

Episode 5.26 Out Of Mind's Eye

A tremendous, earth shattering thud. The roar of multiple vessels flying far too close to the ground and the rooftops. The people already knew to flee before the first soldier set foot in their town.

Hundreds of men and women dressed fully in red, armed with multiple weapons, erupted from the still landing ships. They poured through the whole town. Some would grab any random people they could, while others threw circular devices that burst into flames on contact with anything.

The captured citizens were dragged to the same place, an open square area surrounded by buildings. The people who were already there hurried to hide or run. The ones who hid witnessed the captured be chained to lampposts, and the offending soldier arm themselves with the same weapon. Long, very thin and agile.

One soldier dressed in a fancier version of the same uniform scanned the prisoners, as well as his surroundings. "Citizens of Thizine, I trust I have your full attention!" he barked. No one dared to say or do anything, even his subordinates remained frozen on the spot. "You have something we want. It is the reason why your town burns. It is why your people are here. For every second you don't hand it over..." A dark smile formed on his face as he made eye contact with a soldier. "I think a demonstration will make my point a little clearer."

The soldier flipped her wrist harshly. The thin weapon in that hand flew at her captive, leaving behind a thick red cut and a scream.

"I don't understand," the apparent leader said in a fake sad voice. "This thing attacked us, and yet you betray your people by harbouring it. I'm being generous here, by giving you a chance to amend that error. Your time starts now."

A nod to his soldiers told them to do the same as the woman soldier. Screams filled the usually serene town square. The people hiding weren't the only witnesses to the horror. Two floors up on a metal walkway, a figure approached the barrier. Not put off by it, he swung himself over it and dropped down into the street, breaking his fall slightly with his hands.

It was more than enough to get the leader's attention. His hand beckoned the others to stop. He watched the new arrival straighten up to a standing position, his hands raised to surrender.

"Excellent. Kill it," the leader snarled.

It only took a few minutes, the soldiers fell one by one, sometimes two at a time into unconsciousness. Only the leader remained, no longer the confident and cruel general. He cowered against the back of a bench, with a sword pointing mere millimeters from his forehead. No words needed to be directed at him, he knew what to do. A communicator was in his hand, his voice stuttered into it. "Retreat. It's done."

As soon as he finished his order a single swipe by his attacker's hand knocked him into a slumber.

More people had arrived, they crowded around the town centre to witness the last few moments. A few hesitated for a moment before they rushed over to the wounded people still tied up. Some of the citizens noticed the person who had rescued them stood with an emotionless mask on his face, while staring toward the wounded. The people thought better than to approach him and kept a wide berth if he was in their way.

That was easy until he walked over to the nearest post, his hands reached for the chain holding the captor there. One tug snapped the metal chain into pieces. The boy there, little more than a teenager, slumped now that his arms were free. He cried as any movement tugged on the slashes on his back. His rescuer crouched down, offering his hand.

Whether it was his actions while taking down the soldiers, his hauntingly cold eyes and blank face, or even a combination of everything, the boy was far too frightened of him to take it. He crawled backwards as fast as he could, his eyes wide in terror.

The frightened whimpering from him didn't go unheard. A collective gasp from the people nearby got the stranger's full attention. He scanned the crowd, making eye contact with everyone staring right back. It was quiet, but to him voices shouted at him.

"What are you doing!?" "No!" "How could you do that!" "A kid!"

Each of the voices clawed at his mind. As his eyes began to burn the people in the square started to blur, the surroundings did as well. Different people were there, they were crisp, sharp. A few were familiar to him, the more malevolent ones were not. They lunged for him, which he braced for, only for them to go right through him.

As he swung around to hopefully shut them off, he saw an image of himself crouching down next to a familiar man lying on the ground.

"Craig," this voice was his, but it didn't come from him. Another person ran up behind the other him. She was small, barely four foot tall and young. Her face was scarred, her bared teeth looked more like fangs. Her intention toward him was clear.

As this image of him swung around while still on his knees, it blurred and split into two of him. The new image appeared startled as he stood. He swung around too as the little girl ran up to him. At the same time both shadows of him immediately attacked her with a small sharp weapon.

When the girl stumbled back from it, her image diverged into two as well. While one exploded into dust, making the crouched version of himself bow his head down in shame, the other merely fell to the ground. The standing copy of him started to shake horribly as the earlier figures he saw including the one that looked like Craig surrounded him, shouting the exact same things.

The pain tripled, the voices got louder and more frequent. His hands flew up as if to protect his head from it. That's when he saw the same figures screaming at him were also lying on the floor, wounded but still alive. His crouched self was about to check on them when a new man entered, his face brimming in fury.

The new arrival charged through the earlier, screaming figures, destroying their image instantly. The crouched version of himself quickly stood to confront him, only to be thrown back down onto his back. He felt the same pain suddenly course through his own, pushing him further to the ground too. His hand reached out to the pavement to steady himself.

Multiple hands gently grabbed him, which helped far more than his own. When it did the images were gone, in their place were the town's people surrounding him. A couple tried to help him to his feet. Concern was all over their faces, the fear they had toward him still lingered though. The voices shouting at him before were nothing more than a faint whisper, the longer they looked at him, the louder it got.

"He should go to the hospital too," one of the town's people said towards the two holding him.

No. No time.

He pulled his arms away and hurriedly stepped backwards, collecting his fallen weapon after a couple steps. Once he had a clear path, he ran away. The shocked faces of the town painted into his mind.

Buildings, fires, then eventually trees and bushes lined his path. He kept running until the greenery blocked all view of the town he fled. The rest of the way he walked, barely avoiding any of the hazards along the way. Even the shallow river didn't deter, he just walked through it like it wasn't there.

The next object in his path was his destination. The usually sleek and silver Delta Flyer sat in the muddy clearing. Its hull scarred by phaser like fire and a few small dents. Like its current owner it looked sorry for itself, with its better days behind it.

Once inside of it he pulled off the thick jacket he had been wearing. When it dropped to the floor, it made a loud clattering sound as if it contained metal and lots of it.

The door began to seal behind him, then he walked forward to head for the cockpit. A rattle ahead of him caught his attention, his head swung in that direction. He still had the sword in his hand. With it, he slowly walked towards the steps.

Everything looked the same as he left it. That wasn't enough though. Carefully he placed his foot on the first step, so as to not make any sound doing so. The lights in this room were dim, he still noticed slight movement from the cage in the corner of his right eye. His destination changed. He was little more than half way there when a device powered up behind him.

Instead of swinging around, that was always a mistake, he pushed himself backwards. He hit someone, they dropped something metallic. He didn't stop until they were slammed into the wall, and only then he turned around, his hand as usual reaching for their throat to restrain them.

He didn't expect what he saw. The attacker didn't either. However out of the pair of them, only one showed a hint of surprise in their eyes and it wasn't him.

The words were clashing together, it was difficult to make out what either person was shouting at her. All Jessie could make out were occasional words, which made it so much harder to understand.

A quick glance at her children sitting at the table doing their best to concentrate on their meals, then at the rest of the Mess Hall who would occasionally glance over irritably, made her finally snap. "One at a time!" she said with a huge space in between, and each word louder than the one before. Time was almost shouted.

For a few seconds it was quiet, which was a nice change.

The first voice to speak up over her commbadge was the Doctor. *"Your sister has just arrived in Sickbay, she's having contractions."*

"I'm afraid I need her first. This is an emergency," the second voice, Tom's stammered nervously. He sounded urgent.

The next voice to speak was new, so that was now three people who were talking at her. *"Oh yeah, that,"* her sister's voice sighed. *"It's okay, I'm fine. I'm fine. You can just see the little mite afterwards. I'm fine."*

The barrage of voices shouting at her earlier had wiped her patience clean. Her eyes rolled. "I hope that's not a guilt trip, Jodie."

"No, no. I wasn't there for yours and my fella will be here soon. Well he better be anyway." Jessie heard her gasp. She figured it was normal considering the circumstances and didn't pay any mind to it. *"Ooh sorry, my bad."*

"What?" Jessie scowled as if her sister was there to see it. "What are you sorry for? You're not me, you'll definitely be fine."

"Yes of course she will be, because I am here. Nothing to worry about," the Doctor's voice said a little too cheerfully.

"Ohno," Jodie's groaned.

The telltale beep that one comm link had been shut off helped Jessie calm down a little. One to go. "Ok Tom. What's the emergency?"

"I know you're busy Jess, but I'm going to need you to go to Transporter Room two. We have a guest."

Jessie looked down at her children again. Duncan was staring at her curiously. She gave him a smile back to put his mind at ease. "A guest is an emergency? Have we really got nobody free to go talk to them?"

"It's er... not that. I need you to go. You'll see when you get there," Tom's voice said, Jessie noted very nervously.

"Is that it? What am I suppose..." she stuttered but another beep told her she'd been cut off. There was only one thing to do, other than give the ex-helmsman a slap the next time she saw him. With a sigh she tapped her commbadge. "Stuart to Annet. Mum? I'm sorry this is last second, but I need a favour."

It took a good ten minutes for her mother to arrive, briefly explain without really explaining anything, and finally leave the Mess Hall. Her kids weren't too happy about it, Amy in particular she noticed. Jessie winced, thinking that she was probably associating her grandmother with that demon attack a few weeks, nearly a month ago.

The transporter room she was heading for was just down the corridor. She hesitated before going inside. The secrecy and the urgency, and why she had to do it, was a little worrying. Finally she stepped inside to find herself disappointed that nothing was out of the ordinary.

A blue shirt officer stood at the terminal, staring expectantly at her. Jessie nodded at her, "energise."

Definitely nothing unusual about this, Jessie briefly thought. Typically once she thought that, the officer finished at her station and hurried out. There was no time to even think the question, let alone say it out loud.

"What's going on?" Jessie asked over the top of the transporter hum beside her. Once that was over she turned her head to see what all this fuss was about. What she saw on the pad shocked her to the core.

"Hello Jessie. Long time no see," a familiar raspy voice said.

The woman before her was dressed in a long robe with a hood, which she had lowered before she spoke. Her ghostly white skin was covered in scars, and slightly blue tinted blotches. The colour in her eyes had faded to almost white, but still looked strong and fiercely determined. The only part of her seemingly unchanged was her fiery red hair, tied up quickly at the back, slightly disheveled by the hood she had been wearing. Then Jessie noticed the blinking light on the right side of her scalp, she could just make out the tiny hint of metallic grey it came from.

It took her a while to muster up some words. "What are, how you..." She grunted a little in annoyance. "How did... What..."

"I'm sorry for putting you on the spot like this Jessie, but I didn't want my visit here to create that much fuss. The less who knew the better."

"How?" Jessie found herself asking again, even though it annoyed her. "I'm sorry, I didn't expect... I'll start again." With a deep exhale out of the way, Jessie thought she'd feel a bit calmer but she didn't. Still, she tried one more time to get a sentence out. "Welcome home, Janeway."

The smile she got for her sentence was a one of relief, but it was warm too. "You really should call me Kathryn."

Jessie cringed a little, the thought of doing that didn't sound right. At least she felt a tiny bit better. "No, I'd never get used to that. How did you get here?"

She stepped down from the pad to stand in front of her, all the while still keeping an odd distance. Her face seemed conflicted, and it made Jessie realise just how much thinner she was. That thought she berated, of course she was.

"That depends on how much you know already. Fortunately though there isn't much time to catch you up anyway," Kathryn said, worry was seeping through her raw voice.

Jessie instantly started to panic. She was the one who wanted to be caught up. That's why Tom called her here and nobody else. How on earth was she going to explain everything that had happened? The other woman's face looked at her in concern, only then she realised that her panic had made her tremble.

"I know where he is," Kathryn said softly.

It took a while for the meaning behind those words to make sense to her. When it did everything seemed to freeze, including her thoughts.

"We can swap stories on the way," Kathryn continued anyway.

That may as well have been a *snap out of it* slap in the face. It worked the same way, more or less. "What? On the way where?"

"My ship can help with the evacuation. We'll take one of yours. I suggest wearing something waterproof and discreet, bring maybe a weapon or ten," Kathryn said.

Jessie was getting a little tired of all the evasiveness, but she was still very much stuck on something Kathryn had said earlier. *I know where he is*. There was no reason to really think about it. If she had said jump, she'd jump. The only thing Jessie was concerned about was her kids being stuck with their new grandmother. It had already been too long.

"I... do I have time to make some arrangements first?"

Kathryn picked up her hood to put it over her head. Her face was shadowed now, she could only make out her eyes. "Of course. I'll meet you on Deck Nine."

"Nine? What's on Deck Nine?" Jessie wondered aloud.

The Bridge:

Tom had tried to settle his nerves with a few cups of coffee, but it only made him worse. What was about to happen didn't help either, he was overcome with a little jealousy.

"Message received," Faye said from Opps. Tom slowly turned his head toward her. "Aeroshuttle is ready for launch."

"Oh god," Tom groaned into his hand.

Danny peeped over her shoulder to get a hint at what was the matter now. It didn't help. "What?"

"Aeroshuttle?" Tom said in a sad voice. A few people on the Bridge shared a concerned look. "I could sleep talk a better name than that."

Faye tried to hold back a giggle. "Sorry, Isshgreatzzzz Snort is ready for launch."

"*I is great*. I see your character's still based on the writer," Tom retorted.

"Wow," Faye mumbled, her hand moved up to pretend to fly over her head.

Danny sniggered as she turned back to her station. "Good timing too. The Katane's just entered orbit, we should be going."

"Yes, set a course for the evacuation point Danny. We'll catch the Katane up later. Tell the *Spaceplane* they're clear to go," Tom said.

"I don't know why you're whining. At least it's not as bad as what Lena nicknamed the Enterprise Captain's Yacht," Faye reminded him.

Tom turned a little pale, "Lena. Has anybody told her about our visitor?"

"Uh, no. You said it wasn't allowed to leave this room, and then Jodie walked out," Danny muttered in response.

"I wasn't going to stop her. I'm not that stupid," Tom said defensively. He expected some sort of wise crack about that last sentence, he was surprised when no one even smirked. "It's okay, we'll treat that headache when we come to it."

"Oh, I'm channeling the writer's bad grammar and writing?" Faye groaned.

Tom chose to ignore her, even if he could hear the quiet laughter because of it. "She's leaving and Lena's on the surface, it's fine. One thing at a time. Our priority is the evacuation. A little professionalism people."

"Yes Tom. It was us that started it with the complaint about a shuttle name," Danny said.

Before Tom could respond to that, Faye spoke up. "Aeroshuttle is departing."

In the centre of Voyager's saucer section, the little T shape came to life. Slowly it emerged from the hull, revealing itself to be a shuttle craft type vessel with long wings on each side. Once it was clear from the mother ship its impulse engines brightened, pushing the vessel forward and then to right. Finally it shot away in a flash of light.

Inside the barely used shuttlecraft the atmosphere was a little awkward, and uncomfortably quiet. Jessie would glance over now and then, determined to break the silence but would struggle again to come up with a half decent sentence. Kathryn continued to pilot the vessel, seemingly unaware of it.

Jessie sighed, annoyed with herself. There was so much to talk to her about, ask her. That was before she said anything in the transporter room, so now there was even more to discuss. It was difficult to know where to start, hence the problem she was having.

Kathryn glanced over, just catching yet another annoyed look away and inaudible mutter. She gave her a smile and decided to help her out. "How is Sarah-Amy?" she finally asked, taking Jessie by surprise.

"What? Oh..." she stammered. "That's right, the last time you saw her..."

"She was this tiny little thing that just fit into the palm of my hand," Kathryn finished for her. "I have no concept of time these days, how old is she now?"

"She celebrated her second birthday two months ago," Jessie couldn't help but smile as well. She laughed at a particular memory popping up. "The amount of presents, we thought we lost her in them there were so many. We went to the Holodeck, spent the rest of the day in a recreation of our house. It just felt right, you know."

Kathryn tried to imagine it, it was a welcome distraction from the present. Unfortunately the brief story had left Jessie looking down, biting her lip.

"We decided to postpone our anniversary for the week after, so Amy will always have the day to herself. She deserves it," Jessie said as her voice slowly turned to a whisper. "We never really found the time. There was always something awful happening. Now... I don't even know where he is."

So many questions flooded through Kathryn's head, it was which one to ask first that was tough. Jessie however wasn't done. She whispered, "she was so happy that day. We all were. Everything was perfect." Kathryn noticed not only that her eyes were brimming with held back tears, but they were hesitant about something. "Well, mostly everything."

"It's okay. I know," Kathryn said to hopefully reassure her.

"I don't mean where he is literally," Jessie said while shaking her head. "I was afraid something like this would happen. He's been through a lot. Nobody can handle that much... horror."

Kathryn resisted the need to bite her own lip, not that anything would happen if she did. Pain hadn't been an issue for a long time. One of them had to have a strong front, it had to be her. "What happened Jessie?"

