

## Episode 1.11

### Extreme Night

*"What is this? Is this the best you could do?"*

*"What do you want? It's better than the alternative. That, I couldn't even measure."*

*"You better be right. This isn't something that will go unnoticed."*

No matter how hard he tried not to look at it, he could still see it in on the edge of his sight. Short of standing up and turning his back on it, it would have to do.

The silence on the Bridge wasn't helping the tension he was feeling. Occasionally a station would beep gently as fingers would be pressed against it.

Everyone heard the turbolift open and the footsteps that followed it.

Chakotay took that opportunity to do what he thought about; stand up and turn his back on that horrific sight.

"You better have good news," he said to the newcomer.

"I must disobey. I have no good news to report," Seven told him, making her way over to join him. The PADD in her hand was passed into his. "I've completed an astrometric scan of the entire region. There are no star systems within 2,500 light years."

Chakotay didn't have time to read the report, he felt his eyes widen. He looked up at the ex drone. "Nothing?"

"Nothing," Seven confirmed.

Chakotay's eyes were drawn to what his mind wanted to avoid. It was dark, yet empty, with no end in sight. Even if he ordered someone to turn off the viewscreen it would look exactly the same. Either way, it was a window to their predicament.

"We should still be able to see stars. Why can't we?" he had to ask.

Seven appeared a little frustrated to him. Her chest heaved, on her it was a lot more noticeable. "I do not know. Something is occluding our sensors, I have not been able to determine what it is."

"Can we even see if anyone's out there?" Chakotay asked. He didn't need to, he knew what the answer was.

"We are alone," Seven answered how he expected.

It was a disturbing sight but as usual Chakotay could not keep his eyes off it. His whole body had turned to stare at the viewscreen. He hoped if he could stare long enough that he would make out a star in the distance, anything to make it feel like they were making some progress. Nothing, they may as well be sitting still.

*First Officer's Log Stardate 52367.4: It's been fifty three days since we entered this desolate region. If we want to continue our journey towards home, we have no choice but to cross it. We won't be able to gather any food supplies for a while. I suppose there's always a silver lining to everything.*

"That was uncalled for," Neelix pouted.

Chakotay wasn't in the mood for niceties, his eyes rolled. "Well maybe you can use these next two years to learn how to not kill people."

"Hmph!" was Neelix's only retort. He folded his arms tightly.

Tom sighed sadly. "First the Deck Thirteen explosion, then the time loop, now this void. We can't catch a break." He looked to B'Elanna for someone to agree with him, but she just blanked him.

"There's nothing new to report. What's the point of this briefing?" she asked.

Chakotay didn't dare think about saying something similar to her, he smiled weakly. "Humour me."

"Apart from Thirteen, all decks are running smoothly. Warp core is operating at peak efficiency," B'Elanna answered. "My people are going stir crazy. I tried to give them a task, repair Thirteen but everyone claims to be too *wigged out* by it."

Neelix shuddered, "I'm not surprised. The last thing anyone needs is a reminder of where we are."

B'Elanna nodded. "Also someone..." Her eyes averted to Tom, he grimaced at the dangerousness of them. "Nearly overloaded the hologrid in Holodeck One."

Tom pointed at the Doctor, Harry did as well. The Doctor rushed to defend himself, "Mr Kim and Paris frequently overlap their Holodeck time with others."

"I'm sure that won't happen again," Chakotay said with his own dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Yeah sure. I'm just glad no one's reprogrammed my things again," Tom grumbled impatiently.

"Are you sure?" the Doctor questioned playfully. "The program seemed to think you were the hero of the story."

"I am," Tom said defensively.

"Oh, that'll be why you still haven't finished it in the last two months then," the Doctor smiled.

Chakotay cleared his throat to distract them. "Harry, Operations report."

Harry timidly shook his head, "nada."

"Perhaps if you spent more time there than playing Tom's love interest..." Chakotay muttered.

Harry's face turned very red, most of the room smirked as a result. "Everything's running fine, and that's not what a partner is."

"Seven and I are still trying to determine what is blocking our sensors," Tuvok butted in. "It would be prudent to investigate."

"You're right. At the very least it could distract the natives," Chakotay sighed.

Tom perked up a little, "oh, maybe the reason we can't see anything is because there's a giant cloud beast that eats ships."

Jessie rolled her eyes. "That's the stupidest thing I've heard you say."

"Hey, this is Voyager, crazy is part of the job," Tom said, trying badly to hide his offense.

Chakotay tried his best not to laugh at the two of them. He wasn't the only one. "Something must be blocking our view ahead. Two thousand light years of no systems shouldn't look like this."

"It might make us think there's nothing there before it eats us," Tom muttered quietly. There were a few sniggers amongst the group. "Fine when it happens, you'll be sorry you didn't listen."

"Next you'll be saying that we'll be knocked out and only Naomi Wildman can save us," the Doctor said.

"And Seven," Jessie groaned.

"Don't say that like she always does. When has she saved us so far?" the Doctor asked.

Jessie frowned, "when has Naomi?"

"I don't need to ask, but crew morale," Chakotay said to change the subject slightly.

"Deteriorating, obviously," the Doctor replied.

Neelix sat up in his seat, his bad mood had faded away. "Perhaps I can offer some suggestions. Rotate crew assignments. Offer training programs. Add variety to the daily routine. I myself wouldn't mind squeezing in a little tactical training."

"What did I say about learning not to kill people?" Chakotay muttered under his breath.

Tuvok's eyebrow raised high, it had been a while so it took two tries. "Perhaps Astrometrics would be more to your liking."

Neelix didn't take him seriously, he was on a roll anyway. "The Holodecks have been in high demand. I was thinking, we could install a few emitters in Cargo Bay Two. Make it a third Holodeck."

"Yeah cos that worked so well when the Hirogen did it," Tom commented.

Chakotay felt his forehead as it started to ache. "How many times... it didn't happen."

Tom laughed, "next you'll be telling me there was no Demon planet either."

"There wasn't," everyone said in unison.

Tom's face whitened quickly. "What? Then what about Demon<sup>2</sup>?"

"I don't even know what that is," Jessie mumbled.

"Actually..." Tom calmed a little, his shoulders raised. "Neither do I. If it was a 2 there would be a space. If it's a squared symbol, it doesn't make sense. Is it Demon in 3D?"

"If this fourth wall conversation doesn't lure the Captain out of her quarters, nothing will," Harry commented.

### **Meanwhile:**

A pair of blue eyes narrowed. The owners fists clenched, her ears seemed to twitch. A different pair of blue eyes stared up at her curiously.

"What's wrong mummy?" Kiara asked.

### **The Conference Room:**

"Yes, that's the other problem. No one's seen her in a while," Neelix said.

Chakotay's face stiffened at the mention of the Captain. "What's your point?"

"People take comfort in talking to her," Neelix explained. "When they see that the Captain's happy, they're happy."

Harry pulled a confused face, "who are these people? I assume these are the ones that only see her after a hundred cups."

"I dunno. I get a good laugh when she starts tearing new ones," Jessie said.

Tom shuddered at a lot of memories coming in all at once. "Rumour has it she never leaves her quarters."

"Rumours also has it that you changed your mutiny program to reveal your true feelings for Harry," the Doctor said.

Tom and Harry blushed in unison. They didn't dare look at each other.

Chakotay was starting to get a little irritated at all of this. "She'll come to the Bridge if and when she's needed. It's up to her."

"Spare us the protocol, Chakotay. It's pretty odd, you've got to admit it," B'Elanna said. "It's not the first time she's done this either."

"She can run this ship from wherever the hell she wants to!" Chakotay snapped at her, taking her aback. "Understood?"

Most of the room froze, they worried how B'Elanna would react to that. Luckily she didn't seem the least bit angry about it. "Yeah, sure," her voice softened.

Chakotay sighed to calm himself down. His face looked apologetic. "We're all feeling the strain. At least when we were in regular space there were aliens, anomalies, planets. The things we were used to, things we were trained for."

"Better the devil you know," Tom remarked.

"Are we talking about the Captain again?" Harry asked innocently.

Everyone else seemed to choose to ignore the pair. Chakotay looked over his shoulder to stare at the abyss outside. "Two months is a long time. Two years..."

"It's not all bad. We can spend the rest of the season having a laugh and stuff, lighten up," Tom badly tried to convince him.

"Every sentence you say tops your last on the stupid metre. Try shutting up," B'Elanna muttered.

"Perhaps we could release a probe to determine what is affecting our sensors," Tuvok suggested.

Chakotay didn't look so sure, "we'd have to slow down and keep close to it to avoid losing any data we get from it. We don't know the extent of this anomaly's range."

Tom perked up at the thought that suddenly came to him. "Or, we could have a shuttle sitting in the middle, extending its scanning range."

Harry couldn't help but smirk, "here we go." He knew this was coming. Everyone else though wondered why Tom acted so excited over this idea.

"Every other day for two years?" Chakotay was bemused. "You're going to have a hard job finding a volunteer to go with you."

"We wouldn't be going in the old class two shuttles. We'll be going in our new shuttlecraft," Tom said proudly.

"That's not the reason Chakotay was hinting at," Harry said to him cheekily.

Tom brushed him off, but most of the room were staring at him like he was going on about starship eating clouds again. "Let's face it. Our current stock just don't cut it in the Delta Quadrant. We've needed something bigger and better since we got here. It's time we built it!"

"That seems like a huge waste of time for something that'll just crash when it sees a planet," Jessie said.

For some reason Neelix seemed eager after her comment. "We have a lot of time to waste. It may be the boost for morale we've been looking for."

Tom smiled gratefully at him. "That's the spirit Neelix."

"Tom, are you seriously suggesting we have and should waste the resources to build a shuttle from scratch?" Chakotay said as patiently as possible. "You do know the shuttle replicator is just a joke around here, right? We don't just walk up to it and ask for a new one."

"With how many shuttles we've lost, we've probably wasted more than twice the resources to get equally crashable replacements, than it would take to create a new one," Tom said, his sales pitch voice finally kicked in.

"We appreciate your enthusiasm..." Chakotay said.

"No we don't," almost everyone muttered in perfect unison. Harry pouted as he didn't get a similar joke in before they did.

Tom leapt out of his chair to scurry over to the wall computer. "I already made a head start on the design." He tapped the controls to bring up a schematic of a shuttlecraft that didn't look like a box with a window and nacelles. The front had a more pointed look than the older ones. Its nacelles appeared to be apart of a wide winged design near the back.

"Behold the Delta Flyer. Ultra-aerodynamic contours, retractable nacelles, parametallic hull plating," he began his spiel.

"Yes, double exhaust so it sounds louder, sorry cooler. Surround sound speakers in the back. Banging tires, we get it," Chakotay groaned.

Tom tried not to look offended. He tried to defend his new baby but someone else beat him. "You forgot the pink dice in the cockpit and the personalised number plate saying CT PRT0M," Jessie sniggered.

Harry sniggered quietly, behind his sealed lips. Tom still heard it though and glared at him. "Don't give him any ideas," Harry said now he was caught out.

"I designed a perfectly functioning shuttle. Sure it has bells and whistles, but nothing that isn't useful," Tom protested.

"Tom, I saw the Holodeck version. How do you explain the antique helm controls?" Harry asked.

Tom laughed confidently, "after your performance in the car, don't worry about it. You won't be driving stick anytime soon."

Jessie bit her lip to stop herself making more jokes. She noticed a few people at the table were struggling to do the same.

"All right fine. You're humoured. How long would it take?" Chakotay asked.

"I'd say a week if we all chip in, pull all nighters. Of course, we're not in any hurry are we, since my plans are stupid," Tom answered.

"Finally," B'Elanna sighed quietly.

Tom threw her a look of betrayal. Her blank expression made it only bounce off.

"Fine. Volunteers only, this isn't a mission. Dis..." Chakotay said.

"Am I the only one worried that a huge region of space has nothing in it, yet we're the only ones here?" Neelix wondered.

"Why would there be? The locals would know better than to go in. We're only doing it as we're trying to get to the other side," Tom said.

Harry stared down at the table grimly. "If there were people inside it, using it as a place to hide and ambush, we'd have encountered them by now. Two months is a long time to be rubbing your hands and cackling."

"Missed," Chakotay finished with a sigh.

Almost everyone rose out of their seats to leave. Only a few remained in the end. Tom had to finish mopping up his pride that had been carelessly kicked on the floor again, before shuffling out. That left Chakotay and B'Elanna, she still sat in place as if she didn't hear him dismiss her. He gave her a troubled look before she finally got the hint and walked out.

