

Episode 5.27

Closure

Kathryn wished it was better circumstances that brought her here, however it still felt good to be back amongst familiar faces, to be back home on Voyager. There was no time to really catch up, there was a lot to talk about with the people she knew. She scanned the Conference Room to see who was there. There was one person she expected to be around, it seemed odd that he wasn't. The thought of Damien being on her ship, sitting with her friends was just as unnerving and very irritating to her. For now she kept it in the back of her mind. There was no need to make the hole they were in any deeper.

"There's been rumblings for a while. Game activity had become far more common place. The people who had survived reported many more experimental games, rule changes. Actual Softmicron sightings had decreased," Kathryn began while she paced around the table. Everyone watched her intently. "The rare few were in games themselves, instead of the sprites that usually inhabited them. Survivors described them as ruthless, soulless. These games would be won narrowly, some thankfully because of the experimental rule changes.

"Then a few Tolg outposts suddenly vanished without a trace. Our vessel was sent to investigate. That's when we discovered it. A blue wall, surrounding two sectors. Four outposts within them. The collective ordered us to penetrate it." She paused in case there were any comments or questions so far.

"Aren't Game Spheres usually purple, like the cubes?" Harry questioned.

"Really, that's the question you ask? I'm curious as to how the Tolg know all this," B'Elanna said.

"We have no reason not to trust the Captain, it doesn't matter," Harry said.

Kathryn smiled at them both, anything to hide the uneasiness she felt with her coming answer. "The Tolg are very interested in the Soft's technology. They focus on assimilating planets that have been targets."

"Oh," B'Elanna said uncomfortably. Harry resisted directing his *told you so* face at her.

"It was easy to slip through the blue barrier. That was when our vessel powered down and every drone fell where they stood. I thought that I could finally be free when this happened, but the implant in my skull," Kathryn said, gesturing to the flashing light mostly hidden within her hair. "Activated, effectively reviving me, or more accurately my brain. The younger the drone, the chances of it working increase."

"The Tolg don't keep people alive forever," the Doctor chimed in as he leaned on the table. "Their technology only stalls the decomposition process. It's still impressive that the neural amplifier can stimulate a deceased brain after so long, as that is most commonly the organ that prevents resuscitation. As you know, they're extremely complicated..."

"Thanks Doc, we got it," Tom butted in as the topic was freaking him out.

Kathryn's smile grew. Even if the topic wasn't worth smiling over, she had missed the banter this crew always had, whatever they were talking about. Nevertheless she continued, "the Tolg ship was useless to us. We took what we could and abandoned it, in search of another. Specifically a one that would rouse less suspicion. We found a world that knew enough about the Tolg to remove the majority of the technology that wouldn't kill us. The rest, well, is necessary.

"We've spent a significant amount of time investigating the anomaly. The first port of call was the outposts I mentioned. Like us, they were disconnected and several drones had survived. A couple joined our crew, saying they had a lead they wanted to pursue. That lead was a strange *crack* in space, blue and red mixed together. I was certain I'd seen something like it before."

That part of the story made the rest of the Conference Room perk up, they stared at her far more intently than before. Even Damien seemed interested. Kathryn avoided looking at him and continued, all the while stopping behind the head chair where Tom sat. He glanced up as she leaned on the back of its head. "It was surrounded by a darkness that didn't even seem real. Darker than space. I couldn't believe it. It then spread two thousand kilometres before our eyes. This crack sat in its dead centre. Our scans picked up subspace readings from it, but everytime we scanned this darkness the sensors would go blank.

"We had no other leads, so we headed for the nearest habited world. Only we never found it," Kathryn continued. "In its place was a completely different system. We were searching for a binary system, five planets. Instead a one a little similar to the solar system; six worlds, one habited, one star, numerous dwarf planets. We double checked our astrometric data, but we had no information about this particular planet and system. We visited anyway, we were greeted immediately by its lead fleet. It was a controversial topic with our crew, but a majority voted in favour of not telling this planet about the nearby anomaly we discovered. I was in the minority."

"Was this a tower planet?" Tom asked, eager for her to get to any familiar point. B'Elanna nudged him with her elbow.

Kathryn sighed, not out of impatience, just sadness. "They knew nothing about a blue wall, they did confirm that our data wasn't the problem. Constellations were off, they lost contact with their colonies. A few of their ships were missing. You get the idea. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary, so we left. I'll tell you now that I insisted countless times that we should warn them. That anomaly was so nearby. I was refused every time. You know me, I'm not one for being told what to do."

"You told them," Harry said with a smirk.

Kathryn however wasn't as impressed with it as him. "Their fleet escorted us out of the system. Before we jumped to warp, I left the lead vessel's captain a vague message with co-ordinates. It didn't matter, did it?" She looked over her shoulder so she could watch outside. One member of the fleet flew by their side, as they orbited a small grey world. A few members of the Conference Room followed her glance, even fewer still understood why and they fell back into their chairs uncomfortably from the realisation. "Maybe it saved them, maybe it was a coincidence. I don't know. When we tried to return, we couldn't detect the planet or its system. Instead, a black wave forced us to turn around and flee."

"Oh god," Tom stuttered when the realisation hit him too. "The Katane. It was them you told."

Kathryn barely nodded her head, her pacing continued so she could turn her back on the window. "That's right. I left the co-ordinates with a man named Shoytin..."

"Crap," Craig muttered.

Damien sniggered slightly, "priceless. I should be paying for this, it's so good."

Kathryn rolled her eyes, she wasn't the only one either. "I had no idea how my interference panned out. I don't even know if it had anything to do with why he attacked Voyager, I never mentioned you. You'll have to tell me."

"Enterprise tried to liberate Erayas when the wave took over," B'Elanna started to answer.

Tom nodded quickly, "at first they thought Enterprise was behind it..."

"Hold on," Harry butted in. "The Captain might not know the Enterprise's story. Maybe we should fill in the blanks."

Kathryn was already regretting asking. The rest of the room had begun to chime in as well. "Does it matter? They captured the Enterprise, found out the truth..." Tom said.

B'Elanna groaned, "that doesn't explain the fact that it was empty, or what we were doing at the time. Harry's right."

"She asked if her message may have influenced Shoytin's actions," Craig tried to intervene.

"Well that answer's clearly duh," Damien sniggered.

B'Elanna threw him a glare, "not necessarily. There was nothing linking it to Voyager or Enterprise."

"They blamed us for the anomaly, so I'd say it did," the Doctor said. "We saw the same crack before the anomaly expanded."

Neelix pointed at him, "that's true. I'm gonna vote yes too."

"He may not have had time to see it," Harry said warily.

Kathryn cleared her throat loudly to shut them up. Her face had stiffened in anger. Like in the old days mostly everyone froze at the sight of it. "It doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things so..."

"Yes it does," Damien laughed. Everyone glared, not that it would put him off. "He obviously saw it before the anomaly grew. Am I the only one who figured that out? Of course I am. Fools."

B'Elanna narrowed her eyes in his direction. "He sent one of his ships inside the anomaly before he encountered us, or the Enterprise. He could have spotted it then." Damien scoffed and rolled his eyes. "I'm not saying you're wrong, just that it isn't the only possibility."

"Actually B'Elanna, he probably is. That ship discovered something, we never found out what it was," Tom reminded everyone. A lot of the room nodded knowingly, agreeing with him. "It obviously wasn't Erayas itself, they already knew it was there."

"Ahem, key word is discovered," Damien grunted in annoyance. "Shoytin already knew about it."

Kathryn finally looked at him, giving him a deadly glare. He stared back at her menacingly, then smirked at her.

"Tom's right. Shoytin was the only who knew what it was. We wanted to retrieve the Enterprise first, then investigate it," Harry said. "Other things happened that distracted us."

"It's what likely made him so... mad," Craig said awkwardly. The brief eye contact he shared with Kathryn made them both a little uncomfortable, she lowered her head. "Sorry."

"It's all right. The only real casualty was Shoytin, right?" Kathryn said, giving him a meek smile.

Tom winced, "actually." B'Elanna elbowed him again to tell him to shut up. "Yes. Thanks to yours truly."

"The next planet we visited," Kathryn said quickly to change the subject. "Which was before we returned to witness the anomaly expansion, were a lot less friendly. They insisted nothing was wrong and sent us on our way. We visited a few more worlds, all but one reacted similarly. The last one we visited before the anomaly incident, it... well I've never seen anything like it." The pain in her voice was obvious to everyone, it put everyone but Damien on edge. "You've seen a similar planet yourself, it's where we met after all."

Tom's face fell, "a dying planet?"

Kathryn nodded. "Yes, a little further along than that one." A few members of the room were a little shocked, the planet they were at recently, they couldn't imagine looking worse than it was. "People were evacuating it. If it weren't for our sensors we wouldn't have known it was there. Black clouds choking it to death, sensors showed the land collapsing into the core. Lifesigns falling thousands per minute. Sickening."

"Yes, terrible," Damien sniggered. He was of course ignored, which made him sulk and look bored instead.

"Our ship couldn't get through the clouds, our shields were too weak. We don't have transporters. There was nothing we could do. As we left, it began to collapse. I... never want to see something like that ever again," Kathryn said, her fiery eyes matched her sharpened voice. "It didn't fall in vain though. Our sensors found something strange as it was destroyed. Two buildings that remained until near the end, which vanished before the land beneath it weakened. Our sensors only caught it as we tried to find out what caused this problem, and that particular continent was where it originated from. In its death throes, this planet told us the truth about this place."

"Wow corny," Damien said in a bored voice.

"Can we kick him out, preferably into an airlock?" B'Elanna muttered to Tom. He just smiled weakly in response.

Kathryn meanwhile stared at Damien again, if looks could kill he'd be on the floor in agony by that moment. He didn't notice at all. She kept a lock on him as she paced. "Our previous scans told us that these towers were on all of the unfriendly worlds. What was even more disturbing was the evidence that one was being built on the first planet, Erayas. We naively thought we could stop it if it wasn't finished, so we rushed back.

"After the expansion, we overheard distress calls from a couple of planets. Each one described a large silver vessel opening fire on their power stations. We knew what that meant, there was no reason to respond. First we investigated the anomaly growth, then two nearby worlds, one of them being the one I mentioned. That was when we started to put the pieces together," Kathryn said, finally breaking her death stare towards Damien, just in time for him to notice.

"The towers caused the anomaly to grow. We're on the same page," Tom said.

Kathryn nodded, "for the most part. Am I right to assume that one of them was Voyager?"

"The Enterprise took down two, us one," Craig replied.

"Ah, so it's possible," Kathryn said. "I think you should know that there's no pattern here. Two networks went down and the anomaly grew from its tiny size. It didn't grow again until eleven more were destroyed."

Everyone stared with their eyes widening in shock. Even Damien was surprised, although while everyone else were shook by the news, he was a little impressed.

"I didn't know blond freak had it in him," he said.

Kathryn swung around to glare at him once again, this time she walked over to him. "What does that mean?"

Damien sniggered at her angry face, while everyone else cringed. "He's got a long way to go until he surpasses me, don't worry your coffee head about it," he teased.

Kathryn reached out to grab him by the scruff of his shirt, pulling him up out of his seat. "Why don't we change the subject to you, you scrawny little..."

"Uh, maybe we should calm down," Tom stuttered.

Harry shushed him, "no no, I want to hear this. Don't you?"

Tom sighed, "well yeah, I've been waiting all season but..."

"What's your problem Janey?" Damien sniggered despite his situation. "I did what I was supposed to. I fulfilled my side of it."

Kathryn growled as she shoved him roughly back into his seat. "Talk about James that way again, and I'll see to it you're back in the Tolg," she threatened.

Damien's eyes widened briefly while he smirked. "Ooh, you can tell someone's coffee deprived."

It was obvious to everyone that Kathryn was about to attack him again, she was trembling, fists clenched, her eyes on fire. Tom thought to put it out. "Oookay, so now that we're up to date. We should come up with a plan. Anyone, no? Dismissed," he said far too quickly.

"Hold on," Kathryn said through gritted teeth. "We're not up to date, not even close." Tom tensed as she turned to walk over to him. "I trust you know what the anomaly is, or have an idea?"

"A glitch, anything caught inside it is drained and the people suffer hallucinations," Harry replied.

"Hmm," Kathryn seemed a little put off by his answer. Everyone were looking at her to gauge her reaction. "The ship with a door closes the final link," she said ominously.

"What?" B'Elanna asked first for everyone in the room.

Kathryn bit her lip as her hands rested on her hips. "It was just some alien folks tale, about a cloud that moves the cosmos. It seemed oddly familiar to our current problem."

"It does?" Tom was more than confused.

Harry stared thoughtfully. "Moves the cosmos, could apply to the sphere mixing systems from the Beta and Delta Quadrant together. The ship with a door..." his face paled. "You don't mean?"

"Deck Thirteen," Craig finished for him, stealing his thunder.

Kathryn gave him a smile, "there's more to it, but I think you get the picture."

"What's the final link?" B'Elanna questioned.

"That I'm not 100% on," Kathryn admitted. "I assumed it referred to the final task to end the game."

"That doesn't really help us," Neelix said. "What was the full tale?"

Kathryn chuckled, "I don't know if it's worth putting all our faith in it. It just gave me a chill when I heard it, as I thought of Voyager."

"No surprise, you're dead," Damien commented.

"Please, maybe it'll mean something to us since our journey here was different," Neelix said.

"I don't remember it all. Something about four phases will falter, the fifth... um a new hope arises," Kathryn said in frustration. She leaned on the nearest chair to her, which was Craig's. "It was very detailed on these phases, but I don't remember I'm sorry. I heard it from a few protestors on Krralef. You know how they are, very spiritual. It's why I automatically jumped to Voyager. It could have easily been made up after they encountered us."

"Maybe James heard them too," Neelix said.

"Oh boy," Tom sighed.

Harry's face brightened, "I'll ask Tira." It immediately faded away, "though she isn't what you call a believer in things like that. Maybe a few members of her crew can help."

Kathryn shrugged her shoulders, "I shouldn't have brought it up. I mean..." The light flickered on her head at the same time something about the story came back to her. "Oh, um with the second phase comes darkness, heralded by the beacon of a haze. The third phase begins with a choice." Nobody looked any of the wiser after that, which made her a little embarrassed. "It's likely a load of Damien, not worth listening to."

Damien scowled, "that's contradictory. I'm great, definitely worth listening to."

"Sure," Kathryn laughed mockingly. "That does bring me back to you though."

"Oh joy," Damien groaned sarcastically.

"Does a Game Subspace Scanner ring a bell to you?" Kathryn asked.

Damien froze for the moment, he turned an odd shade of white and a little blue. "No," he answered finally with a fake smug smile.

"Oh sorry, I meant the Damienator Sub Game Detector," Kathryn said, not sounding sorry at all.

Everyone stared at Damien, very curious about what was happening. They all witnessed Damien getting paler and a bit anxious. "That's an infantile name, how ridiculous."

"Yeah I thought so too," Kathryn said honestly. "I'll explain for everyone, since I'm mistaken about your *genius*." Damien obviously flinched at the second smack to his pride. "In a parallel dimension to ours, a scanner was invented for the sole function of detecting Game Cubes before the warning cloud even appeared. The interesting part was that it would detect it in subspace, as it travels to its destination."

"Why would *our* Damien know about it?" B'Elanna had to ask.

"Oh, just that the Tolg had no previous awareness of this specific dimension and this device until he was assimilated in 2376," Kathryn replied. She noticed Damien shaking while clenching his teeth together. "Just a coincidence, I suppose. I guess I got mixed up with all the other dimensions he introduced to them."

"Oh boohoo, who cares," Damien grunted.

Kathryn approached him, her hands back on her hips. "They knew about Voyager's final year in that dimension, nothing after that. So much detail, it got my interest. During that time period you were a member of the crew. You died with them."

Damien swung his chair around to glare at her. "Who's fault was that? As per usual, all you cared about was precious Jamesy." When his anger fizzled away he groaned and rolled his eyes, "oh what does it matter?"

Kathryn smiled while the rest of the senior staff were wide eyed and worried about what was going on. "Oh so you do remember? I was wondering how the Tolg got that information when you didn't. Mystery solved!"

Damien growled, "you're treading thin ice here Janeway."

"Please, I was on your list long before I knew you. I couldn't care less," Kathryn muttered. "I should thank you though, at least we have something that may be useful and dare I say, good."

"Oh god," Damien groaned in disgust. It even made him gag a little. "No, it was like a lifetime ago, I don't remember the specs for it. I definitely wouldn't have when I died. So too bad."

"Uh," Tom raised his hand to get their attention. "Are we still talking about the Damienator? We're already in the sphere, how will detecting a game in normal space help us?"

Kathryn smiled broadly, "it already did." Another groan from the so called villain made her laugh briefly. "The readings from the initial tear matched the subspace the cubes travel through. Exact match."

B'Elanna sat up, her face lit up with curiosity. "Blue and red, the Games Matrix? Of course."

"Uh hold up," Tom was suddenly very nervous about this news. Everyone turned to him, unsure why. "In Daniel's latest vision, a tower is destroyed, a black wave spread through space. People burned to death, with a giant sun on the horizon. All came true. The final image, Voyager's hull buckles with red and blue colours reflected on it."

The news made the Conference Room feel so much colder than it did before, as well as tense and awkward. Nobody said anything. Damien's laughter briefly broke the silence after a minute, he stopped it as if he didn't mean for it to happen.

"Sorry, full circle. It's beautiful," he said, struggling to stop from laughing again.

Kathryn's eyes narrowed in his direction, he smiled back. It all came flooding back to her. "The first phase begins and ends with a shattered circle. Come the second phase, influenced by a mother's love and with it the second phase ends in darkness, heralded by the beacon of a lavender haze. The third phase begins with a choice, shattered by death's cruel embrace. On the fourth the stars begin to align, offset by the span of time. Ends on a painful scream. Four phases all falter, birthing the fifth phase and the cloud that moves the cosmos. The ship with a door closes the final link. The cosmos begins a new day."

"Wow," Tom mumbled. "Now *that* is corny."

"So that's everything settled then, is it?" Rachel asked hopefully.

Jessie had been focusing on the bedroom door while her mother spoke. The question pulled her around with a judgmental look on her face. "It's about as settled as a meal cooked by Neelix is."

Rachel wasn't going to let that put her off. "He's home, he's fine, and I've got some news."

"Oh, don't let me stop you," Jessie groaned sarcastically.

Rachel obviously didn't notice so she started to talk, just as Jessie headed for the bedroom. "Well as you know, me and Antony..." Then she realised her daughter wasn't interested in listening to her. "Jessica, I'm serious, this is important to me."

Jessie irritably walked back over to her. "Jess... ie."

Rachel rolled her eyes, "Jess. Your sister-in-law is in with him, I'm sure he doesn't need you now." Her eyes lit up, "oh that reminds me. Your sister left you a message. Something about transferring to the Enterprise. Anyway, getting back to me and..."

"What, that's it? Has she had the baby yet?" Jessie cut in to Rachel's annoyance.

"Um, she didn't say. She did say to thank you for warning her about the pain and I quote *grossness*," Rachel said.

Jessie raised her shoulders slightly while she smiled awkwardly. "I'm sure I did. In my defence, I tend to miss it. Three out of five ain't bad."

Rachel sighed impatiently, "yes, that's funny dear. Now, I've got some great news that should cheer you up."

"I thought you wanted to talk to me about Antony," Jessie said.

"Yes," Rachel said, trying not to sound offended. "As you know our wedding day was last week and..." Jessie's eyes widened, she looked worried. "Correction, as you *should* know our wedding day was last week, but since we're stuck in this silly game we couldn't reach the church we booked."

Jessie relaxed for moment, relieved she hadn't missed anything. She tried to laugh it off nervously, "I hope you didn't sent the invites before you got lost."

"Hysterical," Rachel briefly formed a fake smile.

Jessie's face tightened, any awkward nervousness and relief she had flew away. "Look, my family's lives have been turned upside down by a stupid little chip, planted by a stupid little jealous cow with a Kazon fetish. Ten sodding years ago. You're lucky I'm still here listening to you at all. I'm really trying here not to sound all doom and gloom."

Rachel could only blink a couple of times. She sighed as the guilt spread to her face. "You're right, I'm sorry. I was just thinking you could do with a distraction."

"Fine. How is your wedding being missed good news?" Jessie asked half-heartedly.

"Well we can always rebook it when we return, but Antony and I decided we've been waiting long enough. We'll have a small official ceremony on the Enterprise, and just have a ceremony for show at home," Rachel replied.

"Okay?" Jessie said as lightly as she could, hoping it would mask the dread.

"Two days time it's our anniversary, it seemed appropriate," Rachel said. Before Jessie could react she added, "I've found the perfect dress for you."

With the dread confirmed, Jessie shuddered in horror and revulsion. Not just at the dress part either. She tried to look disappointed, "oh, then I'm sorry, I'll definitely make it to your flashy show wedding. I assume that one's casual dress."

Rachel looked on, confused at her reaction. "Sweetie, I don't do casual dress."

Jessie groaned, the disappointment all the more real now. "No, neither do I."

Rachel beamed proudly at her, "that's my girl. Now, don't worry. There's nothing you need to do but show up and walk down the aisle before me. You've got enough on your plate."

"Yeah that's the problem. James won't be better in two days. I wish he could be, but that's not realistic," Jessie said, wiping the smile from Rachel's face. "I'll be at the second one though, promise. Since it's not the real one, I'll pick what to wear. Yeah, agreed. Great."

"If this is about the dress, I..." Rachel then laughed, "no of course it isn't. We have similar tastes."

"No, it's about James. But yeah, we don't have similar tastes," Jessie said.

Rachel sighed knowingly. "Don't I know it," she muttered, but not about the dress. Jessie was none of the wiser though as she still looked awkward. "You haven't seen it yet, you'll love it."

"Is it a dress?" Jessie asked.

"You know it is," Rachel answered with a frown.

Jessie winced through her teeth, "then no I won't." Her mother stared at her as if she suggested wearing a scruffy tracksuit to her wedding. "I don't wear dresses, or skirts. Long story."

"Oh, you did say something about that before," Rachel said, disappointed. "What did you wear for your wedding?"

"Um... trousers," Jessie lied, and Rachel saw right through it making her groan. "I couldn't find anything wedding-y, James suggested I should try, Danny suggested designing one. Ironic, it wasn't really wedding-y either." Rachel smiled, seeing her chance. "But two days isn't do-able. I won't ask you to postpone it, and I'm not saying that to avoid the dress."

"You'll be there," she said with a confident smile.

Jessie was starting to get annoyed with her again. "No."

"What's the big deal? So his family watches him for an hour. No big deal," Rachel said with a laugh. "Though why he needs to be watched at all is a bit strange. Sometimes when a guy is having one of his tantrums, he should be left alone. No attention and bam, they're fixed. They can be right children."

Jessie stared at her blankly. "Have you been listening to me at all? Or have you just been thinking *wedding, wedding, wedding* while I've been talking?"

"Sick people don't go for a shuttle ride for two weeks. I'm not buying it," Rachel said bluntly. She pointed her finger at the bedroom door Jessie tried to go in earlier. "I've seen it before. A new baby comes along and they get a bit needy. Don't cater to him."

"What?" Jessie muttered, not believing a word of what she was saying. If it was a joke, it wasn't that funny to her. "That's the worst way to get attention I've ever heard."

Rachel just shrugged, "you said he was clever."

"Ugh, clearly you were thinking about hideous dresses when I mentioned chips in brain, hallucinations, post traumatic stress dis..." Jessie said.

"Psychotic breaks. Yes, I heard you," Rachel said too casually to be serious.

Jessie shook her head, "I didn't say that."

"Oh, wonder where I got that from?" Rachel asked herself out loud, prompting a scowl from her daughter. "It's one hour darling. That Leanne can babysit him while you're gone. He's not going to drop dead in that time."

"Lena," Jessie corrected her.

Rachel sighed irritably, "oh, I suppose that's short for something too."

"No and you can't accuse her of having a masculine name. What she used to go by though, yeah," Jessie mumbled. She shook her head at the change of subject. "It's no big deal. So I don't come to one of your weddings, it's..."

"It's why we put it off so long, remember? So you'll be there," Rachel snapped, making Jessie freeze a little. Her mother settled down, breaking into a smile but Jessie remained still with a feeling of guilt. "It will get your mind off all this sadness. It'll do you some good. Oh and, I'd clear your schedule for tomorrow evening too."

Jessie nodded lightly until the last sentence clicked with her. "What, why?"

Rachel giggled, "rehearsal dinner of course."

"That's fine. I don't need to practise walking and not putting on a dress," Jessie said. She tried again to escape to the bedroom.

"It's only a name. It's a party and you're going to it, if I have to magic you there I will," Rachel teased, stopping her yet again.

It took all the effort Jessie could muster to not shout at her mother for failing to note the seriousness of the situation. All she could manage was covering her annoyed face with her hands.

Enterprise:

The only thing keeping Commander Chakotay from losing his mind and wallowing, was watching the three men in the parallel cell to his bicker about their now tenth escape plan. Like every other time one of them would sit down in what Chakotay could only

describe as a bad Yoga pose, and mutter nonsense for five minutes. When nothing happened as always, the other two would give him grief for a while before sulking in different corners until the next round.

Unfortunately during their sulking stage, or when they were sleeping, there was nothing to really distract him. He would think about anything and it would eventually lead back to his current circumstances. Everytime he would ask himself how he got there. At least then his mind would go blank, as he had no answer.

The door to the brig opened, instantly causing a rift in the routine. It was likely a visitor for the three men, as it always was. The only exception was a Security officer getting confused as to which brig he was in and quickly leaving as it was the wrong one.