Jessie turned her head to stare at her directly. Those tears were still there in her eyes, she was managing to keep it together outwardly after all. They showed determination. "You first."

Kathryn felt a smirk escape from her. "Me? That's a long story."

"So's mine," Jessie said stubbornly, her shoulders raised to shrug.

"Hmm," Kathryn barely made a sound. "Our ship was investigating a strange anomaly. It pulled us inside. Then it..."

"No," Jessie butted in. "Was Chakotay really responsible for what happened to you?"

She expected the former Captain's face to fall, or show any kind of emotion. It didn't change, she only looked to the front of the ship. "I don't know how long I was a part of the Tolg. All I do know is that the trip into the anomaly cut us off from the hive. We were alone."

"The Game Sphere," Jessie said with a sigh.

"Yes. It took us a while to confirm that," Kathryn said.

Jessie nodded grimly. "Your ship didn't look like a regular Tolg design."

"No reason it should, it's a different ship," Kathryn said light heartedly. When she looked back at the girl in the other seat her face had stiffened, it brought out the scars in her skin. "So I've been dead two years, huh? No wonder."

"James was heartbroken when it happened," Jessie said quickly just as it popped into her head. "He... wanted to see you that day, to apologise."

Kathryn's head dipped a little, twice, almost like a nod. "I know," she said to Jessie's confusion. "I wish he had the chance to as well."

Jessie felt awful for bringing that up, she started to mutter insults towards herself. Once she was done she turned her head back to find Kathryn staring at her, bemused. "I'm sorry, it wasn't my business to say that. I just know it ate at him for so long."

"One of many things, I assume," Kathryn said, her voice cracked mid way.

Jessie slowly moved her chair around so her whole body was facing her. When she sat back in it her thoughts finally cleared up a little. She breathed in, then exhaled slowly. Even thinking about talking about it was making her chest thump furiously. "You... you know because Chakotay did, right? You were both assimilated."

Kathryn only gave her a nod as a reply, but her face said so much more. There was a flicker of anger in her eyes, Jessie had a good idea why.

"It's okay, I'll not pester you about him. I just wanted to make sure we were on the right page," Jessie said reassuringly.

"No, that's not why I gave you the silent treatment. I know why James was there that day, what he wanted to do. I know how Chakotay treated him then," Kathryn said, the anger took over her voice near the end.

Jessie wasn't sure what to say to that, her head shook. "How he treated him? James never said anything."

"That doesn't surprise me," Kathryn said with a bitter smile on her face. "It's... it's nothing. Go on."

"If you know what Chakotay knows up to a certain point, then you'll know about... Lena," Jessie said hesitantly. Kathryn closed her eyes and nodded. "Right. What took over her wanted to complete a ritual that would destroy Earth, or at least leave it in ruin. There was a time limit for both that and Lena herself. James, he... hated that in the end, he chose to fight Ylara, to stop the ritual. He thought that he killed his sister by his *inaction*."

Kathryn didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Her uncomfortable posture, her shifting eyes. She seemed to have an idea where this was going, she didn't like it at all.

Jessie didn't want her thinking like that for too long, she tried to smile. "His actions saved Earth. He realised that. On his own." Kathryn quickly looked at her, the eyes showed surprise. "He changed on that day. He was no longer a man full of self doubt and guilt. He didn't blame himself for every bad thing anymore. Or think that he had to do things on his own. That burden, that heavy weight on his shoulders was gone. You would have been proud of him."

Kathryn stared at her as if she were holding back tears, but Jessie couldn't see any. She briefly wondered if she could at all in her condition. Internally she shook that away.

"How... what could have happened to make him go from that, to what I saw?" Kathryn said quietly.

A lump quickly formed in Jessie's throat, her jaw started trembling. "What did you see?" she dared to ask, she had to know.

As soon as she saw his face, she expected the grip on her throat to lift or lessen. Nothing changed. It was then she made eye contact with him. Those brilliant blue eyes she remembered, full of character and life, had been replaced. The colour had all but gone, leaving them a dull grey, which she hoped was only because of the dim light in the Flyer. They didn't flicker or move, anything that would hint to an emotion. They may as well have been glass eyes. There was no life in them.

Luckily she didn't need to breathe, the sensation of pain was a long forgotten memory. Her voice though was a little rougher, due to the pressure on her throat. Still, she had to talk. "James. Don't you recognise me?" Again, there was nothing. "What happened to you?" He was almost frozen on the spot, she was starting to think he was as dead as she was. "Let go, now!"

Kathryn didn't expect it to work, but he finally let her go and backed away a few steps. She was about to question him further when she realised it wasn't just his eyes and behaviour that was off. His cheeks had sunken in, his jaw and cheekbones were far more prominent. He looked so much paler than he used to, almost as white as she was. There were signs of still healing injuries like cuts and burns on his face, neck and what she could see of his arms. It wasn't merely his face, he was definitely a lot thinner than she'd ever seen him. He looked healthier when he came back after two weeks of being stuck in a demonic version of Voyager. It shocked her so much it made her speechless.

The sound of footsteps approaching snapped her out of it. She wasn't the only one. The figure before her finally moved. Weapons, both long and short range, were drawn as he walked around her. She swung around. "No, wait!"

Two robed figures appeared at the top of the steps, each pointing rifles down at them. James fired first, striking them both quickly in the chest. They merely shrugged it off as a brief inconvenience and fired back. Their target rolled out of the way, once he was back on his feet he quickly changed the setting on his rifle. Another phaser strike almost hit him while he did that, which he narrowly avoided just by shifting his torso a little to the right.

The shuttle rocked, she felt it lift up from the ground. Kathryn wasn't surprised, but it did annoy her. James didn't seem to care or notice, he just fired back at his attackers one more time on a higher setting. One of them stumbled backwards through the door. The second figure ducked so the phaser fire would hit the wall. It tore a small hole out of the interior of the hull, sending sparks flying.

A couple more robed figures leapt onto the landing pad at the rear exit, just before it closed completely. With one hand clutching the hull and the other holding a rifle, they started firing immediately. The sword quickly raised to block the incoming fire, denting it slightly. While he held it still, the other arm casually maneuvered underneath it to fire back. They each threw themselves forward to the floor to avoid it.

"Stop, he's not one of them!" Kathryn shouted at them. Her head turned to behind her so she yelled it at the first pair as well. However the one who had been distracted by the sparking hull above and behind them, was already aiming his weapon with his finger on the trigger. James had looked over his shoulder behind him just at that moment. His rifle remained fixed on the two ahead of him, who were still a threat as well. He barely had time to throw his short range weapon before he was shot at. "No!" Kathryn shouted more out of anger than anything else.

She could only groan as the sword impaled the shooter through the chest, like it was no big deal. The figure himself acted like it wasn't either. He just seemed annoyed by it and rolled his eyes. "Again? This is ridiculous," he grumbled.

James' face didn't change at all, but he did do nothing but stare at him for a few seconds. It was one second too long as one of the robed people behind him fired into his side. This time it landed. He hit the floor with a loud thud.

"For god's sake," Kathryn groaned, instantly making the not impaled attackers freeze on the spot. "It's no wonder you keep getting stabbed and getting your arms swiped off. You're a bunch of Neelix's, aren't you? No, Tom's."

For some reason the robed figures each looked very offended, but they didn't say anything. Kathryn stomped over to the one trying to pull the sword out of him. She yanked it out for him, then slapped him over the head.

"We were securing the vessel. It's not our fault one of these were interested in it too," the one who had fallen through the doors said irritably.

Kathryn face palmed briefly. "I tried to tell you. He's not one of the Softmicron's test tube experiments."

The pair that had taken cover on the ground were up on their feet by now. "You could've fooled me," one said.

"Well it doesn't take much, does it?" Kathryn snapped at him. Her deadly eyes directed at the man beside him, since he was the one who managed to land the hit that knocked James down. He was too busy staring at his weapon as if it were broken to notice her directing a death glare at him. "That better be on a stun setting or you'll spending the evening outside again."

He then noticed and started to stammer. "It is, that's the weird thing." His spare hand pointed at the man lying stunned on the floor. The others were shocked at the news, while Kathryn sighed a little in relief.

"Lucky you," she hissed at the shooter. Then she walked forward to crouch down beside the body. "I need a scanner, now!"

The rest looked around at each other, for the most part. One of them quickly got distracted again by the hole in his chest. "Wait, if it's not one of them, then..."

Kathryn's head shot up to glare at him. "He, not it! This is James..." She looked back down, her hand brushed the side of his face.

"Oh crap," one of them stuttered, understanding immediately. The shooter shriveled up and hoped the floor would swallow him.

"My son," Kathryn finished, though she didn't have to.

A short while later James' body had been moved into the cage nearby, with the door locked. A few more robed figures had joined them, making Kathryn extremely irritable, at least more than before. The newbies stood next to the cage with her.

"This is him?" one of them said in disbelief.

"Yes," Kathryn answered forcefully.

He lowered his hood, revealing his pale skin and scars. Unlike her a thin sliver of metal covered the side of his face, all the way up to his scalp. "Why is he alone? What's he doing here?"

Kathryn growled as her impatience was taking its toll. "I don't know, I didn't have time to ask."

The shuttle rocked gently, nobody reacted. They seemed to expect it. "That's it. The shuttle is safely in our bay. We should leave," one newbie said. The first one to speak nodded at him, prompting him to rush up the steps, to the Flyer's front area.

Another member of the new arrivals looked inside the cage, "we didn't detect him when we scanned the shuttlecraft. His behaviour, as described by Tomalik and Ruften matched that of the experiments."

"I don't care. As far as he's concerned, we trespassed in his vessel and opened fire. He had a right to defend himself," Kathryn snapped.

The no longer hooded one sighed sadly. "Janeway, this shuttle has been sighted in ten systems so far. That's ten tower networks destroyed."

Kathryn's shoulders slumped, her demeanour changed to a one of worry. "Just give me ten minutes alone with him. I'll explain..."

"He attacked you. That's not happening," one of the original four spoke up.

"She's right. If he's not one of the experiments and is who you say he is..." the un-hooded man said.

Kathryn's anger shot back, "why the hell would I lie?"

Nevertheless he continued like she never said anything, only his voice rose, "then he is still a risk to our ship, this system, the sphere and everyone in it!"

Her fists clenched, so did her jaw. It made her tremble. "I am dead to him. He wouldn't know, or expect me to be here. He probably thought that I was a Softmicron, trying to trick him."

"Maybe so, but we can't let him continue what he's been doing," another new arrival spoke. Her voice distorted, as if she spoke through a computer.

"Five minutes," Kathryn said, it was an order not a plea. "The James I know wouldn't risk another anomaly expansion. I'll tell him, he'll stop." The rest of the room didn't look too sure about it, everyone but the one with the hole in his chest shared a look with someone else. "Then we'll find Voyager, and return him and this ship to them."

"That's if it still exists," one person spoke up, making Kathryn visibly flinch.

The woman with the partly robotic voice glanced over her shoulder, "what colour were his eyes?"

The four reacted with a mixture of nervous laughter and head shaking. The hole in chest man winced when he did and continued trying to close the wound with an alien regenerator.

"He was disabled by a phaser on stun. He's not evil," Kathryn said through gritted teeth.

"Really?" the woman said as she turned her head back. "Cold, calculating, no facial expression whatsoever, violent. Is he always this warm and friendly?"

Kathryn resisted the urge to punch her in the face. She knew it wouldn't make any difference if she did. "A woman that probably looked like she was impersonating his dead mother, people hiding in robes. People in robes unaffected by phaser fire, clearly dead already. What did you expect from a Slayer? Did you think he would stop and invite you to stay for dinner?"

One of the original four nodded, "she's got a point there."

"If he's been sneaking into towers and fighting those things, he's bound to be a little on edge," Kathryn said, although she knew there was more to it than that. The lack of life in his eyes alone still unnerved her. "If he's on his own, there'll be a very *good* reason for it too. Let me talk to him and..."

"If he thinks you're a Softmicron then he won't talk to you," the un-hooded man interrupted. He turned to one side to address everyone. "We need to prepare him for transport to our ship. Unless someone...." he said the last word in Kathryn's direction. "Can get a shield around him. I doubt this cage will contain him."

"I did a damage report before he got here. There's very little power remaining, just enough for propulsion and life support. I imagine we only caught him here as he would need to stock up on supplies before he could leave," Kathryn said.

The un-hooded man stared at her blankly, while the other newbies seemed a little surprised. "Do you think he was trying to trade with the townspeople?" the woman asked.

"That seems plausible. The Softmicron found out and sent the army," Kathryn muttered. She shook her head. "We're wasting time arguing about this. He won't talk to you, but if I explain he may talk to me."

"Five minutes," the un-hooded man said. He gestured for everyone to leave the shuttle, which they did immediately. Only he and Kathryn remained outside the cage. "Just remember Kathryn. We're no longer a collective but we're not running under a command hierarchy either. This is a democracy. You're not a Captain anymore."

Kathryn mimicked his earlier gesture while her eyebrow raised stiffly. "So you say."

"I didn't want to waste any further time. Good luck," he said in a much friendlier tone than before. He then gave her a nod and followed the others out.

Inside the cage he was starting to stir. She had to hurry. A quick look at the nearby computer told her what she already knew. There wasn't enough power to put up a forcefield. What was left was barely maintaining the life support systems. Kathryn had no idea how he would react, if he would believe her story and she certainly didn't want to resort to pointing a weapon at him to keep him at bay. There wasn't many options, in fact there was only one, period.

He was standing up a little too quickly for someone in his condition, as well as stunned into unconsciousness. It had to be now. What part she told him first was important. The wrong one before he had a chance to escape would be disastrous.

"You've definitely improved from when you were little. I remember catching a certain hyper little boy scooping the last of a large jar of coffee, that I thought was too heavy for him to carry, into his mouth. He thought the best hiding place was under a sofa cushion," Kathryn said, chuckling briefly at the memory. What brought her out of it was the same empty face staring at her. "Life with him was never dull. I loved him more than anything in this universe. Even if he did eat a whole three hundred gram jar of coffee."

She had said the last sentence in a tongue in cheek tone of voice. She didn't expect him to burst into laughter or even a smile, but she at least expected some kind of reaction. Anything, even just a blink. She got nothing. At least he wasn't trying to break through the cage as she feared.

Just in case, Kathryn brought out the bigger guns. "That last week with you, I didn't want to leave, I couldn't accept it. I had plotted various ways to smuggle you home, so your father wouldn't know about it. I'd talk myself out of it, calling it selfish. It's not a good reason, but it's the truth. I wasn't shouting at you that day you were sick. I was angry at myself. Every word was directed at me, you were just there to see and hear it." She allowed herself to sigh. "That's the answer I should have gave you before I died. Maybe if I did, we would have had more time together."

He must have only blinked once through the whole speech. He didn't move other than that. It concerned her, he was still there though. Perhaps it was enough to convince him of who she really was.

"You're probably wondering how I'm here. The story is long so I'll cut it short. For an unknown amount of time I was a member of the Tolg. Dead but still aware, unable to control my actions. When we entered this Game Sphere, the connection was cut off. We were free. The people who fired on you are like me. They misunderstood the situation. They thought you were one of the experiments, which I'm sure you've encountered," Kathryn explained as quickly as she could.

He was still there, eerily still like he was frozen on the spot. "We've been investigating this sphere and there's something you should know before you continue with what you're doing." She noticed the faint sign that his interest was piqued, a subtle eye movement. "You shouldn't be destroying the towers. It's..."

"It's my job," he finally spoke, only his voice was raw like it hadn't been used in a while. Kathryn suspected that was true. He was still staring at her, apart from speaking he looked exactly the same as before. However Kathryn felt like something else had changed. His blank face didn't give her the impression of being lost, damaged. It was more like he was when fighting her comrades, a little dangerous. She tried to sweep that to one side, convince herself it was her imagination.

"The game, it's damaged. What you're doing is exacerbating the situation and not in the way you'd like," she chose her words carefully. "You can't destroy every tower in time to end the game. They're building them far too quickly. Destroying them is only making the glitch I'm sure you've seen spread. You can't keep doing this, you must stop."

Something inside of him must have been triggered, as his shoulders flinched only slightly. There was no time to dwell on it, his hands grabbed the metal in his way. It groaned, even screeched a little as his fingers wrapped around the thin grating, then slid through the cage like it was made out of paper.

"Stop. What happened to you?" Kathryn asked desperately.

One little gesture to his right and the cage door slid open with a painful creak. Kathryn stepped back a little. As he approached she scanned his face, eyes for anything. Hesitation, anger, sadness, regret. There was nothing like that. Nothing she could use, but nothing to convince her there was a genuine danger either. Even if she had a weapon, she wouldn't use it. If she were alive, it would still be a wasted effort to get in his way.

"James, this isn't the way. It'll ruin you," Kathryn could only warn him. Before she realised it she had back stepped to the other side of the room, and he had followed every step she made.

His eyes blinked once. She swore his pupils moved slightly in that brief moment. "James is dead," he said.

