

## Episode 5.25

### Echoes

The Enterprise drifted to port, narrowly avoiding a blast of energy. It grazed the edge of its shields. More came at once. The starship took an almost vertical dive to avoid it. The range of the beams fizzled out as Voyager glided by on its side. It returned the favour to whatever was firing with a couple of phaser shots of its own.

Each hit connected with a large red ship, leading two smaller ones. It seemed to slow it down, prompting the two little ones to overtake it and give chase. They began to fire small bursts of energy.

The bigger one continued firing from a launcher hidden on the bottom. A beam struck that particular point from beneath it. The launcher went up in flames, while the rest of the ship's power began to falter. The Enterprise casually flew up towards and passed it, then turned to join the battle between Voyager and the two remaining ships.

"The lead ship has been disabled," Lena reported.

"Four dimensions, baby," Tom joked.

Naomi glanced backwards briefly, "five dimensions."

Tom groaned as the ship trembled again. "While we're on the subject, flying on our side isn't that impressive in space."

"The Enterprise was upside down, silly," Naomi laughed.

Everyone else looked at Tom expectantly, he knew what that meant, he was thinking it too. "Computer relocate helm control to the Captain's station," he said it quietly. Naomi continued to tap on the helm, none of the wiser. "When I said we needed a new pilot... How long?"

At the Opps station Faye quickly turned around to check the console behind her. "They should be in communications range in two minutes."

"Shields are at seventy percent," Lena said, but she stalled for some reason. Tom looked on in worry. "I'm not going to jinx it."

"Faye, as soon as they are, relay the co-ordinates I'm sending you. They mustn't exit warp. Tell me when you're done. We need to make a hasty retreat," Tom said.

"Why? They're chumps," Naomi questioned.

Tom sighed and decided to ignore her. "In the mean time, tell the Enterprise."

Lena winced a little at her station, then glanced up at the viewscreen. On it the two ships had decided to focus on the Enterprise, which was now flying straight ahead of them. The amount of fire they were sending their way was non stop, ruthless. A few phaser barrages and torpedoes from Voyager's side did nothing to put them off.

"It seems their reputation will be hard to shake off," Tom mused as he noticed it too.

"No," Danny said from her station at the left of the bridge. "I've never seen these guys before. They're not Softmicron either or they'd be hitting us."

Lena tapped a few more commands, seconds later the viewscreen showed a few more hits to the aliens. Fortunately the Enterprise was replaced by a brief flash of light, then it was gone.

"Now," Faye said.

Tom nodded, "matching Enterprise's speed, warp eight. Engaged."

The alien ships were soon gone from their sight as well. The screen just showed the stars streaking by.

"The Katane and Prometh are right behind us," Faye reported.

Tom sighed in relief, then sat back in his chair. "We'll update them later. Damage report for both ships."

"Minimal damage here; the shields took most of it. Enterprise suffered a few power overloads where the shields were starting to weaken," Lena said. "Any longer and they would have been sitting ducks."

Tom saw Naomi glancing around curiously in the corner of his eye, while he focused on Tactical. He decided to ignore that too. "She did all right considering we're still running repairs and the crew being so tiny. Maybe we should..." He was interrupted by pedantic beeping from the Opps station.

"It's getting a bit noisy. Tira's ship is calling both of us, Katane's trying to get through to us," Faye said.

"We'll leave Tira to Harry. Open a channel to the Katane," Tom ordered. He quickly sat straight in his chair.

The current leader of the Katane, Ersä, appeared on the view screen with a concerned frown on his face. "Another one, Commander Paris?"

Tom sighed and nodded. "Yeah. Two ambushes in three days. It's not easy being beautiful." He meant Voyager and Enterprise, but with the way a few people were looking at him, they assumed he was talking about himself. He quickly cleared his throat to hide his embarrassment. At least Ersä seemed a little amused by it, judging by his eyes. "Maybe next time you choose a place to meet."

Ersä gave him a polite smile, however he still appeared to be worried. "I don't think that'll be necessary, thankfully. I believe we have a lead, but you're not going to like it."

The star shone brightly in the clear blue sky. A gentle breeze would appear to push a few dead leaves from the trees, and to the ground. The streets were bustling with all sorts of different people; walking to and from shops, standing and chatting, children ran around in the leaves covering the paths. It was another normal, mundane day.

A roar overhead seemed to cast a brief shadow over them. People looked up, just catching a glimpse of a small silver ship fly above the rooftops. The ground then trembled, followed by a loud bang in the distance. Most of the crowds stopped to look around, hopefully to see what had happened. A few seemed to, as screams started leaking from different parts of the city.

Soon everyone was looking in that direction. Fear and confusion had frozen them on the spot. They watched helplessly as the tall building fortified in the nearby mountains burned in an intense fire. More ships flew overhead in the opposite direction to the previous ship, these ones headed for the building.

The citizens watched helplessly, most silently as the building started to fall to the ground. Even though it was so far away, people ran away from it. The ones who ran missed the strangest part of all. The crippled building faded away. All that was left was the cloud of smoke from the blaze. People wondered if the building was still there, obscured by it. It was wishful thinking, the fire hadn't reached high enough to do that.

Still, the people waited with baited breath, expecting the sound of the city's power to fade away to silence. Apart from the sound of the ships flying back overhead, nothing changed.

It was if the building never existed.

Harry shakily sat down in one of the chairs, not realising it not only wasn't the Captain's chair but another chair's arm rest. He kept his eyes straight ahead towards the viewscreen, Tira stared back at him from it.

"Really? Are you positive?" he asked.

Tira nodded with a pained expression on her face. "I'm sorry Harry. I wish I had better news to tell you. I even considered telling Mr Paris first, so we could discuss how to break the news."

"It was all for nothing. So senseless," Harry stuttered. "Just pure evil, I couldn't expect anything less."

"What do you want me to do, Harry?" Tira asked softly.

Harry covered his face with his right hand, mainly to hide the tears threatening to fall. "A lost cause. What is there left to do than to get rid of it?"

Chakotay had been holding it back long enough, he just managed to stifle a snort. The sharp exhale of air was loud enough for Harry to hear. "We are still talking about your clarinet right? I hope so."

Harry's head darted to one side, only then noticing he was not in or rather on the right chair. "Have you no heart?"

"That's what we all used to ask whenever you played it," Chakotay said.

"That's a no," Harry said on the brink of tears.

Tira smiled sympathetically. "I would have tried to repair it but I obviously haven't seen one before. Perhaps it is salvageable."

"From a cupboard falling on top of it? Sure," Craig sniggered from Tactical.

"It's fine. I'll replicate a new one. It was only eleven years old and kept me sane all these years, it's fine," Harry muttered while glaring back at him. He heard Chakotay laughing quietly as well and so he focused his stare at him. "It would just be nice if my crew would be a little supportive at a time like this."

Chakotay's good mood fizzled away into quiet anger. That didn't last very long. "I hope you're joking. A smashed clarinet is worse than what's happened the last few months? Your ship being destroyed. People dying from magic aneurysms. A species nearing extinction just so another species could use their planet as a battery. A possessed crewmember that likes to rape little girls. Evil warlocks, children kidnap..."

Harry quickly got up so he could reclaim the seat he usually sat in, all the while blushing furiously. "Don't put words in my mouth! It's because everything is so awful that we need the normal, little things to distract us from this horror. But oh yeah, I'm obviously just an overgrown child crying over a broken toy."

"Finally. I've been waiting for this day," Chakotay said out of relief.

At the very least Harry's outburst had convinced Craig, he even looked a little guilty. "So... the people who attacked you, they thought you were someone else?"

Tira was grateful for the distraction. "Yes. Everywhere we went the people were afraid of us. Nobody would tell us anything. Most of the time we were ordered out of their space."

"So, no one has seen it. We split up and still we can find no trace. Impossible," Chakotay said.

Harry scoffed, "really? It sounds like that's exactly what we've done." Chakotay looked at him strangely. "Think about it. With everything that you've mentioned, you didn't worry that this was coming? It was only a matter of time."

Craig's shoulders fell as he turned his attention to his station. He wanted to say something, but he didn't know what. Someone would. He waited but no one did.

"Are you sure about this, Jess? Talk about opening old wounds," Jodie said in a worried tone.

Jessie paced in front of her while her sister spoke. The silence afterwards slowed her down to a stop. "What choice do I have? I have to know."

Jodie sighed, she looked over to the baby sleeping beside her in a cot, while her hand rested on her own rather big pregnant belly. "Even if it destroys you?"

Jessie's blood ran cold at those words, she slowly turned her head towards her sister. "What? What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't be going if you didn't believe it had something to do with what happened to James," Jodie said carefully.

Jessie shook her head defiantly, a little fire was back in her eyes. "How can you say that? Nathan is still our brother. He wasn't responsible for what his *other self* did."

Jodie looked down to hide the guilt growing on her face. "You don't know that. I don't know that. Nobody does." A scoff from her younger sister made her look up despite what expression she had. "You only have the word of two watchers who have both screwed you and James over, multiple times. If I were you I'd take what they say as the opposite."

"So, Nathan isn't possessed by a demon? He either is one and or did it all himself?" Jessie said, disgust tainting her voice.

"We know he's not a demon, Jess, unless we are both half one," Jodie said quietly. "Remember, when you first found Nathan, the Doctor did a DNA comparison and he didn't notice. You wouldn't believe him until that was done."

"What about his mother? The demon came from her, not ours, and look what happened to her," Jessie asked angrily.

Jodie stared at her sympathetically. "Maybe it's easier to believe the fantastical version, Jess. His mother was locked up because she was nuts, that's all. He's probably not much better. We both thought he was a bit eccentric..."

"No, no, no," Jessie stammered while she approached her. "Don't go there."

"It's hard not to. What he did to you, unless I see proof that doesn't come out of the mouth of Wesley, I can't forgive him so easily. If it were the other way around, would you?" Jodie said.

Jessie turned her head towards the door. "I never said I forgave him. I didn't say I wasn't scared of seeing him again either. I mean, I don't know which Nathan will be there."

"Jess..." Jodie tried to interrupt.

"But I need to know, I need answers. I can't run away from it," Jessie said. She then headed for the door without looking back.

"Isn't that what James did?" Jodie asked quietly, regretting it immediately when her sister froze just in front of the door. "I... I'm sorry, I shouldn't..."

"Watch her," Jessie said flatly as she stepped outside. The door closed behind her.

Jodie let out a sigh while she turned her attention to the baby in the crib.

Everywhere they looked the colours were vibrant, flashy. The streets were coated with character, every other building was painted a different colour to the next, bright decorations plastered all over windows and doors. It was somewhere they expected to be teeming with life. Only it was deathly quiet, still. The few people walking in the streets were a stark contrast to the shops and restaurants they passed by. If they weren't keeping their heads down, people were looking around rapidly with fear in their eyes. There didn't seem to be anywhere for them to go, each shop had their doors firmly closed. The only lights in the street flickered randomly from a long narrow beam following the edge of the rooftops.

Rain had recently fallen, quickly and relentlessly as the paths were more like shallow streams of water flowing into the gutters. It wasn't the sudden rain storm that had cleared the streets though, it just made it look far worse than it was. Men and women dressed in all black uniforms, armed with long and short range weapons occasionally marched through the streets. Everytime the civilians would freeze on the spot and wait for them to pass.

Just in case the away team kept close to one of the larger groups, and copied their behaviour. The soldiers passed by without even a passing glance.

They waited for the nervous group to continue their journey. When they did they made their way towards a sheltered shop entrance.

"Well this planet's creepy, I'll give you that," Lena said. A drop of water escaped from the edge of the ceiling above, hitting her in between the eyes. She muttered something quietly as she lifted the hood of her jacket over her head, in case it happened again.

Ersa looked around with a worried expression. "It's gotten worse since we were here. I wonder what happened."

Harry stared at him intently. "Didn't you say these people were peaceful?"

"I did, and that's what concerns me," Ersa answered with a nod. The tension in his face eased as he spotted somebody walking toward them. "Ah, here."

Harry and Craig followed his glance to see them as well. The alien kept their head down and with their dark, baggy clothes Harry wasn't sure if they were a man or a woman. He wondered how Ersa managed to recognise them at all.

"We haven't got long," a female voice warned the team. "The next wave will be due in ten danens."

"They've tightened their patrols. That's not a good sign," Ersa said. He gestured to the rest of the team, "these are..."

"Voyager, I know," the woman said as she lifted her head slightly. She hesitantly looked to her right. "You should leave while you still can. You won't find what you're looking for here."

Harry gave Ersa a sideways glance just as he flinched at her urgent tone. "We were informed otherwise," Harry said to her. "He claimed you had information. Anything will do."

"If the military catches off worlders here then they'll be quickly executed," the woman said. "You're too late."

Lena quickly stepped closer to the alien woman, a panicked expression formed on her face. She appeared to be startled by her sudden move. "What does that mean exactly? What did you see?"

"Lena," Craig said softly, hoping to calm her down.

The sound of footsteps and many of them in the far distance made the woman freeze with fear. The rest of the team grew worried as it got louder. Harry noticed a few of the locals rushing to the edges of the street, some even hid. Just as he was turning his attention back to his team, movement above caught his eye.

He wasn't the only one who noticed it. Lena was looking upwards as well. Some of the buildings had very narrow balconies, all of which shut off from the inside. The movement seemed to be coming from a few of them, only now they were looking up at them directly it suddenly became still again.

The woman looked over her shoulder to see another batch of soldiers marching their way. She turned to the awayteam desperately, "don't move, don't even look at them. They won't hesitate."

The team did as she instructed, just as they did the last time. Only this time they didn't have the cover of a few locals next to them.

Lena again noticed movement just above her, this time it was subtle. She doubted the soldiers walking up to them had seen it. She was just wondering what was going on when the sound of phaser type weapons rang out from above. The soldiers reacted immediately, all of them aimed their weapons upward.

"Ohno," the woman stuttered, shaking her head.

Some of the soldiers rushed for cover as the phaser barrages rained down from so many locations in the street. After some shots there were some chilling screams, but none of them came from the soldiers on the ground.

A few soldiers were stalled by their chosen place of cover already being taken by locals who'd hid at the sight of them. They remained so until they were roughly pulled out of the way.

The sight of one soldier tossing a young man to the ground, then aiming his weapon at him made Lena lurch forward to stop him. Everyone else in the team, including the woman quickly either grabbed her or put their arms out in her way.

"Don't. They'll kill all of us," Harry whispered to her.

Lena stared at him angrily, but she knew he was right. The amount of soldiers still unscathed would easily get a shot in before she could even do a thing. Still, the sight of the innocent civilian getting shot for no reason made her squirm.

The shots from above had dwindled to very little. It seemed like there was only one left. It then stopped, but not from a shot from the soldiers. They still had their weapons trained up, scanning the balconies for this last straggler. One of them made a few gestures in different directions which made them all lower their weapons and then split up into small groups.

The woman sighed once they were all gone. Ersa seemed too shell shocked to be relieved, while the awayteam still felt like they were in the thick of it.

Lena hurried over to the young man shot for daring to hide, she knelt down next to him to check on him. Harry noted the civilians nearby were too afraid to even look at him let alone do the same. It chilled him to the bone.

"You're... this was a peaceful planet, it thrived on visitors, trade. It had no enemies. How has this happened?" Ersa stuttered.

The woman turned to him. "I wish I had an answer, I truly do."

Harry focused on her, while Craig kept a close eye on Lena. His shoulders fell as she covered her face and the man remained deathly still on the ground.

"Change of leadership, I'd wager," Harry commented.

"No. The Emperor has ruled over us for thirty years," the woman said. She looked briefly at the men of the group. "What you just saw here has been festering for months. First the trade routes were abolished. They blamed it on strikes, poor trade crews, things as silly as star charts being wrong. Then the checkpoint around our system was established so no aliens could enter, and any escaping ones would be captured. The soldiers on every street corner. The people are angry. All they needed was a trigger, they got one."

Craig was already suffering from a sinking feeling, her last sentence made him drop like a stone. "You said it was too late after mentioning the alien executions. Ersa told us that you had a visitor to your planet, that's why we came here."

"I saw them open fire on him, I wasn't the only one. That was the final trigger," she answered. "I don't know what happened to the visitor, but the message was clear. This is no longer our world anymore. We have to fight to get it back."

Lena slowly walked back over to them, her face had stiffened, almost frozen in anger from before. "They tried to execute their only tourist. The locals decided that was enough."

The woman looked at her sadly. "Only we're not fighters. This rebellion, it won't last. I'm sorry. If the visitor is what you're looking for, you'll find they've long gone or have been executed. The odds aren't in his favour."

"Unless they found the same loophole through the checkpoint that we did," Harry said. Ersa glanced at him and nodded. Harry felt dread building, but he decided to hold it at bay with some optimism. "This is sounding less like our dangerous fugitive, and more like an innocent tourist as Lena put it, getting caught in a bad situation."

Lena scowled in his direction. "What the hell are you talking about? We're not looking for either of those things, and even if we were, you're just gonna shrug this off and go on your merry way?"

"Of course not," Harry said defensively. "If there's anything we can do, we will."

"No, you must leave while you haven't been seen," the woman said. "An unprovoked attack on an alien started this rebellion, anymore could turn it into a war."

"But..." Craig stuttered.

"No, she's right," Ersa said reluctantly.

Harry nodded, "it was okay if our actions merely affected us. I'm not comfortable doing something that'll pose further risk to the citizens here." He focused on the innocent man shot down in the street. "Doesn't mean I don't hate this."

Lena had been staring at him as well, until she noticed the woman looking at her in the corner of her eye. She turned her head back, confirming that it wasn't just her imagination. "What?"

"I'm sorry, I hope I'm wrong," the woman said meekly.

Lena just stared back at her while her heart started to thump harder and faster. It settled a little when Craig placed a hand gently on her shoulder. She gave him an appreciative smile.

A device in Ersa's pocket chirped to get his attention, he discreetly pulled it out and brought it to his face. A woman's voice whispered from it, "*Commander, we've been spotted.*"

"We need to find an inconspicuous place for transport. Keep the shields up for now Yana," Ersa said.

The woman gestured for the team to follow her, then she hurried off. They quickly followed.

Meanwhile tensions were a little frayed on the Katane bridge. The usual stars on the viewscreen were mostly obscured by the dark side of the planet. However what wasn't obscured were two tiny moving objects slowly getting bigger.

Yana sat in the edge of the centre chair, clutching the arm rests tightly. "How long until they're in weapons range?"

"Two minutes," was the answer.

Yana breathed in deeply to calm herself down, then forced herself to sit back in the chair. A few of the bridge crew watched her. "Plenty of time," she said in a confident tone. She still felt worried, but it was enough to settle the crew's nerves.

The dots on the screen had an easily distinguished shape now. They could even make out the windows in the hull.

"Thirty seconds," the same officer warned her.

As if on cue another station beeped, getting everyone's attention. "*We're ready. Transport.*"

"Lower the shields," Yana quickly ordered. The nods from two of her crew gave her the next cue. "Shields up. Set a course for the fleet, brief warp one jump."

"Yes sir," two voices rang out.

The Katane turned around fully just as the alien ships were almost on top of them. They fired a few shots just as the ship jumped to warp.

A few seconds later they dropped out of it, just in front of a waiting Voyager. The Enterprise and Tira's ship, Prometh, hovered nearby.

Each one maneuvered around to face the same direction, when further ships dropped out of warp nearby and immediately began firing on the fleet.

### **Voyager:**

Tom groaned into his hand as the ship shook. "Great, things never go smoothly, do they?" He quickly tapped commands into the helm.

"For a so called passive race, they sure hit hard," B'Elanna remarked from Tactical. "Shields at 60%."

"Lets not annoy them further then," Tom said as he was about to hit the engage panel.

"The Katane's shields are down," Faye quickly said, making Tom's finger hesitate. "The aliens are focusing fire on their engines."

Tom sighed, "fire a few warning shots." He tapped on a different panel, "Voyager to Enterprise. You and Prometh retreat, we'll cover you."

Just as he was saying that the Enterprise flew into view on the viewscreen, all the while firing shots somewhere they couldn't see.

*"Sorry Tom, shot gun," Chakotay's voice said over the intercom. "Go."*

Tom groaned into his hand, "shot gun doesn't mean you fired first. Oh who cares, get a tractor beam on the Katane, let me know when you've done it."

While the Enterprise fired a few shots at the attacking ships, the Katane did its best to maneuver around them. Voyager joined in the attack as it approached the battle.

The Prometh seemed to hesitate for a while before leaping into warp without them.

Two of Enterprise's regular torpedoes slammed into one of the ships, disabling its shields. It quickly retreated. Voyager took that opportunity to lock on a tractor beam to the Katane. Its warp drives lifted and shot off with them trailing behind.

Enterprise received a couple more hits as it turned back around to follow everyone.

"The ship's following," Triah reported.

Chakotay paced the Enterprise bridge with a disgruntled expression on his face. After hearing that he smirked. "Persistent little pacifists aren't they?"

"That last hit knocked out our rear shields. If they catch up..." the Tactical officer reported, wiping the smirk from the Commander's face immediately.

"I'm starting to think this ship needs to fly around with a crutch," Chakotay grumbled.

Triah pulled a confused face, "that makes no sense."

"Yeah, Voyager's older," Bryan commented.

Chakotay rolled his eyes, "forget it. It would just be nice to have time to properly repair this ship, instead of having to do botch jobs. Hail Voyager. We may have to ask them to slow down so they can cover our weak spot."

*"Oh, come crawling back to little old Voyager ey?" Tom's voice teased.*

"They're tractoring the Katane, it's probably not the best idea," Triah said.

"Fine, forget it. Did we get any quantum torpedoes made during our last repair job?" Chakotay asked.

The Tactical officer quickly tapped a few things. "Yes sir. Two."

"Fine, we'll only get one shot at this. When the ship closes in on us, aim one at their engines," Chakotay ordered.

*"Uh, may I remind you that we were the intruders and they're only defending their planet," Tom's voice said warily.*

"We're fleeing and we're vulnerable, we have to defend ourselves. Really, we're having this morality discussion?" Chakotay said irritably.

*"I'm the fleet commander," Tom's voice said.*

"They're in range," Tactical reported.

Despite his anger, Chakotay seemed hesitant to give the order. He shook his head, "fire a photon."

"Yes sir," Tactical said, she sounded relieved.

Everyone waited for the ship to tremble or worse. It felt like hours had passed since Chakotay gave the order.

"Direct hit to their engines," the Tactical officer said. "They're retreating."

Chakotay let out a sigh of relief. Everyone heard Tom do the same. "We need all the quantums we can get," he quickly covered when he noticed everyone looking at him.

"Yeah yeah."

Chakotay shook his head while heading for the first officer's chair. He hesitated again before finally deciding to sit in it.

### **Voyager:**

"The Katane will be out of action until we repair the engines and shields. We should find somewhere quiet to repair," B'Elanna said.

Tom collapsed into the back of the helm chair. "Well we've officially run out of leads, so it's as good a time as any. We should swap our awayteam for an engineering team." B'Elanna smiled at him to hint that she should be on it. He didn't even need to see it to know. "Have fun."

Danny hurried over to take B'Elanna's place as she stepped into the turbolift. "So, the Katane has joined the shoot on sight club. Maybe we should find a new recruit," she said.

Tom didn't take her seriously, but he was too tired to smile. "Yeah. I think our sneaking around days are over."

