

Episode 1.16

Test of Time

Chakotay climbed as high as he could without getting unwanted attention. Just in case he crouched down slightly while he got a good look around. The hill he stood on surrounded the area before him. Down below looked like a tiny crater filled with light foliage, a few trees, rocks and a tiny stream trickling down almost opposite from where he was. The barely two metre square wide puddle at the bottom seemed to be the only source of water in this place.

He peered up to the top. All along the rim of this area stood a barbed fence, with an occasional scaffolding style watch tower. Each one manned with armed aliens keeping a close watch on the people inside the hole before them.

Not everyone imprisoned were his people. Other aliens seemed to have fallen into the same trap Voyager did. From here he counted two different species. Two other crews, both smaller than his even combined.

Chakotay headed down quietly, while wondering whether Voyager made it or not. He hoped so.

A few of the senior staff waited for him at the bottom. All of them curious. He shook his head. "They seem to have every nook and cranny covered. Eyes everywhere."

"They have not stated their purpose for imprisoning us. They may yet negotiate," Tuvok said.

Neelix looked up at the closest tower with worry. "None of them look very friendly. We'll be here a while."

"Hold off on dinner for now," Chakotay said quickly in a panic. Everyone else were grateful for it. "Tuvok's right. They showed no interest in Voyager herself. They must want something from us instead."

"We're not in any position to bargain. If they want something from us as a people, Voyager will be the one they bother. Not us," Neelix said.

"Think he'll see us here?" Jessie asked as she sat beneath a small tree. She offered a handful of purple grape looking fruits to the group. They all reached to take one or two.

James looked backwards towards Chakotay's group. Neelix started to pick what looked like weeds, Chakotay and Tuvok quickly restrained him. "I'm sure he won't forget us."

"Yeah, thanks for that," Craig shuddered, popping a grape into his mouth gingerly. Once he chewed he nodded and smiled, "not bad."

Morgan kept her eye on the tower nearby while eating hers. "If we could get close..."

"We'd need a distraction. There's no further cover at all on the way up," James said to her. He crept up to his feet to walk towards a nearby tree, using it as cover as he looked upwards.

Morgan huffed and rolled her eyes, "I know. I thought if Neelix offers up some dinner, we'll have one."

Craig got up as well to follow James. He tried to follow his stare direction, but looked up into the tree instead. "Let me, I used to climb them all the time back at my grandmum's house."

"What?" James frowned at him until he noticed where he was looking. "Wouldn't it save more time if you ran up the hill shouting *let me out*? Same result."

"Nuh uh. I'll show you," Craig scoffed and waved his hand in his own face casually. Before James could respond he went for the tree and started to climb.

With only Morgan, Jessie and Tani left behind, Tani made a point of staring at Jessie while she leaned over to her friend and whispered. "Laugh and pretend to avert your eye from her when I finish..."

Morgan burst into laughter for a good minute or so. Tani kept trying to finish her sentence but couldn't get a word in. Jessie stared at them both with a raised eyebrow. As sudden as she started, Morgan stopped and her face was completely straight. "You're welcome," she said.

"Yeah, *thanks!*" Tani grunted. Her eye hovered back to Jessie as she laughed quietly to herself.

The awkward silence that followed didn't last more than five minutes, as another more argumentative group joined them and made themselves at home around the lack of a campfire.

"Nuh uh, Pokémon can be cute and badass. Digimon are uggo's," Kiara said.

Naomi rolled her eyes, "overrated pap. Better stories, better games. I'm right. So there."

"What's Digimon?" Jessie asked.

"I rest ma case," Kiara said. Naomi scoffed and folded her arms in a huff.

Triah chuckled nervously towards the rest of the group. "Sorry. Chakotay wanted me to keep the kids in a more sheltered, less open place but didn't want to lose his command point. I was trying to distract them with the cloud shape game. Got a little heated."

"It's all right. It's better than Tani pretending to say mean things about me, instead of you know, actually daring to say anything to my face," Jessie smiled sweetly.

Tani glared in her direction while her own best friend sniggered at her. "Maybe you should turn your hearing aid up. I said you dress like an old granny."

"Why didn't you just say that instead of what you did tell me?" Morgan asked.

"Morgan," Tani whined pathetically at her. She lowered her voice to a whisper, "I hadn't thought of it yet. You should be on my side."

"Why?" Morgan asked genuinely in an innocent voice. Tani pointed a look of utter betrayal at her. "You honestly think being a bitch to Jessie is gonna get James to declare his undying love for you and pull a ring out of his ass? Oh I know, next time I want some rations from mum I'm gonna tell her the coffee looks like crap and so I threw it out into space."

Kiara giggled first, "coffee crap."

Jessie struggled to keep a straight face at them both. "I... think your comparison is incy bit more um... risky, but thanks. I'm okay with letting her try to piss me off. It's fun."

"I dunno," Triah said, treading carefully. "All you're doing is proving the really bad stereotype that you can't leave girls alone with each other, or they'll start pulling hair. I bet the guys are getting along, we can't let them win."

Meanwhile James was staring at the tree, sniggering but trying to stop it by biting his lip. "How's the view?"

Craig glared down at him, "shut up. I'm fine." He wobbled a bit on the thin branch, his hug like grip on the base tightened. "Any ideas?" he asked meekly.

"Let go," James replied.

"No, I'll fall!" Craig snapped back.

James eyed the ground, then slowly looked up at where Craig was. He barely needed to lift his chin. Craig had not even reached six feet up, stalling on the first branch that could temporarily hold his weight. "Yeah...?"

"A serious idea would be super handy," Craig stuttered.

James shrugged and cringed, "oh serious? Then no. I thought you had done this before."

"Yeah, but these trees are a little bigger than what I'm used to," Craig said.

James looked down and slightly up again, his eyebrow raised higher than Craig had climbed. "You know climbing the Christmas tree doesn't count, right?"

"Stop making jokes for once and help me!" Craig cried.

"Oh I can't. I'm scared of heights. That's why I stopped growing before I got to six foot," James said.

Craig's face turned a bright red from trying to keep from losing his temper. "What did I just say? You're not funny."

"No but this is," James sniggered.

"You're a jerk," Craig huffed.

James shook his head, "thanks, I try. Let go of the damn branch and jump down."

"Why? I'm not stuck, I'm just... its boring as an adult," Craig stuttered.

"Ookay?" James' other eyebrow went up. "Then get down. I'm gonna go back to the women. They're the saner of us."

He had turned to walk away when he heard a clatter behind him, and a painful grunt. James smiled and partly rolled his eyes. "Never fails," he whispered.

Soon Craig was limping on his way to get by him. "Okay, but I call dibs on Morgan and Tani."

James stared at him with his face scrunching up in disgust. "Did you fall head first?"

Craig swung around with confused expression, "what do you mean?"

"If I have to explain why you sound like a big creep, then do us all a favour and test the aim of our prison guards," James answered.

"God, it was a joke. Are you the only one who can do that? What's the difference?" Craig huffed.

"I made fun of you for doing something stupid, and funny, to your face. You insulted the women, no underage girls, behind their back," James replied.

"Don't be so hard on him," Triah's voice said as she emerged from around a tree. "I hear Tom had him as his next protege before you stole him."

"Sis, don't say that like I'm some wannabe sidekick. I have a mind of my own," Craig whined.

Triah walked forward to ruffle his hair as if he were still a kid. "Aaaw, of course you do," she said mockingly, then she wiped the same hand on a few leaves close to her. "What do you put in that? Grease."

"Funny you should ask. I don't have any gel for my hair, so I used this brown slushy stuff to hold it steady," Craig said while trying to keep his face straight.

Triah narrowed her eyes at him for quite a while. She finally laughed and walked off, "yeah, I can see it." Once she was gone, Craig's hands crept up to check on his hair.

The lowering sun dipped behind a few clouds, casting most of the crater in the shade. The rest already were and the groups in it had huddled together for warmth.

Chakotay looked to the stars as he sat down in front of the fire. "I wonder if they made it," he said softly.

"We could be here a long time if they didn't," Tom said.

Tuvok glanced toward them with his hands still in a meditative hold and his eyes closed. "It will do little good to ponder on the fate of our comrades and Voyager. We must focus on our survival here, whilst keeping a close watch on our captors routine. Only then we can contemplate an escape plan."

"Way of ahead of you Mr Vulcan," Neelix said in between laboured breaths. He approached them carrying small tree branches. Doing so seemed to have tired him out, his face dripped with sweat. He groaned as he dropped down beside Tuvok, too closely for his liking. To make matters worse he started to take off his boots. The fire flickered, everyone thought it would go out at any second. "So far they change shifts when the star approaches the horizon. Of course like a lot of planets, the sun can set earlier or later by a matter of seconds or minutes. We'll have to see where it is tomorrow when they change shifts to get a good idea how it works here."

Most of his group had shuffled backwards as discreetly as possible, all while trying to close their nostrils. Neelix did not notice this at all, he merely wriggled his toes by the fire before it gave up and left them in the dark.

"That's if we live that long," Tom commented.

Meanwhile Voyager was a little busy with their own life and death situation to deal with its stricken crew.

"We are the Borg, existence as you know it is over..."

"Yes, yes that's still terrifying and true the twentieth time," Kathryn mumbled while yawning into her hand.

"You will be assi... hey don't sit their ignoring us!"

Kathryn pretended to look insulted, she gasped overdramatically. "I'm not, how dare you! I'm more slouching if anything."

The only other person on the bridge's face twitched a few times before replying. "Captain. We are not at our best. Perhaps you should not aggravate the Borg."

Kathryn snorted uncontrollably for one mere second, she held the rest of her laughter in by biting her lip. She looked up at the woman behind her. "I'll do what I want. If they want to assimilate a couple of dweeb to get to me, instead of waiting for our rescue mission, then more fool them."

"What's a dweeb?" Seven asked.

"You will be assimilated."

"Yeah, yeah," Kathryn waved them off.

The Doctor hurried onto the Bridge, for some reason wearing a command red uniform. "Captain. I have a suggestion."

Kathryn stood up just so he could see her clearly as she laughed at him. "Oh, keep dreaming. It'll be a cold episode in a rotten season before I let you take command of my ship. Go photonic cannon off."

"I er... wasn't..." the Doctor stammered nervously. Seven looked on in actual sympathy. "It's okay. You're angry that your daughters are missing. I won't take it personally."

"Resistance is futile."

"God. It's always something. Maybe I just want to be rude, ever thought of that?" Kathryn snapped.

"Why do they keep mispronouncing that?" Seven wondered quietly.

Not quietly enough, Kathryn grumbled something incoherent. At first. The next sentence she directed to the Borg ship on the screen. "I'll tell you what. You sod off until, um I dunno, next week, and I'll give you back Seven of Nine."

"What?" Seven said blankly.

"Unacceptable."

Kathryn shrugged with an indifferent look on her face, "worth a shot." She made her way over to the helm. "You know the routine."

"Evasive maneuvers?" the Doctor questioned.

"Rotate the bloody phaser frequencies," Kathryn snarled.

"Oh," the Doctor stuttered whilst dashing to Tactical. "Back to my suggestion..."

"Let me guess, the nanoprobe cannon? Seven, open your veins and point it that way," Kathryn groaned.

Seven knew not to take her seriously in this case, so she blanked her. The Doctor chose to ignore it as well. "I found footage from the Luau last week, I'm sure the Borg would be *pleasantly* surprised to see it."

"What?" Kathryn said in disgust.

That was a no, but the Doctor decided to open a channel anyway. He prepared a file send program. "One person would be disgusted to see this, so this should send the hive mind into a frenzy," he chuckled.

"No, we're still doing that stupid hula hoop and flower crap? God, I thought these programs die out after a season," Kathryn grunted.

"I'm sure something equally ridiculous and offensive will replace it soon enough," the Doctor commented. His finger tapped on send. His eyes widened in a panic. "Uhoh."

"Oh what now?" Kathryn groaned.

"I didn't just send it to the Borg," the Doctor replied sheepishly.

On cue the viewscreen changed from the Borg cube to a still picture of Neelix drooling, his eyes rolled up and worst of all, his crusty foot being massaged right up close to the camera. Toe nails were brown and curled, hair and spots were everywhere.

"Aaaaah. Retreat at once!"

"Aaaaah!" Kathryn screeched almost at the same time. She reached for the empty coffee cup she left on top of the helm and threw it at the viewscreen in a blind panic. It smashed on impact, the screen cracked and turned off. "Ugh, I don't want to imagine how they'll adapt to that."

Seven's eyebrow raised in good humour, "indeed."

"The Borg cube's retreating, they jumped straight into transwarp," the Doctor chuckled. "Can't say I blame them."

"I'm surprised they can still see where they're going. Resume course. We've..." Kathryn said.

"Um, you're at the helm," the Doctor reminded her.

Kathryn scowled over her shoulder, "yes, but someone posted a picture of Neelix's verruca raddled stubby toes. My poor eyes need time to recover."

"Understood," the Doctor replied meekly. He muttered under his breath, "you're welcome."

Some people had not yet fallen asleep when the large orange star made its reappearance. It felt like to most of the Voyager crew that it had been gone for only a few hours. It was difficult to know. Neelix was one of the few it didn't bother, as he looked towards the towers on the hills and watched the soldiers on duty swap over.

While Morgan volunteered to collect food from the trees, Jessie decided to walk down to inspect the only supply of water. Footsteps crunched behind her routinely, she swung around to confront them with her first raised.

"It's only me!" Craig panicked with his hands up.

"Oh," Jessie mumbled. "You should stay with the group."

"That's the thing. We really shouldn't be wandering around on our own. It's not like we're the only people here," Craig said meekly.

Jessie shrugged and continued on her way. "Yeah I guess. It's a good thing though that this puddle isn't enough for a bath or I'd be telling you where to go."

Craig cleared his throat uncomfortably. "A bath, yeah. That's too bad," he said awkwardly.

Jessie turned around again with her eyes narrowed. The sun wasn't the only thing making Craig sweat uncontrollably. She pointed her finger accusingly at him, "are you saying that I smell?"

"No, I wouldn't do tha..." Craig blurted out in a blind panic. What she said hit him, stalling it for now. "What, smell? No. I wasn't thinking anything like that."

"Good," Jessie said. Her eyes still squeezed mostly shut remained trained on him. "What were you thinking about then?"

His collar was starting to feel very tight, and clammy. Craig tugged it a little to get some much needed air. Another person approached the puddle just in time to smirk at his situation.

"Oh hey Jess," the new arrival called out. "Airing the new boy out before you try him on?"

"What?" Jessie whispered and frowned. Tom winked at her suggestively, which helped her understand immediately. She groaned in disgust, "girls and boys can hang out together without wanting to make

out. I know it's hard for you to believe, since no girls ever wanting to be around you is good proof of that..."

Tom hand waved her comments to one side, laughing all the while. "Yeah yeah, I know. Chill out. There's not enough water to go around as it is. Just be careful not to stamp on the boy's hopes, he's only young."

"Oh yeah. Cos in Tom's eyes, he's my friend so he's entitled to get some of that, huh?" Jessie hissed. "What's the matter Tom, can you only make friends with fellow twats like yourself?"

"Ookay, struck a nerve," Tom said in Craig's direction, with a forced smile.

Craig meanwhile visibly winced. "Yeah, so maybe you should stop picking at it."

"I'm sorry Jess, but I'm only calling it as I see it. James, Craig, even that counsellor dude..." Tom said.

The argument had left a nasty chill in the air. Craig couldn't help but shiver. He was thankful Jessie's vicious glare wasn't pointed anywhere near him. "Not all men are as sad as you. Piss off," she grunted and turned her back on them both. "You know what, screw this. I'd rather die of thirst." She stomped off, leaving them behind.

Craig sighed, partially in relief as that was over. The rest was pointed in Tom's direction as he still grinned like an idiot. Craig wondered if the heat was getting to his head. "Really?" he only said instead.

"It's okay," Tom smirked. "We've always had this back and forth. It's harmless. You've been hanging around with no fun James too long."

"I don't know, he's really blunt sometimes, but at least he doesn't go out of his way to harass girls for fun," Craig said.

The comment left Tom taken aback. He laughed it off. "Oh he'll get there. I assure you." He pointed towards the little water. "You were here first kid. I got ya back."

