

## **Episode 5.19**

### **Bounds of Illusion**

The black wave spread, rippling through space with a vengeance. Hidden by the vast darkness of space, it consumed everything in its wake.

A beautiful green world stood in its path, oblivious to what was coming. They had troubles already. A strange ship had entered their space, it was heading right for their world. Over a dozen of their vessels quickly intercepted it, shots were fired at the invading ship. It however did not fight back. The weapons seemed to bounce off their shields, their path undeterred.

Another six ships emerged from the atmosphere to join the battle.

As if it noticed the incoming wave, the alien ship swung around, completely reversing its course. Its long sleek warp engines lit up for a second, then it was gone.

The wave gradually wrapped around the planet. Almost all of the ships stopped dead at the sight of this. It only took a few seconds to take over their entire home. It was as if it no longer existed. Even worse, the wave kept coming right for them.

Three ships reacted first, they pursued the enemy ship. Others turned to follow. No sooner than the first three ships disappeared in a flash, the wave swept through the defending ships, swallowing them whole.

Nothing was left behind, even the stars themselves were gone.

The viewscreen changed from complete darkness to a star chart. Unlike other charts there was very little detail. There was just a green line going the scenic route towards a Starfleet commbadge symbol, and a second symbol following said line.

B'Elanna glanced up from the Engineering station briefly, "the tracker is working. We should be able to see for ourselves how twisted this anomaly is."

Tom sighed, "as long as they follow our original course through the thing, they should find it." He cringed as the commbadge seemed to follow a tight, almost complete circled turn. "We went in a straight line, but it really looks like this. It's amazing."

Chakotay looked towards the alien Yana, she was the only one watching the screen constantly. Her left hand was clenched against her lips as she did so. He slowly made his way over to her. She only noticed him when he turned his body around to stand parallel to her shoulder.

"It's interesting that an abandoned ship could drift several light years into a place like this, in such a short space of time," he said. Yana's eyes tightly shut for a couple of seconds, that told Chakotay a lot more than she wanted it to. "I'm only making conversation."

"No, well yeah it should be," Harry said in response to Tom's earlier comment. "Since we found our ship, we can lock onto its position even if it did move. James and Lena will be able to see it too."

Chakotay's eyes widened. Everyone but Yana and the man himself stared at Harry with disapproving raised eyebrows. Harry didn't notice immediately, when it did it made him uncomfortable.

"What?"

"Lena?" Chakotay answered him.

There was something off about it, but Lena couldn't quite put her finger on it. The murky blue displaying on the alien viewscreen in front of her looked like it was moving, almost like a thick fog being pushed aside by a gentle breeze. If she stared at it intently, focusing on one specific part of it, nothing changed at all. They were definitely moving, she could hear the engines clearly. If she was judging that only based on what she was seeing, her mind would be convinced they had stopped.

Consoles were completely black with the exception of one. With only one small light barely lighting up the room, the fog on the front screen gave the room an eerie blue tint.

Some of the overhead lights flickered back on and off again. Before the Bridge's occupants could comment on it they came on and stayed on.

"You need one more to win," James said, temporarily bringing Lena out of her head.

"I guess," Lena said as she reached for a sandwich sitting on a nearby plate. With her other hand she picked up one of two piles of cards sitting on the floor between them. James picked up a solo card. "You could have brought pizza. It's been a while."

James smiled, he put down the pile face up and climbed up to his feet. Lena peeked at them and her own cards. He walked over to a couple of large bags at the back of the alien bridge. While he knelt down to rummage around in one, she reluctantly put down a two and Joker next to the Ace he put down.

"We can only use it a few times," James said. He stood back up and walked over with a rectangular device in both of his hands. "I imagine you'll only get a ten inch out of it, but hey," he said, sitting down with it.

Lena squinted her eyes at it, then at him. "What... what is that?"

"I found it underneath mum's chair when the ship crashed," James replied, his smile turning into a smirk. "Portable replicator, charged before we boarded."

"Ship crashed?" Lena wondered out loud. She reached out to take it from him, her right hand stroked the side of it like it was precious. "Doesn't look big enough."

"Yeah, she'd probably have more coffee's to make up for the smaller cups," James said. He noticed her hand, his smile shrunk a little. "You can have it if you want."

"No, you're the oldest. You should get all the hand me downs," Lena said.

James studied her face for a bit to see if she was joking, he couldn't tell as it was blank. "Including the favourite cup with the permanent coffee stains?"

"Yeah, I never bought that. That cup was tiny," Lena said, finally smiling. "It's okay, I don't need it. When we get the Enterprise back I'm taking my old desk. It had a replicator built in."

"Oh god, I remember mum's reaction when you told her," James couldn't help but laugh. Lena didn't, she looked a little confused. "Were you not there? I was called to the bridge to find it stuck in the door. She claimed some Betazoid was driving the ship and it fell into it."

Lena wasn't amused, she gasped. "Is that why there was a dent in it?"

"A few yeah, I had to push it back in," James replied.

"Oh mum," Lena groaned into her hand. She moved it away, James was relieved to find her smiling again. "Things were never dull, were they?"

"You're not wrong. I did wonder how she was going to get it into the turbolift," James laughed.

Lena giggled as well, "why didn't she just beam it out?"

James shrugged, "why didn't she just ask someone to replicate her own? We'll never know."

"Maybe she did, and somebody stopped it. Imagine the damage if she had a replicator in hand's reach 24/7," Lena said.

"Imagine? I remember opening the door to the Ready Room to find nothing but Cherry Coke bottles," James sniggered. "I couldn't even walk in."

"Oh yeah, that was a good day," Lena smiled. She looked down at the device in her hands and sighed contently, "what kind should we order?"

The only online station beeped a couple of times. James looked over and got back onto his feet. "Your call. As long as it doesn't have fruit on it, I'm okay."

As he walked over Lena pulled a face. "A pizza without tomatoes, are you crazy?" Before he could answer she nodded, "yup."

James glanced over to just smirk at her, then turned his attention to the console. A PADD lay on top of it, which he quickly looked at before tapping something into the console.

A few orders later four small pizzas appeared in the replicator, one at a time.

Halfway through one slice Lena's eyes narrowed slightly. "So Jessie's having another kid, huh?"

"That came out of nowhere," James said.

Lena shrugged, "I thought little Sarah-Amy was the last one. What is it, are you trying to even the boy/girl ratio?"

"It's a long story, and no," James answered while walking back over to her. "This is the last one."

"Uh huh," Lena didn't believe him. "I think you and Tom are competing. Who has the most kids wins."

James laughed at the idea, "yeah like I'd be encouraging more Tom kids." His smile disappeared quickly and his shoulders fell. Lena frowned at him. "Great, I just forgot about that."

Lena sighed, "you really have to let that one go. You chose keep one kid hostage over keeping two. Unless you've been lying this whole time, I don't want to see you go all emo about it again. If you do I'm gonna change the word emo to James, after you." She smiled. "Stop acting so James, get over it."

"You know I'm glad you're feeling better," James said, smiling a little. "It means I don't have to go easy on you anymore."

"Bring it on old daddy," Lena smirked at him. "You never used to win anyway."

James shook his head, "you mean like the times I did, as in every time?" Lena pretended to huff as she folded her arms. "I was taking the piss out of people before you were born."

"As if you would know when I was born. It just proves that you're old, so keep going," Lena said.

The computer started beeping again, this time it was a bit more tenacious about it. James looked over with concern all over his face.

"Hmm, saved by the course correction beep," Lena said.

"No, that's not what that is," James said. He quickly got back onto his feet to go over to the console.

Harry's face turned pale so quickly it was a miracle he didn't faint from the blood loss. "Oh! Um, I feel a little sick. I'm going to lie down." He hurried off to the nearest exit he could find. Unfortunately for him that was just the Conference Room.

Nathan stopped looking over his shoulder to focus on the viewscreen, "wow, awkward."

Chakotay stared into his back, or rather glared into it. "Even him? Everyone knew she was back but me? Why!?" He continuously turned on the spot so he could spread his glares around the bridge.

"She's traumatised enough, that should be obvious to even a selfish prick like you," Jessie said bluntly enough to make everyone shudder. She just rolled her eyes, "oh poor Chakotay. Everyone is so mean to him, boo hoo. Not, god!" Mostly everyone were still worrying about her first sentence to really care about the last one. Nathan just sniggered at it.

"Hmm yes, Jessie. Due yet?" Chakotay asked.

Jessie frowned, "no, next month."

"Is that one month until your usual pregnancy length, or normal pregnancy length?" Chakotay asked, immediately regretting it. Most of the room stared at him in shock. Jessie seemed to be frozen on the spot, her mouth slightly open.

Tom laughed it off nervously, "ok that was cold even by your standards."

"She said I'd traumatise my own daughter," Chakotay said defensively.

"You traumatise everyone, this is a shock to you?" B'Elanna commented.

Chakotay sighed, his shoulders slumped. "No but Jessie making it to eight months is." The only movement Jessie made was a slight narrowing of her eyes. "Oh fine, I'm sorry. It was a genuine question because of her mood swings, it was not meant to be malicious." Nobody really believed him, it made him angry again. He decided not to bother and stomped off to the door next to Jodie's station.

"Oookay, I can breathe now," Tom sighed in relief. "Now we wait without a fear of imminent death."

Opps bleeped a couple of times, Jodie cringed slightly as she looked at it. "Tom, we're picking up a very faint signal. We're just within its range."

"Looks like you were right," James said.

Lena looked back over her shoulder and watched him tap a few things on the computer station he stood at.

"The closer we get to the *exit* the less power is drained," James finished saying.

Lena nodded once lightly. "That's why the anomaly tries to trick you into going further in, instead of just staying."

"Yeah, it also explains why the Enterprise drained so quickly," James said. "It's not like we were that far behind them."

"How long?" Lena asked quietly.

James briefly glanced at her and back, then he looked again as he noticed the worried look on her face. "We're almost out, don't worry about it."

"Hmm," Lena only sighed. She turned her back to look at the viewscreen. "Almost over."

"Yeah, I told you it wouldn't be that interesting," James said with a small smile. He checked the station briefly before walking over to stand near her. "Nobody around to hallucinate, it is just a boring fly in, tractor beam and fly out mission."

"Nobody likes a *told you so*," Lena said in a serious tone.

James watched her, waiting for a smile of some kind. Something was worrying her, it bothered him too. "Are you thinking about that upcoming meeting with your dad?" he asked.

Lena's head dipped slightly, then she turned it to one side to make eye contact. "That's not even happening."

"Okay, I don't blame you," James said. "You've just been a little... off since we found the Enterprise."

Lena shook her head almost timidly. "No, it's good that we have it."

"I know it's not the end, not even close," James said. "It couldn't have been flying around, firing at Game Sphere towers on its own. Now it's empty."

"I think we both know why it's empty," Lena mumbled, her voice cracked a little at the end.

"No, we don't," James disagreed. "It was empty before it got trapped here. These aliens stole from it because no one was there, they couldn't have done that if it was here."

Lena's eyes seemed to glaze over to him. Her head turned to look at the viewscreen again. "Perhaps. It doesn't mean its crew is not dead though."

His throat ached and swelled a little, he tried to swallow it away. "Lena. The Enterprise shouldn't even be here at all. The last we saw it its core was breaching and it was mostly evacuated. A few people didn't get out. I don't think we can jump to any conclusions yet, we're still missing a huge piece of the puzzle."

"I suppose once it's out and powered back up we'll be going through logs, sensor stuff..." Lena mumbled and trailed off.

"Seems like a good start, yeah," James answered. The computer he stood at beeped at him, he glanced down at it. "I wouldn't be too worried about that, our job is done."

"You mean your job is done," Lena said plainly. "I didn't do anything and it's still not right. I bet some of that stuff will be hidden, restricted... they'll need you still."

"That's weird," James said as he read what the computer was telling him.

Lena hadn't even noticed the computer beep or him looking at it. "Not really, you were always good at that stuff."

James glanced back at her briefly, "huh?" She passed him a confused stare, it then clicked with him. "No, what's weird is we're getting a weak signal from outside the anomaly. We should be almost out. If it's Voyager, it should be stronger than that."

"Oh. What's it say?" Lena asked.

James stared at the alien computer for what felt like a few minutes. He shrugged and turned around to face her. "I have no idea. I only know the helm and power transfer functions. Tractor beam as well, I guess."

The blue fog on the viewscreen gradually lifted to show normal space. With her head facing away from it, Lena missed it but she did notice the frown growing on James' face. She turned her head back to

see for herself. Apart from a few stars, including one that seemed to be flashing, the area was empty. Both of them were getting more worried by the minute.

"Where's Voyager?" Lena asked first.

He didn't like this one bit, Tom felt a cold chill run through him. From what he saw from just over her shoulder as she sat at the Engineering station, B'Elanna was feeling exactly the same. The only part of the console he could focus on was the analysis screen and the seven letters displayed on it.

"Voyager," she read it aloud.

"Are you sure? It could be just a coincidence," Tom said nervously. B'Elanna looked up at him to give him a slightly dangerous stare. "Right."

Nathan's chair swung a little to the right. He couldn't help but stare towards them. "I don't get it. How did that... noise translate into that?"

"Well at least there's no mistaking it, the message is definitely for us," Harry commented.

"That doesn't answer my..." Nathan said impatiently.

Tom straightened up, his body turned slightly in Opps' direction. "The signal was weak, where did it come from?"

Jodie sighed as if Tom had asked her to work during her lunch. Though lately, that was probably accurate. All she had to do was glance at one particular panel. "A system under two light years away. One m-class, it was probably that."

"That's only a few hours away at maximum warp," Tom said thoughtfully. Naturally everybody looked at him judgmentally.

"I don't like where this is going," Jessie commented.

"Tom, you can't be serious," Harry said as he pulled himself out of his chair. "This has trap written all over it."

Tom stared at him with a puzzled look. "A broken transmission to anyone in the area, with a one second blip that decoded into the word Voyager is a trap?"

"Yes," everyone answered.

"We're barely in range and if it wasn't for B'Elanna happening to be on the bridge, we would have missed it altogether. Surely a trap message would be a little easier to get," Tom protested.

Jessie rolled her eyes, "the guy holding a *this is not a trap, I swear* sign was a little too obvious."

"Besides," B'Elanna interrupted. "We're still waiting for James and Lena to tow the Enterprise out of the anomaly. We can't just leave."

"What if it was a call for help? The Enterprise isn't going to be ready as soon as it's free. It'll probably take weeks, months to get her back up and running.," Tom said. "By then it'll be too late."

Nathan pulled a face, he was about to respond but Jessie beat him to it. "Voyager is seven letters. Help us or help me is only six, seven if you count the space. Surely that would have been easier."

"Oh ha ha," Tom groaned. Luckily for him he wasn't looking directly at her at the time or his eyes would have melted. "Come on guys. To encode Voyager into that so we could read it, would mean

whoever wrote it knows English and uses our alphabet." He winced a little so he could get a confirmation nod off B'Elanna.

"He has a point," B'Elanna said warily.

Tom smiled gratefully at her until he realised she looked a little pained to have helped him. "That narrows our message sender down to at least an Alpha Quadrant race."

Jessie wasn't buying it. "It also narrows it down to the Softmicron, who have gladly translated the rules for their games everytime we've been in one that has them written down."

Harry glanced between the two, he looked a bit conflicted. "Um, that could be something just like our universal translator. One of them associating a noise or a wave frequency with one of our letters to spell out a name of a ship, that's a bit farfetched."

"Ah, I knew you'd come around my friend," Tom smiled at him too.

"Yes because Voyager is a totally made up word to name a ship, or a name of someone the Soft won't have heard of," Jessie said sarcastically, her eyes rolled again.

Tom's smile grew, but he didn't dare direct it Jessie's way or even close to her for that matter. "I have the Chief Engineer and ex-Operations First Officer agreeing with me, but the Tactical girl who never agrees doesn't. That settles it. We should leave right away. Jodie, leave a buoy behind with a message for the Enterprise."

"A boy? Sure, can we leave you?" Jodie muttered.

Tom looked over to B'Elanna for help, she gave him a warm smile. "I could do it, but still, shouldn't we wait? I know the Enterprise won't be ready, but it wouldn't hurt to wait the couple of hours and leave an engineering team behind to start repairs."

"And it wouldn't hurt to have a Chosen on Voyager, but that's just me being crazy paranoid," Harry said.

Tom looked hurt as he glanced back at him. "We'll check it out, see what the problem is. If we detect towers or anything Softmicron-y, we'll head back." He dared to look around the entire bridge, so that included Jessie. "Agreed?"

"Since I never agree, if I say yes will you assume the opposite?" she said.

Tom laughed a little nervously, "yes."

"No," Jessie replied.

"Uh..." Tom was naturally confused. "Is that opposite or, god damn it woman. You did that on purpose." He turned to his first officer. "Harry?"

"Of course she did," he answered. Tom sighed irritably. "Oh, right yeah I agree."

"Great, my First Officer's approval, that's all I really need," Tom said. "Though Janeway never bothered. Oh well. Nathan, set a course."

Nathan span his chair back to facing forward, "oh, I gotta bad feeling about this one."

"Once B'Elanna's left the buoy, engage," Tom ordered.

B'Elanna quickly worked at her station, then looked up. "Done. Although I just thought it would be easier to record the last five minutes. That's okay right?"

Tom knew she was joking, or at least he hoped but his skin turned pale anyway. "Um, with the Enterprise dead that'll mean they won't be able to follow us, right?"

B'Elanna knew the answer, but she smiled deviously anyway. "It won't take long to power it up."

Tom laughed, clearly with some nervousness in it, as he walked over to sit in his chair. "Did I mention warp nine, Nathan?"

*"What are you worried about? You didn't say you were doing this just to ditch them," Nathan's voice said.*

Both James and Lena were pulling very different but just as confused faces at the computer in front of them. Lena's eyes kept drifting over to James to see if he was reacting like she was.

*Tom seemed to cough but on purpose. "Who'd do something like that? It's bad enough they're super strong, but they'll have two ships too. You wouldn't give a bull terrier a machine gun and then just run off."*

*"Now you have a reason to be worried. Good job," B'Elanna's voice sniggered.*

*"Wait, you weren't kidding?" Tom's panicked.*

*"I was, but I think it'll be funny to send it anyway," B'Elanna's mischievous voice said.*

James reached across the computer to press a button, the line seemed to go dead immediately after that. "It has been too long since I hit him, but I'm starting to think he misses it too." Lena turned her head in his direction, her frown deepened. "Weird's me out a little."

"Only a little?" she said, raising an eyebrow.

James shrugged, "I must be too used to weird."

Lena smiled slightly, her arms folded tightly. "So now what? We just wait?"

"It wouldn't hurt to start the power transfer," James answered. "We can worry about the repairs later. It doesn't look too bad."

"It doesn't?" Lena said curiously.

James nodded, he typed in various things on the station he was at. "Tractor beam's off, I'll bring us about so I can start the power transfer. You'll be able to see for yourself."

"Great," Lena mumbled unenthusiastically. She turned her head anyway to focus on the viewscreen.

Slowly the familiar sight of the Enterprise's saucer came into view from the right. The second she saw a black phaser scorch she turned her head away and cringed. James passed her a sympathetic look, but it was too late to do anything, the damage was done. All he could do was turn off the viewscreen. Before it went off he noticed not only scorch marks on its hull, there appeared to be a large crack alongside the belly of the ship.

"It's okay, Voyager's come back from worse damage," he said to not just reassure Lena, but him as well. "The Enterprise itself has been through a lot more than this."

"Yeah," Lena said, her head facing down to the floor.

They both heard something inside the vessel powering up, then they felt a tiny shudder. Neither of them seemed alarmed by it.

"This should take a while. Do you want to play another hand?" James asked, gesturing to the abandoned cards on the floor.

Lena turned herself around, she tried to smile but her face just looked worried. "Sure."

One by one the lights flickered off, cloaking Voyager with space itself. Even the one illuminating the starship's registry powered down. All that remained were the warp drives, which lowered down to drop them out of warp.

Their target, a large silver moon orbiting an ocean blue world. They circled it until the planet no longer could be seen from Voyager. It then slowed to a complete stop.

### **The Mess Hall:**

Chakotay walked through the doors to be greeted by many agitated aliens hanging around the window. Neelix was there as well along with two Security teams, trying badly to calm them down. Chakotay grew a little concerned as well as he caught sight of the moon to the left of the window.

"Please calm down, I'm sure there's a good explanation," Neelix said.

"No... we've been kidnapped," one alien stuttered.

"This is a punishment," another chimed in. She made her point by gesturing at one of the guards.

Chakotay approached them. "What's going on here?"

Neelix's eyes lit up, he hurried over to him. "Commander, I'm glad you're here. Maybe you can help put their minds at ease."

"I'm afraid not. The last I heard of anything, we were just waiting," Chakotay said.

Another alien and Yana entered the Mess Hall, luckily neither of them noticed the change of scenery as they did. They did glance at their comrades with worry before sitting down.

"Oh," Neelix sighed sadly. "I'll contact the bridge. All we got from them was the power down warning." With that in mind he scurried off towards the kitchen.

"All right, Neelix is going to get some information so just sit down, relax. Everything's fine," Chakotay said towards the aliens. He hoped they wouldn't notice the improvised and probably a lie last sentence. They only stared at him for a moment. That was more than enough for him so he walked away to find an empty table.