It took a while before he noticed something about this visit was different. The three men were whispering their plans to each other, their eleventh escape plan more than likely. They wouldn't do that if they had a visitor, that usually came immediately afterwards.

Chakotay forced himself to look up and check. The sight of the new arrival hit him hard, it took his breath away. His throat closed up, making it difficult to get it back. He started to consider that perhaps he had fallen asleep and was dreaming her. It wouldn't be the first time, so he braced himself for it to end in a horrifying nightmare as it normally did. It seemed like it already had progressed that far as he noticed the scars and the complexion of her skin, the metallic features and her almost white eyes staring right at him.

"We have a lot to talk about," Kathryn said, her voice was neutral. It was difficult to know what she was feeling. "I debated what to and how to start, then I realised why should I? But I know you're not one for defining parametres, so I thought I'd tell you a story. An ancient legend I heard on my travels."

Chakotay tried to get rid of the lump in his throat, with no such luck. It didn't matter, it wasn't what was keeping him from saying anything. Her words brought some meaningful memories back.

"It's about an angry warrior, who lived his life in conflict with the rest of his people. A man who couldn't find peace. He struggled for years with his fear and fury. The only satisfaction he ever got, came when he passed it on to others. This made him a pariah amongst his people, but the warrior still longed for the truth buried within himself."

He wanted to say something, badly, to put this to an end. Another side of him wanted to let her finish.

"What caused it? One fateful day, the warrior sparred with a fellow warrior. A woman he allied with. She called on him to support her, because her own tribe were fighting against her and her kin. The woman warrior knew her time was running out, she knew there was only one option left. The angry warrior had swore to himself that he would stay be her side, doing whatever he could to make her burden lighter. That her needs would come before his. It was the peace he had long fought for."

Her head shook, yet her voice and face remained neutral despite the words she was saying. "On that day, he turned his back on her. The woman warrior was lost in battle, but not in spirit. She had entrusted that with him, so she could keep fighting to protect her kin even in death. He left her side, did whatever he could to make her and her kin's burden heavier. His needs came first." Her voice turned cold for the last sentence, "and in that way, the warrior began to know the true meaning of darkness."

Chakotay tried to look composed, he thought he pulled it off. Inside though he was dying. He said the only thing he could in response, "is that really a story you heard?"

He knew exactly what she was going to say next, so he prepared for it as she stepped closer to the forcefield separating them. "For your sake, I hope so." She may as well have punched him in the face, it felt like she did. "Perhaps you have a version of your own."

"I... I wouldn't know where to begin," Chakotay stuttered.

Kathryn's arms folded, her neutral face slowly faded into a one of contempt. "From the beginning. I really can't stand vague prologues based in the future, twenty years in the past, or something in the middle. It's lazy."

"I'm not sure where the beginning even is with us. I..." Chakotay said.

"Allow me," Kathryn said. "You didn't believe me, yet the first thing you did was take your anger out on James and your daughter." The air rushed from his lungs, making his chest heave. He didn't expect her to open with that. She stared him down, making him feel even more uneasy. She didn't fancy waiting for him to reply so she cut in, "in your mind, I wouldn't be dead if it wasn't for them."

"No," Chakotay protested but far too quietly.

"No?" Kathryn pretended to sound surprised. "You never liked James, you resented him, so unfortunately I can understand hitting him. But Lena? All she did was rightly ask why you didn't come to her mother's funeral. The nerve of that, huh? How selfish and inconsiderate of her to need her father at a painful time."

"Kathryn," Chakotay interrupted.

"Losing her daughter to the Q, her mother being murdered. That spoiled little girl deserved more than a slap for daring to..." Kathryn grumbled.

Chakotay couldn't take it anymore, "stop! That's not what happened."

"Well, if nobody tells me, I have to fill the gaps in the story for myself," Kathryn said. "I know you didn't expect me to know any of it, but still. I do."

"I didn't think it was possible, I couldn't accept it," Chakotay said. Even he was tired of hearing the same old excuses he had just spoken and were still in the queue to be, he grunted in disgust. "I should have listened, had faith in you. Then you died and... I couldn't, wouldn't accept that you were right. James was there, bloodied and freaked out, I thought it would be so much simpler to accuse him. I was so stubborn, I even started to believe it. I became lost in the delusion."

Kathryn's eyes drifted away, her lips tightened together, he saw her cheek bones flex.

"When I was linked to the Tolg, the delusion became even more convincing. It all made sense to me. He had to exist so that you would die. He was too weak, so Lena suffered and died as well to make that right. The Soft targeting Earth, for god's sake space time itself, all because of him," Chakotay said. He could feel that old resentment building up again as he spoke. He feared it would make him fall for it all over again. He couldn't risk doing that, not now. "I know. I know what I've become. I deserve whatever you think of me."

Kathryn shook her head slowly. "That doesn't explain Lena, unless you blame her for the same thing." He tried to protest but she was too quick for him, "it doesn't explain what you did to Jessie. All of those efforts you made to go against my wishes, to disrespect everything I stood for. And why, you had to bring *him* into this."

"Damien?" Chakotay said, trembling from the wrath of her rage.

"He recovered his body, he got what he wanted. What did you expect him to do?" Kathryn snapped. She seemed to realise something, she gasped in an over the top fashion. "Oh that's right, without Damien being revived into his old corpse, you wouldn't have had any idea how to do it yourself."

"No," Chakotay muttered.

"No? Because that whole hoping he'd betray you, steal the shuttle and leave you behind plan was so convoluted, it made our Lena's origin story look like a children's book," Kathryn said. Chakotay's sigh frustrated her further, she stared intently into his eyes which he shut as soon as he noticed. "Damien was never going to hold up your end of the bargain, Chakotay. Remember that hatred, that blame you had for James. He has that for me."

"It was simple. He needed his body back, I needed you. The Tolg would never do a straight, one for one exchange. I could never give you up to them," Chakotay said, the pain pouring out of his every word. "He was going to leave us there, it's what he does. He only cares about himself. But he did nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Two years ago:

Screens filled with alien languages, electronic charts and ship schematics lined every wall. Unlike a Borg ship, every surface shone under its piercing lights. Instead of a murky green, they favoured an iced blue and white colour scheme. Creepy in an entirely different way, it felt like a soulless hospital from far in the future.

Chakotay thought it was ironic that the collective who favoured the dead had ships that looked so pristine and bright, while the Borg's was so grimy and dark. Somewhere along the way, they got their ship designs mixed up, he assumed.

"Negative on both accounts," their collective voice replied. "We cannot accept the loss of this drone without the agreed replacement."

Damien seemed almost too gleeful as he pointed at the torpedo casing standing between him and Chakotay, and the quartet of drones ahead of them. "Well she's right here. Don't worry, all that coffee must be way gone by now."

Chakotay didn't even think about it. His hand swung across the back of the other man's head, causing him to scowl viciously back at him for it.

"Ow, it wasn't an insult you fool!"

"Excellent. We will zombify her into our collective, then we will return your body," the collective said.

Chakotay nodded, that was exactly what he expected. To his confusion and worry Damien wasn't particularly happy with the offer. "The agreement was that I'd get my body back first," he said.

An elbow to the ribs would fix it temporarily, "it doesn't matter, either way is fine."

He didn't see it, but Damien stared at him in contempt while his attention was on the casing. Three of the drones approached it, leaving the one that they had come for behind. Only two of them picked the casing up, the other kept walking toward them. Damien was instantly on his guard, he stumbled back a step.

"Wait a minute. I know how to swap bodies without the help of you zombies," he spluttered in a panic. He briefly looked to Chakotay, his eyes were wide. "You..." The drone grabbed his arm roughly.

Chakotay stepped forward, a similar look was on his face. "We had a deal!" he snapped at the room, knowing the collective would hear him.

"We will honour it," the collective responded.

Damien's relief was short lived. The hand holding him tightened, blood rushed to the surface. His skin felt like it was being punctured with thousands of tiny needles, setting his arm ablaze with an intense heat. The rest of his body was overwhelmed by a crippling cold on every heartbeat. On his last breath, the last thing Damien saw was Chakotay's look of indifference at his fate.

Damien's latest host lay lifeless on the white metallic floor, and yet the drone wasn't done with him. It peeled a small part of its own technology from its forearm. Before Chakotay could wonder about what was happening, it forced the tiny device into the host's skull. As soon as it did, a light blinked from it.

"Now you have your payment," Chakotay said. He noticed movement in the corner of his right eye. A slow turn of his head allowed him to see the drone resembling the true Damien standing beside him, staring straight through him. "It's time for the exchange."

"Correct," the collective said.

Chakotay breathed in deeply as if for the last time. Fear began to overwhelm him, his survival instincts tried to kick in. Angrily he attempted to push them aside. *No hesitation, no regret.* "I assume you've noticed. Get it over with," Chakotay said, offering his arm to the familiar drone next to him.

In those few seconds he knew how Damien felt in his final moments. The pain, the crippling heat and cold draining his life away. That was nothing. It was the stupidly bright room he was in fading to black while that was happening. He could barely see the outlines of closer objects when his brain was pierced. It didn't hurt but he was very aware of it. From what he saw of Damien, he knew he shouldn't be. He should be dead. Chakotay then wondered what would truly happen to him now. Would his restless soul linger for eternity, would he be pulled away against his will? Or just fade into the dark?

He had to focus or all would be lost. It was then the wave of voices struck him, drowning his own. So many images forced their way in, billions of them in a single second. Even still there were a few he could single out and see clearly.

Through his own perspective, multiple times over surrounding her from above, Kathryn's body lying in an open stasis unit.

And through only one, the inside of the shuttle, Damien's original face reflected in a console.

Present Day:

Kathryn stared at him pitifully as he once again tried to replay that event in his mind, his ego and sense of self shattered around him. "He ruined everything."

She didn't come here for anything like that, someone had to put a stop to it. "Damien did exactly what you wanted. His host was given to them as payment, he ran away."

"He knew. He knew all along that I was playing him," Chakotay muttered. He rolled his eyes and huffed, "but still, he never did anything. He played along right until the end."

Two years ago:

At the helm of the shuttle Damien sat on his own, quietly seething towards a screen. His eyes scanned it multiple times, trying to make sense of it. Frustrated he couldn't he flung himself back in the chair.

The message on the neighbouring screen, still unfinished waited for him. He lingered on it, looking for anything hidden in it that could mean something else. It was only the final part that screamed to him.

"I know you will consider simply assimilating all of us, and why not? Do so and the information stops flowing. You lose a tantalising opportunity in your greed. With your thirst for knowledge, I'm sure you will find this offer more than satisfactory for the both of us. If you're interested, meet us at the co-ordinates..."

Damien slammed his finger down on the command that would transmit the message. The door behind him opened, allowing Chakotay to enter. He with a look of disgust on his face, and Damien with a one of fury. Each face was replaced by a mask as the former Commander sat down in the chair next to him.

"Not used to doing things on your own?" Damien asked lightly.

Chakotay faked a smirk, "a sarcastic quip about lazy commanders, from the guy who enslaved people to clean the toilets. Good one."

"It is much easier that way," Damien grumbled.

"Ironic isn't it?" Kathryn said, putting an end to the memory. "That Damien, the fool that hates me the most, and you the man who claims to love me the most. And he's the one that helps me."

"No, no, don't!" anger flared in Chakotay's eyes. "Do you have any idea what you asked me to do? What you expected of me? There was no guarantee that the Tolg knew anything."

Kathryn glowered at him with her usual death stare. His anger made him immune to it. "Chakotay..."

"No proof, no explanations, just *oh Chakotay, when I die toss me to the zombie Borg, would you. Oh and darling, what should we do for dinner?*" Chakotay snapped, making her stare flicker hesitantly. "It's just like you. Only you would think of something so ridiculous. No, that's not true. We have a daughter who would stay on a planet about to die, in the middle of power draining cloud, just to save a few extra people."

Kathryn's eyes glazed over at the last sentence, he wasn't done though.

"Then there's your son, who's no better is he? Who cares about everyone else's feelings, people are in danger and the only solution, is my solution. People who love me be damned," Chakotay's rant ended with a pained sigh. He didn't feel better for it, he had no idea how long he had been harbouring these particular feelings. Something about it was strangely liberating.

Kathryn stared solemnly toward him. It didn't help him feel any less guilty. "I'm sorry," she said, horrifying him.

"No, I don't want an apology. All I wanted was for you to understand, heck for me to," Chakotay said.

"Do you?" Kathryn asked gently.

Chakotay shook his head and scowled more toward himself. "No. You owe me nothing. I understand the isolating helplessness that comes with being the parent of a Slayer. You got it twice over. You wanted to help them without adding to their burden. For Lena, I should have trusted, believed in you. The evidence was right there all along. Yet, all I thought of was myself. You died and my peace was shattered.

"You think that trying to turn Jessie so she'd revive you, or hitting James while he grieved for his recently deceased mother were my lowest moments. You'd be mistaken. I don't even deserve your scorn, let alone an apology."

"Don't misunderstand. I'm sorry I asked something so horrid of you," Kathryn said. "I'm not taking the blame for your actions."

Chakotay nodded. "Good," he said honestly, out of relief. "He tried to pay me back for what I did to his wife. He didn't know about you. The first chance I got, I tried to kill him. Twice."

Kathryn's face froze, what little blue was left in her eyes fired to life. "Why?"

"I told you. I had convinced myself it was his fault," Chakotay answered bitterly. "He did it personally, or his failure to kill Frenit led to it. His part in the paradox. Everything. I hated everything he stood for."

"If he's talking about who I think he is, join the club," one of his fellow prisoners whispered to another.

Kathryn made a mental note to slap all three men behind her, she wouldn't know which one spoke after all and that suited her fine. "Warlocks?" Chakotay's eyes shifted, lips curled slightly to confirm it. "Lucky me."

"I know he's your son and you love him deeply, but..." Chakotay said hesitantly. "There's an air of truth to what I said, even if I don't carry that hatred anymore."

"It's not James' fault that things have ended up this way. He didn't ask to be born or chosen," Kathryn reminded him gently. "He didn't demand more strength so he would literally be Chosen. He's just the easiest to blame. It's like blaming the white wash being ruined on the stray red sock. The blame falls on who put it there. It didn't get there on its own."

"You mean Q?" Chakotay questioned.

Kathryn's features darkened, her eyes were strangely haunted. "No, me."

"In your analogy, that's like blaming the washing machine," Chakotay disagreed. He pulled a face, "that sounded so much less offensive in my head."

"If I had known what it really entailed... Q was right, I wouldn't have made such a sacrifice," Kathryn said as her voice strained. Chakotay felt a rush of instant regret coming out from it, something he wasn't used to hearing from her. It was unnerving to say the least. "This would have fallen on someone else's shoulders. It'd be their burden. Q chose us because he had faith in us, or even in me, I'm not sure. Nevertheless, I wonder what would be if I refused."

She made eye contact with him as if preparing for the final act, "I do know we wouldn't be here, having this discussion."

"What? How do you know all this, what are you talking about?" Chakotay stuttered.

Kathryn managed to smile through the pain and hesitance, something that he was sure she had stolen from him sometime during this encounter. "From what you said, I assumed you knew. I suppose without any Tolg technology left, it's only what you work hard to remember that remains."

"Kathryn, I know about the diverging timelines. Kes told of us of a one without Lena, and about the one where she was born. I saw a brief glimpse of a one where James wasn't on Voyager. If there was one where you actually had a choice in this circus, I'd remember it vividly," Chakotay said.

"Hmm," by Kathryn's tone, she sounded disappointed and somehow relieved at the same time. Her face had changed so he couldn't read it and find out which it was. "Doesn't change my point, does it?"

Chakotay wasn't sure what she meant again, his head shake told her that.

"Your blame was pointed in the wrong direction. James and Lena never hear of this, understand?" Kathryn said determinedly. "I've inflicted enough on them and so have you. We need them to be strong, with nothing to hold them back. They need us to be a united front to aid them. All of us are crucial players in this game. I need to know if you'll willingly be one of them."

There was no hesitation, nothing to regret that he could think of. "Of course."

Lena felt like she had been there hours. The silence was painful. Everytime she considered breaking it her mind would go blank, or she'd think of something to say and quickly realise it wasn't good enough. For now she leaned by the door, keeping a watchful eye on her brother as he stood at the window, staring into literal space.

The warning that the Doctor had given her and Jessie still weighed on her mind, which was likely why nothing she wanted to say was any good. James had very likely heard everything she thought of so far, still he didn't respond. Was there any point in saying anything? Apart from when he hallucinated, his side was closed off. She had no idea

what was going through his head, or whether or not the drug the Doctor had given him was numbing his telepathy in any way.

What to talk about hit her suddenly, she doubted he had time to really make sense of it before she said anything. "You remember the story I told you about my timeline James? About how he felt when Zare and her brother were killed on that ocean colony? I never told you the rest of it. I'm sure you have your own version of it, considering..." She hesitated briefly.

"Doesn't matter. It was just a routine mission for supplies. Turned out that a group of vampires were stranded there, waiting for any ship to come along to feed off, steal parts from," Lena said anyway.

James didn't move, however Lena felt a little flicker of recognition from him. There were no words, to Lena it felt like the story was familiar to her as if she experienced it. Nevertheless she didn't let that put her off. "He told me the parts they stole from his shuttle were vital. However he later admitted that he wanted to make up for running away in the incident with Zare. Their deaths kept him up every night, especially the boy's. He was just a kid, who wanted to save his sister.

"That was when my James first met Frenit," Lena said a little hesitantly. She waited to see if there was a response to that, when there was nothing she continued. "I was right, you have your own version. However this'll be where it differs. My James wasn't as strong as you. He did things he regretted to stay alive but it was no use, Frenit won. Somehow, his team got him out of there and took him back to Voyager. While they were occupied the vampires fixed their own ship and left."

Lena breathed in deeply, her shoulders raised and then lowered as she breathed back out. "Zare and Rean weren't the sole reason for that James' guilt. Those vampires ravaged every planet they picked and expanded their own group doing it. In his mind it was his failure to stop Frenit, not retrieving that part, that killed so many people. That was what took him a while to get over. And he did, you know. It wasn't his fault. It took two us, two Chosens to finish Frenit off. That James was a Natural, he couldn't have stopped him. Besides, even though the odds were against him, he still in his words at the time *cleaned up his mess*. I dunno how, he never said.

"Those times where he isolated himself out of guilt, he'd always come off worse, he'd make mistakes and cared less and less everytime he was injured. The more broken down he was, the harder things got and the more things went wrong. Then he would feel bad about that. A vicious cycle. It took him a while to realise it. He wasn't a weapon, he acted that way because he was Human. It's such an obvious realisation to some, but for us, it's still a question. What's better? In his case acting like a weapon; not bothering to heal, refusing to sleep and eat, just focusing on the job, got him into so much trouble and nearly killed him. The times where he remembered he was still a guy with a family, important for more reasons than just being strong, were when he excelled. He'd survive to keep on fighting.

"The point is; even though that James had to fight by himself in my timeline, he wasn't alone. He said that he wouldn't have survived without Jessie, their kids, mum, me. I'm struggling here because I thought you had already reached that realisation, years before my James did. I mean, this is the same argument you used to talk me out of the same thing. So I don't get it James," Lena started to stutter as her confusion sank in.

She tried to calm herself down before she started to shake. "Everyone's blaming the chip. This has been going on long before then though. It's not just me, Jessie thinks so too." While she was speaking, his head turned very slightly to the right toward her. She

continued without realising it, "so whatever is causing this, it must be something that happened here and not in my timeline. Then I'm right back to where I started, thinking that a few kills that you can't be blamed for managed to break you. And I refuse to believe that. You're so much better than that. It took a lot more to almost break the other James and yet, it didn't, not to this magnitude so..."

"Go," she heard him mutter, startling her enough to cut her off completely and lose her train of thought. The only word he spoke then registered with her, it stung.

"What?" she whispered.

His head lowered ever so slightly, that was when she realised the movement he made while she was talking. "Go," he repeated. "You're just going to get hurt."

Lena rushed forward, anger taking over. "Going? You don't think you've hurt me enough already?" she blurted out without thinking, immediately regretting it.

James closed his eyes and turned his head away. In that moment Lena felt something from him, and she wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. She tried to explain it to herself, but the only word that came to mind was acceptance. Thinking the word made her realise that maybe she was proving whatever point he was trying to make. At least that settled whether it was good or not.

"James, acting like this hurts the people who love you. If you're bothered about that, then the answer here is simple," she said.

That did something. He shook his head, as he did she felt so much bitterness and self hatred swarm out of him she had to try and close off her own telepathy to avoid it taking over. It made her skin crawl, she stepped back instinctively.

"You're better off without me," he said. "Everyone is."

She could still feel what he was feeling, lingering behind. His words added onto that made her throat swell. "That's not true."

"Safer," he mumbled.

"Safer?" Lena whispered. "Where's this coming from?"

It took a while for him to answer. "Everyone dies..." Lena froze before he could finish. "Around me. No argument. It's fact."

"No, you're wrong," Lena said quickly as if that would instantly change his mind, or before he could say anything further. Her mind raced to think of a more useful response, something that would convince him. Then a horrible realisation hit her. He may have a point. Their mother, his big sister, step mother, step father, Jessie, even herself. He'd lost two babies, one stillborn thanks to the same jealous Q that created Kiara, and Amy's twin sister gone for no reason that the doctors could find. His living children were lucky to be here as well, even their latest one had a brush with death when she was barely a few hours old. His father probably counted in his mind and twice, so there was another.

Lena was trembling viciously once she finished running through them all. She couldn't stop it. James stood there, staring at the stars. Now that she knew what was on his mind she wished she was still ignorant. The whole situation chilled her to the bone, no, to her very soul. For a brief moment, she wished that Ylara was in her place again. The selfish

thought made her a little mad at herself, it was enough to calm her even a little. Now she knew, she had something to work with. It was how that was the tough part.

"That's not your fault," Lena said. She expected a rebuttal so quickly continued, "I know, I know. Your step mother was murdered to influence you. Mum was murdered by Frenit to get to us. That doesn't make it your fault though. You didn't do it personally. The only one that I can think of that was you directly, was your father and then you weren't even yourself. Considering what he did to you, it's a testament to who you are that you had to be evil to even touch him. I mean come on. Dad slapped me and I let him have it. I dunno, I don't get it. If I were you, as soon as he showed up on Voyager I would have given him a taste of his own medicine. But..."

"I don't blame him," James said quietly.

Lena wasn't sure what to make of that. "Blame *him*? I thought..." Then she understood what he meant, it made her angry again. "He was a mons... no, a coward. Only a weak, pathetic little idiot would smack around a little kid, his own son. You did nothing to deserve that, no kid does."

The silence took over. Lena waited for a minute for him to say anything, or do something for that matter. Desperate for anything, she opened her mind to see if she could hear anything from him. Immediately she felt like she was all alone in a dark room. Pressure slowly crushed her chest, as a horrible feeling she couldn't name flooded around her. Panicked she closed her mind again, just in time to hear the words, *I did*, echo in her subconscious.

She looked at James, still frozen in the same spot. His head turned only slightly toward her. The jaw clenched, just a little, but since he had gotten so thin it was so clear for her to see. "I'm sorry," he said and it was the only thing he said with any real feeling behind it. He meant it, the apology was riddled with guilt. It was probably the only emotion he was capable of so that didn't surprise her.

"Don't be. You didn't cause all of this pain, you're the one living it. You're not alone," Lena said. "Jessie, mum, me, we're all behind you, no matter what. We won't abandon you this easily, no matter what you do."

Kathryn hurried down the corridor, eager to get to her destination as quickly as possible, and to avoid more people seeing her. In her haste she neglected to notice someone step out of a nearby turbolift, and then follow her. She was almost by the door, finger raised to press the door chime, when the follower decided to get her attention.

"Grandma?" The young girl's voice stopped her completely in her tracks. The girl though used that as an opportunity to catch up and approach her. Her face brightened the closer she got, seemingly not put off by her appearance. "So the rumours were true for once. I can't believe it."

"Kiara?" Kathryn whispered. The shock lifted, quickly replaced by joy at hearing her. She turned to face her with a smile spreading. "You're back?"

"Yeah, you too," Kiara said with a relieved look on her own face.

Kathryn resisted the urge to reach for a hug, thinking that with the way she looked she would scare her. So far the girl didn't seem that put off, but she did have her hood up

covering most of the damage. "I'm so glad, I bet Lena was too. How was the Q training?"

Kiara pulled a hesitant face, "oh, this could take a while. Maybe later."

"How did you know it was definitely me?" Kathryn asked.

"Please," Kiara scoffed, her finger raised to point at her. "Only you would do up your hair while wearing a robe like that."

"Hair?" Kathryn mumbled, as her hand flew up to check. Then she noticed that her hood wasn't up like she thought. "Oh. Well, that doesn't matter. You're another person I didn't expect to see here, another nice surprise."

Kiara smiled, then she spotted where they were standing and her face fell. "It can wait. You're going to see James right? I heard he was back."

Kathryn sighed a little in annoyance, "news still travels fast, I see." Kiara nodded a few times. "I'll be honest. Considering what I knew and where Voyager was, I only expected him and Jessie being onboard. I'm not complaining, I just, I'm not sure what to do. I need to help him but..."

"It's okay. I already said it can wait," Kiara said.

"No it's not okay. I need to make time for you. You, Lena and I..." Kathryn said.

"Yasmin," Kiara added on.

Kathryn stared at her blankly, "Yasmin's here too? I understand James, technically Lena, and you could go where you want. But why Yasmin, she's a civilian. She should be at home."

