

## Episode 5.20 Within Reach

### **Astrometrics:**

The entire star chart displayed on the large screen couldn't be seen for all of the different data that kept popping up over the top. Everyone there were having trouble keeping up with them all.

"Wow," Harry could only reply with.

"The Enterprise has certainly left its mark around here," Chakotay added on.

Damien was the one feeding the data through, being carefully watched by Jessie and Craig on either side of him. His face was scrunched in disgust, but the data he was reading left a sparkle in both of his eyes.

"Hmph, another one humping the great Enterprise's leg," he muttered. One part of the screen lost the data it was showing to focus on the stargate. One system was highlighted, then the same happened on the other side of the screen. "These two planets were liberated. One from orbit, little resistance due to poor military. The other would have been impossible without the actual resistance from the natives."

"We can't say anything. We're one for one and with the same excuse," Harry pointed out.

"One for one is still better than two for twenty one," Damien sneered. Jessie gave him a rough shove in his arm. He gave her a glare until she gave one back.

"Why did they fail? We should know," Chakotay asked.

Harry stepped closer to Damien and Craig so he could get a good look at the same thing. He studied it for a few minutes.

"One of the tower networks shot us down, I can't see the Enterprise faring that much better," Jessie said.

"You're not wrong. If the alien ships themselves didn't fight them off, the towers would fire on them instead," Harry said while reading. "There's been a few attempts to destroy the towers from within like we did, but they've been caught everytime and forced to escape."

"I'm not surprised. We wrongly assumed that they were sensing James as the resistance had no trouble breaking in before. Then our teams without him were attacked as well," Craig said.

Damien rolled his eyes. "You were aliens sneaking around with weapons and bombs. What did you expect them to do? Give you a passing nod, ask you if you want a cup of coffee in the workers canteen?" Most of the room stared at him with contempt, a lot of them knew he was right though. "They're Softmicron, or created by Softmicron. They'll sense Slayers and they'll send their best to deal with them."

"Ok, lets say the Enterprise's away teams were a lot sneakier than we were," Craig said.

"I wouldn't," Damien scoffed.

"How were they pursued, apprehended so badly that they had to escape every time?" Craig asked.

Damien glanced up at the ceiling like he was silently praying to some rabbit god. "These are the morons that bested me all the time. The shame."

"It would take a lot to destroy those towers. It's a long time to be sneaking around the enemy stronghold. I'd be surprised if they didn't run into any trouble," Jessie said.

"I agree," Chakotay nodded.

"They simply didn't have enough people to maintain their ship and to send a decent size attack team down," Damien groaned. "That's why the rest of their attacks since are from orbit only. Either way, they were still fools."

Harry moved back to his previous position to look at something else. "Have you found anything that we don't generally know? How is the Enterprise still in one piece, how it's here, why did it lure us here? Heck how did the crew know this was a giant Game Sphere long before we did? Anything about the anomaly?"

"There's a lot of detailed crap going back four months; logs, sensor stuff, diagnostics, replicator logs," Damien replied. "Nothing before then."

"Four months. We've been here longer than that," Jessie said. Chakotay nodded, he noticed that too.

"Detailed crap? Can you be more specific?" Harry muttered in dead pan.

Damien laughed like it was so obvious. "I didn't want to overwhelm your tiny brains."

Jessie sighed impatiently. "If you're done here I can always drag you to where Annika is, you little piece of sh..."

Harry quickly cleared his throat, "why don't we just start with why James and Lena took the Enterprise. I imagine whatever it was, was recent enough for them to leave in a hurry. Check the most recent logs."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Lena liked to play Captain," Damien snickered. Jessie grabbed his arm to start to drag him towards the door, he panicked immediately. "Okay, okay. Sheesh!" Jessie let him go so he could continue tapping away at the console.

"They couldn't have gone far. Neither of them would have the expertise or the means to reactivate the warp core," Harry said.

"So how come we can't detect them?" Craig questioned. His eyes gravitated towards the tiny black spot on the stargate. That felt like the answer to him. "The anomaly."

"Yeah I was thinking that as well," Chakotay said.

Jessie frowned at them both, "but anything that stays inside it too long gets their power drained completely. No one could survive that happening to their ship. There shouldn't be anyone to save."

Damien looked like he suppressed a gag, everyone who saw it assumed he was faking it. "Ugh, don't say stuff like that."

"Why? People being dead is a good thing to you right?" Chakotay grumbled.

"Not that. You people all act so high and mighty. Oh our main ship's sodded off, but this planet is in danger. Let's not wait for them and save them, by golly," Damien said mockingly. "You guys did the same exact thing; just couldn't wait for reinforcements or whatever. It makes me ill."

"Good," Jessie said.

Harry pulled a confused face at him. "Planet?"

Damien rolled his eyes again as he turned his head towards him. "Yeah. The Enterprise's stargates have a system sitting right where the anomaly is now. One m-class. Their course before the ship stopped was going right for it."

"Good god. How would a planet endure an anomaly like that?" Harry stuttered.

"Same as a planet in a Game Sphere I'd wager," Chakotay said.

"But James and Lena can't save anyone from that. The best you could do is evacuate it and you'll just have a bunch of hallucinating aliens running around, pulling wires," Harry said.

Craig was turning a little pale, his head fell. "That wouldn't bother Lena." Everyone but Damien turned to him. "She'd want to rescue them anyway."

"Yes, just like her mother would," Chakotay said sadly.

Jessie grew a little angry at them both. "And James wouldn't?"

Harry shrugged, "who knows. He's not exactly consistent these days, is he?" Jessie's glare made him a little nervous. "There's no way to know for sure if the planet even survived the anomaly at all. It's a bit of a risky move even if there was. He claims to think things through these days, and that's not an insult. I'd definitely be thinking it through before charging in."

"Really? The guy who can go from Ensign Eager to Ensign Suck Up, then back again randomly in the span of two episodes is calling someone else inconsistent. Try pulling the other one," Jessie muttered. "I'm not suggesting he charged straight inside as soon as he found this out. Since he and Lena are the only ones that can go back in, it would be a waste of time to wait for us to come back before doing it."

"I hate to say it but she's right. Going back inside was probably his idea," Chakotay said.

"Oh for... who the hell cares?" Damien groaned. "I know those two idiots well enough to know they'll be inside that thing. You can't go in to get them out. There's nothing you can do. You may as well take that bratnapper ship and head back to the other planet. Though if you want my opinion..."

"Nobody does," Jessie butted in.

*"Bridge to Astrometrics. Something's emerging from the anomaly," Jodie's voice said.*

"Can you send the viewscreen image of it here?" Harry ordered her.

*"Maybe I should have the viewscreen on before I do that."*

Chakotay shrugged, "is that really necessary?"

*"Duh, I can't feed you guys nothing, can I?"*

"I meant is it necessary to see whatever's coming out of the anomaly? We know what it is," Chakotay groaned.

The many data windows and most of the star chart were overtaken by a much bigger window showing nothing but black. Seconds later a familiar ship slowly appeared from out of nowhere.

"See?" Chakotay said.

"Hail them," Harry commanded.

Damien smirked, "we can't. They're suffering from many power failures. Shocking huh?"

Harry responded by groaning into his hand. Jessie's response was a bit more to the point with a nasty shove in the chest. Craig quickly side stepped to avoid being knocked down with Damien.

"I hope someone's started a power transfer," Chakotay muttered.

Jessie took over the part of the station Damien was using. The people watching the screen saw a beam shoot out from their side towards the Enterprise.

"Um..." Craig said as he watched the same screens Jessie was. She looked at him and not the specific part he was looking at. "Sensors are reading twenty nine alien lifesigns matching our Eryan friends, and one Human."

Harry took a step backwards as if that would make him safe with Jessie in the room. "Okay, let me know when they get their communications back and..."

*"We're being hailed. Obviously it was top priority for them," Jodie's voice butted in.*

"All right, patch them through," Harry said nervously while taking another step backwards.

*"Audio only."*

"Right viewscreen needs power too," Harry stammered. He took another step. By this time everyone was staring at him, well everyone standing were. Damien was too busy grumbling about revenge while trying to stand up to bother. "Oh god, I don't know which one to hope for," he said during a step that was so far back it opened the Astrometrics door. It startled him enough to make him jump.

*"Okay, channel open."*

Harry was about to say something, but he only had time to open his mouth. *"Tom, beam the Flyer into our Cargo Bay and hurry," James' panicked voice said.*

Both Craig and Chakotay's shoulders fell, Craig's face was getting whiter.

"Um, Tom's not here and the Flyer well... it's broken," Harry said nervously. "What happened?"

*"I don't have time to explain. I've already wasted time by flying out of the anomaly. Just send a shuttle or maybe that Captain's Yacht we never use."*

"Hold on, you're going to have to give us more than that," Chakotay muttered.

"You mean the thing that sits at the base of the saucer? That won't fit in the Enterprise shuttle bay," Harry said.

*"God really... just beam me over to it. It's not hard."*

Chakotay was a little annoyed that what he said was ignored, his fists clenched.

"James, try to calm down and think about this first. You're not going to achieve anything by panicking," Jessie said softly.

She got a quiet sigh on the other end of the comm. *"Jess, I've had an hour or two to think about this and calm down. The Enterprise will take too long to re-power up, the journey both ways is too long. I could be too late now."*

"What happened to my daughter Stuart?" Chakotay snapped coldly. He caught a glare from Jessie in the corner of his eye, but he was too mad to really care about it. "Give me the skunk eye all you want, it doesn't change anything."

*"Did anyone get a chance to read the data file we left?" Chakotay made an annoyed grunt in response. "There are people still alive on that planet. They're underground so transporters are out. They think we're the people responsible for what happened. It took us the only few hours we had to save twenty nine people. Lena she... didn't want to waste anymore time. She stayed behind to gather up survivors."*

"You let her?" Chakotay hissed.

*"Of course not."* James' voice didn't sound annoyed like anyone thought it would be, just exhausted.

Jessie gave her death glare a rest as it clearly wasn't working. It was replaced by a look of sympathy. "I know you want to get back in there as soon as possible. Think about it though. A shuttle will not last long in that thing, you'd end up wasting more time or risk getting yourself killed. That won't save Lena."

*"The Flyer might, the yacht's too. I can wait for the Enterprise's one to power up... In the mean time, those people in the Cargo Bay will need medical attention. The aliens on Voyager will need to know about them."*

"I'll take care of that," Harry said, finally taking that last backwards step to safety.

"I hate to make the situation worse but I gotta know. How long does that planet have?" Craig asked.

The silence made a tense room even more unbearable. Craig regretted even asking.

*"I don't know. When there's enough power I'll send the data the sensors got before they were shut down." A loud sigh followed. "The planet dying isn't the thing I'm the most worried about anyway."*

"Why, what could be worse than your planet breaking apart at your feet?" Chakotay asked.

Damien had been so quiet lately everyone had forgotten he was there, until he laughed at the image of what Chakotay said. Jessie just shoved him back on the floor again.

*"Things that can kill you horribly before that even happens."*

#### **Two hours earlier:**

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.

Her eyes widened. Even in the dark she recognised that face and voice easily. "Frenit."

A dark smile spread across his uncovered face. His fist clenched and flew towards her. Lena quickly rolled to one side, just narrowly missing his fist. Once it hit the land there was nothing left there but a small hole.

She jumped to her feet, he straightened back to a standing position. Her hand reached into her jacket again to pull the sword out of it. All she got this time was a smirk from her opponent. Pointing it at him made it worse.

"I see you've picked up big brother's habits," he said in a mocking tone.

Lena only pulled a confused face as a response. She remained on her guard. From what she knew of him, it was definitely a bad idea to make the first move.

Frenit stretched out his arm. "What do you think? It's a beautiful world, isn't it?"

Lena then noticed something off about him. His outfit at his right shoulder had been torn off. Even in this dimly lit place there was no mistaking it, he had lost a limb since they last met.

"It's missing a certain something, like you," she muttered.

Frenit's smirk seemed to have faded a little. "I could kill you with no arms. Do not mock me."

"Why are you. How..." Lena said while taking a step further down the hill. Frenit only noticed her trail off, or it looked that way to her. His eyes seemed to be wider than normal and his smile was back. "Why would you come here?"

"Well it's a lot more... *homely* now," Frenit answered, followed by a laugh.

Lena looked down the hill she had only climbed up minutes ago without moving her head. She hoped the visor would mask that from the man in front of her. "It must be pretty dull for you, with nobody around." While she spoke her right foot took another step down.

Frenit pounced forward. Lena quickly brandished her sword in his face to stop him from going any further. He only laughed and swiped it clean from her hands. Before she could really react to that he had lunged forward again to grab her by the throat.

"As I was saying," he said as if he was having a nice chat over a cup of coffee. Lena felt her feet leave the ground. "This planet, it's perfect for me now. Dark, dead. I'm in my element here." Roughly he pulled her closer to him so they were briefly face to face. "Unlike you. I should be asking why you're here."

Lena tried to get him to let go by kicking him, but it didn't even bother him. "You know what, that's rude." Lena briefly assumed it did actually bother him a little after all, until he pulled the visor from her face. The biting cold hit the exposed skin around her eyes, causing it to ache horribly and her eyes to water. The part of her skin where the edges of the visor were stung more than they ached. In the first few seconds she felt something warm dribble down.

"See, you don't belong here. You're just another weak little Human," he sneered at her. Then he leaned in even closer to her face, towards one of her cheeks. This time when she kicked him she used both of her feet and all the strength she could muster. It was enough to push him backwards a bit and growl at her.

All it took was one small swing to the left to toss her aside. To her the fall felt like a few minutes, then she hit the ground. It winded her but it felt like the land itself bore the brunt of it more than she did, the soil began to crumble and crack. The momentum of the fall caused her to roll the rest of the way down the hill. Unknown to her the soil started to collapse in on itself after she rolled over it.

Finally she stopped when the land flattened. The ground began to crack there as well. Despite the aches all over body she had to move from that spot. Quickly she dragged herself to her feet to run back a few metres. She watched as that same patch of land crumbled into a new hole. Her eyes tried to focus on the hill but all she could see was the flashlight that she had dropped during the attack, and a tiny patch of land it was highlighting. There was no way for her to know where Frenit was, at least until it was too late. Her eyes were struggling to see anyway with the freezing air making her eyes water and now ache.

All she could do was pull up the mask a bit, squint her eyes and run the other way. She had to find shelter and fast. Luckily no footsteps followed her.

Zare kept careful watch of the door. Her shoulders were tensed up, a scowl stuck on her face.

"I can't believe you sent her over me," she said.

Tom briefly glanced across, annoying the Doctor a little as the pair were in the middle of lifting a man out of one of the pods.

"She says she's a witch and you take her word for it," Zare continued.

With the body now lying on the ground, Tom was free to stand up and walk towards her. "She did have a point. The Soft don't have special powers and I've never seen a demon that did either."

Zare scowl was directed at the ex helmsman. "She did one *spell*, one. All it was, was a blast of energy to knock me over. I know a few species of demon that can do that."

"Can they imitate Human lifesigns?" the Doctor asked carefully.

"No, but I really doubt I know about every demon in existence," Zare muttered in response. Tom opened his mouth to counter. "Also we know the Soft are engineering monsters out of people. We don't know the full extent of those experiments."

Tom's face whitened a little. "That's... Rachel could be one of the Enterprise crew but experimented on. I told B'Elanna to go with her."

"Will you both relax? I scanned her, there's nothing abnormal about her. Also James and Craig described these experiments as not very talkative, black eyed and definitely not sociable in the slightest," the Doctor said.

Zare's eyes darted from one side to the other, then back again. "Not talkative and not sociable are the same point."

"All I mean is they weren't eager to hang around without trying to kill you," the Doctor said.

Tom glanced over to the hologram while he began treating the latest pod evacuee. "Still, that's kinda cheating."

"All right, then how about this for a third point. Aren't you supposed to sense these things? Does Rachel give off an otherworldly vibe?" the Doctor asked.

Zare sighed, allowing her shoulders to drop a little. "No, but that woman does have a problem with me. Since it was immediate, I put it down to being wary of Slayers."

"Maybe she's just racist," Tom suggested.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. Zare just stared blankly for a while, making Tom shrug casually.

"What? You said she was all on edge until she saw us, the Humans of the group," he said. The Doctor cleared his throat. "Really? She'd know you're a hologram by just looking?"

"I thought Starfleet were supposed to be above racism," Zare said after shaking her head. "It's not that."

"Ok what about she's been trapped alone for days or weeks with inhumane screeching going on. The first person she sees is strong and pointing a weapon at her. Obviously Rachel got three when she did one plus one," the Doctor suggested.

"I did nothing to let her know I was strong. You're just making excuses," Zare said.

Tom smiled a little too smugly. "Ah ha, so why would she be wary of you because you're a Slayer then? Thanks for worrying us over nothing."

"Because a demon would probably know without me doing anything," Zare snapped at him.

"Enough of this," the Doctor groaned. "Rachel is Human, has no sign of any experiments, altered DNA and still has lifesigns. I don't recall seeing any disdain from her side, only you. You're being paranoid."

"All right, fine. I'll dare not to think anymore, I'll just do my job and guard, huh?" Zare grumbled. Before anyone could say anything she walked over to stand in the doorway with her back to them.

Tom winced, "I think you hurt her feelings."

"I think it was a shared effort," the Doctor pointed out. "It's okay to be cautious but there's being cautious and there's making a tense situation needlessly worse."

Tom looked over to the door. He felt a little guilty. "Maybe we should take her seriously. She's got more chance of noticing a demonic thing than we do. When has she ever got it wrong?"

"Normally I'd agree but Zare admitted it was because of Rachel's behaviour towards her, not because of a sense or feeling," the Doctor said. "Besides, Zare's still a regular humanoid. En-heightened abilities or otherwise, they can still make mistakes."

"Regular humanoid. We've given up finding out what species she is, huh?" Tom commented with a smile.

"Nobody ever asked and it's been ten years," the Doctor said.