Unknown to him the two aliens who had walked in after him had nabbed the final empty table. He decided to go over to the galley to wait for one and listen in on Neelix's call to the bridge.

"Really? What should I tell our guests, they're a little concerned," Neelix said.

*"Yeah I can imagine. Tell them the truth, it's not like we're dumping their ship and kidnapping them. What harm..."*

"Can I just stop you there Paris," Chakotay butted in. He heard an annoyed sigh on the comm. "This recovery mission was only going to take a few hours. They're probably back by now. What's so important?"

*"Oh you didn't hear that bit. Neelix will fill you in. Paris out."*

Neelix turned to the ex Commander with a nervous look on his face. "Distress call from somebody who speaks Human. That's the jist."

"He does know about universal translators right, or does he just assume you know English?" Chakotay said blankly.

"Um it's a little more complicated than that. Something about a secret code and whatnot. However we don't know what they need rescuing from, so we're staying low key," Neelix explained. He hurried over to the aliens near the window to tell them the same thing.

Chakotay let out a sigh as he leaned on the counter.

"I hope you didn't forget to tell the Humans anything. That seems to happen a lot lately," the alien at the table said.

Yana sighed impatiently. "Keep it down Jerik, this is just the start of the mission."

"Yes and we don't even know if it'll work. This is our last ship you've given them," the alien protested quietly. "This is a lot to sacrifice for something you said you didn't believe in."

"Shoytin believed enough," Yana whispered.

Jerik scoffed, "Shoytin proved time and time again that he was insane."

Chakotay rolled his eyes. He was standing close enough to hear everything. "Seriously, if you're going to act suspicious, do it out of earshot and maybe in a dark secret location."

The aliens tensed up as they looked over at him, Yana felt even more nervous.

"We gave you the Katane, surely that should warrant some trust," Jerik retorted.

"I am curious about that," Chakotay said on route to their table. "Your leader seemed very eager to get back into the anomaly. Something interesting must be there."

Yana stared down at the table as if she was ashamed. Jerik only looked more irritated. "Most of the crew disagreed with him, not that any of us dared to tell him that." He noticed Yana tense up a little. "Not that he told us minions his reasons."

"Please, don't start that up again," Yana pleaded with him.

"And so the Shoytin kissing up and covering up continues," Jerik quipped.

Yana folded her arms tightly. "The old Shoytin would never have thought about that hostage plan, let alone carried it out. We only did so as we believed in him, even then we didn't know who our hostages would be."

"Right," Jerik groaned. "Just like you didn't know what was on the Enterprise that made him so furious." Yana looked towards him, her jaw had dropped slightly. "Yeah the anomaly turned him into a megalomaniac, but the Enterprise visit..." He shuddered violently, "oh boy."

"Something hasn't been shared? Shocking," Chakotay muttered sarcastically. "What exactly are you covering up? Maybe we should have known before we sent my daughter back into that anomaly."

"It isn't relevant to the vessel's retrieval," Yana said quickly, but she said it to Jerik not Chakotay.

Jerik shrugged, "how would I know that? You didn't tell us anything."

Chakotay glanced between the two, slowly getting more and more impatient with them. "Excuse me. I think this affects us as well as you, care to fill me in?"

Jerik waited for Yana to say something instead of him, all she did was break eye contact with him.

"The team who were sent to your Enterprise were banned from talking about it," he answered for her, ignoring her silent pleas. "Yana was one of them."

"You're making too big a fuss about it. Shoytin was already obsessed with going back into the anomaly, this is pointless," Yana said.

"So why was the information banned?" Chakotay questioned.

"It's nothing you don't already know about; Game Spheres, towers, planet draining," Yana answered reluctantly. Jerik just shook his head. "Enterprise was actually trying to help us, not kill us. That's the information that infuriated Shoytin. It didn't change what he did then. He didn't start to change his plans until Voyager escaped the anomaly."

Chakotay felt his eyes widen as one of her sentences sunk in. "Wait..."

Jerik was furious, his fists clenched. "You knew our world was... were you ever going to tell us?"

"It... it doesn't matter now," Yana said sadly. Jerik's anger dissolved in an instant when he saw the look on her face. His whole body slumped, his head fell.

"This makes less sense than before," Chakotay said, his hand went to his forehead. "Shoytin accused us and the Enterprise of attacking other planets, yet he never brought up his own. He never hinted that he knew about the Game Sphere towers."

"He would never have victimised himself by doing so, it would weaken him," Yana said.

Jerik grunted and walked away to the nearest exit. One of the Security officers standing there moved out of the way and then followed him.

"*What he did then,*" Chakotay said quietly. Yana looked up at him. "You said he found out the Enterprise's true mission, but it didn't change his plans. Only Voyager's escape did."

"I'm afraid I don't know beyond the weapon, armour theft," Yana said. "Once he found out he ordered us off the ship, saying he'd handle the rest himself."

Chakotay stared at the window, worry was all over his face. "For all we know he expected us to follow the Enterprise, board it and..." He stared back at Yana intently. "I guess you're lucky that anything planted on the Enterprise would be drained of power by now."

"If leading Voyager into a trap was his intention, he wouldn't have done it that way," Yana said. Her face turned white as she thought about it. "Shoytin would have preferred a more subtle method."

"Like kidnapping children?" Chakotay said bitterly.

Yana closed her eyes tightly, she lowered her head. "Shoytin never wanted you to get your ship back, that's the truth. I know it doesn't mean much now, but trust me, your two crewmembers are not in danger. They should be able to retrieve it."

"Their success affects what happens to you, that's your ship we're using," Chakotay reminded her softly. He sat down in Jerik's old spot. "If you know anything that can help us, it would hurt you as well not to mention it."

"I know. It was only the politics I didn't share. Everything you needed to know to retrieve your ship was shared. I wasn't trying to deceive you, I merely didn't want to waste your time. I apologise," Yana said with a trembling voice.

The sincerity in her eyes and the guilt riddling her voice convinced Chakotay she wasn't lying. He decided not to press the issue any further for now. "I should tell my crew about this. You understand?"

"To be honest, I would too. You're right to be suspicious of us. What we did to you was unforgivable," Yana said sadly.

Chakotay felt a twang of guilt of his own, he shook his head gently. "What Shoytin did to us was unforgivable. You followed him until he gave you reason to doubt him. Then you did the right thing. It's what you do here on out that'll matter, not what some lunatic told you to do."

"He..." Yana stammered. "He wasn't always the evil mad man you paint him as. Yes he was a strict, firm leader but he genuinely had his crew's best interests at heart. I don't know what happened that made him lose himself like that, we all saw the same things."

"He liked to be in control I think. Your world and the Softmicron, your fleet and the anomaly. It must have been infuriating for someone like him," Chakotay said while rising to his feet again. He walked towards the exit, Yana watched him do so. "You can't fix everything," he mumbled.

The entire time he had been walking, he had felt like someone was following him. Damien glanced behind him every few seconds to make sure, but everytime there was no one there. He had a good idea who would be doing it anyway, so this didn't make him feel any safer. Any second now she'd probably pounce, he had to be prepared to run at any...

"Hi Damy wamy!" Annika cooed from in front of him.

Damien jumped out of his skin. He had been too busy looking behind him he didn't see her coming. She was right in his face as well. He quickly double backed a few steps. "Dear devil, what are you... why... Damy wamy?"

Annika giggled, "you like? It keeps the deviousness of your real name, but it also is a cute pet name for only me to use."

Damien rolled his eyes in disgust. "It says a lot that I miss your old boring *I'm so perfect, woe is me* personality. What do you want?"

Annika tried to look serious, it almost looked like her old default face. The only difference was her eyes were wider, if that's even possible. "I have a confession to make."

Damien closed his eyes. "Please be dying, please be dying," he whispered to himself.

"It's about the alliance you made with my ex hunny bun," Annika said. Her serious face was gone, it was replaced by a terrible attempt at looking apologetic. If it wasn't for her outfit, she'd look like an overgrown toddler about to suck her thumb. "I'm sorry, we're not supposed to talk about exes."

Damien wasn't sure whether to be disgusted or confused. He didn't like being confused, he felt it wasn't in his nature so he picked disgusted. "That wasn't an alliance, Brannon Braga was just taking the wrath while I schemed in the background. He was always a fool."

"I meant Chuckle-kins," Annika laughed.

"Oh, I knew that," Damien said.

Annika showed off her teeth with a big grin. Damien cringed at it. "I know, you were just trying to make me laugh."

"Can you hurry this confession up? I gotta take a long bath in the warp core or maybe just gouge my eyes out," Damien muttered.

Annika just winked at him, "sounds like fun! Anyway I want to tell you that..." She trailed off, looking a little nervous. Her right foot raised up to rub the back of her lower left leg, while her arms folded

across her back. Damien quickly looked around to see if anyone was witnessing this. "Maybe you will tell me the story about you and Chakotay again. It was so interesting."

"What? I never told you, I make it a habit to avoid talking to you," Damien muttered. "On that note!" He turned around to walk the other way.

"I am so afraid that if I tell you, you'll go somewhere far away," Annika said sadly. She perked up instantly, "oh well, you still love me right cos that's so romantic and junk, all the lying for your own good you know?"

Damien had missed the second half of that, he had stopped and was stuck in his own mind. He smiled deviously, "somewhere far away, ey?"

"Who cares if I doom Voyager, even the universe in doing so. You being with me is far more important. Why if..." Annika continued to blab on.

Damien heard the words *doom* and *Voyager* so he paid attention again. He looked torn as he turned around to face her again. "Hmm, I have no idea where you got this crap from, but I like the idea of ending Voyager for good." Annika's eyes widened and sparkled, like her skin. "But I hate you more. It's a toughie."

Annika pouted, "you are going far away, aren't you? I can feel it."

Damien smiled. "No, no of course not," he lied.

"Good," Annika sighed in relief.

Luckily for Damien they were now no longer alone as Chakotay turned the corner. He groaned at the sight of them. Annika's eyes started to shift suspiciously.

"No, don't listen to his lies!" Annika suddenly screamed as he walked by them. It startled the remaining life out of Chakotay and Damien. She then grabbed Damien by the shoulders and shook him, "you were there, you wouldn't lie. Don't listen, it's not true." As soon as she let go, Damien wobbled and fell over.

Chakotay stopped a few steps away, he couldn't help but look over his shoulder. Damien struggled to get back up but he was way too dizzy after that. "What are you talking about?" Chakotay asked.

"Shh! Don't do this Chuckle-kins," Annika hissed.

Chakotay grimaced quite a lot, "don't call me that again. And do what, I'm just walking."

"Don't listen!" Annika shouted as Damien finally stood back up. He had to step backwards a few more times to avoid being deafened.

"I'm assuming this is new stalking material she's stolen now that she's ran out of Twilight material," Chakotay said quietly to Damien.

Damien groaned, "no, she hasn't. Just yesterday she was telling me I'd have to chew any baby we had out of her." Of course he had to gag at remembering this. "That wasn't the worst part."

"Really?" Chakotay said. Damien was about to continue but he shoved him back to the floor to shut him up. "Sorry, that was my mistake. Really usually means *continue*, my version just means *I don't care*."

"Hey do you want to talk next to some shuttles and have a fade out moment?" Annika butted in.

Chakotay and Damien looked at each other with the exact same confused look on their faces.

Annika winked at Damien, "then a fade in moment of us sitting, sleeping next to each other."

"I... I have no idea what she's ripping off here but it makes less sense," Chakotay said.

Damien dragged himself back onto his feet, using that as an opportunity to take another step backwards without her realising. "I'll go and erm... prepare the shuttle bay."

"Chakotay can hint later that he saw us and I'd get cutely embarrassed, hehe," Annika laughed.

Chakotay eyed Damien suspiciously as he backed away. "Yeah right, I'll call you when I'm ready." He ran and fast.

"Can you pull off *cutely*?" Chakotay asked.

Annika smiled that toothy grin again, "can you pull off staying in character?"

"I could say the same to you," Chakotay groaned. He hurried after Damien.

Annika just giggled, "yep, go find a nice place to watch. I'll practice my surprise face." Luckily Chakotay was gone when she started dropping her jaw, gasping and touching her exposed chest.

Damien ran through the shuttle bay doors, only stopping for a moment to catch his breath. The first shuttle to catch his eye was Tom's prized possession, the Delta Flyer. His devious smile crept onto his face as he approached it.

"I dunno why I never thought of this before. So long Voyager, good riddance," he cackled.

Not long after he ran inside it Chakotay walked into the bay. He was about to turn around and leave when the Flyer powered up. "I dunno why he never tried this before," he said. Quickly he rushed into it as well, not noticing that the shuttle bay doors never shut behind him.

Somebody else entered the bay just as Chakotay hopped inside the Flyer. Her eyes narrowed and she followed as quickly as she could manage.

Inside the Flyer Damien was still trying to figure out the silly manual controls Tom had installed. Chakotay crept into the room as he studied one of the levers. The Commander was within a metre of him when the villain grabbed it and pulled it forward.

The shuttle shot forward straight for the shuttle bay doors. Naturally a few seconds later there was nothing left of them, just a hole. The other shuttles started to be pulled out as well, luckily a forcefield shot up before they were gone too.

### **The Bridge:**

"Er Harry," Jodie commented, pointing at the viewscreen.

Everyone looked up in time to see the Flyer shooting off into the distance. Harry was the first to panic, "jesus... follow, get a tractor beam on it!"

"We can't. If we leave, the planet may detect us," Nathan reminded him.

The Flyer was barely a dot when it flashed, then it was gone.

"Oh crap. Who was on it and why the hell can people still steal shuttles from this ship so easily?" Tom asked.

The person manning Tactical laughed nervously. They quickly tapped something into it as if they were trying to hide something. Everyone looked at him. "Yeah I have no idea, Security is flawless."

"Normally I'd laugh, but we have a fricking hacker as our Chief of Security. This shouldn't happen," Harry stuttered.

Jodie shrugged, she looked down at her station. Her face turned pale, "um... probably cos it was Damien."

Harry face palmed into his right hand, "oh." He then realised something, "wait..."

"Also there's Chakotay," Jodie continued telling him.

Harry turned back to Tactical, "where the hell is Jessie? I hope we're not doing another disaster while she has a kid plot."

Nathan shook his head and rolled his eyes. Jodie just sighed, "I dunno about the second one, but the first question is she's on the Flyer."

"What?" Harry stuttered.

"What?" Nathan said as well.

### **The Flyer:**

Damien was now on the floor nursing a bump on his head. Chakotay quickly sat down in the pilot's seat.

"Hey!" a familiar voice yelled at him from behind. He only groaned. "I hope you two aren't teaming up again."

"Jessie, this isn't the time," Chakotay said. He studied the helm controls, hoping the stop button or lever was easy to find.

Jessie stomped over, her face was very red. "Oh it's the time. I hope you're not carrying dead bodies around again, you sick fu..." The shuttle suddenly stopped, making her stumble to the floor.

Chakotay and his chair were pulled backwards as well. Unfortunately for him it meant he'd fall on top of Damien.

"What, how could this happen?" he whined. "I didn't do anything yet."

### **Half an hour ago:**

Annika tip toed into the shuttle bay and over to the Delta Flyer. She went inside for a few minutes. Once she left she was holding a small device, giggling to herself.

"You're not going anywhere, it's not safe. I'm so good at this protecting thing."

### **The present:**

Jessie was even more unhappy than she was before and that took some beating. She tried to get up, fortunately for everyone she was stuck.

"What did you do?" Chakotay snapped while giving the villain a nasty shove.

Damien rolled over a bit so he could at least sit up. "Me? I was flying fine until you whacked me. You are the shuttle crashing moron anyway, so I'm not surprised."

"We haven't crashed, we just lost our warp field," Chakotay groaned.

"Give it time. We were near a planet, weren't we?" Damien sneered. He grew angry, "wait, what? No warp, so I'm stuck with you? This can't get any worse."

"Son of a..." Jessie growled once she grabbed a hold of a station. Damien and Chakotay looked her way, both of them grew a little worried, especially as she was able to pull herself to her feet. "All right, who do I kill first?"

"Who invited fatty?" Damien had to make it worse.

Chakotay stared back at him. "I can't believe even you are *that* stupid!" He backed off towards the helm, he feared it wasn't far enough.

Jessie tried to grab Damien, he was too low down for her to reach though. "Stupid, me? I'm a gen..." Damien said oblivious to the impending danger. A foot swung into a certain area, shutting him up immediately. Well talking wise anyway. All he could do was cry.

"Okay, now that, that's sorted..." Chakotay said nervously. Jessie glared at him. "Ok ok, settle down. It's not what you think."

"I saw you sneak into that shuttle after following Damien," she said.

Chakotay shook his head, "what did I just say? It's not what you think."

"Did you just snap at me?" Jessie said dangerously. The look in her eye made Chakotay's insides cower.

"No, no. I'm just trying to reassure you," he stuttered. "I think Damien was trying to escape from Annika. I was trying to stop him."

"Why? Tom has the Delta Flyer specs in the replicator, it only takes him five minutes to make a new one," Jessie said.

"I know that, everybody does. No matter how annoying he is, we can't let Damien go. We have enough problems," Chakotay said.

Jessie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, good job fixing that problem."

Chakotay sighed, "that wasn't my fault. Let me have a look." Jessie's glare told him she wouldn't let him touch anything, but he couldn't bare to look at her, she was scarier than Kathryn's worst death glare. He turned around to check the helm. "Yep, according to the controls we should still be going at warp. Nothing's changed. Can you check the..." He managed to feel her glare get even worse even with his back to her. "Never mind."

Jessie groaned, she sat down at the nearest station. "Looks like we've been sabotaged."

"Really, that's odd. This trip wasn't exactly planned," Chakotay said. Jessie stared at him with her eyebrow raised. "I know, you don't believe me."

"Damn," Damien whined from the floor.

"I'm not sure what it was but without it the engines were overheating. Dropping out of warp was a fail safe," Jessie said, getting angrier with every word. "Nice job."

"Nice job? You manned the Engineering station for seven years and you don't know what part was removed," Chakotay said too quickly. He immediately realised that wasn't a good idea, the look on her face confirmed it. "You know what it did though and that's the main thing."

"If we go to warp again, we may get back to where we were before it conks out," Jessie muttered.

Chakotay nodded quickly, "right." He sat back down in the pilot's seat, then pulled it forward to the helm. The lever Damien pushed was pulled back. "Okay, so let's turn us around."

He and Jessie heard Damien manage to cackle through his pain, they each slowly turned their heads towards him. "What now?" Jessie hissed.

"Oh it's funny, for so many reasons," Damien answered in between cringes. "If we didn't already, going back will attract attention to Voyager." Chakotay couldn't help but groan. "You know I'm all for it."

"I'm still waiting for the punch line," Chakotay said.

Jessie smiled maliciously, "yes, me too."

Damien understood what she really meant, he tried to laugh but it sounded as nervous as he felt. "That fail safe you mentioned will have tripped out the warp engines, permanently. At least until it's reset. I doubt either of you clowns knows how to do it."

"It shouldn't be that difficult. We can head back at impulse for the time being," Chakotay said.

Damien chuckled, "you just proved that you don't know. If the engines overheated, I wouldn't even try to reactive them just yet. I don't fancy dying with tubbo one and two here."

Jessie was about to give him another kick, Chakotay rushed over to stop her. "Wait, I've got a better idea."

"So do I," Jessie scowled. She instead threw a punch towards Chakotay's face. Damien quickly crawled away to the helm to avoid another kicking. "Hey!" She hurried over to get in his way. "You're going to reset the fail safe and get us back to Voyager."

"Why would I want to do that? That blonde cow is far more annoying than you, and that's saying something," Damien grumbled.

"Fine, that's up to you. You're smart, apparently, so answer me this first. Which place and situation is a more likely one for me to suddenly going into labour?" Jessie said. Damien looked disgusted at the thought. "Voyager and nothing going on. Or stuck in the Delta Flyer with you two while Voyager probably goes Game Tower heisting?"

"Oh crap," Damien groaned. He shook his head, "fine, I'll fix it. You still have to wait for the temperature to go down."

Jessie folded her arms tightly and stared down at him with narrowed eyes. "How long?"

"An hour, maybe two. Probably two as this stupid shuttle is so compact," Damien replied.

Chakotay groaned whilst nursing his newly bruised nose. He walked over to sit down at one of the other stations. "My plan was pretty much the same. You didn't have to hit me."

"Yeah right, of course I did," Jessie spat back at him. "Your best plans would involve Tolg ship hunting or bullying me. Though I'd really like to see you try the second one now."

Damien sniggered, "yes please."

Chakotay sighed and glanced down at the station in front of him. "I didn't bully you, please let it go."

"Well since you asked so nicely," Jessie said, rolling her eyes.

"I should get us turned around. The sooner we get back the better," Chakotay muttered. He spotted Damien shaking his head. "Even impulse was affected? Great."

"Isn't it?" Damien laughed. "What did he do anyway? Pass the time for us."

"Sure," Jessie said in a fake sweet voice. He didn't see it coming until it was too late, her fist slammed into his face.

**Voyager:**

"If we leave now we could be discovered. What do we do?" Harry questioned.

Tom didn't look too worried. "Jessie's there. She'll likely kill them both and fly back. Auto pilot isn't hard to figure out."

"Why would Chakotay be tagging along with Damien again? There's no one to resurrect, right?" Nathan wondered.