"Shame, I liked them better than the shooting at Game Sphere towers ones," Danny commented.

Tom was about to respond with the first thing that popped into his head, when other thoughts rushed at him. He swung his chair around so it was facing her direction. "That's too bad," he finally said.

"What?" Danny said with a worried face, and she wasn't the only one. Everyone had the same expression.

"I think we need to go on a trip," Tom said, worrying Danny further. "Down memory lane."

Danny stared at him, blinking furiously. She then laughed, "oh Tom, you're so... I don't get it."

Tom smiled at her which just made her all the more worried.

It took her a few minutes to steel herself before she could take that first step. The step that would open the door in front of her, in more ways than one. There was no going back after this. Jessie tried to put on a brave, even stern face as she walked further inside.

Two Security officers turned to her, each of them showing dismay on their faces. They quickly glanced at one another, before one of them hurried over. "I'm sorry, we can't just let anybody in here. You need permission."

Jessie kept her gaze fixed on him. A sense of dread lingered on her left. She felt like if she even looked in that direction, that she would be in grave danger. It made her a little sick to the stomach but she tried not to show it.

"I have permission," she finally said, gesturing her hand forward. In it, a small PADD. The man took it to have a look. He didn't look so sure about it, he gave her a nod anyway.

"We're not leaving though. Not after the last few times."

"I figured," Jessie said plainly.

The Security officer walked back to where he came, resulting in an awkward silence hanging over the room. Jessie remained fixed in the same spot, still very wary about looking in another direction. The silence wasn't helping. She imagined being stared at maliciously, but at the same time she feared that the silence was because the person she came to see wasn't responding to anyone or anything.

Another few minutes flew by as she muscled up some courage, fake or otherwise, to finally turn towards the occupied cell. It was obvious immediately that one of her expectations were spot on. The occupant sat in the corner, with his knees bunched up, arms wrapped around them. His skin pale and clammy. Eyes a thousand light years away.

"Nathan?"

No answer, just as she expected. He knew she was there though, the subtle head movement gave him away. If he hadn't been frozen in one position before, she probably wouldn't have seen it.

"Nathan please. I know, and I need your help," Jessie said.

His eyes moved, seemingly to focus on her. He had to be listening.

"James came by here a few weeks ago, didn't he?" Jessie questioned. There was no response this time. "I need to know what happened. Something did." His eyes changed back to the way they were before, it made her feel a little desperate. "Nathan please, I know the real you. You're..."

She got a bitter scoff as a response first, it brought him back into the living world for the time being, but Jessie didn't feel any relief from it. Every movement he made radiated self hatred and anger. "You know nothing," he eventually spat out.

"I do. You're not to blame for these crimes. *It* is," Jessie tried to say softly to calm him down.

It didn't have that effect at all, it just made him all the more angry. "*It* is me. There is no distinction."

Jessie shook her head lightly. "How long have you known, Nath? I hope it's not something you've lived with all these years."

"Not long enough," he said.

Jessie carefully approached the forcefield, she stopped when she was merely a foot away. "You were going to tell me. It took over to stop you, didn't it? You both conflict, so there's definitely a distinction."

"There's no *it*!" Nathan snapped. He turned his head away from her as far as he could. "He's in my DNA, he is me. You're better off forgetting I exist."

"I can't. I need to know what happened here, with you and James. I also want to help you. If we can separate..." Jessie said.

"You don't want to separate us. There's only one way and you won't like it," Nathan muttered.

He was right, Jessie didn't like it at all. "How do you know there isn't another way? We didn't know it existed until a few weeks ago."

Nathan stared down at the floor, his head started to dip down from the weight of his guilt. "He should have killed me."

The anger that he must have been feeling had drifted over to Jessie. She tried to subdue it for now. "Don't you think James has enough deaths hanging over his head? He can barely live with it as it is. Killing you, his sister's best friend, his own best friend's brother. One way or another we're family. There's no coming back from that."

She got a bitter and hateful laugh from her older brother. It was disgusting to hear it. "You don't know. If it were the other way around; he raping and killing you, I wouldn't hesitate. We barely know each other and I would. It would just be physically harder to do it, that's all."

Jessie knew she wouldn't be able to keep the anger back for long. "You would hesitate. You're a good guy..." As she expected he laughed again at that comment. "If you weren't, you wouldn't be acting like this. You wouldn't care."

"I see you've practiced that speech a few too many times," Nathan said.

"You have no idea," Jessie muttered. "Neither of you are innocent, but you're not evil, not even close. You can prove it. You still care, that much is obvious."

She got another chuckle from him. It felt a little less bitter than the other ones. "What do you think happened here? Hmm?" His tone of voice had changed as well. All of the pain was gone, she was immediately on her guard. "I'm still alive, so why do you think he came here at all?"

"Don't play games with me. What did you do?" Jessie asked sternly.

He looked at her, his eyes widened. "Reasonable question. Better yet, why not ask James himself?"

Jessie moved her hands behind her back, just so he wouldn't see her clenching them into fists. "What did you do?"

"I'm curious. How did you figure it all out? I doubt Jay told you. You already knew something in our last conversation," Nathan asked, his voice colder than normal.

Her eyes started to roll, they lingered above while her forehead pushed down to form a frown. "Wow, you really are useless, aren't you?" She couldn't see it, but his stare locked onto her intensely. "You must be very bored of your pointless existence, to think that not answering a simple question compares to the real evil out there." She allowed herself to look directly at him, meeting his gaze. "You're the demon equivalent of the cold. No point, just some mild inconvenience and then you move on. Not easily killed, but who gives a crap?"

"For something that is only a mild inconvenience, I sure did a lot of lasting damage to a Chosen," he said with a smirk forming on his face.

Jessie wasn't fazed at all. "All you've done is guaranteed your death. You'll spend the rest of your existence in a place just like this. Maybe if you hadn't tried to be something you're not, you know a demon, then we'd still not know the truth. Maybe stick to what you're good at from now on; stay in the background and do sod all but exist."

He smirked at her, but his eyes proved that he was far from amused with her. He was angry. "And what of poor Nathan? You're content to let him rot in jail for all of his days, just to get back at me?"

"It won't come to that," Jessie said.

"You seem awfully sure that we're separate entities that can be split up. We're not. Right now I'm as much Nathan Andrews as he is. To kill me, you have to kill him," Nathan said, his tone mocking her. "Between you and me, there is a way it can be done without killing him."

Jessie knew he was only going to toy with her in some way, so she turned to leave without saying anything more.

"You do seem to have excellent luck in making and killing little brats. This problem fixes itself," he sneered.

Her blood ran cold, it even made her shudder. Her fists tightened so they were starting to go white. "You're... you're disgusting."

He laughed at her reaction. "Everyone wins. You get a chance to kill me without hurting Nathan. He is free. If my new host doesn't die from still birth or stabbing injuries, I'll get to spend the next twenty or so years watching my new uncle slash step dad fall to little tiny bits. I guess, mutations would be a worry. It'd be worth it, just to see the look on his face."

Jessie swung around with fire burning in her eyes, "that's what this is all about isn't it?"

"Well yeah, you said it yourself. All I do is move on and exist," Nathan said cheekily.

"No, not that," Jessie said. "It's why you picked Debbie. It's why your second victim was a girl of a similar age, and a refugee that he had rescued. It was why you really attacked me. All of this, just to destroy a Slayer."

Nathan smirked at her knowingly. "It's far more effective than beating him to death, isn't it? Since you're here, I'm right aren't I?"

Jessie gave him a smirk back, but hers was very much forced. "No, you just couldn't."

"No," Nathan sighed wistfully. "His father couldn't, what hope did I have? The brat thrives off pain and misery, or at the very least deflects it. It's probably why everyone he ever knew suffered the most, and paid with their lives." He smiled at Jessie's fading fake smirk. "How many times has it been for you, sis?"

"How many times did you slip up here? Your impatience over your previous host, Nathan's mother, left us the first clue that lead me to you. Your attempt to force yourself into James' family by attacking Debbie; not only did you leave DNA evidence behind, you killed her. Then you waited decades for Nathan to have a child on his own. He didn't and you left behind evidence again," Jessie said. Nathan merely rolled his eyes, his mood was still very much amused. "You didn't go through with it. You ran instead. Why?"

"Maybe she wasn't my type," was his cold answer.

Jessie didn't buy it though. "Nathan fought back, didn't he, and it's not the first time I'm betting. Or maybe you're just not that eager to live your boring existence any longer."

"So how is James?" Nathan asked with a smirk. "I'm sure you're here asking me what I did to him, cos he's perfectly happy and fine."

Jessie refused to answer him, at least vocally. Instead she settled for one of her more deadly glares. It only made him laugh though, making her even angrier.

"I think I can guess," Nathan sneered at her. "What else does he do when things don't go his way? It takes over so easily, and he gives into it like the weak little brat he's always been."

"Hmm. Nathan was quite distressed before you arrived. You also took over while he was sleeping," Jessie said as coolly as possible. "It seems a bit rich that you accuse James of being weak, when you can't seem to take over until your host body can't really fight back."

"You know nothing," Nathan said, also coolly, but Jessie could tell he was covering up anger.

Jessie shrugged casually, "even then Nathan took over to stop you. Pathetic really." She waited for him to try to respond, only so she could interrupt him. "The only reason you'll never move onto a new host is because of your pointless attempt to hurt James. No one else's fault but your own. Nathan will never allow you to move on now that he knows about you. I hope your little game was worth it."

The angry look on his face satisfied her enough so she could turn her back on him and walk away. It didn't solve anything but it made her feel better, which was better than nothing. The door opened and she was about to step through them when she heard a chilling laugh come from him. Determined not to show him that she noticed, she didn't stop, she kept walking until the doors closed behind her.

"It was," he said once she was gone.

### **Voyager's Conference Room:**

Every seat was taken and for once nobody was forced to stand. Tom was usually the one gypped when this happened, so he was relieved to be able to lean back in the head chair. He couldn't relax but it eased him slightly.

"I really hope you didn't call this meeting because you're bored, or something. That's what the Holodecks are for," Harry said.

Tom gave his best friend a raised eyebrow briefly. "I'd never do that. We haven't had a silly meeting in ages."

"So, *never*," Chakotay muttered.

Tom chose to ignore him. "I called this meeting because it occurred to me, we haven't really had a chance to sit down and talk."

"Isn't that..." Chakotay said.

"All we do, I knew you'd walk into that one," Tom butted in. To his surprise Chakotay was more amused than angry. "Thanks to Danny I thought that maybe we're going at this all wrong. We're forgetting the big picture and that might help us."

Danny laughed nervously, "uh, I don't think I want credit for this."

"We know that you, you and you..." Tom said while pointing at her, then Ian and finally Triah. "Used the Enterprise to not only attack the tower networks, but keep track of them as you did."

Harry joined in with the nervousness. "Just because we have four ships, doesn't mean we're capable of pulling off an all out offensive on the sphere. Especially now."

Lena shifted in her seat uncomfortably, Craig noticed it in the corner of his eye.

"No, that's not..." Tom said irritably. "No. All we know about the tower heists was learned from the Enterprise's data and logs, not from the people themselves."

"That's not true. We talked about this a lot when we were trapped in that facility," Ian pointed out.

"We talked about how you were captured, both times," Tom said, making Ian immediately frown. "All we know is that Sandi took command, even that's just a guess, and the mission began."

Triah glanced at Danny and Ian awkwardly, they both looked a little wary as well. The rest of the room looking at them didn't help either.

"How will that help us now?" Craig asked. When he did Lena settled down just to look directly at him. "The only reason you'd ask is so you can do the exact same thing."

Tom shook his head as he leaned on the desk in front of him. "Think about it. We have no lead, nowhere to go. We may find the answer in currently occupied planets." He looked at his friend beside him, expecting him to be on his side, only he looked shocked with his jaw threatening to drop. He was surprised to see Chakotay on Harry's other side nodding instead.

"It's something I haven't considered. It could be worth investigating," he said.

Harry swung his head around to stare at him. "You can't be serious?"

Chakotay gave him a bemused stare, "and why not? I've tried to figure it out myself and come up blank. At least this theory holds a little weight." He focused his stare on Tom, "just a little mind."

Danny bit her bottom lip nervously, her head shook. "I dunno. It's possible but it's also really dangerous, on both sides."

"Yeah, even if it were, every single one of those planets will remember us," Ian said. "If we do this, the Enterprise will have to stay behind. At this point Voyager may even have to."

"It can't hurt to share information, can it?" Tom said with some determination in his voice. Either nobody had that answer or they didn't want to vocalise it. It settled the topic for Tom regardless. "You had two successful heists, so we can exclude them." With that in mind he climbed to his feet to make his way over to the wall computer. A few taps brought in a distorted star chart with a few red dots marked on it. His finger pointed at one. "This one is the closest to our current location."

"I hate memory lane," Danny commented as the chart zoomed in on an image of a golden planet.

"According to your data, this planet had two tower networks, one still under construction. Only solo towers, no little ones surrounding them," Tom said. "It was one of the earlier planets where you sent in people, and..."

"Yes, we remember. Right?" Ian interrupted begrudgingly. Danny nodded, Triah merely winced slightly. "I don't see how it's necessary to go over this one."

Chakotay frowned in his direction. "Clearly it is necessary or you wouldn't hesitate."

Danny closed her eyes tightly, briefly sighing. "There's not much to say. We went in, it went wrong and we were chased out of orbit. Can we move on?"

"Okay, but why did it go wrong? What were their ships and weaponry like, what..." Tom questioned.

"We were fresh off our first successful mission," Triah said reluctantly. "I still think we were a little cocky. That's why it went wrong. Don't you dare laugh Danny."

Danny again bit her lip but for different reasons. The memories of the mission helped her stave off the temptation to laugh. "No probs."

Ian raised his eyebrow in her direction. "It was the last time we sent in teams. With good reason." Everyone who were not a member of the Enterprise crew at the time stared at him curiously. "It was also the first and last time we encountered the experiments. We..." he hesitated.

"We lost half of the crew in that attack," Triah said for him. She shuddered at the memory. "Sandi was the only one who survived."

"Oh," Tom mumbled, he felt terrible for pushing this. He started to stutter an apology.

"It wasn't because we were over confident," Ian said in Triah's direction. "We learned from our previous attacks like this. Rachel had the spell to hide us, the Enterprise attacked from orbit to distract them. Tani came up with the internal distraction of hacking their systems, so she did that. Each team were spread out and had different ways in and out. It was just bad luck that we had picked the tower that had been there a while, building an army."

"Tani," Lena whispered to herself.

"I... I didn't even know that many people were on the Enterprise in the first place," Chakotay said, his tone apologetic.

"I didn't even know Tani was a crewmember. Though now that I think about it, she was on one of the ships during the Game Cube crashes, so it's possible," Harry said. He noticed Lena look forlorn at the mention of her, he thought it was best to change the subject. "I think we can safely rule that planet out, as it probably has three complete ones now."

Danny made a few hesitant noises. "Um, maybe not. We never did figure out the pattern, but some worlds had different amount of towers. One world just had one and it wasn't new, awaiting a buddy."

Ian nodded. "Sandi theorised it was due to the technology the species had at hand. One species could probably build a more effective tower, while another would need multiple to drain the same amount of power."

"Seems a good a theory as any," Harry said.

"Maybe, but all planets are different types and sizes. That one tower planet Danny mentioned wasn't that big," Triah said.

Danny briefly glanced at her, "could be a mix of both. Probably."

Craig pulled a face that looked like he was in pain. "Wait, does this mean that there could be a planet out there with five, eight, maybe twenty of these things on it?"

His question made the room deathly silent and a little uncomfortable. Harry accidentally swallowed the wrong way and started to cough, making it even more awkward.

"If Sandi was right then it probably means the towers are made out of sticks, so no worries," the Doctor said to hopefully lighten the mood.

Tom chuckled nervously, "hmm yeah, lets go with that. It's better than a gigantic Jupiter sized planet with hundreds of towers. Nightmare fuel."

Harry lightened up a bit, despite his difficulty breathing. "Actually, it..." his throat tickled again, so he tried to clear it. "Makes sense. The Shurouvans had those mini towers. They were more sneaky and resourceful than advanced so it kinda fits. How many did Erayas have?"

"We detected two," Danny replied.

Harry seemed a little relieved, "the Krralef seem like they're at a similar level, we already know of two towers, so..."

"Great, you can deliver the good news to Tira," Chakotay said bitterly, killing off Harry's better mood instantly.

"Soo to change the subject back. This planet's probably not a good one to go to," Tom said. He went to tap on the screen again.

"Wait!" Lena blurted out, startling him. "How advanced were these people?"

"Advanced enough to force us out of orbit, why?" Danny asked.

Lena stared at the image of the planet. "I'd try to take it down. It's dangerous to leave it alone."

"This was months ago and the tower was already there a while. The planet was dying. If it isn't gone already, it will be soon," Ian said, hoping that would put her off.

It didn't though, Lena just stared at him blankly. "So, there could be people still alive there, like Erayas." Everyone stared at her instead. "I thought the point was to figure out a realistic place to look. Back then I would've, it wouldn't have mattered to me then if it was dangerous," her voice lowered to a whisper as the stares got to her. She ended up staring at the desk, hoping to avoid it.

"There are... um, more favourable suicide spots, I'm sure," Tom said uncomfortably. He tapped on the computer so it would focus on another planet. "Okay, this was before your second success story. The log said they weren't that hostile but the tower itself had good defences. Anything else you want to add?"

The trio tried to remember this one. Ian's face brightened when he did, "oh yeah. We considered beaming a team down cos the people actually welcomed us. The only ones who did in fact."

Danny gasped, "oh them, yeah that was weird. Maybe the Softmicron didn't care about manning any of their ships. They did though have a planetary defense shield that quantum's wouldn't be able to get through."

"Why would a team be any better? I doubt they'd be as welcoming if you tried to walk in," the Doctor asked.

"If they could beam through the shield at all," Tom said.

"As I said, they invited us down, so they'd lower the shield briefly. The tower itself you could probably walk in. It was probably a trap now that I think about it," Ian said.

Lena rolled her eyes, "you think?"

Tom stared thoughtfully at the planet on the screen. "Just one tower?"

Danny nodded, "just one."

Harry watched Tom with a worried look, he knew what was coming next. Most of the room did. "Tom, if Sandi's theory was right the solo tower means an advanced race. Not a good idea," Harry tried to change his mind.

"They're also either very passive or are willing to chance inviting a Chosen into a trap party," Tom said with a sly smile. "If their defense is a shield, and nothing else, it's a perfect place to start our hunt."

"Our previous journey was to a passive planet," Chakotay reminded him.

Tom shrugged his warning off as he approached the table again. "Remember, we're not there to destroy towers. First we've got a mystery to solve. We'll head for it once repairs are complete. Dismissed."

A lot of the room weren't that happy, but they were convinced at least. They all started to file out. Harry was one of the few that wasn't, he stayed behind hoping that Tom would get the hint and do the same. In the end only he, Tom and Lena were left behind.

"We're jumping to conclusions a bit here, Tom," he said.

"No, no jumping, just walking," Tom said with a confident smile.

Harry didn't feel the same way. "We've done this before, we know how it goes. At least I thought you knew. We're not going to find it there, nor will we find its trail. In fact I'm worried that by doing this, we'll end up losing the real one. The longer we waste time, the less likely it'll be that we catch up."

"Okay Harry, say I'm wrong. Where do you think we should go?" Tom asked patiently.

"I think we were on the right course before, planets we'd already been to, planets nearby," Harry replied.

"But we didn't find anything there. There was no reason to go to all of these worlds. I honestly can't think of another reason for this situation, can you?" Tom said.

Harry frowned, "really? You can't? We're not talking about someone who's thinking rationally. We're thinking about some lunatic who..." He then noticed Lena was still in the room as well, and she was watching them with a Janeway glare on her face. He started to stutter nervously.

She didn't say a word, she didn't have to. Harry was still a gibbering wreck when Lena walked out of the room. Tom cringed as he looked at his friend. He hesitated a little as he tried to think of the right words. They were both uncomfortably silent in the mean time.

When he figured it out the ship had other ideas as it shook a few times, making him wobble slightly.

"Again?" Harry sighed.

The pair darted for the exit.

Tom tried to cling on to whatever he could as he returned to the bridge. The Tactical console was his destination, one heavier tremble made him stumble back. Instead he stayed where he ended up and just looked over.

"Can we get a warning next time?"

Harry meanwhile stumbled over to the centre of the bridge. "Four ships didn't see this coming?"

Lena didn't take either comment lightly. "Well I'm sorry. I was too busy in those few seconds looking for an irrational lunatic. Want to hear my results so far?"

Tom quickly turned away to avoid the death glare, or at least eye contact with it. "Who, what's attacking us?"

"A small alien cruiser was passing by at warp. They more or less slammed on their brakes and headed straight for us," Faye answered

"They're still coming around, just out of range. It's not putting them off firing though. We're just getting the aftershocks and the closer they get, the bigger they are," Lena said just as the ship started trembling again, making her irritable. "See."

Tom hurried over to the helm, he stopped midway and sighed in relief when he realised that a brunette woman was there instead of Naomi. "Is it just us or..."

"No but it's not clear who they're aiming for exactly. We're in a tight formation," Faye replied.

"Let's keep it that way, the Katane's helpless," Tom said.

"I assume you've already tried hailing them," Harry said as he focused on the viewscreen. All he could see on it was black, at first. A few blue torpedo sized lights flew ahead. The floor rumbled lightly a second later. He decided to go towards the command chairs and use the computer there. "Put them on screen."

The view quickly changed but the differences was subtle. Anyone looking could just make out the tail end of Voyager on the lower part of the screen. A few more blue lights flew towards the screen this time, bringing up the shields to briefly block the view. The ship shuddered not just from them, something blurred overhead and everybody felt it.

"They're on top of us. They're definitely aiming for Voyager. They get a clear shot on the others but they hold their fire, and it's always..." Lena said but she was interrupted by more continuous rumbling. She grunted a little. "Good news is the shields are holding for now. 92% still."

"Try hailing them again," Harry said panicked, while he hurried over to Opps. Tom gave him a bemused look, which he caught in the corner of his eye. "Does it make any difference what ship I'm on? You don't take me seriously on the E anyway."

"We should inform the rest of the fleet, we may need..." Tom said.

Harry quickly looked up at him once he got to Opps. "No, wait. It'll be another misunderstanding. Hang on."

"Nobody else has listened so far," Tom reminded him just as the viewscreen changed again. He frowned as it now displayed an alien ship flying overhead. "That ship. Where have I seen it?"

Danny's face fell when she saw it as well. "Yeah, I have seen these guys before as well."

Harry wasn't as surprised as either of them. He looked forlorn as Tom turned towards him, he also spotted Danny at the Science station with her similar expression. "I'm not going to forget these aliens in a hurry. They're from the planet Ruva. They have attacked us before."

"That narrows it down," Lena commented.

"It was the Leda's final battle," Harry finished solemnly.

Danny slowly looked over her shoulder to stare at him. "I suppose you could say it was the Enterprise's too, before we were captured."

Tom felt goosebumps building on his arms. He tried to shake it off. It helped clear his head and lightened him up slightly. "Neither was because of them. Daniel destroyed the Leda, Enterprise was attacked by different ships. Isn't that what you said?"

Danny nodded, "yeah, it's just a funky coincidence." She turned her head towards him and shrugged. "I guess."

"They're little more than an annoyance anyway. Shields have only dropped by another 1%," Lena said.