"I dunno, I wasn't here when they picked the crew," Kiara answered.

"Next you'll be telling me Phoebe's here, or my mum," Kathryn said, only partly serious. Kiara shook her head and shrugged, all with a smirk on her face. "Wow, they've really gone out of their way, haven't they?"

Kiara was confused, "who have?"

Kathryn gave her a warm smile, "just muttering. Look, give me an hour to check on him. Lena and I will join you and Yasmin in the Mess Hall then, okay?"

"But..." Kiara said uncomfortably. Kathryn's expression told her she wasn't going to budge on that. Instead of standing down and agreeing, it just made her inspired to speak her mind. "We can't do that. It feels like we're excluding James, abandoning him, just because he's sick. It's not fair."

Kathryn's smile wavered, though Kiara's protests made her feel prideful of her granddaughter. Ignoring her earlier concerns and fears, Kathryn reached forward to pull her into a hug. She was more than relieved when she hugged back tightly.

"We're not excluding him from anything," Kathryn whispered into her hair. "When he's better we'll have our family get together. You, Lena, Yasmin, James, Jessie and their

children. What I'm suggesting is something to tide us over in the mean time. He meanwhile won't be alone, he'll have Jessie with him."

"Phoebe and your mum?" Kiara asked in a voice that sounded like she was teasing her.

Kathryn chuckled, "we'll just have to have another one when we get out of this game."

"What about Chakotay?" Kiara asked, her lighter mood instantly gone.

Kathryn pulled away slightly so she could look her in the eye. "For today, lets just invite the girls. Okay?" she said it as jokingly as possible.

"Right," Kiara didn't fall for it. "I don't feel right about you leaving James in exactly one hour, when the time runs out. It'll seem to him like he's a chore, part of the routine. Oh it's three pm, time for the next appointment."

Kathryn grimaced, she was right on the surface. However Kathryn wasn't sure if he'd even notice such a thing. Not that it made the insult any better. It lowered her mood considerably. "Still meet me there, sweetheart. If I need to stay with him past that time, I'll leave you a message. All right?"

Kiara still wasn't happy with the idea, her head shook, "but..."

This time Kathryn definitely wasn't going to budge. "I want to hear everything. The training, your life here. I so badly wanted to make up for lost time with Yasmin, as even though I tried when we were staying at my mother's house, it wasn't enough. I want to hear about Lena, and how she's managing with remembering her previous life."

"That... that's going to be more bad stories than good," Kiara said.

Kathryn smiled again, "I don't care. We can't ignore the bad, if we do, we only make it easier for the bad stuff to hurt us later."

Kiara couldn't help but giggle at her and she didn't know why. "Use that on James and he'll be joining us later."

"I may have to write it down, improvising isn't really my thing," Kathryn had to laugh too.

"Yeah right," Kiara said.

Kathryn raised her right hand to brush some of her granddaughter's hair back behind her ear. She smiled proudly at her, "my little girl. You've grown so much."

"Mum... stop, you'll make me get all teary," Kiara just laughed. Her head shook. "I mean grandma."

"I'll tell you what. You call me whatever makes you comfortable. As long as it isn't rude of course," Kathryn said. "I don't mind mum as long as it doesn't bother your actual mother. I really don't. You'll always feel like one of my daughters, okay?"

"I doubt it would bother her. I think she'll always prefer to be called Lena," Kiara said.

Kathryn gave her a brief wink, then an amused smile. "Maybe you should consider mummy, you're still only nine after all."

Lena shook briefly, causing Jessie to stare at her with a quizzical frown. "That bad, huh?"

"Something horrible's just happened," Lena mumbled.

"Sounds about right," Jessie said wistfully.

Lena fidgeted slightly as she leaned against the back of a chair. "I wanted to return the favour, but I really just made things worse."

Jessie looked at her sadly. "At least he's talking to you. You must be doing something right."

"Believe me, I don't think you want him talking to you," Lena said honestly, feeling the need to shudder again. "All I did was speechify and lose my temper."

"You're being too hard on yourself. I've known him for so many years and I can't figure out what he's thinking," Jessie said.

"Well we both know it's not as simple as guilt," Lena said, prompting a nod from Jessie. "Or the chip. If the culprit's intention was to destroy him, it worked."

Jessie averted her eyes, Lena wondered why. "That part's no big mystery, the demon in Nathan wanted to keep up its charade. James acting out was a way to point blame away, distract us."

"That doesn't explain the later damage to it," Lena said.

"It had unfinished business. When the Doc first said it was physically damaged, I knew..." Jessie said uncomfortably. "The demon wanted him to suffer."

Lena's composure started to fail her, "but how, why? How did he do it? James was already crumbling from everything that's happened to him. Debbie was already on his mind. It's still guilt, I felt it. It's just not the only thing." Her voice was getting higher and more strained, it started to tremble with her as her face turned whiter. "How did Nathan, no why did the demon use the chip to prey on that? It was already working. What was the point in making it more powerful? So he gets the memory visions more often?"

Jessie felt the same wave of panic that Lena did once she finished rambling. The younger girl finished with, "does James know Nathan did it, and that's how?"

"Why else would he activate a chip that not only forces him to relive painful and relevant to the situation memories, but also boosts his telepathy," Jessie said.

The two stared at one another, each with horror across every inch of their faces. Jessie stubbornly attempted to shake it out of her system. Lena though couldn't, she hugged her own arms tightly and bit her lip.

"No, it doesn't make sense. Yes finding out that Nathan was involved would hurt him. But it also absolves any guilt he had over his sister's death," Jessie quickly said to calm her down. It wasn't working but she had more to say, "it doesn't push him away from his life to do what he did. It doesn't add up."

"What if he saw it?" Lena trembled, she looked like she would throw up at any second. "Maybe that was the point in boosting the chip."

Jessie rushed forward to grab a hold of the other girl's arms, gently shaking them. "Lena listen to me. We don't know for certain. If we do, it explains nothing. James doesn't give up his beliefs, something he relied on, believed with all his soul because he saw his sister's murder. Unfortunately he's seen murder and horrible violence against family many times."

"Then what is it Jessie?" Lena snapped at her. Still Jessie kept a firm hold on her. Tears threatened to fall. "He thinks he's the reason why people he loves suffer and die. He blames himself for all the pain that he's suffering because of it. He's not responsible, he's a victim in this too, it's all tragic coincidences. Even through all that, hell even when he was evil he still didn't disappear into that faceless mask in there. I tried to reach him back there, but there was no person in there, just hatred. How..." It was all too much for her, she broke out into full on tears.

Jessie struggled to think of something else to say that would stop it, instead she just felt helpless. "He's as good as dead like this, why?" Lena said through the tears.

"He's... he'll want us to give up on him. Don't," Jessie stuttered. "If he thinks he's to blame for everything, we show him he's wrong, prove that what he's doing isn't only hurting him." While she spoke the door to the quarters opened, neither girl noticed. "He's done this before, I can..."

"What, exactly this?" Lena wasn't convinced.

The answer to that wasn't really that much better. Jessie chose to avoid it, "I've helped him through a breakdown like this before. If it's what you say, leave it to me. Don't worry." Her words broke Lena down completely, leaving her inconsolable and Jessie feeling terrible for it. She wasn't sure if it was how she said it, making her sound unsure of herself and desperate, or if Lena felt like she had been told she was powerless to help her brother. Unfortunately she felt it was the latter.

"Mum?" Kiara stuttered, startling Jessie as she hadn't noticed the new arrivals. When Lena didn't respond to her she hurried over to wrap her arms around her, her head collapsed onto her shoulder. Jessie's own arms fell to her sides. "Don't do this, it's okay. You're not alone, you never will be."

Kathryn carefully walked over to the pair, sharing a pained look with Jessie as she passed. Noticing her expression, Kathryn shook her head. "Don't you start with that," she gently scolded. Jessie swallowed the lump she didn't know was there before and turned her head away. "Sometimes there's nothing you can do. Things happen, you can only do your best. Buck up, all right?"

Jessie briefly smiled out of her control, "buck up?"

Kathryn meanwhile slipped an arm around her daughter's shoulders. It appeared that it wasn't necessary as Kiara seemed to be enough to settle her down.

"She needs a break, she needs her family," Jessie said.

"Jessie, we're all family here," Kathryn said.

"I know but..." Jessie blurted out, even though it was a lie. It was also a surprise to hear something like that from her. Then she thought that Kathryn obviously just included James in that comment. Putting that aside, Jessie forced herself to explain better. "If he sees her like this, he'll blame himself, add it to his list."

Kathryn appeared to consider it, she frowned and looked a little torn about it. While she did a realisation hit Jessie hard, it momentarily made her a little scared and unsure if she could do anything. "That's why he's hiding. If we knew what was bothering him, it'd hurt us and that's the last thing he wants."

"Typical. A stupid martyr to the end," Kiara said not seriously, or at least she made it sound that way. She felt her mother shake a little, then heard her laugh briefly and quietly.

"I hope you're not insisting we throw in the towel," Kathryn said.

Jessie shook her head, "of course not. Maybe hit him with a wet one, it may wake him up."

Kathryn responded with an amused head shake. "You're not doing this alone. We've all gone in one at a time so far and..."

"No. Lena says he's playing the blame game again. It's the only game he's never beaten me in," Jessie said.

Lena straightened a little, still with Kiara's arms around her. "You're going to *no I'm worse cos of evil witch antics* him to submission?"

Jessie felt her face flush with embarrassment. "No no, that's not what I meant. Although I could give him a run for his money there too."

"She means she's good at rebutting his self blame," Kiara said helpfully. Once she said it though she doubted it. "Right?"

"Right," Jessie said. "One of the reasons James and I work; I'll defend him to the very end, even if I have to fight him to do it."

Kathryn looked at her warmly. It meant so much more to her considering that in her state it must have been harder to pull off. "Oh we all know that."

Jessie smiled at her back. "Take a break, catch up, eat something. Leave him to me. You three have suffered enough over the last two years, you deserve a time out together. It may help him later if you do."

"Normally I'd agree but I've missed a lot since I last saw him," Kathryn protested. Jessie shook her head with a stern look on her face. Kathryn recognised that glint in her eye, she wasn't sure if she was pleased to see it or not. "Suddenly I'm remembering the real reason why I didn't like you two together. He's stubborn and fiery, he got that from me. You're almost as bad. You may as well argue into a mirror."

Jessie seemed almost offended, "almost? Give me more credit than that."

"I suppose I can do that. You annoyed me so much back then," Kathryn laughed.

"Good," Jessie smirked at her. "Now go. Invite Yasmin too, have fun. Bye."

Lena stared at her mother, surprised that she'd listen to her. "I'll be fine, I just needed five minutes." Jessie gestured to the door with an odd smile that was partly friendly and half command like. "What about the baby, the kids?"

"Mum and I had time to drop off some packed lunches at school, and come back while you were in there. How I know that? I heard the whole timetable for both weddings and how she picked her stupid dress," Jessie replied, slightly exasperated by the end of it.

Kathryn frowned while Kiara and Lena just laughed at her, Lena a bit more meekly. "I'm sorry," she said in good humour.

"Why? You're not my self absorbed mum. Now go, don't come back until you're less blamey," Jessie ordered.

Lena responded with a sincere smile, then she made her way outside with Kiara, leaving Kathryn behind.

"The Doctor told me what happened the last time you were alone with him," she said, apparently waiting for Lena to be gone to bring it up. "He said that the drug isn't strong enough to repress the hallucinations completely, just make them less often."

Jessie raised her palm to cut her off, "it's fine, I know. I'll be fine."

Kathryn stared at her, a little fear was there to Jessie's surprise. "If your plan is to let him attack you again, thinking it will snap him out of it, then I'll be the one kicking you out of here."

"It's not," Jessie said.

Kathryn wasn't assured at all with her answer. "He doesn't need more things to feel guilty about. He loves you deeply, and hurting you is the second worst thing to him."

"It won't come to that. I know what to expect," Jessie said.

"Do you?" Kathryn asked. "What if you're wrong? You forget how strong he and Lena are. It's a struggle to hold back with even menial things."

Jessie tried to repress the anger slowly building from what she was saying. "I know that. I grew up with him for god's sake."

"One hit could kill you. Whether or not you're revived from it won't matter. It'll destroy him," Kathryn said forcefully.

"It won't happen," Jessie said just as much.

"How can you be so sure? This isn't a predictable situation," Kathryn stubbornly asked.

"I know he won't do it again, because he's already seen what happens. If Lena's right, he'll fight to avoid that happening again. After everything that's happened, I still have faith in him," Jessie answered.

Kathryn sighed, her shoulders fell to signify her defeat. "I hope you're right."

"I am right," Jessie said with confidence. "Sometimes we need to suffer a little to get somewhere. It hurt yes, but I believe it was a necessary step forward."

"Without hardship there's no growth," Kathryn mumbled, relaxing slightly. "Fine. But you'll call me if..."

"I won't need to. Go," Jessie smiled.

As she left, still showing signs of reluctance, Jessie noticed movement coming from the mobile crib nearby. She hurried over to check, relieved to find her baby just kicking a little in her sleep. Apart from that, she looked content. Her hand reached into it to pull up the tiny blanket that had been kicked half way off. Just as she did she heard a voice coming from the bedroom. It was subtle, low she almost didn't hear it.

Then she realised that she hadn't thought kicking Kathryn and her girls out through. The idea of luring her mother back filled her with dread, and was a little embarrassing as well. Still, she couldn't be in two places at once, she certainly couldn't watch her baby and help James out at the same time.

The voice in the next room wasn't shouting, it didn't really sound that urgent either. It gave her a little time to think of what to do. She settled on using an open commline, one way only, so she could hear if she was needed. Jessie set it up, only just tapping her commbadge to activate it when something dropped in the next room, startling her.

Jessie rushed over to the bedroom. Before the door opened something inside her made her feel a little fearful for a fraction of a second. Her disgust for that feeling swiped it aside as she continued, allowing the door to open, but remained there so it wouldn't close behind her.

She wasn't sure what to expect, but she really didn't expect to see no sign of James at all. The bedroom looked fine, undisturbed. Jessie started to panic. The first scenario that popped into her head was him hacking into transporter controls and running away again. Before she could think of and worry over a second one, she spotted the top of his head just on the other side of the bed. Just barely, he would have had to be sitting on the floor, crouched down. Then she heard him whispering to himself, which she couldn't make out.

Even with the open comm system Jessie didn't want to leave her daughter on her own. At the same time she feared he'd freak out like he did before, and the noise of it would frighten her. Not that a closed door would mute it out completely, but it would help slightly.

"Sorry," she heard finally from him. "I'm sorry." He said it over and over. "Please, I didn't mean to." He sounded frightened to her, helpless too. The urge to go over was too strong. If she understood the Doctor's warning well enough, she didn't have to, he'd hear her. It was possible he already had.

"James." As she hoped he looked up sharply. "It's not real, it's..."

"No," she heard him say, his voice shook. "No, no, no." He sounded more afraid than before.

"You're home, you're safe here. Try to remember that," Jessie said softly.

He jumped to his feet, then she could see for herself how panicked he was. Once again she felt a pull to go over and comfort him from whatever he was seeing. It didn't matter, something was pushing him toward her anyway. Even though his body language, his voice screamed fear and uncertainty, his face was still the blank slated mask. Jessie stalled upon seeing it, instantly on her guard.

"No, no..." he was still saying, only louder than earlier. This time he was looking right at her, she was sure of it. "You should go. Leave me alone."

Jessie felt her lips and her lower jaw quiver as she tried to think of a response. "James, calm down. Whoever you're seeing isn't really here. It's just me, we're alone."

"Jessie," he said not in surprise, but fearfully.

Jessie wasn't sure what to make of it. Had he only just noticed her? "You want me to leave?" she asked to make sure. He kept his distance, his head turned away. Jessie knew exactly why, still the words didn't make sense.

"I shouldn't be here. Anywhere but here," he said. Jessie noticed his attention was directed at one of the computer panels. She felt a wave of panic at what that could mean. Instinctively she stepped forward once, instantly making him back off a couple. "No, don't come near me."

Jessie's throat started to throb, "you won't hurt me again."

"Yes I will," he stuttered in response. The next words chilled her to the core, "I'll kill you."

Jessie hated that they had made her tremble a little. "You... you don't have it in you."

"When I see... I..." he said, stalling as if forming words were difficult for him. "I don't see you."

"Yes I know," Jessie said. "That's why I know you didn't attack me. It was someone else."

"I'll do it again."

"No," Jessie protested a little too quickly. It was the only time there was any kind of movement in his face, it was barely a twitch but it meant something. "I'm not abandoning you." He looked calmer after hearing that. Jessie knew better than to let her guard down though, it was only one tiny step. "I don't care if you accidentally kill me. I'm staying put."

"It's... not worth it," he said plainly.

Jessie bit her lip briefly and shook her head. "If you think that I'd give up on you now, you don't know me as well as you think. If you also think that you'll let something like that Sickbay incident happen again, the James I know would avoid it at all..."

"He's gone," James said in the same blank tone. "There's nothing to save."

Only then Jessie noticed he rarely blinked at all, his eyes seemed much wider than normal despite the bags under them. The blue that always brightened them regardless of his mood, were lifelessly grey. Coupled with his words, someone else would have believed him.

"You've said barely anything, all the while hiding in your head. But when there's a risk you may hurt me, you're suddenly talking, even emotive sometimes," Jessie said. "James is still there, or you'd still be staring out that window. You wouldn't be reacting to these visions of yours. Hell, you wouldn't have even left the ship at all."

"I can't... stay here," his face grimaced for a moment. Then he turned back to face her. "Move aside."

"No," Jessie muttered stubbornly.

"You'll die. You'll all die." Jessie felt that cold chill again as he spoke. "I fight, I kill. Nothing more."

"James, you're more to me," Jessie said. "If you want me to get out of the way, you've got two choices..."

"There's nothing... to talk about," James said, clearly responding to what she was thinking, not saying aloud. Jessie shook it off as her just being obvious. He backed off slightly, then began to walk back to where the encounter started. Jessie had no idea why, her thoughts were only about the possible mind reading and what to say next. "Brig, Thirteen. Not here."

Jessie stepped forward, unintentionally setting the doors to close behind her. "You belong here. Not in a prison, not in a demon trap."

"I'm sorry," he said as sincerely as he could manage in this state. His head began to turn back to the window. "I brought you nothing but pain."

"What? No you..." Jessie protested, but not quickly enough.

"I was selfish, a coward. I wasted your life," he muttered, watching the planet the ship was orbiting come into view. "Sorry doesn't fix it."

Everything he said brought it all back like a *déjà vu* injected punch in the face. She almost wished he had literally done so, it would have hurt a lot less.

"What does it matter? I'm a curse to everyone I know," James said, his voice seething with hatred toward himself. "If it were not for me, you wouldn't have been bullied so much. You wouldn't have been expelled, you wouldn't be here."

"I don't care about that," Jessie stuttered all those fifteen years ago.

"You'd be better off without me. Everyone would," James mumbled so quietly she almost didn't hear it.

Only three hours later she found him, lying in a pool of his own blood at the bottom of the stairs. Jessie remembered screaming so much in anguish, that her throat felt like

nails had been dragged through it. She nearly fell down the same stairs in her hurry to get to him.

Jessie stared toward James, struggling to keep it together with that memory fresh in her mind. He must have seen it as well, with his enhanced telepathy. He must have been aware of how much he was hurting her, but still he remained completely still, staring away from her. His eyes shut, she noticed a subtle tremble.

"See, I can't stop," he said.

"You can," Jessie managed to say through her throbbing throat. She felt a tear drop onto her cheek, she hadn't noticed she was even crying. "Just fight. You're better, stronger than this. We can get through it, together, like we always have."

James' head shook slowly. "No we. It was a mistake."

"What do you mean?" Jessie stuttered, although she had a good idea. "All these years, you don't regret them do you?"

"Yes," was the answer she didn't want to hear.

The Mess Hall:

Laughter rang out from the Janeway table as Yasmin told her story, she smirked all the way through it. "The next day I found her hanging from the end of the ladder with a jar in one hand."

"You didn't?" Kiara giggled.

Yasmin grinned at her, "she may as well have handed it to me. She was never going to get back on the ladder with one hand, I helped her."

Kathryn covered her face with her hand, "oh Phoebe. Why couldn't she just put it under her pillow like when we were kids?"

"That sounds uncomfortable," Lena muttered.

"And way too obvious," Yasmin smiled at her.

Kathryn nodded knowingly, "oh, that's why." She turned to Lena, "your turn."

Lena's laughter faded awkwardly, "um, I thought about cutting my hair, maybe a new colour."

"Red's nice," Kiara added helpfully.

Kathryn felt a little bad for what she said, she reached over to gently grip Lena's hand. "Sorry, didn't mean to put you on the spot like that."

"No it's fine. I have stories, they're just mood killers in comparison," Lena said.

"That's not true. What about Annika?" Kiara suggested.

"Huh?" Lena was momentarily confused. "Do you mean the note she left crumpled in my door?"

It was Kiara's turn, she stared at her curiously. "No. That's got to be a far better story."

"Well it's short. The picture she drew for me took up most of the page," Lena said. Yasmin and Kathryn tried their best not to laugh. "And she crossed out a lot of what she said."

"So a letter saying she's the better ex Borg, and a drawing to illustrate her reasons why?" Kathryn had to guess.

Lena pulled a disgusted face, "more or less, yeah."

A few tables away Rachel and her fiance Antony had just finished their meals, only their drinks remained. She glanced over towards the Janeway table every few seconds, making Antony frown at her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Is that her?" Rachel asked while she was facing him.

Antony tried to take a peek at the same table discreetly. "Looks like." He looked worried as Rachel immediately climbed out of her chair. "Rach?"

"Leave it to me," she said.

"She's clearly occupied. Maybe later," Antony said.

Rachel disagreed, "it will only take a few minutes. Be right back." She rushed away before he could argue any further.

"I dunno," Lena said uncomfortably.

Yasmin wasn't put off though. "Why? You could retake the Enterprise, show Harry Pandy how its done."

Lena shifted in her seat, dismayed by the thought. She got to her feet, "that letter will be much funnier in person. I'll go get it." There was no time to say anything to stop her, she hurried off as soon as she was done talking.

"Yasmin, she clearly doesn't want the pressure of command anymore. Commanding the Enterprise took its toll on her," Kathryn said.

"But..." Yasmin protested.

Rachel arrived at the table. "Excuse me," she said, cutting Yasmin off.

Kathryn looked up at her first. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Rachel. You're Captain Janeway correct?" Rachel said.

"Kathryn Janeway, yes," Kathryn said with a polite smile.

"Well my fiance and I were due to be married a week ago. But well, you know, we missed it," Rachel said.

Kathryn blinked while her eyes looked towards her daughter and granddaughter, all the while her friendly smile remained fixed on her face. They looked just as confused as her. "I'm sorry to hear that. We've all had a bad time here, I guess."

"I heard a Captain can perform the ceremony, so now that you're back..." Rachel said, her tone hinting.

"Oh," Kathryn sighed, now that she got it. "I see. You're asking me cos Tom can't."

"Yes, two days," Rachel smiled.

"Wow, short notice," Kathryn muttered to herself. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

Rachel's smile disappeared so quickly Kathryn thought she had imagined it. "What, why not?"

"Well, as you can see I'm here with my family, catching up on two lost years. Perhaps later when things have settled down," Kathryn replied.

Rachel glanced briefly towards Yasmin and Kiara, then at Kathryn again. "In two days, surely..."

"Surely what?" Kathryn's friendly facade almost broke.

"A wedding ceremony takes what; five, ten minutes. Hardly a problem, so..." Rachel said.

"Excuse me, but I said no," Kathryn said as nicely as she could, despite her wavering patience. She turned back to her family. "She just needs to get her confidence back. Maybe we should have a little music event later, encourage her to take part."

"Music event?" Rachel stammered with disbelief.

The table ignored her. "We all know she belongs in a Captain's chair, not on a stage dancing around," Kiara said.

"Yeah, holding a sword on her lap, ready for action," Yasmin giggled.

Kathryn groaned into her hand, "you're both jumping the gun."

"I'm not asking for much. Only ten minutes," Rachel butted in. "Surely that's more important than some concert."

Kathryn scowled up at her, "no. You can get married any time. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not in the land of the living here..."

"But," Rachel protested.

"I can't stay this way forever and it's a huge risk to cure it. Every minute I have is precious," Kathryn said.

Lena then returned to the table, but was put off by what was happening, so she stayed back a little with a curious glint in her eyes. Rachel meanwhile grunted as her temper slipped away from her. "It's ten minutes, not an hour or a day."

"Ten minutes I could be spending with my two daughters, my grandchildren. Ten minutes may be crucial in saving my son," Kathryn argued passionately.

"What's going on?" Lena whispered to the younger girls.

Rachel's eyes flickered and widened when she spotted her. Her anger toward Kathryn grew once she looked back. "Of course, I should've expected this kind of attitude from you."

The death stare switch was flipped on by that comment. Yasmin and Kiara knew to shift their chairs a little backwards, although Yasmin had a small smile on her face as she did. "I beg your pardon?" Kathryn said dangerously.

"Selfishness must run in the family," Rachel muttered, clearly oblivious to the trouble she was in or not caring about it. "No care about anyone but yourself and your ridiculous family."

"Hey," Yasmin moaned.

Kathryn leapt out of her seat so suddenly it made Kiara jump, even though she knew something would happen. Rachel's face seemed oddly proud. "Who the hell do you think you are calling me selfish? Or ridiculous? I'm not the one whining about some stupid wedding ceremony I can have later. My family's falling apart, that's so much more important."