Tom shook his head. "Don't worry, Jessie won't take any of that crap. We got something far more important to worry about." He paced over towards Opps. "Are we close enough to the planet to get an idea what the inhabitants look like?"

"I think so," Jodie said.

"Well then, I think it's time we have a look around then," Tom smiled.

Harry winced, "Tom there's no proof that this species is warp capable. No ships, no satellite systems, nothing. The prime directive is pretty damn clear on this matter."

"Yes there is, that transmission was subspace. We've had this argument before," Tom said. "Besides if I'm right or wrong, we still have to do something discreet. The only other options are to give up and leave, or just beam whoever's in trouble."

"If they're not warp capable and if it's true there are aliens among them, Softmicron or something else, we can't just leave them there," Nathan said warily.

"Great. Harry, I'll leave Voyager in your hands," Tom said a little too cheerfully. "Since she cracked the code, I'll bring B'Elanna. Oh... Bridge to the Doctor." He hurried for the nearest turbolift.

The Doctor's annoyed sigh was heard over the comm, *"I have a name, why isn't anybody using it?"*

"Ha, you crack me up Doc," Tom sniggered once he arrived at the turbolift. "I hope you're in the mood for some *plastic surgery*."

"I've been saying that you needed that for years," Jodie said.

Nathan spoke at the same time as her, "ah good for you, it's about time." The siblings looked at each other, then at Tom before the doors closed. The pout on his face made them break into laughter.

"They're just jealous," Tom mumbled when he was on his own.

The alien ship, Katane, stood nose to nose with the Enterprise E, a blue light connected the two together. With every single source of light on the starship still off-line, the former flagship looked like a ghost ship that had been abandoned for years. The Katane with only its engines and a couple of lights on itself, was piercingly bright compared to it. Without the blue beam, it would be mostly impossible for anyone passing by to even see it.

James had knelt down in front of the two large bags, he was busy rummaging through them. Every now and then he'd take something out and put it to one side. Lena glanced between him and one of the alien computers, only she wasn't really looking at the computer itself. She was looking at the PADD James had left on top of it.

She sent another glance his way while he was holding and inspecting a phaser rifle. Her attention quickly returned to the PADD, then the computer itself. Glancing between the two things she started to

tap the controls. Unlike Starfleet computers, these didn't make a sound, at least not until a command was fully entered. Lena only needed to give it one command.

James heard the beep, but by the time he had turned around to see what was going on Lena was already enveloped by an alien transporter beam.

"Lena, what are you..." he stuttered whilst scrambling to his feet. His hand flew to his commbadge.

Everything was exactly the same as she remembered it. Without the flashlight she had brought there wouldn't have been much to see. The only light came from the flickering consoles that weren't damaged.

Chairs had been knocked over, pushed to one side.

The fallen bulkhead lay near the entrance to the Ready Room, blocking entry to it.

There was a crisp chill still in the air as the environmental systems struggled to get back to normal.

Lena had a small bit of hope that the illusion Q gave her was wrong, but it was hauntingly right. The only differences allowed her to survive being there, to see the state of her old ship for herself.

Only then she realised the air was still a little thin, she had to force herself to take fewer but deeper breaths.

"Lena," her commbadge chirped. *"Why did you do that? I thought you didn't want to go over there."*

Lena hesitantly tapped it. "I didn't, but I had to see it."

She heard a quiet sigh. *"You know that only one of us can go over there. Someone has to stay on this ship. I can't keep the shields down so we can beam back and forth."*

"It's okay, I'm fine," Lena said, even though it felt like a lie. The sight of the Enterprise bridge, abandoned and neglected, the guilt was too much for her.

*"We both know that's not true. I shouldn't have brought you, I'm sorry."*

"Why? I insisted. It's okay, I had to come back someday," Lena said. Her first destination was the bulkhead blocking the Ready Room.

*"Keep the comm open, okay? If it gets too much we'll swap."*

"Uh huh," she barely mumbled in response. Carefully she lifted the large piece of metal up so it was standing upright. Despite her efforts it groaned and then crashed into the wall nearby. She winced a little.

*"What happened?"*

"Yeah, the gravity's still a bit light here," Lena said. She didn't dare to look at the damage moving that did, instead she looked ahead into the open Ready Room.

*"We're lucky the remote connection managed to turn a light on."*

Lena rolled her eyes, "that's another complaint about me beaming over, isn't it?" Despite her annoyance at that, it was a distraction to her surroundings for a second so she was a little relieved too.

*"Well you know, I like trashing things more than you. I'm a little hurt."*

Lena smiled, even laughed a little. Then she made her way into the pitch black Ready Room. The torch illuminated her path, what she saw wiped the smile off her face. Instead of the desk and chair she was expecting, all she saw was broken bits of the wall in its place.

The torch was quickly moved to the left so she could inspect the rest of it, but her hand was shaking as she did so. The rest of it wasn't much different, apart from the chair that used to be at the desk was lying sideways on the floor. Something else caught her eye before she could wonder why it lay on the other side of the room. A small computer sat on a table made up with wall debris.

"I... don't get it. The ship wasn't that damaged. Why is it so bad inside?" she asked herself quietly.

*"If the ship was crewed by the people left behind during the breach, I can't imagine they'd be able to keep on top of the minor stuff."*

"Yeah," Lena said, walking slowly to the computer. "I think it's time we find out."

### **The Katane:**

Lena watched silently as James was hooking up the computer from the Ready Room to the portable replicator.

"I don't think this'll last too long. I don't want to risk hooking it up to the alien's systems," he said, now focusing on the computer itself.

"I thought it would be quicker than waiting for the main computer to come online," Lena said.

James nodded, "well you said it's been used since the ship was damaged. It's got to have something."

"You do know what you're doing right?" Lena asked, wincing a little.

"Not at all," James replied honestly.

Lena quickly took a couple of steps backwards when he went to turn it on. Both of them were relieved when the screen came on and nothing exploded.

"Ok, so let's see what was accessed last, that might..." James said, tapping on the interface. "There's a log here dated last month. This should be good."

One touch and all they got was a bunch of quiet static. Just when James was about to give up with that they heard a light clatter in the recording.

*"Damn it, there goes another one,"* a voice both of them recognised muttered.

Lena and James looked at each other, their eyes wider in surprise.

*"Enterprise Log, 27th March 82. Another planet has been taken care of but there doesn't seem to be any change. I'm starting to think they're making these things faster than we can even repair. We're on route to another tower network close by which makes me think we're pretty close to the source of this sphere."*

"I don't believe it," Lena said quietly. James however didn't seem as shocked anymore, he looked like he was thinking to her.

*"The ship's not going to last much longer. Our weapon reserves are nearly depleted, and the shields have seen better days. I suppose it's inevitable that we'd return to the Erayas system. The answer must be there. Perhaps it's time."*

"The Erayas system," Lena wondered aloud.

The word had brought James out of his head, he had a worried look on his face. "The ship we're on, it belongs to the Erayans."

"Oh," was all Lena could say.

James quickly tapped a few more things in the computer. "Just doing a quick search for Erayas. The replicator doesn't have enough power for another full log." Luckily the screen showed a couple of search results for the name. He picked the one at the top with the more recent date.

*"Enterprise Log, 25th February 82. As our tip suggested, the Erayas system was infected with the towers. However before we could help them, something..."* there was a loud, annoyed sigh. "I'm not sure, space is black but this thing was darker somehow. The planet no longer exists. Only a few ships managed to escape. I've never seen..."

The computer lost all of its power and shut itself off.

"I don't like the sound of this at all," James said.

Lena's shoulders had tensed up during the entire log. "Was she talking about the anomaly? Is that why the Enterprise was stuck in there? Some sort of suicide mission?"

"No," James replied. "Shoytin and his crew got to it first, he didn't know how to get out of the anomaly."

"Their planet, it could still be in one piece," Lena said. "That's if we're right."

"That remains to be seen. The Enterprise was drained in a matter of days, maybe a week tops. Two months in here..." James said.

Lena's shoulders finally gave way, she glanced down at the floor. "The whole thing was screwed up, there's no guarantee the planet was still near its star. Power drainage would be the least of their worries."

"Maybe that's why Shoytin was so eager to get back in there," James said.

"Hmm," was Lena's only response.

"So the Enterprise *attacks* the Erayans, they probably fight back but this anomaly somehow..." James tried to figure it out, but he reached a dead end. "The anomaly was in the same place it was when we entered the last time. There's no proof that it moves."

"Maybe not, the system was probably in its way when it formed," Lena said.

James nodded, "yeah, that's gotta be it. So the anomaly appears, taking over the planet and apparently some ships. The Enterprise attacked at the wrong time so Shoytin believes they're to blame. They pursue them, board the ship, steal the weapons. There's still a lot missing here."

"The crew," Lena stated. "Are they dead or just gone? It looked like the bridge had been left in a hurry, but the ship wasn't going to blow up, why abandon it?"

"Yeah, not only that though. They had no proof that the anomaly hadn't just destroyed the Erayas system and its towers. Why was it something they had to go back to?" James questioned.

Lena finally looked up, but only to stare straight ahead of her. "And with no crew, how did the Enterprise still end up inside?"

James slowly turned to face the alien viewscreen, an unsure look was growing on his face. "We have to go back in."

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all," Tom said.

B'Elanna looked at him, then sent a cringe the Doctor's way before glancing back at him. "What gave it away?"

The trio stood in what they thought was a dark alleyway in between two streets. Each of them were dressed in old fashioned clothes, Tom and B'Elanna had opted to cover their disguises with large sleeveless coats. The Doctor though was in his element with his disguise, he was smiling way too much.

"I don't know, could be the coats in the middle of their summer," Tom answered. It took him nearly a minute to maneuver his arm out from under the coat to wipe his brow. Even in the shade the heat they were getting from the system's star was unbearable. "Could be the really primitive planet we've come to."

B'Elanna giggled as the coat fell off him while he put his arm back inside. He quickly knelt down to recover it, almost losing his hat in the process. She walked over to straighten that for him, once she was done his hair was completely covered.

"I think this is fascinating. What an interesting species. I wish I had time to study them," the Doctor said mid grin. He raised his right arm to fluff the hair he now had on his head, which was a navy blue. Doing so he accidentally raised a second right arm to do the same thing. "Oops, that takes some getting used to."

Tom sighed sadly, "a four armed race. That's not a problem, no way."

"Well we could have had prosthetics attached," B'Elanna said. The Doctor directed his beaming smile her way. "We're not here to mingle though. We just don't want to stand out too much."

"Speaking of which, have you found the source of the signal yet?" Tom asked.

B'Elanna quickly took a peek at both entrances to the alley before looking down into her coat. The tricorder in her hand was still scanning. "It's nearby. It shouldn't be too hard considering that the most advanced thing I saw here was that cart being dragged by what I can only describe as a floating spider."

Tom shuddered quite violently, it took him a while to stop. B'Elanna looked at him sympathetically but that didn't last, laughter overtook. "Yeah we didn't stand out at all when you spotted that."

"Hmph, if I had six limbs like these guys, I doubt giant spiders would be as terrifying. It would be like seeing a dog or something," Tom muttered.

"Yes dear," B'Elanna teased him. Her tricorder started to bleep. "Got it. There's an underground structure east, just outside of this town. It looks like the interference is coming from a nearby mine."

"I'm going to go out on one of my many limbs here and assume that this structure doesn't belong here," the Doctor mused.

"I'm so glad I invited you, Doc," Tom said, obviously not seriously.

B'Elanna smiled at the pair, "normally I'd say that was obvious, but the Softmicron like to mold into the planet they're on, so they're none of the wiser."

"So... the reason we didn't detect any Game Sphere towers was because their attempts to hold up rocks with sticks keeps failing?" Tom joked.

"Yes, sure. Shall we?" B'Elanna said, gesturing her arm behind her. Naturally that led to her coat falling off. Tom and the Doctor dared to snigger at her, luckily for them she decided not to punish them for it, yet. Once the coat was back and covering her whole body, she led the way down the alley. The two men followed.

Not long after they re-entered the street, Tom dashed back into the alley in a panic. B'Elanna hurried after him, grabbed him by his arm and dragged him back.

"Oh god, they float, why do they need so many legs?" he whimpered.

### **The Delta Flyer:**

The stranded trio were now in the lower level of the shuttle. Chakotay kept a close eye on Damien as he worked inside the cage looking area. Jessie sat nearby constantly scanning her belly with a tricorder, sighing in relief each time.

She glanced over to the steps leading up in between one of her scans. "You know I've always wondered. The Flyer's control room is tightly confined around the window area right, then there's the back bit where the ceiling raises up a little. You walk alongside the shuttle and you could knock on the window if you want."

"Yeah so?" Damien muttered.

Jessie pointed at the steps, "where on earth did we climb down to then?"

The two men glanced at one another, then up at the ceiling and then finally at the steps leading up to a normal door. Their eyes were wide for a while. Chakotay shook it off, Damien just laughed.

Jessie shrugged and got back to her scanning.

"You'll probably knock me out for this one, but here goes," Chakotay said. "If you had such a terrible time with it the last three, four times, why put yourself through it again?"

Jessie raised her eyebrow, "there's nothing wrong with pineapple and mushroom sundaes."

Chakotay shuddered, Damien did as well. "No," Chakotay said. His eyes then widened, "you've had four of those already? When?"

Jessie smiled but not in a nice friendly way. "Hey, they calm me, so don't whine."

"I meant your pregnancy," Chakotay said.

Damien sniggered, "I have a theory."

"No one cares," Jessie groaned. She decided to direct a new glare towards Chakotay. "Not that it's any of your business, but I wanted a family. A big one."

"Still, you almost died on the last one," Chakotay reminded her.

Jessie sighed, "I know that."

"Do you? James isn't exactly a stable father figure as it is. Take you out of the equation and we'll probably have little kids running around stabbing people," Chakotay said.

"Hmm?" Damien liked the sound of that, he smiled.

Jessie used the nearby console to pull herself to her feet. "I obviously didn't hit you hard enough before. Hold still." She started to walk over to where he was.

"I'm not attacking, it's just a slightly exaggerated version of what would happen," Chakotay said quickly. He was a little relieved when Jessie stopped.

Damien looked disappointed, "maybe they'll choke people instead. He likes doing that." He smiled with that image in his head.

Jessie focused her attention on Damien this time, with a look on her face that would normally be on someone who was given a cup of Neelix's coffee. "What?" Her head shook to try and get rid of Damien's remark, she turned it back to Chakotay. "You're not attacking, just like you weren't bullying me to turn Evil two years ago?"

"I'm sorry, okay," Chakotay said sincerely. "I wasn't me, I got lost amongst the anger and grief. At the time I thought anything was necessary to..."

"Snore," Damien groaned. "I wouldn't take that, kick him."

"It takes more than sorry to fix something like this. It wasn't even the only thing you did," Jessie said. "Oh and while we're on the subject. Stable father figure? Have you forgotten about poor Lena already? I suppose she's not Janeway, so who cares?"

"Burn," Damien laughed.

Chakotay grimaced, his fists clenched. "Jessie, don't go there. I really am sorry, there's no need to attack me like this."

"Why not? You thought it was funny to mock my bad luck with pregnancies. We're way past the line already," Jessie grumbled.

"Wow, that is low. I love it," Damien continued to laugh. Chakotay responded by reaching over to push him to the floor. As there wasn't much room to fall, Damien hit a few things on the way down.

"I never did such a thing," Chakotay said.

Jessie rolled her eyes, "oh Jessie, you haven't had the kid yet, surely it's a month overdue for you."

"I wasn't mocking," Chakotay grumbled. "You know what, forget it. I was trying to be civil with you but hey my mistake, I thought..."

"Yeah you were, and I was responding as such until you started going on about my kids running around with knives," Jessie said.

Damien nodded, "she has a point." He pulled himself back up while rubbing his sore areas. "So would they," he giggled.

"Look, I get it. You never liked James, you thought he was in between you and Janeway. You're like those men who beat or kill their kids cos they dare to take your wife's attention away from you. Why else would you have abandoned Lena when she needed you the most?" Jessie ranted while making her way over to the replicator.

"Hey while you're there get me some popcorn," Damien sniggered.

Chakotay walked over to Jessie just as she turned away from the replicator. She pulled a worried face and took a step backwards. "Stop. What I did to you, I'm sorry but it wasn't personal. What you're doing now is. You don't have all the facts so just stop."

"I don't even know who you are anymore. That's the only fact I need, so back off," Jessie snarled.

Chakotay sighed, he took a step backwards. "I didn't want to hurt you. I was desperate for an alternative, I was willing to try anything to avoid the inevitable."

"Look as someone who doesn't take a certain loved one's death very well, and is only here because he had the same issues, I get it," Jessie said. "There's a limit though. Missing the funeral and slapping your daughter was the line, but you just kept going for another few laps. That *inevitable* was horrible but at least you would still be Chakotay today. Sometimes I honestly don't know what to call you, I still can't believe you're the same guy."

"I have a few ideas," Damien commented whilst yawning.

Chakotay rolled his eyes in his direction, then turned his head back towards her. "You think when I said the inevitable I meant Kathryn remaining dead, don't you?" Jessie frowned, but more for the ice cream already starting to melt in the bowl she held. "If it was as simple as that, I may have accepted it eventually. You're wrong, you can't compare."

Jessie walked around him to go over to the cage. She was about to speak when she noticed Damien fiddling with something. "Hey, if you don't pack that in I'm going to induce myself."

"Eew. Damn it," Damien growled. He moved over to work on something else.

"Better, now you were his partner in crime. What the hell is he talking about, do you know?" Jessie asked.

Chakotay shook his head, even smirking a little. "Really?"

"I don't know, I fell asleep when you were whining about the Slayer's many deaths," Damien replied.

Jessie faked a sweet smile, she reached over to give him a slap. He expected this one and quickly moved further back.

"It's obvious isn't it?" he said proudly. "The inevitable was my grand reawakening, my revival. It was surely an event that made the universe shudder."

"I think we can both agree on that last part," Chakotay said.

Jessie nodded, "sure, except that you helped him do that, so no sympathy here."

"Forget it, I'm not explaining myself well. I did lose myself, that's why I treat you so badly. I just wanted you to know that in my warped state of mind, I wasn't trying to hurt you by doing so. I thought it was for a greater good," Chakotay said. He hung his head in shame, "I'm sorry."

"I don't accept it," Jessie said. "Your *greater good* sent me back to my insecure childhood years. Almost cost me my marriage, made me lose the first year of my daughter's life." She turned to one side so she could still keep an eye on Damien with a glance now and then, but look at Chakotay too. "That's not the point though. It wasn't the worst thing you did. James has a permanent scar from when you tried to kill him the first time. I'll not even get started on Janeway."

"Ah good, cos that's getting old," Damien commented.

Chakotay sighed, "all right, fine, that's fair. I'd better check the sensors and comms just in case..." He walked over to the steps to climb up them.

Jessie turned her full attention on Damien, he rolled his eyes in response. "You were there, how can you not know?"

"Hmm it's probably cos I don't care," Damien answered with a smirk.

"Of course you do. You love this sort of crap," Jessie snapped. "Come on, it's dirt and you know it would be fun to spread it around."

"Do you really think if I knew something interesting that I'd keep it to myself this long?" Damien sniggered. "You're a delusional little baby maker, aren't you?"

Jessie sighed, her attention went down to her bowl of ice cream. "You're right. You wouldn't." Her nose shrivelled up as she stirred the ice cream in the bowl. "Ugh it's starting to melt." As she turned her back on Damien she tossed it over her shoulder. It splattered him right in the face.

"Ah, no it's not!" Damien cried. The bowl dropped onto his toe. "Damn it. I hate you so much."

Jessie smiled, "aaw, I hate you too."

With a few more lights and a lot of systems running again, the Enterprise was already looking a lot more lively. Its warp nacelles still lacked the blue that showed it was warp capable, the red on the tips burned brightly in contrast. The Katane now sat alongside it, the beam it was generating was long finished.

As the pair walked down the empty corridors, James and Lena avoided paying too much attention to the minor damage surrounding them. They turned to go through one of the doors, which stuttered a bit as it opened. Once they were inside they were both surprised to find the room relatively undamaged. James only noticed a little bit of debris lying beside a tiny charred part of the wall. The consoles, the large screen were in one piece.

"The Bridge is in shambles, why is this..." Lena stuttered. "Did they just concentrate their repairs on Stellar Cartography?"

"Seems like it. I guess with their mission they must have needed it," James said. He had a look at the different panels for any hints at what the last thing anyone looked at was.

Lena tapped at a different part, then glanced up. The circular screen surrounding them zoomed in to focus on a system of six planets, the Starfleet symbol floated nearby with a destination line connecting the two. "They were definitely heading back there."

James glanced up as well. "Thing is, is the system in the same place while inside the anomaly? Everything else we saw moved around."

"Everything, but the Enterprise," Lena reminded him.

"True but that planet we saw could have easily been in this area too, or could be on the other side of the galaxy. There's no way to know," James said, slowly getting annoyed with himself with each word. "You're right, this is a waste of time."

Lena scrunched up her face, "I didn't say that. I just thought it was funny that we'd go to all this trouble to get this ship back, then just send it back in right away."

"There's no proof the people on that world survived the anomaly, but no proof they didn't. I don't like the idea of leaving them," James said a little impatiently. "Even if we could find them, how the hell do we get them to safety? As soon as they're on the Enterprise, they'll just start hallucinating. We may not have the power to get back, who knows how far in it is."

