a corner of the library collecting data that might help us escape this planet's orbit hadn't been indignity enough, now I have command-level Prime Directive issues to concern myself with. My Emergency Command Hologram subroutine is ill-equipped to cope. The longer I'm here, the more difficult it's going to be not to affect something in some manner. I must concentrate on keeping the contamination to an absolute minimum.

I was able to adjust my appearance parameters to pass as a native, so that shouldn't be a problem. However, for the long term, I might be able to adjust my appearance parameters to pass as, say, a shrub in the garden. No. While they may be several centuries behind the Federation in terms of cultural development, they do have a modicum of intelligence. I'd be discovered as soon as the gardener came through. I can't continue to spend nights in the library. The caretakers will get suspicious.

While I may not actually require food or shelter, having a place to "hide out"- as Mr. Paris might say- might prove beneficial to my blending into this society. I will need a place to at least say I live, if nothing else. Perish the thought one of these people should investigate any credentials I may need to present. Perhaps Mr. Tuvok's rather prescient thought of adjusting my program to allow me to forge identification will come in handy after all. But what to do to locate that hiding place? How will I pay for it? Perhaps a job? Hmm. How to do that without violating the Prime Directive? I must spend more time considering these questions. Anything I do may be thought of as interfering in this culture's development. However, considering the extent to which Voyager's current situation has interfered in the last few

centuries of Tahal-Isut development, have we not already violated the Prime Directive merely by being here?

There have been sufficient recorded instances of Prime Directive violations- both intentional and otherwise- that perhaps I can gain some insight into what I should do from the efforts taken in those instances.

In the interest of preserving both memory and energy consumption in my mobile emitter, I have procured a small, albeit primitive local version of a padd on which to keep my logs. Everything that will be required for the inevitable Starfleet inquest into this matter will then be archived as a compressed data stream.

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- Stardate 53501.3003280651

Subjective time: Day 10

I have attempted to spend the days since my last entry passing as a researcher in the library. I have studied a tremendous amount of Tahal-Isut history in that time, and learned that the government of the Central Protectorate- where I find myself- has been in strained relations with the government of Terrina Protectorate for several years. There seems to be no indication of how the situation began, but the lack of open hostilities suggests something of a Cold War scenario. Prisoners have been taken by both sides. Accusations of conspiracy to commit espionage have proliferated in the last two years. It seems the only thing lacking is actual gunfire.

One of the minor points of disagreement seems, surprisingly, to be over the origin of the Sky Ship- as the natives have come to call Voyager. In general, Terrinans believe it is a ship sent to rescue them and take them to another world where they would be safe, free, and secure for eternity, whereas the residents of the Central Protectorate are more divided on the subject. Some agree with the Terrinans, some haven't quite figured out where they stand, some are even willing to consciously ignore the visible presence of Voyager in orbit. It's an unusual confluence of beliefs, but one that is tolerated by many of the protectorate's residents. One might say they've agreed to disagree, but the Terrinans haven't achieved such a mildly enlightened point of view, choosing instead to inflict their own personal beliefs upon everyone within their reach.

I believe I might be fortunate in having beamed down to the Central Protectorate and not to

Terrina Protectorate.

Still, the presence of the Sky Ship in Tahal-Isut mythology suggests that Voyager has already interfered with this planet in ways we could never have imagined. We have become a part of this planet's culture, not unlike the presence of Chicago Mobs of the Twenties interfering with the development of the civilization on Sigma Iotia II, the Mintakan deification of Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the U.S.S. Enterprise, or the disaster on the Trelakis homeworld with the U.S.S. Kibalchich.

I must also consider the effect that the removal of Voyager from orbit will have on these people. Perhaps treating patients and saving lives in penance for those we took in our attempts to break orbit would be more appropriate.

What if there's a way to mitigate the damage that Voyager's presence has done to these people? Something tells me it would almost be like trying to eliminate Surak from Vulcan history- a Herculean task, but I am a hologram of considerable talents.

While I continue to expect Voyager to beam me back at any moment, I find myself coming back to the subject of planning for a long-term stay on the surface. It's a difficult chore, taking every movement, every word spoken, and every hand gesture into consideration. I must blend in, but with a culture I know very little about.

I will continue to observe. If I'm consigned to more time on the surface, we should know for the future all possible effects of a Prime Directive violation, as well as the effects any possible effort to correct the damage might have. Fortunately, I was able to download all of the Starfleet data covering General Order Number One in Voyager's memory before beam-down. This mission should add a tremendous amount to our collective knowledge.

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- Stardate 53501.3005577107

Subjective time: Day 17

After careful consideration of both the problem and the various solutions, I have come to the conclusion that it would be in the best interest of the Tahal-Isut culture to attempt to mitigate the damage that was done when Voyager first entered orbit. I have been studying the extant texts from when the star that later became the Sky Ship first appeared in their mythology. There is no way to know with absolutely certainty if the plan I have in mind will work. It's my

intent to find the young woman I met on my first night here. Her name is Mareeza Tabreez, and she's a composer. She'd been studying forms of classical composition when I bumped into her in the library. She said she wanted to create the perfect ode to the Sky Ship. Perhaps her compositions can be used, instead, to begin to steer Tahal-Isut thought away from the worship of the Sky Ship. My first step will be to determine her trustworthiness.

This is, of course, provided that I am able to locate her once again.

The communications directory has been quite unhelpful in the matter. Either she does not live in the capital city, or her communication information is intentionally not listed. One option is just as possible as the other.

We spoke quietly that first night until the library closed, her telling me all about the city, what she knew of the Sky Ship, anything I could think of to ask. When we had to leave the library, she asked if I would walk her to the transit station. "While the city has its advantages over the suburbs," she said, "guaranteed safety isn't one of them."

Mareeza certainly kept me on my toes that evening while we walked. I tried to think of every answer to her litany of questions that a person in the position I claimed- a simple doctor trying to relocate to the city from a lifelong practice in the suburbs- would give. It would appear that I was successful. If she thought I was deceiving her, she gave no indication. She may very well be just the inroad I require to begin restoring this world to its former path of cultural development.

D

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- Stardate 53501.3006889368

Day 21 on Tahal-Meeroj

Well, it's been an eventful day.

I began my attempt to mitigate the damage, but it didn't turn out quite the way I'd intended. Using the skills given me by Mr. Tuvok's programming adjustment before my departure, I was able to construct the identity for myself that I'd given Mareeza Tabreez. Interestingly enough, this would have led to my first job interview, but it would seem that fate, destiny- whatever it is that organics call what they believe- intervened.

I was on my way to the hospital for the interview when I came across a mugging in progress in a darkened alley. Someone was curled in a fetal position on the ground, and his two assailants were picking over his clothing like jackals.

The newspapers would have me believe there is no crime here. Hah!

I am fully aware that my actions constituted interference, however, my core ethical programming could not allow me to continue to watch the person be beaten. I called up the various martial arts subroutines that Mr. Paris had thought amusing for my forays into his Captain Proton holonovels, yelled for the authorities, and ventured forth. The attackers were both male, and looked to be about twenty years old, although without real-world experience with Tahal-Isut aging, it was difficult to determine that with any precision. One was muscular, with short, dark hair and eyes. The other was blond and thin, more sinewy muscle than bulk- and a knife covered in their victim's blood in his left hand.

Since the victim had already been wounded, there was no time to lose. With a swift side kick, I knocked the knife from the blond's hand. Did I expect that to work? Hardly. However, while the blond went scurrying for his weapon under a nearby waste bin, his colleague brought a fist up to punch me in the jaw.

Now, under normal conditions, I would have simply adjusted my holomatrix to allow the punch to pass through me without harm to either of us, but I couldn't do that. It would have given me away.

It was, however, a simple matter to increase the density of my outermost forcefield, making the punch land on something vaguely resembling duranium, breaking several bones in the dark-haired man's hand in the process. After that, a simple Vulcan neck pinch put them both on the ground, unconscious.

I made certain to note for the future that that trick worked on this species.

I had been, however, too focused on the combat to notice the extent of the damage they'd inflicted upon my first patient on this world. The blood on the knife had come from a puncture wound in the man's lower left side.

Fortunately for him, I'd been brushing up on their medical texts. The wound was serious, but if we got him to the hospital soon, it would not be fatal.

While I continued to call for help from more official sources- where were the police in this city, anyway?- I asked his name. Darek. His name was Darek Rez.

Darek had lost a considerable amount of blood, but somehow remained conscious. I suspect the typically lower blood pressure of the Tahal-Isut had something to do with this. I placed his hands over the wound, instructing him to keep an even pressure on it while I ran back to try to get help.

He was an excellent student.

I considered moving him to the end of the alley, but concluded that this might cause the bleeding to increase. Without being able to use my usual diagnostic tools, it was difficult to get a good idea of how injured Darek truly was. Therefore, I chose the more cautious route. That was when we began talking. It kept him conscious, and it allowed me to find out more about the extent of his injuries.

I've also discovered something. I've grown far too accustomed to working with tricorders, scanners, and sensors. The idea of doctors working without such tools is... well, I might as well be working with my eyes and hands deleted. I wasn't sure what to expect from the current standard of medicine, but from what I'd been able to study of Tahal-Isut medical

technology to that point, I didn't even expect something of the oh-so-high standards of Klingon medicine. But I'm digressing again.

Between us, Darek and I managed to keep enough pressure on the wound to slow the bleeding to what I thought was a safe point. Of course, that was the time a police officer finally arrived. While we waited on a transport to take Darek to the hospital, I gave the constable the best possible description of the two attackers. The only detail I couldn't give him was the name of each culprit.

When the ambulance finally arrived- ambulance, hmph, try six wheels and a small, rather low-powered engine attached to the loudest siren ever created by a living creature- I explained that I was a doctor and asked if I could ride with them to the hospital. Mr. Paris was a more gracious medic six years ago than those two technicians could ever aspire, but they finally allowed me to accompany them.

While I was riding in the transport with Darek, he did something that I did not anticipate. He offered me a place to live to thank me for saving his life. I believe the phrase is "never look a gift horse in the mouth." As I had been planning to look for living quarters once I managed to find a way to pay for them, I accepted the offer. Darek is something of a real estate entrepreneur. He owns several apartment buildings throughout the capital city, and in his gratitude he offered me a dwelling in one of his more lavish buildings.

At least, this was his claim. I'll find out how truthful it is when he's discharged and able to escort me to the building himself.

As for the interview- my first, I might add- it went well. The chief of staff is a small, older woman. I'd estimate she's in her mid-sixties. She has short, dark red hair and a perpetual scowl. She introduced herself as Dr. Senni Ruaal, and she was very impressed with my work. She studied what I'd done with Darek, and- not surprisingly, I might add- approved of my course of treatment. Before I could leave the hospital, she offered me a job.

If I choose to accept the offer, I'm to report for duty tomorrow evening. If I do not arrive on time, I'll have to find other means of obtaining a believable way to "hide out" while I'm on the surface. I can't deny the convenience of the situation, even though it puts me in a position that's directly in conflict with my base programming. I'm a doctor, not a secret agent. Is it possible for me to uphold both the Hippocratic oath and the Prime Directive in this instance?

However, while they do not know who or what I am, by offering me this job, have they not effectively asked for my help? If I can render that assistance, without making who or what I am known, would it be different than when the Enterprise assisted the people of Drema IV (which they only found out about when an outside invader found the remains of the probe casings), or when the people of Boraal were relocated without their knowledge?

Or, is there possibly a compromise in choosing to help these people, but only in the cases where they would have survived, anyway? Those who would otherwise have died would still die. Those who wouldn't would live.

I certainly have quite a bit to consider in the next few hours.

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- Stardate 53501.3007217433

Subjective time: Day 22

After lengthy consideration, I've come to a decision of how to approach the situation I find myself in. I have chosen to act on a compromise between my medical programming and my Starfleet programming. As a doctor, my first responsibility is to the sick and infirm. However, my responsibility as a Starfleet officer demands that I not interfere in the natural development of this culture.

But the damage is done. Voyager has both taken lives and changed them merely by being here. The best we can do now is try to effect repairs.

I'm going to take the job.

D

OCTOR'S

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OG

- Stardate 53501.3008201628

Day 25 on Tahal-Meeroj

I found her.

More to the point, she found me- quite by accident.

My first night on duty proved to be more eventful than I'd ever thought it might.

A woman was brought in presenting what looked to be symptoms of a condition humans called oligohydramnios. Her amniotic fluid levels were almost nonexistent, and she was into her second quadmester of pregnancy. I was assigned her case, and found that my patient

was none other than Mareeza Tabreez. She was fortunate. If she'd developed the condition in her first quadmester, it would have put the baby in tremendous jeopardy. As such a condition is usually brought on by a birth defect in the child, I checked the fetal development to insure that urinary tract, kidneys and cardiac development were at the requisite levels. This was not an easy task considering that such luxuries as a simple ultrasound are foreign objects to these people. Everything looked okay, but without proper diagnostic tools, it was impossible to be certain.

Perhaps a more proper mitigating effort would be just to bring the Tahal-Isut up to the standards of Klingon medicine. No. No matter how much I may see their need for technological advancement, the Prime Directive forbids me from doing it. My position is tenuous enough as it is without adding that level of behavior to it.

I tested everything possible at their level of technology. The results weren't exactly optimal, but it was something to work with. I admitted her to the hospital for observation without asking about the baby. On Voyager, saving this child would be a simple task. Here, it might be a bit more of a challenge.

The next few weeks will be difficult, but I believe it's possible to save the baby.

The question facing me now is, should I?

I will finish this entry later, as the hospital is calling me back to duty.

D

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- Supplemental

The page from the hospital was for Mareeza. Her condition briefly took a turn for the worse. I was given a choice between saving the child, and keeping Mareeza alive in the process, or allowing the child to die, and losing any possible assistance Mareeza could give, with it when the worsening of her condition killed her as well.

I attempted every traditional method of treating her condition. Fortunately for both of us, the last treatment I attempted only required a mild, logical addition to the medication to work. I believe any competent doctor would have determined the same addition to the medication to be effective. Both she and the child will survive.

C

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- Stardate 53501.3013778736

Subjective time: Day 42

I've reached the conclusion that the politics of this world are positively medieval. Diplomatic relations between the Central Protectorate and the Terrina Protectorate have become strained. It seems that the Central Protectorate is holding five political prisoners from a conflict between the two states that dates back three years. A loophole in the treaty between the two protectorates allowed them to keep these prisoners tucked away after hostilities ended. The thought of being trapped here for three years... if I had a spine, I would shudder.

However, after years of legal battles, it seems that the families of the prisoners have reached the point where no one will listen anymore. Now, unable to avail themselves of further appeals to the judiciary, they're taking their battle to the court of public opinion.

The condition of these prisoners is not being reported in the local media, only the complaints of the families, but I suspect that has more to do with the rather militaristic manner in which the prisoners are being guarded than anything else. Armed guards, electrically charged fences around the camp, filthy conditions, isolation- the only thing missing is torture. An Akritiri prison camp would be like a vacation spot compared with where these men are being held.

I took the liberty of doing some research into these men's stories. They were all captured during conflict between the two protectorates, and were accused of a bombing near the capital building. They were found guilty, but the families are claiming that information was ignored during the original trials.

The newly elected protector for Terrina appears to agree with them. She is a strong-willed woman, with a tremendous amount of support from her electorate. I have a feeling that if she's willing to go to war to get the five prisoners released, the population of Terrina Protectorate will be right behind her.

D

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OG

- Stardate 53501.3019027778

Day 58 on Tahal-Meeroj

I should note for the record that the dwelling Darek offered me is lovely. Considering how much I had to fight the captain for a place to store items on Voyager, I've come to appreciate such luxuries as spacious accommodations.

The apartment has two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen I suspect Mr. Neelix might envy, and a living room the size of the mess hall on Voyager. From what I've been able to determine, such a dwelling appears to be the standard size for buildings in the capital city.

Mareeza Tabreez's condition is improving by the day, as is the condition of the fetus. The oligohydramnios would have been easy to treat if I'd had proper equipment. As I don't, it forced me to improvise. Apparently, my previous belief that any competent physician would have devised the same clinical solution was in error. Dr. Ruaal is thinking I might have invented a brand-new technique.

If she only knew it was really a variation on a five-hundred-year-old Vulcan treatment.

I have spent far more time inside the hospital than I probably should these last few days. Between my daily workload in urgent care, making sure Darek's injuries were being properly attended to, and time in the maternity ward checking up on my two favorite patients, it has been busy.

"Favorite patients?" Hmm. That might be the first time in four years that I've used those words and meant them.

There is something oddly charming about the young woman. She has lovely hair the color of a rich chocolate; hazel eyes that seem to dance; and a grace and beauty that I think even Danara would have admired. She also has that same intelligence and that wonderfully inquisitive nature that I always admired- and, I must admit, miss- in Kes.

I haven't asked Mareeza about the child's father yet. As she never mentioned a mate in her life, I presumed that there was none. Judging by her reaction when I suggested that there was a risk of her illness damaging the baby, I believe she may not have even realized she was pregnant.

Darek has invited me to his home- which happens to be in the tallest building he owns- to participate in one of his Sky Ship viewing parties. He says that he intends to have one as soon as possible after he's discharged. When I informed him that the knife wound took a section of his stomach with it, and he would have to be fed intravenously until the wound had adequately healed, his response was, "Then bring your damned tubes with you! I want you at this party, Aeson!"

Yes, that's the name I've chosen for the duration of my stay. I'm not sure why the old reincarnated character in Greek mythology came to me when I was trying to think of a name, but it did.

I find it fascinating that I have been able to choose a name for my... secret identity, you might say... so rapidly, but in the six years since my activation on Voyager, I have been completely

incapable of choosing a permanent name for myself. I wonder why that is?

As of today, Voyager has had a full minute to figure out how to get me back. If they haven't found a solution by the time of Darek's party, I intend to go. I have a feeling the services of a competent medic will be required, if not several doses of anti-intoxicant.

Hmm, I wonder if they even have anti-intoxicants? I must go research this.

C

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- Stardate 53501.3024604885

Subjective Time: Day 75

The political situation here is growing increasingly unstable. Terrina Protectorate is now openly and quite vociferously demanding that the Central Protectorate release the prisoners. Protests are taking place in Terrina's capital city. There are reports that one prisoner's wife has holed herself up in an unknown location and is threatening to kill their three children if the request isn't met within a week. Apparently, the Terrina Protectorate officials haven't been able to reach her- or even do something as simple as a telephone trace- to put a stop to it themselves and take the children away. I have a feeling they may not have even tried. To the Tahal-Isut- at least the ones of the Central Protectorate- to not stop a child from being killed when you're in a position to do it makes you just as guilty as the killer. It would appear that the Terrinans want us to think they hold the same belief. The Central Protectorate would be held at least partially accountable for failing to release the prisoners.

From what I've been able to judge in the short time I've been exposed to these people, Protector Azanthair Baracin, the head of the Central Protectorate, is the kind of man who will find the option that allows both sides to claim victory. His daughter was brought to my emergency room two weeks ago for a compound fracture in her right leg, and to say that she was angry about the situation would be putting it mildly. She was allergic to some of the painkilling medications at my disposal, and the drugs that wouldn't give her a reaction would have barely scratched the surface of her pain. Rather than risk it, he managed to find a way to cajole her into allowing me to set the bones in her leg to avoid the most scarring, and only use the least amount of medication necessary.

Between that encounter and what I've seen of the man's politics, he appears to be a very levelheaded individual with a keen eye for possibilities inherent in a situation. If there's a way out of this situation without the blame falling on the Central Protectorate, I'm confident

that Baracin will find it.

D

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- Stardate 53501.3026245210

Day 80 on Tahal-Meeroj

For the last month, I've spent an hour after each duty shift checking up on Mareeza and just engaging her in simple conversation. There are some days when she appears lost, as though a large black cloud were looming over her and she had no idea of what to do. It's at times like that I wish I'd taken on the programming of a ship's counselor.

Pain was obvious in her eyes whenever the subject of the child came up, but if I attempted to ask further, the proper words wouldn't come. I always thought holograms were above such things as being tongue-tied. Not for the first time on this mission, I was wrong.

Tonight, the right words finally came to me, courtesy of Earth's William Shakespeare.

"'Tis not enough to help the feeble up

"But to support him after."

"What?" Mareeza asked.

I tried to think of an appropriate way to describe the Bard, but if I just said he was a famous writer from my homeland, with her inquisitive nature, she'd try to look it up. I instead settled upon an answer that seemed appropriately vague. "It's something I read once, a long time ago."

"It fits you," she said. I thought I heard admiration in her voice.

After a long silence, a wistful smile slowly appeared. "I can see you want to ask. He's someone I'd prefer not to think about, Aeson."

"The baby's father?"

"Yes."

At that point, I didn't care how she knew I had wanted to ask about the father. Instead, I asked her if it was really that bad. She nodded, and said, "The child may be the only good to come of it, and he was almost taken from me before I knew he existed."

That comment piqued my interest. Once I'd discovered that Mareeza was pregnant, I had begun studying every local obstetrics text I could find. Nothing mentioned the mother being able to know the sex of the child without highly specialized testing equipment. If she'd had the tests run, it wasn't at my hospital. "Do you know the gender, or are you guessing?"

Mareeza simply smiled.

I came to the conclusion that it was probably not the proper time to pursue the subject. If she wanted to believe she was having a son, then who was I to try to disabuse her of that notion?

Four days later, Mareeza had recovered enough to be discharged. I volunteered to take her home, as it appeared I was the only one she would trust. As the evening was cool and clear, and walking wasn't a danger to the baby, we decided to walk the route to her apartment.

Mareeza had, it seemed, been working on a composition in her mind while she lay in bed—the ode to the Sky Ship that she had been researching when we first met. When she remembered my interest in music, she was willing to hum the melody for me as we walked. It sounded almost like a piece from Delvok, or even Bizet.

I couldn't help myself. I began humming along in harmony, even though I didn't know the melody at all. As luck would have it, we achieved a fascinating blend of music.

By the time we reached her apartment, I had achieved an objective that I hadn't realized I was after. Mareeza laughed like I hadn't heard her laugh in days. "Aeson, thank you. I've really needed that," she said, taking my hand.

Before I could even respond, the front door to her building opened. A Neanderthal of a man carried a box of what appeared to be books down to a small transport. "Tabreez, what the schkix are you doing back here?"

Mareeza sighed, and then asked, "What's going on now, Razmad?"

"Leeram wants you out. Says if you want to disappear like that, you can go."

"But I contacted him!"

She'd mentioned Leeram as being something of a benefactor to her. If her reaction to hearing the name was anything to go on, I began to suspect that he might also have been the baby's father. "She was in the hospital, if the ill-mannered buffoon had bothered to inquire," I said.

Razmad dropped the box of books on the sidewalk. The left corner of his lip turned slightly. He almost looked bemused with the whole situation. In two steps, he was standing right in front of me, trying to use his rather ample height to his advantage. "Look, mister, inquiring ain't my job. Leeram says he wants Tabreez's place emptied, I empty it. Got a problem with that?"

Unfortunately for him, I've faced down more menacing foes.

Immediately behind him was a public comm station. I took a step to walk around him, which he stopped with one enormous hand.

It took several reassurances that I was not going to call the authorities, but finally he settled

for watching me closely as I took a step around his destined-for-cardiac-problems physique, entered the personal code with which I'd been entrusted, and made contact with Darek Rez.

I made the usual conversational niceties, and then proceeded to explain the situation to him and ask the biggest favor I'd ever asked of anyone. If Darek would be willing to take Mareeza in, I could at least content myself with the knowledge that she and her child would have a place to live when I was finally beamed back to Voyager. I wasn't sure why that was becoming more important to me, but it was.