Tom shrugged it off. "They were then as well." He regretted it when Harry grimaced. "To us anyway. Enterprise was damaged back then, the Leda wasn't battle ready. Not a problem this time. If they don't answer, just broadcast a message to them. They'll eventually get bored and..."

Faye pulled a confused face, Harry quickly mirrored it when he looked at the same spot. "Each time a hit connects, we receive a very brief signal from them. Almost like they're tapping the wrong button," she said.

Harry kept an eye on the station until another tremor, he smiled afterwards. "It's definitely no accident. Each signal is different. I'll keep an eye on it, Faye you watch everything else as normal." Faye nodded.

The ship trembled a few more times. The only other noise was the consoles being tapped. Harry watched the readings on one panel intently. The messages they were getting did seem like white noise, as if it were accidental. The second one he noticed the frequency of the signal spiked, yet the attack felt the same as the others.

It happened again, this time the frequency dropped to a completely different number. Every single one said nothing, but there was definite intent behind them. He was convinced. He made a mental note to get the logs from this attack later, all while memorising what was still incoming.

Only Danny caught the similar blur to before on the viewscreen. The tremors stopped afterwards.

"They've gone to warp, they're gone," the girl at the helm said.

"Okay, I speak for everyone when I say; what the f..." Lena said.

Harry excitedly interrupted. "It's code. They were sending us a message." Everyone looked at him warily and a little suspiciously. "I guess they didn't want anyone to know about it."

"Including us it seems," Tom sighed a little out of relief. "Something tells me that as long as Voyager's hanging around, these repairs are going to take a tad longer. Stand down from Red Alert for now. Hopefully we have time to figure something out before we're attacked again."

Chakotay stepped out of the turbolift and began to make his way down the corridor. He nodded a hello at a passing crewman going the other way. Even though he was the only person around, the Commander could hear hurried footsteps keeping up with him, not fading away. As soon as he stopped he heard a little gasp, then the footsteps hurrying away again.

Slowly he turned around to see what was going on. All he saw was the crewmember that passed him turn right at the turbolift, all the while giving something behind him a funny look. He muttered something and disappeared out of his sight.

Chakotay rolled his eyes before continuing, slower than he normally walked. Just as he expected the footsteps approached again. This time he swung around quickly to catch the person in the act. Only he saw and heard a nearby door open and close. He sighed. "Oh, must be my imagination," he said loudly on purpose. Knowing that was probably not enough, he decided to stamp his feet on the spot. Each time he did he made it lighter.

The door opened again. Somebody wearing a bright red outfit hurried out of it. Chakotay quickly stepped sideways out of the way so she'd run right by him, then waited for her to notice. She was half way down the corridor when she did.

"Huh? As if he could out run me," she huffed, stamping one of her heels into the ground. The floor complained, Chakotay immediately thought she had cracked it. When she turned back to face him she gasped in surprise at the sight of him.

"I don't care if we're near the end of the series, we're not doing the C/7 thing okay?" Chakotay said in an amused tone of voice.

Annika rolled her eyes over dramatically and made a little huff noise at the same time. "As if I'd go out with a nasty man like you."

Chakotay tried not to laugh, it caught in his throat. "That explains the infatuation with Damien I suppose."

"Jealousy doesn't suit you," Annika said seriously. Chakotay wasn't used to her acting like that anymore, it just made him smirk a little. "He's twice the super villain you are."

Chakotay dared to approach her, all the while trying to avoid looking at her latest catsuit. It was merely one colour, despite its brightness it was low key for her. Surely there was more to it than it appeared and he didn't want to find out. "Why are you following me around if I don't interest you? Make it quick. I have far more important things to worry about."

Annika's eyes flickered curiously, they then narrowed suspiciously at him. "Oh, like what?"

"Very important things. Far too crucial for me to waste my time babysitting you." Annika's eye narrowing was making them twitch uncomfortably. "This mission could fail if I don't find that perfect spot to scratch my nose discreetly. I don't want the lower ranks to see something like that."

To his annoyance she just laughed at him. "Oh I know that feeling. This new catsuit keeps riding up my bum."

Chakotay regretted that immediately. To add insult to injury his brain forced him to imagine her trying to fix this problem. His whole body shuddered several times uncontrollably. He figured even he didn't deserve this. Eager to change the subject he tried to ask her again why she was following him, but the constant shudders made any words he managed to utter ended up longer and shaky.

"Wow, that's some itch," Annika said sincerely. At least she wasn't concerned, her voice made it sound like she was mocking him.

That was enough to settle his reaction. "Last chance, why are you stalking me?"

"I don't stalk, I observe," Annika said, a little offended by his question. "I dunno why you're complaining. You didn't seem bothered yesterday."

Chakotay opened his mouth to argue, only he realised what she later said. "Wait, this isn't the first time?"

"Duh," Annika groaned.

He only mouthed a *but* while she fidgeted slightly, then her arm went around her back. "But you were so obv... wait, I was in my quarters yesterday," Chakotay grumbled.

Annika let out a little giggle, then her arm returned to her side. "Better." Chakotay found himself grimacing yet again. "You mumble in your sleep."

"All right, I've had it. You're a vampire and you should have been slayed long ago. I know someone who will love to vent the recent drama out on you," Chakotay snapped.

"Oooh, I thought I had wedgie troubles. You got nothing to hide, you've got nothing to worry about. Hmm?" Annika teased him.

"I honestly don't know why we keep you around. You've done nothing but cause problems, you've even betrayed us on multiple occasions," Chakotay said. He shook his head as he began to walk away from her. "At this point, I'd keep Damien over you and that's saying something, at least he's useful. Enjoy your final days."

Annika watched him until he was about half way down the corridor. "I know, that's why you're so eager for me to die."

Chakotay stopped to sigh loudly. He didn't give her the satisfaction of looking at her. "Know what? It's clearly not how to dress without making people want to poke their eyes out."

"You and my Damy. I know what you've been up to, and what you're going to do," Annika said.

"What?" Chakotay muttered with disinterest. Even still he found himself turning back around to look at her after all. "Everyone already knows what Damien and I did, do try to keep up."

"Not all of it. You came to Voyager for a reason, the both of you. I'm onto you smexy men, you don't fool me," Annika purred at him.

Chakotay shuddered yet again. "I'm going to have to burn my quarters," he mumbled while walking away.

Voyager lead the way towards a planet covered in numerous shades of blue. The Prometh followed closely behind them. Other vessels dotted around the area, each one made a point to change their current course to avoid them.

On the Bridge, Tom watched the planet get larger on the viewscreen. The lighter shades of blue were starting to look more like continents covered in ice to him. It made him feel cold just looking at it and he usually didn't mind the snow. It wasn't only the idea of seeing the ice from orbit that made him feel that way. It seemed pretty ominous to him that a m-class world looked like this in both hemispheres and on every landmass that they could see. Their star was much closer to them than Earth was to theirs, which made even less sense.

Since the rest of the Bridge had been eerily silent, he figured they noticed the same exact problem.

"There's... no clouds," he heard Jessie say.

Tom barely nodded. He had to hear someone stutter the words *oh god* before he realised the significance. Then he could see it too. But then he grew distracted by who said it. He looked around towards the turbolift to see her standing next to Tactical. "What are you...?"

"She's right. I've never seen anything like it," Faye said while focusing on Opps. "Surface temperatures vary from minus ten to minus twenty five degrees Celsius. The atmosphere is .02% thinner than it was in the Enterprise's scans..."

Tom gestured his hand to hint for her to stop. He was thankful she understood. "This could be normal, let's not panic. Scan for vessels."

"You're in luck, there's plenty of them. They're giving us a wide berth," Faye reported. She knew that wasn't what Tom wanted to hear, but felt it was important anyway. Then something in her scans confused her. "Um, ok, that's weird."

Everyone looked in her direction. Tom decided to not only do that but hurry over to her. "What is it?"

"I can't find any evidence of a tower," Faye answered. "Or this defence shield."

Danny turned her attention back to Tactical, only to find Jessie looking at it as well. "Missing the big guns Jess?"

"I'm missing a lot of things," Jessie mumbled just as the station beeped at them.

"Three ships are approaching from the other side of the planet," Danny quickly reported. "They're coming straight for us."

"I wonder if they're still friendly," Tom said as if he doubted it. "On screen."

The image of the planet changed slightly. Now they could only see the edge of it, mostly covered by the lack of direct star light. Three large ships slowly loomed towards them. Tom swallowed a lump in his throat, but it barely settled his nerves. He managed to feel even worse.

"I can't see what their weapons are like, or even if they have them. Their shields are blocking everything," Danny said.

"Hail them," Tom said in a croaky voice. He tried to clear it before the viewscreen changed again. He waited but the only change was the ships getting closer. "Faye?"

Faye briefly turned her head his way, she shook it slightly. Finally her station gave her a positive beep. "They're hailing us. Audio only."

Tom breathed in deeply and out again. "This is Lieutenant Commander Paris of the..."

*"Silver vessel, you've done enough damage to us already. We demand you leave."*

His voice startled Tom, it threw him right off. "The er... starship Voyager. What?" He quickly tried to gather his thoughts together again to reply. "No, this is our first time here." He stared towards Danny with an annoyed stare, only to find her as baffled as him.

She shrugged. "We didn't do anything," she whispered.

*"Your vessel matches the description of the culprit. Why else are you here?"*

"We're looking... we heard you were in trouble," Tom stuttered. "I assure you we're not the ones that attacked you. What happened here?"

*"Our power station was destroyed. Witnesses saw a ship of similar colour escape through our defense network before it failed. If it were not you, I assume you're here to finish the job."*

Danny looked at Jessie with a confused look on her face, she seemed too busy staring at the Tactical station to notice. "Wait a minute. That defence shield of yours was impenetrable. I get that it couldn't stay online once the tower was gone but..." she said.

"Danny no," Tom whispered desperately.

It was too late though, the voice on the comm was suspicious. *"So you have been here before."*

"On a different ship, long ago. Nobody else here did," Danny quickly explained. "No ship of ours could get through that shield of yours, unless you invited them in. You must know it wasn't us."

*"We've heard about you. Whispers, stories from visitors and travellers returning home,"* the voice said harshly. Though it was trembling slightly. They were afraid and didn't want to show it. *"A ship made of silver arrives and disaster soon follows."*

"I'm so glad we left the Enterprise behind," Tom whispered to Faye so quietly even she had trouble hearing it.

*"A small ship, designed for infiltration. I assume one of you is the mothership, although we suspected that Anerprise vessel was up to no good as well."*

Danny laughed quietly and nervously, she spotted Jessie staring at her with a grimace. Tom meanwhile was getting back into his old habit of sweating his entire body weight.

"You've gotten the wrong idea here. We're a peaceful fleet, our mission is exploration and..." he stuttered.

"So, now that this power station has gone, has your cold weather improved, gotten worse, the same?" Jessie interrupted

*"What?"*

Tom looked at her, horrified at the blunt question. "Jessie, shh."

"What? I understand the initial response to a ship firing on a tower, power station whatever, being a one of fear and or anger. But still feeling like that about it once its gone confuses the hell out of me," Jessie protested.

Danny was about to counter what she said, then nodded like she agreed. "Yeah, that's a good point."

*"How dare you try to blame us!"* the voice snapped. Tom cringed while his forehead poured sweat over the rest of his face, like a waterfall. *"With no power we could no longer support our defense network. The damage from that is the cause of the extreme weather conditions, which we are recovering from."*

"Your planet is covered in snow, yet there's no cloud cover that could have done that. This sort of thing doesn't happen overnight or during a shield failure," Jessie said. A few people looked at her, surprised she thought of it. "What?"

Tom groaned inwardly. "Of course. I'm so stupid. The towers never provided Shurouva any power, they suffered blackouts didn't they? How then were they able to sustain a planet wide forcefield?"

Danny pulled a face in his direction that made him feel even more stupid. "There was a shield. We detected it, while the tower was there."

Faye looked at her station as various noises from it tried to get her attention. "Speaking of which..."

*"You've failed,"* the alien voice said just as the planet on the screen briefly was covered by a shimmering green. *"Fortunately our old power generator was not targeted during the attack. We only needed a few minutes more to protect ourselves. Now leave."*

Tom tried to dry his forehead with his hand. "You only talked to us to distract us? There was no need. We are not here to invade. Surely our actions prove this. We have nothing to do with this other silver ship." A thought popped into his head that he had to vocalise, "wait, when this mystery ship fired at your power station, was this old generator no longer being used? Your new power station was doing all the work at the time?"

There was an unusually long pause between his question and the response. He was sure he heard quiet discussion in the background. *"If you're trying to trick us into thinking we are to blame, it will not work. We know the true facts and we will warn further planets of your deceit. A large ship arrived as a scout. Your infiltrator then waited until the new station was able to sustain our defence shield on its own, then you broke in and destroyed it. No, attacking it from the outside would be too obvious. Internally and at the right time, it would look like an accident."*

"Maybe we should go," Danny whispered while cringing.

Tom nodded as he quietly made his way back towards the helm. The alien continued to talk while he did this.

*"Then once your victims are defenseless and blaming themselves, your fleet moves in for the kill. You'll find we are more than capable of driving you out of our system. You have one cycle to do it yourselves."*

"How long is a cycle?" Tom asked as one of the ships on the screen fired a red torpedo. It exploded directly in front of the ship, close enough to trigger the shields. Even though it barely touched them, Voyager trembled viciously. "Stat..."

"Shields are down," Danny stuttered before he could finish asking.

Tom ran the rest of the way to the helm. He didn't bother sitting down, he leaned over the chair to enter in a new course. "Tell Tira, though I doubt it'll be necessary."

*"That was merely a warning shot. Half a cycle remaining."*

"We're going... even if this is a misunderstanding," Tom stammered just as the view of the ships and the planet quickly started to veer to the left. It wasn't long before everyone felt the jump to warp. Tom then collapsed onto the chair without even looking at it, he narrowly avoided missing it and falling on the floor. "The Prometh?"

"I think they got the message when the torpedo hit," Faye said.

Tom meekly nodded, "good. We'll rendezvous with the Enterprise and Katane in a few minutes. This isn't good."

"I think we've just found out why we're not welcome anywhere," Danny said. "So much for it being only déjà vu, huh?"

"Unless you guys have been stealing the Enterprise while we're asleep, it's not the same thing," Jessie commented while giving her a scowl.

"No, but the being mistaken for villains sure is," Danny said with a wry smile.

Tom found himself staring at the stars streaming by on the viewscreen. The dread that built up during that entire conversation had left him feeling hollow. Then he realised it hadn't started then, it had been building up for weeks. Every planet or system they visited had a story to tell, and no matter how different they were they all centered around the same thing. While he mulled over it Voyager dropped back out of warp, the sight of the Enterprise greeted them as they did.

"I don't get any of this. When we visited, was the shield just there because the old non-Soft station still powered it? If so, wouldn't they notice if the new power station wasn't?" Danny said.

Jessie shrugged half-heartedly. "He did say that they were attacked when it went fully online. Maybe they didn't get a chance to."

"Yeah but this other ship must have gotten through the shield to do it," Faye said. "All I can think of is that it went down briefly while they transferred it over, and the ship slipped in."

Tom overheard the last half of the conversation and he found himself turning the chair back around to watch them. He wondered about that too, but then his head started asking other questions, confusing him further.

"You'd think they would have high security during something like that," Danny said. "It couldn't be a far more advanced ship, they wouldn't have suspected us then."

"So that leaves two possibilities. The shield was already down or they turned it off," Jessie mumbled. Danny frowned at her, she didn't look too sure about either of those. "The Softmicron do still prefer to trick its victims, create illusions to make them think things are fine. The shield could have been fake, so *already down*. *Turned off* suggests that like other planets, there are people there that suspect the truth."

Danny felt guilty for even thinking it, but she had to say it as no one seemed to consider the other option. "Or someone who knows what they're doing disabled the shield so they could get in." Jessie stared at her with her eyes widening, Danny tried her best to ignore it.

"We need to find out what this ship is," Tom interrupted calmly. Everyone looked at him quizzically. "We're not going to get anywhere until we can exclude it as a possibility. For now, lets make sure we can all survive another fight."

*Lieutenant Commander Paris' Log, Stardate 58962.4: It's the sixteenth day since we started our investigation, and I'm already starting to miss the nothing we had been finding for fifteen. A ship, only described as small and silver, is terrorising the area for no clear reason just yet. As it's our only lead we will pursue it once the battle damage has been repaired. Hopefully it left us some tracks behind. If it's a ship that is aware of the tower networks, we must find them and try to share information. If it isn't, we must stop it at all costs.*

"Way to be overdramatic Tommy," a male voice sniggered at him.

Tom leapt out of his skin, which made him spill his half cup of coffee all over him and the desk. Luckily it was lukewarm. Once he recovered he glared at the door to the Ready Room as hard as he could. Naturally the intruder just smirked at him.

"Damien, there's a door chime. Use it," he snapped.

"Why?" Damien asked in a genuine questionable tone. That went away when he chuckled lightly. "I got what I wanted."

Tom groaned while his hand tried to wipe down the wet patches on his uniform. All it did was spread it further. "Besides from trying to summon the vengeful ghost of Janeway, what do you want?"

"I'm ready to test my new cloaking field," Damien said. For some reason he looked a little grumpy, Tom just frowned at him. "Not that there's any need for it as I made it, but you idiots like wasting time."

"Oh," Tom said as his whole body slumped a little. "I don't know if we'll be able to do that just yet."

"Oh don't worry your tiny brain about it Paris, I'll run the test," Damien said in a patronising manner.

Tom rolled his eyes, "no, that's not happening." Damien responded to that as he expected, with an angry scowl. "I know it's been a while since you've done anything *evil*, which is suspicious in itself, but we're not going to trust a device you've made and let you lose with it."

"Oh, trust issues? That's your problem, not mine," Damien laughed at him.

"Still, I call the shots. I'll ask B'Elanna to do a test on the Holodeck. Anything more than that will have to wait," Tom said.

Damien folded his arms tightly, "why? You've been pestering me about this for over a month. It's not my fault the bimbo attention seeker smashed my first model."

Tom sighed. He reluctantly pulled himself out of the chair, all the while putting his now empty cup onto the desk. Damien watched him carefully as he walked towards him. "The Flyer was going to be the test subject."

"So?" Damien scoffed and shrugged his shoulders. "You're not still treating it like it's your little brat, are you?"

"No. It's just not... available right now," Tom said. Damien frowned as he walked by him on route to the coffee table. "That's all."

Damien stared at him knowingly, with a tiny smirk on his lips. "So another conspiracy in the making? More secrets. I'm liking this already."

Tom slowly looked over his shoulder while his back was still on him. Once he saw the look on Damien's face he turned his body around too. "Not at all. Although you've just talked yourself out of me telling you the real reason."

"Oh, if it's not interesting, I couldn't care less," Damien said while gesturing his hands and shrugging.

Tom smiled bitterly. "Oh that's not the issue. At all. You'd probably like it. That's why you're not going to find out."

"I will though, being much smart..." Damien started to gloat.

"Dismissed," Tom said sharply.

Damien smirked, his right eyebrow raised slightly. "Of course, *Sir*. Whatever you say." He turned to leave.

Once he was gone Tom turned back to face the window. He watched the distant stars, his eyes began to glaze over as he did.

### **Sickbay:**

"Stolen?" the Doctor was shocked. He felt his program ripple for a second which didn't help either. The person who must have done it stood in front of him, and had only just stopped tapping at the main console when it happened. Her facial expression said sorry without her having to open her mouth.

"No, it got up and left on its own," B'Elanna said with a smile. The Doctor gave her a look of bemusement. "Of course it was stolen."

"Well you never know these days. I couldn't handle seven years of Tom giving me *my baby* cuddles," the Doctor said chirpily until he remembered who he was talking to. He laughed nervously. "Is it related to what happened to me?"

B'Elanna briefly made eye contact with him. He noticed her uneasiness when she did. Her head turned back to face the console while she cleared her throat. "It's possible."

"Possible? I thought you knew what happened," the Doctor said.

B'Elanna smiled warmly but it was still directed towards the station. "I do." The Doctor stared at her intently. "Looks like somebody entered new sub routines into your matrix, but they're long gone now. Not to worry."

"Oh, all the more reason to be worried. Why would anyone do this? What was their intention? Will they do it again?" the Doctor started to panic.

"They can't do it again. I've made sure of it," B'Elanna said as she faced him again. The worried look on his face started to make her feel a little guilty. "I've tripled the Security and best of all I've made it so only you have access to the write version of your program. Anyone else will only find the read only. That won't appear obvious to them either."

"They made me break my oath. They used me. I'd be able to start accepting it if I knew why. I don't understand," the Doctor said.

B'Elanna breathed in deeply before quickly sighing. "The culprit altered the oath in your database, very subtly might I add. They also made slight edits to your memory files. I've undone the damage, it was just finding it that was the hard part. I think whoever did this must have thought that you'd discover something that they wanted to hide. To cause a distraction instead, point fingers elsewhere."

"If it was undone, why do I remember everything I did?" the Doctor asked. "I've caused so much pain and suffering."

B'Elanna looked on sympathetically. "If I erased your memory of it, then I'd be another person treating you like a machine, a thing to suit my agenda. I'm not going to do that."

The Doctor finally smiled, even just a little, he was grateful but he still had a pained look in his eyes. "You're right. I need to approach this like everyone else does, not pretend it never happened. I have to fix what I've done. The trouble is, I don't know how."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself. I'm sure if you explained to Jessie why you said what you did, she'll understand that you weren't you that day," B'Elanna smiled.

"That day?" the Doctor stuttered, he blinked nervously. "Are you sure you fixed everything?"

"Yes, why?" B'Elanna said, now curious and a little worried.

The Doctor didn't look convinced with her answer. He tilted his head slightly to peep at the console, which B'Elanna mirrored back to him, her eyebrows raised. "Please check again."

"Doc, stop. Your program's security was breached when James stopped you from being able to walk through the forcefield. The files that were edited..." B'Elanna said a little more forcefully.

"It couldn't have been then," the Doctor said, slightly dazed.

"They probably were trying to get in themselves and took advantage of it," B'Elanna said. The Doctor shook his head, mouthing the word no a few times. "Why couldn't it have been then?"

The Doctor sighed deeply. "I broke the worst oath of them all; do no harm. I thought you knew."

"Doctor. I have no idea what you're talking about," B'Elanna said. "As I said, I made a point not to touch your memories."

"James threw up a forcefield to stop me from approaching. You're saying my files were edited then, but that's impossible," the Doctor said. "I remember doing it and it wasn't then. It was much sooner than that."

"Are you talking about the DNA evidence that was distorted? That was crucial in solving the case. I doubt your discovery was manipulated by whoever hacked into your program, or that wouldn't have happened," B'Elanna tried to reason with him.

The Doctor was now staring down at the console she was using. His eyes scanned everything there, looking for any kind of clue that she missed. A disgruntled noise from her made him look back up and face her.

"You removed Nathan from the suspects list, I know. Craig told me. It made no difference. The DNA on his file was fully Human anyway. It wouldn't have implicated him. Try to calm down," B'Elanna said patiently.

The Doctor stared directly at her fearfully. "You really don't know. I... did more than alter evidence and point fingers. I re-activated it," he whispered the last few words.

B'Elanna flinched at the whispered words. She leaned in a little closer and lowered her own voice. "Re-activated what?"