"I'm not the kid here, that's you," Craig said to surprise him further. He left the helmsman speechless for once.

When Craig returned to his group he found one member of it missing, and James standing to one side constantly looking over his shoulder.

"Uh, where's Jessie?" Craig had to ask.

The question caught James' attention first. He hurried over whilst looking back a few times. Craig instinctively took a step back, just in case.

"What happened out there? Jessie came back rambling about little boys, pests and prizes, at least I think she said prizes," James asked sharply.

"It wasn't me," Craig quickly defended himself. "Tom, he started teasing her about you and me being friends with her and..."

James groaned as he looked over his shoulder once more. "Tom. What a surprise."

"Am I missing something? What's so insulting about that?" Morgan asked while snacking on orange and tiny nuts. Triah quickly leaned forward to collect them before she ate the entire lot. Morgan's lip stuck out as the older woman added them to another small pile in the middle of the camp.

"Because you know, girls have germs and are icky. They stop being so when you want to make out with them," James said a little painfully, rolling his eyes in disgust afterwards.

"Eh?" Morgan was more confused with that explanation than without. She looked to her friend for help.

"Yeah it's not meant to make sense, that's his point," Tani said. She looked up, unsure of herself. "Right?"

James nodded. "Right. For some idiots, being friends with a girl who's not interested is a fate worse than death. It's the insecure little boys that rate their masculinity on this crap. Like it means anything."

Craig laughed nervously, he leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Maybe you're both overreacting here. It's Tom, he comments on everything."

"No," James said tiredly. "Jess and I have gotten this a lot growing up. It gets old very quickly."

"That's so dumb," Morgan commented.

"Yeah, you two are clearly not..." Tani said while doing kissing motions with both her hands. Everyone pointed similar raised eyebrow looks of disdain at her. "Though with her, it's not for a lack of trying."

Morgan shoved her to one side without even passing her a glance. She fell onto her side with a light thud and an *ooph*. "That's you. It's gross, stop it."

James looked away awkwardly, "yes, stop."

"Wait. You let her go off on her own?" Craig stuttered as the thought popped into his head. "I know let is a strong word for her but..."

"She's not far. She's fine," James said, looking over his shoulder again. Craig finally understood why he was doing it and relaxed a little. "Sorry," James said, turning his head back. "For a second I did think you were the one who caused this."

"Yeah I figured. I wasn't entirely innocent in this either," Craig mumbled as quietly as he could manage.

"She's always been a bit sensitive on this subject, I've noticed," Triah chimed in thoughtfully. "You said you both got it a lot growing up, but Jessie's more bothered about it than you. More to the story, or?"

Tani shuffled back into a sitting position and folded her arms over knees, pouting her lips furiously. Morgan noticed her expression, she restrained a laugh for the moment by shaking her head.

James meanwhile did laugh, but at Triah's comment. "You have no idea. In those days it was usually her telling me to calm down, and holding me back. She suffered mostly in silence, didn't believe in fighting back. It all built up over the years and... boom, Jessie won't take that same crap now."

Morgan stared at him, slack jawed in shock. She wasn't the only one. Craig's eyes nearly fell out, or so he felt as he slowly shook his head. Tani only shook hers and scoffed.

"Jessie, quiet and meek. I don't believe it," Morgan said just in time for Jessie to return to the group from behind James. Instead of being embarrassed, Morgan smiled and shrugged. "He's telling beefies about you."

Craig hid his laughter behind his hand, not very well either. "Porkies."

"Whatever," Morgan grunted.

"He's not," Jessie said begrudgingly. "I didn't have the guts then. Didn't dare do anything about anything. It wasn't until I was sixteen, I erm... what's the best word?" She looked to James for inspiration.

He looked at her, thinking about it. "Snapped. That's what you called it then."

"Yeah," Jessie laughed briefly, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "Snapped like a twig. Years of constant bullying will do that. Non stop since I was four, those first few days at school. Ignoring them never did a thing."

"To be fair, I didn't help matters," James smiled meekly.

"Oh I dunno. It was pretty relentless those two days before you started," Jessie said, cringing slightly.

Tani sighed huffily again, "wait, you saying you've known him since you were what, four?" The pair nodded their reply. "Aaw."

"Aaaw," Triah said in the opposite tone, like she was looking at cute puppies. They looked at her, Jessie with her eyes narrowed, and James' eyebrows both raised and his teeth clenched in an awkward grimace. "Not aaw, as in how romantic. I mean aaw, friends forever, how cute."

"Ugh," Tani rolled her eyes in disgust.

"I wouldn't call anything about our first meeting cute," James said reluctantly.

Snow had fallen heavily the night before. All of the children of Miss Turner's class had arrived in soaking wet boots and coats, their cheeks a rosy red from the biting cold and the running around outside. The young inexperienced teacher and her assistant had to spend ten minutes trying to calm the excitable lot down before they could even get their coats off and get them dry.

The assistant managed to spare the two seconds she needed to get the extra heater on. The old fashioned hot air blower would dry off the snow in no time, then it would have to be turned off until the next snowfall. Before she got the chance to do anything else, Miss Turner whispered in her ear and hurried out of the classroom.

No sooner had their teacher stepped out the door, twenty odd kids were running around screaming their heads off. The assistant tried frantically to calm them, way over her head. It was their third day at school ever, so their shy period was long over.

Only a couple of the children remained still at the desks. One boy looked on with his eyebrows high. He returned to his crayon scribbling until another two boys ran up to him and *helped* him finish it. The other kid, a girl with short black hair kept to herself by the window.

Miss Turner returned to the classroom with another child, a blond boy keeping his head down, trailing behind her. Using the file on her desk she banged on the blackboard to get the class's attention. All the kids rushed to their desks.

"Good morning 1TR," she greeted them.

"Good morning Miss Turner," the children said politely.

"I have another member of this class that you haven't met yet, I want you to be really nice to him," Miss Turner said. The classroom fell strangely silent, most of the children merely stared curiously. "His name is James Taylor. Say hello children."

The assistant looked on, worried that the silence was a bad omen for this new kid. Fortunately a few of them did say hello as if they were shy, which she knew they weren't, and a couple waved. She breathed a sigh of relief anyway.

"Where should we sit you then?" Miss Turner said down to the newcomer. She lead him over to the class, which he didn't look too keen about as she looked around to find him a suitable seat.

The classroom was a small one, with four medium sized desks enough to fit roughly six kids around each one. One of them had been taken over by only girls nearest to the front, while another with only

boys in the opposite corner. The third table closest to the door with a mixed gender ratio still looked split, with the girls bunched to the right of it so they were closer to the girls table, and the boys in the back corner of it keeping to themselves.

Only one table seemed like a good idea for this new shy boy, the teacher thought. The fourth and final table sat the lone raven haired girl she had several failed attempts at getting to mingle with the others. She thought perhaps another child seemingly like her would work better, so Miss Turner crouched down next to the new boy.

"Go and sit at that girl's table near the window. She's on her own so it would be nice if you could keep each other company," Miss Turner whispered. James looked at the girl, she was staring out the window looking very bored and lonely. He made his way quickly through the other tables and he carefully tried to pick a seat. Choosing not to startle her, he took a seat on the opposite side. She hadn't noticed since she was still staring out of the window.

For the first hour the class was encouraged to use all of the crayons, pencils and pens in the middle of each table to draw anything that came to mind. The new boy was still choosing which of them to use when a boy from a neighbouring table tugged on his sleeve, he looked over his shoulder.

"Hey Jamesy, can you give this to that girl?" he asked, pointing a piece of paper at James' table-mate. "She'll like it and I can't leave ma table."

"Um okay," he replied, taking the drawing from him.

"Ta," the boy chuckled for some reason. He turned back to talk to his friends.

James thought to look at the picture first. On it a hastily scribbled stick figured dog, a speech bubble popping out of it with only the word woof in it. He had nicely autographed his masterpiece. Another name was on there though. Trailing along the dog's back was the words 'Rexxie the dog' underlined three times in red.

He looked up, for a second he made eye contact with the shy girl sitting opposite him. She glanced down uncomfortably to continue what she was doing. Sniggering from the boys behind him at the same time and after made him look down at the picture again. He was still going to give it to her, as the boy asked, with some edits.

Once he was done he slid the piece of paper over to her. She took one look at it and promptly burst into giggles. He did as well, leaving the other boy dumbfounded as to what they were laughing at. All it took was a little scribbling over the Rexxie part with a felt tip of the same colour. The boy's autograph being the only name left next to a picture of a dog, looking like he was wearing a superhero cape, was enough to bring the two shy kids into a ten minute long gigglefest at the drawer's expense.

"Aaaw," Triah repeated, once again cueing further strange stares. "What's not cute about that?"

"Nothing. James overthinks it. He whines that he shouldn't have given it to me at all," Jessie chuckled, now sitting down against a tree with Craig and Morgan on either side of her.

Morgan was confused again, she looked at her frowning. "Why a dog? What's a dog? Rexxie?"

Jessie inhaled through her clenched teeth, her shoulders tensed up. "Rexxie, is my first and one of my last names combined. Rex is a *cute* name for a pet dog. They thought they were being funny."

James walked by them, looking for a place to sit down too. His choices were next to Tani, or with the kids. There really was no choice, he figured. He sat near the kids, Kiara gave him a polite smile for it. Morgan noticed it and checked to see if Tani would seethe with jealousy over even that. Luckily she didn't.

"I had no way of knowing if you'd still be upset at the pic. It was dumb, and that wasn't what I was commenting on," he said.

Jessie looked over with a mischievous glint in her eye. He couldn't help but feel worried. "No. You were talking about when we finally spoke to each other."

"Ohno. Are we really doing this?" James asked, groaning slightly.

Jessie tilted her head to one side, smiling sweetly. "You started it. You're welcome to tell this part."

"I dunno," James said. He noticed Kiara and Naomi watching him, both with the same puppy dog look on their faces. "Okay fine, but it's not that interesting. Boring actually."

Most of the kids had looked forward to break time more than they usually did. It was rare to get a chance to play in the snow. However in the few hours of class they had, all that was left of the white stuff was instead slushy and dark grey. The field nearby had been made off limits since it was still wet, with an odd few patches of white left over.

While a lot of the children made do with what they had, the new boy and the shy girl stood near the small park, also off limits due to the wet weather, leaning against the brick wall of the school.

Neither of them had dared to say anything to the other all morning. The girl looked on warily occasionally, while James tried to think of something to say that wasn't stupid or anything. In the end it was so awkward, he said the first thing that came to mind.

"So, er... is this place good?"

The girl jumped and she gave him a quick stare before she answered him. "No, it's boring, I hate everyone."

"Why?" he asked.

"They're all mean. The boys they call me ugly, laugh at me, pull my hair," she replied with a pout. She looked at him fearfully. "Pretend to be nice for a bit, then be mean later."

James didn't notice, all the things she listed brought his gaze down to the gravelled playground. He scraped his foot against a faded white line. "Oh," he could only muster up.

The girl thought about taking that opportunity to hurry away from him before he could turn on her, like the rest. First she looked around for another spot to hide in. Kids were everywhere though.

"You ever play Line Race?" James asked abruptly. Her eyes briefly widened, a frown formed on her face. "Where you follow cracks, and lines and stuff. Reach dead end, turn around and go another way. Pick a finish line, first to get there wins."

The girl didn't look so sure. "My sisters call it Maze Race. I always win."

James smiled, he fully expected her to not know it or be uninterested from her expression before. "It looked like fun. Do you want to?"

"You never played it?" the girl asked, puzzled he'd even bring it up.

"No," James replied, his eyes fell downwards but he kept his smile painted on. "Seen others play it though."

"The trees over there," the girl said, pointing to the opposite side of the playground. At the far edge, along the fence stood a row of trees. Her finger gestured to the closest one. "I go easy on you."

"Nah, that's no fun," James said, shaking his head.

"Okay," the girl said brightly, her guard seemingly lowered.

The two kids found a mark on the ground to start with, two different coloured lines going in the same direction that hadn't been repainted in years. She meekly said go and off they both ran, following the faint lines, hopping onto nearby cracks or other lines on route to the tree. The girl chose to avoid a group of kids nearby by leaping onto a crack by the fence and following it up. Her slight detour gave James the edge, and he reached the tree a few seconds before her.

"Hey," she huffed, puffing her cheeks out. "That's not fair. You cheated. I always win."

James tried to retrace his path in his head, worried that he had missed something after all the games he'd witnessed from his bedroom window. He couldn't think of anything. "Good you didn't go easy on me then, huh?"

The girl threw her hands on her hips. "I knew it, you're mean!"

There was a brief silent stare down between the two, merely a few seconds long, until they both broke down into uncontrollable giggles. Hers lingered a little longer than his, she tried to talk through the end of it, "you were called James, right?"

"Yeah," James nodded. "Still am. You?"

The girl scowled briefly, it looked so animated he figured she was faking it. "I'm Jessie. Where we started."

"What?" he said whilst she ran off, following the lines again. He quickly dashed after her. Halfway back he noticed her stop and look around frantically. From what he could see there were two paths she could take to get most of the way back, he wondered why she couldn't see them. James decided to look ahead and continue following his own, then he noticed what the possible problem was.

"Hey REXxie," one of five boys sneered at her from near the park. The others whistled at her, while the first boy bent over slightly and patted his leg. "Here girl, wanna a stroke, go for a walkies?" They all burst into laughter.

Jessie remained frozen on the spot. All of those lines James saw lead straight to these laughing boys, she wouldn't go until they did. It didn't matter anyway, they started to head over to her.

"I told you Harley, not to let her off her leash again," one boy scolded the one who was doing all the vocal taunting.

They started to circle her like vultures, James saw her entire frame flinch as she looked down at the ground.

"Well, it's not my fault she's butt ugly. Would you have her around all da time?" Harley sniggered, inspiring a few of the boys to laugh with him and at her.

Another boy pointed at her face, sneering, "nope, those buggy eyes make me wanna hurl. Her stupid black hair. So boring."

She hadn't moved an inch. Jessie stood, staring at the floor looking close to tears. Something the boys took great delight in. The sight of it annoyed James so much, he started running over without even thinking about it. One of the boys noticed his approach.

"Oh look, REXxie's got a boyfriend," he laughed. The other boys howled in response.

"A blind and dumb one. Better put him down," another sniggered, making it even worse.

"I dunno why I'm still doing this," Jessie said shakily. Her arms folded defensively around her knees.

James looked on sadly. "Yeah, they got the point. It's okay."

Triah glanced between them, forlorn at what she had heard so far. "I dunno how kids can be so crap to each other. So much for innocence of youth."

"I dunno how they swapped who was telling the story without us noticing," Craig commented.

The rest of the group that weren't James and Jessie did a double take, they thought about it as well with a confused look on their face.

"Oh yeah," Morgan piped up first. "I guess I was more into it than I thought. I did like it up until the crapheads appeared. James is still a big smart arse, I noticed. He hasn't changed."

James forced a smile on his face, "that was quite tame by my standards, even back then."

Tani pouted in his direction. "I wanna know what happened next. Violence?"

Morgan rolled her eyes, "eww, you're not gonna drool over this story are you? He was like four. You didn't exist."

James decided to ignore the question all together. "It was usually the same boys. Every day, the same routine. We'd be playing together, not bothering anyone and there they were, lingering across like a really bad smell."

"But why? I don't get it," Morgan said.

"Because they were braindead tossers," James said bitterly while his eyes fell to the ground in front of him.

Jessie glanced at him and sighed. "Because of my silly surname, my family, I was easy pickings, they had a bet to see who could make me cry first, they hated me, my looks really did make them ill. Take your pick. I never found out the actual reason."

"Your family?" Triah questioned.

"When you come to school with a mother who looks nothing like you, with a sister in tow that looks like neither, it tends to create ammo. Like I didn't have enough," Jessie sighed.

The school bell rang loudly across the entire building. Children fled out of it as if it were on fire, towards the parents waiting at the gates.

James though walked out slowly, glancing around gingerly. As soon as he clasped eyes on the gates, he hurried left towards a small inlet in the building. There, with his back against the furthest wall, he wouldn't be seen by anyone at the fence but still visible to everyone leaving through the main entrance.