I tried to keep the thought in mind that beam-out could come at any moment, and it helped rein in the reactions from my emotional subroutines for the time being. Although, it was difficult when she leaned up and kissed my cheek after I informed her of her new dwelling. "Thank you, Aeson. It's almost like I've suddenly got a Sky Ship Friend watching over me."

If I'd had one, my heart probably would have stopped at that.

Metaphorically speaking, of course. The heart doesn't actually stop, it- oh, there I go again. I don't remember the last time my digression subroutine kicked in so regularly. Where was I? Oh, yes. Mareeza and the Sky Ship Friends.

Sounds almost like the name of a music group. But, pressing on...

About seventy-five Tahal-Isut years ago- at about the point when their telescopes allowed them to determine that the bright day/night star they'd known for centuries looked more like a spaceship- someone came up with the idea of making toys based on what they thought were the occupants of that spaceship. Yes, those were the Sky Ship Friends. I've never actually seen the toys in question, but the images in the history books suggested a people who looked just like the Tahal-Isut, but in flowing green robes that signified natural purity.

If these people only had someone with half the creativity of H. G. Wells, I shudder to think what they might have accomplished once they discovered it was a spaceship and not a star.

Over the ensuing years, the Sky Ship Friends had become something of a cultural icon, not unlike a human teddy bear. Songs about the Sky Ship were even composed as childhood lullabies.

Voyager has become so intricately woven into this culture that it's amazing. The more I see of it, the less convinced I am that removing our influence will ever be possible. Still, I intend to make the effort.

Mareeza's comment, however, gave me a moment's pause. It concerned me enough to think that she might have figured me out already. My subroutines floundered. I hadn't planned far enough ahead for that possibility. In an effort to cover up my failure, I led her back in the direction Darek had given.

Darek had an empty apartment about three blocks from where we were. He said he would meet us there. Apparently Mareeza's work was growing in popularity a bit more than she- or any of the references on their culture that I'd studied in the library- would have me believe. Darek had not only heard of her, he was a fan of her work and considered her to be an up-and-coming artist. The idea of someone with the potential he saw in her living in one of his buildings appealed to him.

I should add that one thing that was never hidden too far beneath the surface with Darek was

his desire to be near people working their way to fame. I believe Mr. Paris would refer to him as a "schmoozer extraordinaire." I suspect this is why he bestowed upon Mareeza the kind of apartment he did. With me, it was gratitude. With Mareeza, it was networking.

So, while Mareeza packed her belongings, I began to help Razmad with the moving. It took us no time at all to get Mareeza's things to the buildings Darek had told me about. He was there when we arrived, his blond hair slicked back and what I'd come to know as his usual black suit pressed to perfection. Even at this early hour, he was doing his best to make a good first impression.

Darek and Mareeza quickly negotiated the rent. (I wonder why he never had this discussion with me?) Once he turned over the keys, we proceeded to move her into her new abode. Darek was kind enough to also have two of his nephews come to help.

An interesting surprise awaited us when we reached the apartment. It was larger and quite a bit more lavish than anything I'd seen on the planet to that point. Mareeza counted four bedrooms, each seemingly larger than the one she'd looked at immediately before. The largest, presumably the master bedroom, was the one she chose as her new office. It was spacious enough for her to work, and secluded enough from the rest of the apartment to allow her solitude if she wanted it. Placing her right palm on her stomach, she smiled softly and added, "And there needs to be a good, strong door. Hands so small don't belong on the lutebo."

That was one of her prized possessions, the lutebo, and where she did most of her composition. It's a large instrument, very similar to a piano, but in this case its range is only three octaves. Even with so few notes, the Tahal-Isut have managed some musical pieces that I think rival some of the greats of the Federation.

It took some work, but we finally got everything moved in. Mareeza and I took the lighter pieces, while Darek's nephews made short work of the heavier furniture, even the lutebo. I suspect the instruments will be seeing a lot more of Mareeza than I will in the next few weeks while she works on her new composition- provided, of course, that I'm still here in a few weeks.

To make a long story short, that's something of the limbo we've been in since she moved. She has been busy with the composition, and I've been busy at the hospital. She allows me to stop by every evening to check up on the baby, and we do chat for a little bit while I'm there.

I've been chatting with her about the Sky Ship, and what it means for "our people." I've tried repeatedly to put forth the assertion that perhaps it's time the Tahal-Isut grew past the need to worship inanimate objects in the sky. For some peculiar reason, she found it amusing.

After her comment earlier, I obviously should consider whether or not she could handle the real story. She seems just as trustworthy as Kes, however I am uncertain of how I feel about her stand on what is, in essence, religion.

It's been a long time since I had reactions like this. I have difficulty concentrating. Whenever we're apart, it's a challenge to keep my mind on my work.

I can hear Kes now. "Your program is adapting again."

I just wish it had chosen a better time to "adapt," as I'm not in a position to run a proper

self-diagnostic to be certain.

Now that Mareeza is out of the hospital, I've been trying to recall the advice Mr. Paris and Kes both gave me when I was first having difficulty with the concept of dating. "Tell her how you feel." It sounds so simple. "Tell her the truth."

Kes, you were so wonderfully naive and idealistic sometimes. That might have worked with Danara, but that was years ago.

Unlike Danara, Mareeza is fully organic, with all of the added complications that entails. With Tahal-Isut females, hormonal imbalances are just as much a complication on their emotional state as they are to several other species in the Federation, including humans. And Mareeza's pregnancy is convincing me that the Tahal-Isut might be more closely related to humans than I'd initially thought.

Hmm. Perhaps if there's a local version of chocolate, that might be in order. Chocolate's effects on the human brain are well noted, and there are many similarities in Tahal-Isut brain function. It's certainly worth an attempt. I'll enquire with Darek tomorrow.

One thing concerns me, however. I keep coming back to the difficulty of keeping my true nature a secret for an extended period. Fortunately, my mobile emitter's energy consumption is holding steady, and we haven't been in a position where eating or drinking have been involved. If that should change, however, I think Mareeza is certainly capable of keeping a secret. The question is, is she capable of keeping this big a secret? That remains to be seen.

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- Stardate 53501.3028213602

Subjective time: Day 86

Protector Baracin has failed. The prisoner's wife was shown on the morning news program- precisely a week after her threats were made public- with the bodies of their three children beside her. From what I could see of the wounds on her body, there was no way they could be self-inflicted. Nothing in my medical research suggested that the Tahal-Isut anatomy could maneuver in a way that would allow someone to do that to themselves. The children were covered by a dark cloth, so there was no way to determine if those wounds were on their bodies as well. I contacted the police to inquire as to whether the investigators were

pursuing that avenue, but they were maddeningly vague on the subject, merely reassuring me that they had the situation well under control, and that I should go about my daily business.

The protests within Central Protectorate have grown increasingly violent. Several of the outer suburbs have reported incidents of civil unrest, and those detained during these protests have accused the police of threatening them to make sure they remain quiet.

It's still not clear where this situation will lead the Central Protectorate. It's obvious- at least to me- that Terrina Protectorate is looking for a way to start a war, but wants to shift political blame from itself. From the reports, the Central military generals are growing anxious for hostilities to begin.

I believe Terrina Protectorate is going to oblige them soon enough.

D

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OG

- Stardate 53501.3032806513

Day 100 on Tahal-Meeroj

One hundred days have passed since my arrival- a mere ninety-seven seconds on board Voyager- and I feel as though I need to remain here another hundred days, if not more. I've been spending every second I'm able to get away from the hospital with Mareeza. Her pregnancy is not going well. She has developed gestational diabetes, and we have been trying to adjust her diet to keep her away from foods that will do her harm, as well as creating the best exercise regimen that she can tolerate, but it's not abating. The methods I've tried to raise the level of amniotic fluid are also not proving successful on a long-term basis. There is an old Bajoran homeopathic remedy that might work, but I'm still trying to locate adequate substitutes for the necessary herbs from those available to me here.

The next few months are going to be difficult, but I think we will persevere.

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- Stardate 53501.3039039751

Subjective time: Day 119

A month has passed since what Protector Baracin has not-so-eloquently deemed "the Incident."

Since that time, relations between the Central Protectorate and Terrina Protectorate have remained surprisingly stable. Neither side is completely trusting of the other, but at least no more deaths have come because of it. An interesting occurrence, since at least one of the other political prisoners held by the Central Protectorate has a family in Terrinan territory. We'll see how long it takes before the Terrinans use them against us.

Us?

When did I begin to think of myself as a citizen?

In the meantime, a demonstration in support of the peace effort is being organized on the public grounds just outside the capital rotunda. One of the central pieces of the rally is the new piece Mareeza Tabreez is composing, and- if I can keep her up to it- will perform. She has taken it upon herself to use her pregnancy as an example, saying that peace should be on the fore of our minds, for the sake of the future, and for the sake of our past. Without either, she believes, the Tahal-Isut have no "present."

D

OCTOR'S

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OG

-Stardate 53501.3048225575

Day 147 on Tahal-Meeroj

Today was a day of supreme highs, and devastating lows.

Allow me to begin with the supreme highs. Today, I made my triumphant stage debut. Mareeza and I performed her magnificent aria. I couldn't be happier that she asked me to sing.

The devastating low? As the last performer- a gymnast of some repute in the northern

regions of the Central Protectorate- was finishing up her routine, the screams of rocket engines could be heard. Two medium-grade ballistic missiles came in low over our heads, right into the capital building. Thankfully, they were loaded with conventional warheads. If the Tahal-Isut had discovered even the most primitive of nuclear fuel, I doubt I'd be here to give this log entry. My mobile emitter would likely be fused to whatever remained of the stage. Or far worse, I might have remained functional, watching as Mareeza and the others were vaporized. I don't think I've ever felt so thankful for a society not being fully advanced since my activation.

Once I was certain that Mareeza was safe, I began trying to help the injured. Some were cursing the Terrinans, saying that if they were willing to bomb a peace rally they didn't deserve to live, but others thought it nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence. We happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The capital building took the hardest hit. The building had been circular in shape, not unlike the Senate chambers on Romulus... or so I've heard. The deep green marble columns- resakna, as they refer to it- that surrounded it had been so intricately sculpted that nobody had been able to reproduce the level of detail in the two centuries since their construction.

And they were in shambles. At least five of the columns had been toppled by the explosions, and the rear portion of the building looked as though it had collapsed completely. I could hear screams for help from inside, even though the dust was still slowly settling out of the atmosphere.

One of the local sports celebrities- a rather sturdily built cherusa kelo player named Akreedor Torelius, who'd been helping to introduce the assembled performers- was also uninjured. He went into the capital building with me. Together we freed several victims who'd been trapped in the rubble. In a few instances, the damage was so serious that I suspect if I hadn't been able to treat them quickly, the victims might not have survived to reach the hospital.

When we reached Protector Baracin's office, we found that it had been hit the hardest. I could hear very faint coughing, and followed it to my right, to a pile that looked to have once been a bookcase. Now, it was a mound of smoldering papers, with the occasional broken bookshelf sticking up for good measure.

Once we cleared the rubble, I found the Protector. Reflex had apparently caused him to curl into a kneeling fetal position when the bookcase came down on him. There was only one problem, but it was a big one. He had curled up with his back to the ceiling. Normally, his spinal column would have been a long, even ridge of bone beneath the skin down his back, even under clothing. From what I could see, the vertebrae were pockmarked, with distressingly large gaps where there should have been none. His hands were clasped behind his head, blood covering his fingers.

I asked him if he had feeling in his extremities. He moved his hands, and very slightly nodded. At least that much was still working. His voice was like rough sandpaper as he said, "Egram."

"Egram?" I asked.

"My assistant," the Protector said.

Torelius and I looked at each other, lost. We thought we'd gotten everyone out at that point.

"Where was she?"

"Office. Side door."

Torelius searched the room for another door while I worked on Protector Baracin.

While the Protector may have been able to move his arms, his legs were another story. When he tried to stand, there was no response. I tried to figure out a way we might be able to get him out of the building without doing further damage to his spinal column. Considering his position, I wasn't sure it was possible.

"Um, Doc?"

Torelius's voice sounded as though he had found something he never wanted to see. I had a feeling I knew what it was before I even answered. "Yes?"

"You might want to come see this."

At that point, the other rescuers finally got back to us with supplies. I gestured toward the Protector. "Help me get him loaded up and out of here."

Torelius managed to find a way back across the room through the piles of debris that I'd been adding to in order to make room to lay the strikna- I mean stretcher. It took all four of us to get him on it and eliminate any unnecessary movement. When I asked, he said he couldn't feel anyone putting pressure on his legs. I was hesitant to do any more at that point, for fear of causing more injury to his spinal column.

"Help Egram," Baracin said as two of the rescuers hefted the strikna. I caught Torelius wincing at the rasp in the Protector's voice.

The sooner we could get Baracin to the hospital, the better. I instructed them to warn the emergency room of the suspected spinal injury, and get him to the hospital as quickly as possible. Only then did I head off for what was either my next patient, or the ninth fatality I'd be able to confirm.

I could see the remains of the side door that Baracin had spoken of across the piles of debris. A light on the other side of the door was flickering. Egram had apparently been stationed nearby.

I worked my way to the side door, not liking what I saw when I got there. A large piece of what had once been a wall looked to have fallen on top of the desk, breaking it almost perfectly in two. I was about to look around further when I saw two diminutive feet sticking out from beneath the desk. Egram had apparently attempted the age-old trick of getting under a sturdy piece of furniture when the walls were coming down around her. This time, however, the trick hadn't worked.

I knelt and looked for the upper portion of her body, to verify that she really was as lifeless as she appeared. That eliminated any doubt, as a shard of metal approximately twenty centimeters in length protruded from her forehead.

I reached forward and gently closed her vacant eyes. As I worked my way back into the tattered remains of Protector Baracin's office, I tried to make some sense of it all. Even Torelius looked lost.

The kelo player's eyes were haunted. "He won't go until he knows about Egram."

As gently as I could manage, I broke the news of his assistant's fate to the Protector. He was quite the stoic. While he was quite obviously in grief over her loss, he didn't allow it to overwhelm him. "Please," he whispered. "Get me out of here. My people need me."

With Torelius and me on either side of him to balance, and the two rescuers taking the heavy lifting, we gently carried him out of the building.

As we arrived back in the daylight, and our patient was taken to proper medical care, Torelius shaded his eyes and looked in the direction the missiles had come. "Doc," he said, "what did we do to deserve this?"

I looked around at the almost-organized chaos. Emergency workers tended to the seriously injured near their transports, while the cuts and scrapes were attended to by everyday citizens. Tahal-Isut were coming together to help the injured in a way that I couldn't help but admire.

Still, the sight of so much concern for their fellow citizens both buoyed me and made me angry with the Terrinans for inflicting the wounds. "Deserve," I said. "Nobody deserves any of this, Akree."

Torelius nodded. "You're right. I had a feeling this was coming, just not like this."

Before I could respond, Mareeza ran up and wrapped her arms around me. "Thank Tahal you remain safe!"

I wanted to say that I was naturally going to be safe, as I'm a hologram, without flesh to rend or bone to grind- but I refrained.

"Yes. Thank Tahal. Were there only the two missiles?" I asked, trying to think of potential strategy in the middle of this whole thing. According to the news reports, Terrina Protectorate had been stockpiling missiles for years, but nobody could come up with an exact number. Popular opinion seemed to be that the Central Protectorate would find out how many missiles they had if and when Terrina Protectorate chose to fire them.

"No," Mareeza said, her eyes dropping to her feet. "There have been reports of other hits in the city. Right now, they think ten missiles- maybe twelve- but those are only estimates."

Torelius looked down at her, "And they're sure it's Terrina Protectorate?"

Mareeza nodded. I noticed some trepidation in her otherwise exquisite features when her eyes turned back to me. "Aeson, one of the hits was in Dockland."

I had never had an overwhelming sense of panic before, so I wasn't sure what was happening at first. The idea that the one piece of shelter I had managed to eke out for myself on an alien world might be surreptitiously taken from me by those missiles conflicted with the idea that I might be able to help shelter my fellow citizens. Dockland was a small but densely populated neighborhood. If it hit there, the likelihood of my apartment building, not to mention the dozens of people living there, being among the casualties was quite high.

If I'd had a stomach, it would probably have been churning from the lack of knowledge.

"They've got the situation under control here," Mareeza said. "Let's go check on your apartment."

Akree nodded toward Mareeza, then me. "You want another set of hands? I'm thinking the kelo game is off tonight."

Mareeza and I both looked back at the stage. Fortunately, the equipment had been provided by the organizers, because at that moment it all seemed very frivolous. People in the city were homeless and dying. What place did we have worrying about some easily-replaceable musical equipment?

Mareeza apparently had the same thought, as she turned her attention back to Torelius. "Yes, please. I have a feeling we're all going to be needed by the time this is over."

When we got to Akree's transport, Mareeza realized that it was large enough to hold far more than the three of us. She went back to the remains of the capital building, and gathered three more people from the smattering of volunteers who hadn't yet moved on to another bombing site.

When she brought them back, I was surprised to see that Razmad was in the group. With him were two women that I couldn't recall meeting. They both looked as though they had no idea what was happening to them, but there was a resolution in their eyes that said they knew the fact that they were still able to move meant they had to help others somehow.

The six of us piled into Akree's transport, and worked our way through the streets toward Dockland. When we finally reached the neighborhood, I couldn't believe the sight. It looked as though a missile had somehow skidded through three other apartment buildings before hitting mine and shattered it as though it were made of nothing but iso-linear rods.

"Oh, Aeson," Mareeza whispered. "I'm so sorry."

The sight of my home in shambles didn't affect me nearly as much as the sight of the other homes in the area still smoldering. One particularly smoky pile of rubble had four people on top of it, digging through in a valiant effort to find something- presumably survivors. "My interests are secondary right now, Mareeza. These people need help."

Akree put a hand on my arm. "They're going to get it," he said. "Come on."

Once Akree parked the transport, we all got out and tried to determine a good place to begin. I pointed toward another pile of rubble, one that only had a single person sifting through it. "A family of six lived there. Judging by the time the missiles hit the capital building, at least two of the children were home from school."

Razmad took the two women and headed off in that direction. "We'll call you if we find anything," he yelled back.

Mareeza made a small, surprised sound. "Who knew he had a heart after all?"

"Times like this either bring out the best in us, or the worst," Akree said. "Come on. Let's get to your building."

We started toward the pile of rubble that had once been my building. I briefly wondered

where Darek was. Fortunately, he lived on the other side of town. If the traffic had been half as interesting as it had been getting there from the capital, it was no wonder he hadn't arrived yet.

While we helped the half-dozen people who were already digging through the rubble, I quickly tried to estimate how many residents might have been inside when the missile struck. None of those outside looked familiar, but considering the size of the building, I couldn't have known everyone who lived there. A young newlywed couple had just moved in on the first floor; while an older woman lived alone on the third floor. There were at least five other couples that I could remember, none of whom had children. The building was capable of holding around sixty people or more. I suspect only Darek knew everyone who lived there.

There had been thirty apartments in the building- and none of them still stood.

The lack of noise was the most telling part. All I could hear was the sound of people digging frantically through the debris. Occasionally, someone would yell out, asking if anyone was in there. They didn't get an answer. An elderly woman began sobbing on the street, saying something about her granddaughter whenever she could get an intelligible word out. Mareeza went over to console her, slowly walking her out of our line of sight.

What truly struck me about the whole thing- and, in retrospect, I should have noticed this before we left the capital building- was that there were no sirens. Even though there were parts of the town that remained unscathed, there were no emergency transports moving in any direction. It was almost as though nobody knew what to do with such a catastrophe. They could handle smaller-scale events- putting out a single building fire or pulling someone out of a damaged transport- with ease. But multiple bombings? That was beyond their ken.

Fortunately, they had me around. The thought that now would be a very bad time for Voyager to retrieve me flashed through my mind before being just as quickly dismissed. My fellow citizens needed me.

Somewhere along the line, Darek finally arrived. I was too busy with the digging to notice the exact moment, but a man with a presence like his does not arrive unnoticed. He quickly took up the task of helping dig through the remains of his building. I cautioned him not to exert himself too much, as he had barely finished recovering from the stabbing, but he bullheadedly pressed onward.

Torelius and I were working on a back corner pile when a voice yelled, "I found someone!"

I dropped the piece of rubble that was in my hand and went toward the source of the voice. A young boy- perhaps eight years old- knelt, his hands trying feebly to scrape the debris off of someone's forearm and hand. Judging by the weight of the pile that sat on top of the rest of the body, I didn't hold out much hope for the child having found a survivor-

Until the fingers moved.

That was when I yelled for help. Four pairs of hands answered my call, and we finally dug out the older woman from the third floor. After giving her the best field examination I could manage, we got a transport to take her to the hospital for further treatment.

As best I could tell, she had at least three broken ribs, a shattered hip and some internal hemorrhaging. If they got her to the hospital fast enough, Dr. Ruaal should be able to save her.

It went on like that for several hours, until finally all we were unearthing were corpses. Since I didn't tire like the others, I continued to dig while the rest of the would-be rescuers took repeated breaks for water and food.

I know. I should have taken a break also, if only to protect the secret of my holographic nature. However, it didn't occur to me at that point. I'm a doctor, not a secret agent. My duty was to any living creature still buried in the rubble.

When everyone who had lived in the area had been accounted for, we finally stopped digging. That was when I began to consider the new nature of my situation. I no longer had a place to live. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of Tahal-Isut that had been left homeless by this attack. I was in something of a quandary. What gave me the right to consider taking another dwelling, when there were so many in the native population who needed them? What made my ability to hide more important than the well-being of those who no longer had protection from the elements?

Mareeza finally returned, having left the older woman with her children to grieve their loss. "Aeson," she said, "you may consider my home to be your own."

As I was still trying to figure out all of my possibilities, my subroutines fumbled over that. "Mareeza?"

She nodded, and gave me a very soft smile. "Yes. You were responsible for finding me a place to live in my time of need. It's my responsibility to repay that. My apartment's more than sufficient in size, and something tells me this child is not finished being troublesome. Having a doctor nearby might prove useful."

Before I realized what I was saying, I said, "Thank you. I promise you that I won't be in your way."

Until that moment, Mareeza believed- at least, she gave me every indication that she believed- that I was just as much flesh and blood as she was. If we shared a domicile, there would be no choice but to tell her who- or, more specifically, what- I was.

However, Mareeza also was going to need monitoring through the rest of her pregnancy, and I was the only logical person to do it. If helping her required expanding my programming "on the fly," then so be it. My program has adapted before.

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3051834291

Day 158

The Terrina and Central Protectorates signed a peace treaty today. Protector Baracin signed it from his hospital bed. Hopefully, this means we won't see any more missiles flying. The hospital is overburdened with injured and the dying. I'm not sure we could handle any more wounded.

Central Protectorate's Air Command did what is being called an excellent job of bombing the Terrinans in retaliation for missile attacks. The final death toll from all of the attacks- Terrinan and Central casualties combined- was 2,752 lost. All we can do is continue the process of rebuilding.

I must cut this short. I'm needed at the hospital. There are too many patients, and not nearly enough staff. I never thought I'd be in the position to tend to so many patients at once. Fortunately, I don't tire.

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3083000479

Day 253

Mareeza gave birth today. After everything she's endured, the delivery was both quick and easy. I was finally able to compensate for the low amniotic fluid with a successful, if basic, transcervical amnioinfusion. It took longer to be effective than I'd like, but it eventually worked.