"He was injured badly, disoriented. It was the perfect opportunity," the Doctor said, piquing her curiosity further. "He wouldn't notice anything until something triggered a bad memory. I didn't foresee what his newly formed telepathy would do." He shuddered in revulsion. "I didn't care."

B'Elanna felt her eyes widen more than usual, she felt her skin prickling. "The chip?" A timid and very small nod from the hologram confirmed everything. She found herself checking the computer to double check her work.

### **The Mess Hall:**

"Do you ever think about what we'll do when this is all over?"

Lena was mid sip when she was asked that. She quickly swallowed her drink instead of savouring it, then placed it beside her. The confused look on her face made her daughter smile at her. "Where did that come from?"

Kiara shrugged. Even though her plate was half full, she put her fork down beside the unused knife. "It's a distraction. Otherwise I'm thinking about my friend lying in a coma, or why she's there, or the terrifying thought of there being dozens, maybe hundreds of towers that we have to destroy to get out."

"I doubt it's the only way," Lena said first to re-assure her. "Do you mean when we escape the sphere?"

"Yeah," Kiara said with a nod. "The place you lived in with Sandi will have a new owner. I dunno if mum's family would take us in. Maybe you want a place of your own. I dunno."

Lena hadn't thought about it. She was too distracted by the other things Kiara mentioned, as well as the most recent problem. "I've always lived in space, well with the exception of those few months. I never really got used to being woken up by sunlight and birds chirping, but I doubt I'll want to stay on one of these ships forever."

"I can imagine. It must be nice not having to worry that one day your home could be destroyed by some trigger happy aliens," Kiara said.

"Oh I dunno, you just get vampires trashing your place instead," Lena said with a smile. It didn't last very long. She wasn't safe wherever she decided to live, that was something she had to learn to live with. Kiara though was a different story. The worried look on her face made her realise that her own was showing what she was thinking. She tried to smile again. "We can discuss it when the time comes. Okay?"

"I dunno about you, but I don't know the first thing about getting a house thingy or looking after it," Kiara said with a sly smile forming. "I also doubt that I'd be able to stay on a starship if I wanted to."

It was obvious to Lena what she was hinting at, she narrowed her eyes to pretend to be mad at her. Kiara wasn't falling for it, she smiled innocently just like she would have when she did something wrong as a kid.

"Well if that's what you want," Lena said sadly. Kiara frowned at her tone. "I'll talk to dad. I'm sure he won't mind though."

Kiara's mouth dropped open, "huh!?" She started to stammer, "I wasn't talking about Chakotay. I don't trust him, I don't like him anymore. I can't believe you..." Lena's resolve faded away, all that was left was a small smile. "You tricked me."

"It's your fault for thinking I'd be so cruel... lately," Lena said awkwardly as she remembered how she behaved years ago. She cleared her throat as if it would chase that away. "Look, we'll stick together, if that's what you want that is. That's why where we end up living will be picked by both of us. Okay?"

Kiara smiled gratefully. "You're the mum, you're not supposed to let the kid have a say."

"Meh," Lena said with a nonchalant expression, her shoulders raised. "As long as it isn't a morgue, I'm not fussed."

"Are you sure about this?" Kiara quickly asked without thinking about it.

Lena reached for her drink again while giving her the trademark Janeway bemused look. "I was joking about making you live with my dad. I never considered it."

"That's not why I'm asking. I just thought that you might not want to live with me," Kiara said.

"You got that from everything I said? You're..." Lena said while sniggering. "I'm starting to think this self doubt crap runs in the family."

"Well no, I just... you said if that's what I want, with no mention that it was what you wanted," Kiara stuttered as her cheeks turned red.

Lena shook her head while still laughing to herself. "Don't be silly. I'll need someone to wash the dishes and stuff," she teased.

Kiara looked confused, "wash them?"

"You know, chores. We'll get bored if we're not on a ship, and fast," Lena said. Kiara pulled a face which made her laugh again. "Relax, I don't even know how to cook so there will be no dishes to clean, not when there's replicators. I may make you put the washing outside though."

"You put your plates outside?" Kiara said in a slightly amused tone.

"Oh this'll be fun," Lena smirked at her.

Kiara smirked as well and shook her head. "I'm already regretting it. Seriously, at least it won't ever be dull living with you."

Lena's smile faded away. "Yeah. That's my only issue with this. I'm a walking target and you shouldn't have to feel unsafe in your own home."

"I thought that was normal," Kiara said lightly, hoping that it would stop worrying her.

"Only if your parents are Slayers," Lena sighed, proving it didn't work. She stared glumly at the table.

Kiara felt a little guilty for accidentally steering the conversation that way. A change of subject again was needed. After barely a minute she hadn't come up with anything and it was starting to feel a little awkward. She had to say something. "Maybe it's not what you think, and he'll come back soon."

Lena smiled weakly at her. "No matter what I think, it's bad. There's no good here."

"Where's your imagination? For all you know there was this big thing right, that he had to deal with and couldn't risk telling anyone. You know, in case it makes things worse," Kiara improvised. Lena's

stare was unchanged so she decided to carry on. "Or, he's been possessed and he'll come back when he's not. Or we'll find him and fix it."

"I hope so," Lena said. "If not, it isn't going to be easy."

### **Engineering:**

The staff in the lower level all seemed to be focused on their stations, they didn't notice somebody walk in. He smirked darkly at the lack of response. Then he headed for the ladder near the warp core so he could climb up.

He was too busy cackling away to notice that the second level wasn't as empty as he thought. When he did notice he groaned in disgust. "You? How will I ever get anything done with you morons constantly watching me?"

Chakotay smiled. "I think this is a sin that I can live with."

Damien folded his arms tightly and stubbornly remained on the spot. "Are we chickening out? You started all of this, I assume you expect me to clean up your mess."

"Now that you mention it, my quarters is a tad untidy," Chakotay said.

"Ugh," Damien rolled her eyes. "Leave the jokes to the professionals. Actually, while we're on the subject, leave the evil to me too. Now get lost." He headed for the main console parallel to the core. Chakotay had purposely stood there to block him.

"You have no right to complain. You've been gossiping to your girlfriend," Chakotay whispered to him once he arrived. Damien pulled a disgusted face. "She confronted me, she knows. How else would she find out?"

Damien scoffed in his face, "oh please? Like you've been acting completely innocent and keeping out of sight. Someone was going to find out eventually, you're just lucky it was Barbie Cullen that figured it out."

"If you tell anyone about our plans..." Chakotay hissed. Somebody gasped nearby, it echoed as if it was coming from a confined space. The pair didn't seem to notice it, or care. "I'll make sure you never do anything again."

"Without me you'll never be able to pull it off. That's why I'm still alive, right?" Damien teased him.

Chakotay narrowed his eyes while staring directly into his. The villain's sparkled, he was enjoying this a little too much.

"I knew it. My god," a voice whispered, which also echoed. There was a bang shortly afterwards, "owie!" Then the telltale sound of somebody crawling against metal followed.

Damien chuckled once that faded away, "that was fun."

Chakotay had to smile as well, "yeah. It'll keep Annika occupied for the time being."

"So Barbs thinks you're up to something huh?" Damien snickered at him. "I was wondering why it was so quiet. I really was hoping that she died."

"Yes, but I'm just thankful she's not stealing my underwear, or sniffing my discarded food," Chakotay said.

Damien shuddered horribly, "thankfully that first one hasn't happened. I even considered reading those books to find out how her vampire kind die."

Chakotay actually looked embarrassed, "I got that the wrong way round. Sorry." Damien's eyes widened which made Chakotay laugh a little. "Seriously, you don't want to go to Astrometrics. I've seen things no man should see."

"Do you fancy reading a few books to pass the time?" Damien asked.

"Hell no," Chakotay said quickly. "This stalking thing is still a problem though."

"I'll pay you. The only way to kill her I read so far I do not want to resort to," Damien actually pleaded with him.

Chakotay brushed his fear aside for now, "relax, will you? I'm not talking about your stalking, I'm talking about me."

"Oh, of course," Damien groaned.

"I'm curious though," Chakotay said.

Damien scowled at him through gritted teeth. "Oh sure, when it's your problem you want it dealt with immediately."

"It's still *our* problem though," Chakotay said. "You like to talk, a lot. Brag about your deeds. You haven't tried to put her off by talking about... you know?"

"Well bragging about it is much better than badly trying to avoid saying something directly, just for the purpose of prolonging the reveal. I mean seriously," Damien groaned. He rolled his eyes, "you know."

"Anybody could be listening. I'd prefer if you didn't share these things with anyone," Chakotay said sternly.

Damien couldn't help but laugh at him. "Oh, and why not? It's not like you have a reputation left to protect. You're in the dog house already Chucks."

"If they knew, they'd only worry. This crew have enough to deal with as it is. It's not like anything can be done about it now," Chakotay said. Damien narrowed his already suspicious eyes toward him. "I think you know what I'm referring to."

"I built that stupid cloak, I helped recover that kidnapper ship. I've done enough," Damien grunted. Chakotay stared at him blankly, which made Damien think he misunderstood. He laughed as that was impossible. "You know, until I ran into you, I thought the reason why we can't start the tests was cos you pinched the Flyer. It's just your style."

Chakotay rolled his eyes. "Hilarious, but no. I'm talking about your other work. If Annika finds out about it..."

"If she's stalking you instead of me, what's the big deal? Enjoy," Damien sniggered as he turned to walk away. Chakotay grabbed his arm tightly to stop him. He just snatched his arm back and faced him again, his sneering face made Chakotay wonder why he did it. "Who cares if the glitter ball finds out? Nobody likes her, nobody cares what she says unless it's *oh my god, I'm dying painfully.*"

"You've said it yourself. She is a vampire and she did try to use it to destroy us. The flaky bimbo persona is just an act, to throw us off our guard," Chakotay whispered. "You should know. The first chance she got she joined you to get back at us. Why else do you think she follows you around all the time?"

"My evil charisma and intelligence can be a curse sometimes," Damien replied with a tiny hint of regret in his voice. It just made him sound more patronising than usual.

Chakotay felt a little sick, though that could have been just the subject of Annika doing that. "Annika is not on our side. She pretends to be until it suits her, then it's yoghurt pot sniffing and makeshift beds made out of dirty clothes. Annoying, frightening, but harmless. It's quite clever actually."

Damien repressed a few gags as his head tried to imagine what Chakotay said. He tried to laugh it off until he noticed Chakotay's expression hadn't changed.

"Seriously, Astrometrics, don't go there," Chakotay said.

"You're sick enough to make something like that up," Damien tried to tell himself out loud.

"No, but I'm sick enough now after seeing her rolling around in a pile of rabbit toys while making noises. I'll be in therapy for the rest of my life," Chakotay muttered. Damien's eyes went wide yet again. "She either expected me, you or anyone for that matter to walk in. The door wasn't locked. She's got an act to keep up so no one will suspect her when she gets her next opportunity. I'd rather not let her know of one."

"Different in style, but it reminds me of someone else. Care to venture a guess?" Damien said with the sparkle back in his eye.

"I doubt it's you, you've been a neutered and de-clawed kitten for years now," Chakotay answered nonchalantly.

Damien let out an angry grunt, the spark in his eyes turned into anger. "Why should I care if Annika wants to get her revenge on this crew? I don't even like you people. I'm only here and do things as it serves my interests."

"You're only here because you have no choice. It's us or taking your chances in a Game Sphere ran by people who despise you more than us," Chakotay smirked.

"Voyager's no good to me if it's trapped in this bad collage of the galaxy. Don't kid yourselves," Damien tried to snigger. It was forced though, Chakotay's words continued to hit various nerves. "You've got much worse things to worry about than an ex drone turned My Little Pony with a stalker fetish. If your people aren't trying to kill each other, they're running off on suicide missions, setting up bombs to finish off their annoying step sons, having their fiftieth breakdown, stealing shuttles..."

Chakotay's face fell and it froze in a tight grimace. "You're overexaggerating, as usual," he managed to mutter through it.

Damien felt a little better now that he had returned the favour. A devilish smile appeared on his face. "It's any wonder you fools have gotten as far as you have. It's all drama, drama around here. I'm glad I joined just in time to witness it. The shapeshifters don't have to do a damn thing, you people are your own worst enemies. You make some progress and somebody does the switcheroo on Ylara and Lena. You make some more progress and the Enterprise is stolen. Oh we learned something, lets get distracted by warlocks and some system that doesn't matter. Ohno poor little girl trips up in her quarters. Don't even get me started on this wild freak chase nonsense."

"You're right," Chakotay interrupted. To Damien's surprise he said it with not only a straight face, but with no humour in his voice giving him away. "We are getting in our own way. Or at least, someone keeps nudging us in that direction."

"I'd take credit for it if it wasn't so boring," Damien said.

Chakotay ignored him. "When force doesn't work, destroy us from within. Of course. They must know where we are or they..."

Damien yawned loudly to make a point, cutting him off as well. "I wonder who around here fits the classic double agent reqs. Unusual behaviour, keeping secrets, negotiating with villains discreetly, driving away loved ones. Hmm, toughie!" Chakotay stared at him with anger building up inside. Damien acted as if he just figured it out. "Oh, it couldn't be the guy trying to point fingers elsewhere. I need to think on this."

"Don't strain yourself," Chakotay muttered as he walked away.

### **The Enterprise:**

He had been so engrossed in his work, Harry hadn't noticed Ian rush onto the Bridge and stop next beside him. His sudden voice brought him out of it. "The repairs to the shields are done."

Harry didn't look that impressed. The data he had collected seemed far more interesting to him. "You had to come here to tell me that?"

Ian matched his facial expression, before putting on a softer and patronising voice, "no but I was missing you so badly." He cleared his throat to get it back to normal. "I was told to give you a direct report when the ship was ready to go."

"Go, go where?" Harry asked no one in particular.

"To the next planet with towers, weren't you listening?" Ian answered.

"It's a waste of time, I'm telling you," Harry said. He found himself staring at the data on the computer screen again. Ian briefly turned his head towards it. It was just a bunch of random numbers to him so it didn't keep his interest. "All we're doing is ruining our reputation further. The answer, it's here."

Ian looked a little conflicted, not that anyone could see that as they were all occupied. "Months of mostly failing to destroy Game Sphere towers, yeah I could have told you that. You lost me on this though."

Harry's index finger pointed to one of the numbers, then a one beside it. "I've been looking at this all wrong. It's not supposed to say anything."

"Huh?" Ian mumbled. "You just said the answer is there."

"It is," Harry brightened up. He quickly worked on the panel beneath the data. The numbers that he was looking at were entered there.

The computer responded, "*searching.*"

"I was convinced it was a message, a numerical code that translated into one word. Like when we found you," Harry explained very quickly, Ian had trouble keeping up. "What else would numbers mean?"

"Um, somebody stuck on a Maths puzzle?" Ian said meekly.

Harry briefly stared at him like he was an idiot. "How are you an engineer?"

"How did you get command of the Enterprise?" Ian countered with a raised eyebrow.

Harry brushed it off by merely looking back at the computer. It had finished its search and was displaying one result. "I knew it. They're co-ordinates. They've got to be. This can't be a coincidence."

Ian turned to have a look as well, his interest piqued. "I hope it's useful, we've got enough places to visit as it is."

One tap brought up a star chart on the bigger screen, replacing the one with the numbers. One part of it was highlighted with a flashing orange. Harry's good mood dissolved instantly. Ian didn't even have time to notice it, by the time he looked at Harry, he was having trouble keeping his emotions in check, his lips trembled.

"What?" Ian asked. He had no idea why he reacted the way he did. The highlighted area just looked like empty space to him.

"That's... it's nothing," Harry answered as bluntly as he could manage. His fingers quickly fell onto the computer. All of the data disappeared. "There's nothing there. Not anymore."

As he walked away Ian did his best to retrieve the information. Once he did he stared at it for any clue as to what happened. The highlighted area was definitely just empty space, however a few objects nearby caught his attention. A system with one m-class was the closest. What worried him though was the thing that he knew was a bit further away from this area. To him, this certainly wasn't nothing.

"Harry," he called. Harry stood in the command centre meekly, he could barely be bothered to make eye contact with him. "You may have been onto something here. A Ruvan ship leaves a cryptic message with numbers in, which can be changed into co-ordinates nearby their home world. A home world that we tried to liberate. They know exactly who we are unlike some of the other ships that attacked us, but they still send us it."

"Enough!" Harry snapped at him. The rest of the Bridge looked at him in surprise. "They attacked you on the Enterprise, they then attacked us, chasing us both out of their territory. They didn't want our help then."

"So why now? That anomaly is nearby, that planet where we were dumped in pods is also close by. They gave us that message discreetly for a reason," Ian said.

"We're not going there and that's final. I won't lose another ship, understood!" Harry shouted.

Ian felt his eyebrow raise slightly and twitch. He gave him a bemused smile. "Context would solve a lot of problems on this fleet. So would a half decent Captain for the flagship." He waited for that to sink in before leaving.

Instead Harry avoided looking at him as he walked over to the other side of the Bridge. Ian watched him step into the same turbolift he was going to use.

"Awkward," Bryan commented wryly. "You're right though. I've been here this whole time and I still have no idea what's happening."

## **Voyager**

### **The Ready Room:**

The atmosphere was a little tense for Tom's liking. He tried to sit back in his chair while cradling a coffee to his chest. Everytime someone spoke or looked at him he'd just end up sitting forward and abandoning the cup on the desk. He wondered how Kathryn used to do it. Years of practice? No wonder she was so irritable a lot of the time.

"Oh come on. You're doing long multiplication but forgetting to use the zero," Harry complained.

"Or the ever classic; you're putting two and two together to get five," Chakotay muttered. "You're over thinking the metaphor."

Harry stared at him with his furious eyes blinking rapidly. "Yeah, that's actually the point I was trying to make. What's happening isn't simple but you're overcomplicating it by using the wrong method."

"Harry," Tira said gently. It was useless as Chakotay and Harry's arguments were so quick and loud, she may as well have been shouting from outside the ship. She decided to join Ersa at the other side of the room.

"I'm really curious to know what this zero is we're missing," Chakotay said.

He got a grunt from Harry in response. "We've been chasing our own tail for weeks now and what do we have to show for it? Nothing." Tom sighed into his cup, accidentally spilling some of it. "We're wasting time."

Chakotay rolled his eyes, "as opposed to what? What should we be doing instead?"

"Anything but trespassing in alien territories, making people think that we're this silver ship in the rumours. The more guilty we look the more people we're going to have wanting to kill us," Harry snapped.

Tom felt a little torn as he knew his friend was right. "It's a good chance that this is our fault, or at least our responsibility. We can't ignore it."

"We have no proof that the silver ship has anything to do with us, is actually aiming for towers, exists or anything for that matter," Chakotay said.

"If it is, it's obvious what we're dealing with here. We should be prepared for the worst," Harry said grimly.

Chakotay shook his head in disagreement. "Don't jump to conclusions. Many ships will be silver because of its hull material. A lot of metals that can be used in space safely are silver."

"Yeah, that just makes me wonder why the Romulans went to the trouble of painting their ships green," Tom commented. He remembered the colour of their blood and it made him a little more distrusting of them.

"Also, we don't know what this ship or ships intentions are. It could be more than one, different people. It was one planet. It could be merely a coincidence that they attacked a tower. These stories, rumours they mentioned could be about anything," Chakotay continued.

Tom nodded until a thought occurred to him. He eyed the former Commander with interest. "Wait, are you sticking up for..."

"No," Chakotay blurted out defensively. "It's too early to assume anything. That's all."

"Mr Chakotay is correct," Ersa chimed in. "The way the story is phrased; the ship invades and leaves. That doesn't sound like..."

"Someone who kills for the sheer hell of it. No of course not," Harry said.

Tom looked on uncomfortably. He wasn't the only one. The room had fallen silent again. He let out a sigh as he stood up. "I don't, no, I won't believe it until I see it for myself. Until then we're sticking with the facts we know."

"Apart from we're stuck in a sphere that uses towers to suck the life out of planets, what else do we know?" Harry asked bluntly.

"It's nice to sum everything up and quickly once in a while," Tom said lightly.

"That most people do not see the towers as threats until it is too late, if at all," Chakotay answered Harry's question.

Tira thought the conversation had settled down enough for her to be heard, she stepped forward. "Some worlds resist them. Didn't you say your first planet was like that? Now there's the planet the Katane visited."

Tom thought about it quickly before somebody said anything first. "One lone resistance movement, yeah, and I don't think that other planet was rebelling against that. There wasn't even a tower there."

"Now," Ersa butted in, putting Tom right off. He wasn't the only one as the whole room turned their heads to stare at him. "The pieces fit. A whole planet doesn't just turn from a tourist resort and trading hub to a militarised and isolated one in a few months. I'm not the only one who noticed the little light, electricity in the city we visited, am I?"

Tom sat forward, staring at him intently. "Lena reported that the rebellion was started by the military opening fire on an alien. There's a story behind that than simple xenophobia. She seemed convinced at least."

Harry couldn't help but groan, his face was riddled in disappointment. "How I'd love to have your imagination," he uttered sarcastically.

"What's so imaginative about it?" Tom asked. "It seems to me that the Soft are either stepping up with their tower building, or we're in the centre of this whole thing."

Chakotay's mind drifted away, so did his eyes. The conversation with Damien replaying in his head. Tira noticed it and watched him carefully.

Tom hadn't noticed he wasn't listening to him, he kept on talking. "I can't think of any other scenario that fits what we've seen so far."

"I can, and it explains the plot holes of yours," Harry said. "Why leave at all? Hmm? Two starships, two allies, the crew that comes with it. How does a shuttle crewed by one compare with that? Then there's the personal factors that make this scenario even more ludicrous."

"I don't hear any other theories that make more sense, so..." Tom said with a weary voice.

Harry felt a twinge of sympathy for him, even if he didn't understand why Tom was so stubborn on the matter. He at the very least tried to remove the harsh tone in his voice, "it's the one we've seen before. It's the one we all expected. Only this time it seems he was kind enough to keep us out of it."

The last few words brought Chakotay's attention back. "Kind? Have I been getting the definition of evil wrong all these years? No wonder I'm having problems."

Tom briefly glanced at him, weakly smiling at his remark. "Well at least we have Chakotay's change of personality figured out. He's been looking at the wrong dictionary."

Harry sighed impatiently. "I'm not attacking him. If I had been through even a fraction of what he had been through, I'd flip out as well, ideally away from the people I knew. Which is what I'm suggesting. Tom's theory paints a picture of extreme ego and selfishness, if you ask me."

Ersa glanced towards Tira, he was relieved to see her frowning a little. "I'm not the only one who's lost, am I?" She shook her head and smiled.

"That's... actually a good point," Tom said, his face fell as the realisation hit him. "I may have to rethink this completely."

"What do you mean?" Chakotay asked.

"Well, it's been nagging at me for a while, I just swept it away occasionally. What's the goal here?" Tom answered, making the other half of the room confused as well. "The Soft. What do they want? Why trap so many planets and ships here? I mean yeah, they're making these super strong things. That's all we know. Is that what the energy draining is for; to power these experiments?"

"If I remember right, normal Game Spheres drained power to sustain themselves," Harry said.

Tom's eyebrows flew up, he scoffed. "Yeah, but why? If that's what spheres do, what's the point of them other than destroying planets? It's hard to imagine a whole race devoting itself to pointless murder."