The words chilled her to the bone. He had changed so much, she needed but didn't want to know how this happened. "Being the Slayer isn't all you are. You know that, or you used to." Those lifeless eyes seemed to be staring straight through her, which was far more unnerving to her.

Kathryn wondered if her words got to him as everything stopped. The silence was painful, but there was hope in it she thought. That was cruelly pushed away as his left hand flung forward to do the same to her. She felt her whole body leave the ground if only for a moment, in that second or two it felt like she was falling. Her surroundings span, there was a loud crunch as she hit the ground.

When her vision stopped spinning she realised she was no longer inside the Delta Flyer. It stood a few metres ahead of her. The alien shuttle bay she had grown accustomed to surrounded her instead. Somebody groaned to her left. Then she realised she wasn't alone. Before she could turn her head to check on them, a similar sound to her landing made her look to her right. One of her companions, colleagues, Kathryn still wasn't sure what to call them, lay a short distance away.

The shuttle's engines powered up, which made her head swing in its direction. If she hurried, she could get back inside and stop this. The hatch shut before she could even get back onto her feet. The familiar roar of the thrusters filled the shuttle bay, pushing the vessel forward.

"The doors aren't..." Kathryn only managed to stutter in time. The Flyer ran out of room to fly in, the exit remained sealed. It didn't slow down, let alone stop. One phaser beam shot out of it, tearing a huge hole in the doors. The noise was deafening, a thundering assault to her ears. Her first instinct was to grab the nearest object that was attached to the ship, so she wouldn't be sucked outside.

There was no time to think it let alone do it. And yet she managed to get half way there when she realised. Her head turned, immediately spotting the signs of a forcefield. Their emergency hull breach fields weren't that fast. She should be outside, as well as her two comrades. The shield wasn't covering the hole in the doors, it seemed to be directly in front of them, in between them and where the Flyer originally stood.

In that moment, Kathryn wondered how long that little push had knocked her down for. It wasn't a few seconds like she thought.

"It's difficult. He acted so robotic, and yet he still didn't hurt us. He just pushed us outside," Kathryn was saying. "I assume he was the one who left the forcefield up, knowing he was going to endanger us if he didn't. No other option made sense. The others say something similar to me. This isn't just him losing his mind and turning evil. This is, something else entirely and I'm not sure what to call it. He cares but he doesn't. I don't get it. He was so desperate to get to that next planet, no matter what."

Jessie looked a few lightyears away when Kathryn finished talking. She only did so as she noticed her expression.

"He tried so hard. He wanted to be better. Things just kept going wrong, it was like everything was being thrown at him," Jessie whispered. She tried to swallow that pesky lump in her throat, with no such luck. "That first planet with the towers. I had a feeling, a nagging feeling that it affected him more than he let on. His team was wiped out in one enemy shot. Kidnapped, experimented on. He told me they were only on that planet so the Soft wouldn't know he knew about them, so they wouldn't come for Voyager or take it out on those people on the planet. He hid it well, but I knew. I knew he blamed himself for it deep down."

"Then there was the incident with Daniel. He messed around with magic, destroyed the Leda accidentally with it, killing three and leaving Ylara badly hurt. One hit was all it took to put him in a coma," Jessie continued. "James did there what he usually did. *He deserved it. I'm not losing sleep*

over him. That smile, the jokes were always so god damn convincing. I dunno why he used them on me. I lay beside him every night as he stared at the ceiling for hours. When he wasn't doing that he was thrashing around in his sleep, saying *sorry* over and over again."

The image of that hurt, a lot. Kathryn had no idea. She had to admit, she always fell for the *I don't care* jokes and smiles too.

"You saw the ship that joined Voyager earlier? It was originally lead by a man named Shoytin. Desperate for revenge, answers, we don't really know, he took every child in the nursery hostage," Jessie said, shocking Kathryn further. "The moment we heard Amy's frightened crying while that *man* tried to grab her, James was determined to do something. He got in, but as a hostage and not on purpose either. Shoytin used Sasha against him, threatened her. In the end it came down to a fight. James was injured from being captured, tortured. It was apparently just self defense, Shoytin was trying to kill him. James grabbed his arm to stop him, breaking it so badly it bled. Someone managed to shoot that sick son of a bitch, saving him. That shot and the bleeding killed him."

Kathryn let out a sigh. *Another one for the list*, she thought to herself. Now she was starting to understand.

Jessie nodded as if she heard her thoughts. "He was forced to choose. Keep Sasha around so Shoytin and his loyal idiots could threaten her some more, possibly kill her. Or keep her around while another child is subjected to it instead. Tom's daughter." She paused for a moment, expecting a response of some kind. Kathryn didn't do anything. "James chose Sasha. I don't think... I ever saw him sleeping again after that. Sometimes if he was in the bedroom at all he was sitting, staring out the window. Sasha kept boasting about her heroic daddy saving the other girl, but he... he struggled to pretend everything was fine with her. She's a smart girl, she noticed. She kept asking me if she did anything wrong to upset him."

"That's... a decision no parent should have to make," Kathryn muttered in anger. She wasn't sorry that this Shoytin was dead. Unknown to her, it wasn't even him that was responsible for that part of the story.

To her horror though Jessie's story wasn't over yet, not even close. She was just warming up. "One morning we were attacked by someone with a sword." Kathryn groaned a little impatiently. Jessie knew she wasn't irritated with her, but the stories themselves. Telling them was making her feel that way as well. "We were later drawn to Deck Thirteen, trapped there behind a shield and a power cut. Turned out this warlock and his similarly minded friends wanted to kill me, as well as James. We still don't know why, not really. The warlock turned himself evil to accomplish it."

"You serious?" Kathryn laughed and not nicely either.

"I wish I wasn't," Jessie sighed. "I was forced to run away, I hated that, while James tried to hold him off. You should've seen the state of him afterwards. The warlock got to me, but not without killing innocent people first cos why not? I was so close to being burned alive when James arrived. Witches, warlocks when they're evil know every trick in the book. They will heal, I remember I did too. It's either talk them down or kill them, and kill them quickly. There wasn't time to nicely talk to him. He hated us before he turned, he wouldn't listen to us now. James had no choice, he did what he had to."

"This is ridiculous," Kathryn spat, again Jessie knew not to take it personally. "He didn't stand a chance, did he? To reach that epiphany only to have every thing he does afterwards backfire on him, it's just cruel. At some point he probably wondered if his self realisation was even true."

"Yeah. I know exactly when that point was," Jessie said with regret. "When the warlock fell, he... just crumbled before my eyes. Fell apart, broken. Whatever you want to call it. I tried, but I couldn't console him. Yes he stopped crying but at least when he was, he was dealing with it."

"What do you mean?" Kathryn asked even though she didn't want to know.

The question brought it all back, it took all the strength she had not to turn into a blubbering mess herself. "Some mornings I'd wake up and he wouldn't be there. I'd hear him in the next room. He tried to hide it, pretend he was fine. *I'm just not tired, I didn't want to disturb you or the...*" Jessie had to

stop talking for a moment as her words had left her a shivering wreck. "The idiot thought I wouldn't see him wiping his tears away, or his swollen red eyes. The fact that he'd often not finish his meals, or occasionally stare into space. That the times when he acted normal I could feel that he was faking it. No, he was a ticking time bomb. I failed to stop it."

Kathryn briefly checked the helm was fine before moving her chair closer to her. Her hand reached over to take one of hers, hoping it would comfort her. "Don't ever say that. This is not your fault. You tried your best. You always have. It's why I'm happy he picked you."

Jessie had to laugh only briefly, it was more out of disbelief than anything else. "You hated me solely because I liked him."

Kathryn smiled genuinely, "at first, I'll admit. I was just being petty. I gave him up, missed most of his life and when he was back in mine, you had *replaced* me."

The face Jessie pulled at her made her smile grow further. "That's disturbing," she said.

"You know what I mean. Don't go there," Kathryn laughed. It didn't last for very long, but the change of subject helped clear the tense air a little. "There was no way for you to diffuse the bomb. The fuse was already lit. You had no chance of seeing this coming."

Jessie shook her head in despair, a bitter smile was on her face. "You're right, I didn't. I was there through it all, I saw the build up. But I missed the end, the trigger. I got the cliffhanger version of this story."

Kathryn stared at her intently, unsure what to make of what she said. She waited for her to explain, but she didn't. "I'm not sure I understand."

"That's just it, neither do I," Jessie said, her voice rising with anger and pain. "He was hurting because everything he did had a price, the kind that he was trying to redeem himself for. Then suddenly something completely different happens, I don't even know that for certain, and bam he's gone fighting Game Sphere towers on his own. There's a whole stinking piece missing, no... there's several. How on earth can I help him when I don't know how he got there?"

A part of her rant got Kathryn's attention, at least it got the majority of it. "Something different happens? What?"

"You thought everything I said was the long story? I'm sorry, that's the cliff notes," Jessie muttered angrily. Kathryn still watched her, waiting patiently for it anyway. "I told you, I don't know it all. I don't even know if James does, that's the problem. He took off before we could talk about it. I ran home and he'd... he'd already gone. The note he left, just said he was sorry for everything. That was it."

"Jessie," Kathryn said softly. "I need to know if we're going to bring him back."

Jessie hesitated while she tried to think of a place to start. It came to her; *keep it simple*. "Do you remember Debbie?"

"Peter and Susy's daughter, yes," Kathryn replied, a frown slowly formed on her face. "James' half sister. Why?"

"It turned out that I have a brother, a one she was best friends with. The horrible irony," Jessie mumbled. Her throat cleared so she'd stop doing that. "You might remember him, maybe... Nathan?"

Kathryn thought about it, a puzzled look was still on her face. Then a face popped into her head, her eyes lit up instantly. "Yes, I do. Sweet boy. He used to go out of his way to talk to me, even when the rest of the Taylors still hated me. I assume because of his age he wasn't from your mother's side, although your father would have been quite young when..."

Jessie sighed and nodded. "Yeah he was young. Dad doesn't know about him, and I dunno if he ever will." The worried look on Kathryn's face reminded Jessie that she wanted to keep this story simple, and going down this path was definitely anything but. "Nathan has a... demonic alter ego. He didn't know until recently."

"What?" Kathryn could only manage to say.

"It usually just waits for its host to have a baby, then moves on into it. Only it..." Jessie said, the disgust she was feeling broke her voice down. She tried again. "Debbie is dead, because that thing wanted her. My brother killed James' sister."

Kathryn was momentarily speechless. It took her a while to gather her thoughts into a coherent sentence. "Does he know this?"

"I figured it out. The demon didn't like that. It tried to silence me, James stopped it. The last I saw him, he said he'd ask Craig to interrogate my brother instead of him," Jessie said hesitantly. "Because I asked. Later on I thought that maybe he worded it a certain way, so he wouldn't lie to me. Or maybe it was just what he overheard from the Doctor and Tom that set him off. I have no idea really."

"You think the demon or Nathan told him the truth?" Kathryn questioned.

"It doesn't add up if he did. What does the towers have to do with his sister's death? I understand it being a last straw, hell we were in the minus for that, but his resulting actions just doesn't make sense. I'd believe him turning evil despite all his training to avoid it, over this. Something like this, you'd expect more of the behaviour I told you about. Worst case scenario a self harm or suicide attempt... he's done both for much less," Jessie stuttered.

"All he cared about was continuing his mission. To destroy the towers. If he's looking for redemption, he's not going to find it there. Quite the opposite," Kathryn said with pain in her voice.

Jessie bit her lip again, her whole body tensed. "The anomaly. Some of those planets we encountered, they weren't much better off. That's not his fault. He couldn't know."

Kathryn reluctantly nodded. "You know as well as I do that he won't think of it like that."

The hum from the open panel was slowly fading away. His hand flew up to tap the console it belonged to, only for the lights decorating the panel to fizzle out. The hum was gone too. His other hand gently pushed the panel door to a close. Once that was done, he abandoned the hyperspanner on top of the now dead console.

Only the helm and the Tactical station remained alive, with only their basic functions still active. James briefly checked both of them just with a glance in either direction, then he made his way to the door at the back. It hesitated to open, stalling half way there.

His destination, the bio scanners and closed up biobed to the left of him in front of the cage. Sitting on one of the monitors was a regenerator, which he picked up. It was soon directed at an open cut along his forearm. He barely gave it time to do its job, as soon as it was closed he turned it off, leaving a long scar behind.

In arm's reach stood a small silver and metal case. He reached for it, opening it up without looking. Inside a few tiny slivers of rations. He took one no bigger than a cracker, his thumb and finger snapped it in half. One half then dropped back into the case. Still with a ration in hand, he closed it. He lingered for a moment before slipping the half a ration into his mouth.

He barely had time to swallow the measly ration when he heard a clatter, like something hard bumping into metal. His head turned sharply in the direction he heard it come from. Then it happened again, and again. The bangs became louder, more frequent. He quickly stood up to walk towards the landing

grate. Now he could hear voices and lots of them, shouting. Some were close by, while others were distant.

James walked quickly back over to the steps leading to the front. This time the door opened without a complaint. Once in the cockpit he could see outside through the glass, but the only thing there were thick trees filled with reds and orange leaves. The noise was still going on. Whatever or whoever it was, were only behind the Flyer for now. He stopped by the Tactical station, his hand hovered over the shields. Every input he made flashed red and shouted a negative beep at him.

"Insufficient power," the computer reported eventually.

He made his way to the helm. The shuttle then started to rock. He heard heavy footsteps on metal. It was clear to him what was happening now, and it stalled his path to the helm. Instead he reached for the jacket lying on the back of the chair there. Only it wasn't the jacket itself he was after, it was the inside of it. Lined in every orifice was a weapon of some kind. He grabbed two; what looked like just a sword handle with a small button on it, and a phaser.

When he was ready a figure jumped from above onto the glass window in front of him. He merely glanced up at them. No surprise and no annoyance registered in his eyes or face. The sounds on the roof of the shuttle were still going on, so he assumed there was multiple people causing it.

He headed back for the other room, ignoring the figure shouting at him and swinging what looked like a baton at the window on the Flyer's nose.

The noise in the rear side of the Flyer was non stop. Whatever was hitting the shuttle seemed to be hitting it fast or there were multiple different things doing it. Unfazed, James pressed the panel near the landing shaft. It started to open and immediately the sounds tripled in volume. He maneuvered around with his back to the wall, hidden from whoever was outside until the door was finished turning into a ramp.

He didn't need to look to know who were attacking him. The voices were clear enough.

"There's the so called saviour!" a woman screamed.

One man roared over the top of her, "monster!"

"You were supposed to save us, not attack us!" another yelled. Other people shouted very similar things to him.

James' eyes shifted down to the ground, then to the phaser in one of his hands. His chest heaved briefly while his eyes squeezed closed. Slowly he put both weapons to one side. Multiple bangs from above him got his full attention.

Multiple rocks and branches flew into the shuttle through the open hatch. He quickly peeked his head around to see the two dozen or so people merely standing a few yards away, shouting, brandishing all manner of things like rakes, hammers. Things that normal people would have lying around that they picked up. Another rock flew in which smashed into the cage. The footsteps above him though he was more focused on.

Quickly he threw himself outside, immediately jumping up to grab the roof of the shuttle. Several things were thrown at or around him as he climbed the rest of the way. That didn't matter though. Dead ahead of him were a group of five aliens, startled by his sudden appearance. Two of them were frightened enough to leap off the shuttle and land in a roll onto the foliage below.

One of the men was armed with what looked like a shovel, only it was completely square and the handle was curved outward. "How dare you attack..." he growled at him, while swinging it at him. James grabbed it from him with his right hand just as it was about to hit him, then his left delivered a measly looking hit to the face. It still knocked him onto his back.

The other two in the group attacked from both sides of him so he immediately ducked down. He moved the shovel handle around to his right, barely tapping the right attacker at the back of the legs. Like the half hearted punch, it was enough to make them fall backwards.

He was back up and too quickly for the left one to recover from their first attack. One light shove to the chest pushed them off the shuttle to join the previous two.

The barely a fight had riled up the crowd even further. Some had even started to throw their household items instead of any rocks or branches they could find. James quickly had to duck when a small gardening tool flew at his head. Since he was down, he took that opportunity to gently push the two lying on the roof onto the ground.

Despite the roars and continuous attacks, he headed back inside the shuttle and after checking he was alone closed the landing door. This time he ran up the steps to get to the front. Fortunately he was alone there too, so he went straight for the helm. He was about to sit down when he spotted a large crack in the top left of the window. His hand cautiously approached it so it was within a centimetre of the gap. A slight breeze brushed his hand, he pulled it back.

Still, he entered some commands into the helm and the shuttle rose.

"Warning: hull breach detected," the computer warned him.

He looked up to stare through the window ahead of him. The shuttle was just emerging from the top of the trees. In the far distance, beyond a few hills, stood a tower surrounded with what appeared to be scaffolding. A tiny dot flew around it, towing a large piece of metal twice its size.