The baby was a little boy. As I expected after Mareeza's bout with gestational diabetes, he had a mild case of macrosomia. The excess weight didn't appear to have damaged the baby's pancreas too much, though. Perhaps we'd managed to catch it in time. It was certainly going to require monitoring to keep the baby from developing diabetes as he aged.

However, when Mareeza was able to hold him for the first time, none of that seemed to matter. I don't think I've ever seen the kind of joy I saw on Mareeza's face at that moment, although the look on Ensign Wildman's face when she first held Naomi might have been close. Mareeza had the baby boy that she'd wanted.

In an odd turn of events, the nurse asked me for the baby's name. I had no idea. I asked Mareeza what she wanted to name the child, and all she did was give me that same beatific smile. "That's your choice, Aeson," she said. "The father always names the child, remember?"

Frankly, I didn't remember, but I was long past the point of confusion. "Mareeza, I'm not- "

She gave me an unquestioning gaze. "Don't you dare. Aeson, you've been far more of a father to this child than anyone could be. I wouldn't be holding him if it weren't for you. He may not be your son by biology. But, in every other way, you're the reason for his existence. You've been dedicated to his well-being since before I was able. I would hope that dedication won't stop now that he's born."

Virtually every coping subroutine I had failed at that one. I wanted to say, "But I could be taken away at any moment." All that came out was, "But- "

"I know," she said. "I know you can't be here for him forever. All we could possibly ask is for as long as you can."

I couldn't deny that having someone there to care for the child so Mareeza could work would be best. However, that could just as easily have been done by a nanny.

I've been trying to ignore the prospect of fatherhood for the last quadmester of Mareeza's pregnancy. While my database contains all that it is necessary to know about pediatric care and child development, I don't think my attempt at a holographic family properly prepared me for this. Who knows if this little one's rebellious teenage years will compare to Jeffrey's? If he's injured or, Tahal forbid, killed, will it be like Belle's passing? The grief from that was one of the most difficult moments of my existence to date.

It looks as though my program is going to be forced to adapt yet again.

I can't deny that I find the idea absolutely fascinating. They do mean a considerable amount to me. The idea of losing them fills me with the same trepidation that I felt when I realized that I was going to lose Danara. Is that love? I'm not certain.

When I looked at the infant's adorable little brown eyes, and remembered how he'd helped me fight to keep him alive, I remembered the ancient mythology that I'd borrowed my alias from. Aeson had had a son, and that son had grown up to be both a great fighter and a tremendous leader of men- two admirable goals for a child, no matter what culture he might have belonged to.

"Jason," I told the nurse. "His name is Jason."

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3114822797

Day 350

Dr. Ruaal has applauded my newest contribution to Tahal-Isut medicine. As it saved Jason's life, I'm not entirely certain the applause is necessary, but she feels it is.

Jason suffered lacunar rhontopa- a condition very similar to pancreatic failure, but in this instance the organ only stops responding temporarily- yesterday evening. I'm certain it can be traced back to the gestational diabetes, but it's an exceedingly rare condition. So rare, in fact, that I could only recall two recorded instances of it in all of the medical journals I'd studied in the Central Protectorate library. Both instances had ended up being fatal.

We took Jason to the hospital for treatment, but there were no specialists in the area who knew what to do. The situation forced me to improvise yet again.

And the improvisation worked. It took approximately fourteen hours, but finally Jason began responding to the treatment. His insulin levels had returned to near-normal (or, at least, near-normal for him) by this afternoon. As a precautionary measure, I made sure to take meticulous notes of the procedure, should the condition reoccur and I am not here to attend to him.

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3192246169

Day 586

Today was Jason's first birthday.

Mareeza and I threw him a wonderful celebration, if I do say so myself. Darek came by, as well as Akree and the rest of his cherusa kelo team. I believe Jason enjoyed himself.

We cleaned up the leftovers once everyone had left, and Mareeza has gone to her bedroom to turn in for the night. Jason is in his crib, while I finish tidying up the living room.

Jason is a truly special child, I must admit. His birth has forced my programming to adapt in ways I hadn't anticipated. My holographic family simply never prepared me for this. It's as though every time he finds something new in the world, I'm finding it new again, myself.

He was fascinated by the candle on his birthday staiol. The flame had him absolutely entranced. He also seemed to enjoy the caramel custard I improvised with what I could find at the grocery.

Jason's favorite new toy appears to be a doll of the Sky Ship Friend Verasul. It's a diminutive Tahal-Isut, who happens to be the most kind and congenial member of the Sky

Ship's crew. I wonder, though, if it might be an indication of his personality. Where the others have their peace, solitude, and tranquility, Verasul wears an emerald-green robe, is exuberant, always wanting to help others, and very encouraging of finding your own identity and encouraging others to do the same thing. It's Mareeza's and my fondest hope that Jason adopts these very traits in his own personality.

Jason giggled the first time he saw the Verasul doll. Mareeza found it adorable, as did most of those present.

I must put this down for a moment. Jason's crying, and it's time for his late-night feeding.

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Supplemental

While I am not often prone to moments of what might be commonly referred to as sentimentality, I have noticed that Jason's presence is causing my programming to turn in that direction often lately.

Everything about the young man's life is something I want to remember. The first time he ever smiled at me was like a gift from the universe. It's not difficult to understand how some Federation religions attributed supernatural, almost deific attributes to infants.

Well, obviously I'm not prone to sentimentality. That was a dreadfully metaphysical statement. Perhaps my program is adapting once again.

At least, I hope it will adapt once again. I'm not fond of the idea of being unable to properly voice my own thoughts.

Occasionally, I wonder what's happening on Voyager. They must still be trying to beam me aboard. To them, it's only been ten minutes and five seconds since I left.

I find myself beginning to hope they never find a solution. There are elements of Jason's life that I have realized that I do not want to miss. His first steps... his first word... his first cunarcycle... his first day at school. I have heard the occasional statement of the "rose-colored glasses of first parenthood." I can only suspect that this is the condition from which I suffer. (Although, I remain curious how a person of my holographic nature can suffer from a condition that plagues organics, but that is a question for another time.)

I can hear Jason chattering away in his crib. I should go check on him.

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3196839080

Day 600

Jason said his first word today.

It was more a burble than speech, but the "papa" was unmistakable. Even Mareeza agrees. I keep trying to remind myself that it's just a matter of time before Voyager beams me back. I'm probably not going to be here when Jason loses his first tooth, or when he has his first day of school, or even when he has his first date. All of that will be left for Mareeza.

It's enough to tempt me to try to find a place to hide from the transporter, but as I haven't encountered a substance since my arrival that will impede a transporter beam, I must resist the temptation and face reality. That day is coming, whether I like it or not.

D

OCTOR'S

P

ERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3206681034

Day 630

Today, Mareeza and I finally decided that Jason was old enough to see what his "Uncle" Akree did for a living. Yes, we took him to see what could be referred to as the "national pastime" of the Central Protectorate- a cherusa kelo game. It's an odd sport, something of a mixture of Earth baseball and Talaxian grumpta ball.

To read the local journalists, you'd think Akree was the best to ever play the game. I've seen phrases like "Playoff God" and "Kelo hero" being thrown around as though they were everyday compliments. The most amusing comment, however, was from the sportswriter who said, "You probably won't see anything like Akreedor Torelius ever again." It's enough to make you think that when Akree retires, the game will cease to exist.

Akree, you see, is the main guard for Mountain. It is his job to make sure that the volleys

from the hurler don't get by him and impact the freysa- that's a piece of fibrous material used in a manner similar to the backstop in Earth baseball, although here it's part of the game instead of an insurance against spectator injury. If it does impact the freysa, the other team's interceptor automatically gets to move to the first cherusa gap. Of course, if the interceptor manages to beat Torelius to the ball- they call it a kelo- then the interceptor is allowed to throw the kelo wherever he chooses within the playing field, and he's allowed to run around the gaps until he either chooses to stop, or the kelo beats him to a gap- in which case he is "out." If the guard stops the volley five times, the interceptor is "out." If the interceptor gets around all seven gaps, his team scores a point.

Yes, it can be confusing. It's almost as though a very inebriated Romulan tried to reinvent Earth baseball, but forgot about the bat. Most of the time it makes sense, but you have to stand on your head and look sideways through a prism to get to that point.

Or, perhaps that's the Infield Fly Rule.

Where was I? Oh, yes. Cherusa kelo. From a defensive standpoint, Akree's position is quite important. A bad guard could cost a team games, and Mountain is in the middle of an important series against their archrivals, Lakeside.

Ah, Lakeside. A psychologist would love them. There is a tremendous rivalry between Mountain and Lakeside, two of Central Protectorate's premiere teams. According to the record, Mountain has won the most championships, and whenever Lakeside has begun to look as though they're getting close to challenging Mountain's standing, something always happens and they inevitably drop away from the running.

What's interesting is that it's never the same thing going wrong twice, which has some Lakeside supporters talking about ghosts that follow the team and make things go so tragically wrong.

It astonishes me how some cultures will so easily revert to a belief in the supernatural when something they don't understand happens.

It has, however, made Lakeside supporters occasionally hostile. In retrospect, perhaps a Mountain/Lakeside game was not the best choice for Jason's first sports outing. There were insults hurled by both sides in such foul language that it doesn't bear repeating.

Still, Jason seemed to enjoy himself. He sat on Mareeza's lap most of the time, nibbling on a fried tuber, smiling and clapping whenever Akree or one of his teammates did something beneficial, pouting whenever they did not. The little one is apparently a quick study, as in those moments when Lakeside had something go their way, Jason would give them what I believe Mr. Paris referred to as a "raspberry."

I see Akree has already been an excellent influence on the child.

No matter. He has been there for Mareeza ever since the missile attack and I believe he will continue to be there for her after I'm gone. I intend to speak to him about it, once I figure out exactly how to tell him. The least I can do is make sure my son is taken care of.

D

OCTOR'S

P

PERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53501.3328065134

Day 1000

As of this afternoon, I've been on Tahal-Meeroj for one thousand days. Voyager has had almost eighteen minutes to fix the problem that keeps me here. I will very likely be beamed back before Jason is old enough to realize he has a father. It was that realization that motivated me to finally act on something that I've been putting off.

Ever since he helped me recover the victims of the missile attacks two years ago, Akree has proven himself to be more than adequate in that regard. He has been reliable to a fault, and I had to ask him if he could continue to be that way in the future.

I've seen the way he looks at Mareeza. Many of the men on Voyager- and even some of the women, now that I think about it- get that same expression whenever Seven walks into the room. It's obvious that Akree and I both care about Mareeza and Jason, but he's the one in the position to take care of them on a long-term basis. One year of his salary would put Jason through as much schooling as he ever wanted, and artistic pursuits, while spiritually gratifying, are too capricious to rely on for a child's upbringing.

I had a very difficult discussion with Akree today. Without explaining why, I told him that there was a possibility that I would have to leave the city with no warning one day soon. He accepted that Mareeza knew the whole story and understood the risks. Surprisingly, he even accepted that I couldn't tell him what was really going to happen. Fortunately, he also agreed that Jason needed a father if that day should ever come. He was honored to accept the responsibility. I know Akree will do well by Jason, which is all I could hope for.

D

DOCTOR'S

P

PERSONAL

L

OG

- Stardate 53504.04

At least I was able to say goodbye.

Mareeza was taking her curtain call when Voyager finally beamed me back. The finest opera house in the protectorate had finally agreed to allow her to debut her magnificent ode

to the Sky Ship, and the most famous mezzo-soprano in the hemisphere nearly begged to sing the aria d'agilita. It was the most glorious thing I've ever heard.

Akree was in the seat to my right in the box, Jason contentedly sitting on his lap. When the ovation came, he was on his feet with me, hefting Jason onto his shoulder so my son could see his mother get the honors she so richly deserved.

And Mareeza looked beautiful as she took in the ovation. She'd allowed me to help her choose the dress for tonight, and the sable brown satin was just the right color to complement her hair. She chose a gold necklace that Akree had given her for her birthday last month- a perfect amber emyara jewel suspended right over the hollow at the base of her throat where clavicles and sternum met. According to the old superstitions, an emyara was to protect the wearer from harm.

I'd made him promise not to tell Mareeza of our discussion, but that gift told me he certainly hadn't forgotten it.

When my mobile emitter registered the first signs that the beam-out was beginning, I realized I didn't have much time. When I'd beamed down, there had been a delay between when I was fully integrated and when the beam disengaged. It felt as though it were happening in reverse. At least it would give me a few moments to make my farewells.

Apparently, what I felt was also visible. Akree looked surprised, but still managed to say, "Don't worry. I'll take care of them." I had no doubt he would.

With that, I spent my last moments on the surface applauding Mareeza's work with every bit of enthusiasm I could muster. I knew I'd never hear those lilting arias or her wonderful lutebo adagios in person ever again. I caught her eye one last time, and there was an instant of surprise in her eyes when she looked at me. It must have been the slow dematerialization. She curtsied once, and waved. The last thing I saw before I materialized in the transporter room was that genuine, wonderful smile.

That was yesterday, by Voyager's time.

Since my return, the captain has kept me busy with reports and cultural briefings, but it hasn't been enough to make me forget that I'm no longer certain I belong here.

Let the record state that I tried everything I could think of to keep from making the Prime Directive violation any worse than it already was. I did my best to fulfill my responsibility as a Starfleet officer.

Let the record also state that I did my best to serve the people of Tahal-Isut. I followed the Hippocratic Oath to the best of my abilities, so long as it did not compromise my mission. I made every endeavor to allow one set of programming parameters work in concert with the other. Anyone else put into my position might have made different choices, but whether or not they were better, that is not for me to decide.

However, I know that Mareeza and Jason are already gone, memories in the two-hundred fifty-three years that have gone by down there. I can't help but wonder if Akree or Mareeza ever told Jason about me, and if so, what his reaction was. Of course, I can also understand them not telling him. That would be not unlike telling a small child in Ancient Greece that one of their primary caregivers had been Asclepius himself.

Even though I tried not to interfere with their culture, it would still be nice to be remembered.

* * *

On the day of his twenty-eighth birthday, Jason Tabreez stared at the small monitor on the portable recorder, not quite certain whether to smile or cry. After ten years of trying to decipher the unit's contents, with a dozen computer technicians, linguists, and any other person he could think of who might have had insight all telling him he was wasting his time, that he would never be able to break the encryption on the device, he'd found a way. Neither of his parents had tried to stop him from reading it, something for which Jason was both surprised, and grateful.

A light snoring made it to Jason's ears, and he looked down to the sight of Gotara, his one-year-old son, dozing peacefully on his lap. Clutched in Gotara's little hand was a verdil-robed doll that he'd received for his birthday that night. This was a newer design to the Verasul character, but Jason still saw the kind congeniality he'd known growing up in its face.

"Doctor," Jason whispered. "Thank you."

A whispered endearment came from the doorway. He looked over to find his mate, Telluna, standing there in her sleep garment, the fabric's lush verdil color setting off her beautiful hair. She had always had a resemblance to Jason's mother, but that was mostly in her pigmentation.

"Jason," Telluna said, "you should put Gotara to crib. You must be at the hospital early tomorrow. Dr. Ruaal- "

"Dr. Ruaal can wait," Jason said, a sad smile turning his lips. "I want to spend time with my son."

Star of the night... Star of the day... come to take my tears away... make my life always bright....

- Tahal-Isut Childhood Prayer

Or the Tiger

Geoffrey Thorne

This tale is set near the end of Voyager's sixth season.

Geoffrey Thorne

Geoffrey Thorne is a screenwriter and illustrator and lives, incomprehensibly, in Los Angeles with his wife, Susan. He is also the author of "The Soft Room" (Strange New Worlds VI), "Chiaroscuro" (Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Prophecy and Change), and "Concurrence" (Strange New Worlds VIII).

"Or The Tiger" marks his first official entry into Voyager's part of Star Trek mythology. The title comes from another short story, "The Lady or the Tiger," by Frank R. Stockton.

B'Elanna fell and falling thought, Great. Could this day possibly get any worse?

She hit the deck with a hard wet slap and was grateful that the muscles in her backside were tough enough to absorb the impact.

It was the jolt Voyager took when cresting the latest subspace eddy that had shaken her grip on the upper edge of the Jefferies conduit.

Damned Flewmits, she thought crossly.

Flewmits was the name she'd given to the latest in the seemingly infinite string of hostile aliens Voyager had been unlucky enough to encounter on its crawl through the Delta Quadrant. The ship wouldn't even be here taking this punishment if not for them.

"Hello, we're just passing through," Voyager had transmitted to the first Flewmit sentry ships, only to be met with a barrage of fire from the weird phase disruptor cannons those ships sported.

Thanks to the Flewmits (and some hastily plotted retreat vectors), Voyager was limping along, her systems nearly failing, getting further hell smacked out of her by the appearance of these sprocking subspace oscillations.

"B'Elanna," said a voice. In addition to the missing electronic chirp, the voice itself was nearly lost in the static of the glitchy comm system.

"Who is it?" said B'Elanna.

"It's Synge, Boss." Maddie Synge was supervising gamma shift in main engineering.
"We've g*** situation, ** could be*"

"Say again, Maddie," said B'Elanna. "Comms are still acting up."

"**ergancy, Lieutenant," said Synge through the chaff. "*** *** ** looking at a potential MI event."

* * *

"How far in are we?" said B'Elanna as she burst into the warp-core chamber.

"About ten minutes," said Synge, peering out at B'Elanna from beneath dark bangs that sweat had plastered to her pale skin.

"QI'yaH," said B'Elanna even as she pounced on the nearest open console. Every once in a while she resorted to Klingon profanity when her nerves got jangly, despite her antipathy for her mother's side of the family. "Why'd you wait so long to tell me?"

"I called you as soon as I saw what was happening," said Synge, dropping in beside her.

B'Elanna's gaze strayed briefly from the symbols streaming across her screen to the giant translucent cylinder that was Voyager's warp core. The blue-white alchemy of deuterium plasma and antimatter still flowed as usual but grew darker and darker as she watched. The ship would die about a picosecond after they went black.

Matter inversion.

She'd read about it, of course. Hell, every engineer who ever babysat a warp core kept the hideous possibility in the back of her mind.

The spontaneous reversal of quantum properties such that any warpgenic field destabilizes, expanding beyond containment and spreading the inversion effect to any particulate matter with which it comes into contact.

Practical translation: If you see it coming, you're already dead.

A series of unfamiliar symbols rolled across the screen, drawing her eyes away from the warp core. There was a discrepancy in the plasma flow regulation protocols, the ones controlling the matter-antimatter mix.

What in the world?

No wonder Maddie hadn't been able to nail it down. The alteration was in the base system code, not in the subroutines specifically related to the warp core.

The rest of the room and the people in it fell away as B'Elanna dropped into that same tunnel of adrenal slow-time that had served her ancestors so well in battle.

The altered code changed the computer's ability to discern certain ratios and relationships. The bad news was that, though she could discern where the modifications had been made, she had no time to input the necessary corrections. Even under the best conditions that would take hours.

If Maddie's estimate was correct, and hers usually were, B'Elanna had a few minutes, at most, to put things right. She tried to shift control function to auxcon, forgetting for a moment that all of Voyager's systems were on semi-isolated grids until the subspace variances could be blocked out.

She could write a patch that would reinstate the connections necessary to implement the shift, but not quickly. In the meantime the damned machines were still telling themselves that everything was peachy when her eyes could see they weren't. There had to be some way to make a quick switch even under these conditions, but what?

"Fry it," she said softly as the idea came to her.

"Lieutenant?"

She ordered them to strip the protective plates from all the consoles and selected portions of the deck. As they got to it, B'Elanna began tapping in the codes that would fool the computer into thinking a massive rad leak had occurred.

Her chronometer told her that she was down to twenty-five seconds.

"Out! Everybody!" she bellowed. "Now!"

Her people flashed past her in a silent blur of gold and scarlet and black. B'Elanna barely noticed. There was one more thing she had to do. Someone was responsible for this and she wasn't leaving before she found out who.

She burned five seconds digging, probing deeper until-

When the information finally appeared, she was more surprised than she would have expected.

Plumes of silver gas began to flood the chamber. An eruption of light and sound on her left told her the consoles had begun to short.

"Initiating system transfer," said the computer. Then, immediately, "Transfer complete."

B'Elanna dived through the exit even as the silver gas inspired crystals to grow in her lungs and the massive containment doors slammed shut.

Safely outside, she collapsed into a fit of violent coughs as her body purged itself of the gas.

"Computer- " she rasped between jags. "Report warp-core status."

Engineering function had successfully been transferred to auxiliary control. The plasma mix rate was already dropping to normal levels. Voyager was out of danger.

All that was left was to apprehend the saboteur. She could almost see Tassoni's face as he was hauled to the brig.

* * *

The turbolift gave out three decks shy of the bridge, obliging B'Elanna to find an access ladder and climb. The lifts were already on her list of Things to Fix but, as their glitches forced only occasional brief stops, they were near the bottom.

She had more on her mind than that anyway. Angelo Tassoni was one of five people aboard Voyager whose throats B'Elanna had to remind herself daily not to cut.

She remembered how she'd begged Captain Janeway not to bring him and his cohorts aboard. Her argument had been fairly straightforward.

"They tried to kill us," she had said.

In fact Tassoni and the rest of the crew of the U.S.S. Equinox had done a damn sight more than try. They'd come closer to ending Voyager's journey back to the Alpha Quadrant than anyone short of the Borg.

"We should maroon them somewhere, at least," B'Elanna had said when Captain Janeway refused her first request. But Janeway only went on about the possibility for redemption and the need to move on and how, whatever else the Equinox survivors were, they were still Starfleet.

B'Elanna had understood none of it. All she could keep in her mind was the fact that these bastards were still breathing and her friend Max Burke was not.

Yes, Max had also willingly tried to kill her and the rest of Voyager's crew. Yes, he was even guiltier than the few that had managed to survive the incident. Yes, Max's betrayal had cut her more deeply than anything the others had done. Yes, yes, yes. But B'Elanna had known Max, since her brief unhappy stay at the Academy. She had even loved him in a way.

Tassoni and the rest were strangers.

Janeway's "redemption" was a perverse reward indeed if it was something these five could receive but Max couldn't.

* * *

As these dark thoughts assailed her, Voyager took another jolt, causing her hand to slip as she reached for the ladder's top rung. She flailed there for a second, barely maintaining her balance.

"Need a hand?" said someone above her. She looked up into a soft-featured brown face with sad dark eyes. It was Noah Lessing, one of Tassoni's fellow survivors. Why does one of them pop up every time I think about Equinox ?

"Save it," she said, hauling herself onto the deck beside him. "Unless you want to lose that hand."

Lessing backed away, giving B'Elanna the room she needed to pass without having to touch him.

As she rounded the far corner, she saw the doors of the turbolift, apparently functional again, sliding open. Voyager's first officer stood just inside, arms clasped behind his back, looking, as usual, as if he'd been carved out of some ruddy slab of granite.

"B'Elanna," said Chakotay, beckoning. "Didn't you hear the order? The captain wants us in the briefing room."

"Coms are glitchy on the lower decks," she said as she joined him.

"I'm sure you'll get to it," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "It's on the list."

* * *

Captain Kathryn Janeway was a prepossessing woman in a sort of don't-make-me-put-you-out-the-nearest-airlock kind of way. She wasn't one for practical jokes and she wasn't stupid. So it was only with difficulty that B'Elanna was able to process what she was saying.

"It was an honest mistake, B'Elanna," Janeway said. "You could say the whole thing is really my fault."