"With you, I'm not surprised," Rachel retorted.

"That's it," Kathryn growled. Lena quickly put her hand on her arm to stop her, just in case. "Get out of my sight or..."

"Or what, violence?" Rachel snapped.

Kathryn seethed, "tempting, but I've already said you weren't worth wasting ten minutes on and I've already wasted nine."

"Mum stop," Lena stuttered.

"Typical. Now I see where your dead beat runaway son gets it from," Rachel said.

"Don't you dare bring him into this!" Kathryn snapped at her.

Rachel shrugged her shoulders casually, "why not? After what he did to my daughters, you owe me."

Kathryn stared at her strangely, "your daughters, what?" She looked back at Lena who was busy wincing, she noticed and lightly nodded. Kathryn swung her head back, "you're Jessie's...?"

"Yes, I'm Danielle and Jessica's mother," Rachel said with pride.

Kathryn rolled her eyes, "oh dear lord, somebody had a lucky escape."

"Meaning what?" Rachel asked coldly.

"So let me get this straight. You abandoned your daughter, I abandoned my son. I lost twenty years or so with him, you thirty with her. I lost another two for my other children because of the pesky being dead problem. Here I am catching up with my daughters and granddaughter. You're here to make sure you snare your fiancée before he sees your true colours, and you're making a stink because...?" Kathryn said as neutrally as she could manage. She pretended to work something out in her head, while pulling some overexaggerated faces. "Hmm, I'm not sure. There's no differences between us that I can see."

Yasmin snickered quietly, Kiara tried her best not to do the same. Lena continued to cringe at the situation.

Rachel of course was furious. "We are not alike!"

Kathryn clicked her fingers as if she had helped her figure something out, "oh that's right, it was so obvious. I wanted to be with my son, help him through his trauma. Only your daughter sent all of us away as my daughter was upset, to give us some rare time together, to regroup, all the while she's left to deal with a tough situation on her own. The selfish mare."

"How dare you insult my daughter!" Rachel shouted at her. Doing so got her fiancée's attention, he chose to intervene so he climbed up out of his seat.

Kathryn's silly faces and gestures were gone, in their place a stone faced glare. "No, you're the one doing that all by yourself. It just shows you doesn't it, the difference between the two of you. She suffers and fights on her own selflessly to help others, while you fight for your wedding night to come sooner. How fortunate for us all that Jessie was raised without a smidgen of influence from you."

"Lucky for you, and your delinquent murderous son," Rachel muttered.

Kathryn's eyebrow twitched. "Yes, lucky for the both of us. Lucky for her that we consider her a member of the family, when she's got fools like you in the background." Lena smiled at the final sentence just as Antony arrived at the table. "I won't stand here silently while you insult any of us. Especially not over a wedding. Take your spoiled tantrum somewhere else and get a grip."

Rachel was momentarily shocked and silenced by her speech, she didn't notice Antony gently put a hand over her shoulder. "Rach, remember? Count to ten next time you're mad," he whispered.

Kathryn shook her head in disgust as she sat down, choosing to take the high road and ignore her from now on. Lena though stared at her, concerned at what just happened. The older woman stared at her back with a tiny hint of malice in her eyes. Finally she walked away, leaving the Janeway family alone.

"I'm sure Jess will be thrilled that you think of her as a Janeway," Kiara said with a smile.

"Nobody tell her," Kathryn said half jokingly.

The feeling in her legs had gradually drained so much so that Jessie had shakily sat down on the nearest object regardless of its height or comfort. She wasn't entirely sure

what it was other than it was so low her weakened legs had to curl slightly on the floor. It forced her to occasionally strain her neck up to see if James was still there at the other side of the room. Everytime he seemed further away, only in her mind's eye as he remained fixed to the spot with the same exact expression.

"Inducing death so you could save me from a murderous ghost?" she said as soon as it entered her thoughts.

"Couldn't live without you. Nothing selfless about that," James replied a little too quickly.

Jessie scoffed. "Oh? Did you miss the death part?"

"I wouldn't, I didn't," he said plainly, then hesitated for a moment. "Pathetic attempt to impress you."

"Are you serious? Are you listening to yourself?" Jessie stuttered in disbelief. "You're not like that."

"Not now," James said quietly.

Jessie sighed, hoping for the twentieth time so far that she was only dreaming this. It didn't feel real at all. "Sacrificing yourself to the anomaly. There was no doubt at the time it would vaporise anyone going near it."

"Dead anyway if I didn't," James answered that one just as quickly as the last.

"Good god," Jessie muttered to herself to keep from losing her temper. She knew to save that one till later, thinking it would be difficult for him to argue against. Of course then she realised he heard her thinking about it near the beginning, and knew how to respond in advance. Maybe he always thought that way. She shook that away, determined not to go down that path. "Fine, so why do anything at all?"

"Why not?" James said quietly.

Jessie felt her back starting to give her complaints, she shifted slightly, forcing her to move her legs so they were slouching the other way. She straightened her back, determined not to slouch again as it was far more painful that way. It was something she had to concentrate on, and her mind was focused on more important things.

"Pain in the back. It's just the same," James said, creeping her out a little as there was no way he saw her.

"What?" Jessie stuttered.

"I slouched," he said.

Jessie moved her arms so her hands pressed against whatever she was sitting on, supporting her straightened back. "It was easier to jump into an anomaly that would kill you?"

"You would die first, I saw it. Didn't want to handle it, didn't want to think about it," James said, almost muttering. "It was my easy way out. You're the one who suffered, not me."

Her hands gripped the edge of her makeshift chair tightly, "we both know that isn't true. Something happened there that you never told me about. For what reason, I don't know. I knew you were suffering, but I didn't know what to do. I just stood by you as I always have, hoping you would finally be as happy to be back as I was."

"And forget the pain I put you through, as I always have," James said, clearly using her own words against her. It was no accident. What she didn't know was who was the one forgetting, him or her?

"Who made the first move, hmm? Who wanted to take things further?" Jessie said quickly and urgently, so he had no time to hear her think it first or interrupt her. "Who confessed love first? Who chased who to their new home to be with them?"

She waited to see what ridiculous answers he had for these questions. As she half expected, he said nothing. "See. I did those things because I thought you were worth it. I still do."

"I didn't... shouldn't," he mumbled, stalling again. "I could have walked away. How I feel, I wanted to protect you. Instead... I did the worst thing I could do."

Jessie desperately tried to think of a response that he couldn't turn around on her. Before she knew it she was back to listing things he had done, hoping one would convince him he wasn't a selfish monster.

Finally one came to her that she knew would likely hurt him, but even he'd have a hell of a time trying to spin it to something bad on his part. If he did, it'd definitely make no sense. He had glanced in her direction, so she knew he had heard it already. Still, she said it aloud. "Why did you choose Miral over Sasha? If you were selfish, and in your mind protecting people you love counts, then why didn't you let them threaten Miral instead, leaving your daughter alone? Yes she'd still be in the room, but safe from harm, with you."

"I didn't want her to see..." James stuttered his answer.

Jessie could tell he was winging it, she cut in quickly, "no, no. What was your reason *then*?"

"Sasha, she would hate me. That's all that mattered..." he answered. Jessie was sure it was just another way of saying what he attempted to before.

"You would be in great pain if anything happened to Sasha. I know, we both know it. You wouldn't even try to live with it, you'd probably give up just like this," she said with great difficulty. Even the mere thought of that happening made her sick. "But your so called selfishness was more concerned about Sasha going in a huff with you? Really?"

He turned his head away so she couldn't see any kind of response other than that.

"It had nothing to do with you caring about someone other than you? That you didn't want to put another child at risk. Or you thought that having two children in the kidnapper's hands was far worse than one, even if that one was yours," Jessie said calmly. "How many people would have been able to make that same choice? Not many I bet."

"Most people aren't soulless," James said in a near whisper.

Jessie's resolve started to waver as before, the tears in her eyes were trying badly to escape. There was no way she would let them, not now. "So that's how you're going to play it now, huh? With me of all people. No, that won't work with me. We've shared so much together, so many years. You're far from soulless. In fact, it doesn't even make sense with anything you've said so far. Soulless people wouldn't get so attached to people that they're bothered when they're hurt or die."

"Doesn't matter," James said. Jessie felt some anger come from him in that moment. Doubt made her think she imagined it, mistaking it for her own. "If I truly loved you, I would have stayed away. Instead, I selfishly put you in danger."

"James, that's..." Jessie stammered as his words left her a shivering wreck.

"And there it is. I hurt you anyway," he whispered. His head dipped slightly so he was seemingly staring at the floor. "Not just you. Everyone suffers, everyone dies."

"What about Debbie?" Jessie asked reluctantly. She noticed his shoulders tense only a little. It gave her a push of strength to finally stand up to his issues, figuratively and literally. "What happened there?"

She could see his face far more clearly this way. When she had first sat down the mask was firmly in place. Now it was starting to slip, there were cracks. As they always were, his eyes were what was betraying him. They showed fear, helplessness. Exactly how they were when the hallucination took hold in Sickbay.

"You know what," he answered as plainly as he could, but it was clear he was struggling to do it.

"Not really. I know you were three years old, maybe excited about your birthday." The final word seemed to strike him in the chest, as it heaved only once. "Maybe you did what most kids that age do. Run around without a care, full of innocence. Then..."

"I ran away," James said defiantly, and with it a little anger. This time she knew she wasn't imagining it. "I was thinking of only me. She paid the price."

Jessie walked forward, determined to keep going without breaking down herself. "What were you running from?" She waited for an answer that never came, she knew it though. "Your father?" His continued silence was answer enough for her. "No one can blame you for that."

"It was all for nothing. I could never get away from it. She died and I'm still running," James said.

Jessie quickly pondered what he meant, the father theory felt like it had been stamped out. All she got in that short space of time was one thing, "it wasn't the first time, was it?"

"It... it doesn't matter," he said hesitantly. "I killed her, just like every..."

"No!" Jessie cried out. "No you didn't. You were barely three years old, frightened so much of a violent father that you fled. It's not your fault that someone preyed on that moment. If it didn't happen then, it would have happened later. If you didn't know that, you do now. Debbie was a target, regardless of your actions."

He blinked, allowing a tiny tear to escape. Jessie only saw it when it rolled down to his cheek and the light from the window reflected off it. "She was a target... because of my existence."

All of her fears about what triggered the situation were confirmed, she was right. It hit her hard and left her a little breathless. The ache throbbing through her throat had spread to her chest. The shaking couldn't be held back no matter how hard she tried. "Even if that were true, it's not your fault. You did nothing wrong."

"It is and I did," he said.

"I doubt Debbie would agree. You're taking the word of somebody who by nature wants to hurt you," Jessie argued. He knew but she didn't know if he knew everything, now was the time. "A demon, it wanted you to be this way. It's winning, it's laughing at us. Debbie wouldn't..."

He turned to face her. "Debbie died for nothing!" his voice raised so high he almost shouted toward her. "I wasn't worth it. I ruined her life, so why? I was just free to ruin everyone else's."

Jessie frowned, a little confused as to what he meant again. "You *ruined* her life so why, what?" He appeared to be shocked about what he said, or what she was thinking. This time he turned his back on her. "James please, tell me. What did you mean?"

"Her, dad, Susy," James mumbled. "One family gone, wiped out because of some... stupid kid no one wanted. That shouldn't be here."

"James," Jessie tried to stop this, all the while approaching him.

There was no doing so now, he was rambling with very little pause in between. "That wasn't enough. Why not the step dad who tried to save him-"

Nevertheless Jessie tried to interrupt him the best she could, "you're not at fault there."

He continued talking as if she hadn't said anything, overlapping most of her words. "Expose him to the stuff only he should be, then not care when the vampires take him-"

"Your step dad chose to fight for his city," she tried again. "You can't be blamed for that. You weren't even there."

"What about his real mother? I'm sure not killing one vampire with a personal vendetta will end well-" he said before she had even finished talking.

Frustrated, she raised her voice. "You're not to blame for what Frenit did, and if you could have killed him you would've."

"One sister isn't good enough, why not just smack the other around a little while she's possessed, that should do the trick-"

Jessie was close to shouting by this point, desperate to be heard. "Possessed by an Evil Slayer trying to destroy Earth. My god, you didn't kill..."

Still he continued his word rampage, "how many times did I kill you, huh?"

Jessie had been desperate for him to listen and respond, but when he finally spoke to her directly instead of ranting she instantly regretted trying. The question threw her for a loop. "Zero," the answer was simple enough for her.

"I lost count," he said bitterly. His eyes seemed to glaze over, somehow the grey was even fading. The anger started to disappear as well. She knew what that meant. Even though their conversation had been the most painful one they ever had, she was determined to keep it from ending. The alternative was him hiding behind his mask again. Her hand reached out for his, and with no surprise on her end he pulled it back. "It's too late now, isn't it?" he asked quietly. "Either way, I hurt you. Not just you."

"If the either you're speaking of is what I think it is, I speak for us all; your mother, your sisters, our children. We want James back, we want him to want to come back. We want him to fight this, not for us, but himself. I personally didn't marry you with blinkers on. I knew that you being the Slayer would make our lives tough, I'm not naive. I thought you were worth the risk, like anything worth having is."

He didn't say anything, he did nothing. Jessie was sure though he wasn't retreating again. Worst case scenario he was thinking of way to turn her words into something negative. What she really thought was that he was finally listening to her.

"That's all this is. You're a victim of circumstance. You've been given all of this pressure, and one tragedy after another. It's so much easier for you to blame yourself. I know I did when my first foster family were murdered," Jessie soldiered on. His grey eyes flickered toward her. "I had nothing tangible to blame, and neither did you. Debbie and an unknown assailant. Your father's shuttle crash. Susy and another unknown assailant. John and what could be any vampire. Lena and her depression. Even your mother and Frenit. It was so much easier assigning all of that to one thing, your curse, especially with Nathan the part demon and Daniel the watcher being the mystery attackers. That way you can deal with it all at once."

"That's not it," James mumbled.

Jessie stared at him with sympathy in her eyes. "That's exactly what it is. You didn't kill any of them. Deep down, you know it. Why deal with all that pain, when you can just brush it away and claim that you don't deserve to. You overestimated how much blame you could take. I saw it slowly crush you, especially over this last year. I can't and I won't help you carry it any longer."

"What do you mean?" James stuttered.

Jessie finally got close enough to reach up and stroke his cheek. He tensed for a moment, but still allowed her to do it. She smiled in response. "I thought I was helping by waiting, and never asking about your sister. I didn't want to hurt or pressure you. By doing so, I was helping you bury your head in the sand. I waited until you were drowning to finally bring it up."

"Don't. It's not your... fault," James said so quietly, she had to read his lips.

"See how upsetting it is?" Jessie asked gently. "Don't keep doing this to me... no, not to me, to yourself. You've made mistakes, we all have, but nothing as bad as what you think. You've done so much good, you're capable of more. If you continue on this path you'll never help anyone again. I know that bothers you."

"I can't help sticking my nose in everything," James muttered, a little resentment coming back to the surface.

Jessie shook her head, her smile grew slightly as she knew exactly what to say to bring him out of it. "You noticed. You know why, right? Because you're a hero. You're my hero."

He responded as she expected, somewhat mildly disgusted and awkward. She felt him fidget behind her hand. "No. You promised you'd never say it," he complained.

"I don't remember promising that," Jessie said with a cheeky glint in her eye.

"But, it's so cheesy and you're so much..." James sighed. She closed the gap between them so she could wrap her other arm around him. "Better than that," he mumbled hesitantly.

He eventually raised one of his own arms to hold her back. He barely had time to touch her when a voice called out from the other room. "Jessica? You here?"

Jessie groaned angrily, "damn it, not now."

"Jessica. I know you're here. You shouldn't leave a baby alone," Rachel's voice continued, turning into a scold.

"Hypocrite," Jessie muttered as she pulled away. She gave James a tired smile, "I'll be right back."

"It's okay," he said.

Jessie gave him a nod before walking toward the door. As soon as it opened she was greeted by her mother standing right in front of it, staring at her impatiently. She was so close she almost bumped right into her. "We need to talk!" she spat abruptly.

"Eew, space please," Jessie groaned while side stepping out of the way.

Rachel sighed irritably. "It's about your mother in law."

Jessie briefly looked over her shoulder on route to the mobile crib. "Here I thought you were dying or something. Calm down."

"I am calm," Rachel said through gritted teeth, all the while swinging around so her back was to the door. "I've never met such a rude woman in all my life."

Jessie ignored her until she picked up her baby daughter and was half way towards the bathroom. "What did you do?"

Rachel stared at her blinking furiously. "Me? Why do you assume it was me?"

"Well Janeway has her moments sure, but you're on a whole other crazy level," Jessie replied, stopping at the bathroom door as it opened.

"We're not alike," Rachel repeated.

"Okay, fine. What happened?" Jessie asked reluctantly. Just as Rachel began to answer she stepped into the bathroom. She huffed and ran over to join her. "The door's open, I can still hear."

Rachel stopped as soon as she spoke. "I can change her. It's 1700."

"Already?" she heard Jessie stutter.

"Yes, and I think it would be better if you picked up your kids and not me," Rachel said.

Jessie emerged still with the baby in her arms, who was starting to fidget slightly. Rachel hurried over to take her instead. "You're right. I don't want you blabbing about their dad running off and coming back, do I?" she said as she made her way to the exit.

Rachel's jaw dropped as her head turned to follow her out. "I wouldn't do that. I'm not a blabbermouth."

"Yes mum, and Janeway was rude to you through no fault of your own. I know," Jessie teased. The door shut behind her before Rachel could respond.

Despite that Rachel just smiled and shook her head. "That's my girl." She headed for the bathroom with the baby. A few minutes later she emerged to put her into her crib. "It's okay, no need to fret. I'll deal with this." Once the baby was down and seemingly content, Rachel walked away, heading for the bedroom Jessie had left before.

The door opened for her, without hesitation she walked through to find James standing in a different spot, back to staring out the window. The door opening though made his head turn toward it.

"You don't look that sick," she said harshly. He stared at her blankly for a few seconds, his head began to slowly go back to where it was before. "Let me guess. Hand cramp from killing too many? Man flu, though that's stretching considering you're not one," she said holding back a laugh. "Feeling a bit left out now that Jessica's paying attention to a new baby and not you? Whatever you're doing, must be working a treat."

His silence started to annoy her, she took a couple of steps forward. "That poor me attitude won't work on me, so cut it out." He didn't respond to that either. "Fine, I'm not interested in what you have to say anyway. I just need you to listen. My daughter has suffered more than enough thanks to you. If you actually have any of that humanity you claim you have, which I doubt, you'll do the right thing here."

James lightly turned his head back her way. She took it as a sign he was listening and to continue. "You had the right idea before. I hear you were a pretty effective killing machine, so why come back? I know I wouldn't want to go back where I didn't belong, to screw up further lives with my presence." She noticed his eyes looking directly at her with a very subtle frown on his face. She smirked at it. "See, I knew you were faking it."

"Why would you...?" he began to ask.

Rachel raised her index finger while the rest of her fingers clenched, "ah, ah. This isn't a suggestion, or a request. It's a demand." She walked closer, all the while maintaining intense eye contact with him. "Leave. Don't come back."

James looked away, she continued staring at him, watching and hoping for any kind of visible reaction. When she got nothing she slowly stepped to the side so he would be forced to look at her again.

"If you don't, well, there are other ways of getting rid of you," Rachel said coldly.

Even though he was forced into facing her, his eyes weren't on her. "I'm not afraid of you," he muttered.

Rachel's smirk turned into a disgusted scowl. "Maybe you should start."

She kept eye contact with him as she backed towards the door. The only relief came when she disappeared through it. James kept on staring as if she was still there, his face tensed and shoulders tightened. His eyes meanwhile fell to the floor with uncertainty.

The nursery doors opened, Jessie dashed through them with the mobile crib on one arm, almost running into a waiting Lena in the process.

"What are you doing here, is something the matter?" Jessie asked her as she recovered to walk away.

Lena walked alongside with an anxious look on her face. "Well I stopped by your quarters and no one answered. I thought kicking the door down may trigger something."

"Oh, the Doctor popped by during breakfast, which I guess helps the *your dad's just sick* story. Maybe he didn't hear you," Jessie said.

Lena sighed in relief, "I knew I should have come back last night. I figured with your kids being home, I didn't want to make them suspicious."

"It's okay, I managed fine," Jessie smiled to reassure her.

"How is he?" Lena asked almost as if she didn't want to know.

They reached the turbolift. It didn't take long for one to arrive so they stepped in. Once it was moving Jessie attempted to answer, "it's hard to say. We had a rough start, then we talked for hours. Argued for most of it."

"I'm not sure if that's such a good thing anymore," Lena said.

Jessie's smile turned a little awkward. "At first it was so painful and frustrating, I wish I had a younger Tom around to punch or scream at." Lena bit her bottom lip lightly to avoid sniggering at the image. "I'd like to think I got somewhere eventually. He seemed better, but he's got a long way to go."

Lena couldn't hide her relief at hearing that, a grin almost broke out. "I'll be around tonight, definitely. I think he needs 24/7 pestering until he breaks," she said with a slight smirk that made Jessie think she wasn't entirely serious.

"16/7?" she said.

Lena shrugged, "mum doesn't have to sleep."

Jessie shook her head, laughing quietly. "Unfortunately he seems to think he doesn't either. I did wonder how we were going to handle overnight, but he muttered something about sleeping on the sofa since he left. Then he walked out. Turns out sleeping on the sofa means standing outside our quarters."

"What did you do?" Lena asked once they reached Jessie's quarters.

"What could I do? I have three kids who could very easily get up in the middle of the night. He couldn't stand around the living room all night. I offered to sleep on the sofa so he didn't have to leave. Oh no, god forbid. Staying in the room with me, no that's creepy," Jessie tried to explain. Lena mouthed the word creepy. "I guess I see his point. I'd be sleeping, he'd be standing or sitting around in a daze."

"Does this story end with you conking him on the head? Sedatives?" Lena asked.

"As I said. He stood outside. I barely slept, worrying about him," Jessie sighed. To Lena she sounded disappointed with herself. "Long way to go."

Lena nodded, her relief from before a distant memory. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Well, good thing I didn't if your solution was a *conk* on the head," Jessie said.

"I said sedatives," Lena said innocently.

Jessie's eyes narrowed mockingly, "yeah, my mistake." She walked into her quarters first, Lena followed closely behind. The pair were surprised to find somebody already there, waiting eagerly.

"Oh Jessica," Rachel spoke first, rushing forward to her daughter with a smile on her face. "Great news. Wedding tomorrow. I brought the dress we talked about."

Jessie's first reaction was to shudder before her mother had even gestured to it. She then looked over to see the horrid pink monstrosity lying on her sofa. She made a mental note to throw out the sofa later.

"How did you even get in?" Jessie asked. She gently put down the crib onto a nearby chair.

"The Doctor let me in, of course," Rachel replied.

Jessie rolled her eyes, "of course, you haven't teleported in without permission before. Look, that's great about your wedding and I'm happy for you, but I'm still not going. I'm definitely not wearing that."

Lena casually walked over to the sofa to get a better look at the infamous dress. She wished she hadn't, and she wasn't the one forced to wear it. The parts that weren't bright pink were a dazzling white and frilly. She was surprised that Jessie hadn't turned Evil on the sight of it and put her mother out of her fashion sense misery.

"You'll look so beautiful in it, darling," Rachel cooed at her daughter as if she was five years old.

Jessie actually had to repress a gag at the thought. "Even Annika would turn her nose up at it."

Lena stifled a laugh while Rachel gasped in offense. "Why must you be afraid of your femininity so..." she whimpered.

"On that note, excuse me," Lena said with her eyes wide in horror, pointing to the bedroom. She hurried away before anything happened.

Jessie firmly ground her teeth, determined not to make too much noise with her baby nearby. "The only thing I'm afraid of is that dress. And your eye sight. Seriously, is this why Dannielle turned insane, you dressed her up like a frilly marshmallow? I get it now."

"All right. I guess I can go for my second choice. I thought it was a bit too macabre for a wedding. If I change it from pink and black to pink and..." Rachel muttered.

"Ugh, no. No pink and I already said I'm not going," Jessie groaned.

Rachel's good mood soured. "Why not? He seemed fine enough to leave alone earlier. Besides, he has plenty of other women that can pet his ego while you're away."

Jessie stared at her, blinking far more often than usual. "Why do you keep talking about him like that? I thought you two were getting along."

"I just want my little girl at my wedding," Rachel sighed sadly, while putting on the sympathy eyes. "Is it too much to ask?"

It didn't work on Jessie though. "Right now, yes. You knew what was happening, but you still picked tomorrow. Surely having a wedding and an anniversary on the same day would mean less gifts and nights out." She smirked playfully, "don't let future hubby convince you it's fitting or romantic. Take a stand."

Rachel laughed at her, "nice try, but it was my idea. I like having less important dates to remember. Now, 1100 tomorrow. The rehearsal starts at 1900 tonight..."

"Mum really. Not going," Jessie cut in. "I'm not comfortable attending a wedding while my husband is suffering. Delay it, I'll come. Don't and I'll just come to that unofficial one. That's the choice."

Rachel stared after her as her resolve threatened to break. Jessie left her to it, assuming she was thinking about it. She was too engrossed to notice Jessie's attempt to pick the dress off the sofa with nearby objects, so she didn't have to touch it. A fork seemed to do the trick. Rachel got a bit of a shock when she found it in front of her face, her hands quickly reacted to catch it before it fell on the floor.