#### **Meanwhile:**

A deep booming voice chuckled in the darkness. "Soon, soon they will see what true terror really is," the voice echoed thanks to the computer enhancing it. The chuckle after it sounded real and sinister enough.

A few beeps were soon followed by the sound of an engine stalling, then nothing.

"What?" the computer voice snarled.

"That wasn't the replicator was it," another voice said irritably. "Seriously, why do you insist on sitting in the dark? It's my ship, should be my rules."

"Oh I see. Intimidated by my magnificently dark presence?" the computerised voice said. "Pathetic lowly man, you cannot begin to imagine..." He was interrupted by the engines stirring back on and the lights following suit, revealing the alien and very advanced bridge they were in.

The man at the front of the room seemed very relieved, despite the light briefly blinding his eyes. He hurried over to a completely different station. "I knew it, I was way off."

"Hmph!" was the only response he got.

The man turned around with a bowl of blue soup in his hands. "So what were you saying?" He wasn't surprised to see that his team mate was nowhere in sight, at first. Then he spotted a figure badly trying to crouch down behind the only chair in the room. "Nobody cares, Boss. It's not like we're in a novel or a TV show. You're not going to get described. Your so called villainous and dark presence won't be seen by anyone. Heck it's four episodes later and my name's even been forgotten. I'm *the man* apparently."

"As if," the computer voice grunted. "Very well ATourist, I will take my rightful place in the Captain's chair."

"Arturis," the man corrected before the wrong name stuck to him. Amusement soon replaced his worry as the figure went to sit down in the chair again. "That isn't the Captain's chair."

He got another evil chuckle. "Oh? Is that the best you can do?"

"Oh I don't care about that, even though we're supposed to be partners. I only sit in that a couple, maybe three times a day," Arturis said. When he didn't get any kind of response he decided to give him one more clue, just in case. "Sometimes I stand in front of it."

"Well how else would you go to sit in it? Float and land, crawl and climb?" the Boss said, trying badly not to laugh at him. "You really are an imbecile, that is why I'm here. Voyager may be as dumb as you but they're lucky too. You need more than a fake Starfleet ship thrown in their laps. No wonder you weren't worthy of a end of season cliffhanger."

Arturis would have been more offended if this strange man wasn't sitting in that chair. He just thought that now he wouldn't tell him. "How is your plan any different to mine? All you've done is change when it happened."

"You do not possess the intelligence to understand the finer details of the genius of this plan," the Boss sneered. "It requires cunning, a wonderful intellect such as mine, and a lost on you talent for connecting the dots." Arturis hid a smirk as his partner's arm leaned on the few buttons on the chair. "Cause and effect, or more accurately, effect and cause. It's beautiful, a work of art. Isn't it? Just like myself." His hand managed to push one of the buttons, causing the chair to make a tell tale sound that disturbed the Boss and made Arturis burst into laughter.

"Oh please, tell me more about this work of art of yours," Arturis teased him.

The Boss sighed in frustration. "Fifth Voyager sinks to a new low. I didn't think it was possible."

### **Voyager Holodeck One:**

No program was on, the team stood within the Hologrid watching the lone hologram. It being a five foot long version of the shuttlecraft, hovering in front of them. Apart from its size, it looked identical to the one they had used in the Q fight months earlier. It did until two extra wings emerged from the main ones, making it look like a rip off of a Tie fighter.

Tuvok's eyebrow raised. "Computer, delete dynametric tail fins." Thankfully they went back where they came from, disappointing Tom.

"Why not?" he complained.

"In case you didn't notice the derision in the Conference Room, Lieutenant, this is not supposed to be a *hot rod*," Tuvok answered.

Harry smirked, while Seven stood beside him sighing and partially rolling her eyes.

"It's not like I'm asking for go faster stripes or a bright red hull. I just think we should make this thing look a lot meaner than our other shuttles. So people don't attack her when they see her," Tom said.

"You should have made it cube shaped, grid patterned and dark. That would do it," Harry commented.

Once again it felt like his own best friend had given him a wedgie. "Harry, you should be on my side. Their side's big enough."

"We should get back to more important matters; the structural integrity of the hull," Seven barked.

"I concur," Tuvok said with some relief.

"Lieutenant Torres's design is flawed," Seven continued. Tom and Harry froze, fearing the worst. It was bad enough whenever she criticised her work and gave her reasons why. However the ex-drone didn't even bother with that, as if it was worthless to do so, or should have been obvious to anyone. It was simply this metal is better than yours. The thought of how B'Elanna would take that insult, Harry considered stepping backwards as he stood in the middle of this potential warzone.

Nothing seemed to happen though. It was quiet, too quiet. Tom dared to turn his head to the left, towards B'Elanna standing in front of the doors. Her face was blank, eyes were lightyears away. "B'Elanna?" His voice woke her up. Maybe she hadn't heard.

"Sounds good to me," she said to kill that theory. There was no biting sarcasm, no malice, no attitude of any kind. "I'm going to finish up the thruster specs." She was gone seconds later.

Unsure what to make of that, Tom turned his head back to the others. He found Tuvok looking at him, a curious and yet accusing expression on his face. It upset Tom to think that the logical Vulcan would immediately blame him for this with no facts being shown, like he was blamed for everything. He was half tempted to bring the tail fins back and recolor the ship white with red go faster stripes. Anything to put him in his place.

### **The Mess Hall:**

Neelix kept himself busy for as long as he could. Unfortunately he was between meals, between days even. The kitchen was closed. The few crewmembers that were there were off duty crewmembers looking for something to do, or somewhere else to be but their quarters.

At one of the occupied tables, Jessie and Craig sat opposite each other, heads buried in their laptop style computers. Jessie tapped on hers with growing frustration, while Craig took the opportunity to take a sip of his drink.

When she stopped, she clicked her tongue and sat back in her chair. Craig quickly put his drink down to work on his computer.

"Predictable," Jessie said while shaking her head.

Craig's eyes drifted up mid finger tap, "what?"

"The nice guy routine, you always use that strategy," Jessie said.

A smile spread across the young man's face, "that's because it always works. If you don't want to get wiped out, don't steal my tech."

Jessie folded her arms across her chest, "you deliberately avoid trading to piss me off. One city for a tech is reasonable, not all of them."

"It's the principle of the thing. Don't steal," Craig smirked while tapping.

Something on her screen made Jessie's eyes narrow and her jaw slowly drop. "Since when did you get tanks?" Sounds emanated from the screen, making her even more frustrated. She tried to tap but nothing happened. "No, no. That's not fair. First you continuously chuck a unit into my territory every turn, now this. You're hoping I start the fight to keep your reputation spotless."

"Ten games later and now you figure it out," Craig teased her.

"Ten, it feels like a hundred," Jessie groaned with a hint of defeat in her voice.

Craig nodded, "Civilisation is the game of long nights."

"Too long for me," Jessie muttered.

One tap ended his turn, so Craig reached for his drink once more. His eyebrow raised to join his smirk, "I'll bet."

That was a mistake and he knew it as soon as Jessie's eyes sharpened in his direction. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well... the game can't be beaten by you reaching into it and punching my king in the face, soo..." Craig badly improvised a joke.



"Fine. Go back to playing the AI," Jessie spat as she shot up out of her chair. "I hope you enjoy the building right next to your cities and caravans mapping your territory for hundreds of years."

Craig divided his panicked stare between her and the computer displaying his turn, right before a city takeover. "But... where did you think I learned to wipe out a country over a spy stealing Communism?"

"You're a one trick guy, I'm not worried you'll learn something new," Jessie grumbled as she turned to leave.

"Don't be ridiculous," Craig quickly said. He stood up, "I could beat you the old fashioned way, which I do anyway. Just don't get so mad all the time."

Their argument by now had gotten the whole Mess Hall's attention. Everyone were mostly hoping Craig would stop taunting her, or he'd be knocked out cold any minute.

"I'm not. If you want to build cities for twenty straight hours, hoping for some schmuck to send a unit into the borders of Farttown by accident, so you have an excuse to commit genocide. Be my guest. Just don't expect anyone to play that game with you," Jessie grumbled.

Craig laughed a little nervously, "it's revenge for stealing my hard work from me. I was only joking about it being a tactic. I've proved I don't need to do it."

"No, you like being the one that says no for once, then you get that stupid grin on your face when the opportunity for your revenge comes up. Typical passive aggressive little boy wanting to show up a girl because they keep wronging him," Jessie said.

"That... that hurt," Craig stuttered. He snatched his laptop away, unable to look her in the eye. "Congrats, you win. You now have no friends left." He marched away without looking back, almost bumping into one of the people watching them.

Jessie closed her eyes and sighed while sitting back down. The anger she had faded away with it. Even staring back at her computer screen showing most of her territory in his control now didn't stir it up again. Her hand reached out to slam the lid of the computer down at the same time someone carefully approached the table.

"How's the anger management going?" he asked.

Jessie's head snapped up, ready to bite his off. "Great, I'll prove it on you."

The man standing beside her smiled, bouncing the threat right off him. He seemed more offended than worried. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Of course I do. You're the idiot therapist that told me to breathe everytime I got angry," Jessie snapped. "Gee, I can't even remember what I used to do before that great advice. Probably suffocate and die, I'm guessing."

The man slid down into the nearest chair, not breaking his stare toward her. "Not even my name? Just therapist."

"No," Jessie answered with indifference. "I remember you being nosey, wasting my time for a few afternoons and the not speaking English. I didn't need to go to you. I've always been like this."

"You insulted your friend over a game. You think that's a reasonable thing to spit fire about?" the man questioned gently. "And it's Andy, by the way."

"Who cares?" Jessie said, rolling her eyes.

Andy didn't take any offense, his smile even grew. "You wanna know what I think?" Jessie shook her head, mouthing *no*. "You're angry about something else, and you are trying to offend people on purpose so they don't get close to you."

Anyone who were still watching quickly averted their gaze, the last thing they wanted to do was be called in by Tuvok as murder witnesses.

Jessie meanwhile stared blankly at the man sitting next to her. Her eyes turning cold. "I've played that stupid game with that kid every night for the last few months. If I wanted to get rid of him, I'd have done it that first night he took over my city before I could open the first negotiation window. I hate those damn boats."

"Yes, might I suggest concentrating on one objective, and that one objective being raising the culture level. Nothing more satisfying than stealing a passive aggressive enemy's city without moving a single unit," Andy said.

"God, is everyone playing this stupid game?" Jessie groaned, even if she did like the sound of his strategy. Her eye caught sight of the abyss outside and it only then made sense to her. One long game kept the attention off the situation they were in. "Look, I don't need to be counselled okay. I'm not your patient anymore. Why are you here and don't say because Chakotay wants me to go to you again."

"No, I wasn't going to say that," Andy said. "I thought after everything you told me, eventually, that what you really could do with was a friend."

"Yeah, because I'm very good at keeping them around," Jessie muttered.

Andy's face grimaced, his eyes briefly pointed upwards. "Except for the boy I saw storm out, and the friends you told me about in session."

Jessie's blank stare turned into silent pity, "are you serious... do you really not understand sarcasm?"

"Oh," Andy laughed at himself. He quickly tried to stop it to avoid offending her. "I'm sorry, I usually take things at face value. I'll work on it."

"You're a therapist and you take things at face value," Jessie stated slowly, hoping he got irony at least.

"You'd be surprised how often that's a benefit. I've always had a knack for judging a person's character right off the bat," Andy said. "Which is why I'm here, badly trying to befriend you. I can tell, behind the rage there's an awesome yet lonely girl dying for someone to see that."

"Get over yourself," Jessie scoffed. "I don't need your pity friendship. I'm fine."

Neelix hurried over with an anxious face. "Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice that..."

Andy shook his head, "from what you told me, you lost three friends, and your last remaining one was a tense relationship. I assume that was him I saw. You can't keep pushing people away."

Jessie shot back out of her chair, glaring down at him with killer eyes. "No, wrong, I chased him away months ago. Let's cut to the chase, shall we."

"Please," Neelix tried to intervene again.

"Another he, it sounds like your issue is with trusting men. Now we're getting somewhere," Andy said a little too hostile for Neelix's liking.

It wasn't well received on Jessie's side either, "no, if that were the case, you'd have nothing to worry about."

"That's not very nice, I..." Neelix started to wheeze as he looked between them. His hand pressed on his chest.