Tom nodded, "true. It would be rude to ask now."

B'Elanna walked down a dimly lit corridor alongside the older woman, Rachel. She seemed to be getting more anxious the further they walked. It didn't help that the corridors seemed to be slopping down and the floors were creaking a lot more.

"You said you've been down here," B'Elanna said, noticing her partner's nerves.

"Yes but that was when I first escaped. This place is..." Rachel stuttered. The ceiling groaned at them both loud enough to make them stop. "I think it's sinking. The soil is weaker, lifeless."

"Yes, I think so as well," B'Elanna said.

Rachel shook her head. "You don't understand. The structure was not sinking when I first arrived, nor was there any strange noises. Something's happened since we've been here."

B'Elanna frowned down at her tricorder. Her finger tapped it a few times. "I still can't find any signs of a generator or a device that draws the energy to fuel it."

"But you said the stasis units were powered by what we're buried in, separately from the rest of the building," Rachel said.

"Yes but I still don't know how. The technology they're using, I can't make heads or tails out of it. Whoever made this place were far more advanced than we are," B'Elanna said.

The ceiling seemed to groan again. The two women decided to ignore it and continue walking until the sound started to follow them. B'Elanna stopped first to point her tricorder above it. The groaning had stopped, a light tapping took its place. At least it started light, every tap was louder than the last.

"Something's up there," Rachel whispered.

B'Elanna lightly nodded. "One lifesign."

"How come you didn't detect it until now?" Rachel asked nervously.

"Simple, it wasn't there before," B'Elanna replied.

Rachel took a few steps backwards while closing her eyes. B'Elanna noticed her lips were moving like she was muttering. The tapping had seized when she moved, the ceiling above continued to groan.

B'Elanna slowly pulled a phaser from her belt. Before she could point it her skin began to tingle, not just in her hands but all over. She looked down to see her hands covered in a blue shimmer. "What?"

Something fell to the ground in a loud thud in front of her, so she glanced up quickly. Rachel sat hunched over on the spot she was before, breathing heavily as if she had been running. B'Elanna was about to run over to her when the ceiling between them exploded in a sea of metal dust. She quickly covered her eyes.

When it cleared a figure was standing in between them, with its back to B'Elanna. Rachel looked up in time to see it pounce forward. Her hand shot up. A piercing ball of light formed in her palm and flung itself at the figure. "Move!" she yelled at the same time.

B'Elanna quickly side stepped to avoid the figure fly backwards when the light struck it. She looked over her shoulder to see what it was. To her it looked like a normal humanoid, at least until it staggered back up. Its four arms flexed before running straight for them again.

"My god, he shouldn't..." Rachel stuttered.

B'Elanna stepped forward to grab her arm, she pulled her to her feet. "Who cares, just run." She didn't leave it up to her, she ran off still holding the other woman's arm.

"Wait," Rachel stuttered. "If we separate, it won't be able to find you. It'll follow me."

"Even if that made sense, I wouldn't let you do that," B'Elanna quickly said.

They turned left at a junction and a sharp right after that, hoping that it would throw their pursuer off.

"The spell I mentioned," Rachel said in between heavy breath outs. "I cast it on you. Now's your chance."

B'Elanna didn't let go of her arm like she hoped, the grip on it seemed to tighten. "No, the last thing we should do is separate." They arrived at another junction, B'Elanna ran to the right without even thinking about it.

The footsteps didn't sound as close as they did before. B'Elanna wanted to think that they had outran or confused whatever that was for now, but she knew better than that. With every crossroad she found, she'd pick a random one and continue running just as fast as before. However Rachel was struggling to keep up with her, at times it felt like she was stretching her arm.

"Wait!" she breathed. B'Elanna looked back at her to see the other woman's spare arm pointing at a door. The footsteps were faint, they had time. "This door is similar to the other labs. I should be able to..."

"All right," B'Elanna said, noticing the blue shimmer and tingling feeling finally wearing off.

Rachel stumbled back to the door, breathing heavily. Her hand rested on the door. Before B'Elanna could ask her what she planned to do with it, the door slid upwards into its frame. "Quick!"

B'Elanna nodded and ran in to the room after her. She stopped alongside her as the door closed downward. "Was that a spell or just how the doors open?"

"Bit of both," Rachel stuttered, her eyes were wide. B'Elanna frowned and looked ahead instead. The room they had entered looked nothing like the lab they were inside before. Advanced computers filled the circular walls, most of which blinked brightly. Both women's eyes were drawn to the floor made out of a blue glass.

"This definitely isn't another lab," B'Elanna said while her eyes took in the wonders she was seeing. Her tricorder flew out instinctively, but she wasn't sure where to start pointing it at.

Rachel didn't look as impressed as her, she looked worried. "No it's not. It looks important. We shouldn't stay here."

"You're probably right. We don't know what the other lifesigns are, some could be the people running this place," B'Elanna said. The closest computer to her left was her first scanning target.

"I thought you only detected one," Rachel sounded even more worried.

B'Elanna glanced back at her over her shoulder. "You said there were eighteen of you left. I detected close to thirty when we first arrived."

"That... that could mean there are eleven more of those things we just encountered," Rachel stuttered.

"Ten, one lifesign disappeared," B'Elanna sadly corrected.

Rachel's jaw dropped, but not for long. "I'll stick with eleven. Do you have any idea what kind of spell I cast on that thing?"

"No, and I realise that it's dangerous..." B'Elanna answered.

"I've knocked things out for hours with it. The worst one was dazed for five minutes," Rachel stammered. "Him! I may as well have tied up his shoe laces. It would have had the same effect. The lifesign that disappeared is more likely to be one of ours. I don't stand a chance against it, let alone anyone else."

B'Elanna sighed, "try to calm down. Panicking isn't going to help." Rachel stared at her with her mouth open again. "You managed to escape the pod because of that spell you cast on me. The rest of your crew will be still stuck in the pods. I doubt one of them was the one killed."

"What, so these things are killing each other or are you being optimistic and they're killing the people who made them," Rachel questioned.

"They're possibilities, yes," B'Elanna said. She frowned as a thought came to her. "Wait. Someone sent us that message. Was it you?"

"What message?" Rachel said, answering her question.

"Never mind for now. While we're stuck here, we might as well have a look around." B'Elanna looked around the whole room, everything in it was mysterious and new to her. Her eyes sparkled at the thought of investigating it all. She walked over to one of the computers to scan it thoroughly.

"So... if it isn't Softs, who's is it?" Rachel asked.

B'Elanna at first answered with a distracted *hmm* noise. Then she turned around to look at her again. "I don't know. It is similar to them though. Energy drained from the earth, humanoid experiments..."

"That man had four arms. Whoever altered him must have thought he'd be more deadly that way," Rachel mused. Her whole body shuddered. "I'm glad we didn't get to find out... yet."

"Yeah, it does seem like a good planet for harvesting people and turning them into weapons," B'Elanna said while deep in thought. "It's sick and they're probably still doing it."

"Perhaps they're helping the Softmicron," Rachel suggested.

B'Elanna thought about it for a second, then shook it off. "Who in this Game Sphere would want to do that?"

"It's possible. They look advanced enough to maybe escape the sphere or resist its influence," Rachel said.

B'Elanna gave her a smile. "Why don't we find out." Her head gestured to the computers. Rachel pulled a face that told her she didn't like that idea at all.

The further down she went, the warmer it felt. Lena felt comfortable enough to lower the mask, yet a rush of cold instantly made her regret it. She didn't raise it back up though. It wasn't anywhere near as crippling as the cold she had felt before.

Her body still ached in various places from her earlier fall. The one tugging at her leg made it hard to keep a steady pace. After walking for so long it was starting to weaken, forcing her to limp as well.

The tricorder in her hand told her the lifesigns she detected were close by. She had lost her sword during the last fight, so her first choice of weapon was the rifle she was lucky not to land on. Cradling it in her arm loosely she turned a downward corner.

Immediately she found weapons pointed straight at her. For some reason their tense faces seemed to soften, two of the guards had even lowered their weapons a little.

"I... um, I'm here to help," her voice sounded hoarser than before. Her throat felt a little sore now that she had spoken.

One of the guards stepped forward, completely lowering their weapon. "You're hurt."

"Huh? Oh... yeah, it's not so bad," Lena said, completely thrown off by their reactions to her.

The guard glanced back to nod at her companions, they nodded back. The woman glanced back at Lena with warm eyes. "Come inside. We'll help."

"No, no. It's okay. I don't have time for that," Lena stuttered. The woman put a hand on her back and tried to guide her towards the entrance to their camp. "We need to leave, it's not safe here."

"It's not safe anywhere. That's no reason to suffer like this," the woman said.

The remaining guards stayed where they were as she lead Lena inside.

"Please listen to me. You're in danger, I can help," Lena stuttered.

### **Voyager:**

"I knew I shouldn't have left her alone, or even brought her. She wasn't ready for anything like this," James said.

Jessie sat down beside him, she quickly clutched his nearest hand. "It doesn't mean you should pick any old ship and fly in to get her."

"I don't see the problem with that," James muttered.

"Well you said that she was gathering people to evacuate. If you arrive with a measly shuttle drained half to death, maybe more, then what she did would be for nothing," Jessie said. James closed his eyes and sighed. "Yeah. You'd be lucky to evacuate five of them, then you'd have to knock them unconscious to stop them from hallucinating and tampering with it. That's assuming a shuttle would even last long enough for a return journey."

"Okay, I get the point," James said while holding his spare hand out in a surrender position.

"I'll come with you," Jessie said, surprising him.

He laughed very nervously, "I don't want to sound like an asshole... to you, but no."

"I wasn't asking," Jessie shrugged.

"You can't go. The hallucinations will try to trick you into sabotaging the ship, changing our course. Anything to keep us inside that thing," James stuttered.

"No one understands the feeling of coming back from the dead after so long, more than I do," Jessie said. James looked at her with guilt all over his face, she quickly countered it with a gentle smile. "I was happy to return, grateful. It was still a strange experience that isn't very common. Lena has lost two years of her life and we don't even know if she's aware of that time in some way. We don't know where she was."

James frowned, "do you remember?"

"You asked me that then," Jessie said. "I remembered how I felt during that time. Lonely, isolated. Angry sometimes. If it was some sort of heaven, I wasn't ready to be there."

"Angry?" James mumbled.

"Angry that my life was finally making sense and coming together. To be taken then, it wasn't fair," Jessie answered.

"You and Lena weren't supposed to die. You were taken over by people who were already dead. You both came back after a long time by unconventional means," James thought aloud.

"See? Who else can talk to her?" Jessie smiled.

James shook his head, "but hallucinations aside, it isn't safe. I know you can take care of yourself but our track record is awful. You wanted to get through this pregnancy without any problems. If I take you to the anomaly, to that planet, we're daring fate."

"Look. I stay in a room that has no computer access. You bring her aboard, one way or another and bring her there," Jessie suggested.

"Jess," James sighed.

"I don't like the idea of you going back in there alone. Lena also sounds like she needs help from what you told me," Jessie said.

"It's not just that I'm worried for your safety. If you're sealed in this computer-less room, who's going to manage the power? Who's going to use the transporters?" James said.

Jessie looked down at her lap. "Oh." She perked up immediately, "who's going to do that when it's just you?"

James narrowed his eyes at her, but only in a mocking way. "You think you've won? Nope. I'll do it." Jessie just frowned. "I'll beam her and whoever she's gathered, then we're leaving."

"That doesn't sound like you," Jessie said in a worried voice.

"Me doing a stupid lone wolf thing to overprotect someone? Nah, not at all," James commented with a tiny smile.

Jessie smiled and shook her head. "I remember that *stupid lone wolf* risking his life to go up against three legendarily powerful vampires, to save a planet of what... millions?"

"He ended up nearly destroying the planet by triggering the ritual he wanted to avoid. Stupid wasn't a strong enough word," James said.

"Yeah but I have many more examples. Do you really want me to list them all?" Jessie questioned, her smile turning sly.

James climbed to his feet, stepped forward and turned around to face her again. His arms folded. "So let me get this straight. You want me to go back to this planet, and make sure Lena and I get everyone off it. Despite the fact that a lot of the people are probably those experiment things or Softmicron. It would be dangerous, life threatening. And I'm the one who's not acting like myself."

Jessie pulled a face like she had just walked into the Mess Hall while Neelix was cooking. Her shoulders lifted to shrug. "No." James stared at her with a mixture of confusion and bemusement. "But that so called stupid lone wolf always went out of his way to save people, regardless of what it would do to him. I love that guy. I'm proud of him."

James didn't know what to say to that. He sat back down beside her to retake her hand. Jessie leaned over to give him a cheek kiss, then she rested her head on his shoulder.

### **The Conference Room:**

Several of the aliens including Yana and Ersal were sitting at the table, most of them talking loudly over each other. Harry stood to one side, trying badly to settle them down. Craig stood guard at one of the doorways, a few nameless Security officers guarded the other.

"No, stop. We're not getting anywhere here," Ersal said.

An unnamed alien overlapped him, "how could you not tell us what the towers really did, Yana?"

"This is why," Yana answered quickly to avoid someone else talking at the same time.

"Why are you still talking about the towers? The problem is that blue cloud thing," another alien snapped at the other one that talked.

Ersal sighed, he climbed to his feet. That motion got some of the aliens attention but not all. "We're wasting time here, quiet!" The last word startled the rest into silence. "What's the point in blaming each other? We've been attacked, invaded by another species. It should be them that we blame. It should be them that we fight against."

"Wait, from what you tell us, it sounds like the towers are a more immediate problem," Harry interrupted. The aliens looked at him with confused or curious expressions. "From our experience the Softmicron kidnap people, bring them to the towers and turn them into fighting machines. You said you would have survived in your old towns and villages if it wasn't for these invasions."

"Yes but it still doesn't change the fact that with the land so brittle and the star light so weak, we can't grow more food. With no power we can't synthesise it," Ersal replied.

"Destroying the towers won't help them now Harry," Craig pointed out. "The damage is done."

Yana glanced nervously down at her folded hands. "From what we learned on the Enterprise, the towers power the Game Sphere. Or the other way around. With every one of them gone, the Sphere ends and the black cloud with it."

"That's when Game Spheres took one planet at a time, not entire sectors meshed together," Harry said. "We have no idea if that's true here."

"We can't be expected to destroy every tower. That one network almost destroyed us," Craig said. "The Enterprise was more of a battle ready ship than us, and even they couldn't handle more than two."

The aliens started talking amongst themselves again, this time they sounded a lot more panicked.

Instead of talking over them again, Ersal moved his chair closer to Yana who was the only other one silent. "How long have you known about the towers?"

"Don't. When the Enterprise attacked nobody knew. It was only when we boarded their ship," she answered. She stared at him with fear in her eyes. "By then it was far too late."

Harry had walked over to Craig in the mean time. "The aliens on the planet you were on knew about it, right?"

"What? The towers?" Craig said, prompting a nod from Harry. "The resistance put the towers construction and the power drains together, but I'm not sure if the whole planet had."

"So the towers probably hadn't drained as much on Erayas for them to notice yet," Harry said thoughtfully.

Craig raised an eyebrow, "what's your point? They're stuck inside an anomaly that acts like a sphere, that's ten times worse."

"The first Game Sphere we encountered, everyone could see what was happening. The second one there was one tower but the natives were oblivious to it. The Enterprise were usually chased out of systems by the natives themselves," Harry said.

"We don't know that. The Softmicron take over governments, taking over a few ships after wouldn't be too hard," Craig said.

"Yes but why didn't the Erayans suspect the towers?" Harry questioned.

Craig rolled his eyes, "you've already guessed at answering that."

"Yes but they or the aliens we helped before shouldn't have seen the effects of it. In fact one of the Enterprise missions the aliens helped them destroy the towers," Harry said.

Craig sighed, "I don't know. I thought the point of the old spheres were they copied the planet it was on, chucked a tower or three on it, and because they're in a holographic version of the world the people don't see their real one being drained to death. The way these ones are described to us is that they were built, not magically appeared over night."

Harry smirked at him, it took a few seconds for Craig to figure out why. "No I didn't just make a mistake. The towers in the normal Sphere versions would appear like they've always been there. It's definitely different in this case as they're always brand new power distribution buildings," Craig continued.

"It still doesn't mean they should suspect it," Harry said.

Craig was starting to get a little annoyed with him. "Why not? It's one thing to create a copy of one planet and create a tower. It's a whole different ball game to copy a few hundred, maybe thousands of star systems and chuck three tower *networks* on each of their habited planets. There's a reason why there isn't a network on every planet we've seen."

Harry's face fell. "That's... that's a good point. To create the perfect illusion you'd have to use a lot of energy to maintain copies and towers. These aren't copies, the planet's are clearly falling apart. That's why nobody is fooled. It's also probably why James, Kevin and Ylara didn't notice. Chosens can see through the fake. Everything here is real, including the usually fake towers."

"It will be their downfall," Ersa added on as he approached the pair. The two Humans stared at him with curious looks. "Clearly this Softmicron species are arrogant enough to pull off a stunt like this and not care that anyone notices. They assume we don't know what to do about it."

"We don't," Harry said sadly.

The nearby door guarded by Security officers. They quickly glanced back to check who it was before stepping out of the way.

"Not yet. They put these monstrosities on our world in plain sight, our planet dies in front of our eyes. The only reason it's like that is because they couldn't hide it. Therein lies a weakness," Ersa said.

"The weakness is the towers themselves. If we can find a way to defeat them quicker..." Craig said.

"Well we've made a few friends while we're here, perhaps it's not a matter of taking on the towers alone," Harry smiled.

Yana walked over to them as well. "Your Enterprise may have undone your efforts before you've even started. It had a reputation before it attacked our towers, or tried anyway. We'll not be able to help you anyway, we're crippled."

Harry stared at her, he felt guilty for even saying anything. Then he noticed the aliens at the table had stopped arguing, some had been listening to their conversation.

"First things first," the new arrival said. "We have two problems we need to solve. Then we can worry about striking the Soft back."