"As opposed to necessary murder?" Harry commented. He had to laugh when Tom passed him a look that he himself used to use, everytime Tom said something stupid. "I know what you meant, I have wondered about it as well."

"All we know about the Soft and their motives, at least in the past, was to get revenge on us for what the Equinox did," Tom said. "I doubt all of this is a means to do so. It's a tad overkill."

Chakotay glanced between the two, he looked a little worried as well as intrigued by the turn in conversation. "Humans also had this generation of Chosens, and potentially next generation's as well. Then there was Damien turning a unit of them into his soldiers."

Tom nodded, "well yeah, but that doesn't justify dragging other races into it. We weren't even going to be here anyway, so I doubt this whole giant Game Sphere is about getting back at us."

"None of the Enterprise crew remember the trip into Death Corridor. Neither are they aware of anything from last year. It feels like we were lured in here," Harry pointed out. "Still as you said, it doesn't justify the rest."

Tom's whole demeanour fell. The others watched him wander aimlessly towards the window, passing the two alien guests on route. "You're right," once he reached it, his voice hoarse. Since all anyone could see was his back, they had no idea what his reaction was going to be. "We're being played. They're laughing at us."

Chakotay's face turned into a grimace, he turned it away so Harry wouldn't notice it. He meanwhile was too shocked to notice anything else.

"Everywhere we go people are afraid of us. We're hunted by people who blame us for something," Tom said. "Then we hear about this rumour of a silver ship attacking planets, we even get it from a world where their tower is missing. It's vague enough for us to believe this is our missing shuttle, that's what it is doing."

Harry nodded slowly, his own mood had lowered. "So we try to retrace its steps or get to a planet before them. Either way, the aliens think we're this evil ship they've heard about."

"Even if we don't, we're still forced to either fight or flee from other ships who believe it," Tom continued. "This is a distraction."

Chakotay flinched at the last sentence. His fists clenched at his side.

"So... Tom could be right. Strange," Harry said, prompting Tom to glare in his direction. It naturally didn't bother him. "If the Soft are going to the trouble of distracting us, then we must have the ability to destroy this thing."

"But how? The only known method is to destroy the towers powering it," Tira stuttered.

"Which is an impossible task even if the Soft weren't still building them. There must be something we've missed, something only we can do," Harry said.

The conversation was going a little too far in Chakotay's point of view. He had to say something. "I don't think so. If we were a threat of that kind, they would have destroyed us by now." Everyone focused on him. "Remember what they did when we were merely just in the neighbourhood of three towers?"

"By doing all the things they did, they revealed themselves to us. They've probably learned from that mistake," Harry disagreed with him. However Tom appeared to be lost in thought. "Also, with the demon shield and two extra ships, maybe they can't."

Chakotay sighed. He had far better arguments, but everytime he thought about vocalising them, he worried that it would raise further questions. The distraction theory didn't make any sense with what he thought. One argument seemed to win out over the others, it was just how to say it that held him back further.

He had a little extra time as Ersa decided to rejoin the group and the conversation. "What about the ship that briefly attacked us before? Didn't you say they may have sent us a message?"

Harry's face fell, fear grew in his eyes. "I was mistaken," he started to stutter. Tira watched with concern. "It was probably another way for the Soft to mislead us."

Tom escaped from his head to look at his friend as he began to pace over to where he stood. "Which?" he asked. "It can't be both."

"It was a taunt, a ploy, okay!" Harry snapped at no one in particular. It seemed like he shouted it at the whole room. He turned his back on them to stare outside. "The only pattern that those numbers made were co-ordinates."

Chakotay looked on with interest. "Really? To where?"

Harry was feeling the complete opposite of that though. "Nothing," he answered, confusing everyone. Tira was closest to him as she had remained out of everyone's way during the argument. She carefully approached him to stroke his shoulder. It didn't settle him, it just made him shiver. "To where I lost my ship. The Leda."

"The exact co-ordinates?" Chakotay said to himself. He noticed Tom gesturing his eyes between him and Harry in the corner of his own. He countered with a brief frown. "If this was a taunt or a distraction, how would the Soft know where to point?"

"We're in their Game Sphere. They probably know every..." Tom said.

"No, it wasn't exact. It was close enough though. The closest thing to those co-ordinates," Harry said roughly. "We all know what else is nearby. The planet Ruva, the anomaly that trapped Erayas, the primitive planet with the lab."

Anger and what felt like blind panic suddenly consumed Tom. It made him rush towards Harry before he could really do anything about it. "That's the complete opposite of nothing. Why didn't you tell us?" he ended up yelling.

Harry whipped himself around so he could see his friend, and maybe why he was shouting at him. "Tom, it screams trap or at least taunt. We've spent far too long in that area of space and got nothing but grief for it. They want to lure us away, you were the one who suggested that."

"Yeah, but we don't know what it is we're being lured away from," Tom stuttered. He noticed Chakotay staring at him as if he were listening carefully. He ignored it for now. "These odd events, I only started to notice them when we left that area. Tira's ship for example, being sent to that system. They knew she'd try to contact us."

Tira looked on uncomfortably, Harry briefly glanced toward her and got offended in her place. "That just suggests they wanted people who were a threat to their new tower, away from it. Including us."

Saying it out loud helped Harry realise what Tom was hinting at. Tom could tell by his face that he did and nodded. "Or they wanted us to know," Harry said.

Chakotay scowled between them both. He noticed Tom about to tap his commbadge and so he stepped forward. "Wait. Before you give any kind of command, we should discuss it first. Isn't that what you said we should do, stick together."

"Maybe someone should have told James that!" Tom snapped. Chakotay and Harry stared at him silently, but their faces said a whole lot more. They each looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry but one of two things are possibly happening here. One, we're being toyed with, distracted with silver ship rumours and towers that *need* destroying, so we don't see the big picture. Two, I was right in the first place and we have a rogue Slayer on our hands, giving us a reputation of being warmongers."

"I don't agree," Chakotay said.

Harry rolled his eyes in frustration. "Of course you don't."

"The first theory doesn't explain where the Flyer is or what it's up to. It's also circumstantial at best. The second one is too ridiculous to believe. We needed two ships, several away teams just to help one planet. We barely even made it. Now you're expecting me to believe that they can be taken down by one..." Chakotay said irritably.

Both Harry and Tom responded at the same time, very similarly. "You're oversimplifying it!" Tom yelled.

"Well what do you think happened?" Harry had snapped at the same time.

Chakotay laughed despite his irritation with the two of them. "You're making up stories. We don't have all the facts yet. It's no surprise we're flying around the sector like drunk monkeys. And you wonder why everyone suspects us."

"We're gathering information and..." Tom grumbled.

Harry shouted over him though, not intentionally though. "I wasn't in favour of that. Don't blame me!"

Tom stared at him as if he had punched him hard in the arm instead. "No, you'd just prefer to keep important information to yourself and whine when no one does what you want. Way to have my back, *buddy*."

The words and the way he said it struck Harry in the chest. He shook his head. "Don't make this personal, Tom. I'm not."

Chakotay scoffed but the pair weren't paying attention to him now. "Yeah right."

"You didn't want to pursue the hidden message by the Ruvans, because it would upset you," Tom grumbled. "I think that's personal. Don't you?"

Harry wasn't going to take that lying down. "You only think that this silver ship nonsense and missing Flyer mystery is related, because you don't want to believe that we may have a let a psychotic murderer off our leash."

"I was the one that brought up the idea that I may have been wrong!" Tom shouted back at him. By this point the two guests were feeling very uncomfortable and were silently debating how to get to either exits, without bothering the arguing men.

"Well it only took two weeks of provoking everyone in the sphere," Chakotay said sarcastically.

Harry threw a glare his way, "I'm still waiting to hear what your idea is. All you've done is poke holes in ours."

"I'd agree, but I don't remember hearing you suggest anything either," Tom said.

### **The Bridge:**

Everyone was manning their stations in silence. Some were looking around awkwardly every now and then. Any time they caught someone else's eye doing the same thing, they shared a worried look.

The shouting from the Ready Room was loud enough for them to hear, and it was getting far more regular than it did before. It still wasn't loud enough for anyone to make out the words.

"They've been in there an hour," Lena said at Tactical, glancing briefly at Danny standing beside her.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked.

Lena shook her head meekly. "No. You do realise that this is my station right?"

Danny smirked, "I know. It's closer though."

Lena groaned just as the turbolift opened nearby. "I noticed," she said in disgust. "No, I don't think my dad arguing with Tom and Harry is hot."

"Oh, forgot you're a mind reader," Danny giggled. She turned to walk away, only instead she bumped into the new arrival. "Oh, Jess."

Jessie was about to say something, the noise from the Ready Room stalled her temporarily. A frown formed on her face. "What's that about?"

Lena shrugged her shoulders. "I dunno. Harry wanted a meeting just with the leaders. He has been complaining about our destination choices lately."

"Hmm," Jessie said. Her attention went to the viewscreen, it surprised her that all she could see were the stars streaming by. "Where are we going?"

Danny flinched a little before hurrying over to her other side, and clutched her arm. "That reminds me. Got something to show you."

As Danny tried to pull her away, a disgusted look appeared on Jessie's face. Of course that was more than enough incentive to resist being dragged. "I never want to see what you want me to see."

The Opps station came to life, getting Faye's as well as Lena's attention. Jessie quickly pulled her arm away to escape and looked over as well.

"We're picking up a distress call," Faye reported.

Lena looked around the Bridge, getting all the more nervous as she did. A few of the crew saw her do it, not really sure what to make of it.

"Should I uh, listen to it?" Faye asked, now also as nervous as Lena was.

"Who are you asking?" Lena stuttered.

Faye didn't answer, she didn't know herself. Then she caught Jessie briefly looking toward her, then at Lena with a sympathetic look on her face.

"Nobody was left in charge," Danny explained for anyone who was confused. "We may as well listen to it, right?"

Faye nodded, "yeah." She worked on her station until they heard the familiar beep. It was quickly followed by loud rumbles, people shouting in the distance.

Then there was a distressed woman's voice, "we're under attack. Please, anyone who can hear this. Help us." The sound of an explosion cut them off.

"What's the source?" Jessie asked.

Faye quickly scanned her console before asking, her complexion started to pale. "Uh, the readings match the lone ship that attacked us. A Ruvan ship."

Lena hesitantly glanced down at her station. She bit her lip in an attempt to snap herself out of it. "Can we tell who's attacking them from here?"

"No. All I can recognise is the Ruvan specs. There is something else there though," Faye answered.

Jessie walked over to her, she leaned on the station. "How far are we?"

"We'd get there in ten minutes," Faye answered nervously. She directed it towards Lena who hadn't budged at all since her question. "It could be anything. It could be a trap. I... I dunno."

"If we don't go they could die," Lena said, though despite her words her voice sounded timid. "If we do, we're putting the fleet at risk."

"Lena it's okay. It's not your responsibility," Jessie said in her direction. She hurried over towards the Ready Room. Danny tried to tell her that wasn't a good idea but she said something on route, drowning her out. "If they want to play Captains, then let them play..."

The door to the Ready Room opened. Immediately she was greeted by yelling, luckily not directed at her.

"And speaking of withholding vital information, care to share something with us?" Tom shouted over both Harry and Chakotay.

It took the former Commander by surprise and he didn't have time to show it. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh please. You're either constantly acting shifty or you need to check yourself into Sickbay to check for nits or fleas," Tom said.

Harry tried his best not to laugh, still being angry helped with that. Chakotay however wasn't even close to being amused. "As usual, you're nothing but jokes and stupid comments. Maybe you should go back to the safe helm until you grow the hell up. You're not fit for command," Chakotay snarled at him.

"What, and you are? Remind me again, where's Janeway?" Tom shouted back.

"That argument's getting tired," Chakotay said through gritted teeth.

Harry folded his arms defiantly. "There's plenty more we can use."

Jessie stepped backwards to close the door, her bemused wide expression was directed towards the centre of the Bridge. Danny sniggered at it.

"Who wants to play Captain?" Jessie asked. She noticed Faye shaking her head rapidly. The next person she saw was Danny, who for some reason had her hands on her hips and was pulling a pouty expression. "What, what are you doing?"

"Duh, my impression of Janeway. Do I look commandy?" Danny said, Jessie hoped not seriously.

"No," everyone answered almost in sync.

Then Jessie's eye landed on the helm, where Naomi was busy using the console as a mirror while she put on her lipstick.

"Don't worry, auto pilot is locked," Faye said as if she read her mind. Jessie then remembered that she was a telepath and probably did. The thought occurred that it wouldn't have been needed anyway.

"Fine. I'll do it. I think we should help them. Whoever can unlock the helm, set a course. Send a message to the fleet to follow," Jessie said as confidently as she could.

Everyone seemed to buy it, they looked relieved anyway. The only one not convinced was Lena who stared at her with a look of guilt on her face.

"No," she said finally.

Jessie looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Danny should take the helm. You know how to fly right?" Lena said in Danny's direction.

Danny winced slightly, "it's been a while."

"Fine, do you think you're better than Naomi?" Lena questioned.

Danny laughed, "in so many ways."

"Hey!" Naomi whined. Everyone focused on her as she turned her chair around. For some reason she had only put lip stick on her top lip. "Do I have to do both?"

Jessie stared at the girl blankly for what felt like a few minutes to her. "No, you look fabulous," she lied, making the young girl smile in response. Once the two had their backs to each other Jessie looked like she had seen a ghost. "Oh my god."

Lena walked away from Tactical while trying not to laugh at Jessie's expression of horror. "You're a good shot Jess, you take Tactical. Faye, tell the rest of the fleet to keep going and we'll meet up with them later."

"What?" Faye stuttered.

"If it's a trap or something, at least they'll be okay," Lena sighed on route to the centre of the Bridge.

Jessie hurried over to Tactical, the two women shared a smile as they passed.

"It's like musical chairs every day on this Bridge," Danny remarked while sitting down in Naomi's seat.

"Red Alert, battle stations," Lena ordered once she got to her destination.

Voyager left the rest of its fleet behind. Its new course forced it into an almost vertical dive. The speed gradually increased until it could go no faster.

"We're almost in sensor range," Faye reported.

Even though she had took her place in the centre of the bridge, Lena still didn't feel right taking either of the two seats. Instead she stood still, waiting with her arms folded tightly. "Tell me when we know what we're up against."

Faye barely had time to nod, her station indicated it was ready with a few sounds. "There's four other ships. They're..." she started to stutter. "They're the same as the ship that's under attack."

"Danny, all stop," Lena ordered quickly. Danny didn't argue, she quickly gave the helm the same command. The sudden drop out of warp could be felt by everyone. "Have they detected us?"

Opps answered her question before Faye could, the usual sound of somebody hailing the ship made her face scrunch up. "Maybe?"

"If it's a trap, they're keeping up the charade. That first ship is still being fired on," Jessie said.

She only had a few seconds to think about it before the hailing ships would likely turn on them. Lena hurried over to Jessie, stopping beside her. "How are they doing?"

"Not good. Shields are almost gone, five minutes max. Judging by their weapons it would only take one hit to make the hull buckle," Jessie answered.

"Um, they're getting a bit anxious here," Faye stuttered as her station wouldn't shut up.

"I gotta waste some time here, we only have one shot," Lena whispered to Jessie. She gave her a little frown as the younger girl stared at her intently. Jessie eventually gave her a nod. "Danny, how's your impulse flying?"

"Oh god," Faye blurted out.

Danny scowled, not that she'd see it, just hear it. "I was told that I mastered evasive maneuvers. Unpredictable and showy."

Jessie rolled her eyes, but she did it with good humour. "That means all over the place and keep away, she's crazy."

"Good," Lena said to most of the Bridge's confusion. "Put them on screen."

"Are you sure? All of the ships are Ruvan, their planet was occupied by the Soft. Last time I checked they didn't like Slayers, or Humans for that matter," Faye questioned.

"They already know who we are," Lena replied with a small smile.

Reluctantly Faye reached over to open the hailing frequencies. The viewscreen changed, one lone alien with light blue skin scowled at them from behind a desk. "Be gone. This is a civil matter. You have no right to intrude."

"We're responding to a distress call. It's what we do," Lena said.

The alien stared at her directly, his grey eyes sharpened. "They're nothing but criminals. We're merely taking them into custody."

"So, just a misunderstanding?" Lena said with faked relief.

The man's face didn't falter. "I'd be sure to forget any previous misunderstandings if you take your ship elsewhere," his voice was cold, there was a hint of a smirk in the corner of his lips.

Jessie briefly glanced down at her station without moving her head, then straight up again.

"Hmm. I'd be happy to, but something bugs me. What's their crime?" Lena asked.

"Terrorism," he answered without missing a beat, he didn't even blink. "A crime that is punishable by death, just a warning."

"A warning that isn't needed. We were only trying to help," Lena said, her patience waning a bit thin.

A smile appeared on the alien's face. "No of course not. I just thought you looked... *familiar*. My apologies. Once we're done here, I can *assist* you out of our territory."

Danny mimed the words he emphasised strangely. Anyone else who noticed it were confused as well, including Lena. She struggled to maintain her neutral expression.

"That will not be necessary," she said as politely as she could.

Jessie looked shocked, "wait a minute. We can't just leave, they're going to die in a minute if we don't..."

Lena turned quickly to glare at her. "It's none of our business." Jessie shook her head in disgust while Lena slowly walked back to the centre of the bridge. She maintained eye contact with the alien until she reached the helm, right beside Danny. "Turn us around," she said directly to her, her eyes widened a little.

"Uh... yes sir," Danny stuttered nervously.

Once Lena turned away to head back towards the command chairs, the man's hand reached for something off screen. "A very wise decision you have... *chosen*." Lena resisted turning around and making a rude gesture at him, at least until the viewscreen changed back to normal.

"Okay, I got the last word he over said. Familiar and assist though..." Danny said.

"Danny," Lena warned her. "Turn us around, nice and badly. Make sure we get in transporter range."

Danny chuckled nervously, "yeah I heard you." Her fingers quickly glided over the console.

Tactical started to make a fuss, getting Lena's attention immediately. "Their shields are down. They're firing again," Jessie stuttered.

"Shields down, transporters when we're in range," Lena quickly ordered. "Danny, warp nine on our previous course when that's done."

"Crazy and stupid, I like it," Danny commented as she worked.

Everyone could feel the turn Danny was making, a lot of people had to clutch on to their console to avoid sloping to the right. Lena edged over to get support from the bars nearby.

Outside Voyager was on its side while flying away from the fleet of four ships. Their victim was struck one more time, causing the hull to erupt in a ball of flames. Seconds later Voyager leapt into warp.

"Got them," Jessie sighed in relief.

Faye wasn't ready to feel the same, she seemed even tenser. "No sign of pursuit, yet."

"Hopefully they thought that we were only leaving," Lena said with an unsure smile. "They don't want to risk picking a fight, not with those ships. It was our already bad reputation I was worried about."

"Transport was just before the explosion. Hopefully they won't have noticed," Jessie said.

Lena smirked at her, "nice acting, I almost believed you were mad at me."

Someone cleared their throat just below where Jessie stood. Both Lena and Danny glanced to the source, while Jessie could only try but the wall beside her blocked her view. "Someone's mad at you though," Tom grumbled, his hands flew to his hips. "What the hell's going on?"

Lena rolled her eyes away from him. "I'm surprised you even noticed. You didn't come out when the Red Alert klaxon was going off, what hope did I have of interrupting?"

Chakotay bit his lip to stop himself from laughing behind the ex-helmsman. "We're at Red Alert? Huh." It didn't work, he laughed anyway. What did work was Tom's attempt to glare back at him. He paid him back with a shove out of his way.

"You can't just take command whenever you want. This isn't the old days in the Delta, this is far more dangerous," Tom tried to scold her, but it just sounded like a stammer.

"If we had waited for you to finish your play fights, the crew of that Ruvan ship would have been killed," Jessie snapped at him. Tom didn't know she was there, he jumped at that and at her tone. He tried to look more like a commander while staring at her, but for once she was towering over him thanks to Tactical's position. That and her piercing stare melted him into a puddle on the floor.

"The same ship that sent us a message, allegedly?" Harry questioned. Lena just nodded her answer. "Maybe we should pay them a visit then."

**Sickbay:**

"You could've been tricked into rescuing Soft spies. What were you thinking?" Tom angrily stuttered.

"Actually, it was me that said we should go," Jessie spoke up, prompting Lena to stare at her. "We had no idea who was attacking them. Someone had to make the call."

He felt bad enough shouting at Lena, and a little terrified at the same time, but right now he felt it would be far worse doing the same to Jessie. He had the image of kicking an already down puppy, an angry puppy that would bite a chunk out of his leg when provoked. He couldn't do it, just as he couldn't challenge her on the Bridge. He started to pace the Doctor's office instead.

"They're not though," the Doctor said.

Chakotay frowned in his direction. "What?"

"Softmicron," the Doctor answered as if it were obvious.

"That's not really the point. No one's on our side here, we have to be careful," Tom said.

Chakotay held back the urge to grab him and slap him a few times. Shouting at his daughter hadn't helped with that. "Except for our two allies and the potential new ones here, yeah we're public enemy number one."

"It doesn't matter," Lena quickly said. "I agreed with Jessie, that's why I decided to take charge."

"Why? You have no more authority here than Jessie does," Chakotay said to her gently. "Less in fact."

Lena avoided eye contact with him as she looked around the office. "Jess has enough on her plate without the possibility of not saving a ship in time." She noticed Jessie shift uncomfortably in the corner of her eye.

"Maybe, but so do you," Chakotay said.

"They're not Soft. People have been saved and we avoided another encounter that could be used against us," Harry tried to defuse the situation. "They're not following us and I think Lena did a good job. Can we let it go?"

Tom shrugged lightly, all while keeping his arms folded. "Fine."

The Doctor seemed relieved, he dared to smile. "We have a crew of eleven, with the worst injury being a third degree burn to the arm. Nothing I couldn't handle. Their Captain is anxious to speak with you."

Tom and Harry shared a tired look briefly, Harry smirked afterwards and turned to the hologram. "With who?"

"Well she said the Captain of this ship who saved their lives. Make of that what you will," the Doctor answered.

"To avoid anymore arguments, we all go. Maybe we can ask about their intention behind the coded message," Tom suggested.

Harry nodded, "agreed."

"Finally," Chakotay sighed.

All but Jessie and the Doctor filed out of the office. She hesitated when she noticed, then started to head out as well. The Doctor though worried he wouldn't get this chance again. "Jessie."

It was all it took to stop her. Her back was facing him though, so he couldn't see her squeeze her eyes closed. "It's okay. I know you weren't yourself."

"That's not... I wanted you to know something. It's very important," the Doctor said. Jessie turned slightly, seemingly waiting for him to go on. He took it as that. "You were correct. The chip was the cause." He noticed her shoulders tense. "With his new telepathy, I had no way of knowing how it would effect it. If it would at all."

"Why? What was the point?" Jessie asked, quickly noticing that the news had made her voice raw.

"I wish I knew," the Doctor grimaced. "My theory is that it would make him violent, lash out at people for no reason."

Jessie nodded, finally opening her eyes. "Then when you accuse him of the attempted rape and assault, people would believe you. Yes, I remember that part well enough."

He knew admitting this would be difficult, the guilt weighed quite heavily. "Even in my reprogrammed state, I didn't intend for this to happen."

"No. I never saw it coming either," Jessie said with a lot of pain in her voice. Once she walked out, the Doctor realised the confession was long over due, and of no use to anyone at the moment. It may in fact have made things worse.