B'Elanna stood by the still open briefing room door, seething. The nails of her left hand pressed hard into her palm as the anger inside her tried and failed to find some release.

"Honest mistake," she repeated through her teeth.

"Yes, Lieutenant," said Janeway. "Mr. Tassoni wanted to make himself useful. I knew you had your hands full with all these system malfunctions, so I told him to pitch in where he could."

"And his idea of pitching in was to destroy the ship," said B'Elanna.

"You are in error, Lieutenant," said Seven, completely missing the venom in B'Elanna's voice.

"Oh?" said B'Elanna softly. "I am, am I?"

"Clearly," said Seven. "It's obvious Crewman Tassoni's intention was to avert potential danger, not create it."

"You think so?" said B'Elanna.

"His modifications to Voyager's base code allowed the ship to automatically compensate for several of the malfunctions caused by local subspace conditions," said Seven. "Without them, this vessel might very well have suffered the fate you described."

The others waited for the explosion from B'Elanna. Chakotay in particular seemed braced for, at the very least, a stream of purple invective.

None came.

"All right," said B'Elanna in a close approximation of her usual tones. "Next time give me some warning."

"Absolutely," said the captain. Then, the disaster seemingly averted, she gestured for the engineer to take a seat.

"So," said Chakotay, still watching B'Elanna as she slid into an empty chair. "What's the big surprise?"

"What would you say," said the captain with a grin, "if I told you that Mr. Kim has discovered the source of our subspace problems?"

* * *

It wasn't an asteroid, but it resembled one. It was about two-thirds the size of Voyager and maintained an impossibly static position several light-seconds to her starboard side. It had heft and spin and a long, colorful history, if the analysis could be trusted.

Something about it was generating the wild and dangerous subspace oscillations that had plagued Voyager since entering this region.

"Why can't we just blow it up?" said B'Elanna, almost immediately. "I can have antimatter charges ready in an hour."

The captain had other ideas. There was considerably more to the object than met the eye. Though their accuracy was blunted by the thing's makeup, some of the scans seemed to indicate geometries hidden under its outer layer that could only be the result of sentient construction.

"You want us to crack it open," said Chakotay.

"Well," Janeway said with a wry smile, "it does look a bit like a pinata."

* * *

A ten-person away team seemed apropos, with B'Elanna as the leader. The subspace issues made beaming too dangerous, so the team packed into their EVA suits and then into the two shuttles that would get them there in safety.

B'Elanna would have liked to pick her own team, but she had to admit that the captain's choices were first-rate.

Seven of Nine and the Doctor were obvious selections, as was Lieutenant Farley, whose coolness under pressure and knack for decrypting alien code hierarchies made him a staple on any tech-centered mission.

The others on Janeway's list were a little surprising. This wasn't so much for their presence but for the fact that Janeway's selection of them indicated an intimacy with the crew's capabilities that B'Elanna would never have thought her captain possessed.

Jenny Delaney and her twin, Megan, while technically stellar cartographers, had both won highest marks in both xenogeology and minerology at the Academy.

Ensign Black, a woman whose uncommunicative demeanor belied a quick wit and a razor-sharp mind, had grown up on the Hay-Pygram asteroid mining concern, making her well used to the kind of excavation this detail might require.

Crewman Browder, a jolly, inquisitive junior-grade engineer, was responsible for some inspired work in reconfiguring alien tech to work smoothly in concert with Voyager's own.

Lieutenants Hardy, Cobb, and Edgely were all seasoned, first-class engineers, nearly on par with B'Elanna herself, but it was their off-duty activities that put them on Janeway's list. Apparently they were all avid climbers and spelunkers, having each clocked scores of holodeck hours fighting to the top of some impossible summit or piercing the depths of an impenetrable cavern.

Nice work, thought B'Elanna, grudgingly. Left to her own devices she probably would have chosen all these people herself. All but one.

"Noah Lessing is a top-level xenobiologist," Janeway said when B'Elanna protested his inclusion. "The Doctor requested him specifically."

"You don't think there's somebody alive over there, do you?" said B'Elanna. "That thing's a hundred thousand years old."

"Lessing's going, Lieutenant," Janeway said in a tone modulated to let B'Elanna know that the conversation was already over. "Do I have to say it's an order?"

"No, ma'am," said the engineer. "No, you don't."

* * *

"I think it looks like a reetl fish," said Ensign Farley as the shuttle wheeled through the final stage of its journey toward the alien artifact.

A soft-spoken man with a slight Texan drawl, Farley had spent time in life sciences before transferring to engineering. He often likened complex alien structures to some familiar animal or another.

"Touching down," said B'Elanna. "Let's get those helmets locked on."

"I'd say there's more resemblance to the spoon whales of Betazed," chimed the Doctor as he moved from person to person, double-checking suit seals and chemical mixes on the respiration tanks. "That sloping curve at the front is the giveaway."

"It's a roadblock," said B'Elanna as she reached for her own helmet. The computer could handle the landing on its own. "The sooner we get it out of the way, the sooner we can move on."

She had the team spread out in a loose grid pattern to save time in searching for an opening.

The artifact's skin- what their admittedly inconclusive scans had approximated as a millennia-old coating of interstellar dust and detritus- was only two meters thick.

Harry Kim's scans, though unable to ferret any of the artifact's deeper secrets, had managed to target several thin spots in its crust.

Tuvok surmised that, should the thing prove to be a construct of some kind, these areas might be points of potential access.

Phasers were ruled out for clearing the material away, lest they accidentally damage the structure within.

"Choose a spot and dig," she told them.

* * *

"This stuff is like concrete," said Ensign Black.

A movement on B'Elanna's periphery drew her gaze to one side, where she saw the Doctor running a naked palm over the artifact's crust. A figure she took to be that of Noah Lessing stood quietly by.

"It feels more like sandstone to me," said the Doctor. Then, noticing that he had B'Elanna's attention, he smiled. Of course he did. Who wouldn't? Voyager, despite its current predicament, was built to explore, and the Emergency Medical Hologram was part of Voyager.

On the other hand, maybe his happiness came from the fact that, as a hologram, he was the only member of the team not obliged to wear an EVA suit. The Doctor was at home in the vacuum as he was lolling around Voyager's sickbay.

He might look like a human being, even behave like one, but it was just an illusion. The Doctor didn't eat or age or sweat or sleep. He had no heart pumping synthetic blood through holographic veins or prosthetic lungs processing the mix of oxygen and nitrogen enjoyed by the rest of the crew.

He didn't even have to use vocal cords to speak. She listened as he nattered away at Lessing over the comm, moving his lips as if he really needed them to speak.

It was disconcerting to say the least. B'Elanna made a mental note to add standard EVA gear to his holomatrix should a similar mission present itself in the future.

"Lieutenant Torres," said Seven of Nine's voice, snapping her back to business. "I require your assistance."

* * *

Looking down at it, B'Elanna had to admit she was impressed. Seven of Nine's pit was about two meters deep, wide enough for two good-sized humanoids to stand abreast. Dominating the bottom of her little trench was something that could very easily have been a torpedo hatch or even an airlock door.

She trained her tricorder on it, but the readings she got back were an even more contradictory jumble than those presented by the skin.

She bent to get a better look at what she took to be the locking mechanism of what was, apparently, a hatch.

Unlike the rest of the hatch's fairly pristine surface- the lock bore signs of scoring of the kind a pickax or digger might produce.

B'Elanna smiled.

"Knocked already, huh?" she said, running her glove along the surface. What is this stuff? She thought.

It looked vaguely crystalline, but the closest thing her tricorder's analysis would settle on was something it called a "ceramic polymer hybrid." Not the most specific description.

"I have circumvented the latching mechanism," said Seven. "But I am unable to apply sufficient force to move this impediment without assistance."

B'Elanna got into a crouch, her gloved hands taking hold of the hatch's edge. Mirroring her on the other side, Seven did the same.

It moved a little more easily than either of them expected and, before they could get the hatch up to shoulder height, a great gust of wind blew out from the new aperture, nearly ripping it from their hands.

B'Elanna had expected there might be some outgassing. If all the seals on this thing were intact, it might very well have kept its atmosphere bottled indefinitely. What she didn't anticipate was the intrusion of ambient sound that came with the little hurricane.

For a few moments she could actually hear the wind rushing by, even whistling through the small ring couplings on either side of her helmet.

Her faceplate vibrated slightly against the gale, creating a nearly imperceptible rattle in the seams. Those noises were startling enough, but along with them, beneath them, there was something else: a low moaning sound that put her in mind of an erlbuck she'd once seen

expire after being hit by a grain transporter. The creature, a sort of reptilian antelope, had taken three hours to die. It wasn't a pleasant memory.

"Lieutenant?" said Seven.

"Atmo," said B'Elanna, coming back to herself. "Probably got trapped when the seals activated."

"I agree," said Seven.

As quickly as it had come up, the moaning alien wind died away. Some internal safety mechanism had engaged, capping the leak she and Seven had created. That meant somewhere, deep inside this thing, some lights might still be on. With only minor difficulty she and Seven of Nine propped the hatch to one side.

"Okay, away team," said B'Elanna over the comm. "We're in."

* * *

"Tight fit," said Hardy. He was the fourth to squeeze through into the bottleneck that B'Elanna was already calling The Front Door.

Beyond the small chamber they currently occupied, the interior of the construct was just a warren of tunnels extending in all directions.

Like ants they entered, single file, splitting off into separate passageways in order to maximize the effectiveness of the beams from their helmet lamps.

"There's some sort of grav field working," said one of the Delanys. "I can feel my stomach again."

Like the hatch, all the interior surfaces seemed to be composed of the same vaguely crystalline material. Their tricorders deemed the substance to have been woven somehow or even perhaps grown into its current configuration.

"You'd think somebody would have thought to level the rutting floors," said Edgely. The downward slope of the tunnel she'd chosen made keeping her footing difficult.

None of the surfaces kept a flat plane for long. Instead they were all faceted, segmented almost. It was like crawling around inside the veins of an enormous gem.

"I'm picking up something that could be biological," said a deep resonant voice- Noah Lessing's. "The reading's inconclusive but- "

"When the Doctor comes through, take him and check it out," said B'Elanna, cutting him off.

Janeway might be able to force her to work with Lessing, but nothing in the captain's orders said she had to listen to him talk.

* * *

"Anybody else feel a chill?" said Cobb.

"All EVA devices are temperature regulated," said Seven of Nine's voice.

"Seven's right," said B'Elanna. "Nobody's feeling a chill."

"Yeah," said Cobb. "My goose bumps beg to differ."

"Mine too," said Hardy.

"Noted," said B'Elanna. "Now cut the- " Something moved in her periphery and she went immediately mum.

"Lieutenant Torres," said someone. "Are you- ?"

"Shut up," she hissed.

Reaching slowly for the phaser in her belt, she swept her headlamp back and forth across the corridor. There was nothing there.

"All right," she said after a time. "False alarm."

"Anybody else getting that signal echo?" said Cobb. "Sounds like whispering."

B'Elanna was about to tell Cobb to go back to Voyager if his nerves weren't up to the assignment when she realized she heard it too.

The sound was very similar to that of a hundred people murmuring to each other, but from such a distance that the words could not be made out. If it was a signal echo, it was of a sort B'Elanna had never encountered.

She caught the same furtive movement again, this time on her right. In a motion that would have made her Klingon ancestors proud, she flipped onto her side and brought her phaser up.

There was definitely motion on the crystal facets above her. It was ephemeral, barely visible even with the light from her helmet shining directly on it.

Something, some volatile liquidy something, was moving there all right. But it was moving inside the structure of the crystal rather than across its surface.

Her free hand came up to touch the facet, but, perhaps triggered somehow by her movement, the strange apparition vanished. As did Cobb's echo.

"What the hell?" said B'Elanna softly.

She was doing her best to convince herself that what she had seen in the crystal's depths had not been a face when the Doctor started screaming.

* * *

The tunnel was too narrow for her to turn around in, so B'Elanna was forced to go forward and hope it widened farther on. She crawled along, the beam from her headlamp casting strange jagged shadows on the uneven crystal surfaces.

As she moved, she listened to the pandemonium surrounding the Doctor's unknown predicament.

What was causing this? What should they do? Did anybody know how the Doctor's mobile holoemitter worked? Was it something to do with the alien artifact or had the thing just broken down somehow?

B'Elanna fought to get a word in, to ask for a clear description of the Doctor's condition, but her people weren't giving her the room.

"Everybody stop moving and shut up!" yelled B'Elanna.

Instantly the chatter ceased. All that was left was the Doctor's oscillating staticky wail- more like a feedback loop than anything organically produced. "Now. Who's actually there with him?"

"Just me and Lessing, Lieutenant," said Browder's thickly accented voice.

"Good," said B'Elanna. "What exactly is happening to the Doctor?"

"Can't say," said Browder, obviously shaken. "He's all distorted. Bent out of shape, like."

Browder had a gift for understatement. In her mind B'Elanna could picture the actual event- the Doctor writhing in simulated agony as invisible fingers stretched and bent him in several directions at once.

"Can you see his emitter?" said B'Elanna.

"No, I- wait- yes, ma'am," said Browder.

"Grab it," said B'Elanna.

Browder hesitated, telling her he didn't know if that was such a good-

"Grab it, crewman," B'Elanna snapped. "Now!"

Browder paused for a second and then said, "Got it. But he's twisting around and- "

"There's a small oval depression on one side," said B'Elanna. Browder found it easily. "Okay. Press in on it- slowly- and tell me what happens."

All at once the weird artificial squalling stopped.

"Browder," said B'Elanna. "Status."

"He's- the Doctor's gone," said Lessing's voice.

"I'm talking to Browder, Lessing," said B'Elanna, irritated.

"Lessing's right, Chief," said Browder, a hint of panic creeping into his voice. "The Doc's- he's just gone."

"Relax," said B'Elanna. "You just switched off his emitter."

She ordered him to stay there to maintain a com link with Voyager. The rest of them were too deep inside the artifact for external transmissions to penetrate. Then: "Seven of Nine, how close are you to Browder?"

"I am nearly to his position now," said Seven

"Get the Doctor's emitter back to Voyager," said B'Elanna. "Then run a full diagnostic and, if necessary, effect repairs."

"Acknowledged," said Seven.

"What about me, Lieutenant?" said Lessing's voice.

"Get back to work," she said after a brief pause. "It's what you're here for, isn't it?"

* * *

"I've found something," said B'Elanna, pulling herself through. Her little tunnel had finally dead-ended in another hatch, a smaller version of The Front Door. She activated the lock easily, crawled through, and found herself suddenly able to stand upright.

The surface on which she stood- maybe the floor, maybe not- was overtly curved. It was as if she had crawled into the bottom of a massive bowl.

There were enormous semi-curved struts, twelve of them, reaching up from the floor in two evenly spaced rows of six and extending farther into the upper dark than her helmet beam could penetrate.

She directed her tricorder's scan wave at what she perceived to be the center of the darkness above. Again there was the maddeningly diffuse reading of power somewhere.

She cast around for any sort of recognizable control pad or activation device, but all she could see were the same uneven facets twinkling in the light of her helmet lamp.

But, when she looked close, they weren't all uneven, were they? Some of them were more precisely carved and inlaid at regular intervals along the wall.

She approached the nearest carving- a perfect isosceles triangle.

"V***ger!* **d*ring *n *m*ediate bugout," said Browder, his signal suddenly shredded.

Damn it. Of course Janeway would pull them out the second she learned of the Doctor's condition. She had the crew to think of. But there was something about the patterns in the carved crystal that put B'Elanna in mind of a propulsion interface.

Center for power-up, she thought. That's what the nested hexagons mean. The seven-pointed star symbol on the left is for output and the inverted version on the right means dampers. But what's the top symbol? Is it even a symbol at all? Are any of them? Am I just imposing what I want to see on this thing?

One way to find out.

She touched the uppermost symbol gently and was startled to feel a very slight vibration. She smiled at the quaver in her own nerves. The place had gotten to her too.

She traced her finger down to the nested hexagons, still feeling the same delicate tremor, and thought, All right, baby. Let's see what you've got.

* * *

The first quake ripped through the alien construct like a tidal wave, slapping the fleeing explorers into walls and floors like rag dolls caught in some massive centrifuge. Gravitic distortions played havoc with the com-signals, and for a moment all B'Elanna heard was what sounded too much like her people screaming from some impossible distance.

The second quake brought the lights with it and, with them, a return to something like normalcy. Coms came back online and everyone checked in okay, though they were reporting all manner of bizarre phenomena- voices from inside the walls, movement from tunnel branches that had scanned vacant only moments before. Cobb even swore he heard someone singing.

Before she could ask about Voyager's status, the third quake hit them and the question became moot.

"B'Elanna," said Janeway's voice suddenly in her ear, as clear as if the captain were standing right beside her. "What the hell are you doing over there?"

* * *

The repairs to Voyager were completed within a day of B'Elanna's dispersing of the subspace disruptions.

On the second day it was discovered that, now that it had shaken off its second skin, it was possible to beam directly from Voyager to the artifact's outer decks.

By the third day the place was teeming with engineers, biologists, physicists, and even a couple of linguists who found the inscriptions embedded in nearly every surface intriguing.

By the fourth, it was clear to everyone that the artifact was a ship after all, but of kind that no one had ever encountered.

Still, despite the wholly alien nature of the thing, the teams were quick to discover analogues to many of Voyager's departments and much of its technology. This was fairly common among spacefaring cultures. Function really did dictate form in most cases.

Many of the tunnels they'd had such trouble navigating turned out to be part of a gravitic sluice system, which, once activated, would shunt an occupant from chamber to chamber at dizzying speeds, depositing them shaken but safe at their destination.

It was no wonder the Doctor couldn't set foot in the place. All those interlocking grav fields played havoc with his holographic matrix.

Many were also struck by the extreme levels of interconnectivity exhibited by the ship's various systems, quickly learning that no component could be removed from one area of the alien vessel without causing the shutdown of others in other parts.

There was one awful moment when a team of xenobiologists, running down the source of Noah Lessing's earlier life-form readings, came upon a chamber containing a host of new and incomprehensible devices as well as five alien bodies.

Though they were as different from one another as they were from their discoverers, the alien forms had one defining characteristic in common. They had all been dead for a long time.

Still, the Doctor, restored to normal function the second he was reactivated on Voyager, ordered every one of the bodies returned to the ship for autopsy. Even corpses, it seemed, had secrets to tell.

Not that any of that mattered to B'Elanna, or that she even knew of it. Despite entreaties from everyone but Captain Janeway herself, she hadn't left the alien vessel's engine chamber since she'd turned on the lights.

Being half-Klingon had its perks. She needed less rest than her fellows and could manage longer on less food. As if she could eat or sleep when something like this was in front of her.

How do they do it? she asked herself repeatedly. How do they make this monster move?

She had counted no less than thirty-seven interlocking grav fields in the engine chamber alone, allowing every surface to be used as floor, wall, or ceiling depending on where one wished to stand.

At the center of it all, according to her tricorder anyway, cradled by the massive crystal ribs, was a caged singularity- the power source?

Only, if there really was a singularity present, how had she not been pulped against its event horizon? Why was that horizon completely undetectable?

The best she'd come up with was that the material of the ship somehow resonated with the grav fields, regulating their effects by means of some technology she had yet to uncover.

She was close, though. She knew it. Hooking a universal translator into the alien ship's long-dormant AI had sped things up considerably.

After some abortive attempts at straight conversation- the alien idioms were still giving the UT trouble- B'Elanna was bolstered to find that, as long as she confined her inquiry to technical matters, the responses she received were remarkably succinct.

Even the interface itself was noteworthy. Every facet of the alien ship's surface did triple duty, functioning as floor or wall or visual display, depending on the user's desire.

"Present propulsion ratios for interstellar motion," said B'Elanna. Immediately there was a representation floating before her of the alien vessel- now looking very much like Farley's reetl fish- swimming through blackness and surrounded by a swarm of symbols and equations.

The symbols she recognized gave her more trouble than the ones she didn't. The latter were simply meaningless. The former seemed to jog something in her memory, some lost bit of data pertaining to warp bubbles and plus-ten acceleration, that she just couldn't dredge up.

"Present display of all vessels in proximity," said B'Elanna, and suddenly she was looking at Voyager as it floated there beside the alien ship. "Isolate congruous propulsion devices."

As they had been the other ninety times she'd asked for versions of this comparison, Voyager's warp core, nacelles, and deflector shield generators were highlighted in glowing blue by the AI. More of the alien symbols appeared as well.

Some she thought she had deciphered as relating to field integrity and power levels, but others still remained maddeningly obscure.

More irritating, though it had no observable means of conventional propulsion, the entire alien vessel was subsumed in a halo of neon blue.

"Damn it," she said after another hour of fruitless consideration. "What the hell do the deflectors have to do with anything?"

"B'Elanna chooses another syntax to gain our true compliance," said the AI's deep, choir-like voice.

"Present analogous thrust technologies in cooperative relationship," said B'Elanna.

"B'Elanna allows the syntax mote called 'thrust' to be defined for our true compliance," said the AI in a chiding tone.

Reminding herself to ignore the AI's odd conversational manner, she asked for a detailed schematic of the power interface with the engines. What she got was a picture of a system that she had never seen before and that reminded her of something vaguely remembered from an Academy class in field projection.

"Display pathway between presented device and B'Elanna's current location," she said, activating another wall facet. A map of relevant tube junctures appeared before her.

* * *

She emerged from the transport tube on the far side of the alien ship, in the area where the life sciences team had discovered the alien corpses.

Several of them were still present, wandering the walls and ceilings of the massive chamber, clucking over their own discoveries like excited children. Their voices blurred together into a low background rumble- all but one.

"The Doctor wants scrapings for comparison as soon as he can get them," said Noah Lessing.

Damn it, thought B'Elanna, instinctively holding herself hidden in the lee of the tube exit. The last thing she was in the mood for right now was to see or speak with any one of the Equinox survivors.

She decided to hang back until the biologists left, rather than risk a meeting that could very well end with Lessing's split skull in her hands.

There was another tube junction in the center of what, to B'Elanna, was the ceiling. She

watched as Lessing and the others stepped into it, one by one, disappearing on whatever errand occupied them.

When she was sure they were gone, she made a beeline for the device the AI had shown her. It wasn't hard to spot.

The device, one of sixty positioned all over the ship, was a cylinder about four meters high and two around. There were access panels on both sides and some sort of wide Y connector linking the upper portion of the machine to the glossy facet above.

"All right," she said to the thing. "Let's get a look at you."

Several hours later she thought she had learned what she'd come to find out. Just to confirm her theory she pressed her palm against the nearest access facet.

"B'Elanna specifies a service to gain our true compliance," said the AI.

"What is the designation of this device?" she said. The response was a series of strangely musical sounds that reminded her of wind chimes. "Please rephrase, if possible."

"Resonator," said the AI.

B'Elanna smiled. Janeway was going to love this.

* * *

They were all staring at her again as if she'd sprouted an extra head. The captain, Chakotay, the Doctor, Harry, Tuvok; even Tom had managed to tear himself away from the helm to attend her briefing.

It dawned on her that she hadn't seen Tom in days and that to him she must look a mess. She hadn't showered. Her hair and face were smeared with sweat and grime and other substances that had yet to be defined.

Worse, she could tell that the excitement she felt over her discovery was playing as some sort of manic episode in the minds of the others.

What's wrong with B'Elanna now? she could feel them all thinking. Well, they were all in for a big shock.

"What do you mean 'we're going home'?" said Captain Janeway soberly.