"Chakotay, I was running the meeting," Harry said meekly.

"Great job of that by the way," Chakotay muttered. "One; we have a planet guarded by ships with similar weapons to the Soft. Our awayteam is trapped in some sort of underground tower with the kidnapped crew of the Enterprise. Two; a planet stuck in a power draining anomaly that causes hallucinations needs evacuating."

"We know that. James is the only one that can go back in, the Enterprise needs to be powered up. There's nothing to do unfortunately," Harry said.

Craig shook his head. "I wish there was a way to avoid an evacuation, save the planet."

All of the aliens were forlorn. Ersa tried to hide it. "It's too late. Even if the anomaly disappeared and the towers were destroyed, the damage is too great. Our top scientist estimated it would collapse in a matter of days," he said the last part quietly.

"Days?" Chakotay stuttered. "The Enterprise can only survive in there for a few hours at a time, it takes time to power it back up. Even then we can't keep doing it. An entire population..."

"Before we lost sensors the population of our world was a mere five hundred thousand," Ersa whispered.

Yana gasped, her hand flew to her mouth. Her whole body started to shake. "That can't be."

"That's not all. After we lost sensors, our towns, villages, camps were invaded by these creatures. I imagine that number is far lower now," Ersa said.

"How many of them are now ruthless killing machines though," Craig said.

Chakotay sighed, "the Enterprise is not going back in that anomaly until we have a better plan." Craig's eyes widened by quite a bit, he directed that stare at him. "I don't like it either but Lena stayed behind to help these people. We should at least respect that."

"I know it's a mild problem compared to that, but we still have the awayteam to recover," Harry said. "I think I know how to deal with that without it getting in the way of the evacuation."

"Oh?" Chakotay was curious.

"Well, they already know Voyager and it's very likely they'd recognise Enterprise. We need a new player," Harry said.

Ersa understood and smiled. "I'd be happy to assist. I still know my way around a helm control."

Chakotay understood but he didn't look impressed. "Harry, we're trying to help these people, not drive them further to extinction."

"They have Enterprise weaponry, no Deck Thirteen instability to open portals on. Also no pesky anti-Human vendetta," Harry smiled eagerly. "Oh and Tom left me in command, so..."

Chakotay smirked back to his and Craig's surprise. "Well, can't argue with that. The question is, who goes?"

"That's quite a story," an alien man said.

Lena sat restlessly before him, waiting for the alien doctor to finish using a device on her. "Yeah well, I missed a lot of it."

"I'm afraid I have too. Despite everything you say, you managed to come here in one piece," a woman said. She didn't say it suspiciously, her voice and face showed a curious interest.

Lena sighed. "I'm a Slayer, we're... the Chosen kind are immune to Game tricks. No I don't get why either."

The woman who lead her into the camp knelt down in front of her. "Your species can do this, so why are you alone?"

"No, just me and my brother. My species are called Humans. Slayer is something else," Lena said awkwardly.

The alien man stared at her with interest. The other aliens seemed more confused than before. "Interesting," he said.

"So your brother was the one that took the ship back outside. I think I understand," the leader said.

Lena nodded, "yeah and I have no idea how long he'll be. Two hours, minimum. We need to find a location where he can transport you, that's safer than standing around on the surface. With one group it's fine as it was immediate, but I have many more people to warn. You can't stand around waiting for hours."

"Perhaps I can help with that," one of the women said. "Our new orbit meant that we had to evacuate to the northern hemisphere. That should narrow down the search."

"Great," Lena was less than enthused.

The leader smiled warmly at her. "These tunnels were built when we relied on a type of fossilised mineral for fuel."

"Mines?" Lena questioned.

"Yes. A lot of them were filled in and built over when we developed our cities. The ones left were in villages and open areas. There won't be that many left to search," the leader said.

"Do you have a map or anything?" Lena asked.

"The only ones we had were digital," the leader answered like she expected. "However we mapped quite a lot of it while trying to find this spot. It should help. Eigan, can you retrieve it?"

One of the men nodded, he hurried off to the back of the cave.

"You'll have to be careful though. Cave ins happens a lot. The planet is struggling to hold together," the leader said sadly.

"I noticed," Lena said quietly. "I still don't know where to take you for the beam out. Anywhere closer to the surface, big enough for everyone?"

"No, I'm afraid not," the leader answered.

"Maybe we should just come with you," one alien suggested.

Lena's shoulders slumped, the doctor sighed as he was trying to treat her arm at the time. "I wouldn't recommend that. Those things that attacked you, well there's a good chance they can sense people like me. I may be leading you right to your deaths."

"But with no unified place for us all to wait for the transport, we're dead in a few days anyway," the leader said.

"What, days?" Lena stuttered with her eyes wide.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," the leader said in a low voice. "You mentioned you had trouble convincing the past two camps. With us standing with you, there won't be much argument."

"I guess so," Lena said.

"I'll discuss it with the others. Rest for the time being," the leader said.

She walked away with most of the aliens. The only ones that stayed behind were the doctor and a male alien deep in thought. Lena glanced at him with worry.

"What?" she had to ask.

He seemed startled for a second. "Oh I'm sorry, I was just trying to remember it all."

"Remember what?" Lena questioned.

"The myth my mother told me as a child," the man replied. Lena grew even more worried but for different reasons. He laughed when she scrunched her face. "Oh don't worry, I'm not thinking you're a messiah or some doom prophet."

"Oh good, there's enough of that crap going on," Lena muttered.

"No, but the term Slayer is familiar to me. I haven't heard it since I was a child. I wonder if I remember it all," the man said. "There was one. The greatest that ever lived. However he was exiled by his kind, considered a criminal and the people here feared him. Yet still he fought for what was right, kept us safe."

"A Slayer myth. It must have been a long time ago," Lena said.

The man nodded, "yes, it's a few hundred years old. Six if I recall correctly."

"What happened to him?" Lena asked.

"That part's up for debate. There is no ending. He simply stopped making history," the man replied.

"Why was he exiled?" Lena questioned.

"From what I understand of the story, he did not follow the rules. He attempted to mingle with us, share his life. He had a daughter. That sort of thing," the man answered. "They considered his desire to still live his life dangerous. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Lena smiled weakly and stared down at her lap, "yeah it is."

"It's believed that his sister's sacrifice at a young age inspired him to do it. Six hundred years ago a man with such strength and power was probably terrifying to us. It's assumed he fled with his daughter," the man said, his head dipped. "I guess we'll never know now."

Tom paced in the very little space there was left until he heard a light groan behind him. His head turned to the first person rescued from the pods surrounding them, she tried to sit up against the nearest thing she could. He quickly hurried over to kneel down in front of her and help if she needed it.

"Danny."

Their eyes met. Hers widened in shock. "Tom?"

"Yeah," Tom said, wincing when she did as well. "We got your distress call."

Danny tried to express her confusion but her face felt a little tight, frozen in place. The Doctor saved her from bothering any further, "I doubt it was one of the people in the pods."

"I guess," Tom said, disappointed.

"Pods?" Danny stuttered. Then she noticed them. The walls lined with these strange alien pods. They were hard to miss now that her eyes were beginning to re-focus. "Ohno, they didn't?"

"Didn't what?" Tom dared to ask.

"Try to turn us into those poor Evil Slayer imitators," Danny answered. Her face finally was starting to relax a little, allowing her to show her disgust. "There's nothing hot about screaming banshees who try to rip your throat out."

Tom had to unleash a smirk. "You haven't changed."

"And no, there's no sign that you've been tampered with," the Doctor said from afar. Danny noticed he was working on a pod almost opposite to her, then looked around to find two others like her lying unconscious on the floor. "It seems the only goal here was to contain you."

"Oh good," Danny sighed in relief. "So is Voyager here?"

"Not at the moment. Two alien ships chased it out of orbit," Tom replied.

Danny's hopes were immediately crushed. Her face tightened in a grimace. "Let me guess; old fashioned looking things with wings, weapons that eventually adapt to your shields and then the kicking ass starts?"

"We're not sure on the details. The signal's a bit fuzzy down here," Tom answered honestly. "Though I'm sure I heard that the shields were holding."

"That sounds about right. The weapons first analyse how your shields work. When they know what'll hurt them, they'll change to something that will work," Danny said.

"Well, at least that narrows out the Softmicron," the Doctor tried to look on the bright side.

Danny struggled to get to her feet. Tom offered a hand to help her but she didn't even notice it as she pulled herself up on her own. "No, it really doesn't."

"Sounds more like Borg before we ruined them," Tom said.

"If the Softmicron have a tower network on a planet, they'll have no problem getting a hold of the planet's ships. That's the problem. We never know who's really attacking us," Danny said.

The Doctor turned himself away from the pod he was working on. "We have reason to believe this facility was not built by them. It's clear from the poor fellows that have been inside these pods for hundreds of years, and the decay of the building itself."

"The Softmicron could have sucked this planet dry a few hundred, probably thousands times over in that time period," Tom mused aloud. He noticed Danny sniggering, or at least trying to stop herself from laughing too loudly. "I'm going to have to start watching my words again, aren't I?"

"Yes to both comments," the Doctor answered with a smirk.

Danny made a more obvious gesture that she was trying to stop laughing; she took a deep breath in through her nose and put a hand against her chest. "All right fine, this place can't be Softmicron. The ships that attacked us though definitely was."

Tom felt himself frown, "uh, you just said that you never know who's attacking you."

"Yeah but this one was pretty damn obvious," Danny said.

"To you, but you'll need to fill us in," Tom said. Danny smirked at him, making him groan a little. "Why was it obvious?"

"Many reasons. The only ships that should have been attacking us didn't pursue and looked nothing like them," Danny replied. "Before you say that it was poor timing or whatever, we'd never seen them before."

"Your reputation alone may have angered a species you hadn't met yet," the Doctor pointed out.

"True but that's not all," Danny said, nodding her head once. "We were boarded. Our sensors were damaged, we didn't know where. The crew was scattered around the ship to repair it from the last fight when this happened. I got a call from Triah, wondering why I was on the bridge." Tom appeared to be a little lost, he wondered if he'd accidentally turned two pages instead of one. "I wasn't anywhere near the bridge, but I couldn't tell her that or... I didn't hear from her again anyway. Maybe I should have."

The Doctor looked towards the only other girl lying on the floor, Danny did the same and felt a little relief. He turned his head back to focus on her, "the Softmicron infiltrated your ship. Your crew was small, spread out thin. Easily exploitable, especially for shape shifters."

Tom folded his arms tightly as he tried to put the pieces together in his head. "Rachel said there was a bright light and a sudden stop. She said nothing about this."

Danny turned her attention back towards the ex pilot. He worried as she seemed to be confused by what he said. "Rach is here too? Where?"

"She's with B'Elanna. Why, is there a problem with that?" Tom questioned, worry was all over his features by now.

"No, I just assumed that I was the first you thawed," Danny replied.

"We didn't have to," the Doctor said.

Danny opened her mouth to reply but decided against it. Instead she brought her right arm up to rest her chin in her palm.

"So, bright light and stopping?" Tom tried to remind her.

Danny sensed the tension in his voice, her eyes narrowed a little. "Of course the ship stopped. Some moron Soft probably found the manual steering."

"Well excuse me if two survivors from a shape shifting invasion have two different stories," Tom huffed. The Doctor laughed quietly to himself as he continued to work on the pod he was at.

"The light, I don't remember that part. Rach probably didn't mention the shape shifting because Triah didn't announce it to the whole ship, just me," Danny said.

"She did say she wasn't a member of the crew. The Softmicron wouldn't need to imitate her or trick her for that matter," the Doctor said.

Tom felt a little ganged up on now and a tiny bit embarrassed, the anger he still felt was enough to stop his cheeks from blushing. "I'm the only one here with some common sense, but sure just hand wave away a perfectly legitimate concern as irritating and stupid Tom. Sheesh."

"The last thing I remember I was hurrying back to the bridge. I think I was in the turbolift... yes that's where I was, I'm sure," Danny said.

"Great," Tom groaned.

"I forgot the last attack broke them. I don't think I had even remembered that before, yeah," Danny said, her hand dropped back to her side.

Tom sighed once he was sure she was done. "Okay so Softmicron took over the Enterprise, dumped you guys here in an abandoned and similar lab to theirs instead of one of their own. They decided to take the Enterprise for a spin, got bored, left it and then Shoytin found it. Finally the ship just pops up randomly in the anomaly." The Doctor and Danny stared at him as if he was Kathryn after a hundred cups of coffee. "Hey, you try figuring it out."

The Doctor tried to shake off his bemused stare. "It doesn't add up, that's true."

"Who's Shoytin?" Danny muttered.

"Here I thought we'd have all the answers once we reunited," Tom sighed in disappointment.

Danny glanced between the two, then down at the others on the floor. "There's not enough of these pod things for everyone."

"No. Miss Rachel found other labs just like this one. She and B'Elanna are searching for the only two people missing," the Doctor said.

"Oh," Danny's head dipped to stare down at her feet. "Probably only one then."

"How so?" Tom warily asked.

"I doubt anyone had a chance to tell her, only Liza and I knew and she headed for Engineering," Danny started to answer before raising her head back up. "The Soft took care of their biggest threat before they took us. I doubt they wanted to take the chance of bringing her to a place like this."

Tom slowly approached her, staring at her intently. "Their biggest threat? What are you talking about?"

### **The Enterprise:**

"The repair crew found her on Deck Two. It looked like someone just left her where she fell," Craig said, his face now very pale. James walked alongside him, his mind appeared to be elsewhere. Craig ignored that for now and continued, "with only Naomi and Nikki available, I'll doubt we'll know what happened to her until the Doc comes back."

They both turned the corner. Craig immediately stopped, prompting James to as well. Barely a metre in front of them two crewmembers were kneeling on both sides of a gurney. A body lay on top of it. Craig frowned and turned his head away to avoid looking at it, but he noticed that James' expression hadn't changed. He instead focused on that. It confused him, even more so when James took one more step forward to get a closer look and still didn't seem surprised at all to him.

*"You going too?"*

*The haunting image of the enormous cube continued to fall towards them. It felt like it was going slower than normal as if it was taunting them by prolonging the horror. It brushed against the nearby rooftop, it was only a matter of seconds now.*

*"May as well. I know for sure that I wasn't in it, same with Ylara," James replied.*

*Sandi nodded, "yeah, should make the difference."*

*A child's cries got both of their attention. It came from the building they stood nearby. Both their heads turned to see a tiny girl bawling her eyes out.*

*"Ohno. We haven't got time," Sandi stuttered.*

*James ran over to pick her up from the ground. He looked ahead, up at the looming cube about to fall on their heads, then straight ahead of him. All he had to do was run ahead a few metres and she'd miss the cube's landing spot. It would only take a few seconds, he felt he had the time.*

*Once the girl was safely on the ground out of the path of the cube, James turned on his heel to run back into the Game's shadow. Only it landed right in front of him, just missing him by a few centimetres.*

*All he could see was a vast sea of purple. Whatever was there before was gone.*

"How did she even get here?" Craig questioned quietly. He still couldn't bare to look at the figure lying on the gurney. He also couldn't understand James' lack of reaction, but he didn't dare ask.

James stepped forward one more time to kneel down next to it. The two crewmembers sensed they should wait out of their way for now, so they did, leaving the two men alone with the body.

"The last we saw of her..." Craig stuttered as he tried to wrap his head around it.

"The Game Cube in Newcastle, I know," James finished for him. He stared at the body's face, she looked so peaceful to him. There was no signs of any injuries on her either. If he didn't know any better, she appeared to have died naturally. "Sandi wouldn't have let that kill her. She survived in the Games Matrix for centuries. I always assumed that was what she was doing all over again."

"Yeah I guess," Craig almost whispered. He walked forward, while still avoiding catching a glimpse of her. "We're in a Sphere, so I guess it's not that farfetched she'd make it inside from the Matrix. But the Enterprise? The odds are ridiculous."

"That's never stopped us before," James said as he stood back up. Craig stared at him as he was once again by his side, getting more and more concerned that the look on his face was blank. "That's how they knew about the sphere. She did and lead them to destroy it. The Softmicron killed her and dumped the crew on some pre-industrial planet."

"Are you all right?" Craig decided to ask after all.

James barely nodded. "Yeah, I hoped that she was one of the people on that planet."

Craig frowned, "you knew before this that Sandi was on the Enterprise?"

James looked at him with a little guilt in his eyes. "She's all over the logs we heard."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Craig asked.

"There's already a lot going on without adding to it. Right now, all I can think about is Lena," James answered. Craig understood completely, he felt it himself. For once he felt just as helpless as James was, instead of more than. "I don't want to leave her alone there any longer than I already have. She's... she's been through enough."

"You know I've been thinking about that. You and Lena are all alone in this, no one can really help. We'd be more of a burden in this situation," Craig said. "But despite these towers and spheres being Chosen defeatable only, you asked us to help back at Shurouva. It worked; we destroyed the network and saved the planet." He quickly glanced at James to see his reaction so far, he seemed to be listening, or at least he hoped so. "Sandi enlisted the Enterprise to destroy the sphere, saving at least two worlds. No offense, but I doubt you or Sandi would have achieved this without the help from others. There's got to be a way we can help here too."

James glanced towards him with the same blank face, yet Craig saw a glint in his eyes that told him he said the right thing.

"The Enterprise won't be ready to go for another half hour or so. Plenty of time to brain storm..." he continued.

"There might be a way, but we'd need a little more time and power than half an hour," James said as he turned to walk away.

"But I thought you wanted to get to Lena as quickly as possible," Craig said, quickly following him.

James nodded, "yeah I do but you're right. I need a team to pull this off, and there's only one way I can think of that'll get us there and back in one piece."

"Oh? Are you going to share it, or are you going to keep it to yourself and beat up a bunch of surprised terrorists again?" Craig asked with a smirk.

"I was thinking of telling you when the scene ends, but I could just not bother at all," James said, Craig hoped in jest.