Lena giggled for some reason, James looked at her with a confused stare. "What?" he asked.

"Two years ago you would have just set a course straight inside, to hell with worrying about things like that," Lena replied. "You're getting safe and boring in your old age."

"No I'm not. It was only a few days ago I got captured by literal kidnappers for trying to plant a virus. You have any idea what the risk was there?" James stuttered, a little offended.

"I bet you thought it was a sure thing. Oh and virus? Old slash young James would have just ran in and beaten them all up," Lena said, still giggling.

James tried not to pout while he was pulling an angry but confused face, it didn't work though. "You... I was. My kids were there."

Lena tried to stop giggling out of respect for the kids part, but she couldn't stop it for long. "Yes cos your kids never get kidnapped by anyone ever. This was your first time rescuing them."

"Yeah exactly, I know from experience it doesn't go well sometimes," James muttered. "Fine, we go inside the anomaly again, find the planet and find a few million there but the planet will crumble soon. What then? What if we can't find it at all and find ourselves stranded without power. I'm sure Voyager will have a good laugh, I guess."

"Well we won't know until we find it," Lena answered and casually shrugged.

"Yeah but..." James said, then he rolled his eyes. He covered his face with his right hand. "Oh god, I am getting too safe."

Lena started giggling again, then she patted him on the arm. "It's okay, that's why we're a team." Saying that seemed to wipe her good mood away in an instant. James was still covering his face to notice it. She forced a smile back on her face before he could. "Why don't we just assume this planet they were going to is in the exact same spot, well within its normal orbit anyway."

James nodded after removing his hand, "yeah, it can't hurt to look." He tapped in a few things.

The image of the system remained, but a black mass faded in over it. They could still just make out the planet and the heading. The symbol obviously showing the Enterprise's position moved further away from it, to the left. Another symbol representing the Katane appeared. Both symbols mostly shared the same spot as they sat next to the edge of the mass. The heading was adjusted to compensate.

"Don't call me a boring old fart for saying it, but before we went in to retrieve the Enterprise we studied Voyager's original course. Apart from a minor detour to avoid a planet, we were on a straight course. The Astrometrics data made it appear otherwise even though the Enterprise co-ordinates were the same," James said.

Lena's shoulders slumped a little. "So you mean even if we go in a straight line to this system, we may not reach it?"

"It's a possibility, yeah," James replied.

"How far inside is it?" Lena asked while peeping at the controls he was using before.

"It's hard to say without a comparison to our previous journeys. In normal space it would take only a couple of hours," James answered. "If we enter from a different spot, that would increase our chances too."

Lena felt a smile coming back, "I'm sure the Enterprise can handle a little peek inside, don't you think?"

"It was deeper inside the anomaly than this, so yeah I think so," James said.

"What do we do about our other ship?" Lena wondered. "All that bother to have a shared shield seems like a waste of time now."

"Well like Voyager did we'll need something to leave a message in. The problem is protecting it while we're gone," James said.

"I'm not staying behind while you re-live your glory days, so don't even think about it," Lena pretended to scold.

"Enough with the old comments, I'm only thirty two," James complained.

Lena giggled again, "sensitive much?"

"Maybe I should leave you behind. You should be taking it easy after what you've been through," James said, allowing a smile.

"No, I'm fine. Ohno I'm not dead, the trauma, over it," Lena stuttered. "I'm sure you can set up something to remotely raise the shields. I'll do it in fact."

"All right, you do that. I'll go and set a course. We're sure, right?" James said.

Lena nodded and gave him a mildly confident smile. "Why not? We can't do nothing and we've got to wait for Voyager anyway. Though even if we waited for them before going, it wouldn't matter. They still can't go in."

"Yeah, a quick look should be a good distraction at least," James mumbled as he made his way to the door.

Lena turned her head to watch him leave. She waited a while after he did before slumping her shoulders and sighing. "It'll do."

The sun was starting to set much to the relief of two members of the awayteam. They had done their best to keep out of the open so they could not only shelter from it, but walk around without their stuffy disguises. The Doctor's constant humming wasn't helping matters either.

All that there had been for miles was a treaded path. It lead them to a large hill covered in dead trees and bushes, the path itself went down into a cave.

The awayteam hid behind the trees on the flat, luckily for them these trees were still alive and provided plenty of cover. Two aliens were stood at the entrance to the cave, yelling at each other.

"We don't have to go through there?" Tom wondered quietly.

B'Elanna stared down at her tricorder. "The interference is definitely coming from the mine. It's why we couldn't just transport here in the first place."

"That's a yes," the Doctor cheerfully quipped.

"When did I become the one annoyed by snark?" Tom groaned. He shook his head before scanning the area. "We can't transport and since this isn't the aliens doing, there won't be a handy path from their mine to it."

B'Elanna finally looked up from her tricorder. The first thing she noticed were the trees scattered across the hill. "I've got a bad feeling about this." Tom and The Doctor glanced towards her. "A hidden facility, a distress call on a pre-industrial planet from people who know us, fuel gathering that kills the wildlife."

Tom nodded, "yeah, I was thinking the same. I guess towers really were out of the question here."

"Hmm if this is the work of the Softmicron, we'd have no way of knowing if any are here until it's too late," the Doctor said.

"Great. We've come this far, we can't just give up now," Tom said a little impatiently. "I'd rest easy if I knew who sent us that message."

B'Elanna looked down at her tricorder again, she gave it a few taps. "I've brought a few things that could help us break through the interference enough to transport. I hope." Tom and The Doctor both winced at that last part. "Not here, we're not close enough."

"The mine it is then. The problem is, how do we get past the sentry?" Tom said.

The Doctor watched the two arguing aliens with interest. "The fellow to the left is complaining about workers' health."

To Tom and B'Elanna they were speaking gibberish, they looked at him in surprise. "How?" Tom stuttered.

The Doctor scoffed before answering, a proud smile was on his face. "It's obvious. He's sweating, his hair is limp and thin. His skin appears to be paler than the others we've seen."

"Sure, obvious. How do you know that's why they're arguing?" Tom questioned.

"Why else would he be complaining to someone that's not sick?" the Doctor answered.

"That's great, but it doesn't get us in. Besides he could be just asking his boss for a sick day," B'Elanna said just as the healthier alien pulled out a sharp weapon. Before the frail one could respond he was stabbed with it. "Or he could be a canary complaining about the poor work conditions," she said in deadpan.

Tom's eyes widened, he quickly ducked behind the tree stump. "He's leaving, quick!"

The other two did the same with two different trees as the only alive alien wandered off. He wiped the blue blood from his weapon with a nonchalant look on his face. Once he was out of sight the team re-emerged from the trees.

"I'm joining you on this bad feeling, but we don't have a choice," Tom said to B'Elanna.

"I don't know. Humans were pretty brutal in their day. This could be a normal occurrence here," the Doctor said. He wandered over to the man on the ground, the other two hissed a no at him to come back.

"We can't interfere," Tom reminded him.

"I know," the Doctor said sadly, his good mood ancient history now.

"We'd better be careful. Mines dug in this way are prone to collapses. Also the air will get thinner the deeper we get. I've got..." B'Elanna said while fishing around in the many pockets of the giant coat. In the end she had to put it back on to figure out which. "Well I did have oxygen gen..."

The Doctor placed a hand on that arm as if to try and stop her. "If the goal is to only setup a device to allow transport, let me go. I don't need to breathe and if I run into any natives on route, I'll look a lot less suspicious than you."

B'Elanna and Tom glanced at one another. They reluctantly nodded. "I'll go through what you have to do," B'Elanna said.

"I don't get it. It should be working," Damien grumbled while he worked at the helm. Chakotay kept a constant look over his shoulder.

"Gee, that's impossible cos you're super duper smart, right?" Jessie taunted him from a station further back.

Damien's eyes narrowed a lot, his two hands resting on the helm closed up slowly, scratching it as he did. "I... it's..."

Chakotay smirked, "congratulations you broke him."

"It's this shuttle, got to be," Damien said. He felt relieved that he finally had a scapegoat, "so there's that, and Tom made it. It obviously doesn't work the way normal ships do."

"So close," Chakotay sighed sadly.

"Surely you would have seen that while you were fixing it, any genius would," Jessie said with a smile.

Damien's face stiffened as he clenched his jaw. Chakotay noticed his body start to tremble with rage.

"We've got impulse, that's better than nothing. By the time we get there. No, long before then, Voyager will be done and they'll come looking for us," Chakotay said.

"I'm not going back," Damien said defiantly. "At least with that bitch in labour she won't be able to demean me as much. Do your worst."

"That's flawed logic. Women are lot more irritable when they're in labour," Chakotay reminded. "Hence the threat, or didn't you understand?"

Damien sniggered, "please, this is Jessie. She'll be unconscious or dead."

"I wonder if there any of the escape pods left," Chakotay mused as he edged backwards, hopefully out of firing range.

Once he was out of the way, Jessie got up to make her way over to the front of the shuttle. Chakotay quickly escaped before it all kicked off. As he climbed down the steps to the lower part of the shuttle, it yanked forward for a second and then stopped. Once he was safely down the stairs he felt it glide to one side.

"I hope I can get control of the helm from here," he said to himself.

Three figures dematerialised in poorly lit metallic corridor. Two of them immediately reached for their phasers, just in case. They relaxed at the sight of the empty corridor. B'Elanna instead grabbed her tricorder.

Tom tapped the commbadge inside one of his pockets. "We're in."

*"Acknowledged..."* Harry's voice was mostly drowned out by crackling static. The awayteam heard him say something else but weren't sure what.

"You're breaking up Voyager. We'll contact you when we find something," Tom said, then he tapped again. "Well done Doc." He had a quick look at his surroundings, his face scrunched further and further the more details he noticed. The walls had cracked in places, the soil filtered through every one it could find. A distant dripping sound in the distance seemed minor enough, but the stench of stale water told him to expect much worse. One small step forward made the floor groan so loudly he thought it would give way.

"Looks like it's been abandoned for a while," B'Elanna said what he was thinking. Only she was reading her tricorder, so it wasn't just an opinion.

"How long is a while?" the Doctor asked.

B'Elanna carefully walked over to the wall, the ground groaned with every step. There she opened a small panel. She couldn't help but gasp at the strange looking technology hidden behind it. "I... I wouldn't even know where to begin here. This is incredible. If I were to guess, I'd say this entire structure has infinite power. There's no sign of a generator."

"What about the mine? I thought it would be powered by whatever the aliens are mining," Tom said.

B'Elanna shrugged. Her curiosity got the better of her so she raised her tricorder to scan the colourful panel. "I wouldn't rule it out but I can't find anything here that syphons it or converts for that matter."

"I guess it doesn't matter. Are there any lifesigns?" Tom asked.

B'Elanna studied her tricorder for longer than either Tom or the Doctor would have liked. She eventually turned on her heel to face down the corridor, "this way."

Tom instinctively reached for his phaser, he gestured with a nod to the others to do the same. The Doctor didn't look as sure as the pair when he grabbed his. "We have no way of knowing if they're friend or foe?" he said.

"No. The interference is still a problem. There's definitely people here, roughly thirty of them," B'Elanna answered.

The trio made their way down the creaking corridor as carefully and quietly as they could. As they walked further down the lights seemed to get lighter. Tom felt like he was gradually walking up a slight hill. He was about to say something when B'Elanna glanced at him and then at the tricorder again.

"The structure isn't level. The structural damage and the leaks must be weighing one side of it down," she said.

"I don't get it. How or why would someone build something like this and just leave it to rot on a pre-industrial world?" Tom wondered out loud. As if on cue an inhumane screech echoed down the corridor, the sound of it seemed to run right by them and get quieter as it travelled away. "I knew I should have brought Zare."

"Why didn't we?" the Doctor asked.

B'Elanna's face turned ghostly white while she looked at her tricorder. The two men grew even more worried, they both knew it took a lot to spook her. "One lifesign's gone."

"Oh boy," Tom stuttered. His instincts took over his hand again, it tapped the commbadge this time. "Voyager?"

All he got was static back for a minute or so. They could eventually make out a voice but it was drowned out.

"Harry if you can hear me, you need to tell Zare to join us," Tom said. The static stopped for a moment, then came back to muffle out the voice. "The signal's terrible, I'm hoping that it's just our side. B'Elanna?"

"There's nothing I can do. We're lucky to get anything here," she said.

Tom sighed, his nerves were starting to get the better of him, his body shook. "Great, maybe we should have programmed the Doc with some four armed kung fu moves."

"I'm a Doctor not a..." the Doctor grumbled, then his face lit up. "Well I'm already great at a lot of things. Why not?"

*"It would be a shame to miss that," Harry's voice finally broke through the static.*

"Harry? Oh good. Did you understand my message?" Tom sighed in relief.

*"Nope, just the image of the Doc swinging four arms around and people laughing."*

"How rude," the Doctor commented.

Tom was too freaked out to laugh at that yet. "Can you beam Zare down here? I have a feeling we're going to need some muscle."

*"I did wonder why you didn't ask for her in the first place."*

*"We don't need to wait for the Enterprise to be retrieved. What harm can it do?" Nathan's voice teased.*

Something groaned above them. The awayteam looked up but saw nothing. "We all make mistakes, can we move on?" Tom stuttered.

"I'll tell her. Standby," Harry's voice said.

"Make sure she brings lots of weapons. Maybe a flamethrower," Tom said.

B'Elanna smirked and shook her head. "Why would she need a flamethrower? We have phasers that could do the same thing."

"Well it's better than a little knife," Tom argued.

"Or a four armed Doctor with no kung fu skills," B'Elanna sniggered.

Tom wasn't amused, he was still a bit nervous. "I was just suggesting that she needs to be packing when she joins us. You didn't have to pick on everything I say."

The Doctor edged a few steps to one side to separate himself from them. Not that it would help him much.

B'Elanna's face stiffened. "Well excuse me for trying to get your mind off this place. I will not bother next time."

"I'm not a child, so yeah don't bother," Tom huffed.

The Doctor was very uncomfortable now as the pair just gave each other cold glares. He knew from experience not to say anything, it hadn't worked well for him in the past.

"Any excuse to attack, if you ask me," Tom muttered, breaking the awkward silence. B'Elanna's eyes flashed with rage.

"Very mature Tom. When does the *not a child* happen?" B'Elanna snapped.

"See, Doc isn't she being unreasonable?" Tom said in the Doctor's direction.

The poor hologram froze. He badly didn't want to get involved. He could just make out B'Elanna's icy stare in the corner of his eye as well, which didn't help either. Someone was on his side as a voice echoed down the corridor, startling the life out of Tom again and made B'Elanna look down at her tricorder.

"Someone's coming," B'Elanna said, quickly swapping her tricorder for the phaser. Tom was already there and pointing it. B'Elanna gave him a blank stare. She raised her spare hand up to push the phaser so it wouldn't shoot the wall.

Footstep sounds were approaching now. With each step the awayteam's tension level rose. They then saw a shadow emerge from around the corner. Tom braced himself for the worse. The next thing they saw was a rifle being pointed at them.

B'Elanna and the Doctor relaxed a little, but Tom just looked down at this phaser pitifully.

"Is this big enough for you, Tom?" Zare asked with a smile.

Tom lowered his phaser, then quickly hid it. "Yeah sure, thanks." He held his hand out, Zare just stared blankly at it. "What, I need it more than you."

"Then maybe you should have brought one," Zare said. "So which way are we going?"

B'Elanna smirked as she pointed behind her. Zare glanced back over her shoulder and nodded. The group headed off without Tom at first, he muttered something rude under his breath before following.

The Enterprise strafed to one side, narrowly avoiding a small ship drifting upside down. There were many more dead ahead of them, but that wasn't the only thing that was. Something large and spherical, almost hidden in its own black shadow. The starship slowed down to navigate the graveyard of ships that lay before it.

"Is that the planet?" Lena asked carefully. She stopped pacing the back of the bridge to get a decent look of the viewscreen, just to make sure. "It can't be."

James continuously glanced between the helm in front of him and up at the viewscreen. "It's in the right place." He focused on the viewscreen for a bit longer. "It certainly looks like a one. The sensors register it as only a large mass at the moment. I guess they're a little rusty."

Lena walked forward while keeping her eyes on the black sphere on the screen. "There's no star, the planet looks dead. We're too late?"

"I wouldn't say that," James said.

The black sphere grew larger as the ship approached. A bit of light peeked over the top of the sphere, it barely looked brighter than a distant star but it was enough to light up the north side of the planet a little. Mostly all the pair could see were thick, deadly looking clouds that seemed to churn at the star light trying to get through it. All of them were darker than any rain cloud they'd ever seen.

The land itself was a dank shade of brown. Even from the distance they were at, they could see chasms in the ground almost like the planet was an egg shell after one tap with a spoon. The south of the planet was still shrouded in the darkness of the anomaly.

"Why not?" Lena said in a coarse voice.

"I'm getting some energy signatures, probably lifesigns from underground tunnels," James answered. "I'm not surprised, it's well below freezing on the surface. Their position will make it difficult for the transporters."

"Well, better wrap up warm then," Lena commented.

James looked back over his shoulder to find her standing not far behind him. "We can't do that."

Lena seemed a little frustrated at that answer. "Why not?"

"We can't leave the ship unattended with the shields down," James replied.

Lena scoffed, "we're the only ones with power in this area, obviously. No one's going to steal it."

James sighed. He climbed out of the chair to walk over to her. Her arms folded tightly. "Lena think about it. If no one's here, who will beam us back? Also, the ship is draining again. If no one's here to monitor it, how are we supposed to know when to return without getting trapped on the planet?" Lena's scowl faded a little, though he could see in her eyes she was still annoyed. "Also you never know what will happen while we're gone."

"So, one goes down," Lena mumbled.

James shook his head. "We don't know what's down there. Yeah the lifesigns could be survivors, but they could be something else. Or a mixture of both."

"So what, we leave them to die then?" Lena said impatiently. "What happened to you?"

"Lena," James quickly said before she stomped off. "We're not leaving. I'm just saying we should think about what to do before we do it. The planet's not going to fall to bits in the next few minutes."

"We're still wasting time though," Lena said.

"Now we are yeah, so why don't we think of a plan instead," James said in a lighter tone, hoping it would calm her down. He got a light sigh and shrug. "Great, we're agreeing on something."

Lena felt her eyes roll, it was instinctive. "You're getting more dad like with every kid. I'm dreading next month."

"As long as I'm not getting more our dads like, we're good," James said, allowing a brief smile. "Any ideas?"

"No. There's only two of us, we can't change that," Lena answered. A thought popped into her head, her eyes lit up as a result. "Oh, the logs."

James wasn't sure how they would help them with their lack of people. "What about the logs?"

"I was listening to a few of them on route, and one of them mentioned quite a nasty battle," Lena said, only making James' confusion worse. She ignored it and continued, "there were a few injuries, and she mentioned the doctor was having trouble keeping up with them all."

James finally got where she was going with this, it only made him more confused. "The Enterprise doctor was destroyed with the Equinox. I don't think any of the casualties of the Enterprise *explosion* were doctors, our Doc was covering the fleet. Even if there were..."

"Yeah exactly," Lena said with a little excitement in her voice. She hurried over to the Opps station before he could question anything. "Yep, I thought so," she said after using it. Again before James could say anything she ran off to the back of the bridge and disappeared down the Jeffries tube shaft.

"I... what?" James stammered. He walked over to follow her.

### **Sickbay:**

Lena hurried through the doors and straight over to one of the workstations. James followed looking less confused and a bit more worried.

"This isn't even the Sickbay we used to use," he said.

Lena shrugged, "yeah well, it's quicker to walk and climb to this one." She typed a few things into the console. "Hmm, this might work. It might be a huge drain though."

"That'll shorten the time we have here. We've already shut down most of the ship," James said. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Yep, positive," Lena answered.

A figure shimmered into existence between them. He looked around until he spotted them both, he focused more on Lena though. As he glanced again from her to James, his face started to light up. "We did it? We escaped finally." He grew angry a little too quickly, "I thought the days of not telling me anything were over."

James stared at him awkwardly, "sorry Doc, it's not what you think."

"Excuse me?"

"You're only a copy of Voyager's Doctor," Lena started to explain.

"Yes, I know that," the hologram in front of her answered, cheering up a little. "The Enterprise needed a doctor. The choice was a backup of the Enterprise's EMH before it was stolen by the Equinox, or a one of my handsome alter ego when he was dealing with the nightmare alien from the Crazy Horse."

"Yours was more up to date," Lena muttered.

The backup Doctor was very offended at that comment. "That wasn't the only reason. I was always the more superior EMH."

"I'm not arguing with you," Lena said, a little offended herself.

James smirked to himself, neither of them noticed it before it faded away. "I'm sorry, but the Enterprise hasn't escaped the sphere. Voyager's in here too."

"Oh," Backup Doctor's face fell. "How did that happen?"

"I was hoping you'd tell us. Starfleet witnessed you go into an anomaly leading into the sphere," James said.

"Oh dear," Backup Doctor looked even more concerned. "That must have been before I was activated, I'm afraid. I don't know anything about that."

"Well long story short we're here and we caught up with you," Lena said. She glanced at James then back again. "We're back at the Erayas system. Do you know it?"

The look on his face answered her question. He actually looked a bit scared at the thought. "Yes, yes of course. I assume because you're calling it that, that it survived the wave."

"More or less," Lena muttered.

James winced a little at her answer. "We need someone to watch the ship while we check it out. Um..." The Doctor's face turned a little blank and strangely pale despite him being a hologram. "What?"