One command stopped the Flyer from rising further. Another moved it forward, directly towards the monstrosity in the sky.

The Aeroshuttle slowly approached a m-class planet. It sped up slightly when it was clear there were no other ships in sight.

Inside the crew looked a little anxious.

Jessie focused her attention on the scanner. It didn't make her feel any better. "There's four Krralef vessels over on the opposite side of the planet. They're scanning something on the surface." Kathryn glanced in her direction with interest. "I'm not detecting any Federation signatures or Human lifesigns."

"You won't," Kathryn said plainly. "James has masked his lifesigns and hidden the Flyer. We found it purely from eye witness accounts on Derada."

Jessie mouthed the last word to herself, then she nodded with realisation. "The planet in your story. So we should just look for the towers. Tira said one was on an island near the capital city."

"It's a good thing you've been here before," Kathryn smiled at her.

Jessie didn't look as confident as her. The readings she was getting were conflicting with what she said. "That's where the ships are. They're hovering around the capital's continent. There's no sign of a tower there."

Kathryn sighed irritably. "I hope we're not too late."

"Hang on," Jessie said, calming Kathryn down momentarily. "There was another tower being planned. It may still be under construction. Let me..." Her fingers moved across the console quickly, desperately. A meek smile appeared on her face. "There. I'm detecting a large structure. Power levels minimal, there's a couple small ships hanging around it."

"Where?" Kathryn asked. Jessie glanced at her briefly, then her console started to bleep at her, getting her attention. When she looked at it she noticed the answer was right there. "We'll have to be careful. It's close enough to the capital and previous tower that those ships will spot us. I need to figure out a long way, so to speak."

"They like building these things in one part of the planet, instead of spreading them out. I wonder why," Jessie said quietly.

Kathryn's shoulders raised as if to shrug, she didn't lower them. "I imagine it's to keep the damage caused by the drain localised in one spot, instead of two and more. Less suspicion then."

"Yeah but if they spread it out, the illusion would take longer to spot," Jessie mused. Her head shook in anger. "If we sneak in via the north pole, we may be able to get close discreetly. After that, unless their sensors don't like trees..."

"I'm way ahead of you," Kathryn smiled again, this time playfully. She passed it to Jessie, inspiring her to quickly think of another plan. It had been a while but that smile had gotten them into trouble so many times over the years.

Nothing was coming to mind to her annoyance. Then she realised that the shuttle was already plunging into the planet's atmosphere. The ice caps clearly visible underneath the clouds they were skimming. They were quickly replaced by blue shimmering oceans. Before she knew it they were flying dangerously close to hills covered in trees. The shuttle twisted to the left a few times, they were almost completely sideways on one turn.

"Um. I just want to remind you that I'm not dead like you, and I'd like to keep it that way," Jessie stuttered.

"It's okay, we're almost there. I've already slowed down. I'd do another scan," Kathryn said.

Jessie nodded and did so, trying her best to ignore the ship trying to drag her into the wall. "Do you want me to keep an eye on those ships?"

"Scan for residual thruster or impulse readings. You can't hide them so easily," Kathryn said. She didn't hear any beeps that usually came with entering commands, so she turned her head to check on Jessie. Sure enough she wasn't doing anything, just staring out of the window. "Jessie?"

"There," Jessie stuttered while pointing ahead and to the right. Kathryn looked to where she was pointing. First the tower caught her eye, surrounded by building equipment, scaffolding. Unlike the others she'd seen, it wasn't covered in blinding interior lights yet. Another few weeks and it would be done though. Then movement caught her eye to the left of it. Silver, with a sloped nose like shape, heading directly for it. At their distance it looked like it was going slowly, it was obvious to Kathryn that wasn't the case. Panic started to set in.

"What the hell is he doing!" her voice raised, her anger taking over just as quickly.

Jessie trembled as she worked at her station in a hurry. "It's registering as one of those maintenance vessels sitting at the tower's base. It's running on thrusters only. Low power signature. It's likely the ships won't have spotted it yet." The trembling intensified. "Confirmed. The ship's on a... collision course," she could barely get the words out, they got stuck in the lump in her throat.

"We're just going to have to be detected," Kathryn said bluntly, her fingers told the console to increase their speed.

"The erm... tower's, lifesigns inside it is depleting. There's nothing wrong with it that I can see," Jessie mumbled while staring directly at her station. She couldn't bare to look at the window. "They must have seen him."

That just angered Kathryn further, her head shook rapidly. "He better not be in it. When we're in range, open a channel. I'll get a tractor beam ready."

Jessie glanced at her briefly. "I'm way ahead of you." Kathryn glanced back, nodding at her.

The wait to get closer was excruciating for the both of them. Jessie still didn't dare look up out of the window, while Kathryn couldn't keep her eyes off of it. The object clearly was the Flyer, it was unmistakable to her now. Its course, directly for the centre of the still unfinished Game Sphere tower. She worried that they wouldn't get there in time, then she worried that the Krralef ships would notice and get there before them. The worry that neither would make any difference here was nagging at her, she struggled to hold back shouting at him.

Jessie meanwhile took in a deep breath, her nerves were frayed and her shakes had tired her out. Nevertheless she pressed the important command. "Aeroshuttle to Delta Flyer. James? If you're there, listen to me. You know I'd never lie to you, manipulate you. I'd never do anything that would add to your grief. Please understand. Destroying that tower is a mistake. This isn't a regular Game Sphere where you destroy the tower and it ends. No, all it does is create anomalies like we've seen take over Erayas."

The course of the shuttle didn't change, it didn't slow down. Kathryn glanced down at her console, hoping for it to tell her they're in tractor range.

"James, you've saved so many people. Millions, perhaps billions with your efforts over the weeks. Some of these planets you helped wouldn't have survived long enough for the game to end, that much is certain," Jessie continued, her voice trembled with fear and worry. "I know, you're not doing it to cancel out things you've done. It won't even tip the scales for you. But I promise you, if you go through with this and something like Erayas happens again, you'll never be able to live with yourself."

Kathryn turned her attention briefly to the window. Still no change. The anger she felt before was slowly turning into fear the closer it got to the tower.

"It's not your fault. I know you did this because you're a good man who wanted to help people. None of this... is because of you, understand?" Jessie started to stammer, but she soldiered through it. "The Softmicron are the villains here. They created this gigantic sphere. They set the rules, they built the towers. They probably even programmed the anomaly I talked about. If they didn't, it's a flaw in *their* design. They're the people who chose to harm and kill innocents. All you've done is try to save them, which you can keep doing if you turn around and come home with us. There's always another way. Change your course please."

The silence that followed was even more painful than the wait earlier. When nothing changed, Jessie spoke up again out of desperation. "James. I love you, don't do this to me. Please, I'm beg..."

Kathryn's eyes were just starting to well up, or at least it felt like it, when the Flyer's course veered sharply to one side so all they could see was the rear of the shuttle. She quickly looked down at her station, Jessie did the same with hers.

"The sudden course change wiped its power reserves, he's going down," Jessie stuttered.

"Looked like the Flyer was riding on inertia during the last hurdle. I wonder what the hell he was saving that final bit of power for," Kathryn said now that her anger and panic was back. "I doubt it was to scare the hell out of us."

"If there's no power," Jessie said, some hope started to brew. She turned to another part of her station. "He won't be able to hide his lifesigns. Just get us in transporter range."

Kathryn stared at her with a bemused expression despite it all. "Yes ma'am."

"Well this is definitely crunch time, I'll let you off this time," Jessie mumbled in an attempt to cover over the fear she was feeling still.

Neither of them were looking out of the window now. If they were they would have seen the numerous shades of green directly ahead of them, with a dense forest in the background. The Flyer was directly in the centre, gradually going into a nose dive. Despite that it was getting bigger, they were closing in on it.

"God damn it, hurry! Maybe we should let gravity speed us up too," Kathryn grunted in frustration.

Jessie tensed at the same time as the Flyer skimmed the fields, slicing everything in its path. "Janeway!" she shouted at her as its nose slammed into the ground, its speed flung it over onto its back. Smoke immediately billowed out of it. "Okay, land instead..."

"No time. Those ships in orbit are scanning us. You transport, then tractor the Flyer. We're leaving in a hurry," Kathryn said defiantly.

Jessie was too busy tapping on her station to acknowledge right away. She looked behind her at the door leading out of the cockpit, just overhearing the faint sound of a transporter hum, then back again. "You want to take the Flyer?"

"Yes, now!" Kathryn snapped. Jessie ignored the tone and did as she was told. Then she was almost tossed out of her seat again by Kathryn's harsh piloting. This time instead of being flung to the side, it felt she was melting backwards into her chair. "I don't fancy listening to Tom's whining if we don't," Kathryn said, strangely not bothered by it.

It wasn't long until the blue skies they watched faded into piercing black and stars. It wasn't all the pair were greeted with when they re-entered orbit. Four alien vessels, all big and menacing compared to their old shuttle and wrecked one they were towing.

"Here's where we find out how much the Soft have infiltrated this species," Kathryn mumbled. She caught Jessie looking behind her again with a worried look on her face. "Sorry, but you need to standby on weapons just in case. Are shields up?"

Jessie nodded, "yeah. I did it during your uphill kamikaze."

The ships in the window started to disperse, gradually moving out of their field of view. It was a relief to the pair in the shuttle. Kathryn prepared to go into warp when one of the ships that had gone completely, flew overhead, then turned rapidly so it was facing them.

"So that's one..." Kathryn said as the hail sound rang out.

"Unknown vessel. Hand over the renegade ship and you will not be harmed."

"Maybe we should bite the bullet and get ear plugs," Jessie suggested tiredly, again she looked behind her. "James is with us, it's no harm."

Kathryn glared towards the ship in front of them. "The Flyer is little more than junk now. Do they think he's still on it? The nerve..."

"Um. I'd prefer for us to leave and quickly. That was a nasty crash..." Jessie argued, her own patience started to wear out.

"I won't be intimidated by some little shapeshifters on an ego boost. Bullies, the lot of them," Kathryn hissed.

Jessie sighed and rolled her eyes. "Can you be offended later?"

Kathryn waved her off, annoying her further. Before she could do anything further she'd regret later, a phaser blast slammed into the opposing ship. Jessie groaned, thinking it was Kathryn overriding her commands and was about to complain, when it happened again from a different direction. She quickly checked to make sure.

"The other ships, they're attacking it," Jessie said in surprise.

Kathryn opened her mouth, about to talk as the hail sound rang out again. *"USS Voyager shuttle, we are eternally grateful for your assistance. We'll cover you. It's the least we can do. Please, give our regards to our saviours."*

Jessie mouthed the word *saviours* in confusion, then she remembered which species this was and she cringed awkwardly. "Oh, I thought they stopped doing that." Her face started to turn red with embarrassment as well.

Kathryn smiled warmly, her finger pressed on one panel. "Acknowledged Krralef vessel. Thank you and good luck."

The Aeroshuttle pushed forward, avoiding the ship in front of them as it moved to counter the attacks. It leapt to warp as soon as it was clear.

"I didn't even do anything this time. Not that I did anything last time, just slep..." Jessie rambled, until she remembered Kathryn was with her. She coughed nervously as Kathryn looked at her. "Are we clear?"

"Yes," Kathryn said, confused at Jessie's sudden nervousness. Her smile grew back, "of course you did something. If it wasn't for you, the Flyer would have hit that tower."

Jessie sighed. The nervous, awkward and embarrassed feelings vanished quickly. "I doubt the Krralef would be thanking me for that if they were firing on a possible Soft controlled ship." She shook that off, there was more important things to worry about now they were at warp. "One of us should check on him."

Kathryn nodded at her. "Go. But..." Jessie was already hurrying away on the word go, but stopped her suddenly. "But remember, I did warn you."

"I know. I have to see him," Jessie said quietly. Kathryn nodded again, showing her understanding.

The doors opened to let her through into the centre of the shuttlecraft. Jessie looked around desperately, only for her shoulders and heart to sink when she spotted a figure lying on one of two of the makeshift biobeds the shuttle had. The stories Kathryn told didn't prepare her for the state he was in. His severely reduced weight, the paleness of his skin, all of the scars along with the new injuries from the crash.

This wasn't the James she knew. It was a harsh reminder of an incident fifteen years ago she had tried to forget. Only this time she arrived too late to save him.

Voyager reduced its approach speed and entered orbit around the world coated in thick black clouds. It joined the Enterprise and the Aeroshuttle right behind them. The latter pulled back to fly directly under Voyager, slowly it merged back into its hull.

"Transport complete," Craig said from the viewscreen. From what everyone could see of the Enterprise Bridge, it seemed almost dead again. Apart from Craig, there were only two others on the Bridge. Triah at Opps and Bryan at the helm, both at the forefront of the viewscreen image.

Tom meanwhile was busy pacing back and forth with his arms folded behind his back. Craig speaking made him stop but didn't kill his nerves. "Thanks, that should give you some breathing room. When will you be ready to go?"

"We're just bringing up the last of them now. It shouldn't be long," Craig answered.

Triah groaned in frustration as her console made a lot of noise. She hammered her finger onto one panel. "No Neelix, for the last time. Use the god damn replicators. These people have been through enough."

Tom laughed nervously. "Scary thought. I imagine these people would be desperate for any kind of food."

"Good thing Neelix doesn't make food," Craig commented with a smile. He tried to get back to looking serious immediately afterwards. "On the way back here we bumped into another ship carrying refugees as well. Something you want to tell us?"

"No," Tom quickly lied. "Just another concerned somebody in the neighbourhood."

Craig could tell he was lying, his eyes narrowed. "The only lifesigns on it were the refugees. That sounds like a something."

"They're helping us. That's all you need to know. You've got your own issues to worry about," Tom said quickly. "All four thousand of them."

"Four thousand and one, you mean. Neelix wants to make them his Leola Pasta Bake," Triah groaned.

"Dear god, does he have that much Leola Root?" Faye stuttered in a blind panic.

Craig hurried away from his Tactical station to approach Opps. "Sorry Neelix, oven's broken." He pressed something on her station. "Delete any references to Leola from the replicator database."

"What if he has some onboard? Those poor people might find it," Bryan asked. Craig's face turned a deathly shade of white.

"Well you look very busy there. We've got a lot of beaming to do," Tom said, then he signalled to Faye to cut them off. She did so with an eye roll. "Phew."

"You're evil," Danny commented.

Tom casually shrugged, "hey, we have plenty things going on here. Speaking of which, I'll be in Sickbay. Start the transporters, let me know when the Katane's back so we can get going." He started to make his way towards the turbolift.

Faye cleared her throat to stop him. "While Craig was on, Harry was requesting transport as well, and an update."

"An update?" Tom scowled. "He's on the surface. If anyone should update it's him."

"Yeah, there's only a hundred left so he has no reason to stay there," Faye said almost robotically. "His words. He wants to be here when you talk to James."

Tom groaned into both of his hands for a few seconds. They then dropped to his sides. "Craig told him, didn't he? Does Lena know?" Faye only shrugged, making him sigh. "They had to return on the Enterprise's watch. Fine, do it. Just tell him to meet me in the Shuttle Bay."

"Shuttle Bay? I thought you were going to Sickbay," Danny said.

"I think it's best to stay out of the way for the first opening minutes," Tom smiled before leaving.

Once the turbolift closed behind him, Faye couldn't help but groan. "He's checking on the Flyer, isn't he?"

Danny smirked first, then it turned into a giggle. "Oh, I want to be a fly on that wall."

It was so good to be back on solid ground again. Not only that but well lit, warm and breathable ground. Harry took his time to walk to his destination, taking it all in. He knew that as soon as he talked to someone, he'd be reminded of the multiple awful situations they were in.

Just as he was thinking that he should probably slow down further, he reached the Shuttle Bay entrance. Even with the doors shut he could hear a muffled sobbing from the other side.

"It's that bad," he said to himself.

The doors sprung open. Tom ventured through them, trying badly to wipe away tears all the while muttering to himself. When he spotted Harry, he quickly tried to put on a brave face.

"What's the prognosis?" Harry dared to ask.

"Oh, just a few scratches," Tom tried to laugh through his pain. It didn't work. "Dents, scorches, broken window, botch jobs, fried systems, still lying upside down on its nose. Nothing a day in the lab won't fix."

"It could be worse," Harry could only offer.

It however set Tom off instead, "oh yeah. Short of crashing into a building, it really couldn't."

Harry winced through his gritted teeth. "We'll have time while the crew help setup the refugee camp properly. I'll help."

"No," Tom groaned. He began to walk back the way Harry came, he quickly followed. "It's not a priority. We were just going to use her to test Damien's cloak. We can use any shuttle for that. So... Craig blabbed everything to you?"

"I don't know about everything. He mentioned the Aeroshuttle arriving, towing the Flyer. Two lifesigns aboard," Harry replied. "The Flyer was transported into the only empty spot left in the shuttle bay."