*"Kim to Anderson. Report to the Transporter Room." Craig's face fell. "I'll need you on the Katane."*

"Wait, can't someone else do it? I want to be on the Enterprise and..." he said.

*"Jessie's already going and I have no one Tactical or Security wise to come with me. Kim out."*

Craig looked to James, expecting him to be annoyed or worried by now. His face still hadn't changed. "Jessie's going? You may as well just induce her now, cos taking her along to a dangerous mission..."

"Maybe I should beat up a surprised Craig," James butted in.

Craig laughed nervously, "I wouldn't be surprised. But you know what I mean."

"I know, but she insisted. What am I supposed to do? Order her around?" James said, finally smirking at the thought of that. "I'm bad enough without being that guy."

"You mean you don't want to be the clobbered in the face or worse guy, cos you've told a pregnant woman to stay somewhere safe," Craig said.

"My experience says no," James nodded.

They both reached an open Jeffries Tube entrance, Craig hung back while James kept going until he was directly in front of it. A random thought slipped into Craig's mind, filling him with dread. He couldn't let him leave without sharing it with him.

"Before you return to the anomaly, there's something you have to know. It may help with the Lena intervention, it may make it worse, but you need to know it."

James was about to climb into the tube when he spoke, he straightened back up immediately. "Is this what you were going to tell me the other day?"

Craig nodded, "it is."

"Okay. What is it?"

Huddled in different sized groups, the aliens followed the torch lit underground path further underground. Lena stayed behind them, fully on her guard. Or at least it appeared that way to the aliens in front of her, as she held a rifle in one arm ready to fire. Her eyes told a different story as they drifted from one group to another.

One group close to her glanced back at her a couple of times. Lena recognised the look of fear in their faces before they picked up their pace. They didn't look back again.

She tried to forget about it but it wasn't the first time it had happened. There was now a large gap between her and the refugees. Amongst them were dozens of children seemingly unaware of the danger. One of them looked like she was alone until a teen boy hurried over to take her hand. The girl grinned up at him, killing any worry he had on his face.

*"Why? You do it all the time," she asked innocently.*

*"That's not the..." There was a sigh. James did this everytime she tried to help him, it couldn't be a coincidence. He always looked worried too. Lena gave him a smile to cheer him up, that always worked. For the moment it didn't. "I fight to keep you and everyone else safe. If you run in before me and pick a fight, it makes all of that a waste of time."*

*"But... I'm thirteen now, I can help," Lena said. She didn't understand why he never got what she was trying to do for him. "You've been doing this alone for ages. I wanna help you."*

*James finally smiled at her, but it didn't relieve her like it normally did. His sore mood had passed on to her. "I know, I was the same at your age. Just relax. You're Human first, Lena. Don't forget that."*

Lena tried to concentrate on something else, anything to distract her from these old memories of hers. There was nothing much to do besides hope that the next camp was close by.

The lab was a lot busier than their last visit. B'Elanna looked around at all of the extra faces, nodding at every familiar one. Rachel hurried over to an unknown man with a big smile on her face.

"You've been busy," B'Elanna remarked to the Doctor.

"Of course," he smiled.

Tom couldn't help but sneak a quick glance at Rachel and the man as they embraced each other. When he looked back he passed B'Elanna a wink, she just rolled her eyes in response.

"Oh Antony," Rachel sighed with relief. Tom glanced over again, just in case he missed anything. "I was so worried."

"Tom, seriously," B'Elanna groaned loud enough to get his attention.

Zare's eyebrow raised quite high, "some thing's never change." The Doctor shook his head. "How did the recon go?"

"Not well, at first. We were ambushed before we could find our last two people or even the other labs," B'Elanna answered.

"At first?" Danny said.

"We did however find something interesting instead. It could be a control room or just a big database, but it's still something that might tell us what's happening here," B'Elanna explained.

Tom was now more interested in what B'Elanna was saying instead of Rachel. He stepped forward, his hand rested against his chin. "Am I the only one who heard the word ambushed? Ambushed by what?"

"I'm going to assume one of those experimental aliens James and the others encountered. Only this one was native to this planet," B'Elanna replied uneasily. "Black eyes, fast, strong."

"So are we all on the hope the lifesign that was lost was one of them, not one of ours page?" Tom stuttered.

The Doctor frowned at him, he wasn't the only one either. Zare said it first, "everything's a badly said question with you isn't it? See, it's infectious."

"It isn't Pick On Tom day until October, so stop," Tom muttered.

"I'm so glad that's an official holiday," B'Elanna smirked. Tom scowled at her. "I hate to say it but it's more likely one of the Enterprise crew, or another kidnap victim that was lost. We'd better stick together from now on."

Danny turned towards the two others she stood with, then glanced towards Rachel. "Who is missing at the moment?"

"Roberts, Evans, Marsha..." Rachel started to answer, until another name came to mind. Her eyes shut tightly. "Liza. I haven't seen her yet. The others are still inside those pods in the other labs I found."

"We'll have to get there at some point. That should be top priority," Tom said.

"I'm sure the four armed killing machine will have something to say about that," Rachel mumbled. "We were almost at one when he appeared. I don't understand why I never had any problems walking around until now."

"If it's anything like the ones in the towers, it was probably *woken up* by a Slayer beaming in," Zare said. The rest of the group looked at her, each with their own worried expressions. "It may be safer if we split up after all."

Tom disagreed, "in the end the tower away teams were pursued by these things, while the only Slayer was hunted by a vampire. I don't think it's as obvious as you think."

"Yes and you're forgetting that it attacked B'Elanna and Rachel, not us," Ian pointed out.

"Oh and we heard something before I called for you. It's why I called for you," Tom said.

"I'm sure they were already roaming the halls before I arrived. I just mean that it and probably others will have more of an incentive to attack," Zare said. "Though I don't have an idea why it attacked them first."

"It makes sense, doesn't it? They were close to the other lab with people in," Ian said, gesturing his hand for some reason. The awayteam looked a little baffled to say the least. A few of the Enterprise crew took a few seconds to seemingly understand and nod. Ian only noticed the confused ones. "Oh of course you don't know. We have a Slayer of our own. It probably saw her as a bigger threat than Zare here, no offense."

Danny's shoulders slumped, her head fell slightly. Ian spotted it right away and frowned at her.

Zare sighed, "I don't think that's it and none taken."

"What?" Ian was more than confused.

Rachel started to tremble, "my god, of course. How could I forget Sandi? She's missing too." The Enterprise crew started chatting amongst themselves anxiously, Ian was amongst them.

"No, it's okay. She was probably the one who sent Voyager the distress call," Ian tried to calm everyone down. "Rachel was able to get out, why not her?"

Danny shook her head, "no Ian, she was never here. I found her..."

B'Elanna was more annoyed than confused, she made an angry groan loud enough to echo around the room and silence everyone. Tom cringed and looked at her. "Sandi?" it was almost a growl by this point.

"Danny told us while you were gone. Sandi was the one who lead the Enterprise into its tower mission," Tom said awkwardly. "The Soft took care of her before kidnapping the crew. I guess we got a little caught up with your tale to catch you up."

"Oh so it's my fault?" B'Elanna snapped. The whole room erupted into anxious and angry chatter again, all except one.

The Doctor clapped his hands together, shutting everyone up again. "None of this is important right now. Our priority is to rescue the people in the other labs and find the other two who are missing."

The guilt seemed to have brought Rachel's head and mood down even further, she was having trouble looking anyone in the eye. "I was counting Sandi in my crew count. There should be only one, Liza, and I've got a feeling that we won't need to find her."

"Oh?" Tom said warily.

"One lifesign disappeared, and I really doubt they put one single person into a different room to everyone else," B'Elanna muttered.

"They could have ran out of pods," Tom said meekly.

"True, but I haven't found any other rooms like it and one had a few empty pods," Rachel said. She forced her head back up, "before the bright light I saw her running somewhere. It's likely my spell hit her too. If anyone could send a message to Voyager from here, it would be her." Danny frowned in her direction.

The man she had referred to as Antony shook his head in a *not again* way. "I swear, your spells always seem to run away from me. Poor Liza."

"We shouldn't count her out just yet. The experiments seem to be quite feral, I doubt they'd kill her just for doing that," B'Elanna said.

"Doc's right, we need to get out of here and awaken our people first. Hopefully Voyager will be able to come back for us with re-enforcements while we do that," Tom said. He turned to Zare, she didn't look like she liked the plan at all. "We don't have enough to assume. Split up and they could attack the rest of us. Stay together and at least you'll be around to fight it."

"Fine, I'll cover the rear," Zare said with a nod. Danny snorted into laughter, almost everyone of course rolled their eyes. Zare was the only one who didn't, she turned to Rachel. "Do you feel comfortable leading the way?"

"Not comfortable, those things barely noticed my spells. There's no other choice though," Rachel said.

"Okay, let's go then," Tom said with enthusiasm.

Triah pulled a disgusted face and started to fidget. "Is it cleaner out there? Cos if so, I'm okay with this. I mean there's things in here that look like..." she stared towards one of the rotten bones on the floor and grimaced. "Oh god, it is. I'm out." Zare grabbed her arm to stop her from running off first.

"Ohno." Most of the refugees were saying the same or similar things. Lena maneuvered her way through the group to reach the ones at the front.

The path had been getting darker with every step. With the torches still lighting the way, it made no sense until now. The ones next to the refugees were no longer working. The path ahead of them was black, the torches much further back barely lit up where they were.

Lena reached the front. Her voice startled the aliens at the front, "what is it?"

"Oh, we couldn't see you coming," one of them stuttered, relieved that it was just her.

The leader stared at her grimly. "Just put your hand out."

Lena did so and was shocked when it scraped by some rocks before she had straightened it out. Her attention went quickly to her tricorder. "A cave in. I don't understand it, I didn't detect it." The light from tricorder barely cut through the darkness, she gave it several taps. It brightened up a little and started to bleep at her. "Ohno."

"What?" the leader questioned.

"I'm losing power. I can't believe it," Lena stuttered. While it was still bright enough to see she tapped it quickly.

One of the aliens bit his lip nervously. "There's not much left. A small device is better than nothing. I wouldn't be surprised if the anomaly drained the fire lighting our path too."

"No, the cave in would have blown them out," the leader pointed out.

Lena felt the blood rush away from her face as she read the tricorder. Its light dimmed back to how it was before. "This path... it's leading us right into the tower's foundations. No wonder the land's so much weaker here, and my tricorder..."

"I don't understand," the leader said.

"It's a long story. We need to turn back," Lena said. Most of the group started talking over each other, a lot of them in panicked voices. "The way is blocked anyway, what choice is there?"

"Colony three was just ahead. There's a longer route to it we can take," a male alien said.

"Just ahead?" Lena stuttered. "I... no, it's too dangerous. I'll get them, you stay here."

The leader stared at her with wide eyes, not that she could see that. "How is the power plant dangerous? Everything should be drained at this point. We should stick toge..."

"No we shouldn't," Lena unintentionally snapped. The leader and the others at the front were taken aback. "The things that were attacking you are directly above us, they were built in the tower." They looked at her like she was insane. "I told you there were buildings on this world that caused it, didn't I? This *power plant* is it. Trust me. There will be a lot more of those things the closer we get."

"If we stay here we won't see them coming. The long route will eventually bring us to one of the exits to the surface. We might as well go with you part ways," the leader said. The mention of the surface made the rest of the refugees very nervous.

One of them spoke up in protest, "we go to the surface they'll kill us, especially if they're not far away. If we went to the camp instead..."

"How far is the exit from the power plant?" Lena asked.

"I'd say a twenty, thirty minute walk," the man Lena spoke to earlier answered. He was busy trying to squint at a paper map in his hands. "It leads to Mujkai village, an old mining village."

Lena turned away from the dead end and thought about it. The faint looks of dread on the people's faces, even in the lack of light, helped her make up her mind. "All right. We'll keep going until I have to go to this camp. Nobody goes to the surface until I either come back with the people, or if you hear screams and fighting. Okay?"

"What if your ship arrives?" one alien asked.

"Or if my brother arrives, fine," Lena answered. She turned back to face the leader and the people she stood with. All but the leader gave her a nod, her head was turned slightly their way and looked deep in thought.

"At least we won't be out in the open this way," the alien who protested earlier said in relief.

"I'll come with you," the leader eventually said. Before Lena could object she continued, "you need somebody with you to gain their trust. In fact you may need two of us, as they might think I'm your hostage."

"But sir," the protesting alien said.

Lena sighed impatiently, but she knew she was right. "Okay. First sign of trouble and you run, got it?"

"Of course," the leader nodded. She barely gave the protestor a passing glance, "you're not going. It's my job as the leader of the camp. Stay safe."

"You still need a second person, you said it yourself. I'm the only one volunteering," the protestor said. The alien doctor raised his hand, but it was too dark for most of them to notice.

"You're reckless and impulsive. I need someone with a level head that won't do something stupid," the leader said harshly. The alien doctor cleared his throat to get her attention. "Physician Loren, good idea. We may need you. It's settled." The protestor snarled through his nostrils and stomped off towards the centre of the refugees.

Lena glanced between them, "if we're done here, let's go."

"That was easy. Too easy," Tom commented.

Zare stared up at the hole in the ceiling above her while everyone else hovered outside an open door nearby. Rachel stepped into the door frame.

"It's clear," she said.

Tom nodded at the group. They carefully made their way inside. He stopped to look at Zare with worry. "That must be where B'Elanna and Rachel were attacked."

"It's up there," Zare muttered.

Tom's eyes widened so much they nearly bumped into each other. He tried to shake it off. "Perhaps we should split up after all," he dropped his voice to a whisper.

Zare briefly glanced forward at him, then back up at the hole. "I think it's..." She turned almost fully around while still looking up. The part of the ceiling where she was staring at creaked, putting Tom even further on edge. "Can you hear that?"

"The creak," Tom whispered as he edged for the door.

"No, the scratching sound," Zare whispered back.

Tom almost didn't want to hear it, but he tried anyway. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved that he couldn't or not. Another creak made him step into the room.

"Guys, change of plans. We should go to the other lab first," he whispered while pointing at the ceiling.

The Doctor's forehead was overtook by worried lines. "Where is it, I'll follow you when I'm done here." Everyone turned to him. "They shouldn't be able to hurt me, unless I'm unfortunate enough to get hit in the emitter. There's only two here, it won't take long."

Tom peeked outside just in time to see Zare standing with her back to him, and her phaser rifle pointed up at the hole. That didn't make him feel any better. "Now would be good."

Everyone but Rachel and B'Elanna hurried back outside, then down the corridor away from Zare. B'Elanna quietly stepped over to Tom's side. Rachel meanwhile walked over to the Doctor.

"With a Slayer here it's suddenly shy. It makes no sense," she whispered.

"I'm not taking any chances," Tom whispered back.

Rachel headed over to the pair. "I told him where the other lab is, I'll tell you as well. You two go, I'll see if I can get a protection spell on Zare."

"No, I'll stay until you're finished," Tom said. Rachel was surprised, B'Elanna more so. "The Captain is always the last to leave."

B'Elanna smiled and shook her head. "Yes, Captain's sure are stubborn." Tom shook his head. She turned to Rachel, "you said it wasn't far when we were last here."

"Um yes. Turn to the right at the first junction, five doors down. It's partly open, you can't miss it," Rachel said nervously. "We went left last time, good thing too."

B'Elanna nodded and turned to Tom. He gave her a smile. She ran off to join the rest of the group waiting for her, just out of sight around the corner.

"I think it's eating something," Zare said uneasily.

Several different images flashed through Tom's head, making him shudder horribly. "Rach?" He was grateful that the other woman was already quietly chanting something under her breath. "Zare, don't do anything, just guard the Doc and..."

"I know," Zare only mimed.

Rachel pointed her hand towards Zare, her whole body began to shimmer like B'Elanna's did earlier. "That's it. Hopefully it won't detect her for a while. We should go," Rachel whispered. She hurried off.

Tom sighed in relief, "okay." He glanced back at Zare one more time before following her.

Zare carefully stepped backwards towards the open door. The distinctive sound of a pod being open made her look over her shoulder.

"These pods are far more damaged than the others," she heard the Doctor say quietly.

Zare looked up at the hole one more time before walking inside the lab. Once inside she saw what he meant immediately. Several of the pods had their doors ripped apart, some were smashed to pieces. Nobody was inside any of these extremely damaged ones, which made Zare more worried than relieved. They were broken into for a reason, she thought. The one the Doctor was working on didn't appear damaged, yet the light inside it was flickering on and off.

She hurried over when the Doctor began to lift the woman out of it. "It's all right, I've got her." He gently lay her on the floor and immediately began to scan her with his tricorder. "Her pod was starting to fail. Another hour or so and she would have run out of air."

The door was her main focus again. As long as she could hear whatever it was scratching around above them, she couldn't relax. "I don't understand, why didn't it attack?"

"You want it to?" the Doctor said in a bemused tone.

"No, but if it did I'd know what I'm dealing with," Zare mumbled. The Doctor briefly glanced up at her, she noticed it in the corner of her eye. "James told me they went straight for him, it makes sense that they would. At least until the Soft sent Frenit after him instead. Here it's avoiding me and attacking others, why?"

"I see. I think it's more interesting that we're apparently not in a Softmicron structure, yet we're encountering similar experiments," the Doctor said.

What he said made her shoulders tense up, her heart started beating a little faster. "My god."

"Yes, the others seemed to have brushed that off. I guess there's a lot going on," the Doctor sighed.

"No, it's definitely Softmicron," Zare said quietly.

"I agree, the evidence suggests..." the Doctor said while treating the woman on the floor.

Zare glanced towards one of the broken computer stations in the centre of the room. "At least it is now."

B'Elanna headed straight for the computer in the centre, the others carefully looked around the similar room they had woken up in. Tom stopped at one of the few pods that still had lights emanating from it. He quickly scanned it.

"Something's been bugging me," B'Elanna said while she studied the console.

"Just *something*?" Ian questioned with a slight smirk.