"What happened to the crew?" he asked.

"I was afraid of that," Lena said quietly as she walked to one side.

The Doctor watched her with the same look on his face, then turned to James hoping for an answer.

"We don't know," James didn't give him one. "Again, I was hoping you would know."

"No. The ship was damaged, we were trying to conserve power. I offered to shut down until I was needed," Backup Doctor said. "There were some injuries from the last tower heist. Now I'm thinking you probably don't know what I mean."

"I do, it's okay," James said.

Backup Doctor nodded timidly. "We failed, we were forced to retreat. That's all I know about that."

"That was probably the one where we just missed you," James said.

Lena walked back over to the two, she stared at Backup Doctor intently. "Can you tell us anything, especially anything about Erayas?"

"How much do you know?" Backup Doctor asked.

"This could take a while. We've got to help the people on the planet," Lena said with a bit of frustration in her voice. Backup Doctor seemed concerned at that.

"We can worry about the Enterprise and its mission details later. It's Erayas we have to worry about now and we're on a strict time limit," James explained to Backup Doctor. "All we know is that during your attempt to destroy the Soft's towers, a wave hit them."

"Yes, we barely escaped from it," Backup Doctor nodded.

"Right now it's sitting inside an anomaly that drains energy and causes hallucinations..." James continued.

"Hmm," the Doctor interrupted.

Lena folded her arms tightly, "yeah interesting, now you get it. The planet's dying, we need to get these people off. We're the only crew though."

"Where's Voyager?" Backup Doctor asked in a worried voice.

"Somewhere outside. We're the only ones who don't hallucinate while in here," James replied. Backup Doctor was more confused with that answer than he was without it. "We just need you to watch the ship. Keep an eye on the power and systems, beam us back."

"Ah," Backup Doctor was relieved. "Yes, I could do that. There's one problem though." He noticed Lena was getting more irritable by the second. "I cannot leave Sickbay remember."

"I already know that, we can transfer control here," Lena said.

"Oh well, at least you have it all figured out," Backup Doctor said, forcing a smile. "Although the people you're rescuing will likely be suffering from delusions as well. That may cause a problem."

Lena and James glanced at one another, Lena's shoulders fell and she walked away again. James' head dipped slightly. "It could be worse on the planet due to exposure, or it could be an intelligence that targets ships as they're the only means of escape. I don't know. Either way, we can't leave them there. We'll have to think of something."

"I see, the hallucinations trick the people inside into staying," Backup Doctor thought aloud. "Once you start the rescue, I may be able to figure out how and a cure. In the mean time though, they may have to be sealed away from any ship's systems."

"Yeah, I was thinking Cargo Bays and the Holodecks. It depends how many there are," James said.

Backup Doctor's forehead quickly filled with lines as he thought about it. Then he noticed Lena still pacing around with an irritable look still on her face. He focused back on James who had been keeping an eye on her as well. Backup Doctor didn't say anything, the pair shared a look of worry.

"This planet's energies have been drained as well?" he eventually questioned.

"Looks like it. The towers probably sped up the process," James replied.

"Hmm. I'd recommend extreme caution. We've had to abandon a couple of worlds that were *lost causes*," Backup Doctor said, guilt evident in his voice. "Also if the anomaly is anything like the wave we saw, the anomaly will have extreme environmental effects on the planet too."

"You're not wrong. It looks like the temperatures have forced the survivors underground," James said.

Backup Doctor nodded. "Before you leave, give me access to the sensors. I don't want either of you going down unprepared, or at all if it's too cold."

James glanced briefly at Lena. She seemed to have calmed down but was staring ahead of her, barely moving. "Well, it's not like we can go down without a plan either."

### **The Delta Flyer:**

Once she got comfortable on the chair, Jessie rested a large bowl on her belly and started to dig into its contents.

"So, where did you get the *genius* impression from?" she asked. "I'm serious."

Damien slowly turned his head to give her a cold look. Of course it was as effective as Harry challenging anyone to a fist fight.

"You should have known that would happen," Jessie continued.

"Would you shut up for five minutes?" Damien hissed.

Luckily for him, Jessie didn't take that seriously. "I'm just saying if you were honest and less well... Damien, people wouldn't keep showing you up like this. I'd be a lot nicer and say *too bad, you tried.*"

Damien rolled his eyes. "Are you capable of being nice to anyone who isn't a blonde super freak that doesn't sparkle?"

"Why, am I being too mean to you?" Jessie mocked him in a cutesy voice.

"Hardly," Damien scoffed, then he smirked. "It just made me think. It's a good thing you did pick him."

"What?" Jessie frowned.

"Any normal guy would probably get his crap kicked in every day and it would be his fault too," Damien continued to smirk. "At least you picked a schmuck that can survive it."

To his surprise Jessie wasn't that mad, she just laughed. "Oh that's... that's funny. Cos I picked on you before. Believe me I wasn't trying."

Damien stared at her again, his eyes wide with anger. "Yes it is funny and true. He's a psycho, you're a psycho." He turned his head to look ahead of him. "Oldest kid's a psycho. Oldest girl's one of those quiet psycho's in making. I heard about the *I'm okay with being a hostage daddy*, if you ask me that's a glutton for punishment psycho. The third one; adopted wuss to make it seem to others like you don't actually breed psychosis. That one you're carrying is probably the next *chosen evil* one." His smile was back, "can't wait for that one. No, I can... I don't want to witness its birthday."

He finally stopped talking to gauge her reaction, only to find Jessie wasn't where she was before. She was at the replicator replacing the food in her bowl with a disgusted look on her face. "Hey! You listening?"

"I rarely do," Jessie replied. Her finger poked the food in the bowl, then it went into her mouth. "Better."

"Yeah well you missed out on something," Damien muttered. "Me, the glorious ruler of the universe. You and Mr Psycho my top evil lieutenants. Too bad you're annoying and the kids, I could do without, especially that smallest one."

Jessie sat down on a chair that was further away from him. The amusement she had on her face earlier was gone, it was mostly blank now. "One more whine about Amy and I'll rip it off."

"Rip what off?" Damien asked.

Jessie shrugged casually, "I dunno, haven't decided yet."

Damien smirked again, chuckling to himself. "That reminds me, why did you change the brat's name? Laziness?"

"Really? You must badly want to know what I'd rip off," Jessie shook her head.

"It was awful to hyphenate her name, did you figure it out?" Damien said.

Jessie couldn't help but roll her eyes as she dug into her new bowl of food. "She introduced herself to Miral as Amy, she prefers it. It's up to her. Besides, the first part of her name was hard for her to say at first. Why do you care?"

"Would you have still changed it if she introduced herself as *wah*?" Damien snickered.

Jessie scowled at him dangerously. "Babies cry, what's your excuse?"

"Ha, good one!" Damien faked a laugh. "But no, seriously."

"If this is your idea of small talk, you really shouldn't bother," Jessie said.

"Would you prefer Chakotay's whimpering apologies and excuses?" Damien asked.

Jessie sighed, "no."

Damien climbed to his feet, dusting himself down once he had straightened up. "It's really a pathetic fall from disgrace, if you ask me."

"I didn't," Jessie groaned.

"Though to be fair, he did nothing but whine about how unfair it all was and how useless your Slayer was," Damien continued anyway. "*He should have done his job, it would be better if he didn't exist.*" He rolled his eyes, "the fool, he had no idea."

The bowl was mostly empty when Jessie put it to one side. "He's never been a fan of James. That isn't news to me."

"Well it wasn't for me either but I still had to listen to it," Damien complained. "*She's dead cos of him, now even in death he's all she thinks about. What about me, boohoo.* If anyone's obsessed it's Chuckles, you should watch out."

"Yeah right," Jessie scoffed. Her eyes shifted side to side as her face grimaced. "Wait, what was that last part?"

"Boohoo," Damien answered.

"Okay I asked for that. Before that," Jessie said, shaking her head.

Damien shrugged without a care, "I implied that Chakotay thought Janeway dug her own kid. Why not, there was that whole Lena and James thing. Personally I don't see the appeal. Too blonde."

Jessie went from confused to bemused in a matter of seconds, then she went back to confused. "Um, I'm going to start with eeew."

Damien nodded, "yeah I would too."

"There was no Lena and James thing, they were just siblings before they knew," Jessie said. Damien sniggered, he was about to respond to that. "Oh and when a woman loves her child more than a husband, you go straight for the incest angle? That says more about you than Chakotay's jealousy about it."

"Husband? I thought he imagined the whole wedding thing," Damien mused.

"That's the part you focus on?" Jessie groaned.

Damien smirked a little more than usual. "Got your attention didn't I? What can I say? Chakotay seemed to be blaming even the Tolg Janeway on sonny-boy. Sad isn't it?"

"Goes with his doing the inevitable speech. Makes sense," Jessie said.

"That," Damien rolled his eyes. "Was what he was bitching at the whole time. He did everything to avoid it, he said. All I know is it was the reason he made a last minute transport to and from Voyager before we left. Dunno what that was about..."

Jessie didn't either, she only frowned.

"He said *she'd never forgive me, I'll do it this way*. Whatever."

The ground crunched with every step they took. Lena looked back every now and then to see if their trail had caused any further cracks to the surface. That last step her foot felt like it sunk down an inch, when she looked back there was what she assumed was a hole. It was too dark to tell any of these things. The sky was taken over by a sea of black. There were patches, but they weren't much better. The weak light from the nearby star tried to break through these cracks, it was as effective as a small lamp trying to illuminate through thick curtains. They could only see a few metres in front of them thanks to their flashlights, even they were struggling to break through the crippling darkness.

It wasn't the worst part though. A sharp cold had lingered in the stale air, no longer being pushed away by a breeze. Thanks to the Doctor they had changed into appropriately thick clothes, gloves, boots, as well as visors with masks to keep their faces covered too. Despite that Lena could feel some of that cold trying to get in through any tiny cracks it could. Her eyes went up to the star in the sky, which looked like it had been up for a few hours. She thought it probably wouldn't make much of a difference. As its light was more pitiful than a moon's on a cloudy night, the heat from it would be just as useless.

She looked to James right beside her. He seemed to be focusing on the tricorder in his other hand, it was probably a distraction from this depressing place.

*"The cave entrance should be directly in front of you now, two metres," Backup Doctor's voice said into both of their ears.*

Lena was starting to regret swapping a commbadge for the communication devices in the ear muffs. Compared to the eery silence of the planet, his voice was a loud shout.

James looked up from his tricorder, simultaneously raising his flashlight higher. Lena raised her hand to do the same. They both stopped to avoid walking into a rock formation they couldn't see.

"Are you sure?" James asked.

*"Yes... no. Hang on."*

The silence after that was more awkward than eery.

*"I told you to walk straight for two hundred metres. From your position turn left thirty eight degrees and walk three more metres."*

Their faces were covered, but the pair could tell the other was pulling the same annoyed face.

"Doc, we can barely see past our feet here. How the hell are we supposed to keep straight in a place like this?" James snapped.

*"There's no need to be rude."*

"You were rude first. You're the one that's supposed to tell us when we're veering off, we can't tell," James grumbled.

Lena was focused on both of their voices, it gave her a distraction from this place for the time being.

*"Here I thought Slayers would be at their peak in the dark."*

"God! I don't even like the dark, how can you..." James continued snapping at him. Lena started to laugh, putting him right off. "That's why I'm looking at the tricorder, it's easier."

*"Then you shouldn't have been able to veer off."*

Lena couldn't stop it, she continued laughing. James turned to her. "What?" he asked.

"Sorry, it's... I'll tell you later," Lena giggled.

"All right. Let's get our protractor out so we can turn thirty eight degrees," James muttered. He then rolled his eyes, "I've already moved, so you'll have to guide me."

*"I see you haven't changed one bit. I'm trying to help."*

"I'd say we'd be better off walking forward until we bump into a mountain, then feel our way into a cave," James said.

Lena shook her head to stop her laughter, it worked for a moment. She grabbed a hold of his arms to try to turn him back around so he was facing away from her. "That's thirty eight."

*"Hardly."*

"Close enough," Lena giggled. The pair started walking again, slower this time just in case.

Their flashlights continued to show nothing ahead of them for a few steps. Then Lena's caught something a little bit more solid to the right of her, she quickly tapped James on the arm to stop him.

"That looks like a rock wall," James said as he pointed his light there as well. To the left of it, there was still nothing but darkness. "Must be the cave. Good spotting."

*"Well of course."*

"Thanks," Lena said at the same time as the Doctor. His response just made her laugh again.

"If I tap the headphone things, will it cut him off?" James muttered.

"If you do it hard enough, yeah," Lena replied.

"True," James said with a shrug. They slowly made their way towards the darkest part of the path ahead of them. Finally the torch was picking up a lot more. They could both see the rock wall surrounding them; crevices, shapes or at least outlines of them.

The further they went the lighter it seemed to be, it felt warmer as well. They both thought it was just their senses getting used to it, at least until they spotted a small ball of fire in the distance.

A creak ahead of them forced the team to stop. It seemed to travel along beside them and fade away behind them. Zare raised the rifle in her left arm while reaching for another weapon attached to her belt. That didn't make Tom feel any better at all, it just made him more nervous.

"Stay back," she said.

"It was just the building falling to bits, bad building," Tom tried to convince himself.

Zare shook her head, "no, someone's ahead." She then pulled a disgusted face and glanced behind her at him. "What are you, five?"

"Hey, men can be scared too. There's nothing wrong with that," Tom muttered, his fear gone for the moment.

Zare rolled her eyes and continued down the corridor without them.

"I think she was talking about the bad building part, you insecure idiot," B'Elanna grumbled.

"It was a joke to lighten the mood," Tom hissed back.

The Doctor sighed and stayed out of it again.

Zare reached a T junction, her head shot to the right. The awayteam saw a blur leap at her from that side, pushing her to the ground and out of their sight. B'Elanna was about to rush to her aid, but Tom and the Doctor grabbed her arms to stop her.

"We don't know what that is, and it has knocked *her* down," Tom warned her.

Zare didn't stay down long. She rolled to one side and aimed her rifle in the direction her attack came from. What she saw facing her wasn't what she expected. Standing on the other side of the junction was a middle aged woman staring at her in shock. The woman's hands were raised almost in a surrender pose.

Without relaxing her weapon, Zare rose to her feet. The two women spoke at once.

"Who are you?"

"How did you do that?" was Zare's question.

The woman stared at her suspiciously, her hands lowered to her side. Her entire body was still tense. "That's a Starfleet weapon, but you are not..."

"Human, no," Zare said. "You appear to be one, but."

The awayteam were confused as they couldn't see anything, they could barely hear the conversation. B'Elanna moved forward first, the two men followed her carefully.

Still suspicious of the other woman, the stranger raised her hand to point it at her. Zare kept her rifle trained on her, finger on the button ready to fire.

B'Elanna stopped in between the two, her head turned side to side to look at them both. The woman seemed to relax a little at the sight of her. B'Elanna then focused on her.

"So you are Starfleet," she said. Her hand lowered, but Zare's position didn't falter. "So it's true, thank god."

Tom and the Doctor stopped behind B'Elanna, they looked on at the woman with surprise on their faces.

"What's true?" B'Elanna questioned.

"Voyager is here too. We were starting to feel like it was a lie to lure us into a trap," the woman answered, clearly very relieved to see them.

Tom frowned, he glanced at every member of his team before stopping at the stranger. "Um yes, Tom Paris of the USS Voyager. This is B'Elanna, The Doctor and Zare."

"You've forgotten my name, haven't you?" the Doctor muttered.

"And you are?" Tom questioned, ignoring the hologram for now.

"Rachel," the woman answered. "Of the USS Enterprise. More or less."

"More or less?" the Doctor said warily.

Rachel's face turned a little red with embarrassment. "I wasn't really a member of the crew, just a passenger."

"You're not alone here, are you?" B'Elanna questioned. In the corner of her eye she noticed Zare still pointing the rifle at her. "Zare."

"She's not a normal Human," Zare warned them.

Rachel giggled, it made her seem completely harmless to the others. "You're one to talk."

"Well yeah, I'm not Human at all," Zare muttered.

B'Elanna turned to put a hand over the tip of the rifle, hinting that she should lower it. Zare stared blankly at her and refused to let her budge it.

"It's okay, I understand your concern," Rachel said. "I practice witchcraft. Not practice literally of course, I'm more than proficient enough to use it."

"Oh," Zare said. She finally lowered her rifle but just a little bit so it was still pointing at the newcomer.

"Oh," Rachel smiled at her. Zare felt like she was mocking her but it seemed harmless to everyone else.

"A witch, huh. I didn't know there were any witches on the Enterprise," Tom said. "You'd think I would."

"You didn't have a question asking that on your crew sign ups," Rachel said in a teasing voice. "To answer your earlier question; no I am not here alone. Perhaps you can help me," she directed the Doctor's way.

His interest was piqued. "If you have injured, please take me to them right away."

Rachel's smile wavered, "I wouldn't call them injured, at least not just yet."

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

### **Voyager:**

Harry wandered the centre of the bridge almost in a complete circle, then he'd stop to stare at the viewscreen before doing the same again but backwards. It was starting to annoy everyone who could see him doing it.

"Stop that, it's making me dizzy," Jodie hissed at him.

Harry turned to her with a confused look on his face. "Stop what?"

A lot of noise came from the Tactical station. Everyone turned to look at it and Craig manning it.

"Incoming. Three ships have dropped out of warp," he said.

"Where?" Harry asked.

"Looks like they're heading into the planet's orbit," Craig answered. Jodie groaned as Harry started to circle the middle of the bridge again. He veered off towards Tactical and hurried over to it. "They don't match anything we've seen so far, their weapons are not powered."

"Tom reported that it was definitely a pre-industrial civilisation. If they're not up to anything, why are they here?" Harry wondered aloud. "Can you put them on screen?"

Craig only nodded his answer. Harry quickly looked up just as the viewscreen changed to show the planet. Three ships shaped like small airplanes flew alongside it.

"They're scanning the surface," Jodie told him.

Harry felt his shoulders tense up a little, he couldn't take his eyes off the alien ships. "Okay. So if they don't leave after they've done that, we should start to worry."

"We should worry anyway. They're closer to the planet than we are, they won't have as much trouble beaming people from an underground structure," Craig said.

"Great, the glass isn't half empty, it's completely empty," Harry muttered back.

Craig rolled his eyes in response. "Yeah, not everyone has Federation ideals and rules. Some aliens may see pre-warp civilisations as easy pickings. These aliens could be the reason we got a distress call..."

"Yeah, yeah I get it," Harry butted in a little impatiently. "Why don't we just give them the benefit of the doubt for the time being. Keep an eye on them." He turned towards Jodie, "if we contact our team, will our new friends notice?"

"I dunno, I don't recognise the signature they're using," Jodie said. "They could be looking for coffee beans for all we know."

"If it was a Tolg ship, I wouldn't rule it out," Craig commented.

Harry sighed, his eyes still fixed to the viewscreen. "We need to find a way to get our people out and quickly. That transporter module in the mine isn't going to help us much in a pinch."

"I thought I was being too paranoid," Craig said.

Harry quickly glanced at him and back at the viewscreen. While still watching it he headed over to the Opps station. "Well it can't hurt to try, can it? Contact our team anyway, they have to know what's happening."

The awayteam followed the woman Rachel down a narrower corridor. B'Elanna noted that the structural damage seemed to lessen the further they walked.

Zare meanwhile kept on her guard at the back, with both her long and short range weapons. Every now and then she'd turn around and walk backwards.

"It's in here," Rachel said as she stopped at a door. At least it looked like it used to be. Now all that was there was crumpled metal hanging onto a door frame. She walked straight inside.

B'Elanna nodded at the others. They waited for her to quickly check her tricorder.

"Well?" Tom asked nervously.

"The lifesigns are definitely coming from here. They're weak, they are probably injured," B'Elanna said.

"Let me go inside first," Zare said.

Tom turned to her, suddenly feeling uneasy at her suspicious face. "Got something to share with us? You've been distrusting since we met her."

"An Enterprise crewmember we don't know, who's a witch as well. I'm just saying we should be cautious," Zare said.

B'Elanna nodded at her. "I agree."

"Her bio readings confirm her to be Human though," the Doctor didn't agree. "She's not a Softmicron in disguise, if that's what you're concerned about."

"No, she's right. Be careful," Tom said, giving Zare a nod. His commbadge beeped, then started making a lot of static noise. He quickly gave it a tap. "Voyager we can barely hear you. Just in case you can hear us, standby."

Zare walked through the damaged door and into a large room filled with strange looking computers. That wasn't all though. The wall was lined with what looked like pods with glass windows. Some of them had lights shining out of them, some were black.

Rachel stood at one of the central computers, looking on in concern. She gestured to the strange pods on the walls.

"This is it?" Zare asked.

"Yes," Rachel answered sadly.

Zare started to follow the wall slowly. The first pod she stopped to look in through the glass. Nothing. The second one shocked her enough to make her step backwards.

"Zare?" Tom called from outside.

Zare tried to shake off her shock. "It's okay... I guess."

The rest of the team carefully walked inside as well. They headed straight over to where Zare stood. Tom was especially curious about what Zare was staring at so he looked as well. The first detail he noticed was the human eyes staring right at him, or at least that's what he felt like they were doing.

"My god," B'Elanna echoed his worries.