The stream of kids gradually whittled down to a small few. A ten year old red headed girl with a fair complexion waited around by the steps. Her face lit up as Jessie emerged from the door to join her.

"Hey little sis," she greeted her loudly.

Jessie didn't look as pleased as her. "Ali," she whined, "I told you."

"Oh pish," the older girl laughed and waved her hand in her own face. "Those boys can kiss my bum. Come on." She reached down to hint for the smaller girl's hand.

Jessie reluctantly took it, then they headed off. At the last possible second Jessie spotted James in the inlet, so she dragged her sister that way instead.

"What, are those boys at the gate still? I told you, I'll sort them," Ali protested.

"James?" Jessie said, instantly getting James' attention. He looked immediately nervous on seeing her. "You said you were in a hurry. Your mum not here yet?"

He shook his head, "no."

Jessie looked a little puzzled. His eyes were darting about, he looked nervous about something. Apart from his first day a month or so ago, it wasn't like him at all. Though he never was eager to go home, she noticed. Which made his earlier rush to get out of the building itself even more confusing to her.

"Ahem," Ali hinted with a throat clear.

"Um, this is Alison. My big sister," Jessie said, getting the hint. "Ali, this is..."

"The infamous James, I know. It's about time I got to meet him," Ali teased her.

James barely looked up, he forced a smile on his face. "Hi."

"Hi. You know, your mum's not gonna find you in here," Alison said.

James flinched, both girls noticed but they didn't know what to make of it. "I'll... I'll check if she's here now, bye," he said before hurrying away towards the gates.

"Do I smell or...?" Alison said.

Jessie frowned as she looked up at her, "no, that was weird though. He's acting more like me."

Alison lead her back into the playground and to the gates. Jessie couldn't shake off the image of James as she did, it distracted her and so she didn't see the waiting bullies by the fence until they spoke.

"Oh Rexxie, say hi to your fake mum for us," Harley sneered.

"That's if she isn't already taking her back to the kennels," another boy said.

The other boys laughed in response. One turned up his nose and put on a posh voice, "ohno, take this scruffy little bag of bones away, all it does is pee on the carpet and cry a lot."

Jessie tried to look away, while blinking away the tears trying to come. Alison though glared back at them as Jessie walked faster, pulling her forward. The older girl badly wanted to say something, "hey, the only scruffy like pee stain around here is you lot."

The boys laughed harder while Jessie cringed and pulled her sister harder. "Oh Rexxie, so ugly no one wants to adopt her," they all sang together, clearly rehearsed.

"That's all you get. I heard their lovely song all the way down the street as they followed us. I..." Jessie's adult voice stammered through a frog in her throat. *"I couldn't take it anymore. My sister had to carry me home, I couldn't stop crying. Stupid. I pretended to have a bad stomach, didn't eat my tea, breakfast the next day to make it look true.*

"I didn't understand why they hated me so much. I was afraid that if I went to school the next day, I would end up blubbering in front of them. I didn't want them to see their bullying was working."

James waited by the park the next morning before first bell. He looked around at first curiously, later it was more out of concern. Finally paranoia. He remembered the previous day, he thought that his running off might have upset his only friend. He winced, silently berating himself for being stupid and rude.

The bell rang. If she was in class, he would keep his distance. He didn't want to be a pest. They always met at this place, every morning. If she wasn't there, she didn't want to see him. He walked into the school with his chin almost touching his chest.

Only she wasn't in class. He wondered why about it all morning. He noticed the boys constantly glancing over at him, sniggering and talking between themselves.

By afternoon break James found himself walking towards his usual spot. He knew Jessie wasn't going to suddenly show up, it was just a habit now. He wasn't there long when Alison and two girls her age approached him.

"Oh James, found you finally," Alison said. "Jessie's not feeling well today. I dunno when she'll be back."

James' face fell, "oh. Hope she gets better soon."

"Me too. Poor thing," Alison sighed.

One of her friends crouched down beside James which instantly made him uncomfortable. "You're almost doll like. Look at you. Baby blue, blonde, that face. I could put you on my shelf."

James' eyes widened as far as they could go, he side stepped away a few times.

"Wow, way to reach peak creepiness Jill," Alison muttered.

"What?" the same girl said whilst looking back and up over her shoulder.

The third girl laughed mockingly at her. "And that's before she talks."

"Speak for yourself Dawnie, you look like your mum drags you around by your lip," Jill hissed back.

"Maybe yours should start. Might shut you up," Dawn sniped back as a teacher approached them.

"Alison, detention remember," he warned.

Alison groaned, "oh come on. I only pushed one of them. How come they don't get punished!" She huffily followed the teacher around the corner.

"Yeah she can talk. At least I don't push four year olds around," Jill sniggered.

"No, you just plan to stuff them and put them next to your Barbies," Dawn mocked her.

James edged away even more. This time the girls noticed it. Jill scooted over a bit to follow him.

"Please, I'm too old for those things," Jill scoffed. Her eyes lit up and pointed to James, who was wondering when the bell would ring and save him. "Oh, do you want them? Maybe not the Barbies since you're a boy, but I got other stuff too. I'm sure my mum will make you some tea if you pop over."

"Okay, going way off topic now. Time for a break," James said rapidly. He climbed up just as quickly. "My turn to go food shopping. Be back later."

No one had time to wonder or ask what happened. He was long gone. Jessie bit her lip, showing her uncomfortableness. They all looked at her for answers.

"Yeah, don't look at me," she said forcefully.

"I know you weren't there, but surely he..." Craig said.

Jessie's face hardened in his direction, he almost melted on the spot. "I mean, you're not getting that story from me. Don't even bother. He's right, let's take a break."

Kiara shuddered and looked to Naomi. "Scawy story. That girl had Sevens on her shelf. Have nightmares tonight."

Naomi frowned at her. "Barbies."

"Where?" Kiara panicked, she ran over to her big sister and hid behind her.

Morgan snorted into laughter at Naomi's even more scrunched up face. "Good thing she isn't actually here," she sniggered. "I'm sure mum's having a great time right now."

Voyager:

"Full power!" Kathryn roared.

Seven flinched. Her fingers were almost like a blur as she worked. "I'm sorry Captain. I can't give it anymore. We really should redirect this power conduit to the..."

"Did I stutter? Full power or I'll use you as a battery," Kathryn snapped.

Seven did the redirect anyway, hoping she wouldn't notice, while still tapping away at the panel Kathryn was death glaring into submission. It whirred back to life and gave a little beep to say it was fine.

"Finally. Coffee, black," Kathryn's voice said from the next room. Seven looked over her shoulder with some bemusement, the Captain had been behind her a mere second ago.

A cup of coffee barely finished rematerialising when Kathryn snatched it away and started to chug it.

"Now may I transfer more power into the shield array?" Seven asked, even though she already was doing it.

"Coffee, black," Kathryn's voice said.

The Doctor shook his head whilst raising one finger, then a second with a grimace. Sure enough the words repeated another two times before Kathryn re-emerged from her Ready Room.

"Are the shields back to 100%?" Kathryn asked casually.

Seven's patience was beginning to strain. She was at least thankful she ignored the Captain before and so got a head start. "Almost Captain. We're at 80%, it should be more than sufficient to get us through the minefield."

Kathryn appeared to be okay with that report. Neither the Doctor or Seven let their guard down though, they knew better. The Captain meanwhile paced across the Bridge, keeping a firm stare on the cracked viewscreen. Strange grey rock formations in various different sizes floated in the distance, getting closer as Voyager drifted through them.

"Until we reach the part we didn't get to map yet, then we'll have to keep our eyes sharp. Two or three bumps and we'll back at square one. Any sign of the aliens who took the escape pods?" Kathryn asked.

The Doctor triple checked his readings at Tactical. "No Captain. Not yet. There is however an energy signature ahead, two kilometres long but narrow, it could be a trail. Or breadcrumbs."

"I have a feed to Astrometrics so we can completely map the mine field. However there is a high probable chance that we could end up in a vastly populated section, unable to leave without grazing a few of them," Seven said.

Kathryn nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. "Someone obviously doesn't want us visiting. Maybe they should have thought of that before they took my crew. We'll have to take it as it comes."

The Doctor smiled. "Perhaps this is a test of time and patience. We create our own pathway through this maze, and the aliens will see us as worthy of an audience."

Kathryn glanced over toward him, her brow furrowed. "You couldn't resist, could you?"

"Captain?" the Doctor stuttered.

"Don't act so innocent. You knew what you were doing with that test of time and pathways bit. I'm not daft. You're on fourth wall report," Kathryn said.

"Perhaps I should have gone on the escape pod after all," Seven mumbled to herself.

Kathryn sniped back, "what so everyone can hear your plot hole filled backstory again? Nice try. Now run along, those power relays won't realign themselves."

Seven sighed and headed for the turbolift.

"Captain. If this mine field is truly a means to keep people out of someone's territory, why would they kidnap an evacuating crew? If they hadn't, we wouldn't have come back after repairing our ship to rescue them," the Doctor said.

"Considering they ignored our distress call after that third mine, and went straight for the pods, I think it's safe to say this isn't about keeping people out. It's about getting people in," Kathryn said.

Tom returned to his group with an arm full of berries and what looked like nuts, to find Tuvok and another security officer pretending to talk, while watching one of the closer towers. Everyone else looked downbeat. Chakotay was the only one that noticed his return and seemed a little anxious to see him.

"Tom, you took your time," he said, sitting upright.

"Relax, Kiara and Morgan are fine. It just took a little longer to catch these bad boys than I thought," Tom said while carefully placing the food into a jacket laid out on the ground.

"Catch?" Chakotay said with a quizzical eyebrow raise.

"The bird things found it first," Tom said. His right eye blinked involuntarily as he grimaced. Typically the rest of the group were paying attention to him now, most of them were smirking. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Too bad. We could do with some entertainment," Chakotay laughed.

Tom faked laughed back, "yeah great. When I popped my head in to their group, it looked like they were telling life stories. I only overheard bits and pieces, like a new nickname for Jessie I don't think I have the courage to use."

Neelix's face brightened up, "oh that sounds like a great idea. Not the nickname I mean. I'd love to hear some stories. Anyone like to go first? Mr Vulcan?" Tuvok definitely heard him, his eyebrow moved only a smidgen, he pretended he didn't though.

Tom took the opportunity to get his in first. "Oh, I was quite thee stud in my prime. Men hated me..." Everyone groaned in response.

"No change there," Chakotay commented.

Tom ignored him, "but they wanted to be me. One day my popularity changed my life forever."

Seventeen year old Tom stood at the bar, waiting for his drinks, while batting off every swooning woman who approached him.

"Ladies please, I'm taken," he said. To prove it, he left with his three drinks which he handled expertly like a pro. He got to his table. There sat two women. As soon as he sat down, they draped themselves over each arm.

"My best friend and roommate suddenly arrived, sporting a look of such betrayal I'd never seen before."

"Oh," Tom grinned at him. "Don't look at me like that. Some men have got it, you don't."

The girls on his arms giggled at the callous comment, their eyes poked many holes at the pathetic boy standing in front of them, gaping in horror.

"But... we were double dating," the boy whined.

"Yeah well, can't blame her for wanting to ditch for the stud," Tom sniggered. He and the girls got up to leave, still all over each other as they did.

The roommate's expression turned to anger. He fumed as they walked by him laughing. The girls towered over the so called five foot nine stud in their needle thin heels, almost drooling over his stupid pretty boy looks and his in your face *charisma*.

"Er Tom," Chakotay's voice intruded. *"I thought this was meant to be you."*

"Oh sh..." Tom's stuttered.

Sure enough the seventeen year old walking away with the girls not hanging off his arm, but merely walking beside him, was a much shorter blonde man with a confident aura about him as he talked. The girls were not laughing at all. One even looked back with some disgust and even pity at the forlorn young Tom left holding the drinks on a tray, ready to cry at any second.

"No, that's not what happened!" Tom snapped in anger. His face a bright red.

The whole group except Tuvok were laughing so much a few were in tears.

"He was a midget. The biggest blue eyed freak ever, they didn't even look real. The idiot belonged in a Japanese RPG game with his stupid messy hair," Tom rambled even further. "Pretty little asshole stole my girl. Said I was too clingy and grubby, whatever that means. Me? He spent most of his time being nice to girls, befriending them and..."

"Ohno!" Chakotay pretended to gasp overdramatically.

"So he didn't even *steal* your date. He befriended her?" Neelix questioned.

Tom scoffed, "yeah, that's what he said happened. Always pretended to be one of the good ones, the feminist who understood the *crap* girls went through. Every guy I know hated him, the girls always fell for it."

Chakotay wiped away a couple of tears and breathed in to calm down. "Now we know why you have it in for James a lot. Sound familiar. Does he bring back some painful memories?"

"What?" Tom was confused at first. Then he exploded once more, turning even more red than before. "No! He was an annoying runt with an I'm better than you god complex." That was the cue for further laughter. "I'm not talking about James. My roommate stole my date, not him. Screw you guys!" He stomped off, leaving the group rolling around the ground laughing.

The break James spoke of lasted until the sun went down. Kiara and Naomi curled up beside Morgan, both a few feet away from a small fire. James hadn't said anything on returning to the group. He kept to himself, staring at his feet as he leaned against a tree, hidden in its shadow.

"It seems like you were picked on for being adopted and *ugly* more than you were given the *sitting in a tree kissing* treatment," Triah was whispering to Jessie.

Jessie raised her shoulders meekly, her face twisted a little. "I was, at first. James would say things back to them, it'd escalate, he'd react more and more."

"It was because he was sticking up for you? That's why?" Triah questioned.

"No. That just brought him to their attention," Jessie replied hesitantly. "Those jokes were more for him than me. It bothered him a lot. They thought he was weird for only wanting to be around a girl. He wanted nothing to do with other boys. He'd act so differently with them so they'd leave him alone."

Craig laughed quietly to himself. Still the girls heard him. "Oh, so that's why he's always so... abrupt?"

"You're worried he'll hear you, huh little bro?" Triah whispered with a cheeky curl in her lips. Craig shook his head timidly but he may as well have said yes.

Jessie lightly smiled at them both. "All boys are the same." They looked at her with puzzled eyes. "That's what he used to say. They act tough around their mates, pick on the girls they like, pretend to like sports even if they didn't, and talk crap to each other. I can't remember the word he used to call them."

"Boring," James replied from his hiding spot.

"Okay, so if James was the one who hated the Tom-esque couple crap, why was it you that snapped over it?" Morgan asked.

"That's, quite a long story," Jessie said, wincing a lot. Her gaze drifted over to James, she noticed his go to her as he shrugged. "How do I explain without...?"

"You probably can't. It's fine," James mumbled.

Jessie didn't agree, not fully. She thought it over, no matter how it ran in her head she figured he was right. She wasn't keen on the idea though. "Maybe the abridged version?" she asked him. He gave her a nod. "After this, you guys owe us a novel or two," she said with a forced smirk.

"Uhoh," Craig said despite his mouth barely opening. "Mine might be more of a novella."

"We'll see," this time Jessie's smile was genuine. Craig swallowed a lump in his throat. "Okay, so blah blah I was off school for a day or two, hiding from them. Right, I came back to school the next Monday."

Rain pounded against the window, the wind howled even through the thick glass. It was still before nine, but because of the bad weather the kids were ordered to come inside before the bell rang.

Miss Turner had not yet arrived. A lot of the class gossiped over what was the reason. The favourite one being blown away by her umbrella.

Alison decided to sneak into the classroom to keep guard of her sister. She told some of the kids on the way in that she was temping for Turner, which got their imaginations running wild again at where this teacher was.

"It's all Fisher's fault. He dragged me to detention before I could tell those two to leave him alone," Alison said with a huff. Jessie frowned toward her. "It's okay, those two tend to spend most of the time catfighting, chav style. They do this a lot. Jill probably wanted another kid on her side, Dawn too."

A couple of kids ran by behind Alison, heading straight for the blackboard. An obnoxious screech took over the room as one scraped a chalk across it as hard as he could. Alison swung around, "oy, get off those you little pipsqueaks!"