"Picture the universe as a river," said B'Elanna, brushing an errant lock of hair away from her face. "Everything flows outward from the center at a rate no one's ever been able to calculate."

"Because there is no static external position from which to judge that rate," said Tuvok.

"Until now," said B'Elanna. She began to warm to her subject, moving around the seated officers and gesturing expansively to emphasize points. "Space is the river. Subspace is the riverbed. The alien drive somehow allows it to create bubbles in subspace in order to travel."

She could tell they understood that at least. It explained the bizarre subspace cyclones they'd encountered when they'd entered this region. The alien ship's drive must have malfunctioned somehow.

"And you've figured out how we can do that too?" said Tom, clearly trying to be helpful.

"No," said B'Elanna. "I have no idea how they navigated subspace or how they traveled in more than one direction."

"Then how- ?"

"We don't have to navigate," said B'Elanna, beaming. "All Voyager has to do is stay put."

They were all still staring. They all still had that look on their faces. She counted to five silently and then asked the computer to give a holographic display of the galaxy. When it came into view, floating above the conference table like a massive snowflake, B'Elanna pointed at the Delta Quadrant.

"We're here, downriver," she said. Then she pointed at the Alpha Quadrant. "Home is here, directly upriver. All we have to do is anchor ourselves in subspace and we won't have to worry about going home. Home will come to us."

There was a brief pause while the others processed what she'd told them. Then there was an eruption of questions. What were the power requirements? Could the alien systems damage Voyager's? How quickly could the necessary modifications be made? How soon, realistically, could they see home?

B'Elanna had no ready answers for any of them but she promised them she would soon.

"Bottom line," she said. "We could all be sipping margaritas at the Quantum Cafe inside a week."

* * *

After ten unsuccessful days of trying, though some of the crew's enthusiasm waned, B'Elanna pressed on. Her estimate had been overly optimistic, perhaps, but there was no reason to give up yet.

Janeway obviously agreed, as she gave the engineer as much leeway as she needed, provided some progress was made. Even if it took another month to make the plan work, that still got them home seventy-odd years quicker than the conventional way. Wasn't that the real, the only, point?

In the interim, they continued to probe and study the alien ship, hoping that the more they learned of its secret history, the more that information might help bring a quicker solution to their shared dilemma.

They learned the name of the alien builders- Moyani. They learned that the ship was really a lifeboat that had just barely escaped the catastrophic failure that had destroyed its mother vessel. The strange subspace patterns in this region had prevented the lifeboat from making a clean escape.

All this was thousands of years ago, and, from the lack of additional corpses, it was

presumed that most of the Moyani crew had somehow abandoned the lifeboat as well. How they had left or where they had gone was still a mystery. None of this new information did anything to help B'Elanna.

So she worked, obsessively it seemed to many, at solving the problem of the alien ship's interconnectivity.

At first she'd thought to simply transplant some of the resonators from the alien ship to Voyager, fire up the alien drive, and bask in the glory of having single-handedly saved Voyager's crew. The alien machines were uncooperative.

No matter how few of them she removed, in whatever combination, the absence caused nearly every other system on the alien ship to shut down. One such outage caused the return of the original subspace disruptions, so it was determined that no more removals would occur until B'Elanna figured a way around the problem.

After that no one saw much of the engineer. She cloistered herself away in the alien engine room with only her thoughts and the ship's AI for company.

* * *

"B'Elanna," said a voice from far above her.

She looked up from where she sat, cross-legged, on the faceted crystal floor, to see Tom Paris staring down from what was, to her, the ceiling.

"Go away, Tom," she said. "I'm busy."

"That's no way to talk to your husband," he said, making his way down the curved wall. He whistled as he took in the huge rib-like spires lancing up from the floor- or down, depending- and the strange non-glowing non-sphere of invisible energy that wobbled in the center.

"I don't have time for this right now," said B'Elanna. "Just leave, okay?"

Of course he didn't leave. He loved her. He was worried about her, about the toll this project was taking on her, on their relationship. Of course she told him to mind his own business, that she knew how much her body could take. The quicker she solved this thing the sooner she could sleep.

"I'm getting us out of here, Tom," she said. "So you have two options. You can support me and go or..." She trailed off, not really wanting to finish.

"Or?" he said, wanting to hear it, having to.

"Or you can just go," she said.

They said other things, harsh things that they both knew they'd regret even as the words passed their lips, and then, finally, he did leave.

I'll make it up to you, she thought as she watched him drop down into the transport tube. An afternoon together on a Risan beach and you won't remember any of this.

Hours after the dustup, after maddening conversations and debates with the Moyani AI, she

thought she might actually have cracked it.

* * *

"And this will work?" asked Janeway, dubiously. "You're sure?"

B'Elanna ignored the captain's skepticism. She'd just been roused from a deep sleep and presented with a solution to their problem so obvious that she likely thought it the product of the engineer's fatigued mind.

"Well," said B'Elanna, "the power outages bled off a lot of what was stored in the Moyani ship's cells. Now there isn't enough to make multiple jumps."

"Net it down, Lieutenant," said Janeway grimly. "I'd like to get another hour of sleep if possible."

"If I'm right," said B'Elanna, "a single firing should get us to within six-hundred light-years of Federation space."

"And all you have to do is reconfigure Voyager's shields to resonate with the Moyani drive's energy field?"

"Yes, Captain," said B'Elanna. "That's all."

* * *

"All" turned out to be a complex balancing of several factors. The Moyani systems had to be programmed to project the subspace field around Voyager rather than itself.

Voyager's own deflectors and warp systems had to be recalibrated to accept the influx of gravitons and other esoteric particles that made up the Moyani carrier field. This was delicate, painstaking work. If only a single line of code was miswritten it would spell disaster for them all.

B'Elanna assigned these duties to teams led by Seven of Nine and Maddie Synge, respectively, limiting her own involvement to that of occasional supervisor.

The job she set herself was the design and construction of Voyager's version of the Moyani field resonators. She might not be able to cannibalize the devices, but she sure as hell could build her own.

She became like a ghost to her crewmates, appearing briefly to check progress or give corrections, only to vanish again into one of the workspaces she'd set aside on either ship. She logged so much time in the transporter that she'd begun to feel a bit unreal herself, as if incorporeality were her natural state and solidity only some sort of weird dream.

The only others B'Elanna saw with any real regularity were Noah Lessing's life sciences team. They too seemed to be spending excessive amounts of time aboard the Moyani ship.

She was unhappy about Lessing's presence there. The Equinox survivors really shouldn't be allowed access to any alien tech, in her opinion, but as long as his team confined themselves to their biological surveys, there wasn't much mischief for him to get up to.

She completed her final scan of the Moyani resonator and compared it with the schematic of the ones she'd built for Voyager.

Seven's team had been waiting for the upload order for hours. Maddie Synge had reported that the recalibrated systems were "good to go" only moments before.

B'Elanna's tricorder display was all green bars, indicating that her homemade resonators had checked out. As soon as they were positioned, Voyager would be only one last step away from home.

* * *

"Janeway to Torres," said the captain's voice.

Irritated, B'Elanna dropped the hyperspanner and wiped a layer of sweat from her brow.

"With all due respect, Captain," she said. "This would go faster without all these interruptions."

"We've hit a snag, Lieutenant," said Janeway.

"A snag?" said B'Elanna, already getting hot. "What the hell kind of- ?"

"Briefing room. Ten minutes," said the captain, cutting her off. "Janeway out."

* * *

"What do you mean, it's alive?"

Having suffered through the engineer's first attack, the Doctor deferred to Noah Lessing to reiterate the unhappy news.

"The Moyani vessel is organic," said Lessing.

"It's made of sprocking clay!" said B'Elanna. It had taken her four hours to position the resonators and two more to get them in sync. She was in no mood for more roadblocks or for Lessing.

"To an engineer," he said. Gods, how she hated him in that moment. "To a biologist, it's clear. The material is made of billions of individual woven strands of something analogous to DNA."

B'Elanna listened, aghast, as Lessing laid out the many discoveries of the life sciences team.

While the Moyani construct was a vessel, it was not, strictly speaking, a ship. The interconnectivity of its devices was not unlike that found between the organs in a living being.

"Remove a lung," said Lessing, "you hurt the heart. Damage the heart, you hurt the brain."

The crust that had covered the thing was not a random accumulation of interstellar dust, as they had first surmised, but a sort of callus composed of local materials coupled with the

Moyani vessel's own paragenetic material. The callus acted as a shield against the subspace vortices the damaged vessel had created.

"It grew a shell," said Lessing.

"That doesn't matter," said B'Elanna. "Even if it is an organic lifeboat- "

"Ovule," the Doctor chimed in. "We're calling it an ovule."

Whatever. "Even if it is some kind of lifeboat," she went on, "it failed. The crew either vacated or they died. You found bodies."

"The bodies aren't the crew," said Lessing. "Not really."

"They looked real enough to me," said B'Elanna, wondering exactly how much pressure it would take to snap Lessing's neck.

"Think about it, Lieutenant," said Lessing. "The Moyani aren't from this galaxy. Clearly their home environment includes a couple of physical laws that we don't have to contend with. You had to think that yourself, looking at their ship design."

She had thought that as she had probed the alien ship's secrets. She'd thought it more than once, in fact. She cursed Lessing silently for knowing that.

"So what happens?" he went on, oblivious of her darkening mood. "They find themselves stuck in an alien environment whose physical laws are nothing like what they have at home. They're alone. Their lifeboat is damaged. How do they survive?"

"They don't," said B'Elanna. "They didn't. Obviously."

"They used the technology that produced their ship to try to grow bodies that would be compatible with local conditions," said Lessing. "But, you're right. They did fail."

"So, what's the problem?" said B'Elanna. "Organic or not, it's still just a dead ship with a dead crew."

No one spoke for a moment, and B'Elanna thought at first that she'd made her point. Then it occurred to her that they were all on one side of the conference table, sitting, while she stood on the other.

They'd already had this discussion, she realized, already argued all the points. Somehow Lessing had already convinced them. Somehow he had already won.

"The Moyani aren't dead," said Captain Janeway when it was clear that no one else wanted to bite the bullet.

"Well, then we should talk to them about their cloaking technology," said B'Elanna. "Because I haven't seen a single one."

"You have, B'Elanna," said Janeway. "You've spent more time with them than anyone."

B'Elanna was sure she could feel her brain frying inside her skull. Had everyone gone crazy?

"I'm afraid you're going to have to explain that, Captain," she said and thought, Before I go insane.

"It's the AI," said Janeway. "The crew are the ship's AI."

* * *

B'Elanna stood there in stunned silence, sinking deeper into a depression whose bottom she couldn't conceive, much less see.

The Moyani had preserved their consciousness in the exotic material of their ship. There was no AI, no computer, no operating systems or software. There were only the Moyani intelligences, encoded as some kind of bizarre gestalt, in the body of the ship itself.

"So you can see the problem," said Chakotay. "If we use the last of their power to get home, we'll strand them here forever."

"Actually," said B'Elanna softly as a point of light appeared in her internal gloom. "Actually I don't see the problem. The Moyani are dead. I'm sorry about that. I really am. They tried to save themselves. They failed. This ship- ovule, if you like- it's not alive in any real sense. At best what you've described is some kind of ceramic vegetable. The AI isn't the Moyani. It's just a recording, a template. None of that adds up to life in my book."

"What does add up to life," said the Doctor quietly. "In your book."

"Something that thinks, Doc," she said. "Something that eats and grows and has some kind of offspring."

"And you don't see how the Moyani ovule does all of those things," he said.

B'Elanna did not. At best the Moyani vessel was nothing more than an extremely sophisticated mechanism.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But, if there's a choice between getting us home and the continued existence of some machine, I pick us."

"I'm a machine," said the Doctor.

"Oh, come on, Doc, you know it's not the same- "

"From where I sit, it's precisely the same, B'Elanna," said the Doctor. "And yet I think, therefore I am. Don't you agree?"

"Of course I do," she said, looking to the others for support and finding only stone faces and silence.

"Yet I'm missing three of the four characteristics you deem necessary for life. I'm just a sophisticated collection of software, defined by my programming, right?" said the Doctor. Reluctantly, B'Elanna nodded. "So the question is, everything being equal, if stranding me on some asteroid would get the rest of you home tomorrow, would you do it or not?"

B'Elanna stared into the EMH's simulated eyes and forced herself to say it. "Yes. I'm sorry, Doc," said B'Elanna after a moment's thought. "Yes, I would."

* * *

Janeway dismissed them all while she and Chakotay discussed what should be done in light of the new revelations. B'Elanna was told not to return to the Moyani ship or to proceed with her efforts to rescue Voyager pending a final decision.

As if there's anything to decide, she fumed as she stalked back toward her cabin. She hated hurting Doc's feelings that way, but facts were facts. Sometimes you had to chew off a leg to get out of the trap.

The Moyani had been dead for millennia. What were they thinking, taking Lessing's word over hers? He and the others from the Equinox had been party to the torture and murder of hundreds of living beings just to squeeze out a plus-nine warp factor for minutes at a time. Now, all of a sudden, he'd grown a conscience?

* * *

Noah Lessing, the Doctor, and Tuvok stood in clustered discussion by the turbolift. She felt their eyes as she pushed past them, Lessing's in particular. She glanced up, in spite of herself, and found herself looking right into his face.

The shape and depth of his eyes conveyed sadness so effortlessly it was a wonder anyone believed it. Nothing that perfect existed in nature, not even remorse.

He might have fooled Janeway and the others with his pose of repentance but B'Elanna knew better. She also knew Janeway's decision would be the wrong one. There was only one thing to do and she was the only one with the strength to do it.

* * *

It was no easy trick activating all twenty of Voyager's resonators, downloading Seven's command codes into her tricorder, and beaming across to the Moyani ship without being spotted, but B'Elanna managed.

The place was colder and darker than she expected- an effect of the power loss her experiments had inspired. She barely noticed. The shadows somehow suited her purpose. All she had to do was take a short tube ride to the engine control core, upload Seven's codes, and withdraw to Voyager before the Moyani drive fired up.

There'd be a short, bumpy ride, after which she'd probably get chewed out by Janeway- maybe even placed under arrest, tossed in the brig, and court-martialed- but ultimately any punishment the captain meted out would be offset by the fact of their sudden arrival in the Alpha Quadrant. There was no arguing with success, after all.

She was just entering the tube when she stopped, struck suddenly by a feeling that something wasn't right. Some sound or smell came to her, perhaps something only her Klingon senses could detect, telling her that she was not alone.

She pressed her hand against the nearest access facet and asked if anyone else was aboard.

"B'Elanna and Noah are alike in proximity," said the AI.

* * *

Lessing knew his time was limited. There was a real chance that the captain would buy Lieutenant Torres's argument to burn out the Moyani drive to get Voyager home. He couldn't let that happen. Not yet.

As he ran back and forth between access facets, activating the systems he'd uncovered in his own research, he began to allow himself a small sense of satisfaction.

It hurt him to realize the axiom he'd learned on the Equinox and tried so hard to put down was still true.

All ethics are situational.

He was so engrossed in his activities that he never heard the mild hum that accompanied the use of one of the ovule's transport tubes. He never noticed the small slender shadow creeping toward him up the wall. He never noticed those things, but he definitely knew the touch of a hand phaser when he felt it, especially when the business end was pressed hard into his neck.

"Want to tell me what you're doing here, crewman?" said B'Elanna Torres, her voice soft and menacing. "Not planning a little solo trip home, are you?"

Lessing's answer was to bring up his shoulder suddenly, and spin, which sent the phaser flying. As it skittered along the curved crystalline floor, he dropped into a crouch and swung out a leg, hoping to catch her behind the ankles and knock her on her ass.

She was too fast for him. She leaped backward, avoiding the sweep, landing a few meters away.

The phaser lay where it had fallen, midway between them. B'Elanna expected Lessing to make a grab for it but he didn't.

Instead he vaulted into the air, his powerful legs forcing him out of the range of the grav field that made the wall a floor. He passed through the null space at the center of the room, flipped over, and landed, feet first, on the far side. Beside him was a bit of Moyani machinery that B'Elanna hadn't seen before. It reminded her, oddly, of food replicators, though on a much larger scale.

As Lessing fretted over the device, B'Elanna scooped up the phaser. She was just about to fire when Lessing slapped his palm onto an access facet and said, "Initiate local surge control."

She squeezed the trigger but the weapon didn't discharge. Some sort of energy dampening field had obviously been activated. Grudgingly she allowed that his tactic had been smart, as far as it went. Unfortunately for him, he had not accounted for B'Elanna's skill with ballistics.

The phaser, having lost none of its velocity to its trip through the zero-g area at the center of the room, smashed into the back of Lessing's skull even as he worked feverishly over the controls of the alien device. He fell to the floor, stunned, and then she smashed into him as well.

"What is this thing?" she said, wrenching his arm back with one hand and pressing his face to the floor with the other. "What the hell are you doing?"

Whether Lessing meant to answer or not, she never learned. Before he could say a word, facets all over the room began to glow with a faint, almost ethereal light.

"No," said B'Elanna in a harsh whisper. "No."

She had no idea what it was Lessing was up to, but she did know that, whatever it was, it was already draining precious ergs from the ship's power core.

The glow from the facets increased, and inside the nearest ones B'Elanna thought she could just discern the same almost-faces she'd seen in the tunnel, peering out like children with their cheeks pressed to winter glass.

Dismissing them as some trick of the increasing light, she wrenched Lessing to his feet and pressed his face hard into the nearest wall.

She felt a bone crack inside him- his cheek or shoulder, she wasn't sure- and let him slump to the floor. He'd keep for the few moments it would take to figure out what the hell he was up to.

Lessing groaned some unintelligible warning as she bent over the alien device. At first it was just a mosaic of small facets, similar to the ones that made up the walls and the floor, but soon it resolved itself into something she understood.

It was drawing power from the primary core and using it to construct... something. She could see representational codes for that something combining, resolving themselves into a pattern she felt she should recognize but, as yet, did not.

Not knowing what else to do and terrified that his actions had already bled too much power away, B'Elanna leaned heavily on a control facet and said, "Suspend tool function."

She wasn't sure the command would stop the AI from completing whatever it was Lessing had set in motion, but it was all she had.

Almost instantly the glow subsided in the surrounding facets and the strange, mask-like faces seemed to recede once more into the crystal depths.

"Stop," said Lessing through what sounded like several broken teeth. "You're killing the Moyani."

"There are no Moyani, Lessing," she said.

"You're wrong," he said, pushing himself painfully into a sitting position. "I'm building one, right now."

That's what the symbols on the display represented: chromosome pairs- genes. Lessing had input them into the device and now it was using energy from the power core to grow some kind of genetic hybrid. Or it had been until she suspended the process.

"I saw that look on your face," said Lessing. "When you passed me in the hall, I saw you,

Lieutenant. I saw that same look on every face on the Equinox every day."

She hit him again, hard, in the sternum. He gasped as more bones cracked.

"Don't you dare compare yourself to me," she said, barely containing her rage. "I'm no murderer."

"You were about to sacrifice these people to get us home," said Lessing, spitting a little blood. "What's the Klingon word for that?"

"They aren't people," said B'Elanna plaintively, though she wasn't as sure of it as she had been a moment ago. "They're just templates. Recordings."

"Not anymore," he said. "Either the revival process finishes, right now, or they die. I don't think there's enough power to get Voyager home and resuscitate the Moyani as well. So, you have a choice to make, Lieutenant. What's it going to be?"

For a moment B'Elanna just stood there. Then she let out a long howl of such complete anguish that it was more like the wail of a banshee than anything a living being might make. It was a sound Noah Lessing knew well. It was the sound of defeat.

Ashamed, weary, beaten, she leaned on the control facet and said softly, "Resume tool function."

The image on the display immediately resolved itself into a humanoid shape. The glowing facets, so diminished before, now blazed with their cool blue light. A body began to assemble itself on one of them.

It wasn't human, exactly, but close. So close that B'Elanna thought she found the face taking shape in front of her familiar.

"Lessing," she said in a broken little whisper. "Whose DNA did you use to make this work?"

"Salutations, B'Elanna and Noah," said the man who had just come into being. Around him, on all the other glowing facets, other familiar humanoid forms were assembling themselves. "This avatar is for the First Speaker of the Moyani."

Maybe so, thought B'Elanna. But you look a helluva lot like Maxwell Burke.

"Many thanks for rebirth," said the First Speaker as the Moyani vessel came alive around them and his crew scattered into the transport tubes, presumably to resume their normal duties. "B'Elanna may address this avatar as Ssymko."

He stepped down from his glowing crystal facet and stretched out his hand. Still a little stunned by the sudden appearance of over fifty alien beings, B'Elanna hesitated.

"Be at ease," said Ssymko. "The Moyani are happy to carry the strings of debt."

The words were strange but the voice and the smile were vintage Max Burke. Disarming. She took his hand, finding it pleasantly warm to the touch. He was wrapped in some kind of pheromonal aura as well- something that reminded her of cinnamon and honey.

For a moment she lost herself in the aroma and the strange pictures it brought to her mind.

She had a flash of an alien landscape- great crystalline spheres floating in a vast multicolored cloud of gas. A nebula? The spheres were surrounded by scores of tinier flittier things that made B'Elanna think of the kites she had flown as a girl. Was this the Moyani home environment? Was this their natural form?

Before she could probe deeper, the image was gone and she was staring once again into the large half-sad eyes of something that looked like her friend.

"Does B'Elanna understand?" said Ssymko. She was surprised to realize she did. These creatures used scent to communicate as much as they did sound. Amazing.

"You're going home," she said.

"That must be our function," said Ssymko. "We must regain that true proximity."

"We're trying to get home too," she said, suddenly desperate. Maybe, now that they were revived, the Moyani could help her get around the power-sharing problem or even help refit Voyager to travel in subspace as they did. Maybe there was still a chance to-

The smell of cinnamon changed to that of freshly cut czuba grass, something B'Elanna always associated with unhappy times in her life. Ssymko's eyes, so like Max's that they almost broke her heart, were filled with some deep emotion. Sadness? Anger? She hadn't been with him long enough to know.

"Opportunity ebbs from this moment, B'Elanna," he said. "And Noah will not last."

In her amazement at the Moyani's appearance, she'd forgotten Lessing. She looked down at him, at his broken bleeding body- broken and bloodied by her- and felt a twinge of shame. Could she have hurt him worse than she'd meant?

"Our function is to return now," said Ssymko softly. "As yours must be."

Suddenly B'Elanna found herself standing in the middle of Voyager's shuttle bay with the unconscious Noah Lessing at her feet. Whatever the Moyani used to get them there, it was nothing like a transporter. Her guts felt like they'd been turned into ginger ale.

Without thinking, she ran to the nearest computer access panel and asked for a view of the Moyani vessel.

She had time to register the ship floating a few kilometers off Voyager's port side before a terrific flash of light filled the monitor screen. When it was gone, so were the Moyani.

* * *

"And how was Mr. Lessing injured?" said the Doctor as she helped him lay the unconscious biologist on the recovery bed.

"Making a point," said B'Elanna. "A good one." She stood there for a minute, listening to the Doctor activate his diagnostic equipment and watching Lessing's chest rise and fall. Lessing's eyes fluttered open.

"Lieutenant," he said in ghost of his normal voice.

"You're going to be fine," she said. "The Doctor's all over it."

Lessing suffered through a couple of painful-looking coughs. "Did it work," he said eventually. "The Moyani- "

"They're gone," she said. "On their way home. Thanks to you."