"I don't suppose you heard all of that," Lena had said not long after entering the bedroom.

Sitting on the bed straight ahead of her, James moved his head up to look at her. To her that was an improvement on its own. Yesterday he would have continued staring at the floor, wherever he was staring at before she came in.

"That Rachel woman's a bit off her head, putting it nicely," Lena continued, forcing a small smile.

"She's not exactly quiet," James seemingly agreed. "Or subtle."

Lena glanced over her shoulder briefly. "I had to get out of there before I witnessed Jessie choking her to death, with the pink shower scrubber she called a dress."

"I don't see the problem," James said quietly.

"Yeah, I could do with a laugh," Lena said, laughing anyway. She sighed to stop herself, in case it looked disrespectful to the situation. A medium bowl on the side cabinet caught her eye, it didn't look like it had been touched as it still had food in it. "You really should eat something. You don't want to make Jessie fret that she weighs more than you, you know how sensitive she gets," she said in a teasing manner.

James slowly looked toward it. He reached over to pick it up. "I doubt it."

"Oh I dunno. If you really were fighting all this time, you should have been eating more not less. I get the shakes just walking down the corridor when I haven't had breakfast yet," Lena smiled.

He stared at her with the bowl just sitting there on his lap. "You seem better today."

"You too," Lena said. "I wish I had been a little more help yesterday. The Doc says that you may pick up a few things, that... how do I put it? Well for example; me being hysterical probably made you feel like crap, cos you felt it too."

His eyes looked to one side, remaining there for a while. Finally he said, "so?"

"So, it sounded self explanatory," Lena said. "Does that mean I'm right?"

"Right now, no," James replied, looking back. "It's not something you should..." he stalled for no visible reason. "It's not your problem."

"Well that's stupid," Lena said bluntly. "How am I supposed to help you if I'm freaking out too? Sounds like my problem."

James looked mildly irritated, it was a small shock to her as he'd shown barely any emotion since he returned. "I meant *not your fault*."

Lena walked forward, then crouched down in front of him. "Would it be easier to talk telepathically?"

He looked at her with his eyes widened, "no. No, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, not a good idea right now," Lena winced, turning her head away to hide her embarrassment. "You just seem to be struggling. I thought..."

"It's worse in here, trust me," James confessed. Lena glanced back at him with concern. "You know that first hand."

"Not really. You didn't think that much, just felt," she mumbled.

James nodded as he moved the bowl to beside him, "exactly."

Lena cleared her throat as a hint while moving the bowl back into his hand. "Nice try."

"Not hungry. It's fine," he said.

"When was the last time you ate anything?" Lena asked. James looked down at the bowl. If it was an answer, Lena wasn't buying it. "You do realise I'd have the upper hand on you right now? I'll do it."

"I did. I had some," James said. There was nothing like deceit in his voice, it wasn't neutral like before either. It didn't seem as if he was lying to her.

"How much is some? A bite?" Lena questioned. She tried to smile again to hide the worry. "I'm not going to catch you in the bathroom later with your finger down your throat, am I?" Their eyes briefly met, she was certain there was a little flicker of mirth there. Even if it was imagined, it was something. "You're probably used to eating almost nothing. Maybe a few more *some's*, and I may stop pestering you."

His eyebrow twitched minutely. "May?"

Lena's smile spread, "more food and the odds go up."

"What, really?" Jessie stammered. Rachel stared at her curiously, all the while still holding on to the dress as if it was precious. "I'll be right there."

Her jaw dropped, she rushed forward as Jessie headed for the door. "Wait. Where are you going?"

Jessie stopped right in front of the door to pass a confused frown her way. "The bathroom. Where do you think?" She groaned when Rachel's eye drifted to a different door. "Sarcasm, look it up. Seriously, didn't you hear?"

"No, I was trying to think of a dress you won't throw in my face," Rachel muttered.

"I can see why that would be a struggle," Jessie commented. "My sister's had her baby. This is my first nephew, so... Can you watch her?" she said with a point to the crib.

"Well..." Rachel said uneasily.

"Thanks," Jessie said just as she hurried out the door.

Rachel felt a scowl coming on, she tried to push it aside. "Fine, fine," she muttered while fidgeting slightly. No matter what she did the scowl did come through, she exhaled to ease her impatience. Finally she dumped the offending dress onto the arm of a nearby chair, just in time for a door to open. Thinking it was Jessie coming back she swung around. To her disappointment it was Lena walking through the bedroom door. "Oh. Leanne."

Lena rolled her eyes, "Lena."

"Does it matter?" Rachel grunted.

"No, no it doesn't Racquel," Lena said, managing to smirk through her disdain. It helped that Rachel flinched at being called that. She walked by her on route to the replicator. "Where's Jessie?"

"Meeting a new nephew I believe," Rachel answered, disgruntled.

"Oh, the horror," Lena teased her, noticing her tone. "Cherry Coke, two cans."

Rachel pulled a horrified face, "ugh god. Nothing like a can of sugar crap to chase the *doesn't give a craps* away."

"Are you sure you're Jessie's mother?" Lena asked seriously, all while eyeing the dress.

Rachel's eyes narrowed maliciously, "yes, I was there."

Lena just sniggered to herself, "yeah, I wouldn't count on that as proof. Ask my mum." Rachel's expression looked even worse with some confusion mixed in. Lena shrugged, not letting it bother her. "Or not. Maybe you should try some of this, calm down."

"I'll pass. Excuse me," Rachel grumbled. She walked away.

"Wow," Lena sighed, turning back to the replicator. The sound of the door opening and closing signalled she was gone, so Lena focused on the crib sitting close by. "She's gone. You're welcome." The girl squeaked, it sounded like a giggle to her.

Unbeknownst to Lena, Rachel hadn't left the quarters. She had merely walked into the bedroom instead.

"You're still here, I see." James stared straight ahead of her, she took it as him staring at her. It rattled her further. "Maybe I didn't..."

"Not now," he said.

Rachel scoffed, her hand reached up to angrily swipe some hair behind her ear. "I don't really care about what you need. Tomorrow..."

"I know," James interrupted to push her further. "Before, your wedding is ruined. After, doesn't matter."

A small smile formed on her face. With it and her eyes glistening, she walked toward him slowly. "So you'll go?"

James closed his eyes and nodded once.

"You do realise that after doesn't work for me either. Jess will not come," Rachel said.

"If I'm..." James said, he grimaced as his words slipped from him again. "Okay, she will."

Rachel nodded. A chuckle escaped her, "you know you were right. Keeping this our little secret worked out for everyone." His eyes opened to stare back at her, catching the derisive glint in hers. "Except you, but who cares about you right?"

"Right," James agreed, no feeling in his voice.

"Jodie was so certain it would be a girl. She asked me if calling him Lindsay would still work," Jessie giggled while she lay a sheet on the floor by the bed.

"I hope you said no," James said.

Jessie picked up a plastic basket from a chair nearby, then she put it into the centre of the sheet. "Who do you think I am?" After answering she crouched to sit down. The basket was opened, revealing sandwiches and various snacks. James stood nearby, watching her as she started to spread the contents which were already in bowls and plates. "I said if I helped her, she could help us with ours. You gonna sit?"

James reluctantly did so, on the other side of the basket. As soon as he was down, she gestured to a couple of sandwiches nearby. He picked up the plate to hand them over, she shook her head whilst pushing them right back. "No, you eat. They're your favourites."

"Oh," he mumbled. He stared at one of them for what felt like ten minutes. There were a pair of eyes staring at him, he didn't have to look to know that. Reluctantly he clutched one half of it to raise it up to his mouth. Jessie watched him still, likely making sure he'd finish it. She wasn't eating herself, so it inspired him to pick up the pace. Good thing he did, once he was done with the whole piece, she started to eat.

"How is it?" Jessie asked with a smile.

James nodded. "Good." It was a lie but she seemed to buy it. Everything he ate tasted like nothing.

"Lena said you were a little quieter when she brought you a few things," Jessie said with concern. "She was worried she said something wrong."

"She didn't. I told her that," James said.

Jessie nodded a few too many times while trying to think of what to say, then how when she did. She wasn't used to doing this with him. Normally their conversations were easy, natural, but this wasn't a normal situation. She decided that the first thing that appeared in her head she would say, as she normally did.

"You going to your mum's wedding tomorrow?" he asked before anything came to mind.

This wasn't a topic she had in mind, not even close. "No."

"Why not?" James asked.

"You know why," Jessie answered.

"I... I never want to get in between you and your mum," James stuttered.

Something about his tone made Jessie believe that was the only thing he said to her this morning with any real feeling to it. It bothered her more than she liked. "Don't be silly. She knew it was bad timing and she did it anyway. Besides they've got this second, unofficial one in a church planned for when we return. I can just go to that one. The Enterprise one is just a registry office type deal, with probably no more than a dozen guests. No thanks."

"Then it won't be that long. It sounded like it meant a lot to her," James said.

Jessie cringed at the thought that came to her. "Oh god, you weren't exposed to her thoughts? I know she's loud, but you'd think she wouldn't shout in her own head."

He shook his head lightly. "I won't be alone, if that's why. I have Lena, mum..."

"Actually," Jessie said quickly. "Tomorrow is Saturday, Duncan won't have any class to go to, someone will have to watch him. And your mum, well..."

"What?" James frowned.

"She's the only one who can officially perform weddings. Mum said she had a change of heart," Jessie replied awkwardly.

"I don't get it. You were dead set against it yesterday," Lena said.

"Well, I thought about it and ten minutes to say a few lines wouldn't do any harm," Kathryn answered.

Lena couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You basically called her a spoilt brat. She insulted all of us."

"I stopped by to see how James was, she was there to see Jessie. We ended up talking," Kathryn said.

"I knew I should have kicked the door down when I was there the first time," Lena muttered.

Kathryn chuckled at her, "oh don't get me wrong, she's still really annoying and self absorbed. Maybe I'll slap her in between vows. If I don't, she owes me."

"Oh yeah? Why didn't you answer when I called, why didn't you stay to see him?" Lena asked, blinking furiously as her eyes had been wide a while.

"You mustn't have called when I was there," Kathryn replied. She laughed and gestured to her daughter's face, "keep that up and people will think you're doing a Seven impression."

Lena quickly blinked a few more times to get her eyes back to normal, all the while muttering, "ew."

"You want to know the truth?" Kathryn said, serious all of a sudden.

"During the vows you're going to say *do you take this fist* and hit her?" Lena asked hopefully.

"She was just angry yesterday. There's no need for that," Kathryn scolded her.

Lena scowled, all the while thinking what she said was more disgusting than the Seven remark. "You heard the way she talked about James, right? If you say *oh*

she's his mother in law, it's normal, I'm going to start throwing the coffee into space. I don't care if you can't drink it yet."

Kathryn narrowed her eyes, "you wouldn't dare." Lena did the same back, all the while putting her hands on her hips. Kathryn couldn't help but giggle at that familiar habit of hers. "Lena, Rachel and I have more in common than I wanted to admit. She told me why she gave Jessie up and it sounded so familiar. And yes, I thought about hitting her but you know why? I'm still mad at myself for leaving James..."

"But mum, you believed you were doing the right thing. You still do, as he was better off once his dad was gone," Lena protested.

"Lena," Kathryn said sadly, her eyes cast down. "You did the right thing, didn't you? You understand."

The sentences slapped her right in the face. Lena was momentarily stunned, but anger took over quickly. "Letting Kiara go to the Continuum doesn't compare."

"No, it doesn't. I just mean you understand regretting something that you did for someone else," Kathryn said. "The thing is I know so much more now. How he was treated, what could have been. I know he found Jessie during all that mess and that's great, but look at him now. It's hard not to regret what I did when I look in his eyes."

"I understand where Rachel's coming from. All she wanted was to find her daughter so she could share her special day with her. That's all," Kathryn said.

Lena's eyes partly rolled, "yeah, she didn't want to find Jessie because she wanted to find her." Kathryn looked ready to scold her again. "If it was all about Jessie being at her wedding, she'd be the one wanting to put it off till later. But no, she wants it now. Everyone else be damned!"

"You're making too big a fuss over ten measly minutes. There's more important things to worry about," Kathryn said.

"Yeah, exactly. We have a Game Sphere we can't get out of, millions could be dead already, billions are at risk. James is suffering from a breakdown that could, no will end up killing him if we don't help him. If we find our way out of this sphere, you'll be a Tolg again, and we've not done anything to sort that out. This isn't the time for a wedding no one but the bride cares about," Lena ranted at her, her eyes flared wide open again. "Seriously, why is this even a thing? What's happening?"

Kathryn placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle shake. "Don't worry about it. This doesn't have anything to do with you."

Lena scrunched her face at her, then she rolled her eyes and pointed to something behind Kathryn. She looked over her shoulder to see what she was pointing at. The last two sentences her daughter had spoken suddenly made so much more sense. Only a few feet away, obviously spying on them using the corner to hide not enough of her body, was Annika pulling a strange stink eye expression. She didn't seem that bothered or she didn't notice she had been spotted.

"Did Damien die, am I next?" Lena asked.

Annika slowly pointed at her, then at herself, while mouthing something neither of them could make out. They both shook their heads. That annoyed her and she did it again. For

some reason she followed it with a fist bump to her chest. Lena's face twisted in disgust even more than before. The strange vampire slinked out of sight while maintaining eye contact.

"What's er... Damien got to do with this?" Kathryn had to know.

Lena groaned, she felt a little defeated after all of that. "Forget it. It's just yet another thing to keep track of."

Jessie squinted her eyes at the image in front of her, her face scrunched in disgust. It was tempting to throw the offending PADD away, all she had to do was tap the command labelled next so she did that instead. There was a loud gasp from her, getting James' attention from the other side of the living room. "Oh god. I think mum's trying to get rid of me again."

"Can't be that bad," James mumbled.

"Oh it can," Jessie said with her eyes wide in fear. This time she did toss the PADD over her shoulder. "Forget it. I'm not going. All this has done has given me two reasons not to go."

James walked over and knelt down to pick up the PADD. At first glance the picture on the screen was of a scrunched up hanky with wings poking out from random places. The second glance didn't improve it much. It looked like an uneven dress constructed with multiple layers of silk, of varying colours. The things he saw as wings at first didn't look like anything now, just random bits of sparkly material sticking out of it.

"I... I don't think I want to know what she's wearing," he muttered.

Jessie nodded furiously, "neither do I! God, that pink chewing gum thing with frills was a masterpiece in comparison. Maybe I should go only to wear jeans and a tank top, see what happens."

"You should," James said.

Jessie sighed, it turned into a lazy laugh like she was faking it. "No. No wedding, no rehearsal dinner. It's bad enough she's wasting your mother's time." James watched her, his face faintly etched in concern. "We've got a lot to work through, talk about. You need me. It's not ten minutes, or an hour on Saturday, it's taking up our time now."

"You deserve a break. I'll be okay, on my own," James said.

Jessie's eyebrow raised, "you mean I deserve to be tortured by awful bridesmaid dresses."

"No. There's been no break. It's been one bad thing after another," James tried to convince her. "It's an hour away from it all."

"Forget my mum, this is important to you... but why?" Jessie asked with a frown. She didn't like that she started to feel a little paranoid. "Why are you so eager to be on your own?"

"I'm not," James answered, internally he flinched.

"I don't like this. I'm so used to trusting you, but... with everything that's happened, your behaviour, I can't help thinking that you're going to run off again," Jessie started to stammer midway. James closed his eyes, his head turned away instinctively. "That doesn't help."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said firmly. He continued but slowly, occasionally stalling now and then. "I keep thinking that it's selfish to... to stay here, constantly bringing risk to you, the kids just by being there. But... I know that leaving is much worse."

"Sorry, I'll stop you right there," Jessie quickly said. "Our kids and especially me don't want a mere bodyguard. They want and need their father back. I want my best friend back. We all need you, not an emotionless Slayer who thinks he's cursed us and only stays around to fight off the occasional demon."

James nodded, he looked directly at her. "I know. I don't want that either. I don't want to think that way anymore."

His voice and how easily he said it gave Jessie a little hope. He sounded like he really meant it. However a little voice in her head still told her that something was horribly wrong, he was still hiding. "That's something we should work on together. So that's settled, I'm staying here tomorrow."

"Why don't I go with you?" James suggested.

Jessie was more than surprised. "To the wedding? Are you sure you're up for that?"

"I don't know. Maybe we can try the rehearsal dinner first," James said.

Jessie didn't look so sure about it. "Even if you have improved, you're still sick. However a change of scenery and subject may help. Then I remember the chip again and I start to worry."

"The last dose he gave me, it helps," James mumbled, making her even more worried. He shook his head, "I don't want you missing out on time with your mum, because of me. Because you can't trust me, I don't blame you."

"James," Jessie tried to re-assure him that wasn't truly the case.

"I want to prove that... that I want to fight this," James said, though he clearly struggled to do it.

Jessie smiled for him, but she couldn't shake off her instincts shouting at her. She knew him too well to fall for it, unfortunately she didn't know what *it* was. "Five minutes. We show our faces, I say hi to mum, steal a few snacks off the buffet table, then we go."

James appeared to be considering it as his eyes moved to one side and up a little. "Ten."

"I'll call Lena to watch the kids, thought it hardly seems worth it," Jessie said a little wary of the idea. Before he could suggest anything longer than ten minutes she quickly raised her hand, gesturing him not to. "Maybe they should be out when we leave. They do know you're ill but..."

"Good plan," James nodded.

Later that evening:

The party in the Mess Hall slowed down for a brief moment when they arrived, most of the guests had looked over in surprise or even shock in some cases. The majority of them returned to their drinks and food, their conversations taking a different turn.

Rachel didn't notice the atmosphere change, she was far too busy chatting excitedly with a female crewmember while proudly showing off her dress. Jessie spotted her first, she smirked up at James. Him looking around anxiously made her re-think making a joke at her mother's expense, instead she gently squeezed his arm she already had entwined with one of her own. "Do you want to go?"

He seemed startled for a moment, then he glanced at her. "No, I just think I... freaked everyone out."

"Don't worry about them. Try to ignore them," Jessie whispered to him and smiled. He sighed, already looking calmer to her. Still she held on to him as if he would run away at any second.

Rachel finally noticed her daughter had arrived. Her face lit up as she hurried over to her. Seeing James was with her didn't slow her down, but it did kill off the sparkle in her eye. She put on a happy facade once she got to them. "Jess, you came. You had me worried."

"Yeah, James can be a little *stubborn* sometimes, tough to argue with," Jessie said jokingly.

"Yes, I'm sure," Rachel said in a neutral tone. She reached forward to clutch the arm Jessie had mostly free. "Come, you must meet the Enterprise gang."

"Mum, I used to live there," Jessie said.

Rachel laughed sweetly, "and you knew everyone on it? Nice try." She tried to pull her away, her hold on James was solid so all Rachel achieved was stretching her arm. He tensed during all the whole thing, which didn't help either. With her face flushing Rachel let go of her. "Oh Jessica, he'll be fine. My crewmates are dying to meet you."

"Maybe I should..." James mumbled, gesturing to the put together tables away where the buffet was.

"Well yeah but..." Jessie stuttered. It was too late to argue, he was already moving away and Rachel made quick work of taking her hand to lead her away.

Half way to the table he slowed to a crawl. Every person he walked by seemed to have his eye on him. A few tried to be discreet about it. Some walked away quickly to avoid him. His face showed no hints that he had noticed or if he had, was bothered by it. He looked around in a daze, the world around him blurred and muted. One image became sharply focused, and that was the cold stare of Rachel as she looked over her shoulder at him. Her eyes clearly keeping track of his every move. James turned his head away to ignore it. Even still her stare had been drilled into his consciousness. It was all he could see, he missed somebody approach him with intent.

"I apologise for my future wife. I promise you, she means well," Antony's voice said sincerely. He sipped at his drink while James slowly turned his head toward him. "She just doesn't think before she speaks, words fly out of her at warp nine."

He could still feel her staring at him in the corner of his left eye. "It's fine, doesn't matter."

"No it does. Her being your mother in law is an excuse, don't let her use it, cos she'll abuse it," Antony said with a friendly smile. His hand gestured forward, in it was another glass. "You could do with a drink."

James refused by shaking his head, a little abruptly and even timidly. Antony studied him carefully while bringing back his hand. "You really don't look well. I doubted that you were faking, Rach has a vivid imagination after all," Antony said. He debated how to say what was on his mind for a moment. "You look like death *not* warmed over. Let me guess, Jessie wouldn't come so here you are?"

"Yeah," James said. A piercing cold abruptly washed over him, he found his attention wavering once again, this time drawn to something behind him. Antony continued to talk to him, his voice gradually drowned by a low muffled sound just like everyone else's. He looked over his shoulder, expecting something out of the ordinary or at least Rachel still looking at him. Neither were happening. Then silence, as if the voices he was hearing were switched off by a flick of a switch. The silence brought pulsating pain to his temple, each one more excruciating than the last.

The room around him felt like it was falling, as well as lurching gradually to the right. He felt a hand on his forearm, only then he realised that it was really him as it momentarily steadied him.

"I'll tell her. Go," Antony said. James looked at him, confused. "Jessie, I'll tell her you've gone home, or Sickbay's probably better."

James tried to nod but it just aggravated the pain and made the room move again. He made his way for the closest exit. The door didn't seem to get any closer, it just danced from side to side. It even started to blur then divide with every step he tried to make. The entire room span around him, a heavy weight slammed into his back winding him. Then it all faded away into darkness.

Everyone in the Mess Hall stopped what they were doing to gather around. A few crewmembers tapped their commbadges to call the same person. The murmurs from the crowd blended together, it was difficult to hear what they were saying.

Jessie tried to push her way through to the front, a desperate look had taken over her face. "Excuse me. Hey, please... get out of the way!" she grunted in the end when no one seemed to listen to her. Finally people started to part to let her through. Once she was finally at the front she dropped down to the floor on her knees to tend to the body slumped on the floor. "James?" Her hand flew to her commbadge.

"It's okay, the Doc's coming," one crewmember quickly told her.

She was trembling viciously as her hand reached to his neck to check his pulse. He still had one but it was weak, finding that out didn't make her feel any better. "I knew... I knew we shouldn't have come," Jessie stuttered as she dragged herself closer. Gently she raised his head off the floor so it could be supported on her lap. Her shaking hand brushed against his face. "Oh god... what happened?"

Sickbay:

The Doctor steeled himself before turning around to face the obviously anxious Jessie waiting nearby. "His blood sugar and heart rate is dangerously low. Are you sure he's eaten?"

Anger flared up in her, the Doctor's question and tone sounded accusatory to her. "Yes, I made sure of it. I watched him. I didn't want to push further, if someone's been starving themselves they won't be able to handle anything big."

"It's all right, I believe you. Generally people who refuse to eat tend to hide the fact, I was just concerned that's what happened," the Doctor said.

"Oh I know, he would do that," Jessie said, still a little angry but not at him. "He has done it before, that's why I kept an eye on him."

The Doctor stepped through the forcefield surrounding the biobed, he smiled at her gently. "I can easily give him a one time boost, so to speak, he'll be fine. In fact this gives us an opportunity." Her eyebrow shot up dangerously. "Since he's unconscious and the chip effects have been slowed for now, I can treat those injuries he wouldn't let me do before."

Jessie nodded. "Right." She watched him go back through the forcefield to get to work on his patient. She waited a few minutes, so not to bother him. "That neural sedative drug, you'd tell me if that was what caused his collapse. Right?"

"Of course," the Doctor replied. One tap activated the over the body scanner. "A number of things contributed to it. The Human body can only take so much punishment I'm afraid. Malnutrition, dehydration has him weakened, he's still injured. The drug can't completely soothe him, not safely anyway."

"We are going to have to remove the chip, aren't we?" Jessie reluctantly asked, a lump formed in her throat.

The Doctor sighed, he badly wanted another option but there was none he could see. "It's a gamble, but it is better than doing nothing. Not much better mind you." He didn't have to see her to know her reaction. "I'll still look for another solution. I can't abide performing such a dangerous operation while a patient is so severely weakened. Perhaps when his condition is a little more stable, I'll have come up with something else."

"Thanks but, you're just giving me false hope. It's never that easy for us," Jessie said.

"Not necessarily. The sedative has calmed his neural pathways significantly, it appears. The damage should be far more gradual, which gives us more time," the Doctor said.

"Really?" Jessie tried not to sound or feel hopeful.

"Yes. I don't think the memories or telepathy will be bothering him as often. I'll need to give him another dose before I discharge him in the morning, then he should be all right for most of the day," the Doctor answered. He noticed Jessie looked uncomfortable, tensing her shoulders and fidgeting slightly. "He needs the rest, so do you."

"He, he refused to sleep last night. Maybe Lena had the right idea," Jessie said regrettably.

The Doctor looked on sympathetically, the smile he gave her was warm. "You're doing fine. More than that in fact. I didn't expect he would leave your room for days, weeks even. Yet in less than a day he's at a party."

"Yeah. I don't think that means what you think it does," Jessie said hesitantly. The Doctor's smile turned into a look of concern.

"Mum?"

Jessie didn't hear it, her mind was lightyears away. Her chin slumped into her the palm of her left hand, the elbow digging into the table. The bowl of cereal in front of her remained untouched. A gentle prodding in that left arm abruptly brought her out of it. She looked to the source, her son standing beside her looking worried.

"What?" she asked.

"Someone's at the..." Duncan barely had time to tell her when the door opened. The whole table turned their attention to it.

Rachel strode in with the brightest smile on her face. "Morning everyone." She wasn't fazed at all that Jessie shook her head irritably at her arrival, or that Amy climbed down from her seat to run to her room. "Today's the day. Time to get ready."