While she was distracted James shuffled in through the only door to the class, soaking wet from the rain outside. He passed the rail holding all the other children's coats, hats and scarves, and yet kept his on. Miss Turner arrived as well, she spotted him immediately. "Oh James, don't forget..." she said, pointing to the railing. James nodded, he started with his hat, then slowly removed his coat while watching her approach her desk.

"Good morning class. Lovely day, hmm?" Turner said with a dry smile. She got a few laughs from the children, but the majority looked disappointed. "It's okay. Five minutes till the bell. Okay, Alison?"

Alison chuckled nervously. "Okeydokey Miss."

James got to the table and sat down at the opposite side without saying a word. Jessie gave him a smile anyway, "hi James."

He acted like he hadn't even seen her. "Oh, hi," he said sheepishly, while keeping his head down.

"Are you okay?" Jessie asked.

Alison overheard and turned back to her sister. She noticed James first, grimacing as he dipped his chin down ever so slightly, twice. It would've been a nod if it were not for the thick scarf he was still wearing.

"Oops, you forgot something," Alison said with a smile. She reached out to only point at it, James shuffled his chair back an inch.

"No. Supposed to wear it," he said.

"But why?" Jessie asked.

"Mum told me to," James mumbled.

Alarm bells were ringing in both of their heads by now. "It's drenched, it's just going to make you sick," Alison said.

The bell rang, prompting Miss Turner to walk over and kick out the older girl. "Alison. Get to your class." James' appearance and his withdrawn demeanour got her attention. "Here, let me get that off for you. The heater will warm you up in no time."

"No," he said, withdrawing a note from his trouser pocket. "Mum told me to."

Turner frowned at the hastily scribbled piece of paper. It didn't take long to read and it only made her even more confused. "Bronchitis? That's not going to help at all," she said while reaching out to unravel the scarf.

She barely had time to touch it. James' eyes widened in a panic as he stumbled backwards out of chair. "No!" Turner still had a hold of it when he did it. His jump back left it hanging over his shoulder, leaving his neck bare, the bruises all across it there for everyone looking at him to see. His outburst had made it so the whole class was doing so.

"Holy crap," Morgan said in disgust. Her sharpened eyes floated over to James, still standing by the tree. He had his head turned to the left, a futile attempt to avoid everyone.

"Seconded," Craig grimaced.

Jessie shuffled around in her sitting position uncomfortably. "Holy crap pretty much sums it up. So anyway, we're in the nurses office..."

"Nuh uh, wait a mo," Morgan said impatiently toward her. Doing so she missed James turn his head slightly, shoulders tensing. "Who did it? The bullies, those weird girls?"

Jessie sighed, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "We're in the nurses office and everyone's butting in their nose to see what's happening. Alison and I were kicked out so they could treat him in peace. The teacher had a hell of a time getting us back to class. I tried to sneak away. I managed to see security officers come into the school when I was caught. The next day..."

"What?" Morgan yelled. Kiara was roused by it. Luckily she decided to roll over and keep her eyes closed. "You can't fast forward through this part. What happened?"

"Maybe she found out the next day. Try to calm down," Triah said softly.

"Everyone were gossiping. Alison said..." Jessie said.

Tani huffed before saying, "this is the abridged version, huh? Why bother mentioning poor James getting beaten up if you're gonna gloss over it?"

"I... some bits aren't necessary, and I wasn't there the whole time in the nurses office," Jessie said impatiently.

"Did you ever find out who did it? Maybe the kids will stop whinging once they know," Triah suggested.

"It doesn't actually matter to the story," Jessie said, shocking the rest of the group barring obviously James. He seemed a million miles away. "It got the attention of the class. It was ammo for our bullies and inspired future ones. Because of it James had to..." Her face turned pale from some unknown realisation. She looked over to James. "No, um... oh crap."

"It *does* actually matter to the story?" Craig said in an uneasy tone.

Morgan nodded, "yep. I bet it was those weirdo girls. They tried to grab him and put him on the shelf. Creeps."

"No way. Jessie said she was off another few days, those stupid boys probably ganged up on him going *oh where's your dog girlfriend* and..." Tani argued.

"Dad," James said without missing a beat.

"Don't be stupid, we haven't seen him yet," Craig scoffed and shook his head. Then he realised who said it. He wished for the ground to swallow him up.

The rest of the group stared at James in shock and disbelief. Jessie was only feeling the former, it made her even more uncomfortable, she could only stare towards the fire.

"Your dad?" Morgan whispered.

James slowly looked over to Jessie. "You should be good to go now," he said. Jessie didn't seem to agree. Her cheeks flexed, arms crossed defensively. She then shook her head. The camp fell into an uncomfortable silence for far too long.

All she could hear from the other side of the door were muffled voices and light clatters, like small objects falling to the floor. Jessie swore she heard her friend cry out. She didn't know what to do.

"I thought they dragged you back to class," Alison said.

Jessie jumped out of her skin. She hadn't heard her approach at all. "I want to help."

Alison nodded grimly. "I get that. You're going to get into trouble though, and that's my..." Movement caught her eye. Two girls laughing and joking approached from around the corner. As soon as Alison clasped her eyes on her two friends, rage took over and she charged over to them.

Neither girl seemed to notice her or care that she was, until Alison slapped the Jill girl with the back of her hand. Dawn gasped in horror.

"What the hell did you do? Huh? You sick freaks," Alison snapped at them both.

"Nothing, god!" Dawn protested.

Their argument was soon drowned out by shouting coming from the nurses office. James' shouting. Jessie started to shake horribly. His words were loud and clear. "No, he'll find out! Please don't! He'll kill me." It was then back to the muffled voices, only this time she was sure she heard crying.

"He, he who?" Alison mumbled.

"See?" Jill snapped at her. "I didn't do anything to that kid. He got all whiny and he left. I was glad!"

Dawn groaned in disgust, "you did all the whining, that's why he ran away. It's not our fault he ran into some guy on the way home."

Alison tried hard to bite her tongue but she couldn't, not with the sounds she heard from the nearby room. "I don't believe you. He mumbled something about you grabbing his arm, there were scratches on his arms and legs, more bruises."

Jill and Dawn shared a similar disgruntled look. Alison expected them to deny it, instead they turned on each other. "I told you he'd get out again!" Dawn snarled first.

"Yeah well, I told you to let him go the first time," Jill growled. "Can't stand whiny little boys."

"Hey!" Turner's assistant shouted at them from the opposite end of the corridor. She hurried over, first to collect Jessie by taking her hand. She let out a small squeak in protest. "Mr Fisher has been looking all over for you two. Report to the Head. Now."

"What?" the pair complained while Alison smirked. They glared at her. "You grassed us up," Jill growled.

"And I'd do it again. And again," Alison sniggered. She turned to the assistant. "I'll escort them. Please look after my sis."

Jessie wasn't too happy with her as the teacher lead her back the way she came. The moment they turned the corner, two men in Starfleet uniforms entered through the door leading to the foyer and entrance.

The two new arrivals talked quietly with a very concerned Miss Turner. One nurse and another teaching assistant were with James, his face bright red with tears still flowing. He'd fidget everytime the nurse tried to treat one of his many bruises. The assistant tried her best to comfort him.

Turner glanced over her shoulder for a second. "Where?" she asked.

"For now; the children's wing..." was all James heard from one officer. The other followed with something quietly. Whatever it was shocked the teacher.

"But what about his mother? Surely she..." Turner said.

"From what you told us, she tried to hide it," the second officer answered. Turner's shoulders slumped. "The boy will be protected. We have a team already at Taylor's place of work, he's probably being arrested as we speak. There's nothing more you can do."

James looked up in a blind panic. He jumped down from the bed. He was stopped by the nurse scooping him up, she struggled to keep a hold of him after that.

The last thing he remembered was the sorry face of Miss Turner directed toward him. Everything after was but a mere blur to him.

"Having fun out here?" Jessie asked as soon as she found James standing behind another tree. He didn't respond in anyway so she walked up to stand beside him. "We could've skipped over that *little* detail. If I had another break, I could've thought of a way to tell the rest without mentioning the whole adoption thing."

James shrugged, "doesn't matter, it's done now."

Jessie studied his face carefully, looking for any sign of what he was feeling right then. All she got was avoidance, and she knew that already. "I thought it would be simple. We were bullied for being friends, you kept sticking up for us, you weren't there for one and I snapped, been sensitive about it ever since. The end."

"But you miss one bit out and it unravels, yeah. We don't owe them anymore of the story though. I think they got the gist of it from what we told them already," James said.

"There's not much else to do. They owe us a few embarrassing tales after this," Jessie smiled. "Besides, until your bit it was strangely therapeutic."

James' eyebrow shot up as he looked at her, a hint of a smile started to form. "Oh? Well, the rest of my *bit* can be avoided. Go nuts."

"Really? Some of my story doesn't paint you in the best light," Jessie said, playfully nudging him with her elbow.

"Only some? Still plan on making some adjustments huh?" James said.

"Naturally," Jessie said with a slight nod. "I need to be more creative with it though. I don't think any of them will believe you being adopted by mum overnight, or the being dropped off by the Headmaster story. You didn't."

James laughed for a while, she scowled at him for it. "Yeah, fiction writing isn't one of your strengths. I thought I'd play along, but I couldn't help but..." he continued to laugh.

"Oh, shut up," Jessie hissed at him but it only made him laugh more. She huffed, and remained quiet until he stopped. "I don't need to tell that one anyway. It's after."

"True, but they're gonna wonder what happened to you after it happened. You know that right?" James said.

Jessie groaned, exhausted at the thought. "Yep. That'll open up a can of worms, and no thanks."

Only a few hours into the night, the prisoners had been woken up by a heavy but brief rain shower. Fortunately for some the trees nearby provided a little shelter. Chakotay's group and others nearby only had time to throw their jackets over their heads and wait it out.

It only lasted a few minutes. Those few minutes helped turn the dwindling puddle into a mini lake. A couple of people from each encampment took turns to hurry towards it to collect some much needed water before the sun rose and threatened to evaporate it back into a puddle.

James and Jessie's group were mostly feeling pretty sluggish by the time they sat down together to eat something with their newly acquired water. Morgan got little more of a sip of hers, deciding to let Kiara drink until her thirst was quenched, but she ran out first. She sat her *little sister* on her knee as she munched on a few berries, blissfully unaware of that fact.

She kept her and Naomi's minds off things by updating them on what they missed of the story, with Tani occasionally making comments against Jessie.

"Then what?" Kiara asked.

"We dunno. It was bedtime when we got there," Morgan whispered.

Kiara pouted. Naomi though waited patiently while staring expectantly toward James and Jessie.

"I don't get it. Why was James' daddy so mean?" Kiara asked.

Morgan shrugged, "some people are just pricks."

"Classy answer," Triah commented.

Morgan looked at her with her eyes a little wide and her mouth pointing down. "What? I doubt there's an actual reason for hurting your own kid. I mean yeah, some kids are annoying but I'd just tell them to shut the F up or something." She noticed James looking at her with his face scrunched up so much, she didn't know if he was struggling not to smirk or frown at her. "I'm not saying that's why."

"Morgan's right, with the first thing she said," Jessie said hesitantly. "James' dad was a violent piece of sh..." Triah cleared her throat, gesturing to the kids. "Er, and he doesn't deserve to have whatever sick reason he had voiced. What he did was messed up and he was arrested for it. End of."

"Was he? You never said that," Tani asked. She got confused when James nodded, but Jessie pulled an unsure face while trying to decide whether to nod or shake her head. "He was or he wasn't? Help."

"He was," both James and Jessie said mostly in unison. Jessie though continued talking afterwards, her anger rising with every few words, "but there wasn't enough evidence despite there being plenty, so he was never punished properly. Lucky a shuttle did him in a year later. Good riddance."

"Jess," James said softly, his eye cast away from everyone.

Jessie winced, she breathed out to calm herself down before glancing over to him. "Sorry. He was still your dad, I know. I'm sorry."

Morgan laughed in utter disbelief. "No evidence? Did they think those girls did it? That's ridiculous."

The mention of the girls seemed to make James flinch a little. Only Craig spotted it since he was the closest, everyone else were none of the wiser. He decided to keep that to himself, at least for now.

"Regardless, James couldn't go back home. They had to find him a new one. My mother, or rather my foster mother volunteered to take him," Jessie said. As she expected, she got a few looks of further disbelief. "It wasn't as simple as *oh can I have him, yeah sure*, but it's what happened. She heard about him from Alison and I, she felt sorry for him. They thought it would be easier for him to adjust if he could still be in the same town and school, instead of dragging him to some other area, country or planet for that matter."

"Makes sense," Craig said.

Tani agreed as well, her face seemed brighter for it. "Does this mean you two are brother and sister?" Morgan rolled her eyes, she saw that coming a mile off.

So did Jessie, she stared blankly at her. "No. Our relationship never changed, at least like that. It only lasted a few years anyway."

"Aaaw," Tani huffed and folded her arms.

Jessie shook her head. "They didn't foresee that the whole class had not only witnessed the classroom scene, but the boys who kept picking on us found it hilarious. They knew James was more likely to respond than me, so they targeted him more often. I always tried to avoid and ignore them, but he liked to talk and stuff back."

"And stuff?" Craig said.

James looked away to his left again. "Does it matter?"

"More of the boys started to join in. *Why are you playing with a girl? Shouldn't you be on a leash, REXXIE. Do you two hang out cos your parents hate you? FUGLY JESSIE. CRAZY JAMESY.* Calling him girly for hanging out, I was wussifying him apparently. Or *he's just being nice cos he wants to play kissy with you*," Jessie rambled on.

"Which lead to *why don't you want to kiss her, are you gay?*" James for some reason laughed to himself.

"Wow, clever insults," Morgan muttered.

"I know, but we were kids. And to be honest, REXXIE the dog and the ugly jokes still hurt a bit," Jessie said.

Morgan instantly felt bad, "I didn't mean that. I meant that ones like the crazy James and the gay for not making out with your best friend, I'd probably laugh in their faces, even as a kid. Looks like James did laugh, proving my point. The ones about your parents and stuff are nasty."

"Meh, I didn't laugh, at least not everytime. I used to respond with stuff like *that again, do you want me to be* or something stupid like that," James said awkwardly. It amused Tani and Morgan, but Craig and Triah reacted with differing cringes. "Yeah, but considering my dad tried to instill *feminine stuff is bad and gays are bad* crap on me, what I used to comeback with was pretty tame. Still not proud of it though."

"I think, what annoyed us both about it was that our friendship was nothing but a joke to them. Something weird to be ridiculed. They really thought that I was stringing him along or he was secretly plotting to jump me one day, after years of making me think he was nice. Which says a lot about their mentality really," Jessie said.

James nodded, "yeah." He briefly glanced toward their dwindling food and water supplies. That was when he noticed Morgan looking a little flustered and sweating a little. "We need more, be right back." No one had time to argue with him, he was gone.

"We thought we'd be free of it once we started Comprehensive School," Jessie said. She realised the younger members of the group didn't know what she was talking about. "It's a school for older kids, eleven to seventeen year olds basically. The majority of our class were going to the big school in the town centre. Mum was sending us elsewhere, where she sent my sisters. Unfortunately, being free of it didn't pan out."

Even though she was dressed in the same dull, mostly all black uniform the rest of the school were wearing, Jessie felt like she stuck out like a sore thumb.

The entire first year were ushered into the main assembly hall and canteen, which was only separated by an occasional pillar instead of a proper wall. They were to get to know each other until their form tutors arrived to divide them into classes.

All of the girls Jessie had seen so far still looked like little kids walking around in the baggy uniform they hadn't grown into yet. Socks pulled up to their knees if they were wearing skirts. Fresh faced, glowing hair tied into ponytails and pigtails, and flat chested. Jessie couldn't help but feel a little jealous. Over the previous summer holiday and Christmas break she had *grown up*, she preferred to call it over the real name. She looked and felt like a teenaged girl standing amongst them all. Her blouse felt too tight on her, her hair was already starting to feel thin and clammy despite the shower that morning. The only thing she had in common with these girls was that she was still petite, height wise.

At some point she lost James in the sea of kids. A teacher had stopped her while she followed him through a crowd, because like her, he thought she was an older student. Jessie absentmindedly tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear as she examined the hall. Apart from his bright blond hair, he wouldn't stand out in a crowd like this, unlike her. Still, she tried anyway.