Outside, the main part of Sickbay looked a little cramped with eleven light skinned aliens sitting or standing around. The command team and Lena had joined them, which had brought one woman forward to greet them.

Jessie decided to hang back for now, out of the way. It seemed like all she had missed were the introductions.

"We were fortunate that you didn't get our message. We'd be dead by now," the alien woman said.

"Captain Tanmin, that message..." Harry said.

"Please Kim, call me Maraina," the woman said politely.

Harry nodded. "Harry. And we did get your message, for the most part. We were just unsure as to its meaning."

"I see. We attacked you, and I'm sorry about that. We thought it was the only way to get your attention," Maraina said.

Chakotay and Tom began to speak at the same time, each of them barely had time to finish their first word. There was some uncomfortable throat clearing afterward. Chakotay gestured with his hand for him to go first.

"I assume you were trying to point us back to your planet. Our calculations were a little off," he then said.

"No," Maraina shook her head. Tom seemed puzzled by the answer, while Harry's mind jumped straight to the Leda conclusion again. "I'm sure you've heard. The stories about a ship bringing death and destruction with it."

"We're..." Chakotay said with a sigh, as he considered his answer carefully. He felt Lena staring into the back of his head. "Aware of it yes."

"It started with us, on our world," Maraina said sadly. "We wouldn't lure you to it, it would be far too dangerous."

"Pointless you mean," another alien piped up, making the Captain nod.

Lena side stepped slightly so she could walk a little closer, in between Chakotay and Harry. Curiosity was getting the better of her. "Your power stations. They were destroyed?"

"That's a leap..." Harry commented quietly.

"Yes," Maraina answered, throwing him off. "The stations were built to fulfill our growing energy requirements. We still had another system in place, they were never meant to replace them. Everything was fine after the attack until..." she hesitated.

"Raids on peoples homes, blackouts, hunger strikes, terrorist attacks," another alien said for her.

Maraina glanced back at every one of her crew, before turning back to the Humans. "This is all that's left of a village, not far from station two. They fire bombed it. Hundreds dead, in seconds."

Harry felt physically sick, "my god."

"Why?" Tom could barely say through his own disgust.

"We knew," Maraina replied. "We were right next to that... horrible monstrosity. People would go out one day and never return. Houses without power for no reason. Plant life started to die. That station was killing us. When it was destroyed, we celebrated it."

One of the other aliens started to tremble just as he decided to talk. "We tried everything to convince the government to shut them down. They'd act like everything was fine and then another person would disappear. Nobody else would believe us either. We really thought once they were gone, we'd get answers. That the horror would stop..."

"Trey," Maraina said softly. He nodded and sat down on the nearest biobed. "I only saw bits of this. I'm a Captain of a small exploration vessel, a part of a highly respected fleet. I thought I could help my home, get the attention of the ministers on their behalf. It would always be the same thing. *We'll look into it, oh by the way there's a nebula we want you to scan.*"

Chakotay tried to bite his tongue, clench his jaw, anything to stop him from saying anything. The last sentence though struck him, he had to respond. "They didn't want you in their way, so they send you on any pointless errand they can think of. When you ask the wrong question, they try to silence you. Whatever means necessary."

"It wasn't your fault, Maraina. You saved our lives," an alien quickly said before Maraina could answer. The rest of the aliens seemed to agree with them as they all spoke up, saying similar things.

"They wanted me to blame myself. They thought I'd stop fighting if I saw my home burning. I won't give them that satisfaction," Maraina said determinedly.

Tom shook his head as everything started to sink in, he caught Lena's angry face as he did. "So the stories, they talked about the destruction that came afterwards. We thought that once the towers were gone, that it would be over. It just gets worse."

"No," Lena said bluntly. "If the towers were left alone, the planet would end up like Erayas. Most of the population either dead or transformed into killing machines. The planet inhospitable, or worse, in pieces."

"She's not wrong," Harry said. "One way or another, the Soft can shift the blame onto us and their actions remain hidden."

"I hate to push you further on this subject, but... I don't see how any of this relates to the co-ordinates you sent us," Chakotay said.

Maraina's confused frown worried the command team. "Your vessels did go in that direction. You didn't see it?"

Harry hid his clenching fists behind his back. "If you're talking about the damage to subspace, we know about it. One of them was lost to a warp core breach there."

"I don't think even a breach could do that much damage," Maraina said with worry. "It'll definitely be far too dangerous to return now, for both of your ships. I'm surprised they didn't shoot at the first sight of you."

Chakotay's eyes drifted to one side, "yes, so am I."

Tom felt a bit more confident than he did before, "we don't have to get that close. A slight detour should do the trick."

"Wait. Is it really something we need to actually see? We have a missing shuttle to find, don't we?" Lena questioned.

"All I know is that it appeared when station one was destroyed. Or at least, around that time," Maraina said. "I can only describe it as a tear in subspace. I didn't have time to get any useful scans than that as my entire fleet were called back from their missions."

Harry turned to Tom with an urgent look on his face, his body language matched. "If that's true it was long after the Leda was destroyed. We don't need to take the fleet, I can take the Ent..."

"No way," Tom disagreed. He smiled at his best friend to reassure him. "We're in this together." He looked to Chakotay who was lightly nodding at him. "What are we waiting for?"

He hurried for the exit, with Harry right behind him. Lena walked over to where Jessie had stood silently. The pair didn't say anything, yet Jessie still gave her a weak smile before heading out as well. Lena followed closely.

"Did anyone else see it? This tear," Chakotay asked carefully.

Maraina's head shook only once. "No. The exploration fleet rarely travel together. I was assigned to assess the damage caused by your vessel's destruction. I found the rift first." She looked at him with a puzzled expression. "Why?"

"Only you knew about it?" Chakotay asked.

"Until now, yes," Maraina said.

Chakotay's shoulders had tensed up, he turned his head away. "Good."

### **The Bridge:**

Tom hurried around the barriers surrounding the command centre, in order to reach Faye at Opps. "Are we alone?"

"I'm not detecting any ships in the area," Faye answered.

"Okay, all stop," Tom ordered as he stared towards the helm. He waited to see Danny punch in the command. Once done, Opps was his priority again. "Liaise with Astrometrics, focus only on those coordinates. Jess, can you watch our back?"

"Just our back? Sure," Jessie replied from Tactical.

Tom laughed, secretly hoping she was joking to lighten her spirits. "We take a quick *peek* and we're gone."

"We know Tom, relax," Danny butted in.

"Hang on," Faye murmured. "I'm getting something. An opening in subspace, two kilometres wide. The readings I'm getting from it are a bit weird."

Tom nodded like he expected, "of course. Don't worry about it, we can examine the data later. Right now it's just about getting everything and..."

"Its energy is building, or is it leaking? I can't tell from here," Faye stuttered.

"Can we get a look at it?" Tom asked her.

The viewscreen zoomed in a few times, giving him his answer. Most of the Bridge was looking by the time it had zoomed in four times. There was nothing to look at, just a field of black. It enlarged again, focusing on a small red dot sitting in the centre. It flickered a few times.

Tom looked briefly at Faye, she was still working so he went back to the viewscreen just in time for one last zoom in. Now they could see that the red dot was a jagged line, like a crack in the middle of nothing. It wasn't just one colour either, there were subtle bits of blue in it that shimmered. It gave the whole anomaly its flickering appearance.

"What the hell is it?" Tom wondered out loud. He then noticed Danny seemed to be shaking as she stared at it. "Have you seen this..."

"We gotta go, now," she interrupted in a panic. She didn't wait, her hands flew across the helm. Tom dashed across the Bridge to confront her.

Faye looked a bit freaked out by this, "the Enterprise and Katane are leaving too, they're hailing."

Jessie was the only one left staring at the viewscreen. Then she saw something far stranger than the crack in space. There were no stars, no distant nebulas, nothing. It was just black. The more she focused on it, the more it looked like it was rippling, moving.

*"Tom, it's happening again. Get out of here, warp nine,"* Harry's voice yelled over the comm.

Voyager was moving to the right, the line was moving towards the left of the screen. Before it was out of view, it was consumed by the darkness. The movement Jessie thought she saw seemed unmistakable now, waves darker than space itself were overwhelming the area and it was getting closer.

Tom had just reached the helm when he noticed this too. He clutched onto the console tightly as the ship's sudden turn tried to pull him over. "The anomaly. My god."

Voyager completed its hard turn just as the Katane disappeared in a flash of light. The Enterprise was facing the same way, waiting for Voyager. Their fourth ally was still turning.

Behind them all the darkness was rapidly approaching. The regular space that surrounded the vessels, filled with stars, seemed so bright in comparison.

Their warp drives lifted, they flashed and took Voyager away from it. The fourth ship was metres away from facing the correct direction when the Enterprise fired its tractor beam onto its hull. Seconds later they were both gone in a flash of white.

"We got them," Triah reported.

Harry had been sitting on the edge of his seat, clutching the arm rests so tightly his knuckles were white. The news washed over him, pushing him back into the chair and taking all of that tension away.

"Well done everyone. Thank you," he said breathlessly.

Triah and Bryan glanced at each other and shared a brief smile.

"That was close. How come we couldn't detect it?" Chakotay asked.

"I didn't really care to find out then, I don't now," Triah answered a little irritably. "We just knew to get the hell out of there."

Bryan turned his head once again in her direction, "how far do we run? I mean if we can't detect it, how do we know when it'll be safe?"

Triah shook her head. Then she found Chakotay standing beside her, staring curiously. "We kept going until the engines gave us grief for it. It wasn't just the anomaly. The Katane and others were chasing us. We had no choice."

"Then we stay at warp," Harry said. "At least until we figure out how the hell this happened, again."

"I couldn't agree more," Chakotay said.

### **Voyager Astrometrics:**

A lot of the Senior Staff and a few of their alien allies gathered around the console, while B'Elanna and Harry manned it. The large screen displayed a stargate; it showed their current location, represented by a commbadge shaped symbol, as well as systems they had encountered dotted all over. The part most of the room were focusing on was the imposing black patch taking up the bottom right corner.

"It's not going to be accurate. We're only able to use markers that we know about; planets we or Enterprise visited, other anomalies and any ships in the area we can detect," B'Elanna explained.

The stargate refreshed. The black patch grew slightly, only overlapping one thing marked on the chart.

"What's that?" Tom asked.

Harry sighed a little out of relief, "the tear we were investigating."

"Oh, so no repeats of the Erayas incident?" Tom questioned. "That's a huge relief."

Chakotay nodded, "yes. It's figuring it out why this anomaly has grown, and hopefully how to stop it before it does reach another habited world."

"Pretty difficult when we can't even scan it," the Doctor said.

"Not necessarily. We were gathering all kinds of data at the time, to research that tear," Harry said. "It might give us a head start."

Inspiration struck B'Elanna, she turned to another part of the station to work on something. "Let's start with correlating all of the data with what's already in our database. We might..." the console beeped at her, making her trail off. "Oh, no."

"What?" Tom asked with urgency.

"I think Maraina was right. It's very likely the rift appeared when the tower was destroyed," B'Elanna started to explain. "I'm getting a lot of matches here. The rift fluctuated before we started to respond to the anomaly expansion. The energy readings matched the ones we got from Death Corridor, the Softmicron attack around Shurouva and previous Game Spheres."

Chakotay winced, forcing his eyes to close tightly. The rest of the room had tensed.

"When in the Enterprise's mission did the first anomaly incident happen?" Tom asked.

Harry gave him a confused stare, while B'Elanna decided to answer this for him. It didn't take her long. "The log reporting it was February 25th. Their mission before this was the one we discussed. This one."

A rectangular border appeared around one system on the chart, a new window appeared immediately showing an image of a yellow planet.

"They failed this one. The experiments slaughtered their ground teams," Harry said.

"The mission before it they didn't. How much time occurred between these?" Tom was still not convinced.

B'Elanna looked down again to find the answer. "The failed mission took place between the 20th and 21st February. Their successful one was 18th February."

"I wonder how long ago the Ruva network was destroyed," Tom stammered. Everyone stared in his direction. "Shurouva, we helped them in late January. We know from their logs that the Enterprise started its mission around the same time. Less than a month after, they succeed. One week later they arrive at their next target, only to be forced to flee while the anomaly swallows the planet whole."

"Tom stop," B'Elanna pleaded with him.

"They tried to stop us, they failed. I wonder how many networks have been destroyed since then," Tom was starting to tremble, the anger was taking over. "What better deterrent is there?"

"No it's not!" Chakotay snapped. "Towers are usually the heart of the Game Spheres. Perhaps this sphere is starting to weaken because of them being destroyed."

"Exactly. The anomaly's broken, twisted. When we liberated three planets, we broke the sphere. That's... that's the other possibility. Either way, it's our fault," Tom stammered.

Everybody looked very uncomfortable, but none of them looked as conflicted as the two Erayans in the room.

"Tom," Harry said with a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Our actions destroyed Erayas. Us," Tom continued anyway. "Billions of people gone, because we stuck our noses in."

"We don't know that for sure. It's a theory," Chakotay said calmly.

Tom was now too angry to listen to him. His head shook rapidly. "No! What else could it be? Did we really think the Softmicron would just let us get away with it? Of course not. It's no fun unless we have blood on our hands instead of them."

"Mr Paris. Please, try to calm down," Yana pleaded with him. "If you had refused to help them, their world would have ended up just like our planet."

Ersa seemed a bit conflicted until Yana spoke, then the same realisation struck him. "Then the same thing would have happened to us anyway. We were still infected."

"Oh yes, that's true. All better," Tom said bitterly. He turned his back on everyone, hoping that would stop them all from staring at him. He didn't want to be seen like this.

B'Elanna walked forward, anyone in her way voluntarily stepped out of her path. Her arm gently covered his back as she stood beside him closely. "Tom. This isn't your burden. The Softmicron are the sole people responsible for this. All we did was fight it. They probably did this as they know we can hurt them."

"We? I remember being the only person who wanted to destroy that tower. Everyone was against it. Everyone was right, I'm no Captain," Tom said, his voice breaking.

"Once we knew what it was, we were on your side. We were right behind you. Just as James' team were with him regarding the other two towers. Just as the Enterprise crew were with Sandi," B'Elanna said.

Chakotay nodded. "She's right. If you want to blame yourself for this, you blame all of us."

"That's not quite what she meant," the Doctor said awkwardly.

"No, but it's a point regardless. A lot of us made a habit of ignoring Tom if we didn't agree with him," Craig pointed out. His comment lightened the tense atmosphere a little bit, it didn't make any difference to Tom's mood though.

"Then maybe we should do that again," Tom ended up snapping at him. "Erayas suffered much more than any other tower infected world. That's on me and my daredevil decision to ram and then shoot down that tower."

Jessie had intentionally kept quiet, mainly to not draw attention to herself. However Tom's words were tugging on her patience. "So what are you going to do about it then huh? Run away on some suicidal quest on your own!" Her original silence had worked, most of the room looked at her as if they were surprised she was there at all.

"Jessie..." Tom stammered nervously.

"You'll only make things worse and hurt the people who care about you. If you're fine with that, go ahead, keep going on like this," Jessie grumbled.

All the Human members of the room knew she wasn't talking to Tom but somebody else entirely. The pain in her voice made everyone uncomfortable again.

"I'm sorry," Tom said sincerely.

His apology seemed to hit her straight in the chest, making her recoil. She'd been holding it in for weeks, her body was shaking from the pressure of her feelings suddenly exploding. With everyone looking at her she felt a need to leave the room, yet she forced herself to stay.

"No. I'm sorry," Jessie said, which seemed to ease the trembling slightly. "I shouldn't have took it out on you."

Tom made his way over to her. He tried to smile but the guilt was fighting against him. Instead he settled for putting a hand on her arm. "We'll find him. I promise."

"We're going to have to," Chakotay said.

Harry glanced in his direction, startled by his sudden interruption. Then he realised why he said it. "You're right. If this anomaly reaches another habited planet..." He looked towards Jessie with an apologetic glint in his eye. "There's no going back."

Jessie knew exactly what he meant by that, she was thinking it before while Tom was having his breakdown. She knew he was right.

"It's possible that he's not behind this at all," the Doctor said, prompting a few questionable stares. It made him uncomfortable. "It doesn't fit. He was unstable, hallucinating. Definitely not in the right frame of mind to be destroying Game Sphere towers on his own."

The opinion divided the room, with the ones changing their mind looking a little worried about it.

"Then where is he? I really doubt that..." B'Elanna asked.

"It'll be him," Jessie butted in grimly. Everyone turned to her again. "James carries a lot of guilt on his shoulders. All he wants is..." She struggled to get the rest of the words out as a lump developed in her

throat. After trying to clear it she attempted to continue. "That thing controlling Nathan said something, I know it. It pushed him over the edge."

Tom had a feeling what it was, but he knew better than to say anything.

"He wants to be redeemed. He'll think it's impossible so he won't stop," Jessie said, getting quieter with each word. Her throat throbbed by now, her eyes stung with tears that she wouldn't let loose. "Never."

"Then..." Tom said hesitantly. What he was thinking swiped that away, it gave him a new found determination. "What are we hanging around here for? Lets get back to work."

Most of the room nodded. B'Elanna gave him a warm smile as well.

Star light reflected off the planet's brilliant blue oceans, creating an array of reds and oranges on its surface and within its few clouds. The only visible land mass was showered by artificial lights. Natural light slowly crept up on the coastal areas, highlighting the various mixes of colours. The golden yellow sands, greys and browns of the buildings, and vague hints of green plant life.

A shadow cast over the oceans, it headed closer to land. Almost triangular in shape, the speed of it, it wasn't coming from anything natural. If anyone was watching it, they wouldn't be able to tell where it was coming from. It just grew larger as it seemingly approached.

It slowed to a crawl as it reached the part of the world still waiting for dawn. Once there was no natural light left it disappeared.

A few miles away from civilisation, amongst the fields and trees, the air distorted, rippled. There was a loud thud as something punctured the grass, pressing down on the land beneath it.

The trees surrounding the clearing, no one would see the sight of a silver stairwell appear out of nowhere and lower itself down mechanically to the ground. No one would also see the figures appeared out of thin air to walk down them. Each one wearing a robe covering them from head to toe.

One of them lingered near the top to stare towards the rising sun, just peeping over the water filled horizon. It wasn't the only thing doing so. A tall, imposing tower piercing the sky, almost as bright as the star itself. The new arrivals walked in that direction.

### **Voyager:**

Tom watched the viewscreen intently as the still stars turned into lines, streaming behind them. Normally seeing them made him feel at ease. Not today, no, not for the last few weeks. He thought about his breakdown in the Astrometrics lab and cringed inwardly. He did not want to feel that way again. It was no use dwelling on it further. They knew now what to do for the first time in a while.

"How long?" he asked.

Danny glanced over her shoulder briefly. He noticed her hesitant frown, he felt it as well. "Three hours."

Tom tried to relax into his chair, but it just made him feel useless, not relaxed so he sat back up. "I know you don't want to go back to that planet, but..."

"I know," Danny interrupted "Lena said she would have gone to it regardless of its state, so James probably would too. We may pick up his trail, I know."

"It seems like this area is the focal point of the sphere. Most of the habited planets have been taken over. If he's going to be anywhere, it'll be here," B'Elanna said from Tactical.

Several thoughts rushed at Tom at once, one of them stuck out like a sore thumb. "They're always habited planets."

"I guess it's no fun if there's no one around to suffer," B'Elanna said with distaste. "Remember the red giant? There was absolutely no point, yet the Softmicron still moved a habited planet into a close orbit. They obviously have no regard for any other species."

Tom inhaled deeply, hoping it would calm his nerves. It didn't but it did make him think of something. "Three hours, at least. We need a plan."

"That would be great if we had all the facts," Danny commented.

"Then we'll have to make several," B'Elanna smiled. Tom looked over his shoulder to return it. "We may get lucky and he'll still be in the Flyer. Tractor it in, forcefields everywhere, maybe Lena to hold him if he gets..."

"Lena," Tom mumbled. He stood up to have a look around the Bridge, even though he already knew what he was looking for wasn't there. "Where is Lena?"

Craig couldn't help but pull a face with worry at the view in front of him. A glass full of a dark red liquid was lifted to her lips. All of it was gone in a few seconds, all in one gulp. It was when she got up to go over to the replicator he felt he had to not literally step in.

"Lena, I don't think getting drunk is the answer here," he said.

It only stopped her for a second. She carried on regardless, repeating her order. This time she kept her back on him as she drank.

"Harry thinks there's a chance he turned, and the towers are just an excuse for him to kill things," Craig said warily. Her shoulders twinged a little. "I'd like to believe he's better than that now, but..."

Lena swung around, the look on her face rivalled Kathryn's when there was no coffee. "But what? That my brother is solely a killer, that's all he's good for?"

"No, no," Craig stuttered. He wasn't only saying that to save his skin, he believed it. "If he isn't, then he still left his family behind. He's done some impulsive stuff in the past, but I don't see him abandoning everyone and thing. I'd believe evil over that."

"He wasn't well. There was this chip thing that was messing with him," Lena argued. The glass was brought back to her mouth, it was empty again one sip later. "This isn't some one off mission where he comes back and he gets scolded by Jessie. No, this is him walking out on his Humanity. Something he... something he believed in greatly. It..."

Craig felt the grief coming from her voice as it began to tremble. He didn't know what to say to help her. "Yeah, I don't think that's what happened either. Evil may be better, it makes more sense."

Lena's eyes rolled as her head turned to one side, facing the window. "James saved me... from myself. I was so convinced that because of how I got here, that being the Slayer was all I was supposed to be. I... I was determined to do what I was *supposed to*. I would have died trying to save Erayas."

The words stung him, Craig tried to swallow a new lump in his throat. He wished he could have helped her then, convince her otherwise.

"I was merely a pawn," Lena said as her bottom lip trembled. "It didn't matter what happened to me, as long as he was Chosen. All of this just to make sure the Chosens survive longer. It's hard to think any other way."

"I can... no, I couldn't imagine," Craig said honestly.

"He convinced me that who I was, before in the old timeline and now, here, was far more important. That it was why we were picked at all," Lena said. "We wouldn't care if we weren't people first. Without our Humanity, we're just as bad as the monsters we fight."

Craig walked over to her, the first thing he did was gently take the empty glass from her hand. Before he could do anything else she dropped to sit on her bed. "I agree with him," he said.

"I can't, won't believe that the same guy would run, steal a shuttle, leave his wife and four kids without telling them. Just to fight the towers, be solely a Slayer," Lena muttered. "Did he lie to me so I wouldn't die? Is this how he really feels? Did I convince him of it?"

"No," Craig replied too quickly. He sighed and walked around so he could sit beside her. "There's more to this story than we know, I feel it. This chip activating, the case related to his sister, everything that has happened the last few months. It was probably like a storm brewing in a cup, it was bound to spill everywhere at some point."

Lena pulled a face through the pain. By the time she turned her head to look directly at him she just looked bemused. "Why would there be a storm in a cup?"

Craig couldn't help but smile at her face. "It's just a saying. Now I'm worried that I got it wrong."

"I don't know," Lena said with a sigh. They sat in silence for a few minutes, it ended when her hand reached over to clasp his closest. "I wonder why we were really chosen. Does it really matter when we die? Was anything we've done since Zare originally died worth changing the timeline over?"