Tom passed him a judgmental look, while making a hmm sound.

"I left Craig in charge. Wouldn't you check in every five minutes?" Harry said defensively. He was more than offended when he got further silence. "Why didn't you tell anyone what was happening? After the Flyer got half hinched, I figured you'd mention that the thief's missus stole another shuttle."

"Oh dear," Tom had to laugh, but nervously. "It's a tad more complicated than that. Firstly, I ordered her to. Secondly, she wasn't alone."

"So..." Harry was confused. "They found the Flyer but no James?"

Tom started to sweat a little. "No, they did."

"Oh," Harry sighed as if he figured it out and it was bad. "Well, at least that saves us the trouble of figuring out what to do with him. One less argument the better."

"Huh?" Tom only mimed, his brain tried to figure out how Harry got there. Then he managed. "He's not dead. No. What argument?"

Harry smiled and nodded. "Fine. I want to be there when you talk to him. Just as long as he isn't going through that walk through forcefield phase."

"I don't think that'll be a problem, just yet," Tom said honestly.

Sickbay:

Jessie and Kathryn hung back in the centre of the room, while the Doctor hovered around his latest patient. Said patient just sat there on the primary biobed with his back to everybody, perfectly still.

"Maybe you can lie back down, so I can continue my treatment," the Doctor said patiently. He waited but didn't get any response at all. He forced a smile onto his face, "okay, then I'll come back to that one later."

Kathryn overheard a sigh come from Jessie, so she looked over to find her staring at them both.

"He was like this before when I first talked to him. An almost catatonic state. That was until I mentioned the towers and the sphere," Kathryn whispered.

"A subject we should stay clear of," Jessie whispered back.

"Why? It proves he's listening, or at least aware of us. It may be the only way to talk to him right now and that's what we need; a way to get him to engage," Kathryn said. She could tell that didn't convince her, as she shook her head stubbornly. "You said it yourself he's not at fault. That he did help more people than the anomaly could theoretically harm..."

"He won't care about that. James could save billions of people, but all he'll think about is the warlock death. Or Shoytin, the two Cardassians, the man who nearly killed Duncan and I. Or the alien possessed by the gun toting demon," Jessie whispered back angrily. "Trust me. You try to start a conversation like this and he won't be thinking about the planets he's saved. He'll be thinking about the anomaly spreading, or any Softmicron attacks on civilians he may have seen."

Kathryn sighed. "You make it sound like I don't understand his mindset. He's unfortunately got it from me." Jessie didn't look convinced, she would have scoffed if she were in a less worried mood. "I know exactly what it's like to make important decisions and have them backfire on you. I understand the weight of the world he carries."

"Do you?" Jessie said with a quizzical look in her eye. "Twenty eight years and I still wonder if I've done enough for him. Imagine a four year old boy finding out that he can't hold his new best friend's hand, because just brushing the skin causes her pain. Who else but other Slayers can understand that?"

"Jessie," Kathryn tried to intervene.

"All I could do was hold his hand until he learned how to hold it back. To him, it was a defining moment in our friendship. Meant the world to him, he said," Jessie continued. "But... to me, I'll always remember the look of horror on his face when I first recoiled. The sadness, the guilt. I wanted to make all of that go away. Today, nothing's changed. I don't want to merely hold his hand and hope he figures it out. I want to help him to never feel that way again."

The Doctor finished a treatment around his patient's face. He moved around the biobed so he could walk towards the two waiting women. A forcefield fluttered around him as he walked through it.

"I've done all I can that he'll allow," the Doctor said. "I was in the middle of treating the damage to his ribs when he sat up, pushed my arm away. Not one word or a look. He hasn't budged an inch since," the Doctor explained.

"I hoped that since he wasn't on his mission anymore, that he would allow treatment," Kathryn mumbled

Jessie seemed puzzled by that remark, her head briefly turned in her direction. "Why? He's punishing himself. This is exactly what I expected," she said sadly.

"I managed to treat the external injuries; burns, cuts, bruises. It's everything else I'm more concerned about, I'll need him to lie down for them or even be sedated," the Doctor said.

Jessie side stepped away so the Doctor wasn't mostly in her sight, and James was instead. Kathryn and the Doctor watched after her for a moment.

"What kind of injuries?" Kathryn whispered.

The Doctor looked toward Jessie again and back. "Internal bruising, bleeding. Broken ribs, one of which almost pierced his lung. Multiple fractures that have tried to heal, but I imagine continuous strenuous activity has prolonged and aggravated the breaks."

Jessie turned her attention back on them, which the Doctor noticed in the corner of his eye. He focused on her for the moment. "My biggest concern is the drastic body weight loss, low blood sugar and iron count."

"Malnutrition," Kathryn said for him.

The Doctor nodded, then he noticed Jessie shaking a little as if she was trying to hold back something worse. "Add sleep deprivation and of course the effects of the chip, we have a problem."

"Did you turn it off?" Jessie asked firmly.

"Not yet," the Doctor reluctantly answered. As he expected, she stared at him with such anger it made him nervous. "It's been active for quite a while, constantly overwhelming his neural pathways. The drug I gave him when he was here would have slowed the damage, but..."

"How long is quite a while?" Kathryn asked.

Jessie harshly scoffed and rolled her eyes, "who knows? Probably months. It was still dormant until the whole Nathan thing triggered him."

The guilt started to seep back into his programming. Jessie's tone didn't help either, not that he could blame her. She accepted his apology long before she knew what state James was in. "We're talking about a neural chip that's been imbedded in his brain for ten years."

"It can be online, but dormant until a similar memory of an event activates it. I remember," Kathryn said. "So I'm assuming that turning it off now would be a shock to the system?"

The Doctor nodded. "Yes. You saw the damage it did to him in only a day. Two weeks..."

"Investigating an attack that reminded him of his sister, and the abuse his father gave him because of it, triggered the memories and visions. But he's been away from all that, fighting this whole time," Jessie thought aloud and fast, it was almost rambling. "Surely that means the chip had no trigger while he was away."

"It's possible," the Doctor said, only to make her feel better.

Kathryn wasn't convinced though. "The last time it was returning to the scene of an attack, medical treatment, coming into contact with a representation of something that hurt him."

"So?" Jessie asked.

"So... are you really telling me it's not possible that fighting and isolating himself, didn't trigger anything?" Kathryn said begrudgingly.

Jessie only answered with a painful sigh. She then turned her head away from everyone. They weren't sure if she was doing it to hide tears or to avoid resorting to violence.

Tom and Harry entered Sickbay, they both felt a bit wary with the silence and strange stares from the women and the Doctor. Tom focused on James himself, all he could see was his back but the sight still made him shudder. "Why do I have this image of him suddenly lunging and choking the nearest person?" he quietly asked his friend.

Harry quietly pondered the easy question to himself. Experience, seen too many movies, experience, the usual Tom paranoia. Instead he looked at his friend and calmly said, "do you really want me to answer that?"

Tom replied with a head shake. He carefully joined the others, with Harry close behind. "I get the feeling he's not going to talk just yet."

"You'll be waiting a long time," Jessie muttered.

"We were just discussing the crux of the problem. The behavioural modifying and memory enhancer chip," the Doctor said.

"Perhaps we can call it BMMEC for short," Tom suggested not entirely seriously. Harry and Jessie stared at him blankly, Kathryn rolled her eyes. "Chip's fine."

The Doctor sighed before continuing, "yes. To refresh your memory, the last two times it was active..."

"Oh I remember," Tom butted in, his hand instinctively flew to his throat to check on it.

Harry felt a little uneasy, his shoulders tensed. "So we don't just have a rogue Slayer who may be Evil, he's hallucinating too?"

"It's not as simple as that," Kathryn said irritably.

Harry quickly tried to avoid her stare, and had resorted to looking at his feet. Tom immediately sprung to his defence, "since when are Evil Slayers simple?"

"It's a label for a condition he does not have. This is unknown, it's different. We need to deal with it differently," Kathryn said.

The Doctor decided to quickly change the subject back. "The purpose of the chip was to theoretically make him an unpredictable threat, without us knowing the cause."

"We assumed Seska wanted us to turn around so we'd be ambushed, like we were, or just to give us a bad day," Kathryn said.

"That first time did turn him evil. So why am I being shut down for going there?" Harry asked.

"He had no interest in killing or even hurting anybody. Evil Slayers don't usually become job oriented either," Kathryn replied, a little more patiently this time. "Destroying towers was all he cared about."

Tom nodded, "he seemed tame from what she told me. Well except for that sword in the chest guy."

"I like the way you name that as an exception, like it's something minor you should exclude," Harry smirked. "Oh little Timmy tried to shave my cat once, but he's a nice boy really."

Jessie pulled a face while Kathryn stared blankly toward him. "Yushan has been dead for ten years. James would have noticed that when the phaser fire didn't work. It wasn't his first stabbing and it won't be his last."

"Are we still talking about Yushan here?" Tom tried to joke and laughed, but nobody laughed with him. Jessie definitely wasn't amused, quite the opposite which turned his laughter into a nervous cough.

"How long will it be until he's stable enough for a Brig transfer?" Harry asked. His arm was tugged backward roughly, it was enough to make him stumble back a step. Instinctively he turned his head to the left to see who did it, regretting it immediately.

"He's traumatised, badly injured and you want to chuck him in the brig!?" Jessie spat at him. Her eyes were ferocious, he almost expected them to change colour at any moment. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

She had a harsh grip on his arm, one of her fingernails was starting to dig a little too deep. He winced and tried to pull back. "I'm sorry, but all Doc's done is convince me he's definitely a security risk, unpredictable. If we move around our current prisoners on the Enterprise, we won't have him being provoked by any of them."

Tom turned to him warily. "Harry, have a heart. We can't just lock him in the brig."

"He stole the Delta Flyer, deserted the ship without us noticing at first. Something he ridiculed Chakotay for," Harry stuttered in a panic. "We have no idea what he'll do. He still managed to cause all kinds of trouble for the Softmicron, even in this state, so..."

"I understand your concerns," Kathryn said with disgust in her voice. She ignored Jessie's sudden stare for the time being. "However he didn't commit those crimes with a sound mind. We know there's a few things wrong with him."

"Exactly. Starfleet didn't lock him up for the Evil Slayer stuff, so why should we lock him up for this?" Tom agreed, nodding.

Kathryn's shoulders flinched for a second, her eyes for the same amount of time were distant. She put the thoughts in her mind to the back burner for now. "Isolating him in the brig will do more harm than good. We shouldn't treat him as a criminal, it's what he'll expect."

"Please don't make me out to be the bad guy. There's nothing wrong with putting the safety of the entire crew first over one man. There will be people on the ship that will be nervous about what may happen if he suffers further hallucinations. They're right to be afraid. Hell I'm afraid," Harry stammered. "I'm sorry for what happened to him, I truly am but we must contain the threat first."

"I don't think he should be walking freely around the ship. When did any of us suggest that?" Tom argued.

Jessie glanced around at everyone warily, she finally let go of Harry so he could settle his arm by his side. "He's not going to hurt anyone," she said with a hint of defeat in her voice. Her face told a different picture.

"Might I remind everyone here that he is a patient until I say otherwise. I need to continue his physical treatment while he is still calm. Any discussion on after care can wait," the Doctor interrupted.

Tom had to smile weakly in his direction. "Is that just a polite way of telling us to go away?"

"If you interpret my comments as that, I'm not going to argue with you," the Doctor replied back lightly.

Tom nodded while gesturing his hand to the nearby office. Harry followed first, Kathryn a bit hesitantly. Once they were gone the Doctor picked up a device from the nearby medical tray, all the while giving Jessie a passing glance.

"You want to keep him here after he's treated," she stated.

"Until I can safely diffuse or remove the chip, I do," the Doctor replied in a friendly manner. "Psychological conditions are far more trickier to heal than physical."

Jessie nodded, then looked over to the office and back to the biobed, silently debating something. Quickly she joined everybody else in the office, immediately noticing they had continued the conversation without her.

"That's not what I was saying. If he were Evil Slayer, I wouldn't suggest the brig. We know that doesn't work," Harry said while meekly shaking his head.

"So you'd put somebody who has psychological issues into the brig and wash your hands of it? Good to know," Kathryn muttered.

"Temporarily, if and only if he had proved to be a threat to public safety. We're wasting time here. We all know that we're only talking about this because James has always been a special case with you," Harry said a little too quickly. He winced as the last part he meant to keep to himself.

Tom cringed and then shuddered. "Look, as the piggy in the middle and the Captain of this ship..."

Kathryn rolled her eyes, "oh god. I knew I should have written a will." Despite the situation Jessie found herself smirking at her words and insulting tone.

Tom was offended but nevertheless he continued on, "I say that both sides have good points I agree with. James shouldn't just be let off on his unmerry way once he's treated, but locking him in the brig is inhumane. Until the Doctor declares that..."

"It's simple. James comes home with me," Jessie butted in to his annoyance, then startled as he didn't notice her until then. Kathryn and Harry turned to her in surprise as well. "The Doctor hinted he can't do anything with the chip until his neural paths or whatever have settled down. The best place to do that is somewhere he'll be more at ease. The Doc can easily pop by to administer the drug that helps him."

Kathryn sighed, while Harry widened his eyes in shock and disbelief. Tom cringed and shook his head a little. Every reaction irritated Jessie further. "I don't hear any better suggestions," she snapped.

"He's already behind a forcefield, in Sickbay. That's a reasonable compromise," Harry said.

"You don't know if he'll even go home willingly. He ran out on you and your kids. I know he's ill, but that's not something you sweep under the rug," Tom added on. "Plus, seeing him like that will freak your kids out."

"They think he's sick. That's not really a lie, now is it?" Jessie said. "I wouldn't expose them to him right away anyway, I'm not stupid. He could stay in our room."

Harry shook off his earlier shock, at least on the surface anyway. "So, house arrest is what you're suggesting? We don't know if he even wanted to come back to Voyager. He might see another opportunity and run off again."

"No, he won't. He knows the truth now," Kathryn said in a steely voice.

Tom sighed melancholically, "doesn't mean he'll co-operate. It's not exactly a nice environment for you Jess. Maybe, help him out here in Sickbay. After some improvement *then* bring him home. Your suggestion's a Step Three or Four at best. You're going too fast."

"I agree," Harry said.

Guilt began to fill up inside her as everything he said made sense to her, and worse she agreed with him. Jessie couldn't look anyone in the eye so she turned her head away from them. Kathryn placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"If it means anything, I don't think he was intending to die with the Delta Flyer," Tom said. Jessie partly turned her head back, he was in the corner of her eye. "From what I could tell, two systems were online until near the end. He had enough power for one, he was saving it."

"What?" she asked quietly.

"Transporter control," Tom answered.

Jessie swung back around and stared towards the group, her eyes were hopeful. "He was going to evacuate?"

"Seems like it," Tom said with a smile.

Jessie didn't say anything further. Her gaze went to the glass dividing the rooms. Kathryn waited for her to leave the office before she said what was on her mind. "He was on a mission to end the Game Sphere. Unfortunately it doesn't mean anything."

"I know, but I thought..." Tom stuttered.

Kathryn smiled at him, "it meant something to her. I appreciate it."

Tom smiled back again and nodded. "I wonder what the answer is," he mused aloud.

Harry glanced between the pair. "If we could do it quickly, destroying the towers would solve this. There's got to be another weakness."

"No, not that. I've been wondering for a while; did the Softmicron really want us here? If so, why?" Tom said. "Revenge, to get us out of the way, both? It's definitely brought out the worst in us. If that was their intention, it's working."

Kathryn watched him intently, her brow furrowed.

"That's assuming that they really were the ones who stole the Enterprise, captured its crew and flew it into Death Corridor," he finished saying.

Harry gave him his trademark chirpy smirk. "Are you suggesting the crew hijacked themselves?"

"No," Tom warily laughed in return. "I just find it a bit odd that the Softmicron would intentionally lure three Chosens into their brand new Game Sphere. There's being overconfident and then there's inviting your nemesis into your evil lair, with the shut down button in full view, just to gloat."

"They didn't. Starfleet could have sent any ship and crew after the Enterprise," Harry said. Kathryn seemed a little puzzled as she stared in his direction, her eyes then drifted away. "They did, remember? We weren't their first choice."

"Exactly. If they were behind it, it's a huge gamble that isn't guaranteed to pay off. I mean, did they plan James' breakdown?" Tom said, briefly glancing at Kathryn. "Zare and Sandi's cause of death were never confirmed. The Leda was destroyed by one of our own. The only real thing that the Softmicron can claim is Kevin. You could argue that their trying to keep us away from the first towers was so we couldn't interfere, but we've seen now that it doesn't matter one bit and actually causes more damage than it's worth."

Harry quickly tried to organise his thoughts so he could reply. It took him longer than he expected. "So... you think somebody else dragged the Enterprise in here? Perhaps somebody who knew and wanted us to help. Is that what you're saying?"