Before she could, a couple of boys bumped into her first.

"Yikes, who invited the wicked witch of the north?" one sniggered. He elbowed his friend, "someone should have a warning sign in front of her face."

"Ouch, so ugly, my eyes hurt," his friend laughed too.

Jessie put her poker face on and walked around them. For all they knew, their words made little impact.

Probably annoyed that they thought they didn't, the second boy shouted after her, "yeah that's much better, thanks!" The two burst into malicious laughter.

Halfway through the crowd, Jessie thought she spotted James near a window, staring out of it with his back to her. She quickly tried to squeeze through any gap she could find. A hand came out of nowhere and slapped her across the bum, she jumped so much she fell into a poor girl she had been squeezing by.

By the time she turned around to see who did it, they were long gone. No one looked guilty, although she did hear a boy's laughter coming from somewhere.

The blond boy by the window was gone. Jessie had to start again. She decided to go to the window, the view was likely better there. No sooner had she gotten to it, she spotted him for definite. He stood on the steps outside, right in front of the entrance. Laughing at something in front of him. Jessie looked but she couldn't see anyone. He turned to go back into the school, saying something while putting his middle finger up at whatever was behind him.

Jessie hurried back to the hall entrance, hoping she'd catch him. This time she stayed by the windows, the thought of going back into that crowd scared her more than she liked. He arrived before she got there, luckily he seemed to see her and headed over.

"James. What were you doing?" she asked.

He spoke at the same time unintentionally, "where did you go, you okay?" He waited for her to answer first.

"Not really," she replied honestly, but she didn't feel up to explaining why. "What were you doing outside?"

"Nothing. Just getting fresh air, calmed me down," James replied. He had that look on his face that Jessie always noticed he had when he did something wrong. A playful glint in his eye, the not so subtle curl in his lips.

A boy pushed into the hall from the door to the left of James. He glared at him as he passed by, for some reason his uniform looked crumpled and he had some gravel in his cheek. He mouthed the F word and *you* as he did. James merely smiled at him, angering him further.

"James," Jessie scolded him.

James looked back at her innocently, which she thought was an even bigger give away than his first expression. He never looked genuinely innocent. "What? I kept my promise."

"Really?" Jessie said, not buying it.

"Really. I saw him, or rather heard him call some older kid a scrawny something or other, cu something. Went over very well," James sniggered.

Jessie still didn't believe him. "Did he really? Then why is he so mad at you?"

James shrugged with a look of indifference. In Jessie's point of view, it made him look even more guilty. "Beats me."

"So, you didn't have anything to do with this?" Jessie asked, eyebrow raising.

James smiled slyly, she knew he couldn't resist taking credit and that was the cracks starting to form. "It counts. I didn't touch him, promise's still unbroken. Maybe he should've kept his hands to himself."

Jessie wondered what he meant. Her mind jumped straight to the boy who slapped her conclusion, but that would mean the boy at the window couldn't have been James. He had many talents, but seeing through the back of his head wasn't one of them. She started to turn red in the cheeks, embarrassed that she got mixed up and for the slap.

James' face meanwhile had softened, he looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry."

"What for? You don't do things like that," Jessie mumbled, her hair once again falling into her face.

"No, I'm just sorry all of us are such creepy pricks," James said. "I really wanted to do something, but I wanted to keep my promise more. So I'm not much better."

"Thanks," Jessie said, which he frowned at. "But you can't keep defending me. All it did back at Shield is get you into trouble. Alison said this place is much stricter."

"Wait, what was the promise?" Tani's voice asked.

Jessie's adult voice sighed, "*I thought it was obvious. Not to get into trouble on the first day.*"

"*Why? You can't hold a man back. If he did that for me, I'd...*" Tani's voice sounded like it was drooling.

"*Gross Tan, nobody wants to know, you sicko,*" Morgan's voice complained.

"It didn't matter anyway," Jessie's voice said tiredly. "They'd pick on me for being so old and ugly, even when I tried my best not to look like that. Or they'd pick on him, and James would always... and I mean always, say or do something in retaliation. I didn't blame him, I guess. I wanted to have his confidence, I felt like such a coward compared to him. But, all it really did was draw attention to the strange not a couple being best friends."

Kids poured into the small dining hall. Some sat down straight away to tuck into their packed lunches. The rest wished they could do the same, as they joined the long queue for the replicators. James had reached the front and so he went to the free unit closest to the window. A few boys on a nearby table spotted him, they started to laugh and elbow each other.

"Oy Taylor. Has she put out yet?" one shouted to start it off.

James ignored him for the time being, so he could order his dinner without distraction.

"Duh, she's put out all sorts of hints. Have you seen all that makeup she slaps on?" one boy said to his friends, loud enough for him to hear. "James ain't wanting any of that."

James rolled his eyes as he collected his food. He walked away, and unfortunately he would have to pass their table.

"Yeah you're right. Has she taught you how to put mascara on yet, I bet you'd look much better with red slapper lipstick on," one boy taunted him.

"Keep dreaming," James muttered as he walked by.

The boy's friends laughed at him, he meanwhile turned beetroot red and jumped to his feet. "Hey, don't think you're so hot, you gay tosser!"

James acted as if he didn't hear him. He headed for a table not far away, which Jessie was already sitting at, wincing at the situation playing out. She was a little impressed James was seemingly ignoring them. He was about to sit down when the boy approached and tried to pull his arm back, while he was still putting his tray down. It was obvious to her he was trying to get him to drop it. It didn't work as he planned, James put it down without even batting an eye.

"What did you get today?" James asked casually.

Jessie though did blink, many times. She couldn't believe it. This wasn't like him. "Uh, I fancied fish and chips."

"Oh, wish I got that now," James said, putting on a fake sulk. He sat down while the boy still fumed behind him.

The rest of the boys approached as well, they surrounded him. Jessie tensed, her nerves were already dangerously high. James though acted as if they weren't even there.

"What's the matter Taylor? Have you finally found the blind and stupid boy of your dreams? Good for you, hope you left him alive afterwards," one boy laughed.

"Yeah, probably left him for dead in the hoffel somewhere," another sniggered.

"Shh, not in front of Jessie. She's still under the delusion that he'll grab her and snog her someday," the boy who tried to grab the tray said, while pointing a wink Jessie's way. She looked down before they noticed her flushing cheeks. It was too late they roared in laughter at her. "Ooooh, I told you!" he howled.

"Aaaw, poor girl. If James ain't interested, what hope does she have?" the first boy said with fake sympathy.

If Jessie was still looking straight ahead, she would've noticed James' patience beginning to crack under the strain. His eyebrow twitched, hands and jaw clenching.

The same boy walked around to Jessie's side. She instinctively moved a little to the right. "It's okay, sweetie. I'll give you a pity kiss. How 'bout it?"

She shook her head, mouthing no. Still he put his arm around her and laughed, his friends too.

James shot to his feet. The boys all readied themselves for something, anything. All he did though was walk over to Jessie's other side, then point somewhere else. "There's another table over there."

She nodded and collected her tray. She hurried off, the boy near her tried to follow with a smirk on his face. James blocked him at every turn, then he followed her after collecting his own dinner. The boys laughed to themselves, thinking they secured a victory for once.

As soon as they sat down Jessie had to ask, "what's... who are you, where's James?"

James sighed while finally picking up his fork so he could eat. "I got pulled into the Head's office today. They say one more thing and I'll be expelled." Jessie's jaw dropped. "Yeah, so I'll probably be out by the end of the day."

"I dunno, you managed there," Jessie said.

"Sure, but three more years of this? I've got more chance of growing another head than keeping my cool for three years," James said, downcast while poking his food with the fork.

"Worst case you'll end up at the other school up in the town," Jessie said to try and cheer him up. Though she hated the idea herself.

It didn't work though, James stared at her as if he had already been expelled. His head hung again. "The nearest school that'll take a troublemaker like me is half way down the country. They said the social services are considering relocating me to another family."

Jessie felt the blood drain from her face. She started to shake as well. "But... you were only defending yourself, us."

"They don't care 'bout that," James said. "It's okay. I want to stay here and that should encourage me to keep out of trouble. I hope."

Jessie nodded, she tried to force a smile onto her face to show she wasn't worried. Her lips merely twitched, stubbornly trying to stay in the frown instead.

"Let me guess. One week," Craig's voice said.

"You know it's funny. James really did try," Jessie's voice said sadly. *"There was one incident during PE, but the teacher there saw they started it and let him off. But he really did try. It didn't matter in the end. I don't think James knew that social services already had a new home for him in the pipeline, regardless of what he did."*

"What?" Jessie stuttered in a panic. It was loud enough for the nearby groups of kids hanging around nearby to hear. They glanced over briefly.

James tensed, he looked angry, tired, defeated all at the same time. "I have no choice," he said eventually. "My mum's wanted custody of me for years. Apparently with all the crap happening lately, they finally approved her. Fresh starts and father figure sealed the deal, it's rubbish."

"Father figure?" Jessie said, her confusion temporarily masking the fear for the moment.

"She remarried. My old doc from way back then," James answered reluctantly. "Their idea of a father figure is a nice reminder of my real one. Better than none though," he said in a mocking tone.

"But, you're my best friend. What am I supposed to do without you?" Jessie asked, her throat started to throb.

James looked apologetic, it did nothing to calm him down though. "No, you'll be fine without me provoking everyone."

"Don't be an idiot!" Jessie snapped even though it hurt the lump in her throat. He was taken aback clearly. "They can't take you away. You're not expelled. Can't they find somewhere to live here?"

"I tried. They say it's for the best. All my baggage is here, in this town, the village, this school," James grumbled. He sighed in a vain attempt to calm himself. "That's my mum talking, I know it."

"But..." Jessie said, she tried to hold back brimming tears but it was pointless. One escaped onto her cheek. "Does that mean you can't come back here? Will I see you again?"

James looked like he was struggling too. He took in a deep breath in through his nose, his shoulders raised high, doing so held his off a little longer. "I... I dunno. I hope so. She said we're never coming back, but when I'm older, I can do what I want."

"You do what you want now," Jessie laughed painfully through more escaping tears.

"Yeah, that's the problem. If I hadn't..." James said regrettably. He rolled his eyes, she could tell with that his anger was more for himself than anyone else. "You were right. Ignoring them was better. I'm sorry."

"It all happened so fast. Days later he was packing boxes and bags, his mother and stepdad waiting outside for him in their shuttle to take him away, seemingly forever."

A man with a medium build, dark hair and beard picked up the last of the boxes to carry it into the open shuttle. James watched him over his shoulder until he was out of sight. He turned back to Jessie standing in front of him. The woman who had watched over him for almost ten years kept back, by the front door with a grim expression and tightly folded arms.

Since it was the weekend, they could hear the sound of children playing nearby, laughter from teenagers hanging around with nothing else to do. The sun shone brightly, even though it was early winter, its warmth could be felt a little in between light gusts of wind. It felt like a punch in the gut to Jessie. Everywhere else people were happy, taking full advantage of this oddly warm Saturday, while she suffered in so much pain.

When it was time for him to go, he stepped forward for one last hug. It almost didn't happen. James had originally turned to leave with his head down. She knew he'd do it. It'd be easier to part if he did something to upset her, make her mad at him. Jessie wasn't going to let him. Her courage plucked, she grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Is this your way of saying goodbye?" she asked angrily. He stared at her for a few seconds before going in for the hug he should've given her from the start.

She clutched onto him tightly for as long as she could get away with. Her foster mother she saw in the corner of her eye approached, she could see her frown. Jessie didn't care one bit. She knew as soon as they let go, her best friend would disappear out of her life for at least a very long time.

When the shuttle later rose into the sky and took off into the distance, Jessie crumbled onto the floor in tears. Both her chest and throat ached at her to stop.

"You're only fourteen, Jess," Alison had told her once it faded to sniffles. "You've got plenty of time to meet someone new in the meantime. When you're old enough..." She didn't get a chance to finish. Sobs overlapped her and drowned her words out.

Once she finished talking, the whole camp was silent. They could hear the trees rustling in the wind, despite not feeling it themselves. Distant voices speaking an alien language. Someone in a close by camp dropped something light.

Jessie forced herself to laugh a little to lighten the mood. "Come on. If you're bummed, don't be, you know we met up again. If it's a silent judgement thing where you laugh behind my back, just laugh now, cos I know I was a big drama queen. Sue me."

"Damn. Ruined it now," Tani said lightly, prompting an elbow from her friend. "Joking, sheesh."

Triah sighed sadly, "I think I get it. Why you snapped I mean. Things are always easier with a friend on your side. On your own... must've been tough."

Jessie smiled weakly and nodded. "Got it in one. I don't need to tell the rest."

Morgan pouted, disappointed for some reason. "Oh, I was waiting for the big finish with you beating the stuffing out of someone."

"Yeah," Kiara chimed in with a chirpy grin. "You hitting Tom is funny, want some of that."

Jessie laughed genuinely this time. "I could go get him, if you want."

Kiara shook her head, "maybe later. Those bullies were nasty. Want to hear about their ass kicking. All the details."

Craig smirked in her direction, "from the mouths of babes."

"Eew," Tani complained, he frowned at her. "And they're calling me and James creepy. She's a baby, sicko."

"It's a saying, back when babes meant kids," Craig groaned, his cheeks turning very red from the embarrassment. He looked to his sister to make sure, she nodded.

"Well, you can't refuse a cute but pottymouthed face," Morgan smiled.

"Nope," Jessie said. "I really can't."

Jessie looked around twice. She was tempted to try a third time. There were no empty tables in the school canteen. Only a handful of empty seats remained, most of which were at tables she wouldn't dare walk by, let alone sit at.

People were starting to stare at her. She picked the least terrible table; a group of girls, one of which was a new girl who started at the beginning of the final school year.

As soon as she sat down, the new girl instantly started talking to her. "Are you that girl from Shield Row who was called Jesse James?" she asked.

"No," Jessie grunted in response as she kept her head down.

"Oh silly," the girl looked embarrassed "I'm right about the Jessie part, I'm sure. James was..."

Jessie cringed. That name was still able to make her throat throb and the tears threaten to come back. "Please, I don't want to talk about that."

"Well I'm Chloe," the girl said. She pulled a face as Jessie lowered her head even further to hide any showing signs of pain on her face. "You don't remember me? We were in the same class at Infants and Juniors. Whatever happened to your boyfriend, James?"

The girls at the table burst into giggles before she finished saying his name. She joined in, telling Jessie that Chloe's new friends put her up to this before she had even sat down. *Ignore them*, she tried to tell herself. The laughter though, it crawled at her skin, it prodded at her over and over.

"Caused quite a scene when he left, I heard," Chloe taunted her. "One of your rejects saw some canoodling before he dumped you to go live with his mummy." The words flicked a switch in her psyche, it made her shiver, her jaw clench.

"What did you say?" Jessie asked coldly.

All of the girls continued to laugh. Chloe though leaned on the table to get a closer look at her face. "I said, where's James? You know that little gay freak with daddy issues you used to hang out with."

Jessie swung around to shove the girl with both hands, she fell onto the cold hard floor. The kids that saw it all burst into laughter.

"Keep your big mouth shut or you'll regret it soon enough," Jessie snarled as she stood over the downed girl.

By now everyone had turned around to watch, for once there were no teachers in the hall to stop it.

Chloe stood up, "oooh, what are you gonna do? Set your big sister on me like you did with that Jill girl?"

The girls at the table howled even more when Chloe reached out to tug on one of Jessie's stray strands of hair. Jessie shoved the chair Chloe had been sitting on into her knee, and down she went again. It must've hurt, but Chloe pulled herself up using the table and laughed at her some more.

"Is that all you got? No wonder you always had that weirdo hanging off your arm. Must've sucked when you got him expelled, huh?" she snickered.

Jessie didn't even think about it. Her hand reached for whatever was closest on the table next to her and swung it at the girl's hand still resting on it. She didn't know until Chloe screamed that it was a knife.

By this point a teacher had arrived and hurried over to the scene, while the entire canteen started the usual *fight* chants over and over.

"You bitch!" Chloe shouted back. Her friends looked on in shock, frozen by it on the spot. She tried to hit her with her good hand, but Jessie merely shoved her out of her way and stormed off.