"You think that all men are like your friend..." Andy started to say. Jessie interrupted by laughing briefly. He cleared his throat to continue, "or you judge them for not being so. Either way, you're afraid they'll hurt you again. This..." he said while gesturing his hand toward her, "is a defense mechanism. It's not going to work on me."

"No? But a punch in the jaw might," Jessie said, clenching her own hands.

The window leading to nothing outside, the suffocating arguments he kept overhearing, only after two months out of two years. Neelix had enough. Something inside him clicked and so he shouted, "stop!" That did the trick, the pair looked at him in shock. "Don't you think things are hard enough without screaming at each other. You should..." he gasped and wheezed. "Should be getting along, not..." His next gasp took his words away completely. Both of them surrounded him to make sure he was alright.

### **Astrometrics:**

Seven entered the lab, expecting it to be empty. Instead she was surprised to find Commander Tuvok on his knees on the raised section. His hands crossed in a meditation stance, a Vulcan candle sitting in front of him.

"Commander? Am I disturbing you?" she asked neutrally to hide her surprise.

"No," Tuvok replied, despite his answer he separated his hands and began to rise to his feet.

"Has the Astrometrics Lab been reassigned for recreational use?" Seven questioned.

Tuvok collected his candle before making his way back to floor level. He wondered if the drone was trying her hand at humour, or if it were an actual question. Nevertheless he thought she deserved an answer. "I come here to meditate. Needless to say, the view from my quarters has been less than stellar lately."

"Astronomical phenomena help you to focus your mind," Seven barked.

Tuvok arrived by her side, "yes. I imagine that each star represents a single thought."

Seven's attention floated up to the images he had on the big screen. "Meditation, it rejuvenates you?"

Tuvok nodded, "it does."

She turned to him with a stern look of seriousness on her face, her arms folded behind her back. "I suggest you try Borg regeneration. It's much more efficient. A simple cortical implant would be required."

Now he was convinced she was trying out humour. At least he hoped that was the case. "Another time, perhaps."

The console beside them beeped a few times to get their attention, and it did exactly that. Seven brought her fingers to the panel, an annoyed glint in her eye. "Curious. The signal from the probe has vanished."

"Has the probe gone out of our sensor range, a glitch perhaps?" Tuvok asked.

"No," Seven replied stubbornly. "The probe was programmed by myself to remain within the exact circumferential range to Voyager."

"Perhaps the interference ahead of us is far more dense than we've encountered so far," Tuvok suggested as he monitored another panel.

Seven briefly looked over her shoulder toward him, "perhaps. Our own sensors will be affected, grossly shortening our already limited view."

"It seems we will have to speed up Mr Paris' shuttle project," Tuvok said. His eyebrow briefly raised curiously, "even at this distance, the probe shouldn't disappear so quickly. We received no warnings of a deteriorating signal."

"Indeed," Seven agreed, she had thought the exact same thing.

"Recover the last data logs we received from it. If it isn't a mere communications range issue, the probe will have detected it," Tuvok ordered.

The view outside wasn't the only darkness Voyager had to deal with. Deep within its belly, one of its decks still remained abandoned, left to rot in its own debris.

Several figures crept down its mutilated corridors, each one armed with lit up phaser rifles.

Some repair equipment had been left behind, like they were dropped in a hurry. Some areas looked like they had been swept clear. What appeared to be a fresh new panel was hooked up to one of the few remaining walls, but clearly had no power running through it.

"No one's here. This should be easy."

The one leading them smiled, "something is. I can sense it."

The group continued to walk down the deck, gradually splitting up as they did. Any spot that didn't have a light shone towards it was pitch black. It clearly didn't daunt them though. At least until they heard a thud behind them. As soon as they swung around they also heard scraping and smaller bangs. They pointed their lights to see what was happening, but all they could see was debris and charred everything.

One of the group then realised they were a man down. As soon as he did a shadow briefly flickered by him. Seconds later he was gone following another loud thud.

"What is it?" the leader snarled. Every one of his group were on full guard, they each turned to cover every corner of the deck that they could, none of them could see anything. He swung around at another thud, then another. Before he could figure anything out or see something, he was alone. He smiled despite everything. "More of it for me then."

He stepped forward carefully to avoid making any noise. Not in a straight line either, he kept straying left and right randomly to hopefully throw off his attacker.

A crack behind him, like the sound of a heel crunching against thin metal. He swung around to point his weapon at it. Like the others, all he saw was a shadow dart away from the light from his rifle. Left it went, he thought. His body slowly turned to apprehend whatever it was. He looked forward to the praise he would get for killing this thing. Little did he know whatever it was, had sneaked up behind him.

Fortunately for him he sensed an incoming blow, the light breeze it generated gave whatever it was away. He swung around to block it, the rifle was immediately knocked hard from his hand. It was surprisingly strong enough to not only do that but twist his arm unnaturally as the weapon flew to the ground. It didn't bother him though, he swung his other arm to hit only air.

*It's fast and small, whatever it is,* he thought. Once he caught it, it would die easily.

Then his throat was grabbed with such force he couldn't breathe. He tried to resist; push it to one side, hit it but every attempt was deflected. He felt himself lift off the ground. The next thing he knew his whole body flew, it hit the ground hard.

He knew then he was the prey at this moment in time. He would return later, more prepared. He ran.

She had only been back for no more than ten minutes, and she had spent nine of them in their bedroom. Tom glanced over his shuttle schematics once more to pass the time. Inspiration struck him, so he quickly made a note of it. He almost missed his fiancée re-enter the room and head for the door without even a passing glance. He just caught the blur in the corner of his eye.

"B'Elanna?"

The door opened for her, she stopped in between them. He heard her lightly sigh.

"Have I done something to upset you?" Tom asked her gently.

B'Elanna turned on her heel to face him, though her gaze seemed far in the distance, the expression on her face unreadable. "No."

"Okay, so what's wrong?" Tom tried once more.

"Nothing," was the answer he knew was coming, but still upset him to hear.

"Then, how come everytime I try to talk to you, you either give me one word replies or biting comments?" Tom said.

B'Elanna didn't reply right away. "I'm sorry." When she did, he wondered why it took her so long to not answer him.

"I don't want an apology," Tom said, climbing from his chair to walk up to her. "I want an explanation. I know this void is affecting everyone, I feel it too, but now we have a project to keep us busy. Something you and I can work on together. All you can do is make fun of it. When Seven threw your idea into the trash and spat on it, I thought you'd care at least a little."

"It wasn't a big deal." B'Elanna's eyes seemed to flicker, finally a response of some kind that wasn't scorn. "I delivered the thruster specs on time, didn't I?"

"That's not the problem," Tom quickly said, his hands reached forward to gently clasp her shoulders. He peered deeply into her eyes, they seemed so much further away than he thought. "I feel like you're not really here, like you're trying not to take part or be noticed. I'm worried, I want to know what's going on."

B'Elanna reached up to take his hands, but not for the reasons he hoped. She lowered them back down in front of them both, finally looking into his eyes for the first time in months. They still seemed like a million lightyears away. "I have to go," she said and then she was gone, again, leaving Tom wondering what he was going to do. Once more, coming up blank.

A couple of crewmembers walked by, talking amongst themselves. B'Elanna watched them as discreetly as she could while she passed them. Her head turned over her shoulder, her pace slowed as they turned the corner. She was alone. She looked around another time to make sure. Then she headed for the nearby turbolift.

Her body tensed when it opened with somebody already in it. The woman didn't move. B'Elanna side stepped out of the way. The woman nodded and walked out. B'Elanna kept an eye on her as she did the previous pair. Once she was gone too she finally stepped into the turbolift.

"Deck Twelve," she ordered. The doors closed and the lift sprung to life.

It didn't take long for it to reach her destination. Slowly she stepped out of it, her head turning to scan the corridor. It was clear, so she hurried the rest of the way and down the corridor.

The sound of a light click, then approaching footsteps slowed her down considerably. Her arms raised to fold in front of her stomach as she walked at a normal speed. She was close to the corner, and with the footsteps she knew the person they came from was on the other side, going the opposite direction to her.

As expected, when she turned the corner she was forced to move to one side to avoid bumping into someone. To her disdain it was someone she knew. He moved as well to get out of her way, so they were in the same predicament.

"Sorry," James said, moving to the side once more. B'Elanna remained on the spot this time, allowing him to pass or in her view get rid of him quicker. Like with everyone else so far, she kept a close eye on him until he was gone. It was only then she noticed the large, heavy looking bag hanging off his shoulder.

It didn't matter, not to her. She was alone again. The Jeffries tube junction was ahead to her left. With no one around, she was free to make her way toward it and open the tube door. It didn't take her long to crawl through the small chute to get to the ladders. Once she reached them, she began to climb down.

The darkness was beginning to make his eyes burn, it was a struggle to keep them open. Chakotay could barely see ahead of him, what little light left a few shadows in one small corner of the room, that helped him distinguish where he was in it. One of them was in the shape of a person standing by the window. He focused on that, hoping his eyes would eventually adjust to give him some clarity.

"It's probably nothing. The probe may have slipped into a deeper stretch of water, so to speak. It could mean that there's something or someone nearby," Chakotay said.

"Distance?" was the half hearted question from the shadow.

"It'll take us slightly off course for an hour," Chakotay reluctantly answered.

"Alter course," Kathryn said tiredly. Her head turned slightly, "you're still here."

Chakotay stood his ground, it wasn't the first time she'd been blunt with him and it wouldn't be the last. "I thought that since Kiara is with Naomi for a few hours, that we could do something. Maybe a few rounds of Velocity to clear your mind."

"Is that slang or something?" Kathryn asked in a dismissive, almost flat tone. "God, you can't keep it in your pants for a few weeks, can you?" Despite her words, her voice wasn't as biting as it usually was when she spoke like this.

Even so, Chakotay felt his own voice go into a stammer before he even spoke, "that's not... the game, Kathryn. You used to play it all the time."

"Oh right. Yes, I haven't played since Boobzilla spat her dummy out. Everytime I think about it I get a whiff of whiny entitlement," Kathryn said.

"Well, I'm not a sore loser so... I'm not leaving until you join me," Chakotay said firmly.

"I'd say have a seat to help with the wait, but you being here is getting in the way of my staring at the window time," Kathryn muttered.

Chakotay stared at her blankly, his shoulders slumped. "But you're still doing it." He shook his head, that didn't matter. "Look, I'll be blunt. You've picked a really bad time to lock yourself in here. Voyager needs her Captain. Without you around to scold Tom or accent correct Seven, this ship feels somewhat dull."

Kathryn sighed but not out of impatience like he hoped, it felt like she did it to make her sound annoyed. She finally turned away from the window to look at him, side stepping slightly toward him too. "If you prefer, I can randomly call and insult him. It's not the same if I can't see his reaction." Chakotay's slight frown pushed her away, she paced her quarters in a semi circle. "I'm not sure I get it myself. It all started when we entered into this, what are we calling it?" she asked, once again facing him.

"The Void," Chakotay replied.

"Oh, Tom's Head, right," Kathryn said nonchalantly. Although her mood was obviously rock bottom, Chakotay felt a small smidgen of hope that she'd recover from it if she kept up her rude comments, even if she said it without feeling. "Strange as it sounds, I almost miss the times when something happened, at least it was a distraction. No time to think how we got into this mess."

"Kathryn?" Chakotay said with some confusion.

"How did we end up here, Chakotay? Tell me," Kathryn said with what he thought was a little venom.

Chakotay wasn't sure how to answer that. He wasn't even sure what she was asking. "There was no going around it, Astrometrics data didn't tell us about it either. We still don't know what this..."

"No!" Kathryn raised her voice, and yet it still had little feeling to it. "No," she said calmly this time.

"It didn't start when we entered Tom's Head though, did it?" Chakotay said, avoiding the question. "You've been on edge for over a year now. Maybe this place has been another trigger, but it's not the cause."

Kathryn shook her head. "No. The Delta Quadrant, how did we get stranded here, on a ship with a cursed deck that likes to explode. A deck that no engineer goes to without coming back nursing a scratch, swearing that he'd rather eat Neelix's food than go back. How did we end up in the Borg and 8472 war? Stranded in Borg Space in pieces. How? Answer me."

"You say no, but you've proven my point. It's pretty hard to ignore what happened when there's nothing but black outside. It's a reminder that on one part of your ship, it looks exactly like this," Chakotay said, gesturing to the window. "We're in the dark, literally. You like answers, we have none. I know how frustrating that is. It's something we can figure out, together, all of us. Staring at it will only let it swallow us."