The figure inside the pod was standing completely still. Even her blonde hair seemed to have frozen mid movement. Her face was blank. Tom assumed she didn't suffer or was expecting this.

"Danny," he said quietly.

B'Elanna had already moved on to the next pod. When she found that empty she walked to the next one. A much taller man stood inside this one, she could just make out the bottom half of his head. "Ian," she said.

Zare walked around the opposite way, keeping a close eye on Rachel as she passed by her. Rachel didn't appreciate it, her eyes rolled. Zare didn't notice or care when she did that as she focused on another pod.

This one housed a different girl with black hair tied into a pony tail, her face scrunched in a mild frown that didn't match the seriousness of her situation. The girl had been taken and put in there when she was more concerned about someone insulting her.

The name of the girl was on the tip of her tongue. Zare knew her, but the name wasn't instantly coming to her. "Um... Tina?"

"Who?" Tom said, quickly glancing over his shoulder.

"No? That name sounded Human enough," Zare muttered. "Um she was a bit odd, liked to clean."

"Triah," the rest of the awayteam corrected her.

"Oh well. Once we get everyone out of here, we can finally stop torturing Scott with the only babysitter who hasn't quit on him," B'Elanna said with a slight smile.

Tom tried to laugh but he was too worried for that. "I dunno, I think Scott is the one doing the torturing there."

**Meanwhile:**

The humming was so out of tune the pans were starting to rattle. Neelix didn't really care, he was in a good mood despite everything. He had so many ideas for new recipes, he couldn't wait to pick one to try it out. Which one was the most difficult part.

As he walked into the Mess Hall he knew something was amiss before he had even turned the lights on. He almost didn't bother, the thought of it scared him.

A child's giggle made him rethink turning the lights on again. In the end he had to know. "Computer, lights."

The sight that Neelix was greeted with brought him to his knees in despair. "Nooooo!"

Scott spotted him, he looked up from his *art* with a big grin on his face. Not that anyone could see that as the boy was covered head to toe in a sickly brown and slimy residue. It wasn't just on him either, it was literally everywhere.

**Meanwhile again:**

"Maybe we should let Craig have a go, he is the kid's uncle," Tom said mid wince.

B'Elanna shook her head. "Don't. Scott's a hero. Neelix hasn't been able to make a Leola root pie for weeks. Although Triah will have a fit if she ever found out."

"Um Commander Tom," Rachel tried to get everyone's attention. When she did she appeared to be a little annoyed. "Perhaps we shouldn't be wasting anymore time with random crap."

The Doctor laughed until he saw Zare's face get even more suspicious. "It has been two years since this crew were exposed to this series. Give her a break."

"Fine," Zare muttered.

The Doctor got back to scanning one of the occupied pods. "I'll have to do this one at a time. It is a primitive type of stasis, similar to twentieth century freezing. Thawing them may send their bodies into shock."

"That's okay, Doc. Do what you have to," Tom said.

"I'd feel better if I could transport them to Sickbay. Without a direct transport though, that may cause more harm than good," the Doctor complained. He sighed to himself. "Where shall I start?"

Tom's hand went up to tap his commbadge at the same time as B'Elanna spoke up. "How come you're not in one of these things?"

Rachel was taken aback, "oh, that's..." She noticed Zare staring at her blankly. "It's a long story. Suffice to say I was prepared and protected myself from it, so I was able to escape."

Tom and B'Elanna glanced at each other warily. Zare's grip on her rifle seemed to get a little too tight, she had to calm herself before she broke the handle.

"We may need the long story. Looks like we have time to kill," Tom said, briefly glancing towards the Doctor.

"It's kind of like a cloaking field, except it protects against the effects and doesn't hide you," Rachel tried to explain but it only made them more confused and or suspicious. She sighed. "You're right. I need to tell the story."

Before she could continue Tom's commbadge beeped at him.

*"Voyager to Paris, is that better?"*

"Thank god," Tom sighed in relief, he tapped it quickly. "Did you get anything I tried to tell you?"

*"Bits and pieces. I wish I had my own good news," Harry's voice said.*

"What do you mean?" Tom asked, his face turned pale.

*"A fleet of unknown ships have entered orbit. They've been scanning the surface for a while now."*

The Enterprise circled around the dark, barren looking planet before them. A small abandoned ship lay almost in its path. It attempted to veer off a little avoid it, but instead the smaller vessel bounced off its shields and drifted out of orbit. The Enterprise continued like nothing happened.

Backup Doctor winced as he watched one of the screens on the station he stood at. It appeared to show the Enterprise's orbit of the planet, a red dot flew outside the screen. "Oh dear. I need to make course corrections faster," he said quietly.

Something else to the left started to blink, he quickly checked that. "Um... shield strength has fallen to ten percent."

*"What, already?" James' voice was surprised.*

"Yes, this anomaly does like to absorb energy and fast," Backup Doctor said nervously.

*"What was the course correction for?" James asked.*

"Oh, just a erm... minor thing," Backup Doctor lied. He turned his attention back to the centre where he was looking before the course correction. "The further you go the clearer it gets. I'm detecting twenty six lifesigns up ahead and some minute energy signatures. It should be in a large open cavern just ahead. Can you see anything yet?"

Lena walked by a lit torch sitting in a rock formation to her left. There were two more either side further down. She or James couldn't see anything else but that. They had both took off their masks and visors so they could see a little better.

"Not yet," she replied.

James' tricorder was making quite a bit of noise, he kept staring at it as they walked. Lena noticed he was growing more uncomfortable with every step.

"What?" she asked.

"Huh?" he said, glancing at her. "What, what?"

Lena nodded her head at the tricorder. "Something wrong?"

"No, I'm getting the same readings as the Doc. We should be close," James said, quickly looking back down at the tricorder.

Lena held out her arm to stop him, he had to bump into it before he noticed it. "What if that was something else? Why aren't you watching where you're going?"

James frowned at her as she didn't look mad, just sounded it. "It's okay, I'll know when something's coming."

"Really?" Lena said, waving the arm he bumped into in his face.

"I knew it was you," James said with a shrug.

Lena rubbed the arm before putting back by her side. "Yeah, so you walked into it because?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking. These people aren't going to be..." James answered.

Lena sighed loudly, interrupting him. "You don't need that now, we can see in here." She snatched the tricorder from his hands, or at least tried to, he kept a firm grip on it. Only then she realised something. "You're claustrophobic. Sorry, I forgot."

"I wouldn't go that far. I don't..." James said, ending with a sigh of his own. "I don't like being being in small, cramped places yeah but I don't freak out or anything."

"Hmm," Lena didn't buy it.

"It's just the feeling of being trapped and helpless. Who does like that? I'm fine," James said. "The tricorder will tell us and it already is, more than our eyes can right now."

"I guess so," Lena mumbled. She continued walking, so did he.

"So what was so funny?" James asked. Lena made another hmm sound. "You said you'd tell me later."

"Oh, that. I just thought," Lena started to answer but she glanced back behind her at him, making her hesitant. "It's still not later enough."

"Really? It'll take us a few more minutes to reach this cavern," James said.

Lena's shoulders tensed slightly. "I dunno how to explain it. Ever since I got back everyone's been on egg shells, and serious all the time. Even you, although you at least tried to be normal around me. Which I appreciate by the way."

"Even me. What did I do?" James questioned.

"Well, like I said you were trying. Sometimes it felt genuine but the other times it felt like you were trying too hard," Lena replied quietly. "It was like you've gotten older, grown up a bit in the last two years and I've fallen behind, when I was already a lot younger than you to begin with." She groaned angrily. "See, I told you, I can't explain it."

Despite her annoyance James laughed as quietly as he could. Lena turned around to send him a disapproving scowl. "Me, grown up a bit? Good one."

"Well you know what I mean, or you should," Lena muttered. "You were playing it safe, worried about consequences. You seemed a bit more serious, less angry. I don't know. Something's changed, I know that much. It was nice to see the easily annoyed, sarcastic James again. I didn't think it was traits you would outgrow, they were just who you were. At least that's how I remem... well figure you'd be even when you were old. You know?"

The pair had stopped again. They stood there silently for a short time. James had long since stopped laughing, his face was serious.

"I haven't changed that much Lena. I thought I did, but... no. I did think you'd want someone acting normally around you, but I'd sometimes mince my words when it looked like you needed me to. I'm sorry about that," he said.

"I want to believe that but," Lena said, shaking her head. "This mission's a good example. You're sensible in some ways, it's creeping me out."

James had to smirk at that comment. It made her smile a bit. "You've got a lot of catching up to do if you think that." He gestured his head forward to hint they should keep walking. Lena gave him a nod and turned back to do just that.

The path sloped down gradually, turning subtly to the left. They had almost walked a full circle when the tricorder beeped at them to stop. It wasn't the only one.

*"Two lifesigns just around the corner. Looks like they're standing guard."*

Lena looked to James to find him strangely bemused and shaking his head. They were too close for her to really question why. She didn't have to though. "I was going to say before that we don't know how these people will react to us." Lena was about to shush him when she realised that his lips hadn't moved, her shoulders relaxed a little. "The last time they encountered Humans, we were attacking them and this anomaly appeared."

"So... if we go in and pretend to be unarmed they may try to shoot us on sight, but if we go in with phasers pointing they'll think we're here to finish the job," she sent her own thoughts his way.

James casually shrugged and turned his head in the direction they were walking before. Lena watched him apparently mulling it over, or so she thought, she couldn't hear him this time. He gave her a nod before starting to walk again.

*"Unarmed it is,"* she whispered to herself.

The rest of the path took a sharp turn to the left. As soon as they turned it they were greeted by two humanoid male aliens. Each of them held what looked like phaser rifles. Both of them were dangerously thin and pale, every bone in their faces could be seen easily. They immediately pointed them at the pair and charged forward. The amount of fear on their faces chilled both of them.

"Stop! Now!" one of them shouted.

James had already stopped. Lena was right behind him, she stopped to stand beside him. "It's okay, we're not..."

"What is that?" the other demanded, pointing his rifle at the tricorder. "Drop it!"

Before either of them could respond the other alien's fear seemed to waver, he side stepped closer to his teammate and started whispering something to him.

"Yeah, good call," Lena said plainly.

"I was counting on them not knowing what Humans looked like but... yeah," James said back to her quietly.

The less nervous alien stepped forward towards them. "Who are you, how did you get here?"

"We're here to help you. Do you have a leader we can speak to?" James answered.

"That doesn't answer my question," the alien said in a threatening tone.

Lena briefly glanced between James and the aliens. "I'm Lena, this is James. We were retrieving one of our ships when we discovered this planet." The two aliens seemed even more suspicious than before. "We're willing to take you with us, but there's not much time left."

"All ships in this place die, and quickly," the more nervous alien said.

"I know, that's what I meant by not much time," Lena said before she could bite her tongue.

"Hmm, I've never heard of a starship surviving the cloud," the nervous alien said warily. "Although if you were one of them we'd all be dead by now."

"One of what?" Lena asked.

"Unfortunately they do not waste any time introducing themselves, they kill everything that breathes," the braver alien replied.

Lena pulled a worried face, "how do you know that if they kill everything?"

"There have been some survivors in the early days when we still lived on the surface. Here, there's nowhere to really hide," the angry alien said. He stared intently at them, "obviously."

"Look I understand that you're suspicious of us, but..." James said.

The angry alien chuckled bitterly. "You understand nothing. You've been outside haven't you? You've seen our home."

Lena rolled her eyes. "For god's sake, he's not trying to belittle you. Believe me, he's a lot more obvious than that."

"Lena," James said mid cringe. Lena huffed in response. "I've seen this before, that's why we're here. I wouldn't have known otherwise."

"So you'll save us with this magical ship of yours?" the alien quite literally spat at him. "Stop wasting our time. You're here to lure us outside."

"If I'm really the enemy, I would probably remember this crap while killing you. Why risk annoying us?" James muttered. Lena smirked in response, until James sighed to calm himself down. At least the alien didn't seem as angry as he was before. "There's nothing magical about it. It just hasn't been completely drained yet... again."

"Again?" the nervous alien said.

"I told you already. We retrieved our ship and found you with it," Lena said.

The two aliens' grips on their rifles tightened, they raised them up slightly. Both James and Lena reached for their own weapons just in case.

"The death ship," the nervous alien stuttered.

James looked confused, "what are you talking about?"

"The only ship in the entire sector that wasn't ours," the angry alien said. "It came and then this happened to us. You claim it's yours. We're not fools." He approached slowly. "Leave."

*"So the Ship of Death title's been passed onto the Enterprise. Voyager will be relieved," Backup Doctor said.* Luckily his voice came from the ear protection the pair wore so only they could hear him.

"You're wrong. The Enterprise had nothing to do with this. They were trying to destroy those towers," Lena argued. "They were in the right place, wrong time. It's not..."

The angry alien fired his weapon at their feet to make them back off. Despite the look of the rifle, it wasn't energy based, it fired what looked and sounded like a bullet. "I won't miss next time," he hissed.

"Don't do this, it's dangerous here. We can prove we're not your enemy," Lena stuttered. James put a hand on her shoulder, she looked at him with quiet dismay. For now anyway. She watched him walk back the way they came. For a moment she hesitated. The alien pressed a button to reload quickly. "Fine."

They kept walking until they assumed they were out of earshot of the aliens. As soon as they stopped Lena directed a harsh glare James' way.

"What the hell was that? There were only two of them," she snapped.

"Your way of proving it was attacking them?" James said a little too calmly for her liking. "It's not easy to dodge weapons like that. We'll think of another way."

"They're going to die if we don't do anything. It's a risk sure, but what's two of us against twenty of them?" Lena snapped.

James tried to hide the worry all over his face, he turned to one side. "If we die who warns the other survivors? Who will fly the Enterprise out of here when the Doc goes off-line? Better yet, if we're dead, how would that help these twenty odd people? They'll still stay in their hideout. It accomplishes nothing."

Lena growled and stomped off, fortunately away from where the aliens were. James was about to go after her to stop her but she already had. Her back was on him as she faced the cave walls.

"There's always another way. I'm not giving up on them," he said.

"Bull!" Lena spat. "You told me you single handedly took out a group of people attacking the Flyer. Were you just full of crap?"

"No, they didn't know where I was. They weren't expecting an attack like that. That's the point," James said. "If I had done the same thing but had been in the Flyer like they expected, it wouldn't have gone as well. The same's true here."

"Fine," Lena said.

*"Um I hate to interrupt, but sensors are picking up another cave a kilometre away, also hosting alien lifesigns. On another topic I'm struggling to re-route power to the impulse engines."*

"We already know the way out of the anomaly, take it from Stellar Cartography," James said.

*"All right. Now can I weigh in here?"*

"You're going to anyway," James said.

*"True. I don't know anything about this Flyer situation you mentioned, but I really doubt that you were restricted to a linear corridor there. There's only one way in, if you can't talk to the guards..."*

James' eyes widened in surprise, "you think we should attack the people already suspicious of us? That's not like you Doc."

*"I don't like it either, but it doesn't seem like you have a choice. It won't be long until the transporters themselves are off-line. We don't have enough power to direct to any of the remaining shuttles either."*

"See, we haven't got time to think of some overly complicated plan," Lena teased, now a little calmer thanks to the Doctor agreeing with her.

"Nobody likes a *told you so*," James said. He shook his head, "I don't think it's a good idea. We shoot their guards or knock them out, whatever, but then what? Do you think the people will listen to us then?" Lena's shoulders sank a bit. "The only way to get them out then is to chase them out. We're

just going to have a mass panic and that's before they're kidnapped onto some strange ship that they think is the bringer of death."

*"Hmm, it would make our situation a bit more troublesome. At least if they come willingly they'd stay in the designated areas. Panicked people who believe they've been kidnapped will try to escape, hallucinate and try to stop the Enterprise from leaving."*

Lena sighed impatiently. "Okay, fine you're right. It still doesn't change the fact that we have no other way to get them out. They die or they're scared of us. Which is better?"

James barely heard the last part, he was too deep in thought. He quickly looked down at the tricorder. Lena was a little impatient with him for it. "There's never just one way to do things." He smiled at her, throwing her right off. "Mum taught me that."

*"Oh no, the Jane-way. I don't like where this is going."*

The smile was a little infectious, especially with the mention of their mother. Lena couldn't help but smile back.

*"Um, maybe you can try your luck with the other cavern I mentioned. Perhaps rumours of rescuers will help convince this group. Or maybe..."*

"We don't have time for that, you were right there. We probably only have time to rescue two groups before we have to escape," James said.

"So what's the plan?" Lena asked.

James glanced down at the ground, then at the tricorder. He walked further up the path which was still spiralling. He stopped right when it straightened up again. "I'd explain but it would take too long, just follow my lead."

Lena frowned as James knelt down and clenched one of his fists. She was about to ask when he threw the clenched fist at the ground. It went right through it, sending very dry dust everywhere.

*"What's happening?"*

"I don't know, maybe..." Lena mumbled. James pulled his hand back, revealing a new hole where it was before. "Maybe send a shovel down."

"There's no need," James said before doing it again beside the other hole, making it bigger. Lena knelt down on the opposite side of it. She was shocked to not see more rocks or soil, just a dark hole. Then she heard a little wince from James that made her look up at him. Even in the poor light she could see his fists were red. "The ground's weak, the anomaly and towers have sucked out any energy it could find."

"Yeah but it's still rocks you're smashing," Lena protested.

James stood up, this time he enlarged the hole by stamping on it. He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "That would have been easier."

*"Rock smashing? Even you would break your hand on rocks!"*

"It's not that bad, these tunnels have been weakened, corroded by the lack of... whatever in the land," James said with a shrug. "It was a lot softer than rocks."

"Mmm hmm, I guess it's better than getting shot," Lena said. She was about to help him out by stamping the ground as well when a scream echoed up the corridor. More soon followed, each one more blood curling than the last. She didn't even think about it, Lena ran back down the corridor.

"Lena, wait!" James yelled after her, after briefly glancing down at the hole. It was more than large enough for him to get through it. He sighed, the screams were getting more and more frequent. His hand reached into his thick coat to retrieve a phaser rifle, then he stepped right into the hole.

*"What's going on? Hello?"*

James landed on top of some metal crates in a dank room. There were other crates and various equipment lying around. The screaming was a lot louder, it sounded like it was just outside. Now he could hear a lot more than that, including bangs and sickening cracks that reminded him of bones breaking. He hurried over to the door while positioning the rifle ready to fire in his right arm. Before he opened it his left arm rushed into his jacket again and to his back.

The two guards she had been willing to fight to save everyone were lying on the ground, in a pool of their own blood. Whatever happened to them happened fast, their eyes were wide open and their faces only appeared to be slightly startled. Lena had hurried back there as fast as she could but seeing this stopped her cold.

Screams just ahead brought her out of the daze. Armed with a phaser rifle as well as a large sword, she ran around the two men and through a narrow opening. What she saw when she did chilled her even further to the bone.

Bodies littered the ground; each one beaten, some broken or stabbed brutally. She was too late, the screaming had stopped.

A shriek got her full attention, it came from her far right. Her head turned to see two figures running to what looked to her like another passage opening. The one doing the chasing was gaining and fast. Lena ran forward, aiming her rifle at it. The blast struck it but all it did was stop them from running for a moment. She quickly looked down to check if the rifle was definitely on high stun. Lena continued to pursue it as it merely shook off her attack.

James had kicked the door in his way down to see a similar sight to her. The people he found had just sat down to a very modest dinner, some of them were children. He tried to avert his eyes but it was too late, the sight of them made him feel sick.

A battered door just opposite the one he left shook. It suddenly flew open. The only feature he could focus on were the pair of black and hollow eyes leering at him. Without looking his hand leapt to the rifle's settings. The figure before him pounced toward him like a wild animal hunting its prey. He fired the rifle straight at it. It screeched as it fell to the ground in front of him.

James carefully walked over to it, still on his guard as it twitched from the pain it was in. His eyes flickered to the settings on the rifle, the setting was high enough to kill. The figure before him was alive, but suffering enough to keep it down. Its arm shakily reached forward towards him. He wasn't sure if it was still trying to kill him or was begging for a mercy kill. Either way, he knew what he had to do.

With a grimace he pointed the rifle back at the thing, this time on a higher setting.

"No, no, please no," a girl stuttered. The figure approached, no empathy was in its cold black eyes. The girl had ran into a dead end, she couldn't get by whatever it was. All she could do was cower and hope it would be quick like everyone else.

Another unfamiliar figure ran in behind it. It swung around to confront the new arrival.

"Come on, surely I'd be more fun for you," Lena tried to taunt it.

The black unfeeling eyes made it hard for her to tell if it was working. It was as black as empty space. She got her answer as its arm swung out to knock the rifle from her arm. The force of it threw her arm back as well, the shock of both stalled her for a moment. With her left she blocked another incoming attack. Before it got a chance to counter she kicked it in the chest to push it back a bit. It gave her the few seconds she needed to raise her other weapon.

Its face didn't change, it made no sound as it ran at her. It was so fast Lena didn't have time to dodge it, she was pushed hard into the rocky wall. Even that strained a bit at the strength of it. Small rocks fell from above.

The girl crawled over to collect the tossed aside phaser rifle. She stretched to grab it and pull it over. It barely made a scraping sound, but the alien's head swung around to stare at her anyway. The girl froze in fear, her hand still clutching the weapon.