B'Elanna ignored that for now. "If the goal here was to create super humanoids, which they've obviously done, why is no one here? The building is sinking, these things are smashing the place up..."

"Maybe the bosses, scientists have been murdered. They turned on them," Tom tried to answer.

"Perhaps, but it doesn't explain why the Soft have similar..." B'Elanna said.

The whole room jumped as a loud bang shook a nearby wall. The ones who dared to look saw two of the pods on the wall had shut down, one even started to tip towards the floor, tearing up more of the wall as it did.

Something made her keep looking backwards to check, not that she could see the refugees from where they were. There was a bad feeling lingering in her chest.

The two aliens behind her were getting more anxious with every glance she made. The leader felt she had to say something. "Something wrong?"

"No," Lena answered instinctively. That feeling again made her look backwards again. Once she was done she looked down at the tricorder. Its faint light had given up as well, now it was just a worthless piece of metal. "I hope not."

The downward sloped path they walked on levelled off, from there it was lit like all the others they had walked down. The two aliens seemed relieved, but to Lena they seemed dimmer, like the tower or the anomaly was absorbing the energy from the fire too.

An opening was not far ahead of them. The aliens were surprised when she stopped suddenly. The feeling was back, but this time it was straight ahead that was giving her a knot in her stomach.

"Stay back," she told them while pointing her rifle.

The alien doctor stepped forward to place a hand on it. Lena frowned and looked down to push it away. Then she noticed it. The rifle was starting to flicker on and off like the tricorder did before. Angrily she hung it back on her shoulder and reached into her jacket, only to be reminded that she lost her sword during the Frenit fight. "Great."

"We should turn back. There's no one on guard duty, that on its own is suspicious," the leader said.

"Ohno, I insist you stay," a voice behind them said. Everyone swung around to see the protesting alien walk down the hill towards them. The leader narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, don't look at me like that. You should have known. What did you say I was? Reckless, impulsive."

"More like stupid. This isn't going to help anyone," the leader hissed.

Lena heard footsteps behind her, she swung around. The alien doctor looked over his shoulder as well. Several figures stepped out of the shadows of the entrance ahead of them.

"I'm stupid? I'm not the Slayer who came here without a functioning weapon," the alien couldn't help but laugh.

"Enough!" the leader snapped.

The alien stopped a good few feet away from them, passing a malicious smile towards Lena. "It's almost like you're new at this, little girl. That can't be so."

"Eigan, stop this foolishness," the alien doctor grumbled. "These things will kill us. We should go."

"And lead them to the others? Oh Doc, I didn't know you had it in you," the alien laughed while pointing at the newcomers.

"He's not Eigan," Lena said. The alien pretended to look shocked and faked a gasp. "He's a Softmicron."

Eigan smiled pitifully at her. "Oh, was I that obvious?"

Lena turned so Eigan was on one side, and the newcomers were on the other. They were standing strangely still, it didn't look like they were even breathing. Their unblinking hollow eyes stuck out the most to her. She instead focused on Eigan on her right. "Go, I'll take care of them."

Eigan laughed sinisterly. "Without a weapon? Yes please, that should be interesting." To his surprise she stepped over to him instead.

"Not for you," she said. As soon as her fist started to raise the people behind her lunged forward. Their feet scraping against the dirt got her attention, so she quickly turned back and rushed forward.

The alien doctor ran forward to escape, Eigan stopped him by grabbing his arm. "Now, now. You wanted to come. You brought this on yourself."

Lena swung the rifle at the first alien that reached her right in the face. It broke in half as it struck, it also knocked the alien to the floor. The remaining two tackled her to the ground. As soon as she hit the floor they started delivering the punches.

Eigan grunted as the alien doctor pulled himself out of his grip. Eigan responded by clicking his fingers. One of the aliens attacking Lena bolted up, it then shot after the runaway alien so fast it was a blur to anyone watching. He screamed as he was pushed to the ground.

"Stop this now!" the leader bellowed at him. He just smirked as she confronted him.

Lena blocked a few hits, then kicked the last one away with her right leg. It rolled away just in time for yet another one to appear from the entrance. She focused on the alien doctor as his screams faded away. For the first time she was thankful the corridors were so dark. She could just make out the outline of his attacker standing back up.

"What is the point of this? What will this do?" the leader demanded.

"He's one of the aliens who attacked your..." Lena had time to spit out before the newer alien ran towards her. She ducked and rolled away from this one. "Planet. They're..." She blocked an incoming punch from the other, then hit back. "Shape shifters."

"She knows," Eigan laughed. The leader glared at him. "What? Did you really think the Slayers would invite you to their ship?" The one Lena didn't hit punched her hard to the ground. "That one may be too stupid to notice, but the other might not be."

"Slayers can't sense us. We could have escaped this wretched planet," the leader snarled.

Lena looked up at her, her eyes shut tightly. Another alien appeared while the one still standing threw a kick at her. A quick roll to one side helped her evade that. Quickly she leapt back onto her feet.

"But no... you thought it would be better to kill her," the leader said. Eigan just smirked in response. "The other will come. What will you do then?"

One of the new aliens grabbed Lena from behind while the other charged at her.

"He'll find a group of refugees lost, waiting for his beloved sister who will never return," Eigan sneered. "We'll escape and at least one overpowered freak will be out of the picture."

"James," Lena mumbled to herself, her eyes shut tight again. Before the alien could strike her she swung both of her legs up to kick it away. The one holding her responded by throwing her into the rock face while her legs were still off the ground.

"Once we have his ship we can invite a few of our own and well..." Eigan sniggered. The wall Lena crashed into started crumbling, rocks fell all around her. She quickly crawled out of its path just in time for it to collapse completely. Rocks still managed to hit her and the remaining aliens, knocking them to the ground. Eigan merely covered his eyes as dust overtook the whole area, like it was nothing. "We'll have this fun all over again."

Once the dust started to settle he noticed a shadow in front of him. He smiled, assuming it was the leader. Then he noticed her lying on the ground beside him. Before he could glance ahead of him again a fist flew into his face. The leader's eyes widened as his body slumped to the ground next to her.

Lena coughed to try and keep the dust out of her lungs, everytime she breathed in afterwards it would just happen anyway. It was the least of her worries as she heard more footsteps behind her. Slowly and discreetly she turned her head to one side.

*As if it came out of nowhere, a female Borg drone appeared behind James.*

*"Look out!" Lena screamed, but the drone had already swiped its artificial arm across the back of his head.*

Lena only had time to see yet another face in front of her, before its owner delivered its own punch. The force sent her flying backwards onto the ground. She barely noticed, the girl's face was all she could focus on.

Her short brown hair now down to her knees. Her matching eyes were carved out and replaced by a void of darkness. The face that was usually so expressive just looked like a mask, devoid of anything with a soul.

The girl standing before her was no longer someone she knew, someone she considered a friend long ago.

*The blow was hard and brutal enough to knock him to the floor. Lena could only watch as he struck the ground.*

*The Borg drone stared at her with lifeless eyes.*

"Tani," Lena said barely above a whisper.

She was just a shell, programmed to follow orders. To kill. It approached her to do just that. Lena didn't have a choice. She dragged her failing rifle out and aimed it to fire, instinctively it picked up speed.

*The axe flew towards the drone, but it just grabbed it. The grip it held snapped the weapon in half. Lena saw the pieces fall down beside her unconscious brother, bleeding from his head.*

*Rage filled her heart. It took complete control of her. Before she could think about it, a fist flew at the one responsible, over and over.*

Lena's finger went to press the fire command, but she hesitated. The blow would kill her. She instead reached to change the settings. Due to the power failure it took a few tries. The shell of Tani didn't show her the same mercy. Instead it raised its foot over her head.

*"You killed my brother," she cried over and over. Unaware that the body lying nearby still moved but gently, she continued throwing punches. One left her open, the drone used it to pierce her neck with the assimilation needles.*

The controls blackened out completely.

*Voices rushed at her with such force she screamed as loud as she could to be heard. Skin crawled, her blood ran cold. Her body fell to the floor.*

Somehow the shell stopped right before its foot touched her face. She looked up, expecting it to be attacking her. Instead she saw it frozen above her, a blade sticking out of its stomach. It then disappeared in a flash. The shell collapsed to the ground beside her.

"Tani!" she screamed so loud the rocks started to fall from the remaining walls again. Her body was pulled up to her feet, she was being dragged back up the hill. The shell on the floor didn't move. Its eyes still black and wide open. Her screams followed her and her rescuer all the way out of the tunnel.

The cold air hit them both hard like a punch to the ribs, it rushed to Lena's lungs, forcing her to stop screaming and breathe. It hurt to do it. Everytime she inhaled it felt like the air was attacking her, forcing her diaphragm to jump up to defend itself. An arm was around her shoulders, keeping that part of her warm at least. Another hand reached over to put an oxygen mask over her mouth. Once the hand moved away, she brought her own left hand up to clutch onto it.

As it got easier to breathe she noticed they weren't even outside yet. Her back was resting against the rocks as well as the arm on her shoulder, she could still make out a rock face opposite her. The cold air lingered in from her left. They were close.

Finally she looked up and left to see a figure with a visor and mask on their face. It didn't matter, she knew who it was. Still she couldn't relax. Tani's face was carved into her mind.

"How could this happen?" she thought. "Why?" Her body started to ache, her energy faded. The fight she suffered was catching up with her. The area around her began to fade away.

B'Elanna side stepped closer to the door, carefully she peered around the door frame.

"Careful," Tom said for the twentieth time.

Both ways were clear. She pulled herself back just in time for another loud bang to knock the second pod off the wall. Everyone cringed as it smashed into pieces onto the floor.

Tom was even more worried than before, he was starting to sweat. "Time to go. B'Elanna, you remember where that other lab you found was?"

"Not from here. I'd have to go part way back to the corridor we left Zare," B'Elanna replied.

The wall was cracked, it was groaning under the strain.

"Better than here, go," Tom ordered while pointing at the door.

Everyone carefully headed for it while B'Elanna kept a watchful eye on the corridor. Only Tom was left when the crack turned into a small hole, large enough to fit a fist through. He lingered on the still active pods in the lab, his heart sank. B'Elanna grabbed his sleeve and pulled him outside.

"Which..." Triah stuttered.

B'Elanna answered by running down to the right. The others quickly followed her.

"Ready."

The Doctor nodded, he carefully picked up the still form lying in front of him, then straightened to his feet. Zare glanced at him briefly, then back up at the ceiling outside. He ran by her and down the corridor, away from the hole in the ceiling. Zare was a little less careful when she knelt down to pick up a body sitting against the wall. She needed to hurry. Once the man was over her shoulder she ran after the Doctor.

The ceiling above them started to groan, something scratched behind them.

Zare noticed the Doctor picked up speed, she did so to catch up. They just reached a junction. "It's okay. It isn't following. Which way?"

"Once we hit the junction, we turn left," the Doctor answered.

B'Elanna stopped to look behind her. Everyone else did as well, Tom hurried over to her side. "What?"

"Zare and the Doctor, they'll not know where to go," she said.

Tom cringed, "they'll run right into that thing."

"I'll tell them. I've been wandering around this dungeon for weeks," Rachel said.

Antony didn't like that at all, he stood in front of her to stare down into her eyes. "Not alone you're not."

"Weeks, do I want to know what you've been eating this whole time?" Ian muttered. Triah gave him a disgusted glare.

Rachel overheard and glared back. "Only you would go there. And no, I should. Next to the girl, I'm the only one who can deter these things."

"He's right. Nobody goes alone," Tom butted in. He pointed at Triah who shook her head, then at Ian. "Once you've got them, bring them to the lab you and B'Elanna found."

"You don't need to tell me once," Rachel muttered.

She hurried off in the other direction. Ian and Antony ran after her. The rest of the group continued going down the same way.

"Let's hope there's something useful in there. We've got a long wait ahead of us," Tom said.

The three plane style ships hovered slowly in orbit, as if they were waiting for something. Whatever it was they didn't have to wait long. A flash in the distance made them fly away from the planet towards it. They soon apprehended the Katane as it approached the planet.

"They're hailing," one of the alien crew said from the back.

Yana gave Erska a knowing glance. He nodded back and climbed to his feet. "Open a channel, Markal."

The alien nodded his head. He typed in a few controls. The black metal visor blocking the viewscreen lifted up so they could see the three ships ahead of them. It immediately changed to show a brightly lit and advanced bridge. Three aliens manned it. The Katane crew were surprised to see that they were four armed like the aliens described from the surface.

"This is Commander Erska of the Katane. What's your business here?" Erska said.

The alien closer to the front of the bridge scowled at him, showing a lizard type tongue briefly. "You first. This is our territory, not yours."

Yana frowned while everyone else worried to say the least. Erska kept his internally. "I was under the impression that this was a pre-warp world."

"If it were, you would have no business here," the alien on the screen said suspiciously.

"We're looking for someone. They attacked our homeworld," Erska explained. The two aliens at the back glanced at one another, the leader watched Erska closely. "A silver vessel, large and badly damaged. We heard they abandoned ship near here."

"You heard wrong Katane. That ship was stolen. No one from it is here," the leader hissed.

"You wouldn't want them on your planet. Can we at least rule that out?" Erska said calmly.

The leader looked back at his comrades. One of them shook his head. The leader turned back to stare at Erska. "That is not your concern. Leave at once."

"So there is?" Erska said. "Let us help you find them. The crimes they committed on our world have left us devastated. We deserve retribution, don't you agree?"

The leader smirked at him as he leaned closer to the screen. "I would if you didn't already have Humans onboard." Ersa's face tightened. "You tried to hide them from us, but we're not stupid. Hand them over and I'll think about sparing your vessel."

"What's with the attitude? We only have two. Their entire crew need to be punished," Ersa improvised.

"That we can help with," the leader sneered. He raised both of his right hands. The screen changed back to space view.

"They're charging weapons. At least I think so, it's some sort of energy build up," another alien said.

The door at the back of the bridge opened. Harry and Craig hurried out of it to join Ersa. He shook his head. "I don't know how they got through your fake sensor readings."

"It's all right. These ships are probably more advanced than the ones we encountered at Shurouva," Harry said. The ship trembled, he quickly grabbed onto a nearby railing. "Plan B."

Ersa rushed forward to the only unmanned station. "Hold on." He typed in a few commands, then the ship lurched violently to the right.

Yana tightly gripped her station as another two hits slammed into their shields. Craig tried to stumble over in between them, he eventually made it over. He noticed the planet come into view on the front screen. "How much time will we have?" he asked.

"Little more than ten of your minutes. Why?" Yana answered.

"I'm going to need some of the tricks you used to get on Voyager," Craig said. Yana looked at him in surprise.

Hidden by the surrounding mountains and the lack of light, the Enterprise stood on a small patch of raised land. Its few lights near the top of it barely pierced the darkness.

Inside the starship it wasn't much better. The only lights came from the few consoles online on the bridge. One of the bigger command chairs had been uprooted from the floor and laid down so the back was on the floor. The top half of Lena's body rested on top of it. Everyone on the bridge stood around her.

"The air's getting a lot thinner on the surface. I don't think we have much time left," James said.

Kiara knelt down on the spot. She reached out to brush a strand of hair out of Lena's eyes, then she stroked the side of her face. "Will she be okay?"

Jessie smiled down at her. "Yeah, she just needed a rest." Kiara didn't believe her but she smiled back anyway. Jessie walked away with James at her side. "I'm definitely no expert here but that wasn't just the oxygen being a little thin."

"I know," James sighed while glancing down at the floor.

"I know a panic attack when I hear about one. What on earth happened?" Jessie said quietly.

"Tani... she was one of the experiments," James answered even if he still had trouble believing it. Jessie's eyes were very wide. "I didn't know until I'd already killed her. I had no choice though."

"You probably did her a favour," Jessie smiled sympathetically at him. "I wonder how she got here."

James shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it was like Janet and she was kidnapped during a tower mission. Or it happened when the Enterprise was abandoned."

Kiara sighed in relief as Lena's eyes began to open. They widened in panic as they spotted Kiara. "What?" she said weakly.

"It's okay. James found the people you rescued and got them beamed up. Then he found you," Kiara said softly. "It's fine."

"No..." Lena stuttered. James and Jessie looked over as she tried to sit up. "No it's not. Why?"

James walked over, he was about to kneel down on her opposite side when she dragged herself onto her feet. The glare she was giving him was very Janeway like. Then she spotted Jessie in the corner of her eye and it only made her madder. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Lena," James said as soft as he could. He was shoved roughly, thankfully it was a little weaker than usual so he kept his footing. "What... why are you mad at me for? You were the one that ran away, worrying me half to death."

"Look if you want to bring your about to burst pregnant wife with you, that's your business. But don't bring my daughter into this hellhole," Lena spat at him. "Beam me back and take her home, now!"

Kiara climbed to her feet to put a hand on her arm. "Lena, it wasn't his idea. I wanted to come."

"Oh... I'm sure Duncan wanted to come too but do I see him here?" Lena grumbled. She looked around anyway. "Nope. So you can say no to kids!"

Kiara's shoulders slumped. James shook his head, "Kiara was worried sick about you, this isn't helping."

"James can't tell us what to do, Lena. Kiara's like you, if she wants to do something she'll do it," Jessie said. "As for me, if he said no I'd probably sneak onboard somehow."

Lena rolled her eyes while James stared at his wife with a raised eyebrow. "Oh so we're all stupid are we? Great," Lena muttered.

"I'm glad you think you were, it's a start," James said.

"So what did you do? Lock them up in a room without consoles, knocked them out?" Lena questioned bitterly. "Why are they on the bridge for that matter?"

"Parts of the surface can still handle large buildings that weren't built by shape shifters, so I thought it could handle a starship landing on it," James replied. Lena didn't look any calmer with that answer. "No one hallucinates down here."

Jessie nodded. "The two hour journey alone with a sore loser was interesting to say the least."

Kiara frowned at her. "You had a stack of jokers hidden, I'm sure of it."