"How... you can't just walk in," Jessie groaned.

Her mood didn't deter Rachel from hers. "You weren't answering. I cheated a little, I'll admit." She clicked her fingers for emphasis.

Sasha stared at her puzzled, "you're a Q too?"

Rachel laughed, "ohno dear, it was just a little touch of magic."

Jessie's eyes rolled, "yeah, I don't think I'm going. Sorry."

"All right, I'll walk back out and you can invite me in properly," Rachel teased her.

"No. Didn't you..." Jessie almost blurted something out she shouldn't. She glanced at her remaining two children, then hurried to her feet to go over to her mother. "Didn't you see what happened last night?" she whispered.

Rachel stuck her bottom lip out, it looked like a forced pout. "Pretty hard to miss it." Jessie scowled at her. It still didn't deter her, she smiled again. "Maybe you should leave him home this time."

"Mum please try to put yourself in my place here. Would you come to my wedding if Antony was sick?" Jessie complained.

"No," Rachel replied far too quickly. Jessie gave her a see glance. "But he isn't really sick, is he? Just a bit mopey. The fainting was probably a..."

"If you say cry for attention you'll never see me again," Jessie grumbled with a dangerous glint in her eye.

The threat finally wiped the good mood from Rachel's face. Her eyes glistened, her face pained. "I'm sorry, I'm just trying to make you feel better."

"Yeah right," Jessie rolled her eyes again. "You don't like him, that's obvious to anybody. If you can't handle that then, I don't see a future with you in it."

"Sweetheart," Rachel didn't take the last sentence all that seriously, or at least she acted like it didn't. "I'm your mother."

"A mother I've survived without for thirty odd years. Like it or not, James is my family," Jessie said firmly. Rachel's face tensed. "He's done nothing wrong here either. This is your problem, fix it."

Rachel's jaw clenched, she seemed to be trying her best not to tremble. "I will. I promise. In the mean time, I need to know if you'll be there for my big day."

"I'll go down the aisle, I'll be there during the vows and stuff, but that's all," Jessie answered. "James needs me, even if he won't admit it."

Rachel did her best to hide her disappointment, covering it with her earlier bright smile did the trick. "I'll take it. Now, twenty minutes at my quarters. You can pick whatever you want to wear, as long as it's a dress and little Sasha has a matching one."

Sasha looked up pouting. "Have I been bad?"

Jessie smiled her way, "we both have it seems." She turned back to her mother. "What about Duncan and Amy?"

Duncan's eyes shot wide open, he shook his head. "Nuh uh, I've been good for a while."

"I don't think Amy's all that keen on me, and I was right thinking that he wouldn't want to take part in a wedding," Rachel replied.

"That's not fair," Sasha complained.

Duncan sniggered, "it's really not." Sasha responded by sticking her tongue out at him.

"I don't think Sasha does either," Jessie said.

"Of course she does," Rachel said in a patronising tone. "Pretty flowers, dresses..."

"I don't like any of those, boring," Sasha interrupted her.

Jessie agreed, "me neither sweetie. Way to stereotype your own gender, mum."

Rachel waved off their comments cheerfully, "one grandkid taking part, I'm not asking for much. Now I'd better go before Ray beats me home."

"Who?" Jessie had to ask.

"Ray. He's the best man. Didn't I tell you?" Rachel laughed. "You'll be walking down the aisle with him."

"Right," Jessie said with little interest.

"You'll like him. We both have much in common. Nice guy," Rachel said as she edged to leave. "Got to go. Remember, fifteen minutes."

Jessie unintentionally breathed a sigh of relief once she left. She made her way to the room Amy ran into earlier. Inside she found the small girl sitting on the floor by her bed, fiddling with a few Lego pieces put together.

"What's the matter?" she asked her.

"I don't like grandma. She's mean," Amy replied.

Jessie walked the rest of the way inside. "She can be a bit annoying, I know. You still shouldn't run off like that. It's rude."

"I'm sorry," Amy stuttered with tears forming in her eyes.

"Don't worry, I was tempted to do the same," Jessie said as she knelt down in front of her.

Amy glanced up at her. "You scared too?"

Jessie felt the colour drain from her cheeks. "Scared? No, why are you scared?"

Amy shook her head timidly. "Her shouting."

"Wait, has she shouted at you?" Jessie asked. Whether the answer was yes or not, she was already imagining smacking her mother a couple of times for scaring her daughter.

"No, daddy," Amy squeaked. "She's mean to him. I bet she made him sick, cos it was after."

Jessie gently caressed her cheek. She got a tiny and brief smile in return. "No she didn't. She knows she's on her last chance."

"I miss him," Amy pouted. Jessie knew that feeling too well. "Will he be better soon?"

"He's a fighter. Don't worry," Jessie smiled through her doubt.

Lena stopped and glanced over her shoulder. James lingered a few feet behind her. His face still blank, but his body language told her he was extremely anxious. She turned to face him more directly.

"Second thoughts?" she asked him. He didn't answer, he merely stared straight ahead. "You don't have to, you know. I think Jessie would be more than happy to skip it."

While Lena's back was turned Rachel walked across the junction ahead of him. Her head turned casually, she must have seen them both and yet she kept walking. Moments later she doubled back to get a better look. Her face had frozen in fury unlike anything he had seen on Jessie's. This was unique to her. Jessie's more deadly stares were harmless in comparison. He had to look away, prompting Lena to frown and turn back around. Rachel had already walked off, she only saw a brief glimpse of what could have been anybody walking down the corridor.

"No. I have to do this," James said.

Lena stared back at him, her eyes scanning him for a clue, a hint to what he was thinking. "I don't get it. Why is this stupid wedding so important?"

"It isn't. That's the point," James eventually replied.

"You know what, I'd love a break from all this crap. After you're better and maybe when we're free, yeah bring it on. Now isn't the time. It's jarring if I'm honest," Lena said.

"It's..." James hesitated. He tried to smile but instead his face seemed strained and a little twitchy. "It's better than me complaining, right?"

Lena looked slightly unnerved, she tried to breath in deeper than usual. "No. At least when you were *complaining*, it was honest, it was you. This screams fake. I don't understand why."

His face faded to blankness again. "That makes no sense."

Lena nodded, her eyebrows both raised. "Yeah, you're right." She continued down the corridor, he followed closely behind.

"Okay. We'd better get you washed up and ready to go," Jessie said on returning to the living room.

Sasha gave her a sad stare, "but mum, I don't want to."

"I know. It won't be too long though," Jessie said sympathetically. She gestured to a different door. "Come on."

The main door opened on its own again. Jessie groaned, expecting her mother again. Lena walked in instead to her relief, but the door didn't close behind her. "Um, look who I've brought," she said uncomfortably. Her hand gestured behind her as James walked in as well.

The three children dropped everything they were doing to run over, swarming him in seconds. They all tried to hug his legs without bumping in to one another.

"Daddy, you're back," Sasha said happily.

"Are you still sick daddy, you look gross," Amy said honestly, her eyes staring up at him curiously.

"I missed you," Duncan said at the same time as Amy, then he pulled a face at her. "That's the first thing you say?"

Sasha laughed in his direction, "like you'd not say stuff like that."

Jessie looked on in shock, Lena still looked uncomfortable. James meanwhile did his best not to look awkward.

"No, cos I don't want to make dad feel bad," Duncan said back.

"Yeah, you good now," Sasha said. Meanwhile Amy squeezed the same leg she was hugging, getting in the way of her own hold. "Daddy, are you staying?"

"Please don't go," Amy said in a muffled voice.

Lena made her way over to stand next to Jessie. She quickly tried to get over her shock. "Who's idea was this?" Jessie asked.

"His," Lena replied. At the same time James slowly crouched down so he was more level with his kids. He flinched as they looked at him, Jessie thought he would be worried about their reaction to his current appearance. They didn't seem to care, they hugged him regardless. "I know, it's too soon."

"Don't you think he's trying too hard?" Jessie whispered to her.

"How do you mean?" Lena asked, even though she had a good idea.

Jessie watched the reunion for a few seconds. James tried to get rid of his usually emotionless mask when Sasha pulled away to look at him. It was a relief to see her not bothered by his whiter skin and thinner face, but it tugged on her heart to see her reach up to touch his cheek. It seemed to have a similar effect on him; his eyes very subtly brightened for a second, he followed it with a look of guilt he tried to force away.

"Like he's trying to seem better than he is," Jessie answered.

Lena wasn't relieved that they were thinking the same thing. It worried her further. "Yeah. But why?"

"It's what he does. Suffers in silence. Why do you think neither of us knew about that big memory?" Jessie muttered, her head shaking.

"You really think that's all it is?" Lena questioned.

Jessie winced, her eyes snapped closed. "He's hiding something. If we want to know what, we may have to play along."

Lena frowned at her, her head turned slowly toward the reunion nearby. Nothing much had changed. The children were constantly talking at him, while he responded with one or two word answers. "I don't know if I can do that, Jess," Lena said honestly.

"You don't have to. Just watch my kids and him while I'm at the stupid wedding," Jessie said.

"You're still going after what happened last night?" Lena asked in surprise. Jessie stared at her with eyebrow raised and a determined look in her eye. "First mum relents, now you. This obsession is giving me the creeps."

"Yeah, my mum does that to most people," Jessie said with a weak smile. She stepped forward, "Sasha. Come on, we should go."

Sasha glanced over at her, bottom lip trembling. "Mummy, I want to stay with daddy."

"I know, but he'll be here when you get back," Jessie said. "Right?" she said to James directly.

He seemed to hesitate before answering, "right."

Sasha whined. She was about to move away, at the last second she threw herself at her dad for one more hug. His arm moved around her to hug back, it looked genuine enough. Jessie still couldn't shake away her bad feelings about the whole situation though.

She held her hand out for her daughter to take, which she eventually did, and they headed for the exit. Sasha pensively stared at her dad all the way to the door, waving at him all the way.

"Daddy you're shaking," Amy whispered. James looked at her, a couple of tears were trying to escape. He blinked them away so she wouldn't get upset as well.

"I'm fine," he said, each arm reached around the two remaining children's shoulders. They got one last hug before he stood back up and made his way over to Lena. He didn't notice little Amy following him closely. "Can you do me a favour?"

Lena noticed Amy trailing behind him, she hinted she was there using only her eyes. "That depends."

James didn't notice her hint. "Instead of taking them to the wedding, can you take the kids somewhere else? Holodeck maybe."

"Why?" Lena asked.

"They're not going to want to waste a weekend going to a wedding, they'll be bored," James answered.

"Can we go to the park?" Amy asked, getting James' attention. He turned to look down and nod at her.

Lena frowned as she felt worried again. "What are you doing? And what about Sasha?"

"Ok, after her part's over then collect her and go," James replied.

"James, you still haven't answered what you'll be doing," Lena whispered so Amy couldn't hear as clearly. James' head turned away, he casually walked by her. Lena gently put her hand out to stop Amy from following. "Why don't you and Duncan get ready," she suggested.

"She can't do that herself," James said.

"Really? I figured Jessie would teach her how to dress before toilet training, or walking," Lena said, laughing to herself. "Ok, what to do. Why don't you go to your room and wait..."

"There's no need for that," James interrupted. "I'll be at the wedding."

Lena was even more confused by that. "That woman doesn't like you, why would you go if your kids aren't?"

Before James could answer the baby in the crib started to cry. The two siblings shared a worried look. "I'll..." James said, gesturing to the crib. "You, Amy."

"Me? She barely knows me, I don't think so," Lena stuttered.

"They both need to wash first. I'll do it after," James said.

Lena sighed, she reluctantly gestured for the two kids to come with her. "I hope by wash you mean teeth and face, cos I'm not comfortable with the bath."

Duncan scowled at Amy as she pulled a disgusted face. "Don't flatter yourself," he muttered.

"Huh? Just don't want to share stinky bath with you," Amy said.

Lena couldn't help but laugh at the two. "Okay, even if it were a bath, I wouldn't put you both in at once. Come on." She briefly glanced over at James as he headed for the crib, hoping in some silly way that he found it funny or at least worth smiling about. As she expected he looked the same as he always did. The pair walked by her to get to the bathroom, she reluctantly followed.

The baby settled down once a bottle of milk was by her lips. One hand reached up to touch it, the other did so too, catching James' finger. In that brief second he felt fine, like nothing was wrong. He missed the sound of a door opening behind him ready to kill the moment for him.

"I don't know what games you're playing here, but I promise you, it stops now," Rachel snapped.

The sudden voice put the little girl off her breakfast, making her whimper. James tried to soothe her by gently stroking her head, his thumb unintentionally tickled her cheek making her giggle. She was settled but no longer interested in drinking the milk, her hand still clutched onto it. He could tell Rachel was gearing up for another outburst, her form he could just make out in the corner of his eye twitching as if she were drumming her fingers against her own body. Another one would upset his daughter again, so he decided to straighten up to deal with Rachel first.

"You wanted her at the wedding. She's going," he said quietly in case Lena or the other kids heard him.

"Oh I have you to thank for that? That little fainting stunt was much appreciated," Rachel said in a smarmy tone.

James checked to see if the rest of his family were still in other rooms before responding. "I didn't do it on..."

"Let's just get one thing clear," Rachel butted in while walking closer. "You have one hour. If you're not gone by then, well..."

"Don't," James warned. It sounded more like a plea to her.

Rachel stopped directly in front of him. "We'll do this the old fashioned way; till death do you part," she hissed.

"You'll lose her. She won't forgive you," James tried to reason with her.

Rachel wasn't having any of it. "Maybe not. But it's worth it if it means you can't influence her anymore." She slowly backed off while keeping eye contact with him. Once she was close to the door she stopped. "Don't think for one second that you can beat me. I have more power than you can dream of."

"I don't want to fight you. I never did," James said.

Rachel turned her nose up at him. "Of course not. I know how you really operate." She took a few steps back to open the door. As her back was still facing it she didn't see the person already standing there. James did though, he froze with worry. "Good riddance, one way or another," Rachel sneered before turning around completely, immediately running face to face with the new arrival who wasn't all that happy to see her.

"Hi, you got a minute?" Kathryn said in a polite voice, obviously faked, with fire in her eyes. She didn't give Rachel any time to react, she grabbed her roughly by her blouse and pulled her out of the quarters. The doors shut behind them.

"Let go of me, you..." Rachel managed to snarl before she was slammed back first into the adjoining wall.

Kathryn pushed forward to get as close to her face as she could, making sure Rachel couldn't avoid her deadly gaze. "If you've got something to say to him, you say it to me." She shook her harshly. "I didn't hear you, speak up."

"Is violence all you people know?" Rachel spat back at her.

"Only when diplomacy fails," Kathryn growled at her. As Rachel tried to speak again Kathryn pulled her forward a little, then slammed her back against the wall. "I'm not the one threatening death on someone, and for what?" Rachel struggled against her, it only made Kathryn shake her roughly again and longer this time. "For marrying your daughter? Loving her? Maybe it's time you grow the hell up!"

"Oh like you didn't give my girl a hard time yourself," Rachel grunted.

Kathryn pulled her forward again to push her into the wall. Only she lingered half way there, "so you don't deny you want him dead?"

"Mum!" James yelled out for her to stop.

"Do not..." Kathryn exclaimed as she pushed Rachel back into the wall. "Compare me to you." James rushed forward as she dragged the other woman forward again. "I am not like you."

Rachel smirked at her despite the pain she was in. "That's not what you said yesterday."

"Well you can forget what else I said yesterday," Kathryn did the same back to her, wiping Rachel's smile away instantly.

"You'll do it, or you'll regret it," Rachel said, her eyes briefly glancing towards James.

One of Kathryn's hands finally let go of her. However it balled into a fist and began to pull back. James quickly grabbed a hold of her wrist before she did anything else, using his other arm he tried to pull them apart. Kathryn resisted him a little too well, Rachel glaring at them wasn't helping at all. Finally he dragged her back far out of punch range.

"If you think that I'm scared of you..." Kathryn snarled at her.

Rachel scoffed. "Maybe do what's best for your..." She looked at James with disgust. "Bastard mutation for once."

Kathryn lurched forward, James kept a tight hold of her to stop her. "I'll kill you before you can even lay a finger on him."

"I don't need to," Rachel smiled as she began to walk away like nothing happened. "Fifty minutes to go. See you at the wedding, Kathy."

Once she was out of sight James slowly moved his hands away. Kathryn stomped a little to the right, barely containing her temper. She stared at him not in anger, but in disbelief. "Why did you do that? I was trying to protect you."

"I don't need you to," he answered.

Kathryn shook her head rapidly. "That's hardly the point and you know it. How long has she been doing this?"

"It's all talk. She's not going to do anything," James said plainly.

"So? The way she speaks of you, it's despicable. I'm sure Jessie wouldn't stand for it, so I assume she doesn't know," Kathryn said. James' silence and a tiny, almost subtle flinch in his shoulders answered her. "James she's not worth it. Jessie deserves so much better than that horrid woman."

"It's not for us to decide that," James mumbled.

Kathryn's eyebrow shot up, "you're right. It's not. So why are you allowing her to get away with talking to you like that?"

"It's only words. I think worse than she says," James replied hesitantly. He glanced away to avoid the inevitable glare he'd get when she replied to that. "She just lashes out sometimes, it's nothing. Jessie will decide whether or not she should be in her life without me interfering."

"It's not you though. She's the one risking her relationship with her daughter. You heard her, she doesn't care if she does," Kathryn argued.

"No, she does. She just flies off the handle occasionally," James countered back. He ignored the almost horrified look he got for it. "You have to do the ceremony."

"I do!?" Kathryn almost laughed at how ridiculous it was. "You say she's all talk but then suggest we give in to her threats."

James nearly cringed, his eyes shut to stop it. "No. To prove you're better than her. I know you are."

"What?" Kathryn could only say.

"You're right, you are not alike. You gave me away for me, not for you. She meanwhile admitted to giving Jessie away and not Dannielle because of selfishness. When we met again you didn't tell me for so long, cos you were worried about how I'd react or how it

would effect me. Rachel waltzed straight into Jessie's life, with no care as to how she was feeling about it. All that mattered was that *she* felt bad, that *she* wanted to see her again. Rachel would not leave her alone until Jessie accepted her. You gave me space when I needed it."

Kathryn's shoulders slumped, her anger then slid from them. "You only have my word on that."

"I believe it. I should have told you sooner," James said, his voice getting lower. "I've forgiven you."

"You don't have to do this, I know," Kathryn said softly and yet hesitantly.

"I wanted to tell you but I waited too long, I was too late," James still said. "You're the craziest woman I know, and no Annika doesn't count. You're blunt, stubborn, naive. At times you're so rude and harsh to people they run away at the thought of you." Kathryn smirked in response. "But when it really matters you put everyone else first. You're strong, brave enough to face any problem, no matter how crazy it is. True you usually come up with an equally crazy plan to deal with it but..."

"I hope this is going somewhere good," Kathryn continued to laugh.

"That day, I wanted to say that I was proud to have you as a mother. Even when you're talking about pixies stealing your last mouthful of coffee, or failing to remember people's names..." James said.

"Well who else took it?" Kathryn asked, sounding only partly serious.

James shook his head. "Or interrupting people. I'm still grateful. I still lov..." This time Kathryn interrupted him with a sudden hug. "You."

"Thank you," she whispered. "I didn't want the only time to be just someone else's memory."

"Chakotay's. Yeah, I forgot I told him," James mumbled.

"*Relax, we're related?*" Kathryn chuckled, she then pulled back so she could look him in the eye.

James pulled a face in response, "it was *chill*. He reacted like I was his competition."

Kathryn's smile grew, she raised her hand to his cheek. "He was just surprised."

"Surprised yeah, he thought I killed you," James said. His head dipped a little. "That reminds me, there's more."

"You don't have to," Kathryn smiled warmly at him as her head shook.

"I'm sorry for everything I did to you and said, when I found out. There's no excuse for it. Before you mention one, I'm not just talking about when I turned." There was the faintest glint in his eye, she wasn't quite sure what it meant, it didn't look like the usual guilt despite the topic.

"You had every right to be upset," Kathryn said.

James stepped back a little, her arm had no choice but to fall back to her side. "Not like that. The things I said were just to hurt you back and keep you away. I don't normally think that way, I want you to know that so you're not as ashamed..."

"I'm really not. I'm proud of you. Most of all I've more than forgiven you, so you don't have to apologise," Kathryn said.

"I wish you wouldn't. It's more than I deserve," James said close to a whisper.

Kathryn studied him carefully before answering. "Maybe someday you'll open up to me, tell me what happened that traumatised you so."

He was confused by the comment, as to him it came out of nowhere. "I'm not... I don't want to talk about dad." Even just speaking of his father made him sound so afraid, Kathryn was angered by it. She didn't want him to think it was directed at him so she kept it buried.

"If only it was *just* that. There's more, more that you refuse to even acknowledge. What are you afraid of? That someone will feel sorry for you, or try to help you?" Kathryn said. "A good example was ten years ago, when you closed the anomaly that second time. You came back distant, unsure of yourself, tense. It made no sense to me why with the story you told me. Worst of all you had injuries that didn't match your story either. Injuries you tried to hide that nearly killed you."

James seemed like he was shaken to her for bringing that up. "I was hiding in a demon infested Voyager on my own for two weeks, that's all."

"I suppose you'll deny that something happened when you confronted Nathan as well," Kathryn said bluntly.

He turned away so his back was on her. "I should get back. Amy needs to be dressed, baby needs feeding. Lena will be annoyed, thinking I abandoned her with..."

Kathryn quickly put a hand on his shoulder, she felt it tense. "You don't have to tell me, just as long as you tell someone. You'll never get better if you continue to stack up the trauma."

"You'll do the wedding, won't you?" James questioned.

"If this is your way of avoiding your issues then..." Kathryn said forcefully.

James meekly looked over his shoulder. "It's the opposite." He turned fully around when he noticed her head moving side to side. "As long as it's there, it's in the way. Please..."

"I don't think..." Kathryn began to argue.

"For me," James finished saying, very quietly like he was ashamed to say it.

"Only if you promise me one thing," Kathryn said.

"That I work on getting better after, I know," James said.

Kathryn stared at him looking puzzled, and a little wary. "No, I mean yes I want that, but no. Promise me you're not asking this because of her intimidating you."

James seemed to be staring straight at her, but his eyes appeared to be on another part of the ship. "No. I'm not."

"No I won't promise, *I'm not* promising that, disguised as no I'm not intimidated," Kathryn said impatiently. She followed it up with a sly smile. "You must think I was born yesterday."

Now he was truly looking at her, she thought she was imagining the tiny spark of mirth in his eyes. "For once I wasn't doing that. I promise." Her eyebrow raised like she was hinting for something. "I mean I promise it's not because I'm afraid of Rachel."

"Better. There's hope for you yet," Kathryn said, patting his arm.

The Enterprise:

"Jessica, come out. It's almost time!" her mother's shrill voice managed to get through the walls.

Jessie mouthed her name much to her daughter's amusement. It took her mind of their shared predicament for a few seconds. "I'm sorry, this is the best I could think of on short notice," she said.

Sasha glanced down at the dress she was forced to wear. It wasn't showy in the slightest, just a simple white number that went down to her knees. Underneath it was a pair of very light purple leggings they both hoped Rachel would think were tights. Not that it made a difference, it was more of a comfort thing. It was missing something, reminding her of another reason she disliked dresses so much, they usually neglected something on the top half to help with the contrast. She quickly hurried over to the replicator, then she hurried back with two ribbons in her hand the same colour as the leggings. Using one she tied her daughter's curly black hair into a loose pony tail.

"Hmm, what do you think?" Jessie asked her, pointing to the mirror.

While Sasha ran over to the mirror, Jessie did the same thing with her own hair. Sasha ran back over, Jessie worried as she didn't look too impressed.

"I know, I need more time than five minutes to..." she started to say.

"It's nice mummy. Much better than grandma's," Sasha replied.

Jessie sighed in relief, "well then, we'd better show our faces. Do you remember your fake smile?" Sasha responded with an obvious forced grin. "Good, we're gonna need it." She stood up and held her hand out. Sasha took it, then Jessie lead her out of the room they were in.

In the next room Rachel was waiting, wearing a ridiculously over the top bridal gown. It was so frighteningly pink the two girls felt the need to squint. Standing with her was a suited man they hadn't seen before standing almost military straight. The cheeky smile on his face ruined the look he was obviously trying to make, instead he just looked cocky.

"Ah don't you two look..." Rachel said then hesitated, she looked a little disappointed. "Well you're always pretty, so that's fine."

Jessie rolled her eyes. "I was worried the white would be too eye catching. At least it's not eye catching on fire."

Sasha giggled behind her hand. Rachel just frowned, either not getting it or not impressed. "This is Ray Burke, the best man I was telling you about." Her hand gestured to the man. "Ray, obviously this is my daughter Jessica and little Sasha." The scowl on her daughter's face only made her laugh. "Oh, she prefers Jessie so use that if you don't want your ear chewed off."

Ray casually shrugged. "That I can live with." The smile he followed up with made Jessie shudder in disgust.

"Ray here was one of our last remaining Security officers on the Enterprise. He and I are very good friends," Rachel explained.

"Mum, we're just going to be walking down an aisle for twenty seconds," Jessie said.

Rachel laughed while turning to her companion, "didn't I tell you, a little wiseacre. Takes after her mother."

It was Jessie's turn not to look impressed. "I'm sure I'll master tactless in no time."

"It's time," Ray said directly to Rachel. Her face brightened up and she hurried over to Jessie and Sasha.