"I made errors in judgement Chakotay," Kathryn's voice raised sharply it caught him off guard. "They were short sighted and selfish, and now all of us are paying for it." Her words left him speechless for the moment, he even held his breath for a while. "If you don't mind I'll pass on the game. If you want to shoot someone, I'm sure Seven is eager to prove herself."

"What happened on Deck Thirteen wasn't your..." Chakotay tried to interrupt.

Kathryn turned her back on him to return to the window. "I'll leave crew morale in your hands. If the crew ask for me, tell them their Captain sends her scathing regards."

Once more she retreated into the shadows. Chakotay had no idea how to tempt her out again. For now, he had to retreat and regroup.

Tuvok stepped out of the turbolift, he immediately felt a chill as he did so. At first glance, the Bridge seemed normal. He kept on until he reached the barriers behind the command chairs. Doing so he got his first clue to why the atmosphere felt so tense. Harry sat in the Captain's chair so rigidly upright, perfectly still, he didn't even turn his head to greet the Commander.

"Lieutenant," Tuvok thought to greet him first.

He got little more than a whimper from the man, he still didn't turn his head.

"Is there a problem?" Tuvok asked him.

"No," someone else replied from the Tactical station. Tuvok turned his attention toward her, eyebrow raised in curiosity. Jessie smiled forcefully, anger still brewed in her eyes. "No I fixed it. Not to worry." Another whimper from the Captain's chair got his attention. It also made whatever was holding Jessie back snap like a foot on a twig. "Oh my god Harry, I only told you to stop strangling that cat you call a musical instrument. Get a grip!"

"Cat?" Tuvok questioned.

Harry trembled as he looked up at the Vulcan, hoping he'd save him in some way. That was when the Commander noticed he had a rather large bump on his forehead. "She threw my clarinet at me."

"You were sitting on the bridge of a starship all on your own, in the middle of dangerous unknown territory, playing a glorified recorder," Jessie countered. "News flash, the Ode to My Love, Paris should never be played around people with ears."

The insult made Harry a tiny bit braver, still not enough to look in her direction though. "It's called Echoes of the Void."

"My mistake. Echoes of Paris' Brain," Jessie said. "Still, I know we've been in dull territory for two months, but am I the only one who thinks it's really stupid to have one person on the Bridge even then?"

Tuvok took a few steps closer to her, not too close so he was still further than arms length. "Commander Chakotay stipulated that there was no need for a full crew compliment, and that the journey through the void would give the crew a needed break."

"For two years?" Jessie stuttered. She pointed at the Lieutenant in the chair, he flinched as if she threw something instead. "I walked in on the guy sitting with his feet up, both hands on his stupid instrument, with his eyes closed." She paused as if expecting a comment, then remembered Tom wasn't there. "In a place where we can barely see *two feet* in front of our nose. What if some violent ship is lurking out there while Harry was on Bridge duty alone? I suppose he could open the channel and scare them away. A bit risky as it may convince them to fire faster instead."

"I didn't have my feet up," Harry argued meekly.

"It's not your job to question the orders of your superiors. Or to do noise control," Tuvok said. Harry shot him an offended look. "Anything else to report?"

"No sign of the probe, or anything for that matter," Harry answered. "You got a minute?"

Tuvok nodded, "too many, in fact."

Jessie rolled her eyes, "really. We pass the two years of nothing time by doing nothing. What could go wrong?"

Harry tried to ignore her, a lot easier now that the Chief of Security was in between them. "I finished my concerto. I'd like a second opinion who isn't homicidal."

"Shouldn't you be on the Holodeck now playing Captain Proton's *secretary*. You can make all the ear piercing noise you want there," Jessie muttered.

"Crewman Rex does have a point, petty insults aside," Tuvok said to Harry's disappointment. Jessie pulled a face at the use of her surname. "Perhaps treating the two year trek through the void as any other part of space, returning to a normal routine, may relinquish the sense of *boredom* shared amongst the crew."



"That's not what I said, but fine, I'll take the cred," Jessie commented with a half-hearted shrug. "I'm gonna assume the bridge was empty when I came in because everyone had already ran to Sickbay, with their ears bleeding. It's better than thinking that someone intentionally left a little mouse to guard a fortress during the night. I don't think I could feel any safer if our badass clarinetist took a nap or went for a twenty minute toilet break."

Harry's jaw dropped as he turned toward her, forgetting his fear for the moment. In the corner of his eye he thought he saw an amused look on Tuvok's face. Of course that was impossible. "Perhaps a minimal crew to monitor the helm and opps as well, that should suffice for the moment," Tuvok said.

Jessie nodded as she moved away from Tactical, Tuvok walked forward to take her place. Harry kept a close eye on her journey to his Opps station, waiting until she got there to summon up the courage to speak his mind. "You know, we have Tom making his stupid, almost sarcastic jokes at our expense. James for his more rude sarcastic comments about how much we fail at everything. We have Janeway to be rude about everything else. We really don't need a combination of all three, thank you very much."

Fortunately for him Jessie took his comment lightly, she smirked in his direction. "Oh I'm sorry, did I hurt your feelings?"

"Yes," Harry replied honestly, and as sternly as he could. "At first. We get it, you don't like my music, you think I'm incompetent. No need to keep bleating on about it. At first it was harsh and a little intimidating, but after ten variations of *haha your music is bad*, it's a little sad and attention seeking. Like I said, we already have Tom for that."

Tuvok thought it would be a good idea to stand between the two again. However he was only one man and there were two, perhaps three routes Jessie could use to get to the Lieutenant, depending on how determined she was. He wondered if he could reach Opps in time to avoid the issue. However he was a few metres away from Tactical when he realised it wasn't necessary. Jessie remained where she was, quietly seething. At least for now.

"Curious," Tuvok mumbled to himself, only getting Harry's attention. "The further we journey into this anomaly, the lower the crew morale is. Perhaps there is more to it than it appears."

"You kidding? Jessie's been a bitch for a while now," Harry muttered.

Jessie's eyebrows both twitched. Tuvok recognised it as a really bad sign. "Oh so now Tuvok's here, you grow a spine. Interesting," she hissed. "I may have gone a little far, I'll admit, but you're still avoiding the fact that a senior officer was solely in charge of 150 people's lives and he decided to finish a concertina or whatever instead. Great job, we all appreciate it. Frankly, you deserve all the ridicule you get."

"Proving the point," Harry muttered as he looked away, his courage already running out.

"Yes you are," Jessie sniped back.

Tuvok's Vulcan resolve was waring dangerously thin. "Mr Kim, as we are no closer to discovering the probe, perhaps you could assist Mr Paris and his volunteer team with the new shuttle. I can take over command."

"You're taking her side?" Harry stuttered, bemused to say the least.

"I do not take sides. With our current needs, it is the most logical method to curbing the tension. It is unproductive," Tuvok answered. "You showed that you were bored of the bridge and you are needed in both locations. Miss Rex however is better suited only here and has shown interest in working at this time."

Harry thought about arguing, but he knew he had no chance with both of them. Then he remembered why he offered to take up the Bridge in the first place. All he'd be doing is going from one unwinnable argument to another. At least Tom wouldn't hit him in the face with a piece of the hull he wanted painting red. "Fine," he mumbled. So he headed for the turbolift.

"Perhaps with no triggers, you could work on your temper and attitude," Tuvok suggested.

Jessie scowled for a moment. It wasn't helping so she ended up sighing tiredly, "fine, but admit it. You agreed with me, or you would've at least scolded me for the clarinet in his face part."

She swore his lips curl slightly when his eyebrow raised, his eyes at least seemed somewhat amused. "A commanding officer must be alert at all times, especially if he is minus a crew. His being unconscious wouldn't help the situation."

"Oh, we'll have to agree to disagree on that one," Jessie said through a butter-wouldn't-melt smile. "Besides I barely tapped him."

"Didn't you throw the instrument?" Tuvok asked carefully.

"Why bother? I'd have to walk over to him in the first place to grab it. It's quicker to conk him on the head then and there," Jessie replied.

Tuvok nodded reluctantly, "indeed."

The ship rocked beneath their feet, knocking them slightly off balance for a second. Their attention immediately flew to their closest stations. Before either of them could discover what was happening, the turbolift doors swept open and Harry burst out of them as if he had stolen Kathryn's coffee and she saw him do it.

"We've dropped out of warp," Jessie reported, struggling to keep her eyebrow down at his reappearance.

"I got it," Harry stuttered. He rushed straight for the barrier, opting to leap over it to get to the helm quicker. It didn't go exactly as he imagined. He landed in a heap on the other side.

"God, you can't be that desperate for something to do," Jessie groaned. She burst into giggles immediately after, prompting a groan from the vaulter.

The lights began to flicker off one by one, the hum of the engines dimmed.

"There's a power drain all over the ship. I dunno where it's coming from," Jessie said as Opps powered down as well.

Meanwhile in the Mess Hall, Neelix stood on top of a chair propped up near one of the windows. In his hands and over the top of his shoulder were huge, thick sheets of hideous material. One sheet of it he was busy attaching to a recently put up curtain pole.

The lights there began to do the same thing as the Bridge. The one nearest to him did so, so abruptly he gasped and jumped a foot or two. The chair wobbled, the new pole groaned as the half of the material attached to it was tugged harshly.

A lucky few were witnesses to the chair finally giving way, throwing the poor chef to the floor and the second curtain on his shoulder briefly into the air above him. The material dropped quickly dropped completely over the top of him. All of the lights snapped off a second later. The fate of the half put up curtain was unknown, the rest of the room hoped he kept a hold of it during the fall.

Kathryn sat down in one of her chairs, clasping a cup of coffee. Since there was only one light, and a very dim one at that, she didn't notice anything was wrong until the room was left in complete darkness. It chose the moment she brought the cup to her lips.

In the dark all that could be heard was a quiet slurp, followed by a contented sigh. This happened a couple more times with silence in between.

"You thought I was going to spill it, didn't you?" she muttered.

The chair groaned, footsteps gently tread across the carpet. When they stopped the silence was over. "Son of a bitch," Kathryn growled, her hand slamming against the obviously powerless replicator.

Flashlights barely touched the surface of the darkness, they were enough though to see into the panel Harry opened near the Science station. He scowled at the quiet sniggering coming from one of them.

"It doesn't seem to be a power overload this time," Harry reported as he worked. "I'll try tapping into the energy reserves."

"Won't they drain that?" Jessie asked, interrupting her laughter for the time being.

Harry looked back over his shoulder, then he turned to look over his other one towards Tuvok. "What exactly does Jessie do around here besides poke nonexistent holes into the plot with her fist?"

"I don't always use my fist. I prefer kicking," Jessie protested.

Tuvok thought it would be best to change the subject and quickly, he suspected Kathryn had a fourth wall sixth sense. "The power drain is not related to Deck Thirteen?"

"No sir," Harry sighed in response before turning back to the panel.

"Go ahead," Tuvok ordered with a nod.

Harry reached back into the panel to work on it.

Craig had no way of knowing which part of the ship he was at now. All he could do was grope the wall beside him and keep walking. He'd find someone with a light sooner than later.

No sooner had he thought that, he heard mumbling and rapid breathing in the distance. He froze, imagining all sorts of horrors that could be making that noise. Fighting his paranoia, Craig continued on, shaking horribly.

The wall curved slightly, so he knew he was at a corner. The noise he was hearing was getting louder. He could now hear an occasional footstep that wasn't his.

He finally got his wish. Someone with a flash light stumbled out of a room through a half open door. They shone the light in his direction. It not only illuminated him, it allowed him to see what was making all that noise.

Whatever it was, it was right in front of him. He screamed and ran off by the light holder, and back into the darkness.

Elsewhere Chakotay made his way slowly down a corridor, a flashlight attached to his wrist, the arm pointing in front of him. He already knew it was useless to try the panels lining the walls. They were little more than glass right now. So he kept going in the direction of the closest Jeffries Tube hatch.

He heard a man's scream echo down the corridor. It sounded like it came from above him, only a few metres away. The deck above him, he figured, instantly on his guard. The priority was no longer the Bridge, he needed to find a weapons locker.

The Jeffries Tube was still where he needed to go, that should be just ahead. Loud and hurried footsteps radiated from above, closing in on him. Something heavy clattered against metal, over and over, louder each time.

Chakotay was very careful about moving any further forward. He took a slow step, all while pointing the torch in the direction the sounds were coming from. Another step and he saw a shadow fly out in front of him. It slammed right into him, knocking it backwards onto the ground. It stunned him, but the shadow was left gasping for breath, clearly winded by their collision. He shone the torch on it.