The usual group of boys saw her coming their way, they couldn't resist, they clearly wanted to be involved in the big finish, after all their *hard work* over the years. The worst of them took the lead and stood in her way, while the others began to circle her.

Jessie barely gave them a second glance. She grabbed the closest chair and threw it into the leader. He went flying to the ground, taking two of his friends with him. The teacher took the opportunity to grab her arm, but she pulled it right back and kept on marching away.

Before she could reach the exit to the canteen, three more teachers hurried through the doors to stop her. The one she resisted before caught back up.

"Jessie! What in hell do you think you're doing!" he yelled.

"Shove it! Keep your big nose out of it!" Jessie yelled back. Of course that amused the entire canteen even further. The laughter prodded at her over and over. She danced out of every teacher's attempt to block her, still she managed to slip through a gap and slam the door in one of their faces.

"Wow," Craig said, he hadn't blinked in a good thirty seconds and his eyes were watering slightly.

Morgan's grin looked painted on, she had no intention of wiping it away anytime soon. "That was awesome, can we hear it again?"

Tani scrunched up her nose, "why? After all the stories about these bully boys, it's a random girl who kicks crazy Jessie off. That's like a program hinting that these two people are gonna get together for ages, and then at the last minute at the end, the bloke runs off with some bimbo he didn't care about before."

"Who'd do something like that? That's poor writing," Triah said, rolling her eyes.

"Maybe I didn't tell it right, but I'm not as bad as *that*," Jessie said with some offense. "I was sixteen. I was picked on for twelve years about the same god damn thing. Those boys from Juniors and Comprehensive did fuel it, but I think what did it in the end was that it seemed like everyone was jumping on the bandwagon. Even the new girl I didn't know wanted to hurt me."

"Don't sweat it. I got it, I understand," Craig said sheepishly. Jessie glanced over, a relieved look on her face. "You already felt like you were alone. That's bad enough without everyone turning on you."

"Thank you," Jessie smiled. "But it was more than that."

"James," Morgan said.

Jessie nodded, "I didn't like how they talked about him. He wasn't there to defend himself. Maybe I wanted to repay the favour for all those times he did it for me."

The headteacher sat face to face, with only his desk in between them, with a stone cold faced Jessie, glaring in his general direction with her arms folded. He tried to concentrate on the PADD he was reading, though her stare was oddly unnerving to him.

"I could overlook some pushing and shoving, but Jessie, you stabbed a girl in the hand with a fork," he said.

"Knife," Jessie corrected him sharply, without even blinking.

He was taken aback, "um, that doesn't change anything. I can't turn a blind eye to something like this, even if your record has been exemplary. What made you do it?"

"Typical isn't it," Jessie said, partly rolling her eyes and looking toward the window to his relief. "Ever since I was four years old, James and I were picked on for every stupid little thing the prats could think of. I was shoved over, demeaned, ass grabbed, the works. James was beaten up, but no, that doesn't count cos it was slightly off school grounds..."

"Jessie," the headteacher tried to interrupt.

"*Wait, what? Did I doze off and miss that bit?*" Tani's voice asked frantically. The others shushed her.

"Then I finally get my own back, I'm the one hauled in here," Jessie said. Her eyes were back on him, they seemed colder to him. "Funny you guys are only around when the defending ourselves starts happening."

"Nobody has ever reported this, why didn't you?" the headteacher asked.

Jessie smirked at him, but it wasn't because she was amused. It was all she had to not lose her temper again. "Oh it was. You don't care, that's why you keep letting the bullies do whatever the hell they want."

"That's not true," the headteacher said.

"Yeah right. A boy once pinned me to the wall and tried to kiss me. But hey, I'm sure putting James in detention sorted that one out," Jessie grumbled. "You see, we couldn't count on you to help us. You were always one step behind."

"Jessie, you do realise that your actions have left me with no choice but to expel you?" the headteacher questioned gently.

"Good," Jessie said plainly. "I might be actually safe now, away from those bast..."

"Watch your language," the headteacher barked.

"I can't see it so how can I watch it?" Jessie said.

The headteacher shook his head in quiet dismay. "You don't understand the seriousness of this. James did, and that's why his behaviour improved. He knew it's not as simple as getting kicked out of school. You're an adopted child. Your foster mother will be investigated because of this, and..."

"She'll kick me out into the streets like she did with Alison, I know," Jessie said with little care.

"That's not what happens," the headteacher said.

Jessie laughed bitterly, "so naive. I don't think anyone's lining up to adopt a sixteen year old girl. Mum knew that, social services knew that. They won't bother, but mum will."

"I think you misunderstood. I can't let you off with this regardless," the headteacher said. He climbed to his feet, "excuse me. I have a few calls to make."

While he was in her sight still, Jessie kept up with the angry and cold staring. Once he was gone it all dropped away, only fear was left over.

"I had nowhere to go, he knew that. No one would take me, my mum would've disowned me. What choice did I have?" Jessie said through a lump in her throat. The rest of the group stared with a mixture of confusion and dismay. "I think after what I said about Alison, he took pity on me. He said he knew what it was like to be hounded like I did, and..."

James cleared his throat nearby. Jessie turned red and laughed nervously. Everyone else took a few seconds to really react to it and turn their heads towards where they heard his voice. He stepped out from in between a couple of trees to rejoin them, holding a few more slightly larger pieces of fruit in his arms.

"Really Jess?" he said.

"It wasn't the exact same story," Jessie said with a wry smile pointed at him.

"Mmm hmm," was all she got. He placed the food down near the remains of the campfire. "Allow me. The headteacher said he was going that way, so he offered to give me a lift to Manchester, where I instantly ran into James and everything was cool."

"Now that's poor writing," Tani said. Triah nodded in full agreement.

Jessie's eyes narrowed while she pursed her lips. "Remind me again why I missed you," she said.

James only laughed in response, he walked over to sit beside her. "You got me."

"Hmm, then we'll never know," Jessie said. Her angry facade slipped into a smirk as she playfully bumped into his arm with her own.

"The end," Tani muttered whilst seething in jealousy.

"No, what did happen?" Morgan asked. Tani scowled at her. "Yeah, yeah, don't care," she waved her off.

"Why? The story was about her snapping. She's told you that," James asked.

Morgan pulled a face, "yeah but, how did you meet up again?"

"No way. It's one of you guys' turn," Jessie protested.

As they both expected the rest of their group didn't look like they were going to volunteer immediately. Craig quickly ate something, only to chew on it for quite a while. Morgan kept getting up and sitting down, mumbling about water or food, only to remember James had only just come back from collecting both. Triah avoided eye contact, occasionally dusting her clothes and arms now and then. Only Tani seemed like she'd be interested in chiming in, either that or her thinking face was because she was imagining getting Jessie out of the way.

Chakotay kept a close eye straight ahead of him, even while removing the first layer of grey he wore under his uniform. Most of the group had already stripped down to the tank tops, which wasn't anywhere near enough to cool them down. Of course Tom was the first to do this, while commenting on showing some guns. Tuvok interrogated him for two hours for hiding that he had managed to acquire weapons without telling anyone, which Tom flatly denied while trying to flex his skinny biceps. Chakotay knew exactly what Tom was talking about, but he decided to keep quiet and let it happen. Entertainment in the prison was hard to come by.

For the time being, Chakotay was only interested in one thing. One of the alien encampments had been ripe with activity the last couple of days. At first he had been worried when he spotted them moving to the foliage area, where he knew his daughters were. All they seemed to do was occasionally send a few people to forage in the trees for food, or collect handfuls of water. He knew Kiara and Morgan were fine, since their group were doing the same at different times.

It was only in the last few hours, not long after the rain fall, that their behaviour was worth keeping an eye on. Their patrols had increased in number. They no longer delved into the trees where they couldn't be seen. Instead they patrolled the edges, some picking whatever they could find and taking that back, while others guarded their backs for some reason. The ones in the camp were doing the same thing as he was, watching the Voyager camps with keen interest.

"They're afraid of the *woods*," Tom said, catching Chakotay's attention. He looked down at the helmsman sitting at the bottom of the hill. "Probably ran into Jessie."

The Commander rolled his eyes. "I doubt it. If they were as stupid as you, they'd be going in more often, not less."

Tom chuckled through his chirpy grin. "Or they know something we don't."

"Mr Paris is partially correct. Their increased party members indicate a higher threat level," Tuvok said. Tom nodded, his grin reduced to a small smile. "However, I do not believe they did this to secure their safety during foraging. Otherwise they would have repeated their earlier behaviour."

"Why ramp up security if you're not gonna use it?" Chakotay said.

"Precisely. I can surmise from their collective behaviour that they see us as a potential threat. The additions to their supply team merely a front for a border defence. They will know we have people sheltered in the foliage," Tuvok explained.

Tom scoffed himself into a smirk, "they're trying to split us up into two. That's why they moved there. It's..."

"Stupid," Chakotay said. "They've effectively boxed themselves in, with us on either side of them. We're either protection from another group, or they're scouting the edges of the woods to find a stealthy attack position."

"Or our sheltered buds are bait. Whatever it is, it's bad, we gotta get out of here soon," Tom sighed.

Phaser like blasts echoed down into the valley from above. It got everyone's attention and nerves up. People looked around the entire crater to see who or what had set the guards off, if it was that at all.

The only hint of movement some saw was Neelix dashing sideways across and slightly down a nearby hill, with armfuls of brown and grey balls of various sizes. He dropped a few in his hurry. Blue energy beams struck ahead in his path, forcing him to change his course so he was running in the opposite direction to before. This kept going, forcing him into a zig zagged course down to the bottom. Even still, it was clear he was heading for Chakotay's group.

They all heard a faint, "Commander," almost drowned out by another phaser blast. "Mr Vulcan," he spluttered in between that and the next one. Two more zig zags later everyone in the group, and ones in between them, heard the dreaded words, "I have fresh veggies. Now I can make a nice barbecue salad."

It was instinctual. The group looked away and pretended they didn't see anything.

Now alien guards were visible, charging down the hill in a straight line. They caught up quickly, shouting in a language the crew didn't understand.

"Help! No, I was only foraging for food," Neelix protested as he was grabbed.

Chakotay felt bad for delaying to move, but he couldn't risk the safety of the group. Also making the aliens think they were rebellious wouldn't be such a good idea either. It was too late though. The two aliens dragged Neelix towards them, grunting words and pointing back and forth.

Tom tried to act nonchalant. "Ohno, we don't know him."

"Yes you do," Neelix puffed out his cheeks. "I'm Neelix."

"Sorry man. I don't know any Neelix's," Tom smiled good naturedly.

"This isn't time for your jokes, Mr Paris," Neelix huffed further. "I picked these for the group. I've done nothing wrong," he said, gesturing to the balls in his arms. Which now that they were up close looked sludgy and smelled bad.

The aliens looked on in disgust at what he had left. They forced his arms back so he'd drop them all. He cried out as all that remained now were the zig zagged trails he left.

"Excuse us. We're going to go back a bit and continue starving to death," Chakotay said, gesturing behind him. Then he couldn't help but pinch his nose. He knew before he did it, it wouldn't be enough to stave off the smell.

"Commander. No, my veggies," Neelix cried once the aliens let him go roughly. They stepped back a bit and turned to walk away. Neelix wiped his finger along a small smudge on his arm, which he licked before anyone could stop him. Seconds later he fell face first onto the ground.

"Oh... brother," Tom groaned. He and Tuvok hurried to his aid. All they could do was roll him over, using the hill to keep his body and his head mostly upright.

The aliens then looked over their shoulders toward them, muttering something to each other before walking back to where they were. "Neelix?" one said, pointing to his own mouth.

Tuvok nodded, "yes."

They both groaned. One looked ready to throw up at any moment. The other said a few words while knocking on his forehead.

"Yeah, he is," Tom said.

The aliens glanced at one another, nodding. The first one who spoke gestured to the top of the hill behind Chakotay. They all looked up to see why. There they could just make out a few large animals grazing on some grass.

"No," Tom gagged at the image in his head. He pointed at his own butt. At that point Tuvok's eyebrow shot into orbit. The aliens waved their hands in front of them, one looked at Tom like he was an idiot while the other shook his head. "Oh thank god."

The relief was short lived. Alien 1 pointed to his belly, then gestured pulling something from it. Tom heaved at where he thought this was going. They meanwhile pointed back at the animals whilst pretending to chew.

"Ok, they didn't look like guts, so I'll remain optimistic," Tom said.

Tuvok sighed, "they're a different species, Mr Paris. They could be gesturing to another organ. I doubt they harvest them out of their own people to feed their livestock either."

"Or us, hopefully," another crewmember whispered nervously.

The aliens seemed bemused. Alien 2 held out his hand like he was holding something, then wiggled his five fingers in a walking motion. "Chutah," he said whilst raising his other hand above his head, then standing on his toes to make it even higher. "Shen nap," he said shuddering.

Tom felt even more eager to leave this prison after seeing that. "I hope that was my imagination running wild again, because I just pictured a five legged beast..."

"Two point six metres tall, yes Lieutenant," Tuvok said.

"Eep," Tom squeaked and hurried up onto the hill, behind Chakotay.

Both aliens chuckled at his reaction. Alien 2 pointed at the only water while still laughing.

"It's a marine creature. You need its organs to fatten your livestock, who you then eat yourselves," Tuvok said. They both nodded, pleased that he understood them.

Chakotay couldn't help but smile, "I do apologise for our comrade stealing your dinner's dinner. However we..."

"You're apologising to the prison guards?" Tom stuttered.

Chakotay ignored him and walked across to stand with Tuvok. "However we do not have any other option here. Perhaps, we could negotiate with a team leader, a captain, sergeant."

"Nah shat. Nada, intine," alien 1 said while drawing a circle in the air. His other fist punched through the middle.

Chakotay understood, or he hoped he did. "We are strangers to this quadrant. We did not know of your borders. We would never intrude on purpose. We only seek a path home, but we'll gladly go around if that's what you wish."

The two aliens frowned at one another. Alien 1 raised his hand flatly before they both walked away back up the hill.

"I'm assuming that was wait here," Chakotay said.

Tuvok agreed, "it seems they have their own universal translators far superior to ours. If we were to negotiate, we would have to request temporary use of one."

"Good plan. It seems like this was a huge misunderstanding. Neelix's octopus bladder theft may have saved us," Chakotay said. Tuvok almost looked amused to his surprise. "Never tell him."

"Regarding your bladder theory or him helping?" Tuvok questioned.

"I'd say both, but we can't risk him foraging something worse in the future," Chakotay replied. "We may be able to talk our way out of this mess yet."

Voyager:

"What? No I didn't. There's no signs, no ships, no energy signs and walls. Just a bloody invisible mine field. I don't understand what you're saying," Kathryn rambled at the viewscreen.

"Captain," Seven warned her.

Kathryn swung around and roared, "what?"

Seven didn't even flinch. "Their territory markers are subtle. I detect outposts in orbit around various planets, that form a vast circular parametre which..."

"That's nice but I don't want to hear about your bra shopping right now. Assuming you wear one at all," Kathryn snapped.

The Doctor looked on in not so quiet dismay, "she's correct, Captain. That would imply we breached their territory long before we touched the minefield."

"I know that!" Kathryn shouted. "It doesn't give them the right to steal escape pods, while the mother ship sits upside down with a warp core about to blow."

A woman on the screen with the same alien features as the one in the prison sneered at her. "Voyager, noosh tact. Relectable."

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that. Did you say please punch me in the throat?" Kathryn sneered back at her.

The Doctor hurried forward, temporarily abandoning the Opps station. "She said; *Voyager, you're not welcome. Savages.*" He saw the steam starting to rise. "Might I suggest..."

Kathryn stomped over to confront him, making him hurry backwards back to where he was with a childlike whimper. "You understand this language? Why didn't you say so before?"

"I tried. You told me to stick my fantasies up my backside," he stuttered.

Kathryn visibly twitched, "these people took my children and crew. I'm in no mood for smart asses."

The Doctor quickly maneuvered around her to escape Opps and get to the centre of the bridge. "Try to understand. We meant you no harm. Our trespassing was an accident. I'm sure you understand our Captain's anger. Please reconsider."