Lena stared between the two, her eyes wide. She instead focused on James. "You really are hopeless aren't you? What was the point of bringing them? You didn't have to do it."

"You're only proving yourself wrong," James muttered in response. Lena stared at him blankly, though her eyes were still full of anger. "You need help Lena. You can't keep..."

"I need help!? You're the one killing people all willy nilly. If you're not killing, you're endangering people," Lena snapped.

Jessie stepped forward, her own eyes started to burn. "Now wait a minute..."

James put a hand on her shoulder, "it's okay. If you want to hate me for what I did to Tani, fine, be my guest. I however wouldn't have brought Jessie or Kiara here if I didn't think it was safe to do it. I brought them here to help you cos I obviously couldn't."

"What are you talking about?" Lena demanded.

"Only a few weeks ago you weren't even here," Jessie said carefully. Lena's face froze, both what was said and her reaction made Kiara wince. "I don't want to sound harsh but that's what makes this whole thing so... I don't know, terrifying? What you've been through needs more than a few days recovery. You can't sleep it off or even cry it off..."

Lena sighed impatiently, "I'm fine. What's the big deal? I thought coming back from the dead was a good thing."

"It is, it's great," Kiara said. "But do you remember what you were like only a week ago? You've gone from being mostly catatonic to raging super hero in that little time. Emphasis on the word raging."

"Super hero, now I've heard everything," Lena muttered.

James cringed a little, "I don't like the term anymore than you do, but it fits. You've been so dead set on trying to save people, do your job, you've forgotten yourself. It wouldn't be all bad if I didn't get the idea that it's almost like a distraction for you."

"Unlike some people I'm not selfish, so excuse me for doing my job. Someone has to," Lena muttered. She walked off towards the Jeffries tube hatch. Kiara hurried after her.

"Are you all right? Do you want me to stay?" Jessie questioned.

James turned to her, his head gently shook. "I'm fine, she's just... It doesn't bother me."

"Liar," Jessie smiled warmly at him. She gave him a quick hug which turned into a longer one from his side. Once he let go she gave him a nod and followed the other two girls into the Jeffries tube. He heard her complain only a few seconds after she climbed in. "God, I'm knackered already."

"It's okay, you should stay," James said.

"Crap he heard me," Jessie's voice whispered to herself. James smirked a little. "I'm fine, really." Another few seconds she complained again, "I swear these are smaller tubes than Voyager."

Metal was being shredded like paper, the sound of it echoed down the corridor. Zare held her hand out to one side, signalling the Doctor and one of the recently awoken Enterprise crew to stop. They already had, frozen by the sounds they were hearing. The one she carried before lay blissfully unaware against the wall next to the Doctor. He crouched down to get ready to carry him away.

An inhumane screech even stalled Zare from stepping forward for a moment. She steeled herself forward towards the broken door. Once she was there it took everything she had not to gasp. The entire lab didn't even look like one. Scraps of metal were scattered around, wires shredded and some still sparked uncontrollably. They weren't the only things ripped apart, it was hard not to gag at the sight.

She didn't have to worry about that for long. The humanoid hunched like an animal over the top of a smashed pod focused on her abruptly. It dropped what it was holding and pounced for her. Zare just had time to swing the rifle out in front of her, but not enough to fire it. It pushed her to the ground.

Outside the Doctor and crewmember winced at every noise they heard, they both felt utterly helpless. The Doctor then noticed several figures running towards them.

"We're too late," Ian stuttered. "Zare?"

The Doctor gestured to the door. Rachel scowled towards it, she shook her head. "It's seen her, I can't give her another cloak spell. I'll have to try something else."

"Get back!" Zare screamed.

Rachel stumbled backwards, almost bumping into the two men with her. It was just in time as the creature rolled on its side from the door and literally into the wall. Zare staggered out, already covered in cuts. The Doctor was about to tend to her when she waved him off. "Get whoever's left out of there. I'll keep it busy." She followed the creature through the hole in the wall. The screeching sounds continued.

Ian hurried forward to help the Doctor lift the unconscious person up to their feet. Antony dared to have a look inside the lab, what he saw made him feel sick. "Oh god."

"Get these two out of here, please," the Doctor said in his direction.

Antony looked at him with a pale face and nodded. He ran over to help Ian with the unconscious man. They and the crewmember already awake rushed down the corridor Rachel and the others came from. Antony looked over his shoulder while he did so. "Rach?"

"I've got a few tricks left in me yet. I'll watch your back," Rachel said to the Doctor. He looked at her worried, but nodded anyway.

The Katane twisted around to the left in a corkscrew pattern to avoid a few more hits. It fired some back of its own. Only two of them hit the enemy. One more hit from them made the Katane shields flash into sight.

"The shield strength's lowering. Re-modulate the shields," Harry ordered. "How long?"

"Almost..." Markal answered. He glanced up at the viewscreen, the planet filled the whole bottom half of it. A flash appeared above it, something flew from it. "Now."

Ersa typed in a few commands, they felt the ship dip down. It felt to the Human crewmembers like being on a roller coaster. Everyone clung onto something to avoid being pulled into the ceiling.

The alien ships continued forward while the Katane dropped towards the planet. They seemed more interested in the ship flying straight towards them. They noticed it veer off to their left early to sneak into orbit but they had already seen them. They sped along to follow them. Meanwhile the Katane levelled off to skim the edge of the planet's atmosphere.

Chakotay smiled at the viewscreen, the alien ships and Voyager's tail were showing on it. The red alert lights and klaxon were already on.

"Predictable," he said. "Do it."

Damien groaned in disgust at Opps. He reluctantly tapped in a few commands.

Everyone else kept a close eye on the viewscreen. A few seconds later the tail of Voyager shimmered and then disappeared from sight.

"Temporary cloak is active," Damien muttered.

"Andrews, change course. Lets keep them on their toes for a bit," Chakotay ordered. "Tactical, alias with helm. Fire weapons with every course change." Jodie just did a hand gesture to show her acknowledgment.

Harry watched on the Katane viewscreen as Voyager disappeared. He sighed in relief.

"That would have been handy when we attacked," Yana pointed out.

"It would but only Damien knows how to make one, and he's not easy to convince," Harry said. He turned to Craig, who was busy fiddling with a tricorder, "ready?"

Craig glanced towards him, "sure."

"Isn't this cloak thing risky? What if the shape shifters believe they're gone and come for us?" Erska questioned.

"They won't," Harry said while pointing at the screen. Erska just missed a phaser beam hit the alien ships out of nowhere. "Yana, energise."

Yana nodded, she pressed one command then glanced behind her at the two Humans. They disappeared in a shimmer.

Kiara followed the trail of violently opened doors and linear corridors so far, but now she was at a loss. The crossroad she reached gave her no new clues. She was about to resort to dipping between the two when a clatter to her right echoed down the corridor, followed by angry grunts. Kiara quickly followed that, luckily she didn't have to go far. She had forgotten how big this ship was, the chase wiped her out way back in the Jeffries tube.

"Lena?"

Kneeling on the floor, head to shoulders inside a wall panel, the person ahead of her could have been anyone. A distinct voice swearing inside of it confirmed it was definitely her.

"You know why I'm here, right?"

She heard a sigh mixed in with the shuffling sounds inside the panel. "I'm fine!" Lena's muffled response was.

"No, not that," Kiara said, shaking her head. "Why I came back from Q training early."

The corridor was silent for a moment. Lena seemed to be still as well. Kiara waited for her to say something, anything. "No," was all she got.

"I missed you, and I felt bad for hurting you. I guess I also wanted to show you the progress I made, so you'd be proud of me," Kiara explained through the lump in her throat. Her torso started to tremble as she spoke. "Most of all, I wanted to help you with this."

"Q's teach you how to re-wire a hacker's power distribution thingy?" Lena muttered a little impatiently.

Kiara's hands flew to her hips, her eyebrows dropped down in anger. "No, and what? Why are you doing that?"

She was still inside the panel, but Kiara definitely heard a scoff fly out of it. "You think big brother will let me go back down there? Hardly."

Kiara had more than enough now. She stomped over to pull her out by the arm. All she managed to do was pull her elbow back slightly. "That's just it, right there! You've got this huge burden on your shoulders, why not share it to lighten it a little?"

"I can handle the heavy lifting, that's the point," Lena mumbled. Kiara tried again to pull her out, this time she succeeded but not in the way she expected. Instead Lena pulled herself out, bumping her

head on the edge of the panel in the process. "Damn it," was the response to that. When she straightened herself up Kiara steeled herself for the Janeway death glare, but instead all she could see were her tired eyes losing their spark.

"Lena please, that's why I left this ship in the first place," Kiara quickly pleaded before she could. "It's why I'm back now. I wanted to be useful, to you. I want to help you so you'd live."

"It's not your job to help me. You're my daughter, not some minion or something," Lena said bitterly. "Besides, I ruined that for you so you can't."

Kiara's bottom lip threatened to slide further out while her trembling worsened. "No you didn't, I did. I can't help you now as a Q, but I can in other ways surely. Like now."

Lena gestured to the open panel, which now that she was out of it was clearly just a cluttered mess of wires. "Be my guest."

"No," Kiara said sternly. Lena turned to stick her head back inside it again. "You're not alone in this. Without us James wouldn't have been able to save you. He'd have to stay onboard the ship wouldn't he?" Lena stopped only to lightly sigh. "With us here on the surface you two can rescue another camp or two, we can beam you back. Tell me, how easy was this rescue mission when it was just the two of you?"

"We only failed the first camp because James..." Lena protested.

Kiara firmly shook her head, "you failed cos you had little time after faffing around with a backup EMH, as well as charging in without really thinking about it."

"Please, when did I ever come up with plans? Sometimes you have to act fast, which he's forgotten," Lena snapped.

"When did you start blaming James for everything? You were one of the few people on his side not long ago," Kiara asked sadly.

Lena's eyes widened as anger started to boil over. "I'll call him out if he does screw up, that's more than fair. He'd do the same."

"That's not what's happening here and you know it," Kiara said.

Lena was about to snap back when she spotted Jessie approaching from the same direction Kiara had earlier. Kiara noticed a frown on her face and looked over her shoulder to see the newcomer as well.

"How did she climb down so many decks like that?" Lena wondered quietly.

Kiara shrugged then turned her head back. "We still have time. Do you want to tell me?" Lena's eyebrow raised. "Why are you so angry with him? It's obvious to me, so it'll be obvious to everyone. Why do you insist on fighting alone?"

"I..." Lena said as the anger in her eyes fizzled away. There wasn't much left once it was gone, Kiara was instantly reminded of what she was like when she returned. It scared her more than she liked.

"God, you couldn't have picked a computer on Deck Two or something?" Jessie complained breathlessly once she caught up.

"He didn't ask you to chase me, did he?" Lena asked plainly.

"Nah, he wanted me to stay. I should have," Jessie said, finally catching her breath. Once she did she pointed a stern glare her way. "What are you doing anyway? You're not planning on leaving alone, again?"

"What choice do I have now? You and Kiara are here, it'll take you another five hours to climb back to the bridge. Who'll..." Lena said.

Jessie rolled her eyes while she had been talking. "Yeah, yeah. I came down here as I remembered James saying something about a map. One of the refugees had one. I thought it would be useful. I guess you thought your previous plan of running in blind and hoping for the best would be more efficient."

"Jess," Kiara complained, her eyes shut tightly.

Jessie shook her head a couple of times. "Sorry, I get a little pissy after climbing down a hundred decks, crawling through stick thin tubes, only to find the girl I want to help is running away again."

Lena looked away at nothing in particular, but Jessie wasn't done talking. "I can't describe how strange and off putting it is to have been gone for so long, and come back. Whether or not you feel it's a good thing right now is irrelevant. The journey from the resurrection to normality is bloody hard, indescribably strange but it's worth slogging through it. If you try to rush through it, pretend nothing's wrong, then you'll end up flipping the dark side button a few too many times and lose who you are in the struggle."

Kiara looked down at the floor and bit her lip gently. Lena continued to stare towards the wall.

"Or you'll do what I did. Isolate yourself so much that even the people who love you will lose hope and give up. Forget dying, that's the loneliest feeling in this world. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy," Jessie said. "I hope I'm wrong, but you're starting down that path. There's still time to walk away from it though. I'll get this map and all four of us will figure out a plan together. Okay?"

"Fine," Lena mumbled, surprising Kiara into glancing back up. She noticed her expression hadn't changed from before, but agreeing with one of them was a step forward at least.

The bright lights in the lab were giving almost everyone nagging headaches. B'Elanna was the only one that didn't seem bothered about it, she was too engrossed in one of the alien computers. Tom stood beside her anxiously tapping his folded arms.

"Environmental systems, security protocols, power control... this is definitely the main bridge of the building," she said.

"Great," Tom said unenthusiastically.

"It will be if I can figure out how to use any of them and which consoles they are," B'Elanna said. Her finger pointed at one part, "no, maybe that one's environmental control. It's very similar to this one."

Danny stepped forward while squinting her eyes. "What? You can't tell."

"Strangely enough the names of the systems are not in English," B'Elanna said in a mocking tone. Her finger tapped one of them. "This one, I think is a data bank." The tapping seemed to activate something. Lights shone out from the glass floor, generating a 3D holographic image of a oval shaped building hovering in the air. Tom had to tap B'Elanna on the shoulder so she could turn around and see it.

A computerised voice began to speak from one of the computers. At first it was gibberish, then the universal translators in their commbadges worked to turn it into English for them. *"System defences activated star cycle fourteen, graviton shift three."* The holographic building lowered a little while an image of the hills rose up from the glass. *"Interphasic shields active."* The building fell straight through the land as if it wasn't there at all. Once it merged the image of the hills disappeared. *"Energy conversion period active. Estimated endurance time; seven point nine hundred star cycles. Re-activation protocols awaiting command. Life cycle almost complete."*

"What the hell," was all Danny could say.

"I'm still going to need a translation," Tom said while pulling a face.

B'Elanna's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "Amazing. Drawing energy from the planet was not its primary function. It's a means of hiding itself from detection."

Tom stared at her with wide eyes, he wasn't the only one. "Come again?" he asked.

"Really?" B'Elanna was surprised at his confusion. "System defences were activated and the building lowered into the ground to hide. The energy conversion didn't begin until then. It talks about endurance time. It looks like its time is almost up."

"What on earth do people who make things like this need to hide from?" Triah asked.

"The locals are just simple people in a pre-industrial age. If I understand right, star cycle means a year on this planet," Tom said. Everyone waited for him to continue. He just shrugged. "I was thinking out loud."

B'Elanna smiled at him, "you're on the right track. Its cycle is almost complete, which means its been here for seven hundred of this planet's years. We don't know how long that is, but it's obvious that it wasn't being hidden from these people."

"I dunno, seeing that thing floating above your head would be worrisome to us, let alone primitive people," Danny pointed out.

"Could it be the Softmicron? Did they build and hide it, or was it being hidden from them?" Tom wondered.

*"Softmicron. Class two being, shape shifting abilities,"* the computer said. *"Threat level three. Inferior technology and limited weaponry. Infiltration threat only."*

"Inferior technology?" Tom stammered. B'Elanna gave him a similar worried look. "The Soft are inferior to whoever built this? I'm getting 8472 in Borg space chills from this. This can't be good."

B'Elanna turned back to the computer. "Maybe seven hundred years ago they were inferior. Now..."

"Now they have similar technology; energy draining buildings, that can hide by the way, strength boosting pods. The tables have turned," Danny commented.

"The tables have... how do you figure?" Triah mumbled.

Danny shrugged casually, "think about it. These people hid this thing and haven't come back for it. The Softmicron meanwhile are using similar stuff. What happened doesn't take a genius to figure out."

Tom felt the blood drain from his face, B'Elanna looked back at him to see it. "I hoped I was the only one thinking the same thing," he said.

Only a mile or so away, Craig and Harry stood near the entrance to the mine that tunneled nearby. Harry was busy working on a device stuck in the ground. Craig kept fishing around in his pocket with one hand, while the other kept a firm grip on a phaser rifle.

Unlike the awayteam's time outside, the pair were lucky enough to have beamed down at night. Nobody was around, the planet was too primitive for street or path lighting. The only light they had came from the device Harry was using, his tricorder and the rifle.

The device whirred into life, Harry smiled at it. "Great, that's the last one. Hopefully that'll be enough for the Katane to get through the interference from the mine."

Craig pulled a device from his pocket to quickly check it. It flashed once so he put it away again. Harry looked over with a frown.

"What was that?"

"What?" Craig pretended to be confused.

Harry shrugged, "I thought I saw another light. Oh well." He tapped his commbadge with his spare hand. "Kim to Katane. The transport emitters are in place."

*"All right, Jita scan for localised lifesigns."*

The pair waited, Harry patiently but Craig not so much. He was getting more and more tense by the second.

*"Confirmed. We're picking up the structure. They're spread out throughout. Not all of them are Human."*

Harry sighed in relief. "That's okay, lock onto the Humans, a hologram and any other biosigns that match the ones we gave you. Hopefully the Enterprise didn't pick up any unknown aliens on its mission."

*"Okay, it'll take a while to selectively transport. Standby."*

Craig reached into his pocket again, his eyes closed. "Yana." Harry glanced at him again with a bigger frown, just in time to see him disappear in a transporter beam.

"What the, Craig?" he stuttered.

Tom looked around for anything that he could understand, anything to distract him. The thought of what he had just learned was still nagging away in the back of his mind. The hologram of the structure was still hanging around in the centre of the room. The rest of the group stayed along the edge as if it would hurt them. B'Elanna kept herself occupied by continuing to study the controls.

A lot of the room cringed as distant screams echoed above them, then another but louder not far from them. The walls shuddered and groaned.

Triah rubbed her own arms, she seemed to shrink inside them. "Oh god, they're getting closer aren't they?"

Ian glanced over to a very worried Antony, he kept glancing at the door expectantly. "Maybe we should go check on them. Anything could have happened," Ian suggested.

Tom stopped at one of the computers, this one seemed to be covered with dozens of little screens showing empty corridors. "Hold onto that thought. I think I found the Security console."