"Craig?" he groaned, moving it away so to not blind the young man on the floor. He held his other hand out to help him up.

"Ow, Commander... are you made of stone?" Craig whined half way up.

Chakotay noticed while he held onto him that he was trembling. "What were you running from?"

Craig's eyes widened as if he had forgotten and the Commander's question reminded him. "A ghost."

"A ghost?" Chakotay said in monotone.

"Could've been a monst... alien," Craig stammered, more embarrassed than frightened now. "Yes, alien intruder. That was the first thing I said."

"Right," Chakotay said, deciding to humour him for the moment. "Where?"

"Near the Mess Hall I think," Craig replied. Chakotay gently grabbed his arm, pulling them both where the young man had come from. His trembling started up again. "No, no, you know where it is. I'm..."

"Security," Chakotay said patiently and with an amused smile. "I'm sure I can count on you to protect me."

"Oh," Craig whimpered. "I forgot," his voice lowered in defeat.

### **The Bridge:**

A couple of lights, including a few on the Opps station sprung to life. Harry's face also lit up, he leapt to his feet to hurry over to it. Tuvok and Jessie closely followed him until they reached the back. Tuvok split away from them to go to Tactical.

"What? No Hop, Skip, Fall In A Heap for us?" Jessie teased.

Harry's face flushed red a little, he cleared his throat instinctively. His voice started out a little higher than usual, showing his embarrassment further, "I found the cause of the power drain. It's a dampening field coming from something on our starboard bow."

"On screen," Tuvok ordered, hoping that whoever was responsible would be greatly lit up in the abyss they were in. Harry obeyed, killing that hope instantly. They saw what they always have in the last two months. Nothing. Whatever was there needed lighting up, an idea quickly came to mind. "Do we have the power to launch a photon torpedo?"

"Perhaps one, why? We can't even see them," Harry questioned.

"I do not intend to fire on the cause. I intend to shed some light on our predicament," Tuvok answered. "If I reconfigure the torpedo to emit a poly-luminous burst..."

"It's so dark, it'll light them up," Jessie said.

"Precisely," Tuvok said.

### **Deck Two:**

The double team of Chakotay armed with a flashlight and Craig shuffling his feet along the floor as slowly as possible, reached the spot Craig had fled from earlier.

"Nothing's here, let's go," he stuttered. Chakotay grabbed his arm before he could turn around and run off.

The pair heard the same noises further ahead. They were approaching. Chakotay pointed his arm straight ahead. To both of their surprise the light caught a large, moving object much closer to them than they thought. It was right in their faces, waving about erratically, moaning at them.

Chakotay was a little shocked at the abrupt sighting of whatever it was. A few seconds of staring allowed him to see the less scary details. The object seemed to be made entirely out of an ugly maroon and gold patterned fabric. Some parts of it looked hollow underneath, flapping around as the object moved.

It also smelled a little like Leola Root stew.

"See, it's a ghost," Craig stuttered as he struggled to get out of the hold on him.

Chakotay rolled his eyes, "it's Neelix," he said also in monotone.

"Commander?" Neelix's muffled voice whimpered, they could barely make it out.

Chakotay reached forward to help him out, only for a flash of light to fly passed him and Craig, then strike the flailing figure. They heard the telltale sound of a phaser shot. He blinked rapidly in disbelief as the walking curtain fell to the floor.

Somebody else approached them from behind, they stopped beside Craig. He noticed the phaser rifle sitting in the fold of her arm.

"Intrude on my ship, shame on me. Intrude on my coffee time, shame on it," Kathryn spat.

Chakotay wasn't surprised at all now. He slowly turned around to face her, "Kathryn, that wasn't an intruder. That was Neelix."

In the poor light he could still make out the harsh, judgmental stare the Captain was sending his way. "Look, I know Neelix wears clothes that look like he's tore up his carpet, but that's just offensive. I'm putting you on discrimination report."

"We have that? You should have hundreds," Chakotay stammered.

"She'd only file them to herself, so what's the point?" Craig whispered.

To his horror and surprise she slapped him across the back, it stung him quite a bit. "He's a clever boy, you should take notes."

A groan emanated from the floor. It sounded so much like Neelix, Craig felt a little embarrassed he didn't think it was him. He hurried forward to crouch down and help him.

"There are no intruders, at least not yet. It's probably another Deck Thirteen malfunction," Chakotay said. He knelt down to do the same.

Kathryn watched them with her death glare on full power, eyebrow twitching. They could still feel it in the dark, with their backs to her. "Oh, is that all? If you think no one will take advantage of us this time, after lucking out in Borg Space, you're as stupid as you look," she groaned, unaware of a shadow creeping toward her from behind.

"I was smart twenty seconds ago, and I didn't even say anything," Craig said with a slight pout. He and Chakotay helped sit the dazed curtain covered Neelix up.

The shadow crept even closer, Kathryn still completely unaware. "You guys think you're on some little holiday. News flash, you've got to keep your guard up."

The shadow revealed a misshapen hand, raising up above her shoulder. "You never know when some ugly tosser's gonna sneak up behind you and choke hold you."

The hand was almost on her when it stopped, its head blurred slightly. "We've got to watch each other's backs, so we're not surprised." A very quiet grunt came from the figure as it dropped out of sight. It got Kathryn's attention so she looked over her shoulder to see nothing wrong.

"We're wasting time arguing about it. Craig, you stay with Neelix," Chakotay said. The younger man gave him a timid nod. "We'd better get to the Bridge."

"Wrong again," Kathryn said. "We're going to Engineering. I gotta make a quick stop first." She squinted her eyes slightly. "Did you forget your uniform jacket?"

"Um, yes," Chakotay murmured.

Kathryn re-adjusted her hold on the rifle, all while gesturing her left hand at her unzipped jacket. "Good. Come with me. I always like giving the shippers some scraps to nibble on, or they'll starve." With that she hurried off in the direction she came.

Chakotay struggled to resist the smirk coming on. "If I said a fourth wall joke, I'd get a slap." He was about to get up when he noticed her trip over something on route, then heard her grumble some swear words.

"Oh, great time for a nap asshole," she snarled at whatever she tripped up over. Chakotay hurried to catch up with her, wondering what the hell she was talking about.

Craig nodded and returned his attention to Neelix. His eyes widened a few seconds later, then he looked toward the spot where she tripped. "Uhoh."

### **The Bridge:**

"Torpedo reconfigured," Tuvok reported as he worked. "Firing."

Everyone's eyes were on the viewscreen as the small blue light emerged from their side and drifted into the black. They waited for it to reveal the hull of a ship, when it didn't happen Harry and Jessie slowly turned their heads toward the Tactical officer.

"Well that was anti-climatic," Harry commented.

Tactical made a confirmation sound which was equally confusing to them both. Tuvok's eyebrow managed to go even higher up. It inspired Jessie to have another look at the viewscreen. She managed to catch the sight of the torpedo detonating against shields, both of which briefly illuminated the image of a ship.

Harry's station was next to make a noise, all while he joined Jessie in staring blankly at the screen. It took a few bleeps to make him snap out of it and turn his attention to Opps. "Someone's hailing us. We only have enough power for audio."

Tuvok's curiosity was further piqued. "Open a channel." He waited for a moment. "This is Lieutenant Commander Tuvok of the..."

*"Maybe watch where you're firing those things next time,"* Arturis' voice said, clearly rattled. Harry and Tuvok exchanged their own bemused stares. *"Now they'll have seen us..."*

"Who are they?" Tuvok questioned.

He kept his eye firmly on the same spot, waiting for any sign of movement. Neelix whimpered next to him, his breathing ragged. Craig's nerves were already on edge as it was, Neelix's sudden arm grab made him gasp squeakily as he leapt up almost into the ceiling.

"I can hear breathing," Neelix still managed to make it worse.

Craig could only hear his heart thumping from the recent shock, as well as Neelix now breathing in his ear. Neelix's grip tightened, most of it though was tugging on his sleeve than his arm.

"I can't," Craig told him, his other hand reaching up to try and bat it away.

"I may be Nothingphobic, but my ears are just fine," Neelix whispered.

Craig had no idea what that was, for a moment he was distracted from his fear. "A fear of nothing? If you hear breathing, then it's not nothing so cut it out," his voice turned into a squeak.

"No, no, it's a fear of the appearance of nothing, hiding whatever lurks within it," Neelix argued in a stutter.

"That's just common sense," another man's voice said nearby.

"It's a fear of the dark. Children are afraid of the dark," Craig snapped in Neelix's direction.

"You were so afraid of it, you thought I was a ghost. Besides, I didn't say that," Neelix said. The pair's eyes widened so much they tingled slightly, tears threatened to fall from them. "Neither did you."

Craig shook his head. They froze on the spot; Neelix clutching the curtain material in one arm, and Craig's arm with another. He on the other hand had inadvertently curled his legs up into a ball, and the hand used to slap Neelix's away remained there. It was a funny sight, a one the mystery voice's owner was more than amused to see when the lights gradually came back on.

On seeing him standing not far in front of them, they pulled away from each other.

"James, how long have you been there?" Craig tried to snap but stuttered instead.

"Long enough to know that Janeway thinks the crew ship her and Chuckles," James answered with a wry smile.

Neelix puffed out his cheeks in anger, "we thought we were in danger. It's very rude to keep us in suspense like that."

James looked over his shoulder first, then turned his entire body around. Doing so allowed them to see an alien figure lying on the floor behind him. "Seems like you were right."

### **The Bridge:**

*"Janeway to Bridge."*

Harry winced as if she were there on the Bridge with them, glaring at them.

Tuvok took the hit and tapped his commbadge, "Tuvok here, Captain. The dampening field has been blocked. We have detected three alien ships, one of which is attacking the others. Three intruders are on board, ten have already beamed off."

"Make that one," Harry said quietly.

Jessie sat at her station, watching as a barely lit ship flew passed their line of sight.

"Zero. The two ships have retreated," Harry said. "The remaining one is hailing again."

*"How the hell didn't we detect them before they chucked a dampening field around us? Which schmuck was snoozing on the job?"* Kathryn's voice hissed.

Harry shrunk into the seat he never used, his head and neck also began to lower into his shoulders.

"Don't be like that, he wasn't snoozing. He was creating musical art," Jessie pretended to defend him, with a malicious look in her eye.

*"Oh so Kimmy's to blame. I'm gonna stick that clarinet so far up his..."* Kathryn growled. Harry quickly cut her off in a blind panic, he knew he'd regret that later.

"Why?" he squeaked.

"Hmm, you're like Janeway, Tom and James combined, you Tom like attention seeking bitch," Jessie said, mimicking his mannerisms. "Stupid question."

Harry laughed nervously while side stepping towards the turbolift.

"Crewman, Lieutenant," Tuvok said, more as a reminder than a warning. It stopped Harry before he could disappear.

Jessie nodded, "I know." She tapped at her own station. "On screen."

The viewscreen changed to show Arturis sitting at the front of his Bridge. His companion nowhere in sight.

"You're Lieutenant Commander Tuvok of the Starship Voyager," he said kindly this time.

Tuvok's eyebrow raised, "yes. And you are?"

"My name is Arturis. It's a good thing I found you in time. Those beasts will prey on anything with a mechanical pulse," the alien captain answered.

"We didn't even see them coming," Harry said.

Jessie nodded, "if only they were hiding in Recorder Tunes for Dummies."

Harry decided to bite his tongue instead of rising to her bait this time.

"You wouldn't. Their power levels are kept to a bare minimum, their vessels painted black. Scavengers with no sense of moral judgement," Arturis said. "If I were you, I'd go around this anomaly. They won't stop until they own every inch of your ship."

"We cannot go around. We are already facing a two year journey going through it," Harry said.

Arturis face softened on cue to look sympathetic, however his eyes remained the same.

Tuvok studied him carefully before replying, "might I ask what you're doing here?"

"Engine trouble I'm afraid. This anomaly plays havoc with the emitters," Arturis replied with a warm smile. "Fortunately the scavengers dampening field has no effect on my power systems. It may have taken a little longer on impulse, but I was able to assist you before it was too late."

"Perhaps we can help you, to return the favour," Harry suggested.

"How kind," Arturis said in a plain tone of voice. Tuvok's eyebrow rose in caution. "But it isn't necessary. I can however help you with your journey."



"Explain," Tuvok said.

"If you have a two year journey ahead of you, am I right in assuming you are still using primitive faster than light travel?" Arturis questioned.