"No, but it does prove my point. We need to keep an open mind. Good theory though buddy," Tom said with a bemused smile.

Kathryn rolled her eyes and sighed loud enough to get their attention. "You guys don't really need me here, do you?"

"Was that sarcasm? It's been a while," Tom whispered to Harry.

"No, I was just asking if you need the room," Kathryn said sharply.

Tom and Harry glanced at each other, both with a frown on their faces. Their faces flushed red when they figured out what she meant, or thought she meant.

"The Enterprise crew never saw their captors. Sandi rescued them. That much we know," Harry stammered. "Whether or not the Softmicron wanted us in here, I'm doubting it. We're a bigger threat in here than we are outside the sphere. If I were the Soft, I'd want to keep a well known plan spoiler out of my evil lair."

"That's assuming that the *do not press* button is on the inside," Tom thought he kept in his head, but said aloud. Harry's stunned reaction told him otherwise. They both winced almost in sync. Kathryn remained oddly indifferent to it though. The pair assumed she wasn't taking them seriously still, so ignored it. They failed to notice her eyes fall to the floor and her face tighten with worry.

Rachel watched her daughter circle the living room of her quarters, all the while talking and holding her new baby. The baby didn't seem to mind her frantic tone or the constant movement, she was more interested in playing with her mother's hair dangling over her shoulder. Rachel was feeling a little unhinged herself as she reached the third lap.

"Look, I just want to know when she'll be back, that's all," Jessie said impatiently.

Danny's voice replied over her commbadge, *"Lena is with the last transport group. Don't worry Jess."*

"Right, and no one's told her anything yet, right?" Jessie asked as she passed Rachel again. This time though her arm was held out to put her off, which it did. The look she received for it was a one of shock.

"Jessica, what's this..." Rachel quickly said.

"No," Danny's voice cut in. *"Stop stressing over it Jessie. I'll tell her to go straight there."*

Jessie shook her head, "no no. Not yet."

"Oh, you know who is still there? Yeah that's not a good idea. Is that why you're panicking?"

"Kind of. Can you just tell her to meet me in the Mess Hall, in about ten minutes?" Jessie asked.

"Ah, tell her first. Good plan. Sure, I'll do that. Gotta go, we'll be leaving orbit shortly," Danny's voice said.

Once the comm was cut off, Rachel tried to intervene again. "Are you ever going to tell me what's happening?"

Jessie was far too worried and tired to give her a scowl. She settled for a half eye roll. "You got to spend an hour with your grandkids, then put them to bed. I didn't inconvenience you."

"That's not the point," Rachel said, briefly chuckling at the accusation. "You got a call, left the ship, and now this. If it was just you, why did you call me?"

"I told you. James is sick," Jessie groaned. It didn't help her mood when Rachel responded with a curt eye roll herself. "While his sister was away there were a few changes. I just need to see her, get her up to date. No big deal."

"Uh huh," Rachel mumbled in disbelief. "You had to leave the ship for that?"

"Mum, I'm a big girl, I'm allowed to leave the ship. I didn't realise I was grounded," Jessie said a little irritably.

Rachel couldn't help but laugh at her. "You don't need to lie to me, sweetheart. I've heard people talking." Jessie flinched slightly. "So, you dragged him home by the ear. If I were you, I'd do more than put him in the doghouse."

"I wasn't lying. He is sick, that's why he left," Jessie said.

"Oh..." Rachel sighed, her eyes glazed over with worry and a little pity. Jessie didn't like it one bit, it pushed her further to the edge. "My poor little girl. Don't let him walk all over you, right back into your life. Please be careful."

"As usual, you're not listening to me," Jessie sighed angrily. She looked down at the girl in her arms, staring at her with her eyes wide. "I'll get her to sleep, then I'll have to go again. I don't know when I'll be back. You can use my bed if it gets late."

Jessie didn't notice as she was still looking down, Rachel grimaced at the thought, even shuddered a little. When she finally looked back up Rachel had recovered from it. "Ohno, I couldn't. I'll use the sofa. Just don't stay up too long. You need all the rest you can get with this little one. She seems like a night owl."

"You have no idea," Jessie weakly laughed.

"I hear that you have a new daughter in the family," Kathryn said. She waited, but no response. "No wonder you're having difficulty deciding on a name, hmm?" she said with an amused smile.

Still he didn't move. The wall couldn't be that interesting. Kathryn wondered briefly what could possibly keep him in his head for so long.

"Kathryn's a nice name," she said, only half jokingly. "Jessie tells me little Amy is an artist in the making; drawing, building things. You used to love doing that too, must be where she got it. A daddy's girl as well, that's cute. I hope Sasha handled the younger sibling better than Duncan did. Sibling rivalry's well..."

Kathryn quickly realised that was probably a subject she should avoid, and desperately tried to change it around. "Is Duncan still a handful? I always had a soft spot for him, even when he was making fun of me." She laughed briefly. "Reminds me of someone all too well, I suppose. Sasha, such a sweet little thing but still she has that Janeway fire in her, you can tell. I imagine they all do."

There was still no sign of any movement. Kathryn felt her jaw clench at the sight, anything left of her good mood was slipping away, even if it was put on to talk to him.

"What was Amy's first word? When did she learn to walk?" the questions started to fly frantically out of her. The desperation was starting to get to her. "What does your new girl look like? When was she born? Is Duncan doing okay at school? Has he made any new friends? Does Sasha still love dolls? Has any of your kids grown interested in fashion like their mother?" She could have gone on, it's not like she needed to breathe but there was only one question she truly wanted to ask right now. It wasn't an easy one to ask.

Instead she waited again to see if James responded to any of them, in any kind of way. The only hint of movement she saw was his eyes blinking, they remained closed a second longer than usual. If it were the hint she was looking for, it was tiny at best.

"Have you thought about them at all?" Kathryn asked. Her head shook a few times. "They don't know, they probably don't even understand what you're going through. All they'll think is that their daddy has abandoned them, and they won't know why. You know all too well what that feeling is like. If you really don't want to hurt anybody, then snap out of it."

Once again, nothing happened. Kathryn dipped her head and closed her eyes.

"I hope you're wrong. I hope that my son, the one who'd do anything for his children, is still alive in there somewhere. He must be, because he's the only idiot I know that would take on the Softmicron on their own. Other than me of course," Kathryn said, the last sentence calmed her down a little. "You know I've followed you since Derada? I talked to the people of the town that was raised. All but one of the towers you destroyed, you activated the evacuation alarm. You avoided fights, unless you probably saw it as absolutely necessary. When you did, it looked to witnesses that you weren't even trying."

She waited for that to sink in before continuing. "We both know it wasn't because you were weakening because of hunger, lack of sleep, injuries. You still managed to win anyway. The worst injury I could find out about, was a broken nose and not your usual smashed to bits kind. You had a few chances to use physical force on my crew, but you opted for a phaser on stun. Until it was obvious they were dead, and conclusions were likely jumped I suppose.

"The best argument I have, I left for last. Krralef. There was another planet closer in your path than that. It was quite a detour, you almost lost us. Since your little escape stunt disabled us for a while, I doubt that was the intention," Kathryn said. "The only thing that mattered were the Game Sphere towers. Yet, Krralef was your choice, why?"

There was no chance she'd get an answer. It didn't matter, Kathryn thought she already knew it. "I didn't know why until I arrived and talked to a few people there. This was the same planet we encountered ten years ago. The ones who believed you, or rather your child, would save them from a far greater disaster than the annihilation of two colonies. According to some the prophecy was fulfilled a few months ago. While others think those towers were the disaster in the prophecy. Regardless, you knew these people and have helped them more than once. Their towers were new, no damage to be seen. The people, they only knew of the threat because of rumours.

"A regular old Slayer would have arrived much later, possibly weeks or months later. If that said Slayer was famous there, it would probably be too risky for him. At least another planet he could trade for and or fix the Delta Flyer before moving on. But no, once it was in suitable range and was on its final leg, you set a course. The other planet was likely your first choice afterwards, once you acquired a new means of transport. There was enough time," Kathryn said. "I'm not saying this because it was a good choice, or a terrible one. My point is it was a very personal choice. Risky, impulsive, not logical, very James like."

The doors to Sickbay opening sliced a knife through the silence. She looked behind her to see further blue shirt crewmen helping two aliens inside and to the last biobed. Before the doors shut again, the two Security guarding the door outside couldn't resist glancing inside. The crewmen inside talked in hushed voices, one of them she just spotted catching a quick peek. Kathryn couldn't blame them, it still annoyed her though. The last thing he needed was to feel like a freakshow on display.

Then again, she thought, he probably didn't even notice. Nothing she said seemed to have gotten through to him.

The Doctor hurried through the doors next, his first port of call was the biobeds closer to her. "They're malnourished, can one of you..." He didn't need to finish his sentence. Two of the blue shirts began to hurry out of Sickbay. "Or two. That's fine. Where's the frost bite patient?" Another pointed him towards the new arrivals, he ran over to get straight to work there.

Kathryn grimaced at the sight of the terrified alien clutching her arm. One of the officers was only there to comfort her, but she was inconsolable. Her mumbled cries, all Kathryn could make out was that she was expecting the *bald man to cut her arm off*. She couldn't have been more than ten years old. Kathryn wondered where her parents were, if she even had any anymore. Wasn't anybody looking after her that could've told her to wrap up warm on that dying planet? Obviously not.

She had to turn away to avoid losing her temper at the situation. It just furthered her opinion on the Softmicron. They were monsters. What had this little girl done to them to deserve it? Nothing. Turning back to her own parental issues, she expected more of the same. Kathryn was surprised to see that James wasn't facing the wall anymore. Instead he was staring in the direction of the patients. She tried to follow his exact gaze, it lead her back to the little girl with frostbite.

"It's okay, I can make it all better," the Doctor said in a soothing voice. The little girl still sobbed, his words weren't getting through.

"I did it," Kathryn heard James mumble while her head was turned. It shot back to look at him. His far away stare seemed to have vanished. In its place was much worse, a one of horror and disgust. She noticed he was even trembling a little. "The whole planet. Cos of me."

"No, no, no!" Kathryn quickly protested as she approached the forcefield. "You gave them a chance. It's not your..."

He interrupted her by slowly lowering himself to the floor, onto his knees. By the time he was down, the look of horror had changed to anger. The trembling had increased, as soon as his hands reached the ground they clenched into fists. "Why, can't I do anything right? All I do." His eyes closed, his body slouched back, the biobed stopped him. "Is hurt people."

His behaviour had briefly gotten the Doctor's attention. The little girl needed him first, he hoped Kathryn would deal with it until he got there. She meanwhile crouched down so she was more level with him.

"Without you, that planet would have been in pieces while they were still on it," she said softly. "Captured, turned into killing machines or killed by them. You saved them. How can you think it was you that hurt them?"

He was silent again but not as distant as he was earlier. It was a step in the right direction. At least that's what she thought when he seemed to lift his leg up to kick the air in front of him. He then buried his face in his hands. The first action seemed a little odd to her, then he spoke again, muffled by his hands. "Only I would start a ritual I wanted to stop. Idiot, idiot..." he continued muttering the last word, however it wasn't the one that got her attention.

"Ritual?" she murmured. This definitely wasn't right. She climbed back to her feet to hurry over to the station nearby. Just as she suspected, neural activity had spiked, as had a lot of things. This ritual he mentioned was likely a memory resurfacing. Of what though? Kathryn wasn't sure. "A whole planet, a ritual, the bad kind." All that came to mind was Abatua, and that was a particularly harsh memory for him. It didn't fit though. Jessie was the casualty then, not a whole planet. In fact, he had never been linked to a planet's destruction. What was he talking about?

She was too busy thinking to notice the Doctor stepping over to use the station as well. "I'll have to up the dosage slightly, it's not working," he said.

Kathryn remembered something Jessie told her, the possibility of it being the correct memory hit her hard. "Is it Earth he's talking about? He saved it, but Lena..."

The Doctor briefly glanced at her. "No it's not." Kathryn stared back in surprise. "From what he said, I imagine this was Tendaran Three." While he was saying that, James' mumbling had faded to nothing. His hands moved down to his side, he stared straight ahead of him. The anger in his face was draining away as well. "The ritual to block its star, so the vampires could have free reign. He beamed down to stop it..."

Kathryn remembered now. "A Chosen's blood set it off. He didn't know, or think he was one. Jessie saved him, stopping the ritual." It fit, she thought. It hurt to know this was how he dealt with the aftermath. He seemed fine after he physically recovered, normal. She wondered if Jessie had seen this. "Not likely," she muttered unintentionally out loud.

The Doctor was naturally confused, "unless I missed a similar incident..."

"Sorry Doctor, I was just wondering about something else," Kathryn sighed. "I'm grateful for the intervention, but you have other patients."

"The little girl is fine, she's sleeping it off," the Doctor said proudly, his smile beaming. "I'm just awaiting the room service." The doors opened again, getting his attention. Only it was Jessie, not the crewmembers he was expecting. She hurried over when she noticed James' change of position.

"What happened?"

Kathryn and the Doctor shared a concerned look. The Doctor decided to answer her first, "I've had to increase the dosage of the neural sedative. The original one wasn't enough. The particular memory was tame though, don't worry."

Jessie wasn't sure whether to believe him, what with Kathryn's still worried expression. "So he still reacts like they're happening?" Kathryn nodded. "Even though he's like this... god."

Kathryn tried to smile at her reassuringly. "That means he's still in there somewhere." Now that she had said it, it sounded convincing. "The chip wouldn't affect him if he was gone, right?"

The Doctor nodded, "that's correct. The chip relies on abusing his senses, to provoke a reaction. As long as we're still getting one."

"What was it, his dad again?" Jessie asked.

Kathryn wasn't sure if she should answer or not. The Doctor gave her a nod before walking over to his other patients. Perhaps if she avoided the details, she could tell her without worrying her further. "No. I think something else triggered this memory. He was muttering about something being his fault."

"Oh, that narrows it down," Jessie said in a low voice. "Look, I can take over for a bit. I've got something for you, for helping out so far, you know for bringing him back."

"I don't think coffee will go down well right now, but thank you," Kathryn said with a lighthearted smile.

Jessie laughed nervously, she looked guilty afterwards. "No, not coffee. Better."

Kathryn was more than intrigued.

The Mess Hall:

Since Neelix was currently on the Enterprise helping with the refugees, all of the tables were filled up by people taking advantage of it. A few had to stand around and wait for a table. Lena was one of them, but she wasn't waiting for a table. She kept glancing between the two doors in anticipation. Her eyes were still squinting from being subjected to light after being in the dark for so long.

Typically as she was looking at one door, the one behind her opened, so she turned to check who it was. It definitely wasn't Jessie, the robes were a big give away. She almost turned her attention back to the other door, the strangeness of the outfit kept it on the new arrival. Their hood was up, so their whole head was hidden. Lena wasn't the only one a little on guard, the room had mostly fallen silent at the sight of her.

She stepped forward, the subtle head movement told Lena she was looking around the room. Once she focused on her, it stopped. Their hands moved up to lower the hood, revealing her familiar face. The colour in her face drained, a strange airy feeling took over her chest. Her eyes still burned a little from the light, so she quickly reached up to gently rub one of them. Her vision blurred for a short time but when it returned what she was seeing was still the same. Her throat began to throb, she had to say something before she couldn't at all.

"Mum?" her voice broke.

The woman standing ahead of her's face softened and smiled. "Lena." She began to walk forward, then she hesitated. Her face briefly showed it, she tried to keep the smile though. "You're alive. I'm.. Don't worry, I won't..."

Lena ran over to her. There was no hesitation on her end, and to her surprise no fear as she wrapped her arms around her, pulling her close. It was a tight hug, a one that probably would have hurt her long ago. Kathryn didn't care at all. She squeezed her back.

"So that's how. I don't know whether I should thank Daniel or give him a slap," Kathryn said.

Without really noticing the pair had inched over to the nearest table and sat in the chairs there. The crewmembers originally budged over or gave up their chairs for them, all the while staring flummoxed at the ex Captain. They had since left them alone. The majority of the room were struggling to keep their eyes off their table, some's conversation had changed to the topic of Kathryn's return. Lena and Kathryn had no idea, they may as well have been completely alone for all that it mattered.

"I'm still in the slap him camp," Lena answered honestly. "I mean, I'm okay with being back now. I just wish it didn't kill four people and the Leda."

"I understand. Consider him slapped," Kathryn smiled.

Lena did too and laughed briefly. "Please, I think he's gotten his already."

"Hmm," Kathryn's face turned serious. "So I heard."

"Yeah," Lena's followed suit. "James hid it well, but he regretted it. Because it worked, it put him in a coma, or both. I'm not sure. That's another subject we should come back to."

"I know. It's why I'm here," Kathryn admitted.

"Oh." Lena stared down at the table, hoping it would hide her sadness.