B'Elanna looked over, "really?"

"Hmm, I don't see anything," Tom said as he scanned them. "Here I was expecting corridors filled with black eyed monsters."

Antony sighed, "Rach, you'd better be safe."

"This place is huge, this can't be it. I don't even see any rooms," Tom mused. His finger tapped anywhere to see if anything changed. It took a few tries as a few taps only enlarged images. The one to the right made them all disappear and different ones filtered in. His eyes widened as every single one of them displayed similar rooms to ones they'd been in. A lot of them were ripped to shreds or just burning rubble. He gestured his hand so anyone curious knew to come over. "Guys!"

Just as he did so the door nearby trembled from a single knock. Everyone froze on the spot. It did it again and again, each time it got more frantic. Antony gave in and ran over to open it. The whole room were relieved to see the Doctor holding a female crewmember on the other side.

Only Danny walked over to join Tom, she regretted her curiosity as the first screen she saw was littered with not just rubble, but dead people as well. "Oh god."

Tom's eye was on a different screen. The door to that particular lab was open, something was there but he couldn't make it out. There was barely any movement but it was enough to get his attention.

"Rachel, where is she?" Antony panicked. He looked outside to see they were the only arrivals.

The Doctor gently put down the woman he was carrying as quickly as he could. "There were two of them, one came through the ceiling. She stayed behind."

Tom jumped as the slight movement turned into a lot, it happened so suddenly too. He swung around. "Doc, you're with me." He didn't give anyone any time to argue with him, he just ran out of the lab. The Doctor frowned and followed.

Danny tried to find the screen he was looking at. None of them really stuck out any more than the others. Then she found it. "Uh... oh boy." Everyone left were now looking at her in suspense. The lump forming in her throat stopped her from saying anything.

Her leg was about to give out. It screamed in agony. One more step, she thought. It could barely handle that, she stumbled to the floor. The best Rachel could do was crawl on her hands and knees. The blood from the gash on her face dripped onto the floor, that was the last thing on her mind.

The few metres she had to crawl felt like it took ten minutes, not seconds. While she dragged her damaged leg, it brushed against some wall debris causing her to recoil and almost scream out. Instead she forced herself to sit against what was left of the wall. She was so close, she could see it perfectly.

Footsteps approached but at this point she didn't care to even check. She couldn't run or even crawl. There wasn't much energy left in her.

"Oh my god," an unfamiliar voice stuttered from where the footsteps came from.

Somebody ran by her, just stopping a foot or so away to crouch down. He blocked her view of it, all she could see was the back of this young man she hadn't seen before.

*"Craig, Craig? What the hell are you doing? Will you just answer me,"* Harry's voice rang out from him.

Craig couldn't hear him. All he could see was the woman lying in the doorway in front of him. He didn't see much wrong with her. A deep scratch on her arm, a bruise on her face, several cuts. She even still had a rifle in her arm. Something just hit her and she fell, he didn't understand it. His hand shook as it went to check for a pulse.

Rachel shook her head, even that took a lot of effort to do. "They... two of them. I tried."

Craig couldn't hear her either. He had his hand on her neck for a good minute, he felt nothing. A tear dropped from his eye, dribbled down his cheek and escaped from his face. It dropped down on the girl's. Harry's voice tried to get in touch with him again, this time he heard it. He grabbed the

commbadge from his chest to put it on her shoulder, doing so he tapped it. His whole body was shaking but he had to get back to his feet.

"Harry. Just beam me back, there's a woman nearby too. We'll need medical attention," he said through the tears.

Rachel stared after him as he walked away. A device was pulled from his pocket. It flashed once from a numerical display. She couldn't see it anymore as he placed it onto a wall.

*"Craig, what was the point in beaming in? We were gonna transport any... fine. Get him out of there."*

Tom and the Doctor ran around the corner. Both of them stalled at the sight in front of them. The Doctor ran forward first, but the two women disappeared in a transporter beam before he could get there. Tom noticed the third person in the corridor, he wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Craig?" he said.

"Tom. It won't be long," the figure said quietly. Tom and the Doctor heard the pain in his voice.

"What are you doing here, on your own?" the Doctor asked.

Craig glanced down at the floor. Tom and the Doctor then saw the device on the wall counting down to something. "I'm... I'm helping."

"Is that what I think..." Tom stuttered. He barely got a nod. "We're still here."

"You won't be," Craig said. His hand went up to touch the device again, he kept a tight hold of it. "I'll delay it until you leave, if you're worried. They won't beam an explosive onboard, so they won't get me."

"Craig, don't be a fool. It's got a countdown for a reason," the Doctor said.

Craig turned his head slightly, the Doctor and Tom saw his tear streaked face and the haunted look in his eyes. "What is that reason? The Softmicron keep building more and more of these things, we lose more and more Slayers. They're..." He closed his eyes, more tears escaped through the cracks. "They're people, good people trying to help. Soon, there will be none left."

"Craig. She didn't look that bad, she was beamed away," Tom tried to assure him.

"Who'll be next?" Craig said, obviously ignoring his words. "James, Lena? God... she's not, she's just a sweet, funny, clever girl. What did she do to deserve this? I can't stand it anymore."

The Doctor stepped forward, it made Craig recoil back a little but his hold on the device didn't waver. "You can help her." He got a bitter laugh, so quiet he only just made it out. "You can help by being by her side, supporting her. That's enough."

"Where was Zare's support? Who was by her side?" Craig stammered. "Kevin, Sandi. They all died alone, didn't they? It'll happen to Lena too. I can't stop that. I can't, won't watch it. I'd rather die."

Tom felt he knew what to say, he had to. "Lena died as her support system fell. Her mother, Kiara, Chakotay. If you die here things will happen as you think."

"I brought her back into this hell. She knows that," Craig muttered bitterly. "She won't care."

"So you'll die an idiot. A self pitying idiot," Tom said but not in a harsh tone. It was still enough for the Doctor to stare at him bewilderedly. "If you want her to live, stay around. Help her. Damn it, atone for what you've done. Take responsibility. Lena needs you more than you realise."

More tears fell, the lump in his throat throbbed. He stared at the countdown on the device, it seemed to slow down as he did. A hand clasped his shoulder. Sometime during his stare Tom had approached him. The Doctor was right behind him.

"Come on. We can all help her together. That's the Voyager way, isn't it?" Tom said with a friendly smile.

To his relief Craig finally moved his hand off the deadly device. They walked quickly away. It wasn't long before the transporters took them away from it.

"The Katane's saying they've got everyone," Damien said in a bored voice.

Chakotay stepped forward towards the helm. "Get us out of here, warp nine."

"Aye, aye," Nathan said while typing in the commands. The viewscreen showed the stars streaking ahead of them.

The alien ships had no idea, they missed the flash of light behind them. On the other side of the planet the Katane did a U turn to warp off in the same direction.

The tower lurked in the distance, little more than a shadow in the dim light. Lena couldn't keep her eyes from it. The people hurrying by her, shivering in the freezing cold didn't seem to see it. Her eyes had adjusted, gotten used to it being there. It was taunting, almost daring her. As long as it existed it would continue to drain the very soul of the planet. If it was gone, maybe they'd have extra time to save more of its people. At the very least there would be less of the monsters to bring terror to the remaining survivors.

The ground beneath her right foot began to crack, she slid it to one side before it broke apart any further.

*"One sec, the transporters need a bit of a boost,"* Jessie's voice rang in her and James' ears.

Lena slowly looked across at the people standing near her, mostly gathered around her older brother. He had given up his thick jacket at some point while she was thinking, or even during the journey to the surface. As her head instinctively turned back to the tower she noticed a trio of kids huddled inside the coat. She was about to remove her own for anyone else who needed it when the comm link in her ear protection sparked up again.

*"Okay got it. Like before it'll be one mass transport. Stay together."*

This was her last chance, she had to take it.

*"Um James... one lifesign's disappeared."*

James' head darted around, his eyes wide. He then noticed a pair of discarded ear muffs lying on the ground. "Lena."

*"If I don't transport now I'll have to find somewhere else to steal power from..."*

"It's okay, do it. I'll go get her," James said. He didn't wait for Jessie to object, he walked quickly away from the group. All of them stared after him, unsure what was happening. They disappeared in a transporter beam seconds later, leaving him behind.

*"Why? She knows we can't stay here much longer, we don't have enough power to rescue any more if we do."*

James looked around, a dark shadow caught his eye. He focused on it for a while. It pierced the sky and blended in with the black clouds that lingered there. He knew exactly where she had gone. Ten years ago he would have done the same thing.

"The experiments. Hundreds of them she said. They'd make the survivors last few days, well..." he shuddered at the thought.

*"I won't talk you out of it. Just please be careful. I'll work on the transporters."*

James nodded. He ran towards the hills as fast as he could. Even when he reached them he couldn't see any sign of her. The star in the sky was long gone, the flashlight in his hand barely made it through the thick black in front of him. He knew it wasn't going to find her that way, so he stopped and listened.

Nothing was around, no wildlife, no wind, no people. The deathly silence and his limited view were a deadly combination, it made him feel like he was standing in nothing. At least now one of them was useful. It meant he could hear Lena's footsteps so clearly, even her light breathing, he knew exactly where to start climbing.

The air seemed to be getting thinner the longer he walked. It was making this steep hill harder to climb up. The sounds were getting louder. His eyes began to adjust to a shadow not far in front of him. It seemed to have stopped. The flashlight was pointed in its direction, it was immediately slapped out of his hand when he did. It clattered to the ground, its shallow light barely shone on him and the figure in front.

"Lena..." he said.

"What are you doing, James? You're..." Lena spat at him.

The fear he had felt before when she had ran off alone again was quickly taken over by anger. "Me? I'm not the one running off on my own again, towards an army of genetically enhanced aliens."

"I'm the Chosen. This is what we do, remember?" Lena said.

"No, no it's not," James said, throwing her off. "There's no point to this Lena. You don't need to kill anything, the planet will do it in a matter of days, maybe hours. This is just suicide,"

"Hmph, I forgot I was talking to the master of doing suicidal things. You're nothing but a hypocrite," Lena scoffed.

"Maybe, maybe not. The difference here is I've had people who talked me out of that, held me back, helped me grow out of it. One of them was you," James said. "I realise you're going through something I'll never understand, but I do understand the need to distract from the pain, and gain control of something. The helplessness is overwhelming. I know, I've done all this myself."

"It isn't anything like that. A lot of people have suffered, died to make me a Chosen. I should do something with it, otherwise it was all for nothing," Lena said, the pain dripping from her voice.

James remembered being a little relieved to see her look like her old self again at the start of the mission. She seemed eager to help out, spend time with him as well. The few smiles and jokes appeared genuine at the time, looking back on them he wondered if they really were. What she said struck the wrong chord, he didn't like it one bit. This was the real reason she went with him. He didn't want it this way. "You're Human first, Lena. Please don't forget that."

"I know that but..." Lena looked a little hurt at those familiar words.

"When I was your age I found out what I really was. I thought that if I didn't involve myself with any bad thing that happened, do something, then I'd be letting everyone down. That I'd be a failure. If I didn't win, I'd punish myself harder each time. If I did, I'd berate myself for not doing it better," James tried to explain.

Lena only shook her head like she disagreed.

"It nearly destroyed me. I hurt Jessie everytime I did this, people hated me no matter what I did. I was barely me anymore, just some freak in a Human shell. I got injured, it didn't matter. If I died, it was worth it," James continued, his face was grimacing at recalling this. Lena turned her head to look at him, she felt her eyes widen. "I don't want you to go through that. It took me a long time to remember that my Humanity was what kept me alive, it's not a weakness."

"Maybe for you," Lena said quietly and timidly while looking down to the ground.

James' shoulders slumped. "Yeah I never said it wasn't hard. I think... no I know it's why both of us are still here. It's why we were picked in the first place."

"I really hope there's time for an intermission here, cos I've got something that kills your whole theory," a familiar voice said.

James and Lena looked up towards the top of the hill, they could just make out an outline of a humanoid. Lena noticed it only had one arm, making her extremely tense. James' eyes meanwhile narrowed, despite him feeling just as tense and worried as she was.

"Frenit," he said.

"Why the surprise? Didn't sis mention it?" the voice sneered while the outline disappeared into the shadow of the hill. The footsteps they both heard gave away how far he was, he was getting far too close for either of their liking. "Shame." The noise hinted that he stopped and close by too. "What, no *what are you doing here* whines?"

"You like hanging around towers, what's there to ask?" James muttered.

Frenit smirked at him. "Do you really think you'll defeat them all? That's the beauty of them. Only two Chosens, three towers each to destroy on so many worlds. I may as well put you out of your misery."

"One of you, two of us," Lena said. "Or even better, four arms versus one."

Frenit's smirk faded away, not that either of them noticed. "Are we still gloating about that? Big bro got lucky."

Lena looked towards James, the very little light from the flashlight barely touched upon his torso so she couldn't see his reaction to anything. She asked anyway, "you did that?"

"Oh please, you should have seen what I did to him," Frenit said with his smirk back. James rolled his eyes while reaching for something behind his back. "The difference between us both was I was holding back. In fact..."

James swung a sword around towards where he figured Frenit's head was. To Lena something flew through the light, reflecting it down the hill. The faint outline she saw of Frenit blurred and disappeared. The crunch she heard told her he had merely jumped backwards. It didn't take long for her eyes to re-adjust to his new position and gave him his outline back.

"Typical James. Rude and would much rather die horribly. I suppose I can honour that," he laughed.

His leg swung out to strike towards Lena first. Her only hint to this was the motion created a tiny breeze that sounded louder than it was. Lena quickly brought her arms up to defend herself. His foot slammed into her right, it was forceful enough to make her stumble backwards. The pain that erupted from the blow made it hard for her to keep it up, it fell to her side. She heard a loud thud as James

tackled him immediately after the kick. The ground, or what was left of it, crackled and groaned as they both hit the ground.

Frenit only laughed as James followed this up with a punch, which he quickly blocked. The sword he was carrying swung towards his neck while his only arm was distracted. "Predictable," Frenit spat as he swung both his legs up to kick him away before the blade could do any damage. With the slope going down just behind him, the push made him lose his balance just long enough to stumble to the floor and start rolling downward.

Lena had very little idea what had happened, all she could see were blurs amongst the shadows. She went with what she heard and followed Frenit's voice forward, aiming both of her weapons. The phaser rifle fired, briefly lighting up the area in front of her. It just missed him by an inch, so she moved it to the right assuming he would dodge or attack after getting back up. This time it only lit up the terrain, she raised her melee weapon quickly.

Something hard, yet shaped like a fist struck her in the face. Despite it dazing her she swung her weapon forward and across. The second slice got a little resistance and she heard a ripping sound. The growl she got afterwards told her exactly where he was. He would expect another hit, so instead she ducked down to swing around on one foot and kick with the other.

She definitely hit something, the bang was clear as day. What she heard next threw her off. What sounded like a gust of wind blowing over her head. There was no time to think about it. Her sword flew out of her hands and she felt a hand reach around to grab her throat from behind. Her whole body was lifted off the ground, the pain resulting in her neck made it hard to say anything or even breathe normally.

Footsteps approached, then stopped not far from in front of them. The flashlight was weakly shone in her direction. She could just make out her brother only a few feet ahead of them. During the scuffle she had no idea what Frenit had done to him, she was relieved he was all right whatever it was.

"Why are you fighting back? I thought you wanted to die," Frenit teased her. He was so close, his voice sounded like a loud shout. "Why didn't you let your little sis go? I did," he laughed.

The strange comment caught James off guard, he stopped and backed away a bit in case Frenit would do something literal. "What?"

"Look at me now," Frenit continued talking anyway, slowly turning his head towards Lena. Even in the dark she could feel his eyes drilling into her. "Stronger, free."

"What the hell are you talking about?" James grumbled. "No I don't care, let her go. She's done nothing to you, I on the other hand."

Frenit chuckled without opening his mouth. "Yes, she's very... job oriented isn't she? Little regard for her life." He sneered down at her, she recoiled in disgust. "Why, I bet the only reason you ran from me before was so you could save those poor helpless people."

James began to lunge forward but Frenit saw it coming, he tightened his grip on Lena's throat forcing him to stop. Lena dropped the rifle during the struggle.

"I've destroyed so many Slayers like her, it just isn't as satisfying as it used to be," Frenit said wistfully. "Although that womanising prick wasn't much fun either. I didn't even notice he was there until he was dead." The laugh he ended his sentence with chilled the pair of them much more than the environment ever could.

"James, just go..." Lena said through the pain. She knew it would make Frenit laugh and she was right, it still made her shudder in revulsion. Her free hand reached into a jacket pocket while he did.

"No, stay. You know I thought I hit the jackpot when I finally found one Slayer worth torturing," Frenit said mockingly. "Completely clueless, self absorbed, pathetically flawed and weak. I haven't had this much fun in centuries."

"So your dead daughter and missing arm is all part of the act, huh? Here I thought you were struggling with a weak and pathetic Slayer, my bad," James said in a similar tone.

Frenit growled just as Lena pulled a small dagger from her pocket, then quickly stabbed behind her. His growl turned into an angry yelp, his hand loosened its grip. Lena fell to the ground just on the cusp of the hill, it forced her into a brief roll. James quickly stepped forward to stop it and help her to her feet.

"Dead daughter," Lena stuttered through her bruised throat.

Frenit snarled. "Perhaps I should return the favour!"

"Let go of your sister. Lost in battle. Daughter, welcome home," Lena mumbled. Frenit and James stared at her, Frenit coldly and James just confused. Lena swallowed the huge lump now in her throat, her skin tingled and it wasn't because of the cold. "This planet, this is your homeworld. You were him, the Slayer in the legend." She got a growl directed at her. "You were like us long ago."

James' eyes were now wide, he had no idea where to even start with that.

"Nonsense. Why would you make up something as disgusting as that?" Frenit snapped.