Lena pulled the sword away from them both, the alien looked back at her as she moved it around to plunge it into its back. Its own hands grabbed her by the throat, barely daunted by the stab wound. Lena felt she didn't have a choice, her eyes tightly closed as her hand swiped the sword up as far as she could. The sound it made, the slight resistance she got when it hit bone, it churned her stomach.

Finally the attacker collapsed to the ground. The girl gasped in response and covered her mouth.

Lena still had her eyes closed, she didn't dare open them. For a minute she really thought she was going to be sick at what she had just done. It brought her to her knees.

James stepped out into the open area where most of the bodies were. He tried not to focus on them, he had his sister to find now. The sound of many footsteps distracted him, they were getting louder. Reluctantly he aimed his phaser rifle in the direction they were coming from, just in time for a group of aliens to run in also brandishing weapons. All of them were dismayed at what they saw, their anger took over and was aimed at him.

"Drop the weapons, do it, do it now!" the leader of them screamed at him.

"We didn't expect that much. It was just another mission, like the others," Rachel said while leaning against the computer. "Only it wasn't. They were ready for us. Someone must have warned them. I guess the Enterprise had quite a reputation at this point."

"I'll bet," Tom commented.

Rachel folded her arms and looked to the floor. "I don't know the details, I'm not a bridge officer. I heard that we were forced to flee. I think they chased us, or at least somebody did. The ship trembled, and a lot as well. I was with my partner when something..." She cringed as she tried to figure out a way to describe it. "It was like the ship hit something while at warp. We were thrown to the floor. How we survived it..."

B'Elanna slowly glanced at everyone in her team one at a time. Only Zare seemed to have a look on her face that matched what she was feeling. Something wasn't right about this.

"The intruder alert alarms were blaring. I tried to contact the bridge to find out what we had to expect. No answer," Rachel explained. "Call it a sixth sense, but I knew I had to do something and fast. I barely had time to utter the words to the spell before it happened."

"What?" Tom questioned.

Rachel glanced down to the floor, slowly shaking her head. "A blinding light. I tried to close my eyes but even that couldn't stop it. The next thing I remember was waking up in that pod."

"I still don't understand. How did your spell protect you?" Zare questioned.

"It's hard to explain. I've used this in one of the towers before. It basically hides your aura, your presence from otherworldly things. Only for a short time though. I'm not powerful enough to keep that going for more than an hour, luckily it was enough to shield me from this... stasis unit," Rachel answered.

"You've been in the Game Sphere towers?" Zare asked.

Rachel sighed. "I feel like I'm being interrogated here."

"Miss Rachel, you have to understand. We haven't been in the sphere as long as you, the knowledge of that is still fresh to us," the Doctor said gently. "You'll have to forgive the many questions, it's natural."

"Then why is Voyager here if you don't know anything?" Rachel asked.

"We followed the Enterprise through what we thought was a wormhole. Obviously it wasn't," Tom replied meekly. He didn't like the look of confusion on Rachel's face when he said that. "The towers?"

"No, I didn't go in. I cast the spell on the team that did though," Rachel replied. "It didn't hold long enough, but that's another story."

"So the spell shielded you from the effects of the stasis unit. You walked out of it," B'Elanna said.

"That's the basics of the story yes, but it was a lot harder than simply walking out of it," Rachel said, glancing around at all of the pods. "This isn't the only room. I've found two others. Some units have failed, some are empty and one..." Her body shuddered.

Tom was feeling the same way. "One what?"

Rachel answered by just pointing at the shrivelled door they walked through, or rather around. "Looked like that."

"Oh," Tom said nervously. The goosebumps on his arms felt like they were developing again over the top of the ones already there.

"I think there's another room. There's a few people still missing," Rachel said.

The Doctor managed to get one of the pod doors open. A cloud of smoke briefly escaped from it. He quickly tended to the person inside it.

"How many of you were there?" B'Elanna asked.

"I don't know exactly, I'd say about eighteen," Rachel answered.

"Eighteen?" Tom said in a worried voice. He quickly counted around the room, "twelve pods, almost half of them are empty..."

"Some of them have failed. I wouldn't count them," Rachel said sadly. "I never knew the exact crew compliment, but there were so little of us, we all knew each other."

Zare walked around the room to have a look at all of the pods. She stopped at the ones without lights to get a closer look inside. Tom and B'Elanna watched her, both of them were uneasy as she lingered in front of one.

"So how many are missing then?" Tom had to ask.

"Two," Rachel replied.

"There's more than two failed machines with occupants in here," Zare said.

"Yes. They looked like they failed long before we got here," Rachel said.

Zare continued staring at the window of one of the darker pods. She could make out the outline of something but it was too dark to really see much else.

"So the previous guests, huh? I'm liking this less and less," Tom said quietly. A light metal creak made him jump a little. Everyone looked around to the source, which was Zare pulling the pod open.

"What are you doing?" B'Elanna demanded.

Zare chose not to answer until it was completely open at least. It was barely half way when something fell from it. Once it hit Zare it broke into many pieces and scattered all over the floor. Everyone else's jaws dropped.

Tom tried to avert his eyes from it but they were everywhere he looked. Brown and rotten, miss-shapen, some even broken. The bones of the poor soul had finally escaped its captivity, but at a cost.

**Voyager:**

The bridge's lights were dimmed, apart from the red alert one flashing every now and then. Harry stared at the viewscreen, directly at the three alien ships now flying their way, at least in the viewscreen's perspective.

"Well?" he questioned.

"They're definitely heading for the moon, but they're not in any hurry," Jodie answered.

"Shields, weapons?" Harry asked as he looked over his shoulder.

"Their shields have been up the whole time. I can't even detect their weapon systems so even if they have any, I wouldn't know if they're powering them," Craig replied.

Harry sighed, his clenched fists relaxed a little to give them a break. His whole body was still too tense. "Try again to contact our people. We may have to leave orbit in a hurry. How long?"

"They should reach the moon at their current speed in three minutes," Nathan said.

"We don't even know if we'll be able to beam them up through the interference from orbit," Craig pointed out.

"If anyone has any other options, I'd like to hear it," Harry said bitterly.

"We don't know if they're hostile. They're not rushing for us, not powering weapons," Jodie said.

Craig didn't look as sure as her. "There's nothing on or around the moon but us. I really doubt they're on their way here for a holiday. They may just think we haven't detected them."

"Sneak attack," Nathan muttered.

"Hmph, they could be wondering why we're here just as much as we are," Jodie huffed.

"Two minutes," Nathan reminded everyone.

Harry sat down in his own chair with a deadpan look on his face. It wasn't hiding his sense of impending doom very well. He groaned just as a tray of slop appeared in front of him. "No I don't want any dumplings, Neelix!"

"They're cookies!" Neelix snapped. He ran off crying into the turbolift.

"Well you did ask for any remaining senior staff to come to the bridge," Jodie said. "Be thankful it was just him."

Everyone groaned angrily almost in unison. Jodie knew exactly why, her face turned beetroot red.

"God, you know most of this series wouldn't have happened if it weren't for people jinxing everything," Harry muttered.

"I hate to sound like a warning message, but those ships have entered orbit of the moon. They'll see us very soon," Nathan said. "If you want to get out of here, I'd do it now."

The turbolift door opened. Everyone froze with fear, they knew who it would be.

Luckily they were wrong. Kiara stepped out of the lift, making everyone sigh in relief.

"Oh I wouldn't if I were you," she said.

"Wouldn't what?" Harry asked nervously.

Kiara wasn't alone, Annika skipped out after her. For once her catsuit wasn't a blinding colour and or pattern, it was one of her old black ones.

"Relax," Kiara replied.

"Hi guys, anyone order some fan service?" Annika giggled.

"What?" Craig said instinctively. He berated himself internally, he knew what she meant.

Harry shuddered quite violently. "Maybe we should let those aliens put us out of our misery." He considered it for a few seconds. "No, Nathan take us out of the moon's orbit and get us to the planet as fast as you can. Jodie..."

"Yeah, yeah. Try and get a lock from there," Jodie said.

"I was going to say stop tempting fate but that's good too," Harry muttered.

Annika stood next to a disgusted Kiara, slouching her hips to appear more alluring. Only it looked like her torso was about to slide off the hips instead. Her arms were behind her back like she was hiding something.

Voyager's impulse engines powered up, the starship picked up speed to glide around the large moon to the other side. It broke away once the planet nearby was in sight.

Three vessels behind them turned completely around to give chase.

"The aliens ships are on our tail," Nathan reported.

"No surprise. Craig keep our shields up until the very last moment. We'll have a very small transporter opening, so..." Harry said.

Jodie groaned, "oh crap."

"What?" Harry dared to ask.

Jodie shook her head, "I hate this kind of pressure."

"Craig," Harry complained into his hand.

Craig rolled his eyes, "I can't monitor shields and possible incoming attacks as well as transporters. You can forget it."

Harry quickly got up to run towards the Opps station. Voyager trembled when he was half way, then again when he arrived. The red alert klaxon decided to remind them red alert was still on.

"Ah well, good news is I can detect their weapons now," Craig said. He suddenly found a round flat object waving near his head. His head turned slightly to the left to see Annika was responsible.

"There, now you're not as tense. I'm helping," she giggled. Somehow despite her waving a fan near his head, she was still maintaining her bizarre posture.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I thought she meant by fan service," Craig said seriously. He tried to ignore her, despite the draft he kept getting.

"Yeah great," Harry said to both of Craig's comments.

The planet was now covering most of the viewscreen. Every few seconds their shields would flash up, the ship would shake at the same time.

Jodie continued working while Harry manned the back part of her station. She kept getting annoyed at her part.

"The team's not responding to communications, I don't think it's getting through," she said.

"The aliens weapons aren't helping, shields are holding for now though," Craig said. "Should we fire back?"

"Negative, I'm still hoping it's a misunderstanding and our non aggression will help them realise it," Harry said. "Long shot I know." He turned back to the front of the Opps station to assist Jodie. "Try that."

"Right," Jodie mumbled as the latest attack pushed her forward. "I think I got it. Voyager to awayteam."

*"Voy... team."*

Tom quickly tapped his commbadge. The static was all he got for the moment. It sounded different to him, every few seconds he'd hear something shudder. "We're here."

*"The alien ships..." Harry's voice barely was heard over the static. "Attacked us. If we... trans... be quick."*

Tom looked worried, he glanced around the entire room. Rachel's though was worse than everyone else, he focused on her. "Is there anything you can do? Teleportation?"

"If I could do that I wouldn't still be here," she said as politely as she could.

"Well we can't transport if Voyager's in a battle," Tom said. "Harry? How are you faring?"

"How am I airing?" Harry wondered aloud. Jodie shrugged.

"Sharing, caring, faring, daring..." Nathan said.

Harry groaned, "faring. Well..."

Voyager trembled several times in the space of a few seconds. The Tactical station sparked at the back, making Craig duck.

"Shields 56%," he replied, wincing slightly. The draft increased, the next thing he knew the fan flew into his face. Since it was Annika it was strong enough to push him over.

"Oopsie," she giggled.

Kiara glared in her direction. "I think the airing encouraged her."

"Oh god," Harry stammered. He was about to rush over to Tactical when the ship suddenly stopped, forcing everyone who wasn't holding onto anything to tumble over. Luckily Annika was one of them. "Uh erm... not good Tom."

"The aliens started to scan us with a beam of some sort," Nathan reported. "It's kinda acting like a tractor beam. I dunno..."

Kiara hurried over to Tactical to have a look. "Um, shields are about 50% ish. I think."

Jodie glanced towards Harry with a worried look on her face. "I've seen this before." Harry turned to her, he was about to ask her to go on. "When Voyager was attacked by those little ships. It's exactly the same, with one minor detail I guess."

Right on cue the intruder alert signal replaced the red alert klaxon. Jodie was a little mad at it. "Oh come on, that wasn't a jinx!"

Harry sighed and took a look at the readings she was getting. "Energy signatures on Deck Thirteen. The shield matrix there is responding."

*"Um did you... say... thirteen?" Tom's voice stuttered.*

A few more shots from the aliens shook the ship again, the last one made the back stations shut off without sparks for once.

"Uh, forty. No, thirty nine," Kiara winced. She heard Craig groan on the floor near her feet.

"The internal shield seems to be blocking the energy signature from growing, but our external shields can't keep up with this," Harry stated. "Um Kiara?"

"Yeah," Kiara said.

"Get Craig up so he can return fire," Harry said.

Kiara pulled a face, "no, no... I think I can do that." She looked at the weapons panel and immediately regretted saying that. Seconds later she was kneeling on the floor trying to help Craig to his feet.

Nathan grew annoyed with his own station. He quickly tapped something on it, one part of it opened up to reveal Tom's manual helm controls.

*"Harry, respond. I can't hear you."*

Craig was finally back on his feet, yet still a little dazed. "You do know there's only a few torpedoes left, right?"

"Yeah, we're still replicating them. Try phasers first," Harry ordered.

One of the alien ships hovered over the top of Voyager, with a blue beam in between the two directed towards the lower decks. The other two ships swung around along Voyager's port and starboard to fire a few more shots.

Voyager fired back from its saucer as they flew away to turn back around. The phasers didn't even slow them down, they returned the favour. A torpedo was quickly fired at one of them before it got too close again. It barely scraped by the aliens shields.

"If we had more torpedoes we may be able to do something but..." Craig said, interrupted by another hit to the shields. "We don't have enough. Phasers are useless."

"We need to get out of this tractor beam," Nathan said.

"I dunno, I kinda like it," Craig retorted.

Nathan rolled his eyes but he was smirking too, "you really need to practice your sarcasm Craigy, it's a bit tired."

Craig shook his head and mouthed, "Craigy?"

Harry turned around to work at the back of the Opps station. A display that looked like an animated bar graph constantly changing got his attention. "The Deck Thirteen forcefield is online, looks like it's drawn enough power from the beam."

The shields around the lower decks fluctuated, the beam trying to break through seemed to struggle to keep its hold on them. Another shield fluctuation sent a spark through the beam and up into the alien ship. Once it struck it, it was violently pushed away, taking the beam with it.

Voyager took that opportunity to move away and quickly. The other two ships continued its assault.

Tom paced the same three metres over and over again, the worry he was feeling was making him sweat a little. Most of the time he and the others could only hear static.

*"23... cent, thirteen... disabled," Craig's voice said.*

*"Any torpedoes...?" Harry's said.*

Tom sighed, stopping his pacing. Instead he walked over to the Doctor and the person he rescued from the pod, who was now lying on the floor.

"How's Danny?" he asked.

The Doctor briefly glanced up from his tricorder. "Stable, but it'll take a while for her..."

"Sorry, do you think the others will be the same?" Tom quickly butted in.

The Doctor was taken aback, "yes, the rest of the pods were the same. There shouldn't be any complications."

"Good," Tom sighed. "Harry, respond."

*"Tom... hold on. We... hold them off... Torpedoes..."*

"Forget it," Tom said, interrupting him or so he thought. The rest of the room stared at him. "It's too risky, get Voyager out of here."

*"What? Did... just say?"*

"Retreat. Get help," Tom said. He only got some extra static as resistance, although he was sure it overlapped a voice. "You're no good to us dead, Harry. Go. We'll be fine."

**Voyager:**

Apart from the occasional shudder from weapons fire, the bridge was silent. Everyone but Annika looked uneasy.

Harry steeled himself despite what he was feeling. "He's right. Nathan, get us back to the anomaly. Warp Nine." Nathan nodded and did what he was told. "Time to get re-enforcements."

Everyone felt the familiar jump to warp. The shuddering seemed to have stopped.

"They're not pursuing," Craig said.

Jodie frowned, "why? They had us."

"Doesn't matter for now. Can you get me that damage report, Craig?" Harry ordered.

**The Delta Flyer:**

"I'm a little busy right now," Chakotay said from underneath and technically inside the helm. All Jessie could see was his lower half lying on the floor.

"Say what you want about Damien but he's still smarter than you, I doubt me bothering you makes any difference," she said.

Chakotay groaned but he didn't budge. "He probably rigged it so we'd stay trapped."

"Whatever, it's time for some answers," Jessie said.

"Annika suggested something about shuttles, she probably did this to stop him leaving," Chakotay muttered.

"No," Jessie sighed. Her hand rubbed her belly while she sat on the nearest thing. A few beeps simultaneously told her to budge to the side a bit. "Oops. I mean about Janeway."

She heard a groan echo from inside the helm. Chakotay's hands went by his side and he dragged himself out from under the console. He gave her a *leave it alone* look.

"You talked about doing the inevitable, and you said it wasn't allowing Janeway to stay dead," Jessie said. "You planned the Tolg thing all along. Your attempt to turn me evil was to avoid it."

"I guess..." Chakotay mumbled. "I did imply that, yes."

Jessie shook her head. "Why? You knew it was an awful plan, even when you were broken. That should have been your first clue not to do it."

"Jessie, if I were to tell anyone my reasons it wouldn't be you," Chakotay said softly to avoid annoying her.

"Why not? I'm probably the only one you should tell," Jessie said, folding her arms. She ignored Chakotay's confused stare for now. "I guess I still think you're in there deep down. The Chakotay I knew cared about Janeway more than anything, he wouldn't do this for himself."

"Like James did when he brought you back," Chakotay bluntly said.

A growl escaped her lips as she pulled herself off her seat. "My god, what's your issue with him? Oh no the woman I love has an adult kid, that means she's been with another man. The horror!"

"Stop it!" Chakotay snapped. He hurried to his feet to not only confront her face to face but to avoid being kicked. "I never cared about that. In fact I did all I could to support her during the years he didn't know. I even joked with her that they were as stubborn as the other... similar."

Jessie raised her eyebrow while her shoulders did too. "Yeah, I always wondered why James drank coffee despite hating it."

"Hmm," Chakotay felt a little smirk brewing. He resisted it, he was still a little angry with her anyway. "My issue was he treat her like crap to the very end. That end was only brought on cos he couldn't finish off one vampire. A vampire that he has proven he's capable of fighting."

"That's not fair," Jessie shook her head. "Frenit is more powerful than some random vamp. Besides, you don't just suddenly get over abandonment issues overnight, it can take years, decades. James was ready to forgive her, it was just unfortunate that their last meeting was after an argument. You're telling me family never argues?"

"Forget it. You don't get it," Chakotay muttered.

Jessie took a few steps forward, mainly so he couldn't walk around her. "You're right, I don't. What I do understand is something that no one else does. I've been dead and brought back, I know what it's like. Let me tell you, it's terrifying, it's traumatising. When I woke up I was alone, trapped in the dark. You have no idea what that's like." Her shoulders slumped, her head dipped. "I got out, things did get better. Janeway though, she'll still be trapped. I can't believe you never considered that."

"So, you wish James never brought you back. It wasn't worth it?" Chakotay said quietly.

"It was much better than the alternative. I don't remember much, but I know that I was alone and lost wherever I was," Jessie said. Her head shook timidly. "I am grateful for it now..."

"You're making no sense. I thought what I did was awful," Chakotay said.

"It was. You wanted me to do the same to her, only she wouldn't be able to get out. This was your better option. You thought Janeway waking up in her own grave was better than waking up inside an undead collective. I doubt the plan was to leave her so... yeah I don't get it. Both were bad, don't get me wrong, but I know which one was better," Jessie said.

Chakotay's face stiffened, she noticed his right hand clench tightly. He stepped forward so he was a little too close for her. Instinctively she backed off a couple, he was able to walk around her. "Just like that James' original plan wasn't for you to wake up in your coffin, huh?" he muttered.

"Well... no," Jessie stuttered. "Demons attacked before it could be opened, that's not..."

"The point," Chakotay finished for her. "I thought it was." He kept his back on her.

"The point is I don't believe the real Chakotay would subject Janeway, the woman he loved, to something so awful. For his own selfish reasons," Jessie said. "For the Tolg plan to still be a lesser of two evils, you mustn't have realised that breaking her free from them would be impossible. Why do it if you didn't think you could?"

Chakotay laughed bitterly. "You believed James when he said he brought you back to save the ships from demon invasions? That just gave him an excuse. He was the selfish one."

Jessie turned around to face him, but all she faced was his back. "No, he admitted that he did it for himself and our children. He didn't hide from the truth, unlike you."

"You're wrong," Chakotay muttered.

Jessie stared at him intently, "why?"

Chakotay only shook his head in response. He walked towards the door at the back without another word.

Both weapons clattered to the ground. To show the aliens he wasn't a threat to them, James extended his arms out so they could see his hands. They slowly approached, yet were still high on their guard.

"Don't," one of the ones at the back warned. "Could be a trick."

"It's not attacking, it doesn't look like one of them," a man at the front said.

"I'm not," James said, shocking some of the doubters. "I came here to help you, but I was... too late."

"It, he talks," another stuttered.

"See," the man at the front said back to them. He took a few steps closer but didn't lower his weapon. "You didn't do this?"

"No. What did is back there," James answered, pointing behind him at the door he left. "I've seen this before. Regular people are experimented on, turned into them."

"You're not from this world are you? How did you get here?" the man at the front questioned.

"I have a ship in orbit," James replied. He expected the suspicious looks he received for it. He quickly continued before they could counter it, "the anomaly is draining its power as we speak, we'll have to leave soon. You can come with us."

"How do we know it's not a trap?" a woman in the group asked.

James sighed and looked down. Not for long though as wherever he looked he could see bodies. "I guess you don't," he answered honestly. "Clearly I'm not who you thought I was, so maybe we can start from there." The aliens looked at each other, then back at him with their eyes narrowing. "I'm not wrong am I?"