"I could probably think of dozens of examples," Craig said. As he moved his hand around so he could hold hers back, he thought of something that made him rethink what he said. "Though, some could have still happened in your timeline. I doubt it... I..."

Lena laughed weakly, all the while keeping her lips sealed. "I know, it's confusing. If it helps, I don't remember this Game Sphere. True, I was only six, seven years old about now. You don't forget stuff like this though." She felt his hand loosen a little so she looked at him. His face was full of conflict and she had a good idea why. "I'm not though. Twenty two and counting."

Craig's face made her think he felt better at that comment, his smile was back. "That's a big difference. The sphere I mean."

"Yeah," Lena said. "We never left the Delta Quadrant. We never encountered that Tolg ship with the conduit to the Alpha. Damien I don't think ever left Voyager, so he never took over Earth. We never got the Enterprise. We didn't end up back in Borg Space, so we never got to the Softmicron home world. No second trip home, no trip to another galaxy. Certainly no Game Sphere."

"Maybe it's not what you've done since Zare's initial death. It's what has happened since we returned home that first time," Craig mused.

"It could be something I do tomorrow. Something I should have done before. I guess we'll never know," Lena said with a blank tone. Her heart sank, Craig noticed it as her head fell and she focused on the floor. "Or maybe it was just about James after all. This could be why the timeline changed. What he's doing now."

Craig tightened his hold on her hand, "the whole point was that he needed you."

"Game Spheres are for Chosens only. Without me, he wouldn't be able to fight this," Lena said with a shake of her head.

"Without you he was fighting on his own," Craig said quietly as if he didn't mean for anyone to hear him. Lena raised her head so she could direct a frown towards him. "Why change it if the result is the same? This isn't it. The reason is still something we don't know."

Lena straightened back up, but her attention seemed miles away. "He still needs me. Full circle, huh? I've got to convince him to stop."

"Don't forget you're not on your own either. You've got all of us," Craig said. "You've got me."

Lena gave him a smile that made his heart skip a beat. While he was still recovering from it she rested her head on his shoulder. The hand she used to hold his had slid across his back, clutching onto him gently. He found himself lowering his own head to rest against hers.

They didn't look as out of place as they feared. Rain clouds had rushed in seemingly out of nowhere, and the town was assaulted by a heavy shower. Most of the population seemed unprepared for it, dressed in beach clothes running for shelter. The ones that were seemed amused at their predicament, like they'd seen it all before.

Despite the weather, market stalls still littered the streets with sellers trying to pawn off their goods.

The visitors' hooded robes protected them from the monsoon, and they weren't the only ones covering their heads. They had split up to talk to the locals, one in particular made their way towards one stall that stood out.

"Hello Miss. I see you're looking at our communication badges," the man at the stall said keenly.

"Yes," the robed figure said, but not in an interested tone like the man thought. The voice was more annoyed than anything else. "Are these real?"

The man was impressed, he laughed in a friendly manner. "If you're wondering if they work, then yes." The robed woman picked up a small golden coloured badge shaped just like a Starfleet commbadge, then studied it carefully. "If your friend has one, all you do is tap it and you can talk to them instantly."

"Are they stolen?" the woman asked coldly.

The seller didn't rise to the obvious bait, he kept his poker faced smile on. "No. Inspired by. I see you're new here, but with an eye for certain things. I'll explain."

"I'm not interested," she said whilst putting down the badge. Her attention wavered to other things in his stall. "Voyager has been here. Are all your goods *inspired* by them?"

"My stall is all about respecting and admiring our saviours," the seller said, still oddly proud and cheerful despite her accusations. He noticed he got her attention as she looked him in the eye. Although from his side he couldn't see much of her at all behind all those robes, only her eyes. "Between you and me, this business is a dying breed. Most of my competitors have disappeared from the market."

"Why would you tell me that?" the woman asked harshly.

"I didn't think you'd be one of them, based on your clothing," the seller said honestly, his smile seemed a lot less fake to her then. "Even if I'm wrong, I won't cave to threats. I am proud to honour the Humans after what they did for us."

The woman's eyes seemed to soften, or at least that's how he saw it. He felt a bit more at ease himself. "Your work, if it is merely based on their technology it's impressive."

"Thank you, and it is. I pride myself on creating trinkets that are useful, not mere decorative souvenirs," the seller said proudly.

The woman nodded. "Do you have a scanning device?"

The seller smiled again, this time far more naturally. "That I do. I keep them secure, so please bare with me." He turned to one side and then crouched down. After a few minutes he laid what looked like a tricorder down on the counter. "It's able to detect energy signatures such as lifesigns, power surges, weapon fire..." he said the last part in a whispered voice.

"I see," the woman said.

"I'll be honest as I like my customers to return, it will not function fully like the real thing. Our technology has a few gaps in that department," the seller said. The woman nodded in understanding, he thought to continue as it hadn't put her off. "It is still incredibly useful. I only just *sold* one half an hour ago."

The woman stared at him again, her eyes were definitely wide. "You did?"

"Yes," he nodded. "A young man, obviously having a run of bad luck. Man of few words, let me tell you."

"Where did he go?" she asked urgently.

The seller was taken aback for the first time in the conversation. "May I ask why?"

As he expected the woman reacted irritably. "May I?" she said defensively.

"Caused a commotion, he did," the seller said in a hushed voice. He thought to check his surroundings before continuing, something the robed woman did as well. "It's that tower. Making people crazy."

She didn't look impressed with his answer, or lack of one at least. "So he caused a commotion because he's nuts, and that's why you can't tell me where he went?"

"No, not him," the seller answered. "I sold to him without discrimination, but another saw it fit to call the Guard." He noticed her eyes narrow as if she were frowning. "I didn't see much else, a crowd gathered as they tried to arrest him."

The woman looked back over her shoulder, carefully scanning the crowd until she spotted two men walking with rifles nestled in their arms. They looked out of place amongst the drenched tourists. What caught her eye were the locals going out of their way to avoid these men. Their body language was far more telling. They were terrified of something.

"Whether or not I saw where he went afterward, depends on your point of view. Of course," the seller said, getting her attention back.

The robbed woman nodded. Her hand emerged from the robe, it glided across the market stall. He watched as her hand slid back away, leaving something behind. "That's for the tricorder, and for whatever you recommend. Keep the rest."

The seller smiled back at her knowingly. She was close enough to see his hand discreetly reach for something hidden under the counter. Nobody else would though. Carefully he placed another device beside the tricorder.

"If you're going to the harbour, you're going to need this," he whispered. When her hand reached out to push what she had placed down closer to him, he waved his own in front of it. "No. Keep your money."

"Thank you," she said with another nod. Once she collected her new items and currency, the robed woman walked in the opposite direction to the crowds.

## **Voyager**

### **The Conference Room:**

Damien's eyes narrowed. Chakotay was already in the middle of scowling at him. Annika responded to

that by also narrowing her eyes at the Commander, just for a moment. She turned her head to smile seductively at Damien, which he thankfully missed as his eye narrowing was making them water.

Tom watched them all with a bored expression on his face. He was about to say something when Damien's narrowed eyed look was directed at Annika while she had been licking her lips. He shuddered horribly, which made the crazy vampire gasp and point an accusing finger at him.

"He blinked, it's him! I knew it."

"Oh lord," Chakotay muttered mid scowl.

Tom couldn't help but roll his eyes. He wasn't the only one either. The rest of the table were feeling a bit impatient after ten minutes of this. "Enough already. We're not getting anywhere."

"No we're not. Where are the freaks, I asked for them," Damien demanded. Chakotay kicked him under the table, and hard too.

Tom groaned into both of his hands, while his elbows rested against the table. "I don't need to be here."

"I don't object to extra eye candy at the table," Annika giggled.

"Eew," Tom grunted as he moved one of his hands. "Look, I've got bigger things to worry about. You know like literal end of world problems. What's the problem and make it quick?"

"I agree, this is pointless," Chakotay said, then he frowned. "If you didn't ask for us to come here, who did?"

Annika climbed out of her seat, she then tried to stand in her old way with her arms crossed behind her back. "There's a conspiracy afoot and I think these two are behind it."

Damien glared at her, "this isn't the way into my pants, or anything for that matter. Just to your grave."

"Really? Accusing you of bad things doesn't appeal to you?" Tom said in bemusement. He turned to Annika who looked deadly serious. "You've done this before. This isn't the first season."

"Oh, I have proof this time," Annika said.

Chakotay rolled his eyes, "we're going to need a few gallons of coffee for this."

"They've been plotting behind your back all this time. They hate each other but they're constantly in the same room as each other," Annika explained. "Why else would my evil snookie ookums help out around here? Chakotay will have convinced him, just so you lower your guards."

"Yeah yeah, sure. That isn't proof," Tom said. "We all know Damien is helping us because he's lost his edge, and probably secretly loves us."

Damien's eyes narrowed again. "Keep climbing up my list Paris, just keep climbing."

"But... what about all the sneaking around? Have we forgotten that they worked together before?" Annika stuttered.

"Yes, that went well," Chakotay muttered.

Annika scowled at him, "that was probably the rookie's fault. My Damien would never screw up."

Chakotay burst out laughing, "and there goes any credibility you had left."

"Tommy, you said that Chakotay was acting shifty and has been for a while. That's why you keep leaving him paired up with Harry," Annika protested.

Tom's jaw dropped while Chakotay stared at him, unsure whether to be mad or amused. Tom started to stutter, "I never told *you* that."

"I know," Annika winked at him.

"I've been telling you for months she's a bloody stalker," Damien grumbled. "No one ever listens to me."

Tom was bright red by this point. Chakotay staring at him wasn't helping. "Harry's more um, patient than me. I mean, he needed somebody experienced to help him command. Oh forget it, I'm not the one on trial here. Chakotay acting like an asshole isn't proof. To be honest, I always thought it was an act so the Janeway thing would be overlooked."

"Oh really?" Chakotay said menacingly.

The doors opened, Harry hurried in breathing rapidly and his face was flushed. "Sorry I'm late. Different ship and all."

Tom groaned into his hand again, "you invited Harry too?" Annika nodded. His hands flew out as a sort of surrender pose, "fine! Chakotay's acting weird, Damien's got no ideas left, Annika's watching everybody. Did I miss anything?"

"You pick your nose when no one's looking," Annika said.

"Anything that's on point... and true!" Tom snapped, making the others snigger at him.

Harry slowly sat down in one of the empty chairs, even though he was still debating staying or not. "So, what's the meeting about?"

"I have no idea anymore. Conspiracies and Chakotay having secret agendas, I dunno," Tom answered tiredly.

"We've done this one before," Harry frowned.

"We've done these two before," Tom corrected him. He focused on Annika. "You've tried to destroy us a few times yourself. How can we trust you?"

She didn't answer, she seemed to be waiting for something. Everyone looked on impatiently. Damien finally groaned, "he wasn't talking to me."

"Oh!" Annika laughed. "Well, ever since I've had my reawakening I see things so much clearly. Voyager are my friends. Your attention over the years was because of love, not jealousy as I used to think as a mortal."

Tom and Harry bit their lips to stop themselves laughing out loud. Chakotay looked ready to throw up.

"That one time was because of that awful anomaly," Annika said sadly. "I suspected someone was making our journey more difficult, I suspected Dany Wamy. He's sooo naughty and evil..." she started to drool.

"Move on," Damien grumbled in disgust.

"I kept a close eye on him, that's when I discovered Chakotay's interest in him," Annika said.

"Wait, I thought you were in love with Damien. Why are you tattling on him? If it's an act, why keep it up?" Harry asked.

Annika leered at Damien, who rolled his eyes. "I have a thing for bad boys. Everyone has their weaknesses." She tried to turn her head away so she could focus. "When I heard what Chakotay did to my mother figure, I was so revolted. I knew that he was who I had to keep my eye on."

"Mother figure? Oh dear lord, Janeway's rolling in her alcove," Tom whispered.

"From his first sighting on Voyager, to the plotting I witnessed yesterday, Chakotay's been a thorn in our side, plotting our demise," Annika said with a scowl. "I know you need more than my beautiful word, so..." She approached the wall panel and started to tap on it.

"You said plotting twice. I hate that," Damien muttered.

Tom smirked in his direction, "no wonder you hate us."

"I'm sick of being the bad guy in this, tell them what happened or I will!" Chakotay shouted.

Tom, Harry and Damien looked at him, he was just as confused as they were. He seemed calm apart from that. His head shook.

"This is fam..." Damien said as his own laughter drowned him out. Then he realised where it was coming from, the computer on the wall. Everyone else seemed to realise that too and turned to look. On it was a bird's eye view of a Bridge, a one that made Harry flinch when he recognised it. He also saw himself adjusting his rushed sitting position on the Captain's chair. Chakotay and Damien were also visible, standing nearby.

"Are you worried what will happen if they knew, cos I thought you loved being the bad guy," the Chakotay on the screen snarled.

"How did you get this?" Harry stammered.

Annika shushed him harshly. Her eyes bugged out in anger, it was enough to quieten him down for now.

The Damien on the screen spoke, "oh boy. News flash, everyone knows. You're on the dark side now Chuckie. Besides, I could easily tell the blond bimbo that you tried to erase him from history just the other week."

Tom and Harry's attention veered to Chakotay. His face told them nothing, but his body shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

"He wouldn't believe you," the other Chakotay said.

"The beauty of that is, he would. You've tried to kill him before. Besides you still come across very badly in the story, so be my guest. I couldn't care less," Damien said.

The current Damien smiled in awe. "God, I'm so camera-genic."

Annika passed him a flirty wink, making him regret it. "Yes you are baby. Anyway." Her hand tapped the computer, changing the image on the screen to a still one. "Exhibit number two." The image unfroze when she said that. Everyone in the room were taken aback by the sudden raised voices and background noise. Chakotay recognised it and immediately looked away.

Tom and Harry on the other hand were dismayed by what they saw. Damien meanwhile wished he had brought popcorn.

The hidden camera seemed to be in the roof of a turbolift. Two figures inside it were in the middle of a one sided fight. If it could be called that. One of the men restrained the other on the ground, his arm pressing deeply into the other's throat. Even still the two managed to exchange words they couldn't make out. The one with the advantage would throw a punch occasionally.

"Oh my god," Harry stammered.

As if he tempted fate, the event on the screen escalated further. The punches didn't seem to stop, the anger behind them made him and Tom wince with every one. "What's wrong with you!" they heard Chakotay's voice scream. "You killed people when your wife died, twice even, you can't judge me!"

"Wait, what?" Tom stuttered, he shared a confused look with Harry who returned it.

More words were exchanged, like before they were too quiet for them to make out. Chakotay closed his eyes right at the moment the one on the screen moved his grip to his victim's mouth. The whole room could hear him struggling to breathe. This went on for so long, they wondered if it was being displayed in slow motion. It was starting to make Harry a little sick.

"When was this? How did you..." Tom stuttered.

The Chakotay on the screen looked up distracted by something. It made him angry. He did this again, lingering a bit longer on whatever had caught his eye. When Tom thought it couldn't get any worse, the Chakotay on the screen brought out a knife. It went to his victim's face first, before finally going for their neck.

"Oh god, turn it off!" Harry shouted at Annika as even from the bad angle, he could see the blood coming from the weapon.

Annika shrugged and quickly obeyed. The screen went black. "I have more, if you so need it."

Chakotay covered his face with both of his hands. Tom and Harry stared at him in utter disbelief and disgust. Harry had a little fear in his eyes, instinctively he had budged his chair back slightly.

"I didn't believe it. I just thought it was exaggerated," Tom stammered. "I never believed you'd be capable of this."

"This was when James was weakened, wasn't it?" Harry asked Tom, without breaking his stare on the former Commander. "This wasn't a two sided fight that got a little too rough, as I heard. You tried to murder him in cold blood."

"Oh, there's a bit more after this. It's creepy," Annika said. Harry stared at her in horror, she took it as a curious one that told her to go on. "He wanted to leave the head somewhere for his wife and or kids to find. Pretty messed up, right?"

Damien burst out laughing like he was watching a comedy. Tom could only try to ignore him, but Harry stared at him as his faith in humanity dwindled away to nothing.

"Are you going to say anything?" Tom asked, his voice more commanding than it usually was.

"In my mind at the time. James was, no is a murderer with super strength," Chakotay mumbled, his hands trembled so he moved them down to the table. "That Kathryn died because of him. Everything was his fault."

"Everything?" Harry stuttered.

Chakotay scoffed, his anger was directed inwardly. "It was easier to blame him. I was a fool."

"A fool?" Tom said in disbelief. "We're not talking about a shouting match between the two of you. We're talking about a so called gentle man trying to strangle a weakened person to death, and then deciding that wasn't fun enough. Hey, lets slowly cut his head off and freak his family out with it. Fool isn't the word I'd use."

"You're forgetting that when he was full strength only a day before, he was throwing me through solid metal walls and beating me to a pulp!" Chakotay snapped defensively. He regretted his outburst immediately. "I assumed you knew of this already. I... I wasn't myself."

"Yeah, I knew about the whole drowning him in the bath and threatening his kids, that's what I was told about," Tom stuttered. "God. That should've been enough to keep you locked up for life. You had to top it."

"I didn't threaten his kids," Chakotay said with disgust in his voice. "I can't explain it. I wish I could. My behaviour was inexcusable, I was out of control. I've tried my best to make up for it but..."

Annika did a fake laugh, it sounded so over the top to everyone. "You seemed to have it in for Slayers and people related to them." She tapped on the wall panel, changing the image again.

They were in a corridor this time, again the view was from the ceiling. Damien and Lena stood near each other, facing Chakotay. He pulled out a phaser and pointed it at them. Words were exchanged quietly.

One line though was heard clearly and it came from Lena. "Why not? He's bluffing. He wouldn't vaporise his own daughter's body, no matter who was occupying it." The line made Tom and Harry realise it wasn't Lena, this was Ylara.

"Really, let's see shall we," the Chakotay on the video responded with a growl.

Chakotay winced just as the image changed on its own. This time it showed Sickbay. They could see there were two patients and nobody else. One bed had the scanner activated so they couldn't see the occupant. The other was a man. Tom moved his chair forward to see who it was. He exhaled when he did, "Daniel?"

"I'm sure you guys know about this, but it gets the point across," Annika said with a sad sigh.

Another figure walked into the screen. The broad shoulders, the thick black hair gelled up. The ones watching knew exactly who this was. It couldn't be anyone else, otherwise Annika's show and tell made no sense. Although to Tom and Harry it still didn't until he stood next to Daniel's bed. Like the earlier image his hand pressed into Daniel's face, making the alarms go off immediately.

The image cut off after other figures ran onto the scene to stop him. It was blank once again.

"I thought he killed my daughter," Chakotay explained grimly.

"After you tried to?" Harry said in disbelief.

Chakotay's hands clenched against the table, his face was locked in a grimace. "When I escaped the Tolg I... I was filled with such rage, so much hatred. I thought it was due to everything that happened, and so I took it out on others. The truth was, it was me I hated. When I started to realise it, the rage started to die down. It's still there, it's not as bad. Apart from Daniel, I don't do these things anymore. It doesn't mean there's a conspiracy going on!"

"Tut tut, wrong," Annika giggled. Chakotay stared at her not with anger, he looked exhausted. "The only thing that changed is you weren't as in your face about it. Observe."

Tom groaned. He was more than sick of this slideshow, he knew Harry was too. The only one who was benefiting from it was Damien. He could stop it, but his curiosity held him back.

The next clip was another corridor shot, this time it was empty. Only for a moment as a familiar blond man walked by, heading straight for a Jeffries Tube. It was quiet again for a few seconds until another figure walked into view. The wall panel was his destination. He remained there for a while, tapping away unknown commands on it. He would occasionally hide in the Jeffries tube area, out of sight, while other crewmembers passed by.

A few minutes passed. He stopped whatever he was doing and walked away. Moments later the corridor trembled. The video ended on a few crewmembers running in the opposite direction.

"I'm... not sure..." Harry stammered.

"This was dated April 2382. The same day the Katane crew boarded the ship and took hostages," Annika replied before he asked. "Not long after this video, the crewmember you saw first was taken hostage after he was involved in an overload explosion. Nasty, hmm?"

Chakotay was annoyed at this clip. Harry and Tom already knew about this and yet they both looked sickened by it. "This isn't the same thing. It was a part of a plan to get James inside. I wasn't trying to kill him!" the Commander protested.

Annika tapped the screen nonchalantly. They got a good aerial view of Astrometrics this time. Damien's smile grew as he spotted himself in the video. The other was Chakotay, who suddenly grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

"Then I'll tell the freak what you really planned to do on that Tolg ship," Damien said to him.

The threat was enough to make Chakotay let go. "What are you talking about?"

Damien laughed deviously, "like you said, I am smart. I wasn't going to be a pawn in your little game. Nice try though, too bad about Janeway."

The video glitched slightly, the pair had moved only slightly. "I'll get James to kill off Annika, smash her to tiny sparkly bits. Then I'll tell him to smash your face in with whatever he used to smash her," Chakotay said.

Astrometrics changed into the top floor of Engineering. There they saw James working on a console. Something made him turn around to face the door. They weren't sure what happened until Annika suddenly appeared in the frame out of nowhere and attacked him.

"Ha, she's just incriminated herself. Classic," Damien snorted into laughter.

"I wouldn't say that," Annika said with a smile.

The clip glitched to show James alone again, talking to somebody off screen. "Um, what did you say you were here for again?" he asked.

"My smoochieookums," Annika's voice answered.

It seemed to glitch again, the movement from the sole person on screen seemed sudden, as if it was taken at a later time. "When everyone is completely distracted by their own dreams, I will take control of the ship. The crew will die and Damien will finally have what he deserves," Annika's voice said.

Chakotay was smirking like Damien as well, while Tom and Harry were confused. "What does this have to do with me?" Chakotay asked.

Another glitch annoyed the two Lieutenants. "I am immune to it, like you. You and your sister are the only obstacles," Annika hissed. "Fortunately killing Slayers is what I'm supposed to do."

"Seriously, play these without the cuts. Anything can look incriminating if you remove parts of conversation," Harry protested.

Annika stared at him, confused. "There isn't any cuts. He was obviously twitching out of fear of me."

"I can believe that," Damien commented.

Tom tried his best not to smirk but it was useless. "Yeah the feeling's shared amongst the whole crew. Can we move on to the point here?"

Annika sighed impatiently. She entered a few commands to change the video to something else. This time it was clearly the Enterprise's Ten Forward. It was mostly deserted apart from what seemed to be Lena, and of course Chakotay again.

"You tried to get Jessie to turn evil so you could use her. You took mum to a Tolg ship, bartered with her life," Lena said on the cusp of tears.

"I bartered with Damien's life. It was him I used, he just didn't know it," Chakotay said loudly and suddenly.

To Tom and Harry's surprise, Damien wasn't shocked at his confession. He seemed oddly nonchalant until he noticed them staring at him. "Oh please. Only morons like you would be shocked at this. He's been screaming *I'm acting suspicious* at you since day one."

"Are you sure it wasn't you who was played?" Lena had asked.

"Hmm, we both had our agendas," video Chakotay said. "My plan counted on him having one."

"What exactly does that mean?" Tom asked, gesturing his hand as a hint to stop the video.

Chakotay was now too annoyed to bother with him, he was focused on Annika. "How the hell are you getting all of this? The Leda was destroyed and so was its security footage. The Enterprise shouldn't have anything of the sort, it's still damaged!"