The woman's face softened. "Heren a nos lavill'c." The Doctor frowned in confusion. "Ve na nata tulsni."

"What?" Kathryn asked calmly this time.

"She says *she*, which is you, *is as vile as her sister. We cannot forgive the insult,*" the Doctor replied.

"My sister?" Kathryn said with a blank stare. It then hit her, making her groan into her hand. Meanwhile Seven raised both eyebrows. Even with her face covered Kathryn still pointed at her, "put those down."

"Apologies," Seven said sarcastically.

Kathryn growled quietly. "Another Voyager stopped by here, huh? Borg technology all over its hull. Stupid hair do's on everyone. Stupid all around?"

"Iynar," the woman replied.

"Yes," the Doctor translated.

Kathryn sighed, moving her hand down to brush it against Opps. "Figured. Scan our vessel again. The first Voyager you saw with my sister on is a fake. It does not belong in this dimension."

The woman looked away, her eyes scanning something. The bridge could hear strange bleeps coming from off screen, as well as a few faint voices. Finally she responded with a dubious look on her face. "Iynar. Ewe llash nukshar de na Flyer Delta."

The entire bridge stared with draining faces. "What about the Delta Flyer?" Kathryn asked.

The Doctor couldn't quite believe it. He stuttered a bit before answering, "er she says *we shall verify your story with the Delta Flyer.*"

"You found our missing shuttle?" Kathryn asked. "Were there two people on it?"

"Denara te sancturium da Voyager Seven," the woman answered.

"Seven!" Kathryn barked at the drone, this time frightening the life out of her. "I knew it, this was your fault." She looked to the Doctor for confirmation.

He winced. "The Larain do not use numbers for ranking purposes, they seem to use letters, so Seventh would've gotten lost in translation. It's no surprise they thought we were the same ship if that's the only distinction between the two of us."

"How could you possibly know that?" Kathryn groaned.

"They referred to us as Tre Voyager earlier, and tre is how they say their T's. But you're right, it's only guesswork," the Doctor replied nervously.

"Senar, erij ha," the woman said.

The Doctor's face brightened. "Oh, I was close," he said chirpily. "Either way, unless Seven made first contact, you can't blame her."

"I can, but what can you do?" Kathryn smiled. Seven rolled her eyes. "So does sancturium mean what I think it does?"

"Yes sanctuary," the Doctor answered. The woman on the screen spoke to him eagerly, he nodded now and then. "I see. In their culture they learn a word from an ally's language and insert it into their own. A mark of respect. If that respect is dishonoured by say war, betrayal, theft, it becomes a slur..."

"That's fascinating, really," Kathryn said and seemed to mean it, but her voice was tired. "Can we get our crew and shuttle back first, now that's cleared up?"

"Nooch nah hiran," the woman answered, the viewscreen turned back to default immediately.

The Doctor didn't look worried at the abruptness, he only smiled. "They must confirm, I assume with the Delta Flyer's crew."

"Great. While it's quiet I'll continue scanning for human life. I need a plan two," Kathryn said whilst going into the Opps booth itself.

"The Seventh Voyager. Did it follow the Delta Flyer here?" Seven asked toward the Doctor.

"Seems that way. What insult they made to the Larain remains to be seen, but yes they're protecting our shuttle from them. They mistakenly thought we were here to harm them and so they armed the mines," the Doctor replied.

Kathryn grit her teeth while she absentmindedly drummed the panel beside her. "They still didn't say where they took our crew though, and why. There's many differences between us and Seventh, their ship alone looks like a Borg reject. How can anyone mistake us for those idiots?"

"You forget, our first and only encounter with them was a year ago. They were damaged during our first meeting, and not by us. Chances are they've made repairs since then," Seven said.

"And let their roots grow out, their bridge was a rainbow assault on the eyes," Kathryn said. "Fine, it still doesn't explain why our people didn't think to tell their protectors that there were two Voyagers, and maybe check which one it is before throwing a crap load of mines in their faces. They better have a good explanation."

Harry kicked his feet up onto the helm while he lounged back into the chair, sliding it side to side a little. "We hid there for days, listening to the console's weapon discharge warnings over and over. Then!" he said overdramatically. His eyes drifted to his audience, expecting her to have jumped from the sudden raise in his voice. She merely looked bored, and not even at him. "The shuttle shakes. Not once, but five times. We take off and head straight for the cavern opening. It's moving, it's jagged. We slip out in the nick of time..."

"Of course," B'Elanna mumbled.

He didn't hear, he kept going. "I looked back out of the window the best I could and I see the asteroid we were in as we flee. It wasn't an asteroid. That thing was a beast, and we were almost its dinner."

"Harry stop," B'Elanna had enough. This time he heard her, he looked on in shock. "Enough stories. They're ridiculous, I dunno how you expect anyone to believe they really happened. You certainly put Tom's crap to shame."

Harry's jaw dropped, his voice raised an octave higher as his offense took over. "You can't believe that I'd have a gay male roommate, who would be interested in a straight man like me? That's so, so... homophobic and ignorant."

B'Elanna laughed derisively at him. "No, I believe that one and maybe the ones with your mummy. But my suspension of disbelief flew out the window when you picked up the *hobo* and the whiny kid during your flight exam."

"Why, what's so unbelievable about that?" Harry asked huffily.

B'Elanna stared at him blankly. "That's the plot of Star Wars."

Harry knew the jig was up, his eyes darted around and he started to sweat. Still he tried to keep it cool and keep his offended face on. "I wouldn't call it a war. Just got a little mixed up in a situation, that's all."

"Harry, Tom drags me to those holonovels too," B'Elanna said. Harry's facade finally melted away. He internally kicked himself, he should've known that. "Oh and by the way, stop looking to be offended. The roommate story was over an hour ago. The fact that you jumped to that conclusion says it all about how you handled that."

"I handled it fine," Harry stuttered.

B'Elanna shook her head, "mmm hmm." Her station beeped at her to get her attention. "Saved by the hail. Delta Flyer here."

"Voyager senar seven. Aichanta?" the woman's voice said over the comm.

Harry quickly lowered his feet and got ready to use the helm. "Seventh Voyager's back?"

"I'm not so sure. They've piggybacked some sensor data on this hail," B'Elanna mumbled, getting straight to work on the data she received. A few taps brought an image of Voyager up on the small monitor. Relief flooded her face. "No, it's our Voyager." She raised her voice a little, "are you able to patch us through to it?"

"Iynar," was the response.

"I still take that as a yes. Hope I'm right," Harry said.

B'Elanna watched the steady signal on the nearby status window. It glitched slightly. "Delta Flyer to Voyager?"

Voyager:

"Finally," Kathryn sighed in relief. She opened her end of the channel. "B'Elanna, is Harry there with you? Are you all right?"

"Yes Captain, we're both here and fine. We were captured by Seventh Voyager, we only escaped a month ago. They pursued us most of the way here. The Larains let us dock at one of their outposts, and so far have kept them at bay."

"I see. I have one question so we can finally get out of this mess," Kathryn said.

"What is it?"

"Well, it's only a small one, easy to answer." Kathryn's smile sharpened slightly, she took in a deep breath through her nose. "Okay. Were you trying to piss me off? Oh I know, let's take the unfinished shuttle out for a joyride! What kind of airbrained idea was that? How come you didn't notice Harry on the way in? Why was Harry still in there? If you did notice him, why didn't you throw him out? Was he in on it? What kind of name is the Delta Flyer anyway?" she rambled furiously, her voice getting louder with every question. Thankfully she stopped for a second to catch her breath.

"What were you drinking when you thought flying after a ship hopping into slipstream was a good idea? Do you have any idea how whiny Tom is without his girlfriends? More than usual anyway. And what the hell is up with the sulky arc you had before you left, I don't remember you getting a sodding letter. Plus you were fine for a while in between the letters from Starfleet and shuttle nap. So what the hell? What did you think would happen? Did you think I'd be happy to see you, all is forgiven? Why didn't you tell the aliens there was a possibility of another Voyager showing up, before we almost blew up and had the crew taken away? Do you have any idea what I've had to put up with you gone, Seven in bloody Engineering that's what!" Kathryn was full fledged shouting by the end, her face a bright red. "And what the hell do I have to do to get a coffee around here!" she finally screeched.

The Doctor panicked and ran into the Ready Room once the screaming was over and the Captain was getting her breath back. An awkward silence floated around the Bridge and over the comm. They could almost hear Harry tugging on his collar to get some air.

"That's multiple questions," Seven pointed out. She got an intimidating growl and death glare in response. Seven retreated into her shoulders and vowed to keep quiet for the rest of the day.

"I changed my mind. I want to go back to Seventh Voyager," Harry's voice whimpered.

B'Elanna's sighed, even she sounded nervous. "Relax, I'm the one that's gonna be hung, drawn and quartered."

"You wish it would be that quick," Kathryn muttered.

The Doctor returned holding a huge cup of coffee, "here's your coffee ma..."

She snatched it away without even looking at either of them with a loud "hmp!" She took a very long sip while her eyes very slowly glided over in the Doctor's direction, narrowing as they went. He quickly hurried away before she could finish and bite his head off.

"So er, what happened anyway? All we know is that the shuttle got caught in Arturis' slipstream and you were thrown out of it during one of his course changes," the Doctor asked in a much squeakier tone than usual.

"Oh well, that's a long story," Harry's voice said.

"Ohno," B'Elanna's voice groaned.

Triah couldn't help but worry a little. Her brother had gone to stretch his legs, so he said, and he did so by leaving the camp for what felt like ten minutes. So she wandered away herself to look for him. It didn't take long to find him. Craig had only walked two trees away and was standing against one, hidden from the group.

"You've been awfully quiet for a while now," she said to get his attention.

"I'm fine," Craig mumbled.

Triah smiled warmly as she made her way over to stand with him. "That was almost you. I remember."

"Huh?" Craig frowned.

"Jessie's story was a little too familiar," Triah answered gently. Craig looked down at the ground. "It's stupid. The bullies were the ones being cruel and you're the one that had to leave. I never got that."

Craig sighed and turned his head away, "it wasn't." He heard a small *hmm*. "Familiar. I wasn't picked on for my looks or who I befriended, or called a dog, groped."

"No, but they made fun of our *strange* family dynamic too. Our dad's surname. You were shy and had difficulty making friends, you had to put up with it alone," Triah said.

"So?" Craig said, rolling his eyes before looking back at her. "What's your point?"

"Sorry," Triah said genuinely. "I... I'm just glad that you won in the end. If you weren't kicked out of school, neither of us would be out here exploring the Delta Quadrant. You wouldn't have your friends. And I find it nice that you befriended someone similar, when I originally thought you went out of your way to find the most opposite people you could find."

Craig pulled his back away from the tree, grimacing and his eyebrow raising. "Hey, I've changed, I'm not like that anymore."

"Yeah," Triah drew the word out for quite a while, not sounding convinced. "No. You're still Craig, the only difference is you let people meet him now."

"Nuh uh," Craig shook his head.

"Yeah huh," Triah teased, a playful glint in her eye appeared. "Remember the trip to Disney Land, the girls at the log flume ride?"

Barely over two feet tall, little Craig seemed to disappear in the crowded queue area. Somewhere along the way his hand had slipped from his big sister's. It was not like he could go very far, or even stop. He was more or less pushed along the path everytime the queue moved down.

When he got close to the front, he spotted the themed carriages. His eyes sparkled. "They look like big duckies."

A few people smiled down at him. The pair of ten year old girls standing behind him giggled. "Aaaw, he's so cute," one cooed.

"Yeah I know, bless him," the second sighed.

Craig's cheeks flushed bright red, his eyes opened very wide. Standing right behind the two girls, Triah could see the warning signs but could do nothing about it. Off he went through the slight gaps in the fence. She quickly tried to hop over the fence to follow him. On the fifth attempt she made it, but he was already dashing around a distant corner.

"Oh Craig," she sighed before chasing after him.

The only things there were the hot dog stall, which he was deathly afraid of thanks to his taking everything literally, and a ride he was too small to get on. "How did I lose him?" Triah stuttered. "Excuse me. Have you seen a little boy, this high, ashy brown hair?" she resorted to asking the people in the ride queue.

Then she heard him. He sounded so far away, above her, from the sky. "Mummy! Sissy!" She looked up even though it couldn't be possible, but there he was. Sitting front row in a carriage about to go down a steep incline, twenty feet up. Kids and adults behind him looked miffed. She heard the ride controllers telling another off for stopping it there and not sooner.

"How did he get through the height checks?" the one in trouble stammered. "Jesus."

Triah sighed to try and calm her nerves. She knew. Her little brother could get into someone's house and join them at the dinner table and they'd never notice he was there. So tiny and so quiet, until someone spoke to or about him anyway.

"Nope, don't remember that," Craig replied quickly with a straight face. As soon as he turned away his lip quivered and his eyes started to water. Triah watched him knowingly, she patted him on the shoulder.

"That day I learned transporters have trouble grabbing a squirming kid hiding in a metal box," she laughed.

Craig's eyes shifted side to side. "What? Dunno what you're..."

"No more theme park family trips for the Andersons. Scarred for life," Triah said.

"Shut up," Craig huffed.

Triah giggled, "oh come on. You were so cute, gotta admit. Could fit you in my pocket. Plus you were two, it's a harmless story." She turned to leave.

Craig panicked, "no, don't you dare tell them." He chased after her and got in the way. "Please."

"Hmm what's in it for me little bro?" Triah winked at him.

"Little?" he whined while gesturing at the top of his head. He lowered it quite a bit to do the same to her. "You're like a foot smaller than me now."

"Yeah? And, I can still put you in my pocket," Triah laughed.

Craig blinked furiously, the rest of his face blank. "What?"

"You're still wouldn't hurt a fly, shy, little Craig. Because you got a few friends now, doesn't mean you have to hide that to fit in. You've got nothing to be ashamed of," Triah said.

Craig's face remained the same. "I don't get it. You're still not telling them that story. If you do, I'll..."

"Do what?" Triah teased.

"I'll tell them the story of your old bedroom in our Kyoto home," Craig smiled. Triah's face turned a shade or two paler in a matter of seconds. Craig's smile started to get a little smug. "Oh yeah. You weren't always so... clean, were you?"

Triah laughed off her worry, or at least she tried to. "They wouldn't care. It's not interesting." Her brother shrugged, miming the word okay as he turned to leave. She quickly grabbed his arm to get him to stop. "Ok, ok. You win... this round."

"I know," Craig smirked.

The pair returned to their group to find James telling the two little kids a story they found amusing. Morgan only looked on in disbelief and a little impatiently. From Tani's blank expression, both Craig and Triah assumed she was imagining something else involving him. At first Craig thought Jessie was missing. His attention darted around until he spotted her lying on her jacket and the long sleeved grey top, with her back to everyone.

"Then she said *does anyone fancy a kebab?* I'm gonna assume I said yes, since I woke up on the floor a few hours later to the sound of the floor cleaner mum was intentionally bumping into me," James said. He had to pause for a bit until the two kids stopped their giggling. Naomi did so far longer, Kiara looked confused.

"What's a kebab?" she asked.

James smirked at her, "the theory is sometime in the future, Neelix perfects the most disgusting meal he can come up with. Decides that the tiny crew of Voyager is too little a crowd to be eating such perfection. He then takes it to the Borg, who then become strangely eager to travel back in time to Earth to destroy the species who brought Neelix to them. It backfires though. All it does instead is inspire Humanity to invent warp travel so they can hunt down the evil person who created this fake and rubber tasting meat thing that only drunks can stand, and destroy him once and for all. A perfect loop."

"Wow, you're so smart," Tani said.

Morgan stared blankly at her, then at the two kids still believing everything James was saying. "That's it." She got up to walk away, "I'm gonna go pick a fight with our neighbours. Later!"

"She's... she's not serious, is she?" Craig asked in a worried voice.

"No," everyone but Tani and Naomi answered. Tani smiled knowingly and shrugged.

Naomi shushed them, "then what happened?"

"Ah, mum demanded that Jess leave our house, saying she was a bad influence on me," James tried not to laugh. He noticed Jessie look back over her shoulder briefly. Even though no one could see

much of her face, he saw her eyebrow raise a little. That made him laugh anyway. "I assume she joined the Marquis not long after that. I decided to do the same later, and luckily I was assigned to the same ship. The rest you know."