The Doctor did something with one of his machines that seemed to make things better for Lessing. His breathing improved and he seemed to relax a bit more.

Bending close, whispering so that the Doctor wouldn't hear, she asked him why he had done it. Why he had used his friend's DNA to revive the Moyani crew.

"Everybody should get a second chance," he said softly. Then his eyes closed as the sedation field put him to sleep.

He'd be all right.

And so will Max and the rest of Equinox's crew, she thought.

In a way Lessing had given them all a shot at redemption. B'Elanna thought of them- their genetic duplicates, anyway- returning to the their homeworld with news of the life they'd found in another galaxy. What kind of impression had she and Lessing made? She'd never know.

"Doc," she said as a strange thought occurred to her. "Lessing used the templates from Equinox's crew records to correct for the flaws in the Moyani revivification process."

"Did he?" said the Doctor.

"Yes," said B'Elanna. "But the thing is, only command staff and senior medical officers have access to those records."

"That's true," said the Doctor, running some diagnostic tool over Lessing's chest.

"So how'd Lessing get his hands on them?"

The Doctor stopped for a moment, appearing to mull the question deeply.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said after a time. "Mr. Lessing might have convinced an organic doctor to bend regulations to help in reviving the Moyani crew. But an Emergency Medical Hologram, such as myself, could never move so far beyond his programmed duty parameters. Only living beings are flexible enough for that sort of behavior."

Again there was silence in the medical bay for a moment or two.

"Doc," she said, eventually. "I'm sorry. You know, for before."

The Doctor said nothing for a time, busying himself instead with Lessing's injuries. Then: "You know, Lieutenant, this circumstance reminds me of a saying the linguists translated from the Moyani records."

"What is it?"

"It takes all kinds to make a universe," said the Doctor, looking up at her briefly.

"Good saying," said B'Elanna.

"I think so," said the Doctor.

* * *

"The Moyani are gone," said Captain Janeway. She was simultaneously going over B'Elanna's report and watching her from the far side of her desk. The captain's face wore the hooded expression she usually reserved for adversaries. "And Voyager is no better off and no closer to home."

"Yes, ma'am," said B'Elanna stiffly. "No, ma'am."

"And Noah Lessing's in sickbay," said the captain.

"Yes, ma'am," said B'Elanna.

"Put there by you."

"Yes, ma'am," said the engineer. "I thought he was trying to- "

"I can read, Lieutenant," said Janeway. She quickly burned through the rest of the written report on her padd and then fixed a frosty gaze on B'Elanna. "How would you rate your performance during this incident?" she said.

"Substandard," said B'Elanna with obvious difficulty.

"At least," said the captain. "Recommendation?"

B'Elanna's mind was blank. She'd handled the whole thing so abysmally that coming up with an appropriate reprimand seemed impossible.

Janeway let her stew there for a few moments before letting her off the hook.

"All right, B'Elanna," she said. "We'll just chalk this up as a learning experience. Sometimes the bear gets you."

B'Elanna, at a clear loss for words, only nodded and asked if the captain had anything more.

"You're dismissed, Lieutenant," said Janeway, and then, as B'Elanna was passing through the cabin door, "Better luck tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," said B'Elanna as the doors shut behind her.

* * *

She found Tom in bed already half-asleep after his own long shift.

"Hey," he said blearily as she crawled in with him. She pulled in close, feeling his soft

familiar heat, taking in his comforting scent.

"Hey," she said.

"What are you doing?" he asked, as her cheek settled against his chest.

"Apologizing," she said.

Bottomless

Ilsa J. Bick

This tale is set during the second half of Star Trek: Voyager's seventh season.

Ilsa J. Bick

Ilsa J. Bick is a writer as well as a recovering child and forensic psychiatrist. She is the author of such prize-winning stories as "A Ribbon for Rosie," Star Trek: Strange New Worlds II; "Shadows, in the Dark," Strange New Worlds IV; and "The Quality of Wetness," Writers of the Future, Vol. XVI. She's written for SCIFICTION, Challenging Destiny, Talebones, Beyond the Last Star, and Star Trek: New Frontier: No Limits, among many others. Her first published novel, Star Trek: The Lost Era: Well of Souls, cracked the 2003 Barnes and Noble Bestseller List. Her Star Trek: Starfleet Corps of Engineers novella "Lost Time" debuted in April 2005, and "Wounds, Part One" and "Wounds, Part Two" appeared in August and September 2005.

She's active in the Battle Tech/MechWarrior Dark Age universe on BattleCorps.com, and her MWDA novel Daughter of the Dragon was released in June 2005. Blood Avatar, a murder-mystery set in the MechWarrior Dark Age universe, is forthcoming in December 2005, as well as a sequel to Daughter due out in 2006.

When she isn't writing- like, yah, when is that?- she lives in (mostly frigid) Wisconsin with her husband, two children, three cats, and other assorted vermin. Sometimes, she even cooks for them.

The two men Janeway loved most, her father and Justin Tighe, drowned beneath a polar ice cap on Tau Ceti Prime. She should've died with them but didn't. Afterward, she wished she had. For months, she lay awake at night, staring into an endless darkness and imagining what it was like to drown: water all around, the light from above fading, your lungs burning until you can't help it, you have to breathe though you know it's hopeless- and then you vomit out the last of your life in huge, shuddery, silver bubbles that rise higher and higher toward people and places you'll never see again, never. The scenario played in her mind on an infinite loop, around and around and around. And, finally, she decided: The sea is dark and bottomless and very lonely, and in the end, no one is with you when you die.

A little bit like now.

Her head throbbed. Her limbs felt molten. The air was very hot, and fetid with the heavy stink of sweat, wet copper, and rot. Chakotay was big and needed more air, so he had passed out... what? Twenty minutes ago? An hour? She had no way to tell. The Falnari, however, had died hours before- internal injuries, probably from jagged bone shredding his lungs. When he'd tried to breathe, a thick plume of black blood boiled from his mouth and he drowned that way. Janeway couldn't do anything about it. No medkit, and seeing as how

she'd only known the Falnari for about twelve hours, there was a good chance she wouldn't understand what the readings meant even if she had a medical tricorder. Although she discovered something about the Falnari, a blocky, muscular species that inhabited pressurized domes deep underwater and had the look of squat, bow-legged pugilists. They decayed into a gray-green, viscous sludge- very quickly.

Everyone else was gone: the Falnari captain and scant crew of the submersible in flooded forward compartments. At fifty meters and change, the submersible was a mid-sized Falnari vessel built for touring and very little else- certainly not for teetering on the edge of an abyss. All things considered and in a cockeyed way, she and Chakotay had been lucky- or cursed, depending on how you looked at it. There was emergency battery power (not much), and they'd found the controls to the trim tanks in this auxiliary command center aft of the boat's sail and rudder, bleeding what little air remained. The command center was small, roughly nine meters long by six by five. Two hundred and seventy cubic meters of air, give or take, didn't last a whole hell of a long time. So they didn't talk, or move much. Even so, the air went awfully, awfully fast.

Meanwhile, her mortal enemy was there: contained by a jury-rigged forcefield because the damn sub leaked like a sieve. The water was a roiling wall that sparkled with quick, sudden flashes of eerie yellow-green light like millions of angry eyes peering at her from the dark. She stared at that black, weirdly malevolent water and into those eyes. Sensed them waiting, watching. Hungry.

"God," she gasped, forcing out the word. "God, how I hate you."

* * *

When she came to, it was so dark Crewman Marla Gilmore's first thought was she'd gone blind. Her second was that she was back on the Equinox. Then she felt metal against her left cheek and realized that she'd crumpled against a bulkhead aft. And then she remembered: They'd been two hundred kilometers down, right dead center in that photodynamic column, and she'd just initiated her sensor sweep when everything went to hell....

Navigation went offline, and then we couldn't change course; spun down further, lost maneuvering thrusters and crashed into that sea mound and Paris...

"Lieutenant Paris?" she said. Her voice was shaky and small, and made the darkness worse than it already was. "Tom?"

Her ears strained for a reply. Nothing. Dear God, if Paris was dead... Heart stuttering, she pushed to a sit and nearly passed out when a lightning bolt of white pain seared the space behind her eyes. Hot bile pushed at the back of her throat, and she doubled over, fighting not to be sick. Finally, she let out a slow breath, put ginger fingers to her scalp. Her fall of corn-tassel-fine hair was sticky with clotted blood. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she probed the wound. Not too bad, and she wasn't bleeding much anymore. That was good.

She eased up again, more gradually this time. Given the tilt, she figured the Flyer's deck was canted thirty degrees from true. That might be all right; dead sure a far sight better than a head-on. She'd been sitting behind Paris, but the impact had thrown her to the transporter bay aft.

She braced her back against a bulkhead, recalling the layout of the Flyer in her mind. Secondary science monitor to her left; twin consoles in the ship's midsection, and a narrow

ramp sloping down to the pilot's seat. More light would've been nice. But even if the water on this planet hadn't been so damned weird, they were too far down for the system's sun to penetrate. The water outside the hull was very, very black and about as cold as water could be and not be solid ice.

Still, they must have some power. Shields, for example. Without them, the Flyer's hull would've crumbled like an old eggshell. So maybe she could nudge a little more and get them moving.... Crawling, she negotiated the length of the cabin, the ramp- and then she found a hand attached to an arm and smelled wet rust. Paris, slumped over his controls.

Patting around with her hands, she activated the lights, took a look. Her breath hissed between her teeth. A thick, bright red sheen slicked Paris's left cheek and jaw and puddled along the command console. A scalp wound and much worse than hers, and she knew from past experience on Equinox that scalp wounds bled like stink. She checked for his pulse, found one- thready and fast.

Okay, okay; stay calm, or you're both dead.

She carefully eased Paris to the floor, fumbled out an emergency medical kit and checked him over. She wasn't a doctor, but she'd picked up a couple of things from the Equinox's EMH. So she knew in fairly short order that Paris would live but had a very bad laceration, a hairline fracture below that and a nasty concussion. No subdural or epidural hematoma that she could see. A relief; either would've killed him for sure. She stopped the bleeding with pressure, bandaged him, and then turned her attention to the Flyer.

At first glance, the vessel wasn't so badly off. After she'd smeared away Paris's blood, the console showed they had power, certainly enough for communications, environmental controls, and shields- even the transporter, only there was nowhere to go.

The bad news was the engines. The computer kept coming back with that faintly apologetic unable to comply that always made Marla want to slap the thing silly. (Any moron could've figured out that if nothing happened, then the thing's busted, you stupid machine.) The information made her do a double take, though. The Flyer's dilithium matrix read virtually no activity on a subatomic level, and dielectric polarization and molecular charge fluctuating simultaneously, like the dilithium's temp approached absolute zero. No activity, no engines.

Huh. Weird. Well, maybe Voyager might have a suggestion. They sure weren't going anywhere fast. She opened a channel, and that's when she got another piece of bad news: dead air. Just sizzle, sputter, pop. Crackle.

Seven did say these columns were sensor-opaque. Yet they'd been in contact. She'd heard Paris talking to Voyager right before she started her sensor sweeps. She remembered because she told Paris to let them know that they needed to concentrate their re-modulated multiphasic sensor arrays in sweeps of the same area, the rationale being that two sets of eyes were better than one- especially when looking for a tiny submersible in about twenty-eight cubic kilometers of water. So they'd had communications. They and she had activated sensors...

And then I saw something on the sensors, something moving, gathering itself, like a cloud and then the Flyer bucked, and we went out of control....

Something outside the Flyer. Not an animal, or plant, or anything... living. Her lips went numb. Just... something.

So she did the only thing left she hadn't tried. Two things, actually: She activated an automatic distress signal and decided to have a look around. See if the something was still there. Her remodulated sensors worked fine; the computer hummed right along and the sound was comforting.

She saw something on the second sweep. She blinked once, twice, not sure. Nothing really coming so much as something intrinsic that was, well, gathering; pulling together. Twenty meters away, and all around. Above, to the side. Below. Closing.

Oh, God, like a cloud! What is that? Marla reared back as if she'd touched a hot phaser. Her head snapped up; her frantic eyes scoured the water outside the viewport; and then she gave a small, inarticulate cry.

Because the lights were there.

* * *

Fifteen hours earlier...

Marla's grandmother had been a native-born Texan. Had the drawl, had the attitude, been older than dirt, and had tongue enough for ten rows of teeth. She was dead now, but while she was living, that woman could talk. So here was something Marla's gran would've agreed with: Be careful what you wish for. Otherwise, don't come complaining when your boots come out biscuits.

That morning, Marla got what she wished for twice over. One was to get the heck out of engineering. Torres was in this perpetual funk that had started round about her fourth month. A half-Klingon prickly as a cactus was marginally bearable; a pregnant and prickly half-Klingon was what Marla's gran would've called downright wolverine mean. So when Torres growled about how Marla was behind on her work schedule again and the captain was still waiting, Marla made like she had thrusters attached to her butt and got out of there but right quick.

Only she didn't go to the captain's ready room to fix the replicator. No secret that the five Equinox survivors weren't exactly on the captain's hit parade. The captain wouldn't leave for a briefing for another two hours after which she'd head down to the planet. With four hours to kill before the coast was clear, Marla detoured to Lieutenant Coleman's quarters, figuring that surely his little glitch had priority.

And that's when the second thing she'd wished for came true: as she lay on her back, fiddling with an intake baffle of a waste reclamation unit. (Starfleet-speak for a john. What a crock. Look over any starship specs, and you'd wonder why the hell no one ever bothered to put in the johns. Showers, the designers didn't seem too embarrassed about. But johns? Forget it. A hundred million years from now, there'd probably be some archaeological exhibit claiming humans could tolerate deep space because no one ever had to pull over. Honestly.)

She hated the work. Not because it involved a john but because her workspace was so tiny, her heart seized and fingers of anxiety stepped up and down the ladder of her spine. Little no-nothing space, and you never knew when an interspatial fissure was going to open up and then the last thing you'd see was a streak of gold light and then...

C'mon. Marla forced her trembling fingers to cooperate. She bit down on her lower lip, hard. Don't worry about the mule, just load the wagon. No bad ghostie alien light coming to gobble you up. Just do the work, get it done....

She was concentrating so hard that when Seven's voice sounded over her combadge, Marla near about jumped out of her skin. Clamping back a scream, she held her breath a sec, then let it out. "Say again, please?"

Seven did. (Not happily; Marla's brain would have to be on life support to miss that. Seven was tighter than bark on a tree and not exactly known for little niceties like nuance and generosity.) So when Marla registered what Seven was really saying, Marla just... froze. Baffle bolt in one hand, Mulliard slip-wrench in the other, and her heart crowding into the back of her throat.

"Say again?" she asked. "From where? Are you sure?" And thinking: It can't be because that means Janeway told them. Please, God...

"Obviously, Crewman, if you've processed that I indeed said something and now ask if what you claim not to have heard is accurate, questions are rhetorical." Seven might as well have added and dumb as a stump. "Nevertheless, I believe the appropriate responses are: You have a message from Earth, and, yes, I am sure."

Marla's reaction wasn't what she'd always thought. She didn't drop everything. She didn't cry or scream or faint. She didn't even smile. Instead, Marla thanked Seven and finished fixing Coleman's john. Then she repacked her tools and took her time going to astrometrics. Once there, Seven arched an eyebrow and handed her a padd; Marla thanked her, took it, did an about face and walked out of astrometrics.

And the thing was... she couldn't play the message. Didn't even check who sent it. Only one person it could be, anyway. Instead, she slipped the padd into a pouch on her tool belt and knocked off for coffee. She didn't really want coffee. She just wanted to get someplace where no one would bother her.

Now, she sat in Voyager's mess, cradling a coffee she didn't want, staring out a viewport- and trying not to think about what her brother might've said: Gee, Marla, last I checked, you shipped on the Equinox and now you're on Voyager because...? It was those dot-dot-dots that got her. What to say?

Well, Karl, let me think. First, we got pulled into the Delta Quadrant. Then we got shot at. Then we got ourselves in deep when we killed a whole mess of aliens; but, see, they were such a great power supply and...

Instead, she studied the planet. Not hard: The planet was gorgeous, like nothing she'd seen. Two landmasses: a massive desert that straddled the equator and stretched to both poles. The other jutted from the planet's South Pole where a single, shrunken ice cap splayed over a corrugated, pitted, and denuded continent half the size of Antarctica. The rest was a darkly blue-black sea, studded with a few isolated pinnacles of jagged mountain and dense whorls of off-white clouds spinning crazily on stagnant jet streams like tops.

What caught her were the lights, flickering like sequins on black velvet. The flashes cohered at times then dispersed into wispy tendrils, or spun into tight pinwheels. The lights were denser in certain regions but thinned at others. Maybe odd pockets of high albedo; something highly reflective, maybe related to the water's salinity- that is, if the scuttlebutt was

right about how all the planet's ice caps and glaciers had thawed thousands of years ago, disrupted thermohaline circulation the way things on Earth would go to hell in a hand basket if glaciers melted and...

She wasn't aware that Chakotay was even there until he touched her arm. She flinched, a bad habit. "Sorry. Sir." She started to rise but Chakotay waved her down. "I was... woolgathering."

"I'd say more like heavy-duty daydreaming. Mind if I join you?" Without waiting for her reply, Chakotay slid into a seat on her right. His lips curled in an easy grin, and for an instant, she hated the way he was so relaxed, so... content. "You looked like you were a million kilometers away," he said.

"Not as far as that," she said, passing it off with a light laugh. "Just... I've never seen a planet that was all water before."

"Ah." Chakotay craned his head over his right shoulder. "Pretty. Those lights remind me of fireflies. But you missed our encounter with the Moneans. Now, that was interesting: a water world within a containment barrier. No land at all. Now, from what we can tell of this planet, there's a lot of what used to be land underwater." He paused then cocked his head to one side. "But a pretty planet's not all you were thinking about."

She hesitated, unsure. Thing was, the invitation felt kind of good. In the beginning, Tom Paris was the only person who'd gone out of his way to make her feel welcome. Harry Kim, too, probably because of Paris. But then Torres had come along, scowled- and then likely given Paris an earful because the next time Marla came to the mess, Torres was right there. Paris kind of shrugged- well, you know the wife- and Marla figured she was about as welcome as a skunk to a lawn party. So, instead, Marla sat alone, pretended she didn't notice that three-second pause as everyone else in the place stared. Forced down food that tasted like sand. After that, she avoided the mess. Ate in her quarters or, when the walls got too close, sat in the mess, late, alone. It was okay. Nobody else to sit with, anyway; the Equinox survivors all had different duty shifts. That was okay.

But now, here was Chakotay. Maybe she'd passed some sort of test? Janeway always said she had to earn her trust. Marla felt a surge of hope and just as quickly quashed it because of something her gran said: Just because a chicken's got wings doesn't mean he can fly.

She said, "No, really, I was thinking about the sea, being underwater, that sort of thing."

"You worked as an undersea geothermal engineer for awhile, right?"

"My brother's field, really. He works smokers: geothermal vents, tapping energy to power underwater research stations. Most of those are along the East Pacific Rise off South America. But he likes the sea, and he loves Australia, and he transports home nearly every night. Very peaceful underwater, especially when your breathing's right."

"Why is that?"

"Because rebreathers are a pain and compressed air's still best. At least, it works for me. Compressed air weighs more than regular air. So as you use up your tank, you get more buoyant. Air in your lungs makes you lighter, too, like a balloon. But blow out and you can get pretty neutral, just hover." She smiled at a sudden memory. "I remember a place called Cod Hole. Big potato cod," she demonstrated with her hands, "about two meters. I must've

stayed down an hour, almost two, skimming over coral, like flying. But once my tank was near gone, I got pretty light and bobbed up for the surface, couldn't control my depth no matter how hard I blew out. Karl, my brother, reached up, pulled me back down before I slipped away." She finished, lamely, "Anyway, it was... nice."

"He's your only family, right?" At the look on her face, Chakotay added, "Not prying. It's in your personnel files. They say your parents died a while back. Some sort of boating accident."

"Yeah. My mom's side came from old Texas. You'd think she wouldn't take to water. Except she did and then she and my dad got that boat and came out where Karl and I were working and then..."

And then I just couldn't stand the water anymore, not when the sea had taken both my parents.

"And then I opted for space instead." She paused, collected her wits, forged on. "Anyway, Karl's my only living relative besides Aidan... his son. Karl's wife left them when Aidan was about two, I think. He ought to be nine, ten by now. I've lost track."

"You miss them."

"Sure. I miss them. I miss Earth. I mean, doesn't everyone?"

"What about the Equinox?"

A finger of dread touched her chest. Please, don't do this... just when everything was going so well. "What about it?"

"Do you miss it?"

"Miss the Equinox? Are you kidding? Miss that?" she asked, her voice rising until she became aware that the background hum of voices had ceased. Marla shot a quick glance, saw curious eyes and lowered her voice. "No. I miss home. Not just Earth but the way being on Earth feels. Stand on a mountaintop that's a thousand kilometers from nowhere, and the feeling's... huge. Like you're opening up to infinite possibilities just by watching a hawk catch an updraft. And I miss..." She trailed off, took a sip of coffee. Shrugged.

Chakotay waited a beat. "Belonging?"

"Yeah." Marla flashed a quick, too-bright smile because her eyes burned, and she knew she'd probably cry again when she was alone. Stop this. You're not a little baby. Sudden shame burned her cheeks.

Chakotay was talking. "You could decide to belong here."

"Belong? Here? Is that your point?" She bit off the last word. Off probation, my ass. Chakotay was the XO, just doing his job. That's what she was: another tick off the old to-do list. All that Starfleet malarkey, all that we're all brothers under the skin stuff was crap. "I'll never belong here because none of you will let us forget. On Equinox, we were part of a team."

"Voyager's not so different."

She almost laughed in his face. "The hell it is. You know, if I was going to get religion, I'd have gotten it on Equinox. I didn't, and you know why? Because everything's random. You can pray until you're blue as a Bolian, but at the end of the day? There's nothing except the one person you've got to believe in- and that's your captain. I believed in Rudy Ransom. He gave us dignity. Even after I started having..." Her throat tightened, but she fought her way past the constriction. "Even when I couldn't crawl into a damn Jefferies tube, I was still valuable. I belonged."

"And you don't think you can belong here. You don't think you'll be valued. Marla, you've got to believe in yourself before you can let yourself believe in someone else."

The way Chakotay said it- so calm, so understanding, like a therapist counseling poor, wounded little Marla, spooked by her own shadow. It made her want to throw a chair.

"Value," she said, as if the word tasted bad. The mess was very quiet. Probably somebody had called security. Her mind swirled, and klaxons went off in her head about how she'd be lucky just to end up in the brig if she kept on...

Fine, throw me in the brig. Then you can find someone else to fix your toilets and everyone can just leave me alone.

She stabbed the table with the point of her right forefinger. "Oh, I feel really valued here. I'm a first-class engineer unplugging toilets. I do scutwork. You guys talk this great game about how we're all one big happy crew, but it's shit. It's garbage, it's..."

Eyes stinging with angry tears she looked away. Damn it, damn him! And where was security? Why hadn't they already come for her? Her neck was hot, and she felt sweat crawling down her neck. She still had her mug in her left hand, her grip so tight her knuckles were white and tented her skin. When she could face Chakotay again, his face blurred and wavered, and she knew that he knew she was crying- and that made her even angrier.

Don't pity me, don't you dare...

"I'll tell you what doesn't make sense," she said all in a rush, the words tumbling out before she really heard what she was saying- though as soon as she did, she figured this kind of hissy fit, she might as well step in it. "Janeway said we had to earn her trust. Well, how do you do that fixing toilets and showers and replicators and whatever else- and never hear anything that's not an order? You want to earn someone's trust, that person's got to know you're alive. To the captain, we're just cargo. Just... just..."