Harry couldn't help but let his hopes rise. He had a good feeling about this.

"That is correct," Tuvok however was feeling even more cautious than earlier.

"Ah well. My engines fold the fabric of space, allowing my vessel to travel much greater distances in a shorter time period," Arturis said. Harry was practically drooling by this point.

"Um, good for you, but how does that help us?" Jessie asked dryly.

Arturis wasn't put off by her tone at all, it actually made him slightly more cheerful. "Isn't it obvious? Come with me and I'll get you out of this anomaly within minutes."

"I shall discuss it with our Captain," Tuvok said before Harry could leap over to the viewscreen and squeeze it.

"Of course, I'm in no rush after all," Arturis said, nodding his head. His image disappeared from the screen.

"Was he really suggesting we jump onto his ship for a ride home? It's not like he could tow us," Harry said.

Jessie was partly expecting him to already be in the transporter room, so she felt a little surprise that he sounded suspicious. She glanced over and caught his eager beaver face and sparkling eyes, making her roll her own. "Go ahead, but he'll probably just drop you off outside where you'll be waiting for us for two years."

"That's true, we never told him where we were going," Harry's spirits were crushed.

"We should be cautious Lieutenant, Crewman. We cannot assume his words are genuine because he helped us," Tuvok said.

Harry's shoulders fell, "yeah, but it would be nice to have some good luck for once. We're way overdue."

Chakotay waited for a while, occasionally pointing a glance toward the door. Behind him Tuvok stood patiently with his arms crossed behind his back. A minute, he was told. He knew it was the Captain's more polite than usual way of telling him to leave her alone. It was better than the *piss off* he was used to hearing. Still, he thought he'd give her a chance. Thirty *a minute's* later was more than enough. The Commander looked over his shoulder, catching his Security Chief nodding as if in agreement in the corner of his eye.

"Energise," he said with a sigh. As soon as he did so, he quickly put on his diplomatic smile. Seconds later Arturis stood on the transporter pad with a diplomatic smile of his own. "Arturis, I'm Commander Chakotay. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, Commander," Arturis said as he stepped down to their level.

Chakotay gestured his arm toward the door, allowing their guest to go first. The trio left the transporter room in single file. Chakotay increased his pace to walk alongside Arturis, while Tuvok followed closely.

"Commander Tuvok has caught me up. I hope you understand why we're a little cautious," Chakotay said.

"Oh, too right Commander. I don't blame you," Arturis chuckled. "A few of my customers are wary at first, but I'm a lone pilot, merely offering my unique services to those in need."

Tuvok's eyebrows were once more piqued, "customers?"

Arturis made sure to look over his shoulder as he replied to him, "I'm what you consider a taxi service through this anomaly. When the anomaly appeared, it put a lot of people out as you can imagine. I thought my ship could be of help to them."

"Appeared? So it's a recent anomaly," Chakotay mused aloud, which got Arturis' focus back. "How much do you charge for your services?"

"The fee is optional. If some wish to pay me back in some fashion, they can, but I certainly do not demand it of them," Arturis said.

Chakotay glanced back at Tuvok, he quickly got the impression the other Commander was on the same wavelength. Something was off about this.

Before they could say anything Arturis seemed to sense their distrust, he doubled his smile. "I do not need payment. Every trip through this anomaly I learn something new about it. This trip for example I learned that folding space in certain pockets of this void gradually causes wear to the emitters."

"So what else do you know about it?" Chakotay questioned.

"A fellow scientist I assume," Arturis said a little too cheerfully. "The anomaly formed little over six months ago. I didn't see it, one visit to the area and things were normal, and the next it was there. A few systems were swallowed by it, one of which was the home of the scavengers who attacked you."

"I see," Chakotay said with a touch of sympathy. "Their world is gone. I can't say I blame them for resorting to desperate measures."

Arturis' friendly facade flinched for barely a second. Chakotay didn't spot it, Tuvok did and his eyebrow raised slightly higher. "Their home is not gone. Believe it or not, the stars and planetary objects still exist in this void. The anomaly isn't the void itself, the void is because of it. It is but small pockets of temporal instabilities scattered throughout the area. They block the light from travelling very far."

"You say they're small pockets, but they're big enough to completely block out light within a two thousand light year range?" Chakotay said dubiously.

"It also confuses sensor scans. You're fortunate the nature of space is mostly empty, as you would not detect a planetary object until you were within a few million kilometres," Arturis explained. They reached the turbolift. Arturis took that opportunity to change his position so he could face the both of them. "Don't worry, I don't abandon my customers outside the anomaly and go on my way. I'll need to know your final destination before I set in a course."

Chakotay laughed meekly, "I think even with your engines you'll be too put out. We also haven't decided..."

"Ohno, I'll happily drop you off wherever you need. All I ask for long distances is a small fee," Arturis said.

"Okay, how much does the Alpha Quadrant cost?" Chakotay asked.

Arturis' eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. He cleared his throat nervously, "no wonder you came this way. Hmm, it'd take roughly three of your months, so six in total." He thought about it while Tuvok called for the lift, and Chakotay tried to recover from the three months revelation. "All I ever ask for in long journeys is half of my fuel, basically what's used to get them to their destination."

Chakotay nodded. He knew there would be a catch sooner or later. Arturis carried on with a salesman smile on his face, "since this is such a unique situation, I'll only ask for a quarter. Half is far too much."

Tuvok thought it would be best to step in now as Chakotay's head stopped nodding, hope seemingly building in his eyes. "Am I correct in assuming that this service you provide is merely transport on your own ship, not a tow."

Arturis' demeanour took another hit, he looked a little disappointed to Chakotay at least. "Um, of course. Quantum slipstream technology is very delicate. We're talking about building a bridge over an ocean while you're still running on it. The stresses to a starship not built for this, I cannot imagine. Normally I'd let people store their ship in my bay, but your vessel is far too large."

"I see," Chakotay said. Although he expected that, he still felt a little disappointed as well. "I'm afraid we'll have to turn your kind offer down, Mr Arturis."

Arturis glanced between the two, as if panicked. "I don't understand. The Alpha Quadrant will take decades for you to reach. You'd prefer to continue that journey on this ship, than get home in months without it?"

"Well..." Chakotay tried to explain.

"Besides, didn't you say you'd need to discuss it with your Captain?" Arturis continued.

"I have a feeling she'll say the same thing, but not as politely," Chakotay said, mumbling the last part to himself.

Arturis nodded once, Chakotay thought he had understood and accepted it. "It's a shame," the alien spoke. "This vessel is already damaged by the elements, primitive in its technology. I understand the sentimentality, I do, but in sixty years this vessel will no doubt be a burden to you, if you survive at all. You may regret turning down my offer. I hope I'm wrong." He said it kindly, but it still didn't disguise his meaning. It left the Commander a little uneasy.

"It's not only sentimentality. Abandoning our technology here would be against the Prime Directive," Tuvok said.

"I wouldn't worry too much about that," Arturis said.

"Oh?" Chakotay was even more suspicious. "We only met because what you called scavengers attacked us. That's something to worry about."

Arturis simply laughed like it was nothing, "they are only interested in material. Your technology would be of no use, they'd only take food and perhaps fuel."

An image of Neelix's crops popped into Chakotay's head. He didn't have to imagine what would happen if these obviously desperate aliens scavenged Voyager if they were gone. His entire body shuddered in revulsion.

"I still need to fix the problem with my emitters, so please, take the time to think this through. Your people are far from home, this lone damaged ship isn't worth stranding them," Arturis pleaded with them.

The turbolift doors finally opened. Only it wasn't empty. Chakotay and even Tuvok winced at the person standing inside it. As soon as she laid eyes on their guest she marched out and reached to grab him. "You!" she hissed while doing so. Arturis only had time to briefly squeak before his shirt was pulled forward.

"Um, Kathryn," Chakotay said as calmly as he could.

Kathryn didn't even give him a side eye glance, her attention was solely on the man in her grasp. "How did you get back onto my ship you little drama queen?"

"Get back?" Tuvok questioned slowly.

"Please, I can explain," Arturis stammered.

Kathryn gave him a close up version of the skunk eye. Chakotay felt his own insides cower from his partial glimpse of it, he didn't want to think about Arturis'. "What *little* lie have you come up with this time? Oh, I found this ship in a cracker prize, I don't want it," she said with venom.

"Captain, you've met this individual before?" Tuvok asked. Even his usual calm and collect manner was wavering witnessing this.

His question forced her to redirect her stare toward him, which he regretted immediately. "Don't you remember? Neelix invited him aboard months back, claiming he was a walking universal translator and that he'd easily decrypt our message from Starfleet."

Chakotay turned slightly pale. "We might have done it ourselves but you banned us from talking about the H word ever again." Tuvok was very grateful for that as her stare went to him instead. "Why do I hate myself?" he muttered.

"I do not understand why you are angry at him then, unless your anger is to do with being reminded of the time loops," Tuvok said.

"Because he had no intention of helping us," Kathryn replied, turning back to Arturis, prompting another squeak. "Did you? You'd plant your little ship for us to find, hack the message to tell us to go to it. We think it's ours and blindly board it. Then what, tell the nice men."

"Ohno," Chakotay groaned into his hand. Meanwhile Kathryn roughly shook her captor a couple of times.

"How do you know this, Captain?" Tuvok asked.

"Yes, how indeed," Arturis said mid shake, so his voice wobbled.

"The same way she knew that terrorists would grab a hostage in Engineering. Interesting that Seven was in charge there at the time," Chakotay replied.

Kathryn's face softened for the moment, there was even a hint of a smile, "oh, I saw no reason to change that one."

Chakotay brought his hand to his face once more, "what? So why was B'Elanna seen trying on your maternity jackets during all of this?"

"It's not a crime to give Paris a scare now and then to keep him in line," Kathryn answered far too sweetly for his liking.

While their conversation was going on, Tuvok stepped forward to address Arturis. "Are you admitting to her accusations?" he asked.

"What? No, no. I'm questioning how she'd know of such a ridiculously untrue plan like that. I barely had a chance to say hello to her, how would she know?" Arturis stuttered.

Kathryn's head snapped in his direction as she growled. "Don't deny it. Why else would you be here?"

"Please, let me explain. You're not the only one who's been tricked," Arturis said, getting the other two men's interest. "We've both been manipulated by a third party. You've been fooled by bogus tips he's been feeding you for months."

Kathryn hesitated slightly, her grip loosened. He still wasn't in the clear, he felt it. "What kind of tips? And who?"

Arturis shook his head. "I don't know his name. He only referred to himself as the Boss, and I've never seen his face. All I know is he sent fake information to your database. He convinced me with similar

methods that you were a threat that needed to be confronted. He used my resulting plan against me; broadcasting it to you as another warning of things to come."

"Why?" Chakotay asked, summing up his many questions into one.

Arturis scoffed a little bitterly. "I assume so he can cause trouble while keeping his hands clean. I don't know what his final objective is, but I do know it involves your crew."

Kathryn roughly released her grip on him, not breaking her deadly gaze. "Convenient. If you were really on our side, you'd have told us this from the beginning. Clearly you haven't."

Arturis shook his head timidly, his hands raised up a little like he was surrendering. "Okay, I admit that my original visit here had malicious intent. You knew of it though, did you ever question how? Am I right in assuming that it wasn't the first time you knew of a threat in advance?" He noticed Kathryn's eyes glaze over briefly, it gave him his answer. "I didn't admit it because I wanted to right my wrongs, help you, but I knew you wouldn't let me if you found out. I apologise."

"It doesn't change anything," Chakotay pointed out before Kathryn said anything else. "I had my doubts about leaving Voyager behind. I was already debating the risks of leaving our entire crew at the mercy of a stranger."

Tuvok nodded. "The same thought occurred to me as well Commander."

"Would it help if I gave you proof?" Arturis questioned pitifully.

"I don't think so, no. I imagine most of the crew will feel the same way," Chakotay replied. "Thanks but no tha..."

Kathryn turned her attention to him, fortunately her features had become more neutral and slightly stiff when she did. "Don't assume anything. We can't speak on our people's behalf on this subject. Some may be okay with leaving Voyager behind so they can return to their families. We can't ignore them."

Both Chakotay and Tuvok were a little puzzled and surprised she said anything like that. They stared at her with similar blank stares. They irritated her slightly. "What, it's only a ship for god's sake. If he has proof that we can trust him, we should inform the crew of this choice," she spat at them. "I'll leave it in your capable hands." She didn't give them time to answer her, she stepped back into the turbolift and shut the doors with a panel tap.