"Oh, I've been waiting for this day for so long," she said excitedly. "Let's run through it. Sasha will go first with the..." Her eyes widened in shock. She hurried to the opposite side of the room to grab a basket filled with flower petals, then hurried back to give to Sasha.

"Er, I'm not sure if she got my flower allergy, maybe..." Jessie stammered as she reached to take the item away from her daughter.

Rachel waved off her concerns like they were nothing. "Silly, they're replicated. Besides, only one way to find out."

Jessie still went to take it when Sasha raised the basket to give them a sniff. She only pulled a disgusted face afterward. "Smells like Neelix's soup." Since she wasn't sneezing Jessie pulled her hand back, though the smell comment still made her consider it.

"Okay, when I tell you, you will go first to scatter the petals. Then you can stand at the front beside Antony, okay?" Rachel said to Sasha.

She looked up at her mother fearfully, "on my own?"

"It's only twenty seconds," Rachel said, mimicking her daughter's earlier comment.

"I still don't get why you only chose Sasha. Having Amy and or Duncan with her, would have settled her nerves," Jessie said. She looked ashamed afterwards, "though it's bad enough that Sasha's here."

Rachel turned to Ray, "listen out for the music cue we talked about. You and Jess walk down. Easy peasy." He nodded. "You've definitely got the right ring?"

"Yes, that's yours to give to him," he answered while pointing at the table nearby.

Jessie noticed Rachel hinting toward it with her eyes. "Oh, right. I carry that," she said sheepishly as she hurried over. "It's not a pink box." The box was opened. "Ring isn't giant, tacky, or pink. Yep, this one's definitely for Antony."

Ray smirked at her, "only the very best for our Rach."

Rachel was half tempted to elbow him, she quickly decided against it. "I'm not obsessed with pink. It's my day, stop picking on me," she complained. "Now, off you go. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Let's get this over with," Jessie groaned, following her and still holding Sasha's hand.

The wedding trio looked considerably out of place walking down the corridors, still with a few battle scars and repair kits left scattered on the floor. They were a few metres away when they all stopped. Music could be heard on the other side of the door.

"Music cue?" Jessie asked.

Ray listened for a few seconds. He confidently smiled afterward. "Once this song's over and the next's starting up, that's when she goes."

The grip on her hand tightened, Jessie looked down to find her daughter looking very nervous. "Oh it's okay. Do you remember Grandma Janeway's wedding? Just imagine you're there again with your brother. I'll be with you before you know it. Okay?"

"All right, I'll try," Sasha squeaked.

Meanwhile inside only a dozen or so people were taking their seats. Somebody had taken the time to clean up the place and reorganise all the tables and most of the chairs, so they were stacked out of the way. From the door, all the way up to the sound proof glass doors was a thin white carpet, which the remaining seats were lined up next to. The only thing signalling an altar at the end appeared to be a small podium covered in roses.

Kathryn stood behind it, deep in her thoughts and concerns. The rising music brought her out of her head. She then had a look around while the last person took their seat. Her gaze then focused on the first row where Duncan and Amy were sitting. Duncan was stuck next to the woman from the rehearsal dinner, and unfortunately for him she seemed to be a little broody and thought he was cute. Amy had hidden in his shadow to avoid similar treatment.

Lena and James stood next to Amy, outside of the wedding area, the former carried the portable crib. Lena gave him a little nudge to get his attention, her finger pointed at the two kids. "Are you sure you don't want me to take them now?"

"Aaaw, you're going to be so handsome when you grow up. Yes you are," the woman cooed.

"Eeew," Duncan complained, but that was nothing. Her hand was incoming to pinch his cheeks. He darted out of his chair to his dad and aunt. Amy panicked thinking she was next. Luckily the woman only seemed to be broody for boys and took no notice of her.

"It's not just grandma, her friends are nuts too," Duncan said.

Lena laughed discreetly behind her hand. "Well you'd have to be."

"Aaaw, he's full of spirit, isn't he? You must be so proud," the woman said in their direction. "Oh my, you must have been young when you had him."

Lena looked at James all while resisting the urge to make an old joke as she used to. He seemed to dare her with her eyes. However she got distracted by the woman looking at her and not him. "Are you talking to me?" she asked.

The woman laughed and nodded. "Of course. Parenthood looks like it hasn't been merciful to your husband though."

Lena shuddered, "I second Duncan's eeew, then raise it by a hundred. Eugh."

Duncan rolled his eyes, "nuts and stupid. That's my aunt you weirdo."

The insults bounced off the woman, it just made her laugh. "My mistake. Does that mean this little cheeky man needs a mum?"

Duncan's eyes widened, he ran to hide behind his dad. "Oh god, I'll never be bad again."

"Yeah right," Kathryn whispered to herself just as the music faded out. That was her cue to get ready, or at least look interested in what was going on. Another song began to play.

The door opened. Sasha reluctantly walked through it, following the white carpet. For a few seconds she forgot about the basket of petals. She picked up the first handful when she caught sight of Kathryn, it brought a smile to her nervous face. With petals in hand she waved at her grandmother, sending the petals everywhere. Kathryn smiled and waved at her back.

Half way down the aisle the girl then spotted her dad to the front and far right. She then dropped the basket onto the floor and ran to him. "Daddy, you came." Some of the audience laughed quietly, some thought it was cute. The remaining few and Antony worried that Rachel would make a comment about the two piles of petals in the middle of the aisle.

Sasha didn't care though, she gave her dad's legs a tight squeeze. He briefly glanced at Lena before looking down at his daughter. "You didn't want to come, did you?" Sasha shook her head. "Lena's going to take you to the Holodeck for the day, how does that sound?" he asked.

"Are you and mummy coming?" Sasha asked.

"After the ceremony we'll join you," James answered.

Sasha nodded furiously, "okay!"

"Okay," Lena said less than enthusiastically. She passed James a stare that told him she was worried about something. He tried to give her a reassuring look in return, it seemed to do the opposite. "Don't do anything stupid," she whispered to him. He frowned as she walked away, two out of three of his children following her.

James looked toward Amy still sitting in the seat. "Amy, the park remember?" he said. Amy pouted whilst kicking her tiny legs. James moved forward to pick her up off the chair, then put her down so she was standing. "Sorry."

"No, I could get down," Amy shook her head. "Just waiting for you."

His head turned towards Lena who was waiting by the other exit, then back at Amy. "I'll be there. I promise."

She hesitated, his promise though convinced her enough. She smiled at him before running off to catch up with Lena and her siblings. James waited until they were all gone before sitting down in one of the now free chairs.

Outside Jessie and Ray stood in an awkward silence, waiting for the next cue to tell them to go. Ray kept glancing at her, his face oddly sympathetic.

"It must be tough, huh?" he said finally.

Jessie however was okay with the silence. His question was odd and without context, so she stared at him with a puzzled look. "What is?"

"The wedding," Ray explained but it still left Jessie confused. He laughed good naturedly. "I'm sorry, you probably don't want to talk about it. I just thought that it was poor timing."

Jessie thought she finally knew what on earth he was talking about. She smiled politely back and nodded. "You're not wrong."

"Still, it's a bit crappy to do that today of all days," Ray said.

"Well you know my mum, she likes to be the centre of attention," Jessie said in an annoyed tone while maintaining her polite smile.

Ray was now the confused one. It didn't last, he gasped a little, "god, you knew he was going to do that? What a jerk."

"What?" Jessie snapped more out of annoyance than confusion. Ray only stared at her curiously. "Who and what are you talking about?"

"It's okay, Rach told me, no need to be ashamed. The freak's the one at fault here," Ray said politely.

The music had faded out while he was talking. A new track began to play, all the while Jessie's eyebrow as well as her fist were starting to twitch. "Told you what? I hope for your sake the freak you're talking about is the dress she's wearing."

Ray chuckled nervously, it looked to her like he was nodding as he did. He had held his elbow out in the meantime, hinting she'd take it. "We don't want to be late."

Jessie reluctantly took it, all the while imagining punching him in the jaw. They slowly entered and began their pace down the aisle.

"Don't be angry with me. It was her word, not mine," he whispered to her.

Jessie firmly grit her teeth for the time being. Now there were two people she was imagining being on the receiving end of her fist.

"If you want to talk about it after, it's fine. It's gotta suck putting all your life and soul into a relationship like that, just for him to up and leave you," Ray continued to whisper.

Her head darted to the side he was on, her eyes widened as so many emotions flooded through her. Anger and confusion being the most prominent ones. "Leave? What the hell are you..." she snapped, yet still in a whisper.

"Shhh, it's okay. You'll be much better off without him so I hear. Rach told me how miserable he was making you," Ray whispered.

Jessie stopped abruptly. He had to stop too, he could feel her arm shaking as he looked back at her. "What else has mum told you?"

"Not now," Ray whispered harshly.

"Oh definitely now. Where did she get the idea that James was leaving me?" Jessie muttered. She didn't care that the back row they were standing beside were watching them.

Ray smirked at her, "oh the coward just ran without telling you then?" Jessie stared at him, still shaking but with a deadly look in her eyes. "I'm sorry, at the very least I thought Rach would've told you. Look, from what she tells me you're better off without it."

"That's it. I'm done," Jessie hissed. She pulled her hand away from his arm and turned to walk back to the door.

"Oh for god's... come on," Ray grunted.

He reached out to pull her back. His fingers pierced the skin of her arm, the bones crunched from the pressure of his palm. She cried out from the sudden pain made worse by him pulling her toward him. The shoulder cracked as the arm felt like it was being pulled from the socket. It didn't look like he put much effort into it, but still she was dragged sideways into him. It all happened in seconds, everyone had just looked to see what was happening when the blood from his finger tips started to dribble onto the carpet.

"What's the matter? I thought you'd be used to this," Ray whispered into her ear.

The words chilled her to the bone. The lower part of her arm began to tingle and grow heavy. Where he held her felt like it was burning, while shooting pain from her shoulder and neck spread down to it. She wanted to pull away but she doubted she could, not without risk of further injury.

"Get off her," a familiar voice spoke up from behind him.

Ray chuckled, his eyes sparkled mischievously. Finally he let her go so he could turn to face down the aisle.

Jessie's good hand instinctively flew to her arm where he had grabbed her. She expected the blood and deep scars but she didn't expect to feel a tiny jagged bone pierced through her skin. The image of it made her sick, and a little faint. She still started to turn her head to look.

"Oh you're still here. That's a *shame*," Ray said sarcastically.

Before she could see the damage for herself, Jessie's head snapped forward again. She could just make out James' face over the top of Ray's shoulder, while the latter's back was to her. James' face was a one of shock.

"You're one of the wa..." Before he could finish Ray swung his fist towards his face. Everyone watching expected him to recoil as if he hit a wall, and James not reacting much at all. From Jessie's point of view there was blood, and a lot of it, as James was knocked flying backwards instead. The podium broke some of the momentum, forcing him to land on the floor. Kathryn dashed to one side as it toppled over.

Kathryn wasted no time, she flung herself to the floor to tend to him, all the while tapping her commbadge. "Janeway to the Doctor. Enterprise, Ten Forward. Now!"

Apart from Jessie the rest of the room responded by clattering out of their seats in a panic, then running for the nearest door. Antony made a point of stopping to make safe distanced eye contact with his ex-crewmate and friend. Then he ran for the door Lena had left through only five minutes earlier.

Jessie had forgotten the pain in her arm, all of it was numbed by the shock. She stared open mouthed as Ray seemed to swing back around to face her in slow motion. Seeing his smug, smiling face snapped her out of it. It was very difficult for her to resist slamming her good hand into his face and kicking him in the usual spot. If she did, he'd do the same again, or do what he did to James. That thought was when her head shakily turned slightly so she could see his body splayed on the floor ahead of her, unresponsive in Kathryn's arm.

"James..." the grief, the anger, and the fear blended together to weaken her voice to a mere squeak. "You bastard," she growled more forcefully.

"Please. How many times has he done that to someone else?" Ray sniggered at her.

There was so much blood on James' face. The nose looked shattered. His left eye must have been caught by the attacker's knuckle, as there was a large gash where his eyebrow should be, filled with still oozing blood. She hoped it was her imagination that was playing tricks on her, most of the left side of his face looked flat, almost crushed.

"Never," she managed to say. "He never uses his full strength on anyone." Ray laughed at her for replying, she tried to tune him out.

His clothes were covered in his own blood. She trembled as the corner of her eye caught sight of red clashing against the white near Ray's feet. The contrast made the image so much more difficult. Eye catching. She remembered her mother and her comments then. Her head shook, now wasn't the time. Each step forward, no matter which way she aimed it were blocked and sneered at.

The Doctor had thankfully arrived by emergency transport. He took one look at James before shifting his attention to Kathryn. "He should be in Sickbay."

"I know that!" Kathryn snapped at him. Her head shook, "I called you out of instinct, but when I called the transporter room, they had trouble getting a lock."

"So, incoming only," the Doctor sighed. He knelt down next to them while opening his med kit.

Jessie tried again to get by Ray, he responded this time by a light push to the chest. It hit and pushed her hard to the floor, making her wheeze through her only lung.

"Don't keep wasting your gift on *him*," Ray spat at her.

She clambered backward before struggling to get back up, without the use of her hands. Her good one kept a firm and painful grip on the damaged one, hoping it would stop the bleeding. It still felt hot, she could feel the blood pulsing to the wound. The harder she squeezed it, the less she could feel the bottom of her arm.

Jessie badly wanted to be by James' side, at the same time though she needed answers. She needed to fix this. From the man's behaviour, there was no other choice anyway. Regrettably she turned to run for the door. Ray grunted in anger as he followed her.

The blow to her chest still throbbed, making it difficult to breathe as she ran. Jessie knew she didn't have to go far so kept it up. As soon as she turned the corner leading to the turbolift she almost collided with the person going the other way.

"Jessica? Where are you going..." Rachel snapped angrily until she spotted her daughter's arm. Her eyes widened in horror. "Oh my god, what..."

Jessie swung her uninjured hand into the woman's face and hard, it was enough to make her stumble backwards. The blood on her hand smeared across her face and dripped onto her awful dress. "You bitch! What did you do?" Jessie meanwhile screamed at her. "You fix this right now. You'll never see me again, you understand!"

Rachel's horrified look managed to get even stronger. "Your arm is my fault, how?"

"I don't care about my stupid arm!" Jessie shouted back at her. She pushed her good arm out to push her further back, and to get more blood on her. "That guy, is he really your friend? Did you only invite him to toy with me and hurt James? What the hell is he?"

Rachel groaned in disgust, "oh my god, enough about sodding James!"

Jessie's already fiery eyes flashed in more fury. "Answer me! You were so eager for me to go, is this what you wanted to happen?"

"Of course not. That idiot," Rachel muttered the last two words.

"No of course not. I imagine you wanted your wedding first. You didn't need me after that," Jessie said.

Ray chose that moment to arrive on the scene, Rachel glared at him. Despite his obvious strength he still winced at her. He laughed nervously. "I guess I need to be a little lighter next time. Practice makes perfect."

Jessie's anger was making her shake more than before. "That's it. I knew it." She stared at her mother, "you swapped them, didn't you!?"

Rachel cringed as she looked down to the floor. That was answer enough for her. "You drained James' power." Jessie turned her attention to her attacker. "Then gave it to this creep."

"I'm a creep?" Ray clicked his tongue. "At least what I did to you was an accident."

"Shut up Ray," Rachel growled through gritted teeth.

Jessie's head darted between the two. "Why? Do you hate us that much?"

Rachel's face softened. She tried to approach, Jessie got ready to slap or push her again. "No, no I don't hate you. I'm doing this for you."

Jessie stared in disbelief. "For me? Do I look grateful? Tell her what you did to James..."

Ray answered before she could finish. "Lets just say, red's his colour," he sniggered.

"Undo it," Jessie growled while struggling to hold herself back. "I'll rip you apart you slimy coward."

"Jessie please, this is for the best," Rachel pleaded with her.

"Best for you, you mean. And now you get my name right," Jessie angrily said.

Rachel disagreed, "best for the family, and you. You're just too besotted to see it. He's strung you along all this time. He's the coward."

"Do you hear how ridiculous you sound?" Jessie hissed back.

"You're a threat to him and he knows it. What better way to save his skin?" Rachel continued anyway.

Jessie's face tightened, the look in her eyes were deadly. "Where's the book?"

Rachel scowled at her, "aren't you listening to me?"

"No. The book you used to weaken James. The one you must have stolen from me. Tell me where it is," Jessie demanded.

"The book's not for him!" Rachel snapped.

Ray laughed, "well it is, technically."

Rachel trembled because of her repressed rage. "Seriously, shut up Ray."

"Gimme the book and I'll shut him up permanently," Jessie said.

"Why should I? I did this to spare you the pain," Rachel whined.

Jessie glanced down at her injured arm, which she held tightly with her good hand. It seemed to have stopped bleeding. "Great job so far."

"The Slayer's poisoned your thoughts, he's held you back. No power awareness until you were twenty eight, how ridiculous," Rachel started to rant.

"It'll be in your quarters. Where else would it be?" Jessie said. She moved to the left to get around her mother.

Rachel knew better now than to physically try and stop her. Instead she mumbled a couple of words, creating a barrier to block her path. "I won't let you help him, not anymore. I won't let you disgrace my family further!" her voice rose as she lost her temper.

"Me?" Jessie was surprised, she swung around to confront her. "What have I done? All I've done today is gone to your wedding like you wanted, and tried to save my best friend from you and him!" she shouted while pointing at Ray.

"Maybe you should tell her," Ray said.

Rachel threw him a stare that could melt lead.

"Yes, tell me. After you or I've undone this spell," Jessie snarled.

"That's not happening. It's done," Rachel said bluntly.

"Well so are we. I gave you last chance after last chance, like the mug I am. No more," Jessie said.

"I expected that. It was a risk I was willing to take to protect my precious daughter," Rachel said a little sadly. Tears were even in her eyes. "That's why I wanted you there at the wedding. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Jessie snapped forward, overwhelmingly tempted to hit her again. "All you had to do was accept him! I never asked you to like him. This risk, protect crap is all in your head!"

Rachel laughed bitterly. "I'd sooner die than accept that monster in my family."

The word monster made Jessie's head shake with anger. "I've killed more people in a day than James ever has. He's no angel, I know that, but that doesn't mean he's a monster either. Life isn't black and white, good people and evil people, Rachel."

The use of her name instead of mum made Rachel flinch. "That doesn't mean the black and white colours don't exist, that there's no evil."

"That was hardly my point. James isn't evil, he's not even in the grey area either," Jessie said as calmly as she could manage. "Life's so much more complicated than that. Like me, he's made some horrible mistakes but he's done a lot of good as well. If you condemn him, then you do the same to me."

Rachel stared at her with sympathy. Her hand raised to aim for her cheek, Jessie slapped it away. Her face barely changed. "Oh my darling. You really don't get it, do you? You see and treat him as a Human being. He's not, sweetheart. Perhaps your influence has helped him break the mould sometimes, but it doesn't change what *he* is."

In the corner of Jessie's eye she saw a smirk form on Ray's face. Even still it looked much less obnoxious than Rachel's current expression.

"Look at you, what you're capable of," she whispered gently, pointing at Jessie's arm.

Jessie stared at the hand covering it, she budged it slightly away to finally look at the wound. It didn't look as bad as she imagined, not even close. What looked like holes in her arm, four of them, still bled just not as badly as earlier. The bone she had felt was thankfully no bigger than her finger nail, in between two of the puncture wounds. The worst part was her skin was a hideous shade of dark blue, the arm itself seemed to be thicker than her other as well.

"You're already healing, you see," Rachel said softly. Jessie stared at her bewilderedly while her hand covered the wounds once more. "Don't you remember what I told you? Two twin sisters, two very different talents. While I was more of a natural when it came to offensive magic, my sister was a wonderful healer and support, a protector."

"Why do you think I give a crap about this?" Jessie snapped.

"Between the two of us we could do anything. All of that power at our fingertips. It's why we're split into two, you see," Rachel explained, ignoring her daughter's very impatient glare. "A demon invasion, no problem, up goes a shield. We need something more offensive, how about a thunder strike or fire ball? Need a strength boost? Easy, we have our picks there. Drain something or ask someone..."

"Yeah, I'm sure you asked James very nicely," Jessie said with a lot of venom.

Rachel flinched, "that's not my point. The Enterprise crew had an impossible task ahead of them, so I did my best as offense and support. Without my sister, I think I did quite well considering." She hesitated briefly. "Witches are more common than you think, especially on worlds that need it the most. So answer me this."

"You're insane is the answer to every question you have," Jessie said.

"Why the need for Slayers?" Rachel asked.

Jessie forced a laugh, "really? Game Cubes, Spheres..."

"All things manufactured after the Slayers were created," Rachel said confidently. "My question still needs an answer. Why make a creature that is merely strong, when a witch can adapt to any situation, including a fight with a monster?"

The look on Jessie's face was almost an exact match to Kathryn's whenever she was handed decaf. "So, your problem with James is that there's more people to help fight games and monsters?" She then laughed genuinely, "oh, you're mad that he destroyed your two tower network record in two weeks. If I'm wrong, that's still an answer to your stupid question."

"Is it? We were doing more damage than good on the Enterprise. It also doesn't explain why they severely limited his kind's usefulness compared to witches. Why not make him a warlock?" Rachel questioned. She didn't give Jessie the time to answer, she was finally saying the thoughts she kept to herself for so long. "Why do they turn evil so easily? Doing that to a witch is very difficult. Why only a few? To add insult to injury, why are the Chosens always siblings?"

"Well you said witches are common, so why not some diversity," Jessie started to answer. "For god's sake, that incident a month ago is proof. You couldn't defeat that demon, James did. Yeah sometimes magic can be useful, but in close combat situations

not so much. The few and siblings question, even the evil one, just tells me we're more alike than anything, so why the hostility? Are you really that insecure that you can't share the so called *glory*?"

Rachel's face turned red in an instant, her cheeks bulged, jaw clenched. "Alike!?" she finally spat. "Are you really so seduced by that prat, that you can't see it? Witches protect, defend and fight. Slayers just fight and kill. Witches only turn evil due to freak accidents. Slayers only need to have a bad day and they're rewarded with more power after their first kill."

"Oh my god, I get it. You're racist, prejudice and nuts. Shut it!" Jessie groaned in disgust.

That only fueled Rachel's rage and rant mode further. "Witches are of a vast number, while Slayers are usually in the dozens with two overpowered ones. As you stated, I had no time to cast spells in that fight but the Slayer killed it in seconds. If one got close to one of us, you're right, we would lose. But two of us, three, four?"

"We're not supposed to be fighting each other. Those warlocks were just little boys who play at being men, apparently emasculated by anyone better than them," Jessie tried to cut in.

Rachel barely heard her over the sound of her own voice. "We are always in pairs, a team. The Chosens, the same. That tells me one thing and it's not that we're alike and we should be buddies. It's a yin and yang situation in a way. Two of us, two of them. Good versus evil."

"Good's a bit loose in this case," Ray piped in while looking toward Jessie. She narrowed her eyes back at him.

"Damien's *I'm so great* makes more sense than this. I don't have to listen to your warped opinion. Just lower the shield," she said.

Rachel's temper had faded slightly, "it's not an opinion, it's fact. Think about it. Why Voyager?"

Jessie was more confused than ever. "Why Voyager what?"

"I'm sure it was fate that James happened to end up on the only ship with a fantastical problem. Then of course, the Enterprise was perfectly normal until it ended up in the Delta Quadrant," Rachel said with a self satisfied smile. "That it was a coincidence that the previous generation was mostly uneventful despite the lack of surviving Slayers, if any. That months after a new Slayer is born on Earth, a cube lands on the same little island and takes your father away."

"What?" Jessie stammered as her face drained of colour.

Rachel wasn't too bothered, she looked distracted for a moment. "The last few generations for that matter. Interesting. I hear the Chosens were never seen again pretty early on. Here one lives to his thirties and look at our predicament."

Rachel saw this one coming, Jessie's hand just missed her cheek thanks to pushing back slightly. Jessie then stomped closer, a thunderous look on her face. "You're really reaching. He and Lena are here, they've survived because beings much more powerful

than you thought they were essential. Why go to that much trouble if they were the cause?"

"Yes why would someone go to all the trouble of ensuring two lightning rods are around? Why indeed," Rachel said with contempt.

Jessie remained silent, her head buzzing. Rachel felt relieved that she was calmer, at least until Jessie launched herself at her, pushing her into the wall. Jessie's uninjured arm pressed into her throat. This time Ray stepped forward to intervene.

"So you weaken James, then probably Lena. Then what, your grandchildren? All for some stupid theory!" Jessie shouted into her face.

Rachel looked to Ray, he was unsure if it was a hint to help her or back off. It helped Jessie to notice him coming. She eased her arm back slightly, allowing Rachel to gently touch her aching throat. "And you'll give their power to him. I suppose that part's for fun. It won't fix a thing, just redirect your imagined problem."

"If it means anything, I tried to keep you apart. I tried to warn him away. You love him, I didn't want you to suffer," Rachel said.

"You..." Jessie stuttered in anger. Ray moved as she did, putting an arm in between the two. Unlike his previous attempt to control her, his arm moved lightly toward her to push her and separate them a little. He still got a dirty look in return.

"You'd hurt your own mother, your own kind for him. Other warlocks turned on you because of him. Can't you see?" Rachel found her voice turn to begging without even trying.

Jessie wasn't falling for it. "You're crazy."

"He lures and kills demons, vampires. Softmicron fear him. He kills people, hurts them whenever it suits him. Humans, all humanoids fear and distrust him," Rachel said as if she were reading from a script. Jessie had a feeling she had memorised this speech over and over. "Only others of his kind. What does that tell..."