Kathryn spotted it though. "Well, I did plan to return to Voyager at some point so that's not entirely true. If I knew you were alive and you both were struggling, I'd have been here months ago."

"If I were alive," Lena mumbled, a little worried as it was the second time she said it.

"I already knew about the incident with Ylara, the initial possession part anyway. The details were fuzzy, so yes I didn't expect you to be here," Kathryn said hesitantly.

"Yeah about that. It's your turn to tell your story," Lena said.

Kathryn cringed even though she knew the topic was coming. The look on her daughter's face told her she wouldn't be backing down anytime soon.

"I imagine I was connected to the Tolg hive for about a year, maybe more, just watching," Kathryn said, clearly noticing Lena's impatient head shaking. "I saw so much, learned interesting things. Definitely information we all need to discuss."

"Mum," Lena interrupted as a warning to get to the *good* part, but it came out sounding more sympathetic.

Kathryn was just as stubborn as her though. The story for now was off limits to her. "Sweetheart, it's complicated and messy. Perhaps we shouldn't spoil our reunion with it. What I can tell you is the Tolg Collective doesn't penetrate the Game Sphere. I'll definitely need to be severed completely before it ends."

"The Doc's saved Tolgs before," Lena reminded her.

"Nikki yes, I know," Kathryn said. "As you may remember, it's a lot more complicated than Borg separation. You can't just take the technology out or we're as good as dead, and you can't just revive them first either."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember. If they've been gone a while, they may need donors," Lena said.

Kathryn smiled sheepishly at her, "that wasn't what I meant, but yes. The technology they put into us keeps our cells active, so they don't degrade as quickly. It can't all go at once. Also unlike the Borg the drones are brain dead, so once all the technology is eventually removed, there goes all the Tolg knowledge that I haven't learned from observing."

"Yeah I figured that with Nikki," Lena said, she burst into light laughter afterwards. "I meant the knowledge fading, but the brain dead part fits too."

Kathryn's smile turned into a smirk, "she still would've had the neural amplifier in the early days. It's delicate as its main function is to help mobility, otherwise your new drone's just lying there, useless. Lucky for me it has a secondary function. In an emergency disconnect situation like ours, it taps into the brain to get it functioning on its own. I imagine the Tolg would still be able to track them down and re-assimilate them later, but that's not applicable here. It doesn't work on everyone. Drones that have been there longer just do not respond."

"So, I'm assuming you want to stay Tolgy as long as possible, cos of all the stuff you've learned. You'll not want to start the procedure for a while either, right?" Lena asked.

"Yes, it's a risky procedure. I'd rather not jump right in," Kathryn said, mid frown. "Now while we're on the subject of the reanimated dead I've got to ask. Don't think I'm not happy about it, but er..."

Lena's face stiffened slightly, "how could I hug you if you've been dead so long?" Kathryn's shocked silence confirmed that was the right question. "I wondered about that too a while back. I tried to remember what it was that made me so afraid of the dead, and all I can remember is reacting to it. The first Iinan and Unu meeting, my first awaymission with all the corpses lying around. I was already scared of them.

"I've come to the conclusion that whatever gave me the fear, happened in my fake memory. So it's gone," Lena answered.

"On the Borg sphere then, I see," Kathryn said.

"Yeah," Lena said with a little venom in her voice. "Next time I see Q, I'll ask him why it was necessary to make a Slayer scared of vampires."

Kathryn had to laugh, all the while passing a sympathetic glance to her annoyed daughter. "I'm assuming you've fought vampires recently, hence the wondering. I've seen some interesting types in this sphere, what about you?"

Lena's face scrunched up slightly as she was confused. "Types? All I know is originals and bred from Masters kind." Kathryn remembered one particular kind and found herself regretting she said anything. "I dunno what type Frenit falls into. Yeah I was scared of him, in the normal way though."

Lena noticed the name had unnerved Kathryn, her head turned away as well. "What?"

"It's nothing," Kathryn's first instinct was to lie. Lena knew she did, so Kathryn quickly tried to change the subject. "Did Jessie tell you we found James?"

The question froze her for a moment, then as if it had been literal she started to shake a little. "No... she just asked for me to meet her here. Where, is he okay?"

The warm smile grew back on Kathryn's face. "She told me she wanted to say thank you for *bringing him back*. It was her, not me. I suppose it was still very thoughtful of her, or maybe she just wanted to be alone with him."

"Do we know, I mean, has he said why he left?" Lena stuttered.

"Not exactly, he hasn't said much at all," Kathryn sighed reluctantly. "He's in a lot of pain. It probably seemed simpler for him to do nothing but fight, to distract himself."

That sounded very familiar to Lena, but still she couldn't believe it. Her head shook frantically. "No, that's not it." Kathryn's face asked *why* without her having to open her mouth. "There's more to it. The chip for one. Who activated it, why, what did they do to it exactly? How long was it even working? Maybe he didn't know what he was doing..."

"Lena," Kathryn butted in softly. "Nobody's forgotten about it, but in this case it was trauma after trauma that broke him down. Depression is tricky, it can manifest in different ways. Some can lash out, some will succumb to despair, others will retreat into a kind of catatonia... which he, has sort of done since he came back."

"Nope. No matter how bad things get, James always had some sense of self left over. He still cared, just not about himself. He's probably the only Evil Slayer case I've heard about where the Slayer's fought it off, struggled with it off and on. Remember he was red eyed, then for a time before the big secret came out he was just a slightly grumpier version of himself. I can't imagine him dropping everything to go tower hunting. It just doesn't fit with what I know of him," Lena protested.

Kathryn gently took her hand, it tensed from the lack of heat in it. She couldn't help it, so Kathryn pushed any thoughts about that aside. "It's a difficult situation I know. That time was grief and anger. This is about guilt that kept building until it got too heavy for him."

Lena scoffed, her eyes rolled, "that makes even less sense, mum." Kathryn's sad smile made her feel like she was being coddled, even patronised, it made her angrier. "Think about it. All of those things he was feeling guilty for, were Slayer related in some way. Evil warlock chopped in half, only a Slayer could do it and him being one was why the warlock was peed off anyway. Your death, vampire related. Me, Slayer thing. Tower incidents I missed, guess what? The only one I can think of that could be argued against is the Shoytin incident. But hey, if James wasn't a Slayer he wouldn't have broken his arm that badly, so yeah..."

"I don't think..." Kathryn tried to argue against her.

Lena wasn't finished though, "this isn't James feeling so guilty he's atoning for his sins, or some rubbish like that. It doesn't matter how much good you do, the bad is always there. That's how he thinks. To do something like this, it would have to be something huge. Something that makes you doubt everything you are. A crisis of self, his Humanity. This has nothing to do with the Slayer side of him. It just gave him a way to escape the Human."

Kathryn's eyes had drifted to the table, her face stiffened further as she got lost in her thoughts. The last few words struck her sharply, forcing her to try and make eye contact with her daughter but she seemed far away as well. "You say that like you know from experience."

"I do," Lena mumbled. "It was him that brought me out of it."

"What was it?" Kathryn asked. Before Lena could answer a reasonable guess popped into her head, "the memories of the other dimension?"

"That, my involvement in the paradox. It was hard not to see myself as a tool. So yeah, I tried to be just the Slayer," Lena said in tired anger. "Trust me, if James managed to end up the same way, something happened to make him doubt everything and it wasn't a crazy dead warlock. I'd bet anything the chip has something to do with it, its function revolves around memories after all."

"The last thing to happen was the Nathan case," Kathryn said thoughtfully. Doubts soon took over, making her a little frustrated. "We don't know what happened. The worst case scenario is Nathan or the demon telling him about his sister. Horrible and upsetting yes, but not soul destroying. It makes no sense."

Lena bit her lip lightly until she thought of something. It gave her a cold shudder. "He always blamed himself for it. Just a reminder would be enough."

Sickbay:

The alien patients had the Doctor's full attention again. The little girl had woken up, a lot brighter than she was before now that she could move her arm. To prove it she wrapped it and the other around the Doctor's middle to give him a cuddle. He couldn't help but smile proudly for a moment, however the food he asked for had arrived, so he tried to convince her to let go. The other aliens in the room smiled, while the Voyager crewmembers laughed at him.

Jessie watched them, her mind though was on Lena and Kathryn's reunion. She hoped it went okay. Another thought hit her like a tonne of bricks. It made her want to slap herself a few times. "Lena is afraid of dead people," she muttered quietly out loud.

"You're welcome, really. You really should eat something though," the Doctor meanwhile protested. "I promise you, Mr Neelix didn't cook it." The Voyager crewmember's laughter increased.

Internally she slapped herself for the mistake and tried to focus. The last thing she needed to be now was self pitying, full of regret herself. She checked to see what the Doctor was doing, and as she hoped he was still locked in the girl's hug. Jessie turned her attention to the console, she quickly and yet lightly tapped in a few commands. The light sound of the forcefield deactivating made her wince,

fortunately the laughter must have drowned it out for everyone else. While they were still distracted, she walked quickly over to the other side. Seconds later the forcefield reactivated behind her.

James was still sitting on his knees with his back against the biobed, just as he was when she walked in. Jessie carefully sat down in front of him, only then noticing his stare wasn't being directed straight ahead. It was toward the floor directly in front of him, in between them.

There wasn't much time before the Doctor or anyone would notice she was there, Jessie had to be quick.

"You know, I've had a few weeks to think about what to say if I found you. You know, I still don't know because... god I don't know," she stammered out. "I don't know what happened that day. I can only assume, and if I talk to you now as if I'm right and I'm not, I could make things worse."

So many different things to say kept rushing to the surface. Each one didn't pan out that well in the rehearsal in her mind, so she nipped them in the bud before she spoke them. She didn't notice, but the stress of it had made the blood rush to the surface of her cheeks and neck, making her sweat. It was only when her mind ran out of speech ideas that she noticed and tried to wipe it away.

"You know, you're such an idiot," she ended up blabbing aloud because of it. It only made it worse and made her feel guilty herself. "You've always been so damn hard on yourself. From the start of your life you were dealt a bad hand. Nobody can or should blame you for having a few issues from that. Who wouldn't? I know you hated having a temper. I remember you once compared it to *him*. I said how silly that was. He was a man child having a temper tantrum, while you, your anger was directed more at bullies. Bullies like your father, making others feel helpless.

"You didn't want others to feel as you did. That's why you always looked out for me, until I could do it myself. Even after that," she smiled meekly. "You were in your element, you always appeared so confident, fearless to me, when standing up to these cowards. Anyone in school was being picked on, you were there, picking the bullies right back. It didn't matter what they did to you. The important thing was the victims weren't helpless anymore. I guess, you wished somebody had done that for you."

Jessie took in a deep breath while closing her eyes. Reopening them she continued, "you didn't want any kind of thanks, admiration. It embarrassed you. Sometimes you'd claim you only did it to have an excuse to lash out. When your attempts to help don't work though, it's a whole different story. That's where you and I do start to disagree on things. You think you've screwed up, it's the end of the world, oh my god you're a monster. Meanwhile I'm thinking you did your best, your intentions were good. In some examples you did help but there was a cost. Which is..." She had to sigh as the examples of that pounded at her head.

"Isn't the only thing making you feel like this, I know," she eventually said reluctantly. "This isn't the tired *you're not evil because you care* speech. You were abused, violently and mentally by someone who was supposed to protect you, raise you. Your mother left one day without saying anything. Your sister was murdered..." Jessie flinched, she decided to keep that as minimal as possible. "You were blamed for so many things, but you were innocent. An innocent child already burdened with the weight of the universe. This is all before you're five years old. You got no counselling, no justice, no answers. Of course you'd grow up with anger inside of you.

"Then you were forced to grow up *different* to everyone, with no reason why. Because the people who should have taught you about it, decided that you should be the pawn in their little experiment. They wanted you to finally snap, kill someone. They still did nothing to help you after this. They kept poking, prodding. No attempt to clean up their mess."

Jessie quickly checked if the Doctor would spot where she was. Noticing he was still absorbed in his other patients she turned back to James. Something was different about him. It was subtle, enough for her to notice and no one else. As usual it was all in his eyes, they seemed hazier than before. He was also no longer staring at the floor, but to the left of him.

"Haven't you been punished enough?" Jessie asked, her voice cracking. Her head shook away the tears before they even came. "I know what you'd probably say. That's no excuse for what you've done. You

may be right, but at the same time dead wrong. They're the reasons. You think you would have killed the two Cardassians, your father, the Engineering crewman, if the watchers had trained you to resist turning? Would you have killed the man who attacked me while pregnant with Duncan, if you had not have been subjected to violence and death as a child? That temper of yours, how much of it would exist if you had been raised by your mother away from it? I could go on...

"When it comes down to it, you think you failed. That's what this is about. You wanted to help people, not hurt them. Is that why you left?" Jessie stuttered near the end. Her question wasn't answered, of course. It just raised further ones she needed answering. He wasn't in any state to answer them, she needed them to help him though. As before, she was lost for words. "Or were you running from something? Was what I was saying for nothing? For all I know what I fear happened, did happen and that's what triggered you to leave. Did you even see Nathan before you left? Do you know the truth at all, any of it? How the hell can I talk to you about that subject, when I don't know if it's even a problem? I don't want to make it one."

She stared into his eyes, hoping he'd finally speak and answer her. It was no surprise that nothing happened. Jessie wondered if he was aware and listening all the time, or did he just tune in when the subject of the Game Sphere came up? It was difficult to know without mentioning it and she didn't want to do that. Her hand reached out without her thinking about it. It barely had time to brush his arm when it recoiled back. The sudden move startled her, and apparently him too as his eyes flashed. It was a change but not a good one, Jessie saw the pain in them, and a hint of fear too.

"I'm sorry, was that an injur..." she stuttered.

Before she could finish James inhaled air sharply and his middle shuddered briefly, then his right arm flew to shield it. During all of this his whole upper body slouched closer to the left. More shudders coursed through him. His other arm was moving to cover his face as he hit the ground. Jessie quickly and desperately swung around to call for the Doctor, panic rose when she couldn't see him anywhere. That was when she noticed the alarms on the station behind her were going off.

"Enough," a pained mumble from James made her turn back. She couldn't hear the next words, they had so little volume to them.

He looked a sorry sight. Lying on his side, his left arm still shielding his face while the right had seemingly given up, lying discarded in front of him. Something kept rocking his body, each one made him react less and less. Jessie brought herself forward, so she was on her hands and knees, crawling closer to him. That small distance allowed her to see one tear roll down his cheek, to the floor from his exhausted eyes. The arm protecting his face gave up as well, allowing her to see his face tighten with every tremor.

He needed her. Whether he was aware of her or not right now, it didn't matter. She couldn't let him suffer any longer. Jessie reached out to take the hand that lay sprawled out in front of him, while her other hand stroked one side of his face. "Stop," he said quietly. She wondered what he was seeing, what this latest hallucination was. It wasn't familiar to her. A part of her feared he was back to seeing his father when he was young, considering his begging and reactions. Anger flickered in her in that moment, she tried to push it aside for the moment.

She leaned further forward, hoping that if he would become more aware of her, the vision would be less real to him. It seemed to work, his eyes looked in her general direction. Jessie debated what to say to him, then she noticed something off about how he stared at her. Anger was in his eyes. The hand she held pulled away, he lifted up off the ground slightly. Both hands flung forward. "I'm not a thing!" he had shouted during this.

All of it happened in a quick couple of seconds. Jessie didn't register any of this until her back slammed into the forcefield. Her shoulders ached horribly, the pain spread all the way down her arms. That wasn't the most painful part. James was still shouting, while thrashing around trying to get to her, as if he was restrained by something. "I'm not your play thing, your punch bag! I'm Human!" he was yelling.

Finally his thrashing settled down, stalled by another one of the shudders he experienced earlier. It seemed to break him down into painful stutters, "leave me alone."

Jessie tried to tell herself he wasn't directing any of this attack at her, she was just there at the time. She attempted to move, stand up. A sharp pain shot up her back, to her shoulders making her gasp, then groan as the pain put pressure on the shoulder injuries.

Unknown to her the Doctor had returned from his office, he was at the station working at it furiously. The other patients were more than unnerved by what they had seen and heard. Jessie couldn't move, she didn't dare move her head in case it made the pain worse. All she could see was James ahead of her. It took a while for her to notice the anger had gone, in its place fear, pain. She wasn't quite sure. Whatever it was, it made him tremble violently and shake his head.

The forcefield turned off, the Doctor then hurried to her side with a med kit. The forcefield then reappeared, blocking them all in.

"Hold still okay," he told her as he armed himself with a tricorder and a hypospray.

"Sorry," Jessie heard a tiny mumble while her eyes winced closed. She opened them to see for herself where they came from. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," they were whispers, coming from James as he rocked his head. Jessie noticed that once she made eye contact with him then, he averted his own gaze down. His eyes squeezed shut, but he still mumbled the same two words over and over. In that brief second they stared at each other, Jessie felt it was different to before. The difference wasn't that the anger was gone. This time he was really looking at her, not whatever was attacking him in his vision. It gave her a little hope, even through all of the pain.