Her common sense, clamoring now: Get out; you've done enough; he heard you; everyone heard you, now just leave....

She stood abruptly, jolting the table, sloshing coffee. "I'm sorry... I need to go. Sir. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but... I'm... I'm fine. I understand if you want to post a reprimand... it's what I deserve, it's fine. Really. Sir. Just... permission to be dismissed."

"Permission?" Chakotay regarded her with something Marla hadn't seen in quite a while: compassion. Then he said something that absolutely stunned her. "Marla, we're just having coffee."

And the hell of it? She almost, almost stayed. Having coffee with someone sounded... nice. It

sounded... normal. What people did.

Except there was that little voice that sneered at how stupid she was because no matter how sincere Chakotay seemed, no one would ever, ever forget the Equinox. Or forgive either- not a god she didn't believe in, not Janeway, not her. Not anybody.

Instead, Marla whirled on her heel and walked out: aware of the eyes, and of Chakotay still back there. She expected guards in the hall, but none came. So she kept going and didn't look back. Not even once.

* * *

Eleven hours earlier...

"God, I hate the water," said Janeway. Her palms were moist. She cut her eyes left, saw that Chakotay was busy with a course adjustment and gave her hands a quick wipe on her uniform trousers.

Terrific: First contact, and her as twitchy as two Bynars with the yips. Sure, she had a healthy degree of curiosity. The situation had all the ingredients: global warming, catastrophic melt, deserts and all that black water so sensor-opaque in spots their sensors spit out garbage. A little odd for water so dilute everywhere else thanks to the Falnari's de-sal programs coupled with all those clouds dumping in fresh water; no good reason why they couldn't get a clear idea of what was down there. But they couldn't. So Chakotay was making leisurely passes now, plying newly modulated sensors in tandem with Voyager.

Chakotay glanced her way, a grin tugging the corners of his lips. "I thought zero-g training in the Coral Sea helped you get over not liking the ocean. At least, that's what you told Crewman Celes."

"I lied."

"Really?" Chakotay's black eyebrows inscribed nearly perfect twin arches. "It boggles the mind."

"Don't be snide." She crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at the view: a lip of star-studded space over a haze of atmosphere, a spiral of cloud to her left and a whorl of yellow-white light mingling with black water to her right. Like a whirlpool. Although Seven said the areas were columns of extremely cold, essentially stationary water centered over undersea trenches. "I still don't understand why the Falnari can't just beam to Voyager."

Chakotay toggled in a command to initiate a sensor sweep and then for the information to be fed back to Voyager. (As it happened, their sensors were infinitely better than the Falnari's, and Janeway had agreed to a demo and tech exchange.) "Considering that the Falnari live at depth, I suppose you could beam them directly to a decompression chamber and let them hang there for, oh, seven hours or so. Make a fine first impression. Now, we can tolerate the depth because the Doctor injected us with chelated formulations of nitric oxide. We won't get the bends and won't need to decompress."

"I was being rhetorical." Janeway sighed then. Anxiety always made her crabby. "Sorry. A little touchy."

"That's okay. Actually, I think the water's pretty. I was telling Crewman Gilmore just this

morning that those lights look like fireflies. During the summer and..." His voice trailed away when he saw her face. "What?"

Her face felt so tight over her skull she thought her skin would tear. "I didn't know you were so friendly with Crewman Gilmore."

"I'm your XO. We had coffee. We talked."

The way he said that, she didn't think she wanted to hear the rest. Ransom, what had happened on the Equinox made her... uneasy. "And?"

Chakotay hesitated. "She's very angry. But I think most of that is shame, embarrassment, whatever you want to call it. Understandable."

"Very," Janeway drawled. She heard her tone, didn't like it, decided screw it. "Considering that she aided and abetted what amounted to genocide. Gilmore should be ashamed. Ransom's crew abandoned every principle of Starfleet reg..."

"Whoa, whoa." Chakotay held up a hand, palm out, as if placating a snarling dog. "I understand. I agree. Yet, when we first met, you had even less incentive to trust me but..."

"Don't tell me you're taking their side in this?"

"I'm not taking anyone's side... "

"You do this all the time. You have this predilection for sympathizing with people who run counter to protocol and training. Didn't I relieve you of duty over that very issue and because of Ransom's crew?"

"Captain." Chakotay's lips thinned. "Listen to yourself. Every time we talk about Ransom or his crew, you get defensive... no, hear me out, please. You're just as angry as Gilmore, and I can't figure out why. Captain... you're so by the book with them. Every syllable out of a manual; regulations at the tip of your tongue, chapter and verse."

"It's the only language I know."

"I don't believe that. I know you. You wouldn't lose a milligram of self-respect or their esteem if you looked on them as your crew instead of reminders of how another captain failed."

"Ransom's failure is neither here nor there."

"If that's what you need to tell yourself."

Janeway's eyes slitted. "Implying?"

"You're so caught up with Ransom's failures that you do a one-eighty when it comes to them because you worry you'll make the same mistakes..."

"I am not Ransom..."

"And I'm agreeing with you. But you need to be their captain, not their taskmaster. They lost their ship; they lost their captain..."

"No, they haven't. They've got a ship, and she's got a captain, and that's me. They'd do well to remember that." She paused then added, "So would you."

That stung. She saw a flush stain the skin along Chakotay's neck and creep to his jaw. But taking the side of the underdog was Chakotay's weakness, something she always had to guard against. Recognizing weakness, devising countermeasures to get the most out of her people: That's what a captain did to make a ship work.

He said, very quietly, "I'm for this ship and this crew. I'm for you. Nothing will change that. But crippling someone by stripping her dignity..."

"Dignity?" Janeway felt her jaw firm in a stubborn set. A small voice in her brain whispered that Chakotay had a point; a good captain also listened to her XO. She clamped down on that but fast. "Gilmore did that to herself. They all did. A Starfleet officer lives and dies by a code of ethics. I will never, ever betray mine."

She turned away. Chakotay took the hint and dropped it. He flew. She didn't say anything. He took sensor readings. They ran into a tad more turbulence, a few nav glitches. The trip seemed ten times longer than it was.

It wasn't until well after he'd docked their shuttle at an underwater transfer tube into the Falnari capital that Chakotay said, right before he cracked the hatch, "Forever is a long time."

She didn't even look at him. "That's what they say."

* * *

Nine hours earlier...

Marla felt... numb. Her thoughts moved herky-jerky, as if her brain had tumbled off a cliff.

Not possible... it can't be....

"Computer," she rasped- and paused, running her tongue over suddenly parched lips. She was shaking. Her voice was husky, as if she hadn't spoken in years. "Replay. Time index twenty-two-fifty-seven."

The image on her viewscreen winked, and then the boy- my God, look at him; where have the years gone- began in midsentence: "... months ago. Once the smoker blew, Mom says it was over so fast, he didn't know what was going on." His voice quavered, and he looked away, cleared his throat, faced forward again. "Weird, being back with Mom. At first, I practically never saw her, and now I live with her, it doesn't feel right, no water or anything... I'm not complaining, Aunt Marla. I mean, I don't know what you look like either and..." His lower lip quivered. "That didn't come out right. It's just that... everyone's trying so hard to help, it hurts."

"I know," she whispered, though the computer didn't understand and the message continued on even though she'd stopped listening.

Karl was dead. Eighteen months. Dead. And eighteen months ago, Rudy was still alive and... Her mind shied away. She didn't want to think about that either.

So here was Aidan. She studied him. The eyes were his mother's- big, brown, luminous. But Aidan was lean like his father: the face a little long, the mouth a bit wide, and a full head of hair fine and yellow as corn silk. There were deep lines incised along either side of his nose, and his lips were drawn with worry and pain- and he was so young; his father gone, his mother a stranger, and now his aunt, coming back from the dead on board a different ship...

Her combadge shrilled. She jumped, killed Aidan's message, swallowed against the lump in her throat. "Gilmore."

"Crewman Gilmore." Marla had to think to place the voice. Tuvok: The captain and Chakotay had left the ship four hours ago. "Report to the briefing room, please."

"Of course, sir." Wondering if maybe this was the other shoe dropping, the one she'd been waiting for ever since that disastrous conversation with Chakotay. Or maybe something needed fixing, pronto. She didn't mind, really. She smeared away the wet on each cheek with her fingers. Need time to think, just keep busy.... "Right away. Shall I bring my standard repair kit, or will more specialized...?"

"Negative, Crewman." A pause. "I believe that you will be sufficient."

* * *

"Off course?" Torres was saying as Marla stepped into briefing room. Torres sat, hands protectively crossed over her swollen belly, opposite the viewscreen. Torres looked both uncomfortable and royally pissed off. The look she threw Marla's way made Marla's stomach buck. But then Paris, who sat to his wife's right, gave her a nod and at the head of the briefing room table, Tuvok motioned to a seat to his left and next to Seven. As Marla slid into her chair, Torres returned her attention to Tuvok. "What made the sub go off course?"

"The Falnari did not speculate," said Tuvok. "All we know for certain is that the Falnari lost contact with the submersible two hours ago."

"And before?"

"Everything was proceeding as planned. Commander Chakotay had tied in our modified sensor relays into the Falnari's scanners. At last report, the sensors were operating within acceptable parameters, and they had commenced a wide sweep. We were doing the same. In theory, our combined efforts should have opened a sensor window. They did not."

"And then the sub just vanished?"

"So it would seem. Checking through the Falnari historical databanks, there are references to a number of similar incidents, vessels going off course or lost at sea in certain regions. Over time, the incidents diminished, becoming more folklore than fact. The last such occurrence was over a decade ago"

"Sounds like Earth's Bermuda Triangle," Paris said and at Torres's look, he said, "Well, it does."

Tuvok merely arched an eyebrow. "If memory serves, what was attributed to the supernatural was finally revealed to be variations in the Earth's magnetic field coupled with unpredictable weather and water patterns, neither of which is relevant here, Lieutenant."

"Well, I'll tell you what's relevant," said Torres. "There's been no distress signal, no communications, no nothing. And the Falnari expect us to swallow that they can't just go look?"

"There is a great deal of ocean, Lieutenant."

"Following a projected course would be a start. What about them saying they probably can't get down to the sub even if they find it? For heaven's sake, the Falnari tap thermal vents for power. Do you know how deep they have to go to do that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do not." Then Tuvok's eyes shifted to her. "Crewman Gilmore, perhaps you can enlighten us."

"Uh," was all Marla said. Her pulse skipped then ramped up. "Well," she said then saw the disdain on Torres's face- and that got Marla good and steamed. Fine; this ain't my first rodeo, doll. She spoke directly to Tuvok. "On Earth, most smokers are located along plate boundaries, like the Galapagos Rift off the eastern Pacific basin. Those particular vents are about twenty-four hundred meters down, well above crush depth for most standard submersibles. But there have been some vents on Kronos measured at five thousand meters. If the Falnari've developed geothermal-based power grids, they've got to be able to make it down at least that far."

"What did I say?" said Torres. "This just proves it."

"No, it doesn't," said Marla, ignoring Torres's scowl. "Trenches go a lot deeper. Plus, you said the water's sensor-opaque. Do you know why?"

"We do not, though there is precedent," said Seven. "When we encountered the Moneans, we were unaware of a field generator that maintained the containment field holding the Monean waterworld in place. In part, that was due to depth. The generator was six hundred kilometers deep. But density was also a factor. The Monean's employed hydrolysis to create oxygen and hydrogen for fuel cells. As a consequence, the water's density increased, creating a region that was sensor-opaque. The situation here appears similar."

"How is that possible? With glacial melt and all those clouds, you'd presume the water to be pretty dilute."

"One would presume," said Seven. Her tone was so dry, Marla couldn't decide if that was just very Seven, or if she'd missed something. Standing, Seven activated the briefing room's viewscreen. An image of the planet's single, massive ocean overlain with green whorls shimmered into focus. Seven pointed to a region where the whorls were densely-packed. "These are cells..."

"Cells?"

"I mean cells in the meteorological sense, as one might describe a storm. These are photodynamic cells of high salinity extending into deep trenches. The water is also very cold."

Marla frowned. "That can't be right. Salinity increases with temperature. It should decrease if the water's cold."

"Nevertheless," said Seven, enunciating every syllable. "Furthermore, until a short time ago,

these columns appeared stationary."

Marla shook her head. "If the water's in a column, there should be temperature gradations and internal circulation. Otherwise, it would just be... still. No kinetic energy at all, like being at absolute zero. With the surrounding water creating a temperature gradient, that's not possible. Regions of higher temperature would flow into..." Then Seven's qualification registered. "What did you mean a short time ago?"

"Two hours, to be precise," said Seven. She called up another data set. Two close-ups of a concentration of lights set against black sea appeared. "These are images taken of one photodynamic cell at the perimeter of the general area in which the Falnari sub was lost, before we commenced scans and after. When I saw them, I went back and correlated with these," two more images appeared, "readings taken by Commander Chakotay and relayed back to Voyager. Again, the same scans were employed, and as you can see..."

Marla finally saw it. "Oh, my God."

"Precisely. The column should not move, but it has. Not once, but twice," said Seven, as if she was reporting nothing more amazing than the weather- which, in a weird way, she was. "And the last time was right before the captain's submersible disappeared."

After that, they worked the numbers: the submersible's projected course corrected for the location of the nearest photodynamic cell. No one liked the result. If they were right, the sub was almost one hundred and fifty kilometers off course in a span of ocean as large as the old continental U.S.

"That's a lot of water," said Paris. "Assuming they're still alive, how long before they run out of air?"

"If all hands survived," said Tuvok, "and if the Falnari are accurate, there should be enough breathable air to last five to eight hours. This is dependent upon several variables, however. If the hull breached, or power has been interrupted, this would cut their time considerably. On the other hand, if they or only a handful of Falnari survived, this would likely double their survival window."

Paris chose to overlook that little or. "So add in time to modify the Flyer, we're looking at four hours total since last contact." Paris didn't look happy. "Not much of a window."

"Correct."

"Then we'd better get started," said Paris, and then he turned to Torres. "And you're not going."

"What?" Torres flared. "What?"

Paris ignored her. "She's not coming," he said to Tuvok.

"Yes, I am!" said Torres.

"No. You're not," said Paris, still looking at Tuvok. "I'm the pilot and I say who goes. Am I right?"

Tuvok just raised an eyebrow. So did Seven. Marla was so surprised she only blinked.

Finally, Torres spluttered, "Pregnancy isn't a disease!"

"I didn't say it was," said Paris. "But you can't ignore it either. The baby's half mine. If you and Doc can figure a way to work it so my half gets to stay, great. Otherwise..."

"But I'm the most qualified engineer you've got."

"No," Paris said again, only this time he locked eyes with Marla. "As it happens, you're not."

* * *

Now...

She had to keep it together. So, instead of looking at the lights, Marla cast a quick eye over her systems' board. No surprises there. And then because it made her feel better, she said, "Everything okey-dokey. Not a thing whomperjawed. Girl, you got to be happier than a one-eyed dog in a meat locker."

That made her smile, and then she could brave another look at those lights. They hovered; no, actually, they swirled the way phosphorescent gases orbit an unseen protostar at the heart of a newly born nebula. They weren't moving closer, but they weren't going away. They were... hovering. If they, them, it were alive, she'd have said waiting.

So what got them moving? For a while, she just watched and let her mind wander. Always did that when she worked a problem. See what bubbled up from the murk of her unconscious. After a few moments, she thought: Night dive.

Not Karl, not now. She felt a deadening weight in the middle of her chest as if someone had dumped in a spent warp core. Well, maybe she should've expected that. Maybe her subconscious knew she was going to die.

"I don't accept that," she said, out loud. To no one, really. Or maybe to the lights, or God. She didn't know. "I don't think Karl would want me to either."

Begging the question, of course. Why had her mind skipped to Karl? And not just or only Karl: Her mind had snagged a very specific memory of a night fifteen years ago- right after her parents had died.

Night dive. A moonless night off Lizard Island, almost three hundred kilometers north of Cairns, Australia. Water the color of tar. She hadn't wanted to go down there. But Karl insisted, and with Mom and Dad gone, she and Karl had clung to each other like shipwrecked survivors on a leaky raft. So, she went along.

She remembered hitting the water, feeling the fingers of seawater seep into her wet suit. She equalized the pressure in her ears, adjusted her buoyancy. They had helmets and could've chatted, but the dive leader said they should go silent. Just... swim. Observe. Follow the leader. So they went in a staggered line, their dive lights picking out orange and purple cuttlefish streaking over sand; the bulbous head and writhing arms of a blue-ringed octopus. The tiny red tank lights winking like fireflies. Not too bad.

Then, at twenty-five meters, their dive leader signaled for them to turn off their torches. Darkness closed like a fist. The water wasn't just dark; it was blacker than pitch. Her eyes bugged from their sockets, and she began to hyperventilate, her head going light as a

helium balloon.

Then, suddenly, something came out of the darkness and brushed her elbow. She couldn't help it; she screamed, tried pulling away, almost broke for the surface (a near-disastrous move)- but then a hand wrapped itself around her elbow, pulled her down. Karl's voice, then, like something from a dream: "It's all right, Marla, it's all right. I'm here. Just hold on tight, and don't let go."

This is what she remembered best: Karl's hand, that good steady pressure. So simple. Floating in the dark, Karl as her anchor, she was safe....

"This is stupid," she said, with a viciousness that made her throat convulse with fury. She wrenched away from the memory with a force that was nearly physical. "Don't be so stupid. You are sure as hell not safe. You'll never be safe again." Now memories- even her memories of Karl- were traitors, like sharp barbs pricking her brain.

"God, what's left?" she asked of no one in particular because she didn't believe in any sort of god either. "First, my parents, then the Equinox, then Karl, and now this," and then her voice cracked, rose in a shriek, "What do you want from me?!"

If she was talking to a god, he didn't answer. Paris didn't move. She couldn't even dredge up one thing her gran might've said. But the lights were still there. She and Paris were still stuck, and time was running out- if not for her or Paris at the moment, then for Captain Janeway. And for Chakotay, who had been kind in a way that brought pain because it reminded her of what she'd lost.

"God, I've got to do something," she whispered. Her fists bunched, but her fury was gone. She was wet with sudden sweat, her hair clinging to her cheeks, her chest pulling in and pushing out air like a bellows. Think, think! She closed her eyes, forced her breathing to slow. All the counselors, they always said that the mind was like a dark attic, filled with clutter, but that one thought led to another and then another, like cobblestones on an infinitely long road.

Karl. When had she thought of him? Aidan's message? No. Her breath caught. That wasn't right. She'd thought of Karl from the moment she'd seen the planet. She'd been thinking of Karl for hours. Chakotay said fireflies, and she'd talked diving; she'd thought of hawks on updrafts, but her thoughts orbited around Karl and not just Karl but this memory.

"Because," she said haltingly, not rushing because she knew that this was important, maybe the most important thing she had left to do, "because it was dark. And we were in the water. It was dark and we were in the water and..."

And they're in the water, and she's scared. But she's got Karl by the hand, and she's safe. The current tugs at her body, but he won't let go. She's safe. And she sees things now, pulling themselves together like threads woven into patterns: saw-toothed stands of coral; the silent sleek forms of fish; the sinuous, undulating thread of a sea snake; and, far off, the humped dome of a sea turtle's shell.

Then, something strange. The dive leader waves his arms, churns water, and then, all of a sudden, there were...

"Lights," she whispered- and then she knew what her mind had tried to help her see. The lights of her memory. The red, flickering lights on their divetanks, winking like Chakotay's

fireflies on a summer's night. The lights in the sea: bioluminescent bacteria, fish. Signaling to their prey, or calling to one another, lonely beacons in an infinite night. And the lights that were now.

She opened her eyes and stared out the Flyer's viewport. "Because there were lights."

* * *

She was really feeling the carbon dioxide now. Janeway worked hard, taking big gulps like a hooked fish suffocating on a dock. Her lungs weren't just burning. They were on fire. She was so dizzy, the room whirled like a drunken top. A bright, keen edge of pain knifed the space between her eyes all the way down her skull, pulping her brain, and her pulse was going double-quick, her heart banging against her caging ribs, trying to move oxygen to her shrieking cells.

Not much time. Exhausted, she let her head loll against a bulkhead. Sweat pearled her face, trickled rivulets down her back. She was drenched through. She thought about checking for Chakotay's pulse and then decided she didn't want to know. Didn't matter.

Because it's hopeless. They'll never find us....

Hopeless. Not a word in her lexicon; regulations, the only language she knew- until, maybe, now when regulations were pointless. She wanted to laugh but managed only a tortured wheeze that racked her bones.

Her eyes rolled to the water. Still there. That black. Those eyes. Someone? She tried to remember, but it hurt to think. Her mind wouldn't work. No air. Thoughts came dull and slow, with effort.

The water. Her father, his eyes... the way he'd looked when they'd pulled his body from the icy water: bloated, blue with cyanosis. Hair streaming like seaweed.

But she'd seen him again. Not just in her dreams. Long after, on Voyager when the shuttle crashed and she died... and what she'd told it, the alien who wanted her: I'm not ready.

"But..." She stopped, reeled in another breath then marshaled all her will and every ounce of her energy because each word used up that much more air. But she had to say it. She had to hear these words because she knew, suddenly, what she would do; what she'd staved off all these years. It had followed her in her depressions, her dreams and now there it was, just beyond the forcefield: the water that waited on her. So patient. So cold. So final.

Where I belong. Where I should have gone before.

"I'm... ready," she said. She spoke to the water. "You win."

* * *

It was one of those no-win situations, the kind they liked at the Academy. Only they kept expecting space and knowing what you were dealing with. Her teachers would never, ever have foreseen this.

Her eyes flicked over the Flyer, beyond the ramp and twin consoles and all the way to the transporter bay. If her calculations were on the button, the entire Flyer contained almost

fourteen hundred cubic meters of air plus reserve in tanks. If she was going to get the Flyer off the bottom without hurting anybody, she had to get the thing a lot lighter and reduce its resistance to the medium- in this case, the water. (Or reduce the medium's resistance. She could do that; she had phasers. Heat the water, reduce the density. But she couldn't. It would be Equinox all over again.) Couple two, three ways to play it: say, transport out seats and consoles for starters. The problem was Paris had put all that stuff in here for a reason. She couldn't see that chucking it would do diddly.

Or she could make a balloon. Their air was pressurized. Their air was heavy- just like compressed air in a tank. How to make that work for her: evacuate most of the air. Not all. Just enough. Then heat it. The remaining air would get lighter; less mass per square meter. But she'd have to correct for convective loss. Couldn't heat the water the same way she couldn't phaser it to death. So, extend the shields, contain the heat.

A piece of luck- finally: they had three environmental suits, and they all worked. Getting Paris into a suit had taken some work. He was heavy, and he'd started bleeding again. She'd gotten pretty smeary.

"But he'll thank me when he's not parboiled," she muttered, swiping gore from her hands on her uniform trousers. "Maybe Torres will, too." Though she doubted that.

She keyed the translator. "And you're sure you can disaggregate long enough for my communications to clear once I get closer to the surface?"

The answer came after a pause as the translator macerated, digested, then spat out something unintelligible into English, short and sweet: Yes.

"What about the engines?"

Too many we are. Too much fire thin.