"Well, um," Chakotay mumbled while he organised his jumbled thoughts.

Tuvok came to his rescue, "what proof do you have?"

Arturis seemed to be far more relaxed now that the Captain was gone. He managed a weak smile, "you won't have to come with me to get home. You may be able to do it yourself."

"You mean use slipstream ourselves? Didn't you hint that Voyager couldn't?" Chakotay questioned.

"Couldn't be simply towed. We won't know if it's capable until we try, now can we?" Arturis said.

Tuvok and Chakotay shared yet another wary glance with each other.

*Lieutenant Paris' Log, Stardate 0: Well it is. We were making some great progress in the construction of the Delta Flyer. Unfortunately news has quickly spread about the slipstream ship and so my team has almost halved over the last two days.*

*First Officer's Log, Supplemental: So far, our guest hasn't done anything that the Captain could consider backstabbing. Several teams are currently on the ship Arturis calls the Dauntless, running*

*tests on the core itself. While he is currently working with Engineering personnel to adapt the technology to ours.*

*News spreads fast on this ship though. It's been difficult trying to convince the crew not to get their hopes up just yet.*

*Daily Log, Seven of Nine. Stardate 52374.3: I've analysed the Quantum slipstream technology of the Dauntless. It's similar to the transwarp drive used by the Borg. As a result, my expertise will be crucial to the mission's success. Voyager's crew is counting on that success.*

*Captain's Log, Supplemental: After Arturis excus... explanation, I've re-read some of the information I discovered months back. I'm starting to have my doubts. Despite some of its accuracy over events like the weapon specialist being a giant manbaby and the radiation nebula only Seven was immune to because 'reasons', I'm struggling to believe that I'd go on an awaymission to steal the computer core back with Leonardo da Vinci. Or that some alien would swap lives with Tom. I mean, really? How did this writer manage to hold a pen on that much booze?*

*Also, what kind of idiot writer ends two lines with the same word? I bet it's the same moron who writes just every other sent...*

Seven walked down a corridor with her shoulders slightly tensed. Her eyes scanned her surroundings while the words of her own log replayed in her mind. *"I find myself ambivalent. So I am carrying out my assignment, nothing more."*

*If we do return to Sector 001, will I adapt to Human civilisation? A single Borg amongst billions of individuals.*

Kathryn growled ahead of her. Her hand hovered over the computer recording her log, she slammed her hand on it. *"What kind of stupid question is that? Of course not. I hope it was worth interrupting my log, you attention hogging crybaby."*

Neelix whimpered, his hands tightly squeezed the object she couldn't see. "But, I need new curtains. The first ones ripped during the blackout." He could still see her glaring at him in the darkness of her quarters. "I thought they were pretty," he whispered before running out to safety.

Kathryn sighed. *"Now, where was I? Oh yeah."* She pressed the computer once more. "If Arturis isn't going to be our antagonist this week, I'm sensing someone's going to be making up some forced drama that'll be forgotten by the next incident. My money's on Seven. She hasn't bitched about being the *only Borg* to get attention for a while."

She thought about what to close her log with, only to realise that her first fist slam didn't pause it. It annoyed for all but the ten seconds it took to replicate another cup of coffee.

### **The Dauntless Engine Room:**

Harry's chirpy grin spread across his face. He looked up, naively expecting to be greeted by some enthused faces. Instead all he got were the same two near frowning faces he'd be working with all afternoon. He wasn't going to let them affect his.

"That's it, we have our safety net," he announced to them. "Quantum field strength is below fifty percent, we're one step closer to home."

"Hmm," B'Elanna barely made a sound.

"Commander Tuvok wants us to run a metallurgical analysis of the bulkheads to look for anything unusual," Seven said.

Harry's smile almost lost its own structural integrity. He hung in there.

"You two do that. I should run some simulations in the Holodeck," B'Elanna said halfheartedly.

"Getting ahead of ourselves aren't we?" Harry teased.

"Of course not, that's your thing," B'Elanna muttered.

The smile started to crumble, "again? Seriously why are women turning on me lately? I really oughta change my cologne." He wandered off to another computer panel.

Seven's mechanical eyebrow raised slightly. It went even higher when she spotted B'Elanna rolling her eyes. "Another typical male response. It's never their fault," she grumbled to herself, although Seven managed to hear her.

"Lieutenant," Seven said to get her attention. She got little more than a narrow head turn. "You don't seem... eager to return to Earth."

B'Elanna didn't answer her immediately. Seven determined she was ignoring her as she had been doing to almost everybody lately. She was taken back when the Lieutenant finally did say something, "I wouldn't go that far."

Seven stared at her, deep in thought. "You were a member of the Marquis. Starfleet will no doubt punish you for your crimes. Yet, almost all of the crew are excited about this. I do not understand."

For some reason she didn't get, B'Elanna flinched at her words. "What about you? Are you interested in seeing Earth?" she said with no feeling.

"No," Seven answered.

"You were a member of the Borg. Starfleet will no doubt judge you based on that. I guess we'll have our fugitives posters side by side," B'Elanna said.

Seven's face turned a few shades paler, eyes widened more than usual.

B'Elanna stared at her, slightly surprised by her reaction, though she didn't show it. "Relax, I'm kidding. You're not the first ex-Borg in the Alpha Quadrant. The key is to not act like a robot, take a joke once in a while. If you act like a Borg, they'll treat you like one. Okay?"

Her words seemed to make the drone feel worse. B'Elanna sighed and walked away. Seven watched her do so, staring curiously at her right leg. After a few steps she noticed the engineer favoured it only slightly over the left. It was so subtle, no one else would've noticed it but her.

Harry passed by her carefully to avoid another biting attack. "I've received a message from Tom, he's been left alone on the Flyer project," he said towards Seven. "Apparently the blackout a few days ago caused a feedback loop in the emitter arrays."

B'Elanna stopped and looked over her shoulder, her face frowned slightly. Seven wondered why that of all things would get her attention.

"If you wish I could assist him. I'm sure you'd prefer to remain on this project," she said.

The suggestion brought his smile back. It also inspired another eye roll from B'Elanna, and encouraged her to continue walking away.

"That's thoughtful of you Seven, but that's okay. I'm a little familiar with the Flyer's systems, and your expertise should remain on the more important project," Harry said.

Seven nodded, a little disappointment flooded her face.

### **The Conference Room:**

Chakotay waited by the window, drumming his fingers against his leg. The sound of the door opening turned him around in time to see Tuvok join him.

"Commander, you wished to see me?" he said.

"I need your advice," Chakotay admitted.

Tuvok looked a little surprised, "a first."

"I know we usually keep out of each other's way, but I've always respected your opinion and judgement. Right now, I need to hear it," Chakotay said.

Tuvok nodded firmly. "Proceed."

Chakotay sighed, only realising at that moment how tense his shoulders were. "It's the Captain." They already began to ease, only slightly. "As you've noticed, she's isolated herself from the crew. Her temperament is getting worse, not better..."

"She believes that she made an error in judgement three years ago. That she's responsible for not only Voyager being stranded in the Delta Quadrant, but the recent hardships we have endured in the last two years," Tuvok said.

"She told you?" Chakotay blurted out in surprise.

Tuvok's expression didn't change at all. "No," he replied as he began to pace. "I've been observing her behaviour. Guilt has been her constant companion. Her temperament, as you called it, is her way of hiding it. As well as pushing anyone who can assist her away."

That part was news to Chakotay. It hit him hard in the chest. "I thought... I hate myself for it but I thought it was some sort of post-partum depression. She hasn't been the same since the birth."

"You could be partially correct. It happened to coincide with the events she blames herself for," Tuvok said.

A part of Chakotay wished he never asked. It was necessary though in order to help her. "You've known her longer than anyone here. Have you ever seen her like this?"

"Several times," Tuvok answered to his shock. "If a mission under her command went wrong, usually resulting in an injury or casualty, she would take it upon herself to complete the mission. At least twice she put herself in mortal peril."

"Seeking redemption," Chakotay muttered.

"Precisely. To Captain Janeway, failure is not an option. Her methods have been quoted as *insane* by the officers who've served under her. Her stubborn nature is her strength as a leader, but unfortunately it is also her greatest weakness," Tuvok said.

Chakotay couldn't agree more, it also made him far more concerned than he was before. "If she tries to do that again, I want to be ready. I'm going to need your support."

"I keep telling you," Harry pretty much shouted for the entire shuttle bay to hear. He carried a large piece of equipment into the new shuttle's cockpit, almost tripping over some abandoned tools a couple of times. "We'd be already on our way home with my plan. That's all there is to it."

Tom couldn't take his eyes off the new helm controls. A PADD in one hand, the other gently caressing the side of it. "You're so pretty, I might just live on you."

Harry abandoned the equipment on the closest chair to him. His face twisted into a disgusted grimace. "Uh, should I come back later?"



"Ah!" Tom stuttered in surprise. He quickly turned his chair around, blushing furiously. "I didn't hear you, Har. Bring the new emitter array?"

"Yeah, yeah. Does B'Elanna know you've dumped her for the younger women?" Harry teased him. "I was surprised when I walked in that I didn't see a shiny red thing with eight wings."

Tom sighed in disappointment, "if only. It's okay, she's sexy... er functional enough with a cool grey coat." He visibly and silently berated himself to Harry's amusement. "Let's get the emitter installed, pronto, so we can get you back to the latest hope killer."

"You're only calling it that because we won't need the Flyer when it's done," Harry said. He waited for Tom to climb out of the chair to inspect what he brought. "It is interesting that the only reason we ran into Arturis was because he had problem with his emitters too."

Tom looked at him brightly, "what a coincidence." His face shifted to a firm glare in a fraction of a second. "You're not having it."

Harry's smile turned a little cheeky, a twinkle appeared in his eye. "Please Tom. We've already repaired his." He was satisfied with Tom's eye roll response. "It's an easily avoidable problem, in theory."

"Harry, don't you think it's a little suspicious that we both have the same malfunction, for two different reasons," Tom said.

Harry's mood didn't change, at least his face didn't show it. "Our shields should protect them from any further damage. We could repay him with the specs, or..."

"It couldn't be because of the scavengers dampening field," Tom's voice rose, hoping he'd hear him. "The Dauntless is immune to that, apparently. The Flyer meanwhile has never been outside, let alone in slipstream."

"We could extend our shields around the Dauntless while in flight," Harry continued on as if he said nothing, talking over some of his words.

Tom smirked slightly as he picked up the precious part. "If you fancy giving me a couple of weeks rations, continue ignoring me."

"We'd have to be close, a few seconds behind him anyway," Harry said.

Tom nodded, "two weeks rations it is. He could plot his course around these time hole things, if that's the root of the problem."

Harry looked him in the eye, scowling slightly. "You sound just like B'Elanna."

"B'Elanna?" Tom said, suddenly worried.

"She shot down all of my suggestions. Seven didn't say anything, which is usually a sign that a plan doesn't suck or she would've criticised me too," Harry answered.

"How would following Arturis out of the anomaly once pay him back?" Tom asked. "We don't even know if it'll work anyhow, he's lied more times than Tuvok's raised his eyebrow."

Harry sighed irritably, "weren't you listening to me? We'd need to be directly behind him when he activates the drive. We'd be in his wake, pulled along with him. We don't need to build our own. In three months we could be home, or still building the damn thing. Which do you think is better?"

"This is what you told B'Elanna and Seven?" Tom asked in an unenthused voice.

"Yes, why is no one excited? This is huge," Harry stuttered in anger.

Tom sniggered at his impatience, "don't take it personally. Seven doesn't do excited, and B'Elanna..." His amused eyes mellowed out, his whole body slumped. "She's not herself. I'm worried about her."

"It feels like she doesn't care anymore," Harry agreed, his anger faded. "Maybe if she did..."

A thought clicked into Tom's head before his friend could finish. "Hang on. Have you tested this? I mean, Arturis is a known liar, but you've got proof these emitters are damaged for the reason he says, and he has a slipstream drive? You're not running tests assuming these variables are true, are you?"

Harry's scowl returned, "I'm not that naive and obsessed with home, Tom. I've been burned far too many times to take that chance. The slipstream exists, and the emitters powering matter conversion like replicators, fuel convertors, transporters were fried."

"Sooo, partly no and yes," Tom muttered.

"We're talking about folding space in an area that's blocking light for thousands of light years and has already ate our probe," Harry said. "I'm convinced enough that part of his story is true."

"You have tested your plan then?" Tom asked.