"But... what about Dannielle?" Kiara asked.

James glanced at her nervously, he tried to hide it away with a cough or two. "Well..."

"Who? What did we miss?" Triah asked.

She heard Morgan's voice huff from not far away. The teen hovered at the edge of the camp, stretching her joined hands above her head, cracking the knuckles a bit. "Nothing much. This second half of the story went downhill, fast. Whatever downhill means, other than down," Morgan said, looking puzzled. Her eyes rolled, then she swung around to walk off muttering something.

"I thought it would be obvious," Jessie mumbled as she rolled over onto her other side. Now everyone could see her properly.

"I'd better keep an eye on her. If she's anything like her mum, big trouble," James chuckled as he climbed to his feet too.

"But!" Naomi protested.

"To be continued," James said to her.

He hurried off after Morgan, leaving both kids and Tani pouting in disappointment. They then looked at Jessie expectantly. She regretted turning over. "It got called off. The end."

"What did?" Craig asked.

"Aaaw, but why?" Kiara whined.

Jessie groaned and sat up. "I wasn't there, sorry. Now, can we get at least a preview of someone else's life story? Craig, Triah?"

Triah and Craig exchanged glances, he dared her to say anything with a smirk, she twitched as if the roller coaster story was a matter of life and death. Finally they looked away from each other and back at Jessie. "No," they said in unison.

"Then story time is definitely over," Jessie said, glaring at the two siblings. She wasn't the only one after that, Kiara and Naomi were very disappointed.

"You have tested your plan then?"

Harry's face fell at the question, "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. Even though he sounded like he was complaining, his eyes told Harry a completely different story. His arms outstretched, his proud gaze at the really impressive cockpit of the brand new Delta Flyer. Tom wanted it this way, then it would be only his. His baby.

"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."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll buy you a beer in my local when we get home," Harry said.

"This went on a while. Tom wouldn't leave his pet project alone for anything. I was so certain that with a tiny bit of work, we'd be home in a few months and all we'd have to do was follow Arturis' ship closely. He was as stubborn as I was. In the end, I decided to spare the five minutes needed to help him install the new emitter, knowing full damn well what would happen if I did."

"Oh, hang on. The dilithium gauge needs resetting," Tom said as he crouched under the conn. Not long after he got to work on it, he pointed backwards. "Check the antimatter injectors."

Harry sighed impatiently. The antimatter injectors lead to a microfactory on the hull. The hull repair lead to a panel reconfiguration. That lead to a chair being too high and needing readjustment.

Before Harry knew it, he had been in the shuttle for a good hour or maybe two.

Then Kathryn's voice screamed at them over the comm, "*Bridge to Paris. Get here, now!*"

It didn't matter how much Tom loved his new toy and wanted to live in it forever. The thought of what she'd do to him if he didn't comply made Tom run out of it faster than he's ever ran.

Harry kicked himself for not putting his foot down sooner. He decided to head into the rear room of the shuttle to see if Tom still had some snacks hidden in the cage.

He was relieved to see he did. A few bags of crisps and some chocolate bars in one box. Harry promptly helped himself. Doing so, he missed someone enter the shuttle and head straight up to the cockpit. He didn't even hear the door so close to him open and close. The crisps he chose were very crispy.

He only noticed something was amiss when the shuttle began to rock slightly. He stopped munching to hear the sound of the engines roaring. "Tom? You can't be ready to test this bucket already?" He ran out of the cage to get to the cockpit, only to find the door wouldn't open for him. He tapped the panel.

Access denied it told him.

Harry kept trying until finally it opened. Curiosity was getting the better of him. When he got into the next room, he couldn't believe his eyes. Shimmering streaks of blue beamed through the brand new shuttle windows. He stumbled forward toward the helm in a panic, his forehead sweating briskly. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded, not to Tom as he expected, but what he thought looked like B'Elanna at the helm.

"Voyager's back in normal space," B'Elanna's voice said, uninterested. From what he could see, she was doing little more than watching the helm controls.

"What? What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"We're caught in Dauntless' slipstream," B'Elanna said plainly. She looked over her shoulder toward him. "It was your idea, wasn't it? Follow and be pulled along with it. Somethings need to be tested."

Harry's eyes widened in horror. He ran forward to tamper with them. "Alter our slipstream course! We've got to go back." At the last second she grabbed his wrist harshly.

The shuttle jolted, pulling the pair backwards violently. Harry tumbled to the ground while B'Elanna slammed into the back of the chair and bounced from it onto the console. The last thing she saw before she passed out was a blurry warning at the right of her. "Power overload. Relay emitter failure."

One hand attempted to wipe away the snow from a particular spot. After a few inches were brushed aside, silver metal could be seen beneath it. The edge of what appeared to be the number seven painted or engraved on it, stood out far more.

"We found it," a younger woman's voice sighed. "Voyager."

"How is she?" Harry asked. He slammed his fist into a dead, icy wall panel. "Come on!"

"They'll have hit the ice at full impulse. The shock of it, it would have been instant," B'Elanna said.

"Instant," the girl said grimly. "So he never felt it?"

The Doctor rushed over, his eyes wide. "Lieutenant? What's happened here?"

Harry walked carefully over to his old station, there he saw Seven of Nine's form lying partly out of it, perfectly preserved for fifteen years. He shivered not from the horror of it all, but from hope. It was almost time, and yet he had the strangest feeling of doing this already.

"The crew?" the Doctor was afraid to ask.

"Except for us... dead," Harry replied. "You've been buried inside a glacier ever since."

The Doctor paced forward, "you two were here, on the Delta Flyer, ahead of Voyager. You made it home."

"You remember, Doc? I was in charge of giving Voyager the phase corrections so they could stay within the slipstream threshold," Harry said.

"We can send the message to Voyager through time, to before the accident," B'Elanna explained.

"I know mom, I'm sorry too," the girl said with a smile.

B'Elanna chuckled. "This is Miral, my daughter."

The Doctor had to laugh, if only briefly, "I didn't think she would bother you so. She's exactly like..."

"Tom, yeah," Harry said.

"It doesn't matter. In a few hours we won't remember any of this. Everything will be undone, fixed to the way it should've been," B'Elanna said while getting right back to work.

Sinister laughter echoed all around them, still they acted as if they never heard anything.

"This isn't just about you though. Countless people are going to be affected by this. Fifteen years of history will be changed," the Doctor argued.

Harry hurried over to the wall computer to continue his work. "Now to upload the new phase corrections." His mind drifted to Voyager hurtling through space, toward a white planet. "It's when I failed fifteen years ago. Today, I fix my mistake." He envisioned Voyager slamming into a huge plain of ice. The deafening bang, the screech of metal being ripped apart and crushed, Harry clenched everything except the finger he needed to stop it.

"We're still here. Why are we still here? That should've fixed it," Harry's voice cracked when nothing happened.

The next thing he saw were blue lips coming from his own, belonging to a familiar woman but paler and dead eyes. They both screamed.

Kathryn struggled not to laugh, she kept her bottom lip buried in her mouth. "Okay, I get the picture."

"Oh crap," Harry said nervously. "That wasn't real either."

"Oh I believe you," Kathryn sniggered.

The Doctor stared forward curiously, "I wonder..." Kathryn and Seven turned to him. "You have vague memories of a second slipstream trip, a one which destroyed Voyager and got you home."

"Yeah, and?" B'Elanna questioned. Harry meanwhile flinched at the still lingering and detailed memory of that fake experience; Voyager's vicious crash landing.

Kathryn leaned across the Conference Room table with interest. "We wouldn't have gotten here without jumping into slipstream again. Phase variances caused us a number of problems." Harry and B'Elanna's faces lost most of their colour, Harry felt a lump growing in his throat. "How the hell did Seventh Voyager know enough about this to make this fake disaster for you two?"

The room fell silent for a while.

"Seventh Voyager. Arturis and the Dauntless. This rumoured Boss persona. They're all connected," the Doctor said.

Kathryn closed her eyes, nodding twice. "We fell right into their trap. Maybe not Arturis and the Sevens, but this creep hiding in the shadows pulling the strings, he's dangerous. We don't know what he wants with us, not yet, but we mustn't underestimate him. For all we know, he planned everything from the Flyer's capture and escape, to this species kidnapping the crew. We have to watch our step very carefully."

"Senar, yak ni chei tan!" the alien woman spat on Voyager's viewscreen.

This time though she wasn't arguing with Kathryn, but the hooded man with his computerised deep voice. "Well ah hokey dabby bull crap to you too. Now, get out of the way of Voyager the E before I get all itchy trigger finger, capiche nuh crapity." His crew sniggered behind him, Tom though was in front and had to hold it back for now.

"Profah, yu nah defien rabbita!" the woman snarled. The viewscreen then switched back off.

"What was that about rabbits?" the Boss asked genuinely.

Tuvok rolled his eyes at his now complaining station. "Their ship's spitting out little things. They're coming for us."

The Boss chuckled, "excellent. They're panicking, crapping themselves to my devious and traumatising aura. Destroy every little bitty thing, then push our way through to Voyager. It is empty. This is the moment to take it and be rid of you useless twats at last!"

"I take offense at that, and so does my console," Harry huffed. He caressed the opps station lovingly, "don't you shnookie?"

"I'm so glad I already have a Harry to replace you, again," the Boss grunted. "Now fire!"

Tiny pods floated around the Voyager with still an odd few Borg like patches on its hull. It powered up its phaser banks and fired. The first one it struck exploded instantly far too close to them, the blast knocked the ship backwards into a spin. The alien ship turned around to leave them be. It didn't take them long to re-find the true Voyager lurking behind a space station, mostly obscured by it at the angle the other Voyager would've been looking at it.

"Ishnan michrate Voyager, Flyer Delta," the woman greeted the Bridge. "Trinah il."

"Threat neutralised. Follow us," the Doctor translated.

Harry returned to his old station, replacing him. "That's pretty cool Doc, how did you figure their language out?"

"Oh I'm so glad you asked," the Doctor beamed while taking Seven's usual spot behind the command chairs. He missed the subtle hint that Kathryn was feeling grouchy again; shoulders tensing and steam rising. "My program can find patterns when..."

"Magic, plot convenience, pixies. Who cares. Let's go," Kathryn snapped while taking the helm. Everyone clung onto something just in case she took her anger out on the helm controls. "I'd like to get my kids back sometime this year."

"Oh, Kiara was one of the evacuees," B'Elanna said whilst taking the Engineering station. "That explains... wait, kids? Plural?"

Harry noticed at the same time she did, he looked extra worried and much paler. "How long have we been gone?"

The Doctor chuckled nervously. Seven struggled to maintain an indifferent expression, only an eyebrow raised. "That's a long story," the Doctor finally decided to say instead of answer.

"Ohno," B'Elanna groaned again.

Captain's Log Supplemental: The Larain have allowed Voyager to enter orbit around their prison moon so we can transport our people back to the ship. We'll leave as soon as repairs to the ship are complete. And maybe after I ask why they were dumped in the 'cell' assigned for violent criminals. Fortunately it seems our greater number helped put off any potential attackers...

"But mum," Morgan complained.

I told you sweetie, I can't put that in the log. Still proud of you though munchkin.

"Eew," Morgan muttered.

Yeah so no criminal tried to pickpocket berries from a fifteen year old girl, though I have it on good authority that a fifteen year old showed up a grown man. Damn it, I got it the wrong way around. Nobody beat up the very mean berry pickpocket. We were all well behaved. There, better. I'll edit that later.

"Wait, that's why the other group were scared of us?" Chakotay asked.

"Nuh uh, wasn't me. Honest. I did that much later before we were beamed," Morgan said sheepishly.

Last but...

"Then why?" Chakotay wondered. Morgan shrugged.

God, one day I'll do one of these things without getting interrupted. Lastly, we've lost track of Seventh Voyager after the Larain dealt with them. I doubt we've seen the last of those weirdos.

Tom's eyes lit up, a grin took over most of his face. "You're back!" He ran with his arms outstretched. He threw his arms around his lost love tightly.

"Ahem," B'Elanna cleared her throat beside them.

Tom pried his arms away from the Delta Flyer looking sheepish. He didn't dare look her in the eye. "Oh, didn't see you there."

"No, I'm not surprised," Harry commented. Tom gasped at him, he was next for the hugathon to his surprise but not to B'Elanna's. "Tom, air!"

"It's nice to know I'm third," B'Elanna said once they separated. She arched her own death glare, "I am, right?"

Tom laughed so nervously he was starting to hyperventilate. "Best till last hug?" he asked innocently with his arms gestured outward.

"Whatever. I did cause everyone a lot of trouble so," B'Elanna said. Finally she got her welcome home hug from him.

"That's not true. Are you... are you feeling better?" Tom dared to ask with a friendly smile.

"The fake futures opened my eyes a little. My Marquis family may be gone, but I have a new one. That I was only running away from everything, I..." B'Elanna replied. Tom's confused stare put her off. "I'll tell you about it later. It's a long story."

Harry smirked at her, "ohno."

"Don't worry. There's a lot of that going around. I can't wait to hear it," Tom said.

"Good. Then you can tell me your story in return. I hear it was an eye opener," B'Elanna smiled.

Tom jittered a bit, his face turned red. "What? Who told you about that... it's not true. I was a stud. You can't prove anything!" He hurried out of the shuttle bay in a panic.

Harry and B'Elanna stared at each other with a confused frown.

Tuvok and Chakotay paced down the corridor, the latter tensed with concern.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Entirely. The general said three of their guards on the closest watchtower witnessed several incidents," Tuvok answered.

Chakotay nodded grimly, "I can't believe one of our own would or could fend off a group of criminals. I mean, it is good that they did. It might not have been as *innocent* as fighting over food or water. But still."

"Indeed. It is unfortunate that the trees and the distance stopped us from getting a detailed description of the perpetrator. We will likely never know who stopped these attempted attacks on our people," Tuvok said.

"We all came back in one piece. The Larain are not complaining about it, quite the opposite in fact. Perhaps we should leave it as unsolved, not top priority at least," Chakotay said.

"I disagree. It warrants an investigation. With your permission, I will look into it immediately," Tuvok said.

Chakotay tensed as he saw his daughter approach from the corner, chatting to James. He tried to shake off what she told him earlier. Her word alone was enough to convince him anyway.

"Hi dad," she greeted him with one of her big infectious grins. He couldn't help but smile at her back as she passed by him. Once she did she continued talking, "I don't believe it. You're making it up."

"It's true, I did," James said, instantly getting the two Commanders' interest. They looked over their shoulders. "It was a bit rushed, some boring details are missing. So what?"

Morgan scoffed, "so what? In a few minutes your girlfriend was out of the picture, your mum died, then you were in the Marquis. It took more time to describe your classroom at the beginning of the story."

James laughed while Chakotay frowned and mouthed the word *girlfriend*. Tuvok's eyebrow threatened to raise. Both of them continued on their way.

"Dannielle wasn't my girlfriend. And I don't think your kid sister would want to hear about my mum's murder, do you?" James said.

"All right fine, next time don't mention it," Morgan rolled her eyes.

"She was why I went to the Marquis, why I'm here. That's why the story is so long. Some stuff needs to be told or the story makes little sense," James pointed out.

Morgan narrowed her eyes toward him, "liar. You went running after Jess..." The two's conversation faded away as they stepped into the turbolift.

Chakotay sighed, "I'm gonna have to keep an eye on that."

Tuvok was puzzled, "Commander?" He followed his gaze to the turbolift. "You're concerned about Mr Taylor influencing your daughter?"

"What?" Chakotay stammered. He stared at the Security Chief with wide eyes. "No, I meant Morgan and her growing Janeway traits. Now you've gotten me even more worried."

"I apologise Comm..." Tuvok tried to say.

Chakotay talked over him though, "no, no. This won't do at all. Gotta nip that one in the bud." He wandered off talking to himself.

Tuvok couldn't hold it back any longer. The eyebrow raised high to make up for lack of use. Even though he was alone he could feel Kathryn glaring at him from wherever she was. It was illogical but he lowered the eyebrow and hurried off anyway.

THE END