"That doesn't mean you're not a threat," another alien said.

"It doesn't mean I am either," James said. "Your planet's dying, what have you got to lose here?"

The alien at the front gestured his hand down. The rest reluctantly lowered their weapons slightly. He slowly stepped forward yet again, the two men barely had two metres between them now. "There is no way out. Other vessels have been lost trying. The idea that you've survived the anomaly at all is ludicrous, never mind finding us inside it."

"I assume you know of a ship called the Katane," James said. The aliens were shocked to say the least. "It escaped, and it's even been back inside the anomaly since. As long as the trips are short, any ship can survive in here."

"We have no reason to believe you. The enemy would know about one of our most famous ships as well," one alien said. Some of the group raised their weapons again despite their leader's wishes.

"Wait!" a voice yelled from afar. Everyone looked to their right, while James to his left to see the girl and Lena running over to them. "These people came here to save us. This woman saved my life, she even killed the thing that attacked us."

James walked over to Lena despite the aliens' weapons pointing at him. He noticed the blood all over her clothes and arms, then the distant look in her eyes. "Are you hurt?" She shook her head, doing so brought her attention back to the bodies on the floor. James realised this so he put an arm across her shoulders and stepped to one side to block the view of it. Again she shook her head.

"So there were two," the leader said quietly. He turned to his companions. Most of them still looked suspicious. "Stand down."

"Sir?" one of them stuttered in dismay.

"The alien is correct. What choice do we have?" the leader said. He bowed his head, "we have a week's worth of food left, and that's only if we ration it to a bite a day. The land is brittle, cave ins happen multiple times in one day. We can't stay here much longer. If they are leading us into a trap, it will only speed up the process."

"But Ersa sir, colony twelve said that..." a nervous alien tried to butt in.

"Now's not the time for fear mongering," the leader, Ersa said. The suspicious ones reluctantly lowered their weapons like the others. "So, do you have a transport waiting somewhere?" Ersa asked.

James turned his head to face him without moving. "We couldn't risk that. You'll need to get as many people as you can to the surface. We'll..."

"The surface? They'll find us," one alien stuttered.

"As soon as we can get a lock on you we'll transport you to our ship and then to the Katane when we escape the anomaly. *They* won't have time to find you," James said.

"You mean Captain Shoytin is helping you?" another alien stuttered.

"That's... a long story," was all James could answer with. He turned his head back towards Lena. "Have you heard the Doc since the attack?"

"Yeah, but I was too busy. I didn't hear anything he said," she answered.

*"Yes I'm still here," Backup Doctor said in unison with her last sentence.* None of the aliens could hear him as his voice was confined to James and Lena's ear protection.

"You start the evacuation, we'll get in touch with our ship," James directed to the aliens. He glanced back at Lena, "do you want to? It would be best to talk outside of here, they'll only hear one side and we don't want to put them off further."

"Sure," Lena nodded weakly. She tried to give him a smile to reassure him, but he saw right through it. "Thanks."

James waited for her to walk by the aliens, who were now discussing things between them, and then outside the camp. He then walked over to his weapons to collect them. Before the remaining aliens could really complain or get suspicious of him again, he hid them again in his jacket.

"Do you have any idea how many people are left, or..." he asked.

Ersa stared ahead for a while, his eyes cast down. "I'm afraid not. We kept the sensors online as long as possible, but there simply wasn't enough power to maintain them anymore. We haven't been able to use them for a few weeks. At least, that's how it feels like anyway." He nodded at some of the aliens, they started to leave the camp. Two of them walked over to collect the girl before doing that.

"How many there were before the sensors went down would still be a lot of help," James said.

"No, it would not," another alien commented.

Ersa glanced back at her, then at their alien visitor again. "The reason we escaped to the tunnels had nothing to do with the temperatures outside. Even without power, our buildings are capable of maintaining heat for many, many months."

"You were exposed to the things that keep attacking you," James said.

Ersa nodded. "Not long after our sensors failed, they attacked us. The few that witnessed the attack claim it was fast and without mercy. Well..." He reluctantly looking around at the camp. "You know that part at least."

"All right, we'll figure something out when we get your group out of here. We'll have to discuss the towers at some point, but not..." James said. The remaining aliens frowned at him, he wondered if they knew what he was talking about at all. "Um, recently built power distribution towers?" Their expressions didn't change. "Never mind, evacuation first."

The Delta Flyer continued to drift in empty space, it was starting to lag to one side. A piercing white flashed behind them, Voyager flew from it and directly towards them. They didn't slow any further down though as they past by it. It looked like they hadn't even noticed the Flyer at all until the shuttle disappeared in a transporter beam. Seconds later it had jumped into warp again.

The occupants barely had the time to blink during all of this. Chakotay stared at the window for a while before finally saying something. "That was... I want to say interesting."

"More like anti-climactic," Jessie mumbled.

"Well you'd think we'd be used to it," Chakotay said.

Damien didn't know what they were talking about. He gave them an odd stare each. During the Chakotay one he then noticed the windows no longer showed space anymore, instead just the familiar walls of Voyager. Jessie and Chakotay heard him stumble out of his seat and run off.

"Do you want to?" Chakotay asked.

Jessie smiled, "as if you had a choice." She needed a few tries to get up but once she was on her feet, she was as quick as anyone else.

Meanwhile Damien had ran outside, only to be greeted by the open arms of Annika. He tried to stop himself but he had been running too fast. Before he could really stop on his own, he slammed right into Annika, knocking them both down. It got even worse for him, he landed right on top of her. She naturally started to squeeze him to death, and probably quite literally too.

"Aaaw, my Damy wamy wamy, I thought I lost you," she cooed.

"Oh god!" Damien screamed in horror and pain.

Jessie had heard all of this so she could stop in time. "Well that's worse than anything I can ever do to him." With a shrug she headed for the exit.

Chakotay stepped outside as well. His commbadge chirped. *"Bridge to Chakotay. I don't know what happened to you but we haven't got time to really discuss it."*

"You did seem like you were in a hurry. We didn't even detect you coming," Chakotay said. "What's happening?"

*"We need the Enterprise back up and running as soon as possible, I need every one I can get on it."*

"That doesn't really answer my question," Chakotay muttered.

"Oooh!" Annika squealed, luckily because of something else besides Damien. She leapt to her feet, taking Damien with her. "Me, me... pick me!"

*"Okay, maybe not that desperate. Desperate enough to ask Damien though."*

"Are you kidding? The Enterprise E has enough jokes made about it," Chakotay groaned.

Damien tried to pull himself away from Annika, her grip seemed to get even tighter. "Hey, that bottomless pit serves a purpose. It can be used as a joke but that's not its main function."

"What bottomless pit?" Chakotay asked.

Damien groaned in frustration for more than one reason. "Duh, where do you think Justin Timberlake really is? Dead... ha, you're naive."

"Again, that doesn't answer my bloody question," Chakotay said impatiently.

*"Just try to get rid of Annika and report to the bridge please. We should rendezvous with the Enterprise in less than an hour. Kim out."*

Chakotay stared ahead at the crazy ex drone and villain, he was tempted to leave them be. He groaned in disgust. "Why is it always me that has to do this?" It didn't take long to think of something. "I hear there's rabbits leaking out of a portal on Deck Thirteen."

"Oooh!" both Annika and Damien said at the same time. Annika let go of him and ran off. Damien was put off for a moment but he started to leave as well. Chakotay grabbed his arm.

"There's no rabbits," he groaned.

Damien huffed, "I knew that, I was escaping."

Thirty figures materialised around the Enterprise Cargo Bay. The transport wasn't even complete when a few of them started to panic at their new surroundings. The lights were flickering on and off, systems sounded like they were failing all over the place. It didn't help that containers weren't stacked up anymore, some were broken and most were lying scattered all over.

Ersa approached James as he looked around in anger. "I thought you said your ship was still okay."

"That's what I was told," James said impatiently. He tapped his commbadge. "Lena?"

### **The Bridge:**

Lena's form was still materialising when his voice spoke over the comm. Once it was over her head darted around at the many consoles that were failing. She hurried over to the helm.

*"Lena, did you make it to the Bridge okay?"*

"Yeah I'm here," Lena replied. "The Doc's done a crap job at maintaining everything."

*"So I see. He said he was rerouting to more essential systems."*

Lena shook her head as she quickly worked. "Obviously not. A lot of the Bridge systems are going off-line. Stellar Cartography is still okay despite being told to take power from it. Hang on."

*"I think we should get out of here before we lose engines and life support."*

"No, no, hang on!" Lena stuttered.

### **Cargo Bay One:**

The lights remained on finally, but the aliens were still a little nervous.

*"Power's been rerouted to the Bridge, Sickbay and the Cargo Bay. We should be okay for now."*

"Good job Lena. I'd better go check on the Doc, we'll need him," James said. He turned back to Ersa. "Sorry about that."

Ersa sighed, "it's quite all right. It explains why our own ships never returned."

"About that; the anomaly will play tricks on you so..." James said.

"Yes hallucinations, you've already told us," Ersa said.

James took another look around. Apart from a few storage containers, the bay wasn't as badly damaged as the rest of the ship. His next glance was towards the only door he could see. "If I'm right, they shouldn't affect you too greatly if we shut down any access to our systems. There's no point trying to trick people when there's nothing to do."

*"Just life support and lights. Everything else will be powered down, just in case. Oh and I just checked, the Doc's still online so that's not the problem."*

"Your holographic doctor," Ersa mused. "It's too bad you don't have more copies of him to man your ship. It would help a lot in here. Have you considered finding out what makes you and your sister immune as well?"

"We already know, it's not something we can copy," James answered but the rest of the man's sentence was on his mind. "Why wasn't the Doc with us? Nobody even mentioned it."

Ersa was confused to say the least, "I thought he was here."

"He didn't even help when Voyager was here," James continued like he never said anything. His face turned a little pale, "ohno. Excuse me." He hurried to the exit before Ersa could say anything else.

### **Sickbay:**

Backup Doctor hummed one of his usual opera tunes as he hovered a regenerator side to side. James ran inside to see him trying to heal an empty biobed.

"Doc?" he said carefully.

"Just a moment," Backup Doctor tried to hush him. "Poor Lena twisted her ankle, I'll fix that first."

James walked over to the computer station nearby, while keeping a careful watch on the hologram. He had a much better view and he still couldn't see anyone on the biobed. "I just want to ask if you had any trouble with the power rerouting."

"Ohno, no problem. I'm a fast learner," Backup Doctor answered cheerfully.

"So how is everything?" James asked while he looked down at the station. Nothing looked out of the ordinary there. His fingers hovered over the EMH's systems.

Backup Doctor smiled proudly. "As I said, there's no problem. The power drainage is minimal at best."

James walked towards the office, still keeping his eye on him. Backup Doctor seemed more than happy to treat his imaginary patient. James tapped his commbadge, "Lena. We've got a big problem."

"Oh?"

James was about to reply when he saw Backup Doctor walk over to the station he had been at earlier. He started typing something while muttering to himself. James hurried back.

"It's not working. I'll have to eject it," he heard him stutter in a panic.

"Eject it?" James said, his eyes widened. He ran over to stop him. Backup Doctor glanced at him and his own panic grew. He pulled out something to point it at him, luckily it was just a hypospray. "Doc, what's the matter?"

"Get away from me! You things... they're everywhere," Backup Doctor continued to panic.

"Doc," James tried to calm him.

"It's the only way to stop them," Backup Doctor stuttered. His spare hand flew down to the station, James reached out to grab it in time. "No, I won't let you destroy the Enterprise. I..." He again tried to attack him with the hypospray, only to get pushed away completely.

Desperate, he grabbed the nearest thing he could pick up which was the medicine tray. Instead of throwing it towards James, the tray was thrown towards one of the wall consoles, destroying it on impact and sending sparks flying. The Sickbay lights started to flicker off one by one.

*"James, careful where you throw him. The main power connection I have to Sickbay has been severely damaged..."*

"I didn't..." James started to protest, but then sighed. "Computer deactivate EMH."

Backup Doctor's jaw dropped as he disappeared.

"I'll pick up some supplies, once I'm gone just reroute what you can from Sickbay," James muttered.

### **The Bridge:**

Lena was more than confused, she was worried as well. "What happened? The Doc shouldn't be hallucinating."

*"No, his program was glitching. I should have known the anomaly would still affect him."*

"Oh," the colour in Lena's face disappeared. "I... I did know. I remember the Doc singing for some invisible audience while we here the first time. I should have remembered that."

*"Don't worry about it, he's off-line now."*

Lena looked across the entire helm, she quickly tapped something in. "No I should worry about it. I can't risk doing anything to Sickbay, it could overload. The power there is wasted and it's my... my fault."

*"Lena I didn't think about it until now either. Don't be so hard on yourself."*

"It would be a different story if it was actually your mistake," Lena mumbled. She read the station again, her heart sank. "We just have enough power to get us out of the anomaly."

*"That's good. Take us out. I'll join you when I'm done."*

"No it's not," Lena said quietly. "By the time we get back here, beam down, convince the next group, it'll be time to leave again. There's no way we'll be able to come in here for a third trip, let alone save everyone on this planet."

*"We'll have a think about it on the way out and back, for now lets just focus on saving the ones we do have. Okay?"*

Lena closed her eyes tightly, her fists clenched as well. "There's only one other way. When you bring the Enterprise back, everyone will be ready to evacuate."

She didn't get a response right away. *"What do you mean when I bring it back? Lena?"*

"I might get one more transport out of this," Lena said but only to herself. Her hand hovered over her commbadge, "sorry." Then she tapped it and immediately started keying something else in.

"Lena, don't you..." James said until he noticed he was cut off. "Damn it!" He ran as fast as he could.

The run back to the Jeffries tube was taking too long. A turbolift door was closer. He ran over to that instead. All it took was one push to open it up, the metal that broke off it clattered down the shaft. James quickly looked up to see if there was a turbolift in the way. For now he couldn't see one so he reached around to grab the emergency ladder and climb up as fast as he could.

The shaft seemed to never end, it felt to James like hours had passed since he had started climbing. Finally he reached the top. One arm swing did the same thing to this door that it did to the first one.

He already knew it was but he had to see it for himself. He was too late. The Bridge was empty. The viewscreen no longer showed the planet anymore, the blue mist of the anomaly had taken over it.

"No, no," James stuttered while he rushed over to the helm. What it said confirmed his fears. Lena was no longer on board the ship, and the Enterprise had been moving ever since their conversation. It took all the restraint he had to not slam his clenched fist into the nearest thing. "Lena."

### **Meanwhile:**

Voyager dropped out of warp yet again, it pulled alongside the Katane and slowed down to a stop.

"Where... what?" Harry stuttered. "The Enterprise isn't here, but the alien ship is? Lifesigns?"

"None," Jodie answered nervously.

Jessie glared at the viewscreen as if it was its fault. Craig was still at Tactical sharing it with her. He nervously stepped to one side. Then he noticed a part of the station flashing at him. "Hang on. The buoy you left behind is signalling us."

"It's probably just our message," Harry said.

Craig shook his head, "no, it's not. It's not even an audio file, it's a data file."

Jessie turned her head towards him. Harry did as well. "Data file? Download it," Harry said.

Craig only had to tap that part of the station once. "It's downloading."

"Why send a data file? Surely a *we are here* message would be better," Jodie asked.

"There must be more to it than that," Harry said. "I'd do the same thing."

"Well surely this means they have the Enterprise. It's probably something from that," Jessie said.

Harry nodded, "yeah. Something they couldn't risk waiting for us for."

The clouds had broken up a little more, allowing a little bit more sunlight through to the surface. It was still dark enough to obscure anything in the distance, or at least that's what Lena hoped as she walked towards apparently nothing. To confuse her further the path ahead was getting darker, but not dark enough to be a cave entrance. Then she noticed the ground had started to slope upwards. It made a little sense now, she raised her flashlight a bit which fixed that problem.

It was getting steeper the further she walked. Lena could just touch the ground ahead of her, she did so to avoid sliding back down. For a moment she stopped to check her tricorder to see if she missed a cave opening. The tricorder told her she still had a good three miles to walk before then. It was just a hill, she thought. The ground was lighter than the straight path, her fingers brushed blades of dead grass as she continued her climb.

An end in sight slowly came into view, the sky. She was nearing the top. Just to be safe she slowed her climbing pace to a stop right before the land straightened again. Her head slowly raised to peer over the top. What she saw made her gasp.

Whatever it was, was tall enough to reach into the clouds. It was little more than a black shadow growing out of the earth. It almost didn't look real to her. Lena tried to convince herself it was just her eyes badly trying to focus in the lack of light. The artificial lights flickering along its base gave it a very real presence, and some detail as well. This thing was definitely a building. She knew exactly what kind too.

It was in the way, and what was strange to her was her tricorder didn't warn her about it. She looked down to it to check again. Somehow during her hike up the hill she had veered a little to the west, now that she had the readings for this huge building were coming in bright and clearly.

Just as she lowered the tricorder again Lena heard a few voices coming from below her, just near the base of the hill. As she looked down the few voices became many voices. Then she saw where they were coming from. The land before her had been paved all the way up to the building. The lights at its base would spin around to shine on this land, only then highlighting them.

Hundreds of them, all shapes and sizes, male and female, even children. The next flash of light highlighted their commonality though, the hollow black eyes. They seemed to be standing there waiting for something.

Lena crouched further down the side of the hill she walked up. They hadn't seen her yet, she didn't want them to. Seeing them had chilled her to the core.

Footsteps approached behind her. Lena reached carefully for one of the weapons hiding in her jacket. Half way out, she swung around to swipe it at whoever was behind her. Something hard swung into her face before she could do that, the force of it pushed her backwards into the ground. Her face stung, it felt warm and wet. A hand reached up to check without even thinking about it, the visor and mask were in the way. Her head meanwhile slowly looked up to see what it was that hit her.

"Welcome home," a familiar voice sneered. He swung his only arm at her once again.

Tom could only look on and worry as the Doctor lay yet another pod victim onto the floor. The last one he had helped still lay nearby with the thick coat Tom had worn rolled under their head. Rachel knelt down next to her.

B'Elanna scanned one of the failed pods, her frown was getting more intense. Tom was even more worried.

"I think... this is one of the inhabitants," she said.

"What?" Tom could only say.

B'Elanna glanced down at her tricorder, then raised it up as if she was getting a closer look. "There's not much left of him or her, but what is there matches the data we got so we could disguise the Doc."

"How long would it take for someone to end up like that?" Tom dared to ask while pointing at one of the many bones on the floor.

"Depends on the environment and when the pods failed," the Doctor replied.

"You know at least one. You just don't want to tell me, do you?" Tom said nervously.

"I don't think this is just a stasis pod," B'Elanna thought out loud.

Tom groaned, "no, of course it isn't. Why not? There's people in pods, dead and alive, some screechy thing..." His face turned very pale. "We er... forgot about that didn't we?" Everyone looked at him blankly.

"You mean the reason why I'm here?" Zare questioned. "Yes, apparently."

Rachel was a little worried. She climbed to her feet. "I've only ever heard it. It definitely sounds like a demon. I've just hoped that it's trapped on floors that are inaccessible."

"Maybe you and Zare could team up, investigate it," Tom suggested.

Rachel and Zare glanced at one another. Neither of them seemed to like the idea for one reason or another. "Normally I'd be up for that, but I don't know where it is. There's a good chance that it would attack you while I was looking for it," Zare said.

"Yes, that's what I was going to say," Rachel nodded. "Perhaps one of us should stay behind to guard."

"What kind of spells do you know?" Zare asked, still a little suspicious of the other woman.

Rachel smiled politely at her. "Many, you'd have to be more specific."

"Hmm, defensive; shields like the one you used on yourself," Zare said.

"I have to admit, those aren't my forte. That's why they never last long. I'm more of an offensive spell caster," Rachel answered.

"Sounds like Zare's the guard then," Tom said.

Zare frowned back at him and then Rachel. "No offense, but..."

"Offense already taken sweetheart," Rachel muttered. "I'm not the enemy here. Nothing we've dealt with have magic powers, just brute strength. That describes you more than me."

B'Elanna sighed impatiently, loud enough to get everyone's attention. It worked on everyone but Zare who was more than annoyed now. "Things we have dealt with shapeshift as well. I have a good reason to be cautious," Zare argued.

"I didn't know Softmicron knew witchcraft. My mistake. Go ahead," Rachel said, gesturing to the door.

"Slayer and witch or not, I'm going to make them headbutt each other," B'Elanna growled.

Tom laughed nervously. "Girls, I'll decide if anyone goes and who. B'Elanna, you got something?"

"As I was saying, these don't look like stasis units. Or at least that's not their primary function," B'Elanna said. "It seems to draw energy from the ground, it's not hooked up to anything else in the structure. It's probably why it failed."

"The trees were dying, the structure was starting to sink," Tom said, showing he understood.

"Yeah," B'Elanna nodded.

"So it's definitely Softmicron then," the Doctor said sadly. "Our guest outside is probably one of those things the Softmicron were making on the other world. That'll be what the pods really do."

"I'm not so sure. The person in this pod has been dead for centuries. It doesn't take this long for the Soft to drain an entire planet, even with their old spheres," B'Elanna said.

Rachel was a little confused, everyone else however were very worried now. "What does that mean then?" she asked.

"This entire structure can't be Softmicron. Somebody else built it," B'Elanna replied.

**TO BE CONTINUED**