Harry's face fell, "no. I thought that maybe since I did you a favour, you could help me do that."

"Harry, I'm the only dude here building a shuttlecraft from scratch," Tom protested, his eyes widening.

"Yeah, but it's not like we're in a hurry for it anymore. And it looks almost done anyway," Harry argued with a wry smile.

Tom groaned and face palmed into both of his hands. "Of course it is, I'm just that good." He lifted his head back up, "that's not the point." Harry's smile grew until it was chirpy enough to be infectious. Tom struggled to resist. "Fine, but your emitter favour is in fact null and void since you've taken me away from installing it. You owe me."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll buy you a beer in my local when we get home," Harry said, resisting using a cheeky wink on him.

Tom could only groan once more.

### **Astrometrics:**

Seven glanced behind her as the doors opened. Kathryn walked through them, holding a mug in one hand and a bottle of what looked like talc powder in the other.

"This better be important. I was very busy," she hissed once she joined the ex-drone.

Seven stared at her curiously, "your daughter still needs her diapers changed?"

Kathryn directed a look of disgust her way. "No. It's nappies. What's the matter with you?" To Seven's dismay she started sprinkling the contents of the bottle into the mug. "I trained that out of her at the earliest opportunity. As soon as they can crawl, they can sit on a damn toilet."

"Then, what is that?" Seven asked.

Kathryn finished what she was doing without breaking her gaze. She shook her head to further show her disgust. "What the hell does my coffee powder got to do with babies and their toilet habits, you sick bit..."

"I thought..." Seven protested, still convinced the bottle was talc powder. The contents didn't look or smell like it. It still sparkled a little though. "Is that talc powder or only the bottle?"

Kathryn's glare eased slightly. "Waste not, want not."

Seven blinked a couple of times while the Captain sipped on her coffee. "I've decided that I will not be going with you to the Alpha Quadrant."

Silence followed for almost a minute. A loud slurp broke it. Kathryn sighed as her mug was now empty. She placed it to one side with a neutral look on her face for once. She used it to look at the ex-drone. "Okay."

There was no way she'd admit it, but the response dented Seven's pride a little. "Aren't you going to talk me out of it?"

Kathryn seemed genuinely puzzled, "no."

"But..." Seven said, actually sounding a little upset.

"Is that all?" Kathryn asked tiredly.

Seven grit her teeth for the time being. Kathryn began to walk away. "No," the drone replied, stopping her. "I've discovered something about the Dauntless."

Kathryn reluctantly walked back to her side. "Okay, what?"

"I used coherent neutrino beams to look for any suspicious activity or items as you requested," Seven said. She paused to type in a few commands on the computer. It brought up an image of Arturis' ship, zoomed in to the lower decks. Most of it was a hazy white, but the part she focused on seemed to be a large dark grey object.

"What is that?" Kathryn asked curiously.

"It's the exact size and density as our probe," Seven replied.

To her further surprise Kathryn smiled at the news. "Is that so? I can't wait to hear the excuse for this one."

### **Engineering:**

Excited chatter filled the room as the entire staff were all occupied working around the core. None of them noticed Arturis slowly walk toward an unused station while keeping a close eye on them.

His fingers were about to press against the console when a voice bellowed from the entrance. "Going somewhere?" He froze on the spot at the sound of Kathryn's voice.

A lot of Engineering stopped what they were doing and swivelled around to see what was going on. They caught sight of Kathryn marching toward them, Seven and two Security on her heels, with a deadly glare on her face. They knew better than to keep looking.

"Captain?" Arturis whimpered, trying badly to look like things were normal. He failed miserably. "Is there a problem?"

Kathryn stopped within a metre of him, with luckily the station he chose in between them. "What were you doing with our probe?"

Arturis' fear conflicted with a whiff of confusion. His face twisted, showing it. "What probe?"

Kathryn's eyes narrowed further, "don't you dare pull that crap again, you little toad. The probe we lost before we ran into you and your scavenger friends, why is it sitting in your cargo bay?"

"Honestly, I don't know what you're talking about," Arturis stuttered.

"I tried to tell myself; this idiot wouldn't dare try tricking us again. He must know we'd be on our guard, watching him. Did you think we wouldn't find it?" Kathryn said dangerously. "Let me guess. You

stole the probe so we wouldn't see the scavengers. Then you told them to attack us, so you could swoop in and pass yourself off as the hero."

"Please, I... stay calm," Arturis said as calmly as possible. "Your probe wouldn't have seen them coming either. I have no reason to take it. No one would. There's got to be another explanation."

"You can think of one for us while you're rotting in our brig," Kathryn said. She nodded back at the two Security officers. They gave her a wide berth as they walked over to confront Arturis.

"Wait. I didn't want to say anything before but I saw her..." Arturis said, pointing at Seven. She responded with an eyebrow raise. "Working on the transporter controls two days ago. It seems obvious that she stole the probe, then beamed it over to my ship to incriminate me."

"You are lying," Seven said plainly.

Arturis shook his head, "you hate her. She treats you horribly. You don't care about getting back home, so you'd do anything to sabotage Voyager. Were you responsible for the thirteenth deck too?"

"As true as that may be..." Kathryn said, prompting a bemused stare from Seven. "You had more to gain from the probe loss than her."

The two Security officers surrounded him. He quickly typed a few things before his arms were grabbed. He disappeared in a transporter beam.

Kathryn sighed. "Next time, bring the Security officers with names."

*"Bridge to Janeway,"* Chakotay's voice rang through her commbadge. *"The Dauntless is beaming people from Voyager."*

"Here's a thought. Raise the shields for once," Kathryn growled, before storming off.

### **The Bridge:**

Chakotay winced. He waited for the commlink to cut off before saying anything more. "Block his transporters, bring them back," he directed at the unknown at Opps.

"Uh, I can only do one at a time, and he's faster than..." they stuttered before they were rudely shoved to one side.

"On it," James said once he took his place.

"Scratch that," Kathryn hissed once she charged out of the turbolift. Seven followed her. Chakotay widened his eyes in surprise. "Beam that pissy Arturis back to Voyager, and into my Ready Room. I'll just replicate a bat."

Chakotay watched her go straight for her office. "How did you get here so quickly?"

"I can't. He's put up a forcefield around himself. It may take a while," James said.

Kathryn stopped as her doors opened. "Fine. Get the crew back first." She changed her route to the centre of the bridge. Chakotay instinctively took a step backward.

Kathryn noticed the helm looked a little empty. She tapped her commbadge. "Bridge to Paris. Get here, now!"

Chakotay rushed over to Opps, mainly to get out of Kathryn's arm range. "How are we doing?"

"He keeps changing transport spots, beaming people in groups. Sometimes I catch it in time and block it, when I don't I just beam them straight back," James replied.

Chakotay stood at the edge of Opps while the previous occupant hobbled out behind James. "I thought you of all people would be able to handle this."

James smirked in his direction, his hands kept tapping the station. "I can, it's just getting a little boring."

"So you're saying he's like, a load of rubbish?" Kathryn asked hopefully.

Chakotay was confused at first, then he knew where she was going with this. "No, you can't use the garbage pun."

"It's time for..." she said as the turbolift opened. Tom hurried out of it as if his life depended on it.

"No," Chakotay pleaded.

"Arturis to go on vacation," Kathryn improvised. Everyone groaned. Tom fake laughed as he took his place.

Chakotay shook his head, "James, I'll take over, you try to get through Arturis' forcefield. We'll be here all day otherwise."

James shrugged as he took a step to his left, "fine."

Chakotay immediately hurried to his previous spot and got to work. He worked furiously, his eyes widened slightly. "He's targeting the Bridge."

Kathryn turned her attention to Tactical. "Tuvok, give him some torpedoes."

Tuvok nodded and complied. At the same time both Seven and Kathryn disappeared in a transporter beam. "Dauntless has raised its shields," he reported.

Chakotay's face turned slightly pale, he looked toward James at the same time he looked at him. "It's all yours." He hurried away to go back to the centre of the Bridge.

"Commander. The Dauntless is powering up the slipstream drive," Tuvok reported.

"Set a pursuit course," Chakotay ordered.

Tom briefly laughed, "really? This wasn't what I meant by a test." Chakotay frowned into his back.

"Someone's trying to open the shuttle bay doors," James said to add to Chakotay's stress.

"Are you serious?" Chakotay groaned. "Stop them."

The floor shuddered slightly. James sighed, "I would, but there aren't any doors anymore."

Tom looked up from the helm, panicked slightly. He and several others saw the Dauntless on the viewscreen, glowing from its engines. Then a shuttle flew into view, right behind it. Tom recognised it, he died a little inside. "The Flyer."

"You've already finished it?" Jessie said in surprise.

The Dauntless shot off into the distance, disappearing within seconds. It wasn't the only one. The new shuttle went with it.

"Yey me, I'm just that good," Tom said, repeating his earlier words in a whimper.

Chakotay stood beside him, scowling down at him. "Am I talking to myself? Bring the warp core modifications online. Follow."

"It's only been three days. You're expecting us to believe we can modify the warp core to use slipstream in that time?" James stammered.

"Why not, we finished a shuttle in a few days as well," Jessie sighed.

"Guys, save the nitpicking for the bedroom," Tom said angrily. He knew he'd get punished for it later, but he was far too worried about his precious shuttle to care.

"Why the hell would we nitpick there? I would never have nits to pick," Jessie muttered.

James shrugged, "it's probably what he does in his bedroom so he assumes everyone does."

"Poor B'Elanna," Jessie said, shaking her head.

Chakotay tried to keep a straight face. "While we're waiting. Who's missing?"

"Captain Janeway, Seven of Nine..." Tuvok read from his station. His eyebrow raised higher than normal.

"What?" Chakotay said with worry.

The Dauntless shot through a blue tunnel, apparently unaware of the small shuttle directly behind them.

Aboard, B'Elanna sat in the front seat, staring in disgust at the strange helm controls Tom had fitted. "Oh whatever, at least he didn't put in the steering wheel and gearbox," she grunted.

"Do you understand? I'm telling you I'd prefer to remain here, in the void, than return to Earth," Seven said carefully.

"Duh!" Kathryn said in a fake deep voice. It echoed around the tiny cell they were trapped in. "I understand perfectly. B'Elanna's quiet and moody, Jessie's moody and anything but quiet, then there's me."

Seven frowned, as usual she had no idea what the Captain was saying.

"You don't do anything original do you? Gotta home in on other people's stories. You're a leech in sheep's clothing," Kathryn snarled.

Seven stared at her with her eyes wider. "No, mine happened before yours, especially Jessie's," she protested.

"Oh, go on, have your teenage tantrum," Kathryn smirked. She pitched her voice slightly higher to make it sound whiny, "wah, I'm running away. Why won't you pay attention to me, wah."

"That's not what this is at all," Seven said.

"Don't you think it's a little sexist that it's only the girls having these breakdowns? You could've taken one for the team," Kathryn said.

"It's not my fault you locked Paris up until Vis a Vis was over," Seven said irritably.

"And I'll do it again. I'm sure he has to have a sad episode every season. The boy is so one note," Kathryn said.

Irritability flashed in Seven's eyes. "You are changing the subject. Your attempt to assimilate me into your image has failed."

Kathryn burst into hysterical laughter. "Oh yes, because I slap on a skin tight bodysuit and walk around the ship pretending to be better than everyone."

Neither of them noticed Arturis had been on the other side of the forcefield for a while now, waiting for a chance to speak. He sighed, deciding to sit down until they were done.

"No, I don't recognise your values. Your desire to explore space is inefficient. Your need for familial connections is a weakness. Your infatuation with that one planet is irrational!" Seven spat.

"Wah, wah, wah! Why are you arguing with me? I don't care if you go back to the Borg. You deserve each other," Kathryn said with indifference.

Arturis looked up hopefully. "Oh, speaking of the Borg..."

"Admit it, you just want me to stop you. Beg you to stay," Kathryn continued.

"Of course not. I wouldn't expect you to care about anyone other than yourself and the coffee," Seven said.

Arturis whined at being interrupted once more. "You're both going to see them," he muttered.

"Oh how precious. You think that since I don't like you, I don't like anyone, because hating you is impossible," Kathryn chuckled. "Look, find someone else to imprint your mummy issues onto. I'm not interested."

"Irrelevant. I'll survive without Voyager," Seven said.

"Yes, because you're soooo perfect," Kathryn taunted her.

"Precisely!" Seven hissed.

"Revenge shall be mine," Arturis said mid whimper.

**THE END**