Annika giggled, "ooph, temper temper. I'm not the one going around with a Slayer vendetta."

"Um, what about the clip from Engineering?" Harry pointed out.

"The anomaly was making everyone confused. I don't know what I was thinking. But from what I've seen, Chakotay here wanted us to fight sooner than later. He'd get rid of one of us, either one and he'd win," Annika answered.

"Oh for god's sake. Damien was refusing to give me the information he discovered about the anomaly. I considered offing you as payment. I never followed up on it," Chakotay grumbled. "Your conversation with him incriminates Damien more than me."

"Yes, but I didn't just invite my snugglebumps so I could entertain him and gaze upon his deliciousness," Annika ended up swooning. "Yes, you've been acting out of character and been very naughty. You haven't been working alone though. So many times I went to visit him and you'd be there. Interesting, no?"

"No is right," Damien muttered.

Tom briefly glanced at him, now very intrigued by what she was saying. "Yes it is. There's so much you haven't shared about what happened on that Tolg ship. What we've seen here proves it. Don't think I haven't noticed the shiftiness, the weird comments."

Chakotay leapt out of his chair, his hands slammed onto the table. "Are you serious Paris? This is Annika we're talking about. Even before she was a vampire she sided with Damien, betrayed us, tried to kill us. You know why she acts like a fruit loop these days? Cos we locked her up and got the Doctor to treat her, as she was trying to murder people."

"Commander, calm down," Harry said gently.

"I never really worked with Damien. As the videos prove, I was trying to use him. I'd never work with a prat like that. I'd die first," Chakotay said irritably. "Properly I mean, not assimilated by Tolg die."

Damien smiled in his direction, "oh so that's why you asked me to hide the information about the anomaly from your friends?" Chakotay's eyes flashed as they focused on him. "*I don't want to worry them, they've got enough on their plates.* Haha yeah right."

"What information?" Tom asked bluntly.

"You fool. I already told you that Annika was trying to cause trouble by doing exactly this; incriminate us. Then you go ahead and do that. Well done," Chakotay hissed at the ex villain.

"Us? You think I wanted to do goody two shoe things? I was strong armed into it by not just you," Damien said with some venom behind his voice. He turned towards Tom, catching him off guard with a glare. "I hate these stupid little shapeshifters far more than you incompetent hero wannabes, and so I put up with it. If I was really plotting your destruction with this clown, you'd know about it."

Tom shook his head while Harry responded with an eye roll. The latter spoke up, "you hate them, for what? For being an actual villain? That really must piss you off."

"Careful Kimberly," Damien hissed.

"Oh don't you worry, I am being careful," Harry said. "Don't think we're fooled, not even for a second."

Tom was still shaking his head, only far more rapidly than before. He finally stopped, resting his chin on one of his hands. "I, it doesn't make sense. What are you hiding, Chakotay? I thought you cared about Voyager. I want to believe that you're just going through a rough patch, that nothing you've done will harm us. The Janeway thing was always nagging at the back of my mind."

"I do care about Voyager. Don't ever doubt it," Chakotay said sincerely. "That's why I came back. It's why I kept an eye on Damien, kept him in line. I wish I could explain my reasonings, but I can't. Not yet."

Tom's face had turned pale half way through what he said. "Why you came back."

"Yes," Chakotay nodded. "These videos Annika have shouldn't tell you what you don't already know. They're..."

"It's not just these clips, Chakotay," Tom said in a shaky voice. "You infiltrated Voyager, bypassed its security features by pretending to be a service engineer. A one you beat up. We never figured out how you accomplished it. Your behaviour since then, there's nothing left of the Chakotay we knew. My god, you've tried to murder James multiple times. Ylara as well. A watcher. I guess targeting Lena would be impossible for you to explain away."

"No. I can't tell you everything. You just have to trust me," Chakotay protested.

"If you wanted me to trust you then you're a bigger idiot than I thought. I'd sooner trust Damien than you. Hiding crucial information. Dealing with Damien and hiding that fact. Your attitude towards everyone," Tom said as he stood up. His hand reached for his commbadge. "You're not Chakotay. We should have done this long ago."

"We did. Multiple times. He kept escaping, remember?" Harry said warily.

Tom brushed him off by tapping his commbadge. "Security to the Conference Room." Chakotay cringed but showed no intention of fighting it. "I don't know what your end game is here, or if my theory holds any weight. Nevertheless I can't let you wander freely around our fleet."

It didn't take long for a Security team to arrive. They waited at the door for further orders. "Take Commander Chakotay to the brig." They nodded and complied.

Once the team had a firm hold of the commanders arms, he had to say something. "You overestimate the enemy, Tom. This sphere is an experiment, a first of its kind. It's not perfect." He was by the door when Tom gestured for the team to wait until he was done. "They're weak, that's why they're such masters of deception. Don't ever forget that." One nod and the Security team lead him through the door.

Harry sighed, "what about Damien?"

Tom turned his attention to Annika, she smiled politely at him. "I'm sure someone will keep an eye on him."

Damien's eyes widened horribly. "Oh, hell no. I'm all for Chuckles getting arrested, but I wouldn't trust her, she's..."

"So we should trust you? Good stuff," Tom pretended to laugh.

The chair Damien was in flew backwards as he leapt to his feet. His face was scrunched with anger, his body trembled with rage. As he marched for the exit that didn't lead to the Bridge, Annika tried to follow. Tom got there first and slipped through the door. It shut in her face.

"We don't suspect her. She's just mad. Understood?" Tom whispered as the angry villain walked away.

Damien frowned as he turned back around to face him. "I see. So you should trust me. Is that what you're getting at?"

"No," Tom smirked. "But I trust her far less. I can't let her know that. I need to know how to... deal with her first."

A dark smile appeared on Damien's face. "Ah, isn't that what your last Slayer is for?"

"Of course. Lena would never let me off the hook if I didn't let her do it. I just need to be sure... that it's permanent," Tom said in a hushed voice.

Damien chuckled at him. "That I can get behind." Tom gave him a slight nod as he returned to the Conference Room. A horrible thought occurred to Damien and he pulled a disgusted face, "oh god, I got to read those books after all. Damn you Paris." He stomped off muttering a few swear words.

As soon as he walked back into the Conference Room, Tom found his friend sweating bullets against the wall while Annika blocked his escape. They looked at him, Harry lingered on him longer. Then he noticed her face leaning in. He panicked and did the only thing he could think of; duck and slide away to freedom. Once he was safe nearby Tom, the ex drone pouted and moaned.

"For a moment I thought I walked into Waking Moments," Tom whispered to him as they hurried out of Conference.

"You did, you just got the scenes mixed up," Harry stammered.

*"Bridge to Paris. We've entered the Edian system,"* Faye's voice said from Tom's commbadge.

Tom slapped it quickly, "um, we'll be right there." The pair looked at the door they escaped from, realising they'd have to go back if they wanted to get to the Bridge quicker. Harry then realised something else.

"Transporter Room," he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Tom watched him run off towards the turbolift. One more glance at the Conference door was enough to convince him to follow. "Me too."

### **The Bridge:**

The image on the viewscreen looked nothing like the planet that they had already seen. The golden atmosphere that gave its land masses an autumn sparkle, had been replaced by turbulent black clouds. What little could be seen of its land seemed dull in colour, cracks protruded from mountainous areas. The darker side of the planet couldn't be seen at all. Any artificial light this world may have had, was no longer functioning.

"I'm not detecting any ships in the area. No defense system on the planet, no orbital objects that could pose a threat," Jessie said while reading from Tactical.

Danny tried to avert her eyes from the view and concentrate on the helm, but she couldn't. "Three months. Three god damn months and look at it," her voice dripped with anger.

The turbolift doors beside Tactical opened. Tom hurried out of them until he saw the viewscreen. He stopped instantly. "Is that it?"

Lena looked at him from the barrier around the command chairs. Her hands rested beside the small computer there. "What's left of it, yeah."

"There's no danger. We should be able to go into orbit," Danny said in a hoarse voice.

"The one time we hang back and assess, it's safe to approach," Tom said to himself. "Do it."

Faye was shaking her head as she read her own station. "The core's unstable. I'm detecting thousands of tremors throughout the planet, land collapses."

"What are those black clouds?" Tom asked while walking to the centre of the Bridge.

Faye couldn't help but shudder. "It seems to be a mixture of um... smoke, particles from the surface, debris. Lots of chemicals I don't want to list. There's no wind, they just linger."

Lena's grip on the railing tightened as much as she could without breaking it. "Lifesigns?"

"Twenty thousand," Faye replied hesitantly. Danny swung her chair around in shock, it served no purpose but she stared at Opps anyway. It made the girl nervous. "They seemed to be, um... prepared for evacuation or... it's safer there. They're all in one area of the planet, the north continent."

"This planet had a population of two billion," Danny stuttered.

Tom stared at her sternly, which made her a little mad instead of upset. "That isn't helping, Danny." She huffed and turned her chair back around. "I assume the towers are still there. We best be careful here."

"Actually," Jessie butted in. Tom tried to hide it but his groan gave him away, he felt he had endured enough surprises today and couldn't deal with anymore. He looked around anyway. "There's no sign of any."

"No ships, not even any satellites, towers gone," Lena thought aloud. "We need to help those people."

"For all we know this could be the army that they were building. The one that attacked us," Danny said.

Tom disagreed. "No. Why bother creating them only to leave them here to die? It's more likely the Soft skedaddled once the damage to the planet grew too extreme."

"They didn't on Erayas. Didn't you say there were Soft still there?" Jessie asked Lena directly.

"Yeah two, they seemed pretty desperate to leave," she replied.

"They should've thought of that before making that anomaly," Tom said in disgust. When he heard himself say it out loud, that disgust was directed at him instead. He didn't like what this situation was turning him into, not one bit. "Sorry, they're not a collective, not all of them decided on that."

"It's all right Tom. We all need to vent sometime," Lena said.

Tom was surprised that remark came from her considering what at least one did to her. He looked around to catch her smile weakly. It made him swivel around on the spot slowly to make eye contact with the entire Bridge. They all had a similar weary but determined look in their eyes. Danny was the only one he couldn't see, her back was on him. He sighed once he was done. "Lena's right. These people need our help. Suggestions?"

"If you want that, we should talk to the Enterprise at least," Faye pointed out. Tom gave her a brief nod. One tap opened the comm line.

"Harry? Are you getting what we're getting?" Tom asked.

*"Yeah. It's pretty damning."*

That was one way of putting it, he thought. "We've got twenty thousand people to evacuate and quickly. I doubt they'll fit on all four ships somehow."

"We should look for a place to evacuate them to. B'Elanna's still in Astrometrics, I should..." Lena said.

Harry's voice cut her off, *"we're picking up numerous warp trails, all faint, leaving this planet. The oldest one, it's Starfleet in origin."*

Jessie and Lena both cringed mostly at the same time, they then looked at one another. They heard Danny groan from the helm.

"How long ago are we talking?" Tom asked, he had to know.

*"Ten days. The second trail is a day old. Unknown origin,"* Harry's voice replied.

Disappointment flooded Tom's face. He told himself quickly that even though it was bad news, it still presented an opportunity. "The trail's cold. However the other trail could be the ships evacuating this planet. We can't know for certain."

Lena quickly entered something into the computer in front of her. Then she tapped her commbadge. "Janeway to Torres. Are you getting the data I sent you?"

*"Yes. I'll run the warp trails through the Astrometric data. Bare in mind that unless we follow them, I can only guess from their trajectory."*

"It's better than nothing," Lena said.

"I think we should concentrate on finding a safe planet for evacuees," Tom interrupted. Lena was about to object. "Yes their own people could be doing this already, but it's a pretty big price to pay if we're wrong."

*"Can I remind you that we don't know how many towers need to be destroyed to trigger another anomaly growth. What if these people are going to be evacuated anyway? What if we help them out and the anomaly grows in the mean time? How many will be lost then?"* Harry's voice said.

Lena rolled her eyes, "it shouldn't take long for her to figure out where both trails generally went. Maybe we can wait and decide then."

"We have four ships, surely..." Jessie muttered.

Tom inadvertently started to pace without realising it. "The anomaly didn't grow for three months. I think we're fine. These twenty thousand people don't have that long."

*"Yes, but that's only because there were three networks destroyed in two of those months. Activity's definitely increased in the last few weeks,"* Harry's voice said.

*"No, Tom's right. I've been in these things. There's no way they can be destroyed that quickly. These people..."* Craig's voice protested.

Danny pulled a conflicted face, "it might not be quantity of towers, but how frequently it happens." Normally she'd laugh at a comment like that but her mood was far too low for it.

"Yeah, and two planets managed to trigger the growth. That doesn't leave us that much time," Harry's voice said.

Jessie slammed her hand down on the station, making a few people jump. "Oh my god, we're talking about one shuttle, one man versus at least two of these towers, and that's the best case scenario. It's not a simple case of running in and planting a bomb, or shooting from orbit. It takes time, no matter how powerful that man is."

"Jess," Lena sighed.

"I want to get him back much more than any of you do, for the same reasons and more. Still, I think we should take some time out of doing so to save these people," Jessie continued to rant. She caught her breath. "James would have wanted us to, regardless of his state of mind."

Tom stared at her apologetically. It made no sense, he was the one arguing for the same point. If he felt like that, surely the opposers of that would feel that way as well.

*"I want to interrupt, and so I will. The oldest warp trail won't be of any help, but the youngest one's trajectory would take them to one of the occupied planets. If they didn't change their course, that is,"* B'Elanna's voice said.

"You want to interrupt?" Tom smirked.

*"Well, if I can help in avoiding further argument, it seems a bit silly to say I hate to,"* B'Elanna's voice said.

"Is there anywhere we can take these people, hopefully close by?" Tom asked.

*"There's another planet in the system, it can support life but there's little there. We'd have to leave food supplies and shelter."*

"Can't we leave them a few replicators and some power units?" Lena suggested.

Tom smiled at her, which she frowned at. "I'm sure your mother would love that."

Lena's eyes narrowed, but clearly in jest or he hoped. "I'm sure mum would love for me to pull your ear, like old times."

Tom laughed nervously. "No, that's okay, we'll do this instead. Harry inform the rest of the fleet. We need to get as many people onto each ship as they can. Hopefully this won't take too long."

*"Don't make me feel guilty for asking this, but shouldn't we inform these people first? They'll be freaked out as it is with their planet falling apart,"* Harry's voice said.

"Hmm. Maybe a team should go down to soften the blow and manage the evacuation," Tom mused aloud. "Okay, Harry you just volunteered."

"What?" Harry's voice stuttered.

"I'll go too. I know what to expect," Lena said.

*"Might I suggest then that one ship remain in orbit at all times. To monitor the planet's state. An emergency beam out could be needed at any time,"* B'Elanna's suggested.

Tom nodded, feeling oddly better now that they had a plan. "Should it be smallest ship or do we take turns?"

"The Enterprise is mostly empty and is a large ship. It seems like a huge waste to have them planet-sitting," Lena said.

"I'm over thinking it. Apart from the Enterprise, whoever's back last keeps an eye on things until another ship arrives. They take over from that ship, and so on," Tom said with relief. "Okay, once Harry gives us the okay, we begin. Shouldn't take long."

*Lieutenant Commander Paris' Log Supplemental: It's been a few hours since our evacuation effort began. Voyager has returned from the first trip and we're on guard duty just in case. The Katane wasn't far behind us so we've already started beaming people up from the surface. The planet itself could collapse at anytime, we must be on our guard... Oh I already said guard. We must be extra vigilant in case it does. I've told all ships in the fleet to beam up as many people as they can when this happens, regardless of how full their vessel gets. As long as they have time to do so. As I've never seen a planet die like this, we have no idea how long it would take and what kind of damage it'll do to us if we're in the way. I'm hoping it won't be an issue.*

The door to the Ready Room opened, a very pregnant Jodie hurried in the best she could. Tom's eyes widened so much he was surprised his eyeballs were still firmly in place.

"Jodie what the hell, I thought you were on maternity..." he stammered.

"I'm covering for Jess. I'm ok with one kid, but babysitting four. No thanks," Jodie said breathlessly. Tom blinked a lot more than usual, probably because of his earlier response, the rest of his face scrunched a bit. "I tried to call, there's a ship approaching."

Tom groaned as he climbed to his feet. "Nothing's ever simple around here." He passed Jodie on route to the door, she pulled a face as he did. Once he was on the bridge he quickly barked, "status?"

"Unknown vessel heading straight for us. They're not powering weapons, their shields aren't functioning," Faye reported.

"Finally, some good news," Tom said, though he didn't believe it. "Are they damaged?"

Faye shook her head, "no, not enough to give them weapon and shield trouble." Tom frowned in her direction. "They have been in a fight. There's a couple of weapon discharges on its hull, they have a hull breach near the back which is sealed. It's their only shield, so it can't be that bad."

"I wonder what they want then. If they're a part of the anti-silver ship group, you'd think they would have their shields up at least," Tom said.

Danny pointed at the viewscreen, making Tom even more confused. "I think they could be one of their victims actually," she said.

"They're in communications range. Should I hail them?" Faye asked. Her station beeped a few times, indicating they were already being hailed. "Oh, never mind."

Tom was wary, none of this made sense to him after everything that had happened. A few months ago this would seem like normal behaviour. Now, it was suspicious. "Why not? On screen."

The viewscreen showed a small silver vessel approach, with a few black marks across its hull. The image disappeared to show the ship's occupants.

"Oh... my..." Tom's just managed to stutter as his jaw dropped. The rest of the Bridge looked on with similar reactions.

Meanwhile Jodie stumbled out of the Ready Room, clutching her stomach painfully.

"Lieutenant Paris of the Starship Voyager? We require your assistance, now," the person on the viewscreen said coldly.

"Um, this may be a bad time but uh... I'm gonna need help getting to Sickbay," Jodie stuttered. Tom turned his head slowly to look at her, but he couldn't avert his eyes from the screen.

The heavens were open again. Yet the crowds still grew in size, and in anger. People were yelling, screaming as loud as they could. Many were brandishing signs in an alien language. The target of their fury, the ugly tower on an island a few miles away.

Hundreds of armed soldiers formed a line, four people deep to stop the crowds reaching a small harbour. Behind them a few people were escorted quickly towards a large ocean vehicle still only being towed to metal posts. The engine was still running.

Several metal walkways emerged from it, they touched down to the ground. The crowd was angered further. The shouting was so intense the guarded people fled onto the boat, covering their ears.

A few of the people at the front tried to push their way through the soldiers. They didn't rise to the bait, they stood their ground and warned them away just by showing them their weapons.

The crowd started to thin to the right. Screaming had turned into triumphant yelling. A few of the soldiers could see a swarm of people had broken through a heavily locked gate. Its path led to the rear side of the ship. The few soldiers guarding it opened fire to warn them off. Some were struck, others fled back the way they came. The firing was fueling the fire of the crowds. The soldiers were finding it more difficult to hold the line.

Some of the stragglers escaped by jumping into the water. They swam for the boat, only to find it protected by a shield of some kind. The soldiers chose not to fire at them.

As everyone else stood to voice their protest, someone weaved through the crowd to get to the front. While a few people moved out of their way, the ones who didn't were pushed aside. Before they reached the front, the man veered off to the left instead.

"You're monsters!" one woman shouted near to where he was.

"Shut it down or you kill our children!" a man screamed next to her.

These people stood at the far side, next to a small building. Its only door was on the harbour side, where no one could reach. A tall imposing wall attached to it made sure that none of the protestors could sneak around to this building and climb to the other side. Soldiers stood guard out of the line, with their backs to the wall.

Yet the ones shouting insults at the soldiers had decided against being apart of the mob, and were trying to get through there. The soldiers marched forward to confront them, only to be met by further abuse.

"How can you support them? Think of your family," the woman resorted to pleading. When that didn't work she raised her voice, "you'll kill us all!"

A soldier responded, but with their heavy rifle, swinging it at the woman's face. It knocked her backwards, clean off the ground. Another woman and the other man who shouted pushed forward to retaliate. The few soldiers tried to hold them back from their comrade, while he shouted at them. They responded in kind as before.

The rest of the group that had come to this part quickly backed away as the struggle grew more violent. The two remaining protestors fought back, but it was useless. The soldiers were better trained and once their rifles struck them, they were down.

It didn't end there though. The fight was too easy and the soldiers were still angry. The trio couldn't do anything about it but cover their heads with their arms. They had to lie there and take the kicks and the extra swings from the rifle. The crowd grew, they screamed at the soldiers to stop.

The first soldier to strike was visibly shaken, he saw only one way to settle this. His rifle was raised, ready to fire at the trio on the floor. His finger poised to fire. A hand flew out of nowhere to grab the weapon by its tip. His head turned so he could see and push this person away. All he had time to see was a blank face staring back at him with cold eyes. His own weapon flew up and struck him in the head, the arm holding twinged from the sudden move.

Hearing this, the rest of the soldiers turned their attention to their comrade. He was already down, bleeding from the face. They couldn't see why. One raised their weapon, instantly on their guard. Something touched his arm, the next thing he knew he was flying through the air. The wind was knocked out of him as he slammed into a few of his comrades. They fell to the floor with him.

A pair moved to respond on hearing his brief scream. They saw the result, but could not see the cause. One turned around rapidly, just in time to see a brief flash of a face disappearing to the side, as something hard struck him in the chest. He doubled over from the pain. He felt hands grab his shoulders, then everything was spinning. He hit the ground back and shoulders first, the shock of it knocked him straight out.

The last remaining soldier noticed his comrade lying painfully on the floor. A man stood to the side of the fallen soldier, staring directly at him. He quickly aimed to fire at the stranger who had taken out his entire squad. At the last second, he ducked down avoiding two strikes. The soldier re-aimed. By this time his opponent had retrieved his comrade's weapon. There was no time to consider a plan. All he saw was a flash of light, then he was out.

The crowd had fallen silent during all of this. There was a spreading sense of fear as they watched. A few people dared to run forward to help the three protestors to their feet. The strange man did nothing to stop them.

His head turned abruptly towards the fallen group, where one was still conscious and was trembling violently. He badly tried to manage his weapon. He was shaking so hard he nearly dropped it a few times. When he did manage to fire, the strange alien tried to dodge it. The weapon he held was struck instead and it flew off out of his hand.

Even still he didn't stop, losing the weapon didn't matter, he didn't need it before. The best thing to do was to call for backup, some help. It was easier and quicker. All he had to do was shout. Before he could he was grabbed by his uniform and dragged up to his feet so he was eye level with his attacker. He begged, he pleaded for his life, but he could see no mercy in his eyes. In fact there was nothing in them.

"If I don't check in, the entire squadron will come to see why. Even you can't deal with that many," he tried instead, although his voice shook. The grip on him managed to get even tighter. "I'll tell them. You won't get through."

One of his hands rushed for his throat. He closed his eyes and preyed. He didn't feel anything. His eyes opened, the hand merely hovered in front of him. The eyes that had seem so cold before flickered hesitantly. It was the last thing he saw before he joined his friends on the ground. He watched as the man walked away from him, towards the wall. The new pain he felt in his cheek tried to push him into unconsciousness, his sight went dark for a moment.

When it returned the alien was gone. Shouts and weapon fire emanated from the other side of the wall. As he felt himself drifting off, the amount of noise started to lessen.

"He's a monster," he heard one soldier whimper. Then he heard a horrible thud, like something hitting concrete.

The soldier agreed with him as he fell into the dark.

**TO BE CONTINUED**