Translators were crummy with syntax not to mention words. Some species' language sounded like the maunderings of a blithering idiot: Ugh. Me good, you bad. But she'd parsed it. Too much kinetic energy and you can kiss our asses goodbye. Well, this also explained why the water was so cold. High saline as a lattice, like a framework, and the cold to keep kinetic energy at a minimum. Couldn't use her engines either way; the dilithium was shot.

In the end, it was an appallingly simple few steps. Get in her suit. Bleed most of her air. (That was hard, watching those bubbles rise, knowing she was committed now.) Extend the shields and make a bubble. Raise the internal temperature and shush up that squawk box of a computer that kept yapping that she was exceeding operational parameters. Yeah, and it's hot, too. And wait to see if they would move. Or not.

In her mind's eye, she still saw the lights, though not the ones here- and what you really are, they'll never believe this report; thank God, I got it all down- but the shimmering lights of her youth when Karl still lived and she was safe...

She gasped as a shudder rippled through the Flyer's deck, into her feet, up her legs, and into her teeth. The metal might've groaned, but the air was so thin she couldn't tell. But she felt a hesitation, and then a lurch that flung her forward. Her hands shot out to brace herself against the console.

The Flyer began to move.

* * *

Kneeling, Janeway white-knuckled the console. It had taken a very long time to crawl to the controls. She'd lost her balance twice, smacked her head against an edge of metal, and nearly lost consciousness right then and there. Struggled back from the brink. Because she had to do this, and it had to be now.

On my terms.

She avoided looking at the eyes now. They had... changed. Not long ago. Become more... interested?

She had trouble making her fingers work. She mis-keyed the commands three times, wasn't sure she had the right ones. Think, damn you, think! Eight, there were eight commands to bring the forcefield up and take it down. She put her weight into toggling the commands again, slowly. No mistakes, can't... make... mistakes.

Two steps into her fourth repetition, she remembered Chakotay. She hesitated. Looked over her shoulder. He hadn't moved. Probably dead. Nothing had changed. But her vision blurred.

Can't say sorry. And I need... what's left... in a few minutes... won't... matter...

She turned away. She put in the third command. Five more. Not so many. The forcefield would fall. The water would claim her. Then, death. Rest, finally. Her fingers dragged over the controls. She was so tired.

She input the fourth command- and that's when her ears pricked with a faint gabble, like someone over a combadge- and she paused. Voice? She looked around. Saw water. Saw eyes. No voice. Her mind, playing tricks. Dogged, she put in the fifth command....

Dad. Justin. I'm... almost...

The sixth.

Almost...

* * *

"No," Marla said when no one acknowledged her hail, "I know you see them. What I'm asking is: Are they alive?"

They- the Nimtra, as best her translator could make out- took a long time with that one. She waited, sweated, wishing like hell she could scratch her nose. Couldn't with the helmet, and that just made the itch a hundred times worse. It occurred to her then that beings which had existed as information stored in quantum spin states for millions of years might not really, well, remember what alive was. On the other hand, they understood extinction. When the ice caps had melted, the added heat had caused their spin states to degrade. Who they were- information- started to dribble away. Then when the Falnari's began tapping thermal vents and desalinating the water, the Nimtra began to die. They'd tried, frantically, to tell the Falnari; when a vessel came near, they converged- and killed the very people they were

trying to reach when the sum total of their quantum resonance signatures interfered with navigation, communication, engines.

The kicker was she'd brought them on herself. So had the captain. Just like Chakotay's fireflies on a summer's night- because when the sensors multiphased, they thought it was us, signaling to start a dialogue. They thought we understood.

Her translator sputtered: No why, no why.

Okay, so they didn't understand. What would they get? Her mind flashed to the briefing room, the images. Seven: The column moved. "Are they moving?" She thought, frantically, for something the Nimtra could latch onto. "Do they... reorganize elsewhere?"

This time, they came back fast: Yes. Not we.

Not we. Did they mean one person? Probably. Who? And what to do now? She checked their depth. Still too far down to raise Voyager... and then she thought: Wait, I hailed the captain. The channel opened; I heard it.

Voyager was too far away. But she wasn't.

How? If the Flyer had passed the sub on the way down, surely they'd have seen them. But they hadn't.

"The column moved," she whispered. Her voice sounded hollow in the helmet. "When I told them who I was and why I was here, they moved." She knew what that cost the Nimtra: more kinetic energy, and some of them just ceased. Their information de-cohered. But they understood, knew what they'd done without meaning to and wanted to help. Maybe, atone.

Quickly, she brought up the multiphasic sensors. (Now that the Nimtra understood what the sensors were, they stayed out of the way.) Looking, looking... a surge of elation coursed through her veins. Two combadge signals, close enough for a transporter lock. "I got you, I got you, just hold on."

Then, she paused. Four people. Had to assume Chakotay and the captain were both alive. Couldn't work it any other way. Four people.

Her eyes roved over the Flyer. Superheated air thinned to the equivalent of six thousand meters above sea level. Unbreathable.

And three... working... suits.

She wasted a minute trying to figure an angle. It wasn't the mechanics so much; she knew she could do it. She'd beamed nucleogenic aliens in and out of containment fields a hundred times smaller. That wasn't it. Only... she wasted thirty seconds, figuring how to make this fair. How to make it right.

Then she brought up her log. "Listen," she said, as she punched in coordinates, "there's one more thing."

* * *

The voice didn't come back. That was good. Janeway didn't believe in angels.

She hit the seventh command. Then she watched her finger rise, suspend in midair as if suddenly weightless....

Cold water, I'll breathe it in. A reflex, no way to stop it. Over fast. Ten seconds, maybe fifteen.

"Now," she said- and hit the eighth command.

She had just enough time to see the water curl, roll, hurtle forward. She heard the roar. Felt the cold slap her face. She opened her mouth....

And then she saw the lights, and there were so many... how beautiful... how...

And then- nothing.

* * *

Marla felt it happen: that sudden hitch in her consciousness. A skip between one state of being and the next. Her vision blacked, folded, expanded.

And then she saw the lights. Everywhere. There were so many... how beautiful... how... she was cold, icy; she opened her mouth...

No, no, no, no! She flailed. It hurt. Her chest was on fire. Karl!

Then- how odd- her mind broke free and she floated high above toward... lights. Strange and weird and wonderful. So bright. But she was rising too fast; her air was mostly gone and now she was scared because she would rise too far too fast and never be safe, never...

Then, a miracle. A hand on her elbow. A voice in her ear. I'm here, Marla. It's all right. Hold on tight, and don't let go.

Karl pulling her down, reeling her in, holding her close. Keeping her safe.

And the lights... winked... out.

* * *

Sickbay was about as dark as they could make it, all except the lights of the biobeds. She wanted it that way. Sickbay was never silent, but that was all right. The sounds- the amplified beat of Chakotay's heart, the soft rustle of fabric as Paris changed position- were... comforting. That's the way she wanted things for now.

Janeway huddled on a biobed, blanket over her shoulders, and a mug in her right hand. The coffee was black, fragrant, and piping hot. Feathers of steam caressed her cheeks, dewing into tears.

Her mind skipped over the reports: the Nimtra in stasis; the Falnari killing them without knowing, and vice versa. Voyager would help. Something would work itself out. Figuring a common language for starters... things would work out.

One particular job, right now. She fingered the padd. She couldn't see it well, though if she held it at a certain angle, it caught the light.

Marla Gilmore's voice in her head: Listen, there's just one more thing. My nephew...

Janeway's eyes drifted to the alcove and the darkness there that was, mercifully perhaps, too complete. All she saw was a suggestion of a form. The drape of a cloth.

How to describe a woman she'd willfully ignored to a boy she didn't know? Janeway's lips twitched into a ghost of a smile. Use your brain, girl. You just do.

So Janeway thumbed the padd to life, licked her lips and began to speak.

Da Capo al Fine

Part II

Heather Jarman

"You wish," Kathryn Janeway said in a low, guttural voice, staggering toward Seska. "But I don't believe in ghosts or ghouls and consequently, I know this knife wound isn't real." White bursts flashed before her eyes; she paused, nausea overtaking her stomach.

"That's the feeling of your life draining away," Seska said, backing away from her. "A vague sense of disorientation, distance between your mind and your physical body. Your brain is working frantically to pump endorphins into your body to silence the nerve endings that are sending panicked messages of pain... lots of it. Soon, mercifully enough, you'll lose consciousness and you'll simply slip away. Too bad- I would have liked your death to last longer, but I'll take what fun I can get."

"You... aren't... real," Janeway said, willing her mind to believe what she knew had to be the truth. Seska wasn't here at this place in time. She wasn't aboard Voyager when we left Deep Space 9 for the Badlands. Inhaling sharply, her heart rate accelerated and nausea twisted her stomach. A wave of dizziness capsized her concentration; she dropped down, burying her head between her knees. We haven't even left for the Badlands... or have we? How else would she know Seska? Janeway felt the same throbbing headache she associated with- temporal disturbances. Is that what this is? she thought, wondering if at last she had an explanation for the strange, surreal dreams and experiences she'd had today. Am I stuck in some time loop? With what mental strength she had left, she willed her thoughts into some semblance of order, ignoring Seska's taunts.

No explanation made sense, save her absolute conviction that none of her present circumstances were real. And yet the pain... she couldn't cognitively dismiss it. Her temples and neck throbbed with a threatening migraine. She raised blood-smeared hands to her temples, touched her neck, felt the cold metal protruding from between the cords of her throat. The Cardassian had knifed her! She cried out, panic swamping her. Calm, Kathryn, Calm.

Cautiously, she touched her neck again, felt the metal. Far away, a chorus of modulated voices chattered, their tones devoid of emotion or inflection.

... unable to comply... proceed to corridor one-six-seven...

The voices drew closer, became louder.

The Borg.

Janeway pinched her eyes tight together, scrunched up her face, and pressed her hands to her cheeks, pushing away the voices. This isn't real.

Oh yes it is, came Seska's voice in her mind, and it was then she realized that the quiet yet persistent demands, in all her dreams or hallucinations or temporal travels, had been Seska's whispers. Without warning, waves of pain radiating through her limbs depleted her strength; Janeway dropped to her knees, toppled forward.

Exhale...

Facedown on the deck plating, Janeway pushed herself off the rubble-covered floor and looked around at what was left of her bridge, helpless to stop the exploding consoles popping and crackling. The acrid smoke stench from burning equipment saturated the air; flames erupted from the computer banks as the warning klaxons sounded. Looking down at herself, she discovered that she was stripped down to her uniform pants and regulation gray tank, her bare arms greasy with scorch and sweat. Each laborious breath barely inflated her lungs, her constricted tissues burning from the effort.

Voyager quaked, reeling from round after round of weapons fire. She glanced at one of the few functioning monitors and saw a starship she didn't immediately recognize. The small icon in the corner identified the vessel as Krenim. Krenim?

Considering the damage to her ship, whoever commanded that ship clearly had it in for Voyager. A gut instinct told Janeway that she needed to do whatever was necessary to stop that Krenim vessel.

She crawled across the deck toward the captain's seat. The tremors magnified with each new weapons volley; she struggled to maintain her balance. As soon as she'd pulled herself up onto her chair, another explosion threw her forward. She clung to her armrests, refusing to relinquish her seat of command. Her gaze drawn forward, she discovered that the front half of her bridge hull had been ripped away. A forcefield barely held back the vacuum of space. She had no weapons. Her shield strength amounted to nil.

At a distance, she saw the Krenim vessel.

I'm going to take him down.

Her combadge chirped.

"All our ships have been disabled, Captain. Do you have weapons?"

Tuvok. "Negative," Janeway said. "Torpedo launchers are down. I'm setting a collision course." She then ordered Tuvok and the other ships in the fleet to take their temporal shields offline. Maybe we can undo this mess, she thought. Maybe we can start again.

Voyager hurtled toward the Krenim vessel, closer, ever closer with each passing second.

"Time's... up," Janeway snarled, bracing for impact.

She felt curiously calm, resolved to accept her inevitable death. A captain should go down with her ship. A chorus of Seska whispers chattered in her mind. Yes, Kathryn. Seek your

rest.... Let go.

The Krenim vessel grew larger- and larger still.

Wait a minute- this war with the Krenim isn't part of my past. I've never been here, in this place before. So what am I doing here? Frantically, she searched her recent memories and dreams, scrambling to put the pieces together, seeking to understand what had been happening. Something about her present circumstances felt oddly familiar, and yet she knew that what she experienced right now, in this moment, wasn't a memory, though it felt all too real. Why was she here? Seek commonalities, Kathryn, between all the unusual experiences you've had. Look for the common denominators. The Borg assimilation. Tuvok's attack. The Nechani ritual to save Kes. This hallucination with the Krenim... and Seska, the dead Cardassian spy who had been haunting her. Over and over again, I've relived these life-and-death scenarios. I've escaped death in the direst circumstances, and in every instance Seska has been there, taunting, coercing, leading me toward death.

Then she knew the cause of her madness.

Voyager's nose brushed the hull of the Krenim vessel.

"This isn't real! I'm not dying! Whoever you are, whatever you are, send me back to the present!" Janeway's consciousness disconnected, her awareness of her body diminished. She fought for one last breath.

Inhale...

The scene shimmered and rippled like the surface of water. Janeway realized she'd slumped onto the floor of the Borg Queen's lair. She mustered the strength to raise her eyes one last time- one last time as Kathryn Janeway, not some mindless drone, she amended mentally. The Queen had disintegrated into a heap of twitching cybernetic limbs. At least I've outlived her.

Casting her gaze around the room, Janeway couldn't tell from the scene on the floating viewscreen whether or not her friends would make it through the collapsing conduit before the cube, dispatched by the Queen, destroyed Voyager. Insuring Voyager's safety wasn't her fight anymore, though. Captain Janeway would see it through. Admiral Janeway's last fight was personal. Now, where was that creature and his damnable matrix!

She had to give the alien credit. He'd promised he'd come back when she was dying, and he'd made good on his promise. That didn't mean she'd agreed to cooperate when he decided to pay her a call. Kathryn Janeway was nothing if not stubborn.

"Show yourself! I demand that you show yourself!" she shouted, coughed, choking on the debris polluting the air. "You tried this once before- pretending to be my father was clever. This time you almost had me by convincing me that my life was over, but now I know what you're up to and there's no way in hell you're going to feed off my energy!"

A figure seemingly walked through a wall, materializing before her. Seska didn't appear happy.

Though intellectually she knew this creature before her wasn't Seska, part of her wished that the alien had taken another form. At least last time, Janeway's father had come to show her a way into the next life- if there was such a thing. She'd always dismissed the hope of an

afterlife as a longing felt by those unwilling to accept reality; now, facing death, she understood why so many clung to such a belief. "Nice to see you again," Janeway said, her voice edged in sarcasm. "But don't take it personally if I don't invite you to stay."

"Don't be impulsive, Kathryn. Are you certain that indeed, I am what you believe me to be?" Seska said. "Perhaps I'm merely here to escort you to an everlasting existence as another glorious life-form- " She arched an eyebrow. "- or to damnation."

Janeway snorted. "Don't believe in it. Hell is a fairy story."

"Your belief or lack thereof doesn't change reality. If you knew what your afterlife offered you!" Seska crouched down beside Janeway and whispered in her ear, "Dwelling eternally in a moment of the most promise, of wholeness, of happiness..."

Janeway squeezed a groan of pain back into her throat; there was nothing merciful about Borg assimilation. That damnable explosion seemed to be taking an eternity.

"Oh, Kathryn," Seska said softly, cocking her head and impassively studying Janeway's suffering. "Always taking the hard way, out of some misguided nobility or bravery. Had you been less stubborn, we might have had time to visit your Academy days, your first love..."

"Save the sentimentality for someone who buys it," Janeway said, coughing. "I still don't believe it."

"Sometimes you simply have to trust what you can't see. It's called faith, Kathryn- I hope you don't mind me calling you that. I feel like we've been through so much together that we've moved past the whole Starfleet hierarchical structure, don't you think?" Seska leaned back against the pillar Janeway had slouched against, crossed her arms across her chest, and looked placidly at her. "Time's running out, though. You'll have to decide if you want to take what I'm offering- an afterlife, serenity, a chance to be part of the fabric of the universe forever, or- "

"Or what?"

"Or you take your chances."

She looked up at her, the full weight of the last few weeks at last bearing down on her- the anniversary celebration of Voyager's return, the undercover operation involving Miral Paris and the Klingons, the confrontation with Harry before she journeyed to the past, meeting her younger self and changing the course of history...

Exhaustion overtook her. Accepting Seska's or the alien's invitation to travel into whatever place there might be beyond this- a matrix, heaven or hell- was mighty tempting. It couldn't be worse than how she felt now. And yet there was a skepticism that prevented her from embracing the illusion, as alluring as it might be. Still. It couldn't be worse than this, she thought, surveying the disintegrating Borg chamber.

"All right. I'll give it a try. But I reserve the right to change my miiiind..." Her eyes drooped closed as her will trickled away, then darkness.

Exhale.

Something coarse and wet licked her cheek. She couldn't immediately identify why it felt

familiar, but within seconds sense memory returned. A wide smile curved over Kathryn's face. She opened her eyes and reached up her hands to bury them in Molly's shaggy mane. She pushed up on one elbow and nuzzled her dog's muzzle. Molly pawed at her mistress's arms with sodden forelegs, indicating her desire to play, so Janeway scrambled to her knees.

"Oh girl, you've been in the pond again." Janeway tsked disapproval, but scratched between the dog's ears anyway, and Molly panted gratefully. At least Mother's livestock was being pastured at the neighbor's this week, otherwise she wouldn't want to think about what muck Molly would be into. She inhaled deeply, wondering when she'd again take in the scents of freshly mowed lawn, the damask roses in her mother's arbor, the damp, peaty tang of soil overturned in preparation for the next planting. Wrapping her arms around Molly's neck, she hugged her dog to her chest, looking out over the fields at the last pink-periwinkle vestiges of the setting sun.

Tall grass swished behind her; recognizing the footfalls, she twisted slightly to the side in time to see a familiar pair of lanky legs- she lifted her gaze higher- and a handsome face. "I haven't slept through dinner, have I?" she called out.

Mark grinned. It was an old joke between them: both driven, hyper-focused scientists who often worked straight through meals, appointments, and sleep cycles, without realizing time passing. "Starfleet has a priority communication coming through in a few minutes. I thought you'd want to be there- "

Before he could finish delivering his message, she was up on her feet, headed up the gravel path to the house. Skipping up the steps, she clonked across the farmhouse porch's wooden planks to the door and launched into her mother's living room, forgetting to wipe her boots on the braided rag rug. Two muddy steps across the threshold, she remembered; instead of going back outside to clean up, she kicked her boots off next to a brass umbrella stand.

"Didn't take you long," Gretchen Janeway noted wryly as she raced past the kitchen doorway on her way to the den.

As she walked, she ran a hand cursorily through her wind-tangled hair, then buttoned her dirt-smudged jacket, hoping she'd managed a somewhat respectable appearance. She'd taken her seat in front of the com panel by the time the familiar Federation logo interposed on a solid-color background blinked onto the screen. Admiral Owen Paris appeared.

"Kathryn. I'm glad we were able to connect. I have some news. You'll need to make a decision- immediately."

"Admiral?" She leaned forward.

"Headquarters was just contacted by the Trondheim, which was in the Bajoran sector conducting a scientific study of the plasma storms in the Badlands. A crew emergency forced them back to Deep Space 9. It occurred to command that perhaps we could save time by sending the Trondheim after Tuvok and dispatch Voyager to complete the Trondheim's scientific mission in another week or so. Especially since time is of the essence where Tuvok's concerned, and ideally, Voyager's better equipped to handle the survey anyway."

Janeway opened her mouth to answer, but her breath caught in her throat. A most peculiar

feeling overcame her, and she knew that her response to Admiral Paris would change her life.

"Just think, Kathryn, you could move your wedding up a few weeks- you wouldn't have to postpone your honeymoon until after the Sumatra's rainy season like you'd originally thought. It's a perfect time to begin your new life- a new command, a marriage- a whole future."

The word picture he painted lulled Janeway into a thoughtful state; she breathed in and out slowly as she visualized, over an elongated moment, the alluring possibilities. What harm would be done if someone else took up the search for Tuvok? After all, she could hardly be counted on to be objective where Tuvok was concerned. She could put away the mistakes and memories that drew her back into the past, and celebrate a new beginning with Mark.

She could start over.

In a horrifying moment of clarity, Janeway knew. The past, present, and future aligned so she could see them all with perfect understanding.

"No," she said, firmly, to Admiral Paris. "I'll go to the Badlands and look for Tuvok because that is what I'm meant to do." She pushed back from the com panel and tilted her face to the ceiling, calling to whatever malevolent creature had put her back in this place. "You're wrong you know, this isn't the moment where I want to be forever! Send. Me. BACK!"

A stab of pain cleaved her body; Janeway grabbed for the edge of the desk, struggling to maintain consciousness as her vision convulsed and a grating buzz filled her mind. Unable to remain standing, she collapsed to her knees, then the floor....

Inhale...

Superimposed against the smoking consoles and machinery of the Borg cube, the alien stood before his matrix of churning red and yellow flame.

"I could have given you what you longed for," he said.

Glancing up at the viewscreen, Janeway watched Voyager elude the cube's attack. She calculated how long she'd have before the Borg uni-complex would be incinerated and waited a long moment before saying, "I already have it."

He raised a mocking eyebrow, shook his head, and said "Foolish, foolish creature." Then, turning his back to her, he vanished into the swirling vortex, which slowly dissipated, diminishing to nothing before her eyes.

Good riddance, she thought weakly. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Voyager soar into the Borg cube's interior as a protection from the explosions. She knew that Voyager had survived and, more important, had made it home.

A wheeze escaped her throat and she coughed. Her body was giving up. At least her demise felt a little less like a whimper and a little more like a triumph, though no one was around to witness it.

She sensed the impending explosion only milliseconds before it happened. Time to go. Smiling weakly, she relaxed, drifted toward brisk October twilight, burnished copper around the edges and smelling like moldering leaves and smoke. And then the voices... She drifted

as she listened, the voices becoming louder as she drew closer. Ah... now, that's more like what death should be like- or the afterlife for that matter, she thought as the memory of autumn apples filled her mouth. The place she'd always longed for unfolded before her dying eyes, and at last she allowed herself to let go, to become part of it.

* * *

"We're being hailed," Harry Kim said in a trembling voice.

"On screen," Captain Janeway ordered, hoping her tone didn't betray her own nervousness. She had no idea what or who she might be inviting onto her bridge; she almost feared to hope. Holding her breath, she waited.

Admiral Owen Paris and Reg Barclay, standing side by side, appeared before her.

Swamped by disparate feelings bombarding her simultaneously, she swallowed hard, uncertain which emotion would first push through, and attempted to compose herself. "Sorry to surprise you," Janeway said, in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Next time, we'll call ahead." She watched as Admiral Paris risked a look at his son, seated at Voyager's helm; the younger man looked away. There will be time, she thought.

Admiral Paris addressed Janeway. "Welcome back."

"It's good to be here," Janeway said, incapable of offering more than understatement. No one, save those who had lived, fought, served, and died beside her these last years, could understand just how precious this moment was.

His eyes full of questions, Admiral Paris asked, "How did you- ?"

Not now. "It'll all be in my report, sir."

She observed the admiral glance at his son, who studiously avoided his father's probing gaze, before her dearest mentor returned his attentions to her. "I look forward to it," the admiral said. The signal chirped off. Before the bridge was an uninhibited view of the Alpha Quadrant starscape.

As do we all, she thought, before whispering, "Thanks for your help, Admiral Janeway." We're home.

Exhale...