James stared at him, his jaw threatened to drop. "You... it's true?" Frenit's head darted in his direction. "If it wasn't true you'd find an accusation like that hilarious. That last fight we had you threatened to make me *exactly* like you. Your abnormal strength, your obsession with making Slayers suffer. It makes sense."

"Enough of this. Perhaps I've left you alive for far too long," Frenit growled.

"Like you were, you mean. How old did you say you were not long after we met, fifty?" James said quietly. Lena's eyes widened as they darted at him, her lips mimed his last word.

Frenit faked a laugh, "you remembered that? I'm touched. That was just to scare you, looked like it worked too."

"I remember everything from that night, as well as the one where you won," James said, a particular memory repeated in his head. "That little girl you sired was your real daughter. You were not merely another Slayer, you were a one that had children. I didn't know."

He knew it was coming but Frenit's angry punch still managed to hit him, he had tried to dodge it and it struck him hard in the shoulder. It was enough to push him backwards.

"You! Do not dare mention her, I..." Frenit snarled. "It doesn't matter. She was my last weakness, and you have plenty more for me to pick from." He eyed Lena hungrily.

"You let a vampire take your soul, your entire existence and this is worth bragging about? And *we're* the weak ones?" she stuttered.

Frenit burst out into malicious laughter, bringing him near to tears. While he did that he crouched down to collect the sword Lena had lost. James raised his own just in case.

"Yes, for the moment. No need to fight the inevitable," Frenit sneered. He brushed the edge of the blade across his own cheek, down to his throat while his eyes shifted to stare James down instead. "What impact did I make as the oldest Slayer? Nothing but an old wives tale. Six hundred years as the strongest vampire; a lasting legacy, a deserved reputation."

"I swear, we spend more time yapping than fighting," James said to Lena. She was too dazed to really hear it though.

Frenit ignored him and continued, "isn't it true of you too? Infamous for death and darkness. Does anyone talk about your good deeds?" He cackled as he saw James' eyes narrow and his sword grip

tighten. "Of course not. They feared you all your life, you're already on the dark path. Little sister is willing to die needlessly to save this same world. Save people who are frightened of her."

"Are you getting to the point anytime soon or will I have to be sired too to hear the end?" James muttered.

Frenit smirked, "history is doomed to repeat itself..."

"That's a yes," James butted in.

Undeterred Frenit continued, "as usual you put on this sarcastic bravado act, but you fool no one. You know where this is going. Your fate is to be exactly like me. You tried to be normal but in the end you will lose the fight. I'm just offering a shortcut."

With a flick of his wrist the sword swiped across to point it at Lena. It made enough noise for James to quickly block it with his own. Frenit smiled. "It's not that bad, you know already as you've tasted it before. The strength, the invincibility that comes with it. You're going to die sometime soon anyway, so why resist? Little Lena agrees, doesn't she?"

"No. That's all you have. Just strength and little else. You're nothing. I... I don't want to end up that way," Lena cried. Her head shook angrily.

Frenit showed his offense with a loud snarl. "Does it matter? Big brother is already on borrowed time. Death is inevitable. Hanging on to your pointless existence on Voyager will ultimately destroy you before that happens."

He turned his head towards James. He could just make out the cold stare he was giving him. "Why even bother? You worry about your own lives, you're worrying about everyone else, you beat yourself up if it goes wrong and it will go wrong. And for what, what difference does it make?" Lena's fists clenched tightly.

"So you can say that you care, that you're one of them? If you truly cared you'd accept your role as a weapon and commit yourself to that. No mistakes, no concern, nothing." James pulled back his sword so it was no longer pressing against Frenit's. It was just in Lena's line of sight, she worried about what he was going to do next. "Can you honestly say you both are better fighters, better guardians because you can cry over a little death here and there."

The sword swung back towards Frenit's, knocking it flying to one side. The sound of it flying through the thin air allowed Lena's eyes to follow it to its landing spot. She remained still for now.

"Of course not," Frenit chuckled anyway. "Does trying to be both make you happy? You're flawed at being Slayers, weak and pathetic. And you're flawed at being Human; too strong to grow up with the other kids, too much of a risk to have your own. Why be a failure of two things, when you could excel at one? We all know that you can never be 100% Human, so it's not a hard choice now is it?"

Lena hoped he would see it, she sent a small smirk James' way. She didn't have to see it, a sixth sense told her he was already doing the same.

"No, it's not," James said before he lunged forward. Frenit knew it was coming, he flipped backwards. Lena quickly dashed to one side to collect the discarded sword. Instead of running straight forward she waited for any kind of opening. Frenit landed on the top of the hill and sneered down at them both.

"Shall we leave it to fate?" he said as one of the lights circling the tower briefly lit him up.

James stepped closer, carefully. "Stop. The experiments are on the other side, they'll see you," Lena warned.

A fake pout appeared on the vampire's face to mock them. "That'd be a shame, wouldn't it?" A tiny rock lay near his feet, he gently nudged one towards it. It still flew away down the other side of the hill, every little sound it made as it collided with another rock or the ground were so loud and clear,

each one made the pair cringe. Finally it stopped. The next sound they heard trembled the ground, it roared towards them. Frenit smiled at them deviously. "Oops."

James looked towards Lena, he didn't have to say it and neither did she. They had no choice but to run the other way.

Frenit rolled his eyes. He crouched down, then leapt forward. James and Lena were forced to stop as he landed in front of them, the crunch of the ground was so loud the Enterprise crew would have heard it.

"Now, there's only two ways this can go..." Frenit started to say. Before he could finish or even turn around he was attacked by swords on both sides. He grabbed one with his bare hand and leaned back to dodge the other. Lena pulled her sword away, slicing straight through his palm. James swung his to the left. It only sliced through air as Frenit ducked down briefly. When he straightened he aimed a kick towards Lena. He laughed as she stumbled backwards, almost losing her footing. James responded in kind with a kneecap to the ribs, then a hard punch to the face.

Naturally Frenit just laughed it off. James was about to take another swipe with his sword when Frenit ran at him full speed. Lena heard the sickening crunch as they collided, then again as they hit the ground. She clutched her sword handle tightly, her jaw clenched.

James tried to push him off of him, Frenit pushed his only arm into his throat with full strength. One of his knees were lifted up and pressed against his victim's stomach to hold him down further.

"Now we can wait here until they arrive to rip you apart, or..." he snarled. His head lowered down so they were almost nose to nose. "Or I'll give you the strength to fight them off." He was spat in the face, which he took for an answer. A smile spread across his lips as he got a brief whiff of blood from it. "Very well." He bared his teeth and went in for the neck.

Something stopped him at the last second. A piercing and burning pain in his chest. James looked around him, he just managed to make out Lena's silhouette in the edge of the little light there was. That wasn't all, something in her hand had impaled his attacker. The light reflected off of it.

"You..." Frenit grunted. "Missed." His arm left James' throat to try to reach around and grab at what was causing his pain. James slid his own sword across horizontally to his chest, then pushed it forward into Frenit's neck.

"I won't," he croaked through his own damaged throat. Just as he pushed forward, Lena jerked her own weapon further to the left. Frenit seemed to smile as his whole body disintegrated. James tried to move to one side to avoid getting all of his remains all over him. There wasn't much time to though, most of his body was covered in dust.

"James, we've..." Lena stuttered as he quietly tried to cough some of it out of his throat. She held her spare hand out for him, he took it and quickly got to his feet. Then he noticed the look of panic in her eyes. The thundering roar was close now, he didn't know if he wanted to look or not. "They're here."

James dared to turn his head and look at what she was seeing. Shadows covered the top of the hill. The sound hadn't stopped, yet they were strangely still. The pair of them could hear the shallow breathing coming from every single one of them.

Lena slowly stepped back a bit, then to her left. She crouched down to recover the rifle. The lights on it were flickering, the rifle was dying. She hoped she'd get at least one shot out of it. James stepped back to follow her.

"If we run from here, they're fast enough to catch us," he said quietly. He regretted that immediately as Lena's gasp sounded like a small terrified squeak. "I can hold them off if you..."

"No," Lena said defiantly despite that, her voice shook though. "We weren't meant to fight alone. I'll be fine."

James closed his eyes and nodded. When he opened them he reached out his left hand towards her. She sensed it but she couldn't grab it as her closest one gripped a sword handle tightly. His wrapped around it anyway and clutched it tightly.

It was more than enough to get her to stop trembling. Lena still felt afraid but she felt she had the strength to do this now. Once he let go of her hand she raised her sword and pointed the rifle. James raised his own weapon.

The shadows finally charged down towards them. Lena quickly fired the rifle, it sent a pitiful looking widespread shot at them before it died. It slowed them down for merely a second. She was more annoyed than anything else.

"It's still a weapon," she muttered while raising it like it was a sword.

The first few reached them. Both threw everything they had at them, all the while slowly making their way down the hill.

A loud roar emanated from above, it was approaching. Lena looked up to see a large shadow skimming underneath the black clouds. As it got closer she noticed a faint red light emanated from the nearest side, then she noticed the silver. Something flew towards her head, before she could duck or block it somebody grabbed a hold of her and dragged her down.

The shadow in the sky was overhead, the wind from it passing by so close pushed a few of the attackers off their feet. A bright light enveloped the pair before they could recover. The experiments looked around to find they were alone.

The silver shadow pushed into the clouds and disappeared too.

### **Voyager, Conference Room:**

The atmosphere was grim, everyone there were trying to absorb every piece of information they had gone through. Tom covered his tired face with his hand, his fingers squeezed the top of his nose a couple of times to ease the headache forming there.

"The good news is none of the recovered crewmembers show signs of DNA alteration," the Doctor said to break the silence. "Perhaps the experiments were made intentionally long ago, and the pods were made to only store until that was done."

"I still don't get why that thing was on a primitive planet in the first place," Chakotay said.

Harry leaned forward to lean on the table, his chin rested on his hands. "The Softmicron on the ship looked just like the aliens Tom described."

"That means nothing. They probably do that to fool people into thinking the planet is theirs," Chakotay said.

"Who says it isn't?" B'Elanna mumbled. Everyone looked at her. "The evidence suggests they stole the technology. The people who were experimented on were native to the planet, some had been in the pods for centuries. At the very least they have a firm grip on it, at least until Craig destroyed the structure."

Harry shook his head angrily. "He never said anything but he was acting shady. Why hide it, I probably would have approved of it."

"Not if you knew his state of mind at the time," the Doctor said sadly.

Tom brought himself back into the meeting, his hand rested on the desk. "Zare's death shook him, he couldn't have known until he arrived."

"Yes but he was worried about Lena already. Zare made him snap, but he clearly wasn't in a fit state of mind during the mission," the Doctor pointed out. No one disagreed with him, no one wanted to say that either.

Tom tried to shake off the image of Craig's face during the whole exchange. "Have we heard from the Enterprise yet?"

"No. The last we heard was James taking it back inside. They'd have to cut the communications to save power," Harry answered.

"We're falling apart at the seams," Tom thought aloud. The rest of the room looked uncomfortable. His other hand clenched into a fist and lightly slammed onto the desk, his eyes were fiercely determined. "Yeah we have a huge problem on our hands, but we're not going to get anywhere with people having break downs and running off to do their own thing. We need to be united here or we won't be so lucky next time. We may not be lucky now, the Enterprise may not return." He saw Chakotay flinch in the corner of his eye. "We're not doing anything else until we have a plan and we're all behind it. Agreed?"

Harry nodded, "agreed."

"So no tower hunting, no anomaly surfing, no shuttle stealing, no suicide runs. Nothing. We need to go through the Enterprise's logs more thoroughly, talk to people in the region, investigate. This problem isn't going away but it sure isn't going to fall to bits in a hurry either," Tom said.

Chakotay sighed, "we get it Tom." Tom was a little annoyed he interrupted him. "This is one of the rare moments where you're right and not inappropriate, don't ruin it by speechifying."

B'Elanna couldn't help but smile at the two of them. "I wouldn't stand for that if I were you."

Tom smiled back, even if it didn't have much energy in it. "No, I need it. The last thing I need is a yes man."

"But we still need to be together anyway and agree before we act," Chakotay said with a light smirk.

Tom groaned and went to squeeze the top of his nose again. "Oh I'm too tired for this."

Neelix had been awfully quiet, he thought now was the best time to speak up. "We've got some time to kill. As morale officer I order everyone to the Mess Hall for some dinner. I won't take no for answer."

"If it's your food, will you take *oh god no* for an answer?" B'Elanna teased.

Neelix huffed to himself, "no, no I will not."

Tom nodded, "that doesn't sound like a bad idea. Who knows when the Enterprise will return."

### **The Enterprise:**

The last remaining console online flickered a few times before giving up. There wasn't much left, just a tiny flashlight sitting in between them to stop the bridge falling into total darkness.

James sighed as he glanced back at the newly dead console. Lena wasn't too worried, the engines were still whirring away beneath them.

"I guess all we can do is ride it out now, huh?" he said.

"Yeah. Maybe it was a little pointless to lock everyone else up in the Cargo Bay. It's not like they can hallucinate something to stop us from leaving," Lena said.

James thought about it and shuddered. "No, but I imagine a hallucination about a certain someone's clothes turning into a dress or something, would make the rest of our trip a bit... unpleasant."

Lena giggled at the thought. "That's definitely worse than some butched up aliens on steroids."

"Jess thinks I'm humouring her when I say stuff like this. The truth is though when she puts her mind and rage into it, she can get things done," James said with a smile. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Hmph, that's not really true," Lena mumbled, her smile faded. "If I listened to her, we wouldn't have nearly died. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," James shook his head.

Lena gave him an angry frown. "I'm not saying sorry for doing something little like stepping on your toe or stealing your favourite knife. I dragged you into a fight with Frenit and an army of experiments probably as strong as us. I'd be a little mad at least."

"What do you want me to say?" James questioned, he lightly shrugged. "I understand, you know that. When your suicidal *hero* trip endangers an entire planet, then you can complain about the quick apology acceptance."

"That never happened. At least not in my perspective," Lena said quietly, her head dipped down.

"It did though. I honestly thought I wasn't strong enough to be Chosen, but strong enough to fight and at least delay the threat. Turns out that I was wrong and probably billions almost died. If it wasn't for Jessie..." James said, the guilt made him trail off. Lena looked at him again. "I didn't even learn my lesson, that's the worst part of it. I kept doing things like that. At least you learned yours the first time."

"Second. I ran away twice," Lena muttered.

James shrugged, "better than too many to count."

"Mine probably is too. I died because of one of them," Lena said, biting her lip at the end.

The memories of that incident made James lower his head and close his eyes. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"You know you gave me some good advice a long time ago, to me. Though you were a lot older than you are now," Lena said, getting slowly irritated. "God, I can't get used to this stupid other timeline, dimension thing."

"We'll just go with long ago as the other dimension was your past, that's all that matters," James said.

Lena sighed deeply, "sure. You and the Chosens had a job to do, a one that you found had been attempted by past Chosens."

"Oh, that happened in this timeframe too," James said.

"No it didn't," Lena said with a shake of her head. "Zare saw it as her duty to fight these demons, alone." James frowned at her. "Her brother was too young, you were a Natural. Her brother chased after her, thinking he would save her. You saw them both die."

"Oh. This is advice?" James said.

Lena smiled bitterly, "no. You only lived because you knew it wasn't a winnable fight. You knew you had to back down or you'd die. It was pointless. It apparently took you a long time to really believe it yourself and you had to live with that guilt until then." She looked him in the eye. "Sometimes it's okay to run. It could be the bravest and hardest thing you'll ever do."

James smiled back, but his was closer to a smirk. "Wow. Other me sounds way too mature to be me."

"Oh he wasn't," Lena smirked as well. "He just knew how to survive, he had to. He was alone. No Zare, no Sandi and Kevin. I was far too young. I wanted to help him so badly. I guess that's where *this* has come from. My memory of that need is back."

"Well you got your wish. You did just that," James said.

Lena shook her head timidly. "At what cost? I was fifteen, eight years from now, fleeing alone from a Borg ship. The next I was a fifteen year old version of my own daughter, unknowingly in the same year I was born. Even when I knew this, it was all I remembered, my past was a lie. My real past was lost. I didn't understand why. Why did the timeline need to be changed, why was it so important that I was here fifteen years earlier?"

"I know. It was me," James answered grimly. Lena stared at him, her eyes were puzzled. "Kes told me a little of it. I died, I wasn't strong enough the way I was. I needed you to be strong enough to survive and that's why your life was erased. I can't blame you for resenting me, subconscious or otherwise."

"But... you didn't ask for it," Lena protested. It still brought a smile to her face. "At least that's something else you and I have in common." James smiled back at her just as she reached forward to take his hand. He clutched it right back.

"I... hope Tani will forgive me," she whispered after some silence.

"You? I was the one who killed her," James stuttered.

Lena shut her eyes tightly. "I grew up with her, or I used to think that. My only memories of her now are when we were on Voyager and we weren't on best terms then. Yet I still, I still couldn't save her from whatever they did to her."

"Lena, I doubt she was even in there. What they do, it seems to destroy them from the inside out," James said. "I doubt she would hold the memory thing against you either, it's not your fault."

"It's not just that though. Most of my training was onboard the Borg sphere. All of my knowledge, experience was put there. It's gone now. Everything I know, everything I can do is only from what I learned the last few years on Voyager and Enterprise," Lena stuttered. James could sense the fear in her voice, her hand gripped his tighter. "And the little I learned from other dimension you. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do this."

"I don't think that's true. You didn't want to save Tani because you still cared about her, you couldn't hurt her. The memory of your childhood together may be gone, but your feelings for her aren't, that much is obvious," James said. "There's more to us than just memories, Lena. We both didn't know we were siblings and you treat me as such anyway. Somehow I knew it too, I remember dreaming about you before we had even met."

"But..." Lena stammered.

"I don't see any proof that I'm wrong, do you? I have a lot more I could bore you with," James said with another smile.

Lena felt a smile creep back onto her face. He didn't expect what she said next, "bore me then. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

**THE END**