"That should numb the pain, but I'll need you to lie down on another biobed," the Doctor interrupted her thoughts. While he was talking, she heard the Sickbay doors opening and footsteps.

"Okay," Jessie didn't want to argue, or know how bad it was. She got ready to stand up, he gestured at her to stop. "But?"

"I need to lower the forcefield. First though, I need to make sure he's sedated. Again," the Doctor said impatiently. "It should have been enough for now," he muttered while walking through the forcefield without lowering it.

"What's going on?" Lena's voice asked, prompting Jessie to try to turn her head. The shooting pain made her stop that immediately. She still managed to see the girl's shocked expression. The sound of the forcefield lowering followed. The next thing she knew she was being gently lifted to her feet.

"Jessie thought it would be a good idea to lock herself in with the ticking bomb," the Doctor muttered. They were walking now, toward the three biobeds nearby. One of the alien patients had moved already, probably to get further away from James and her.

The comment angered her, unfortunately it made her tense which brought her great pain. The Doctor sighed and tutted while they painfully got her to lie on the bed. "He just pushed me. It's not..."

"That bad?" the Doctor scoffed as he began his treatment. "Tell that to your broken shoulders."

Lena stared at James, her eyes glazed over and her jaw threatened to drop, trembling. He was still muttering the same two words with his eyes tightly shut. She looked over her shoulder towards Jessie and the Doctor. "Why?" was all she could say.

"The chip was making him hallucinate again. He probably thought she was somebody else," the Doctor replied as calmly as he could. He expected another retort from Jessie defending James, but she merely stared at the ceiling with her eyes wide. It calmed him down considerably, allowing him to feel a little guilty. "I apologise. I shouldn't have talked to you like that."

"It's okay. I was stupid," Jessie whispered.

Lena's head dipped, then she turned it back to her sick brother behind the forcefield. By that point he had his knees bunched up, his arms wrapped around them, with his face turned away from everyone.

"I didn't know. I didn't recognise it," Jessie said.

"Odd. Perhaps you were right before," the Doctor said, puzzling her. "That he still hallucinates about his father's abuse."

"No. I doubt he fought back," Lena said hesitantly.

"She's right," Jessie said mid wince. "It was somebody who thought of him as a thing. He was held back by something, as they attacked. It doesn't make sense." A hypospray pressed into her neck, immediately making her feel drowsy.

Lena waited for her to fall into unconsciousness before saying what was on her mind. However somebody else beat her to it. "Still doing it. I shouldn't..." James whispered to no one in particular. It got Lena's full attention, so she stepped as close to the forcefield as possible. "Have come back."

"James? It wasn't Jessie that you attacked. It was someone else. Who, what happened?" Lena asked calmly and gently.

She noticed a subtle head shake before he turned his head further away from her. He had to shift his whole body around to do it. "Doesn't matter."

The answer got the Doctor's attention too, he glanced over, shocked at it. "Did he... just answer you?"

Lena didn't know the significance of the question, she concentrated solely on her brother. "Of course it matters. It wouldn't have happened again if it didn't."

"I deserved it," James whispered, his eyes closed.

Lena's shoulders fell, but she wasn't going to give up that easily. The Doctor's response earlier made it clear to her this was still progress, it gave her hope. Her eyes sharpened, filled with the new found determination she was feeling. "Then why did you fight back? Clearly you didn't deserve whatever happened. What was it? What caused it, was it something you did, as a Human or a Slayer?"

The Doctor frowned at all her questions. He continued treating his current patient, while listening in. He was prepared to intervene if necessary.

"Both," James answered. Lena sensed a tiny hint of disgust in his voice when he did. Self loathing poured out of his next sentences, "it's always both. Selfish to the end."

"How is it selfish? Was everything you said to me just a lie?" Lena struggled to keep her anger at bay, it made her voice tremble. "No it wasn't. You believed it, that without our Humanity we're merely monsters. What did you do as both that caused you to feel so terrified and helpless? I felt it before I even walked in here. You can't hide it."

He didn't say anything for a while. The Doctor assumed he had fallen into his catatonic silence again, so he sighed and his head bowed slightly. His work on Jessie was over, she'd be okay. Lena meanwhile didn't give in, she stood there and waited for an answer stubbornly.

Her patience did pay off, James slowly turned his head part way towards her. "I did though."

"What?" Lena asked instinctively, as his answer just made her even more confused. "I don't..."

"I did hide it. No one knew. What would be the point?" he mumbled, his gaze was against miles away. "I did my job, it still didn't matter. I was dead anyway."

"I don't understand," Lena admitted.

"I know," he said in a tone that did sound like he was sorry. However to Lena he was giving in, and it only shortened her fuse. If this was progress, she didn't want him to fall back to whatever he was like before.

"So you'll continue to hide from the pain and then what? Is that why you left, you couldn't hide anymore so you decided it would be easier to run from your issues?" Lena said more irritably than she wanted. A lot of this was bringing a painful part of her past back, and now she was looking at it from the other side. The guilt seeped through the cracks, thinking about what she put people through when she felt this way. She had to stop it from happening to him, Lena really thought he was better than this. "Whatever happened two weeks ago you need to confront it. Your memories of your older sister, it's time to face it, it's haunted you long enough and it's destroying you. If this..."

Lena knew at that moment that she had gotten close, as James' eyes faded and his head lazily slouched back so it was facing away from her again. Perhaps too close, still she didn't give up. "James it wasn't your fault. You're not responsible for what happened to your sister." She was trembling viciously as he didn't respond in anyway to her. "James please, don't hide again. You..." A hand rested on her shoulder, cutting her off. She looked over it to see the Doctor giving her a sympathetic stare and a head shake.

"You did your best. It's not going to happen overnight," he said.

"I feel like I misunderstood what he was talking about. Did you know?" Lena asked. The Doctor remained silent for now. He heard somebody clear their throat like they were trying to get someone's attention. Lena continued to talk at the exact same time, "what if I was wrong about his sister, and mentioning her just added to his list of worries?"

The Doctor glanced over his own shoulder, catching Tom waiting by the door looking right at him. "I doubt you were wrong. The Nathan case was what triggered the chip, and it was the last thing he worked on before he left." Lena nodded grimly. "Excuse me." He hesitated briefly before walking over to Tom.

"You should disable it," the Lieutenant said.

The Doctor was taken aback, "I told you that..."

"Yes, that it would cause brain damage or give him such a huge shock etc..." Tom said in a dubious voice. "But the drug you used the last time clearly isn't working. These hallucinations will keep wiggling him out and probably adding to the problem. Actually, there's no probably about it. I mean..." he pointed towards Jessie. "Lets add to his guilt, shall we?"

"That last time he was on a much higher dosage. He's weaker, injured, I deducted it would be too strong for him right now. Since it's been administered gradually, I can get it back to the dose he was on before safely," the Doctor said.

Tom folded his arms defiantly, all the while sighing impatiently. He lowered his voice a little so only the Doctor could hear it. "Turning the chip off will mean his hallucinations will stop. Then we can counsel him without him attacking his loved ones, thinking they're Frenit or daddy, or whatever. You may have fooled them but I know there's no actual risk here, so why?"

The Doctor gave him a disgruntled look, then he gestured to his office. The pair walked into it. "They have enough going on without adding further problems."

"I'm listening," Tom said.

"I cannot disable the chip. I've already tried," the Doctor said to Tom's dismay. "Sometime after he left Sickbay two weeks ago, it was damaged."

"Damaged?" Tom stammered. "What, was it worn out from over use or something? Or his telepathy..."

"No. From what I can surmise, someone forcibly altered it," the Doctor replied.

Tom mouthed the word forcibly before he spoke, "so, a signal fried it?"

"With a hypodermic needle, or something like it," the Doctor answered, making Tom's face turn a ghostly white. "While he was conscious and resisting. There's damage around the chip, the outward wound has healed but internally is another matter."

"Crap," Tom muttered.

The Doctor nodded, "yes. From what I can tell from the status of the chip, its performance was increased by 80%, which explains the rather alarming spikes in his neural pathways. In layman's terms, he's getting many more memories flooding into his consciousness, and his mental abilities have been harshly heightened."

"Meaning?" Tom asked even if he didn't want to know.

"Which do you want, the bad or the really bad news first?" the Doctor asked. The look on Tom's face told him without the need to say anything. "It's merely a hypothesis as Human telepathy is a relatively new thing, but he's probably very much aware of everyone in this room. Their thoughts, feelings. I have no idea the scope of its range. It'll explain that even though he has the symptoms of catatonia, he still snaps out of it when he wants to."

"He hears Janeway, Jessie or anyone thinking about the only subject he's interested in, the Towers and responds. Once the subject changes, off he goes?" Tom tried to simplify it. The Doctor resisted making a comment over it. "Okay, so that's the very bad news right?"

"No," the Doctor answered frankly. "If this keeps going, it'll leave permanent damage, eventually killing him. The chip will need to be removed."

"I thought you couldn't. It's why you turned it off years ago," Tom stuttered.

"That's correct," the Doctor said with a sigh. Tom could tell he wasn't taking that well. He hated not being able to save a patient, but this was far more personal to him. He knew he blamed himself for what happened to James. "This will be something I'll have to discuss with Jessie eventually. It was a risky procedure when I could disable it and sedate him, but now I've got the very likely risk of an hallucination making him fight me off."

"God," Tom said as a frog leaped into his throat. "If you don't do it, he'll die from the stress of it. If you do, he could still die. The latter is obviously better, but if he's freaking out... the odds fall a lot. If the drug works..."

"The dose will likely need to be much stronger than before to compensate for the increased performance. I can't risk giving him anything higher than the last time. I'm hoping that a normal dose combined with his weaker state will be enough to at least slow the inevitable brain damage," the Doctor explained.

Tom walked around him to stare through the glass, towards Lena and James. Neither of them had moved since he first entered Sickbay. "Is he weaker? He needed help to destroy the first towers. How the hell did he destroy not one, but at least four networks and half of Krralef's on his own?"

The Doctor silently thought about it. He shook his head, "only he knows for sure, we can only theorise. According to the Captain he seemed far more focused on his fighting, almost robotic. Coupled with his heightened mental abilities and not held back by Human concerns, he was far more effective."

A cold feeling shot through Tom's back, making him shudder. The Doctor looked at him with concern. "Effective? You're suggesting that Humanity is truly a burden, and a Slayer should shed it after all to do their job?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the sort," the Doctor said, offended by the accusation.

Tom turned to face him once again. "It's true though. A terrifying thought isn't it? We must become them to fight them."

"Destroying the towers was not the solution, so not at all," the Doctor said.

"It still might be. Maybe that's what they want; to give up James and Lena, then later Duncan and Amy to literally play their games. If we don't, billions suffer and die at the Soft's hands leaving ours coated in their blood. If we do, we give up our very souls," Tom said with a haunted look on his face. What he said next made him feel sick, "what's the lives of two people, compared to the entire universe? Nothing."

"That's not true. One life lost can effect so many. There's ripples. James for example, what he does directly effects the next generation of protectors. We don't know, Duncan and Amy may face much grander hardships than their father and what he does now will influence what they do then. One person is never insignificant, never. We lose one person to this Game Sphere, to the Softmicron, we've already lost."

Tom only partially agreed with him, his head still shook defiantly as if he disagreed completely. "We suffer, we learn, then we grow stronger. We only lose when we give in to it. Lena and James will be stronger, more formidable if we can help them. The Soft know it's not just them they're fighting, they're fighting all of us. We help James fight his demons, the chip will not be able to influence him. Round one to us. Round two begins with removing the chip with no resistance..."

"But..." the Doctor tried to interrupt.

"What? It's sound. We're not getting anywhere panicking about it, are we?" Tom said.

"True but you make it sound so simple. We're talking about two very damaged people, one of which has memories of two timelines, while the other has thirty years of issues he won't talk about," the Doctor protested.

Tom smirked at him, "panicking! Lena's already getting better, taking command of Voyager during a crisis, heck she looks stronger. James well, he'll not get better when he's trapped in Sickbay locked behind a forcefield."

"Oh dear," the Doctor muttered to himself.

"I'd ask Jessie first, but in my opinion, he should be at home with her. You can keep on top of his medicinal needs of course. Maybe we should bring that holo-counsellor out of retirement, she may be able to help," Tom said a little too enthusiastically.

The Doctor sighed, "if his records are anything to go by, he'll resist her. Also, one of the first things he did when he was exposed to Jessie, was hallucinate and attack her. You want to send him home with her? No."

Tom wasn't deterred, "if the drug settles him down, there's no problem." The Doctor wasn't convinced and he could tell. "It's obviously up to her, but she'll agree that if we do nothing we get nothing. No risk, no gain. I know Jessie well enough, she'll not be put off by that. I think the only issue she'll have is the children. Obviously, I'd keep them separated until the chip's gone."

"He was talking earlier, after he attacked her. If that's what it takes, I'm not onboard," the Doctor said.

"I noticed," Tom said. "The talking I mean. You say he's fully aware of what people are thinking. Now we have a subject to focus on. I doubt we'll need another freakout to get him to talk again."

"That subject made him retreat. Hardly," the Doctor muttered.

Tom laughed but more from frustration. "I don't mean his sister, no. Whatever he was talking about before Lena brought her up. I assume it was the hallucination itself. I heard he had another one when Janeway was here. They may give us a clue. Do they have a particular theme?"

The Doctor didn't take him seriously at first, he stared at him bemused. Then he found himself thinking that he had a point. It got him thinking further. "No theme that I can determine. The visions of his

father were triggered by the case. These ones just spur up out of nowhere. In fact the only thing the two have in common is guilt."

"Any moron could have told you that," Jessie's voice said, surprising them both. They turned to find her at the doorway.

"Oooph, save some charm for James, 'kay?" Tom teased her.

"Hmm, yeah," Jessie fake scowled at him, at least he hoped. "I think you're right about keeping him here. The forcefield, the people from the planet he saved. There's a lot here to trigger him. I'm okay with bringing him home."

"Are you sure?" the Doctor asked, concerned for her welfare.

"As Tom said, I'd do anything for him," Jessie answered.

Tom laughed nervously, "I suppose you could interpret what I said as that, sure."

"Jessie, if he attacks you again, I won't be there to help you. What if he mistakes you for a demon like Frenit attacking him, and he uses his full strength to fight you off," the Doctor stammered.

The thought of that didn't faze her, she just seemed a lot more determined. "Then it'll help him snap out of it again, as before. I'll take the risk."

Tom winced, he had to take in a deep breath to recover from it. "Sheesh, you're either more badass than I thought, or very, very crazy."

Jessie smiled, "why do you even have to pick one?"

"Oh god," the Doctor groaned, dreading the outcome of this situation.

Tom though just laughed again, "okay, I gotta admit, that's a little hot."

"Eew," Jessie muttered.

She turned to leave again, shaking her head. Tom was left with the Doctor staring at him like he had just signed his death warrant. "Really?" he said finally.

Tom shrugged casually, "if B'Elanna admitted that about me, it'd be tough to keep my hands off her..."

"Too much information," the Doctor groaned as he followed Jessie out.

"What?" Tom asked innocently. He scoffed, "I wouldn't be having a breakdown, that's for sure. James' always been a little weird, I suppose."

Outside Jessie was still pulling a face while the Doctor looked on. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, that was disgusting. Poor B'Elanna," Jessie replied.

The Doctor sighed, "I meant..."

"I know," Jessie seemed disappointed he didn't catch on.

"He possibly meant to say it was romantic, but he's Tom so..." the Doctor said.

"I doubt it. And yes I'm doubley sure. Lena told me the incident made him talk. I doubt he'll attack me again," Jessie said. "Besides, apart from that one, I should know what he's reacting to, so I won't be caught off guard again."

Lena slowly walked over to the pair, with a grimace on her face. "I dunno about that." They looked at her, immediately worried when they saw her face. "I saw things, felt what he was feeling before I even entered Sickbay. I saw him in this dark brig, tied up by chains, being beaten by a demon."

Jessie's face turned very pale at the image she was painting. What unnerved her the most was that she didn't know this had happened. It bothered her just as much that he never told her either.

"Not just one. I mean it was one at a time, but different ones kept landing blows. It was fast, brutal," Lena said hesitantly. "One went flying, probably when he pushed you. The last thing I saw was a couple of them converging on him, with weapons. It's obviously to be continued."

"He never, that didn't happen. He'd tell me," Jessie stuttered.

Lena felt terrible bringing it up, she looked at her directly with a sympathetic expression. "I'm sorry. I just thought you should know before you take him home."

The Doctor stared thoughtfully at the younger girl, "his telepathy is so heightened, you were able to pick up on it outside." His muttering got her attention, as well as Jessie's. They both stared at him accusingly. "There's something you should know if you're committed to this. The both of you. It won't be easy."

TO BE CONTINUED