"Fighting and killing demons, scaring a species like the Soft is wrong now? Okay," Jessie said in a patronising manner.

Rachel growled, frustrated at her daughter. "What's the difference between James and those things that killed half of my crew? Or slaughtered every town, city or village they could find on Erayas?" Jessie was about to answer, Rachel had no intention of allowing her anyway. "Free will. A dangerous thing in a beast created by another beast."

Jessie was stunned. It took her a moment for the words to truly kick in, she hoped she had misunderstood her. "I don't believe this. Do you really believe that Slayers are made by the Softmicron themselves? That's the stupidest thing you've said so far and that's an achievement, I'll tell you."

"First came the Slayers," Rachel continued, unfazed by Jessie's reaction. A dark laugh briefly rang out of her. "Apt name for protectors of the peace, right?" She ignored Jessie's almost bemused stare. "Then came the hordes of monsters, soon after the games. All to give them a *purpose*. The Softmicron don't care about a few won games out of thousands, or a few mutants in a vast cosmos. We saw it for what it truly was. It's a fact that they created their own brand of vampire, a replacement of a dying breed if

you will. That their cubes transported armies. None of these would be possible if every game was lost, correct?"

Heat rushed to Jessie's previously ice cold and painfully prickly blood deprived cheeks. Everything she heard continuously slapped her in the face. So much to say and all she could reply with in a timid voice was, "who's we?"

"We're the last line of defence. What can prevail over the strength of a monster? Brains, cunning, real power," Rachel said to put off the answer a little longer. "Not all of us. Most are ignorant to the truth. For the longest of time our family; your grandmother and grandaunt, their mother and aunt, and so on. We have fought alone against the Slayers and their influence for centuries. Now there's you."

"Me... I married one," Jessie just managed to say, her throat was hoarse.

Rachel looked down, her face painted with sadness. "You birthed two. It's not your fault, it's mine. How could you know? It was too much to ask of you. That's why I chose to do this instead."

Jessie was speechless. Her world crumbled all around her until all that was left were her and her mother, standing in the abyss.

The bleeding had stopped. Gashes were healed. The Doctor still hovered the regenerator over his patient's swollen face when his eyes flew open. As he tried to breathe in, his mouth filled with his own blood. He coughed and spluttered while Kathryn, still supporting him by the shoulders, rubbed his back gently.

"Take it easy, you're okay," she whispered.

"Jessie," he managed to wheeze.

The Doctor continued to treat him without missing a beat, despite his patient's attempt to sit up. However when he got too far he placed a hand on his shoulder. "You've lost a lot of blood. Your skull's still fractured in places. I'm concerned the blow may have done further damage to the chip. The only place you're going is Sickbay." The hologram turned his attention to Kathryn. "Help me stand him up. We'll have to walk him to the closest Sickbay."

Kathryn nodded. She moved only slightly to one side of James, while the Doctor walked to the other still crouched down. They carefully stood up at the same time, bringing James with them. The room around him twisted and blurred for a few seconds. His entire body felt heavier, legs were like jelly. After a couple of steps blood rushed to them.

"What happened, is she okay?" he asked.

"Let's worry about you first," Kathryn said.

James took that as a bad sign. He tried to walk faster to the point he was guiding them, not the other way around. "That man, he tried to kill her before."

Kathryn hesitated, "what?"

"He's one of the warlocks, on Thirteen," James said.

The Doctor had only one thing on his mind so he was a few steps ahead of Kathryn. "We'll call Lena. For now we should get you treated."

Kathryn remembered the Brig visit and the three warlocks in the opposite cell. None of them looked like Ray at all. "Nobody arrested him, why?"

"He was. The four who survived their boss's bar *redecorating* were arrested after," James replied.

"Four?" Kathryn thought aloud.

James took advantage of her second stall, as it created another gap between her and the Doctor, to pull away from them. The Doctor tried to reclaim his grip but James' lack of equilibrium made him stumble forward as soon as his support was gone. He just managed to keep on his feet.

"James, you're hurt, don't!" Kathryn snapped.

It didn't matter. James kept going for the door, feeling far more stable with every step. Although at the same time the pain radiating through his skull increased, it was starting to make him feel sick, as well as ten times heavier. Still he told himself that didn't matter. He didn't want to fail Jessie again.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. The anger she had been feeling drowned underneath the despair. It had to be a nightmare. It was so surreal and horrifying, how else could this be happening? Jessie thought she'd better wake up soon.

Ray stepped backward, allowing Rachel to take a few steps closer to her daughter. "I gave you away. My mother was so angry that I did it. *She'll never be taught our ways. How can she defend herself?* Never in my wildest dreams did I think a Slayer would be Human, let alone meet and befriend you. Almost fate, bringing you two together."

"Stop!" Jessie cried. "I thought it was a coincidence, I don't want to believe in fate. I never thought about how or why you had a book like that, even when a watcher told me it was stolen. I just accepted it as a good thing."

"I'm sure. I didn't want you to know about this. I knew you'd never do it, I had to..." Rachel said.

Jessie's head snapped up, spurned by her fury resurfacing. "You had to? Don't you have any of that free will you whined on about before? How can you be so blinded by this obvious rubbish? James, he's a good man. All he ever wanted his whole life was to be normal and to help protect the weak, like no one did for him."

Rachel wasn't impressed in the slightest, "he seemed to agree with me."

"Of course he did. It's one of the few things he and I disagree on," Jessie said.

"Yet he stays, even when he said he'd do the right thing," Rachel said in disgust.

Jessie's face couldn't get any whiter, her skin prickled as her heart thumped. "You, him," she paused to point at Ray. "You were lying, mistaken."

Rachel gave him a brief glance as well, "my mistake was thinking he could keep his mouth shut until after the wedding. I'm not the liar here. Who told you that me and him were fine? Who said he'd leave, then lingered like a bad smell; the rehearsal dinner, playing happy families, and now the wedding."

"He wouldn't. Why would he lie about that?" Jessie argued.

Footsteps hurried toward them, then they stopped. Ray swung around, fully on his guard. "You can ask him yourself," he said.

Jessie turned her head and was shocked to see James now standing in front of Ray, fortunately out of arm's reach of him this time.

"James?" Jessie said mostly out of fear and worry about his condition, and what would happen to him.

"Tell her," Rachel snarled toward him. "Tell her how you threatened to keep her and I apart, if I didn't do as you wanted. So called keeping the peace."

Jessie ignored her and hurried forward to get to James before Ray could do anything. She was barely behind Ray when a second barrier appeared to block her in. "James, tell me. You wouldn't."

James' eyes drifted over to a smug Rachel, then back to his worried wife. "I pushed both of my mothers away, then I lost them."

"No," Jessie stammered.

"I didn't want you to make that same mistake, just because your mother hates me," James said. "I knew you'd turn her away if you knew."

Her tears freely fell once again. "How long has this been going on? She doesn't just hate you, she's against what you are."

"I know," James said regrettably

"Oh enough, all you cared about was saving yourself!" Rachel growled.

"I don't care about that," James mumbled.

"I do," Jessie objected, her jaw quivered. "You're my friend and my family, my life. I trusted you. You always do this, try to protect me the wrong way. Don't you respect me at all?"

"You never think about me in these decisions," Jessie snapped.

It was James' turn to stare bewilderedly "I do nothing but think about you."

"Yeah safety wise, you never consider how I'd feel," Jessie snapped. "You decide that I'm better off without you, you kill yourself. There's a rift about to kill us, you jump into it. Now this."

The memory brought him pain, physically and mentally. At least it was brief. "They were only words then. I wanted to avoid something like this, keep it as just that; words. I didn't think she'd act on them."

Rachel scoffed, "bull! You asked me to play along, don't lie. You never wanted her to find out."

"If it was about only me, then I would've took that risk," James said, slightly heatedly.

Jessie flinched as the exchange reminded her of what Amy told her earlier. Now it all made sense to her. Maybe at first he wanted to be the neutral party and not influence her relationship with her mother. However when the words escalated to her anti-Slayer attitude, the stakes were upped. He had to protect Duncan and Amy from their own grandmother. One tiny thing could set her off, leading to the situation they were now in. It made her so sick to even be thinking that.

"So much for *oh it's just words*," Rachel mocked him.

"You made your intentions perfectly clear two days ago," James said.

Rachel snorted in derision, ready to respond. Jessie whispered something first, "two days ago? How, when?" she clearly wasn't heard by any of them.

"I only advised you to step back," Rachel then hissed.

James' head turned toward Jessie but he couldn't bring himself to make eye contact with her. "You were going to do it anyway, regardless of what I did." Rachel tensed further, her eyes flared with hatred. "I needed time."

"Well that's up," Ray sniggered. He focused on Rachel, "enough talk?"

She seemed conflicted when she caught her daughter staring at her with pleading eyes.

"Rach... mum please. Do the right thing. Lower the barriers, return the book. Don't do this, you'll lose me," Jessie stuttered.

"It seems I already have," Rachel sighed sadly. She made eye contact with Ray, "it's for the greater good."

Ray laughed, "fun time." He lunged, fist raised. James ducked in time so the attacking hand slammed straight into the wall behind him. Before he could pull it out, James slipped to one side out of the way. Doing so he spotted a small but heavy looking piece of debris lying on the floor. He dove for it. At the same time Ray pulled his hand out of the wall, grimacing at the pain it caused. His body swung around.

"Stop!" Jessie screamed as she slammed into the barrier again.

James attempted to lift the piece of metal, momentarily stunned to be aware of its weight. He managed to do it but not as quickly as he normally would have. It was difficult to swing, it gave Ray plenty of time to grab it and laugh at him for trying.

In his place, James knew what he'd do and exactly what he was capable of. It was the only real weapon he had against him. His hands let go of the debris, expecting the other man to try to pull it aside to toss him on to the floor. Only he didn't do that. Instead it

was swung at him, sharp side first, narrowly avoided hitting him in the head and impaling the wall right next to him. He sneered as if hadn't missed. James had a feeling why, confirmed when Ray's left arm slammed into the wall on his opposite side, blocking him from escaping.

He was far too close to attempt another duck and run. The right hand headed for his throat.

"Wait," Rachel said in a warning tone. Jessie reacted in surprise, Ray only with disappointment. "My daughter can't see this, remember?"

His smile grew, "say no more."

James wasn't going to wait and find out. His knee flew up to his attacker's only real weakness right now. It did the trick, Ray doubled over in pain, his right hand went to in between his legs.

While he was distracted, James prepared to kick him in the head to keep him down. He tried to remember to use the amount of force he only saved for really tough demons. His mind held him back as if he were still the Slayer and his opponent was a regular Human. Even when he brushed that aside, he still hesitated about doing so.

His opponent made him pay for his hesitation, he swung his left arm toward him, striking James in the stomach. The blow pushed him to the ground, back first. James struggled to get back up, he couldn't breathe in without gasping. Still he managed to roll onto his side, his right arm lodged underneath him to prop his upper body up. It was all for nothing though, Ray walked up to him, leaned forward to grab him by the shoulders. He dragged him up to his feet with what looked like very little effort, still they ached from the pressure. Then he slammed him face first into the wall. As he had been leaning more toward his right when he did it, it was that side that hit, sparing his already injured left.

"Leave him alone!" Jessie shouted as her hands slammed into the shield, over and over. Rachel tried to pull her back, each time she resisted by pushing her away.

Ray laughed while grabbing James' left arm. "I could get used to this." He twisted it behind his back. Everyone heard the bones in it cracking and breaking. James was intent on not giving his attacker the satisfaction of a reaction, he kept his eyes closed and his lips firmly shut.

"What did I just say?!" Rachel snapped.

"I think I'm starting to get it," Ray hissed, as he leaned in close. "The power, the control. It's intoxicating."

Even though he was clearly disobeying her, Rachel smiled at the development.

"You get nothing, 'cause that's all you are," James muttered through the pain.

Ray's smile was wiped off his face by the insult. His grip tightened as he pulled him away from the wall. Whatever he was going to do brought his laughter back, it was louder and a lot more obnoxious than before. Jessie and Dannielle had no time to wonder what he was going to do. He roughly pushed his victim back into the wall. Jessie gasped as James was gone, in his place just a cloud of metal dust and the faint image of a hole.

"She doesn't see this," Ray said mockingly, stepping into it.

"See, one day as a Slayer and he's corrupted," Rachel said.

It took all the strength she had left to not lunge at her and hit her over and over. The restraint was making her twitch. "Don't blame it on your stupid spell. He was always a full of himself piece of sh..."

"You haven't seen him without it," Rachel butted in.

"A weak little boy with his first taste of power he doesn't deserve. It proves nothing about James," Jessie growled. "You will fix this, or you'll have a real monster on your hands."

Rachel stared at her in dismay. "He is the monster. De-fanged he is useless. Lied, cheated and murdered his way through life. Look no further than your sister."

Jessie's eyes warned her not to go down that path. "Dannielle? I killed her, not him. Don't start that again."

"Because of him. He caused the rift," Rachel said, tears back in her eyes. "You were supposed to be partners, you and her-"

"You split us up!" Jessie shouted to stop her. "So cut that tears crap out!"

Rachel ignored her outburst and continued on. "To work together, to destroy him and his gobby little sister."

"Well it's a good thing you were as terrible at teaching Slayer Slaying For Gullible Twits as you were picking dresses. 'Cause oh, didn't Dannielle fall for him too?" Jessie taunted her with a forced smile. It was still enough to shut Rachel up. "Clearly your fate friend doesn't like you."

Rachel stomped over to her with full fury. "He seduced her as he did you. He must have known. He kept you close, kept you sweet to keep you oblivious to his dark side. So when he did show it, you'd be too obsessed with him to care."

"Got anymore keeps and kept's in there?" Jessie asked, rolling her eyes. "Now you're trying to convince me that a four year old somehow knew another four year old's barmy mother would turn on him? I bet he had monstrous visions of the crazy lady in the tutu screaming *you're a bad man* from day one. No wonder he never made any moves and I had to do it. That kind of thing would traumatise anyone for life. It explains a lot actually."

Rachel wasn't impressed with her jokes at her expense. For Jessie though it was all she had left to stop her from back handing her. Still Rachel continued to prod. "No, these things sense danger. He already had you wrapped around his finger, but then he met Dannielle. She was so enthralled despite his selfish cruelty to her."

"Hmm, maybe we had something in common after all, besides him. We both thought your paranoid stories were less believable than Fairytales," Jessie said.

"It's in our blood. He managed to fight away any instincts you had of him, but what of other Slayers? Didn't they bother you?" Rachel questioned.

Jessie scoffed, about to answer with another insult when the question hit her in the face. She remembered her hatred and jealousy of Zare. The old days when her and Lena

didn't get along sometimes. Kevin, though that wasn't fair, she wasn't the only one there. All of the reasons she had at the time felt like excuses now. If she didn't answer soon, Rachel would know she had won a round. All she managed to spit out was one word, "no."

Ray cackled with malicious glee as he hurled his victim to the floor. He landed on his front. His hands had instinctively tried to break the fall, the momentum and the strength behind it left them stinging as if he had slammed them palm first into a brick wall.

"All of you freaks should die like this. It's so..." Ray said, trailing off to think. "What's the word?"

James began to drag his body forward using his right forearm and elbow. His right hand moved to press down on the floor so he could push up to his feet. The pain immediately told him no, it recoiled, pulling him back down to where he started. Still, he tried again.

"Oh, poetic," Ray laughed to himself. Then he spotted his victim's efforts. He rolled his eyes, let out a fake huff to make it seem like it bothered him. He merely stepped onto his ankle to stop him, and that it did.

The pain he felt as the other man's weight crushed down on him was mild compared to everything else he was feeling. He already couldn't see anything out of his left eye, the skin around his whole left side had swollen so much it forced it partially closed. His entire face was on fire or so it felt. His brain throbbed in far too many places, he knew it wasn't just the chip doing it. He hadn't felt his left arm since his opponent had twisted it behind his back, he had long since lost the feeling of dead weight.

The trip through the walls had torn at his skin, taken the air out of him, and left his back stabbing at every nerve relentlessly. He thought his previous experiences had helped him endure that a little better, so strangely it wasn't the worst part. Every kick and punch he had delivered since hurt far more. With every one he thought about every person he had been in a fight with, he wondered if this was what it was like for them. Every blow made his guilt hurt more than his wounds. He desperately tried to fight it, telling himself that he never used anything close to his full strength on anyone even when he was evil. It didn't matter. He was stronger than them, he shouldn't have done it. Clearly, Ray wasn't using it either or he'd be dead by now.

Ray delivered a kick to his ribs, but he didn't feel it. He was numb from his own thoughts. A few more; a kick to the leg, stomach and finally a lazy kick to the face pushed him onto his back. He felt nothing. The despair had won again, he found his consciousness slipping into the abyss. What was the use in fighting this? He didn't deserve to. His eyes slowly shut, accepting it.

"Don't give up," a girl's voice whispered.

The voice had grabbed him at the last second, it brought him abruptly out of his fall for the time being. The voice was familiar, it was painful. It shouldn't have been possible. He realised the chip must have chosen now to mess around with him again, so he tried to pretend it never happened.

Its owner then clicked their tongue, scoffing immediately afterward. "This guy, he's a tool. You're better than this." It was sharp and it was coming from his left. Even though he was determined to ignore it, his head turned. Through the tiny crack in his left all he

could see was a light blur, almost human shaped. He didn't have to turn his head far to allow his right to see anything. When it did, it widened, the left tried to as well.

The voice had a painful image to go with it. Young, no older than fourteen, blonde with dazzling blue eyes staring right at him. That wasn't what shocked him the most, she greeted him with a smile.

"No? No silly rivalry with the sister?" Rachel said a little too proudly.

"Unlike you, I have rational reasons for disliking people, and brains, and common sense," Jessie grumbled at first until she got going. "And dress sense. And I'm not blind."

Rachel shook her head to show she didn't believe her. "You'll have instincts like I do. Dannielle was likely drawn to him not out of love, but she didn't know and got confused. You, you were very young and he played you. You've met plenty of these things, you'll have sensed something off about every single one. Name one you haven't."

"Duncan," Jessie snapped in reply. Rachel reacted by turning a little pale in the face. "My only living son. I can't imagine my life without him. I'd do anything for that little boy," she said, her voice weakening as a wave of guilt overwhelmed her. "I let him down when he was a baby. I was so scared that I'd fail to protect him, just like before, that I did things I'm not proud of. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to him."

"Jessica," Rachel tried to intervene, her own voice hollow.

"Then there's Amy. Innocent, sweet, affectionate, caring. Another one I let down because of fear. Fear that I wasn't good enough," Jessie trembled, her throat closed up. Why did it have to be them, she thought. Jessie felt like she was proving her horrible mother's point. There was no way she'd admit that to her. The reasons she spoke were the true ones, not that they were that much better. Anything was better than fearing and or hating her own two children. She shuddered, disgust coursed through every inch of her.

"I didn't want to hurt you," Rachel said.

Jessie snapped out of her thoughts to scowl at her. "What did you think you were doing? Bonding with me!?"

"Your other son," Rachel stammered.

"Don't!" Jessie snapped, her eyes flashed.

"You don't believe in fate, even when it tries to tell you something," Rachel said. Fortunately for her the comment only confused her daughter. "My sister and I. You and Dannielle. Sasha and no one. Amy and..."

"Finish that sentence and I'll use my fist as a full stop," Jessie said icily.

Clearly not taking her threat seriously, Rachel had the nerve to smile sympathetically at her. "Three girls and no twin. Why? Ever wonder why she died?"

"I'm warning you."

"What did her living twin become?"

"Rachel!"

Nothing could put Rachel off, she assumed she was already stuck in the deep end. "Generations of two sisters against the mutations. One blonde freak enters the fray with a couple of sob stories, and the two sisters are killing each other for his affections."

Jessie tried to shout over her once again, "oh so Dannielle and I fighting is why my babies died, is it!?"

"Then finally, through much adversity including that piece of dirt as a father, two sisters finally arrive. As before the Slayer fights back, takes over one, killing the other. Why not? What purpose does she have now?"

Jessie stared at her intensely, the anger bubbling within was ready to boil over onto a burning flame.

"It would be cruel to pit sibling against sibling. I hope I'm wrong about Sasha, poor thing," Rachel still spoke. "After Ray finishes, we deal with Leanne, then perhaps the humane thing to do is to use my spell on Dun..."

That did it. The fire erupted. Her hand flew at her mother's face so quickly she didn't have time to finish curling it into a fist. Fingernails scratched down her cheek. Not content with that she back handed her immediately. Rachel tried to protect herself from the attack, Jessie's arm moved far too quickly for her to do anything but occasionally collide with her arm. Not deterred Jessie kept hitting her, harder and faster each time.

"How could you? You selfish, evil bitch!" she screeched at her while doing so. "I hate you! I wish you were dead, you vile waste of oxygen! Undo the spell, right now!" By the time she finished shouting, her leg was joining in the attacks; stamping on her foot, kicking her in the shin and knee.

"Jessica," Rachel stuttered, trying desperately to block the ruthless blows. "It's not my fault he did this. Stop, you don't mean it. He's..."

Jessie had more than enough, she pushed her hand forward to slam the woman hard into the wall. It was much further behind her than the previous time, so she stumbled first before she hit it.

"Fine, I'll do it," Jessie snarled.

"I was never going to get you to kill him, that's my fault and burden. But I won't let you..." Rachel stuttered painfully.

Jessie walked up to her to stare coldly into her eyes. One final swing to the nose knocked her to the ground, and unconscious. Her hand relaxed as it reached out to where the barrier was before. She callously stepped over her mother's body to walk down the corridor without looking back.

The strikes had stopped, the pain had numbed. James knew why. It was the only way the image before him made any sense. He was dying, or dead already.

"Debb..." he wheezed. Only then he realised he was wrong. It still didn't explain the girl standing beside him. He had no chance of seeing her again, even if he could, she wouldn't want him to. It couldn't have been anything else but the chip in his brain.

The girl's gaze turned away for a split second. Disgust and anger were hiding within the blue when she brought it back. "You must fight back, you're so much stronger than he is."

This couldn't be a memory, the scenery around them was still the Enterprise corridors. The chip was damaged, possibly failing along with him. It made no sense otherwise. "No, not anymore," he said anyway.

"I'm not talking about physical strength," the girl spoke.

She crouched down so he got a closer look at her. The smile was gone, worry was all over every inch of her face. The girl only ever smiled around him, it was what he remembered most about her, that it made him briefly wonder if she was real. The thought was immediately swiped away. Nathan's memories of her were a part of him now, he knew better than that.

"There's a reason why you were picked for this over schmucks like him," the girl continued. "No matter how tough it gets, you never give up, you fight until the bitter end." The last sentence her voice cracked slightly, "at least you used to."

James didn't know what to think. What was the point of this?

"Dad, he knew it too," the girl continued.

Now he knew the chip was just messing him around, possibly trying to encourage him to get up and get injured quicker. He slowly turned his head back to try and block it out.

"He was jealous. You represented everything he wanted to be." An air of desperateness filled her voice. "You have to understand something. Long before you were born, dad was kind and funny. He wasn't perfect, he was still blunt and a little old fashioned, but he believed that the Taylors were in dire need of change. He stood up to his father on multiple occasions. Mum and I respected him, I looked up to him. He believed in individuality, while his father always accused him of weakness."

That didn't sound like the Peter Taylor he knew. There was no way he was ever like that. Still, James was curious about where this was going. Most of all, he was becoming less and less convinced that this was the work of the chip. He still wasn't sure of exactly what it was. He just knew this couldn't be who she appeared to be. If it was a hallucination caused by his blood loss and injuries, it was strangely lucid.

"You want to know what changed his mind," the girl said not as a question, she was going to tell him anyway. "One punch."

James internally flinched. His father was stubborn. If he were like how she described in the past, it would take so much more to change him.

"One punch turned dad into a Taylor. I didn't see it, mum didn't either. Dad told us this story, laughing at it over tea that night," she said in disgust. "*I hit my father straight*

back, we laughed. Tussled around for ten minutes, I won of course. Then my old man shook my hand. He was so proud, like it was some sort of right of passage between a father and son. Mum and I knew the truth of it."

Until now it all felt so made up, like it was a tale about another man. The image of his father exchanging blows with his own and then laughing at it later, while his daughter and wife looked on in horror, that fit his image of him. It just made the first part even less convincing.

"Dad was weak. He didn't want to disappoint his father any further, deep down he feared him, so he succumbed. Suddenly he was obsessed with the family name and what it meant. One day I was daddy's little girl, the next I was just a worthless woman who would later marry and take another man's name."

What little blood he had left drained from his face, dread built up in his chest. He knew what she was going to say.

"He needed a son." There it was. He never imagined that his father's obsession with him carrying on the Taylor legacy would have affected his sister. *No, it's not her*, he reminded himself. Everytime his sister and father were together, he doted on her exactly like he did with his own kids. He remembered always wondering why he never treat him like that. *Not always*, that wonder eventually turned into a hope that he would leave him alone for one damn day. He got his wish once, but only because he had been locked in his own wardrobe.

James tried to brush those selfish thoughts aside. He'd seen for himself that he wasn't the victim in all of this. The girl this hallucination had taken the form of was. That's what the story was about and as usual he'd turned it around to another tale of woe about himself. His distaste for everything he was made him shake his head ever so lightly. He had shut his eye to hide any shame he had left over.

He felt the presence of a hand hover over the less damaged side of his face, the warmth from it was momentarily soothing. He didn't deserve it, he turned his head further to the right to stop it. He heard a frustrated sigh from his left.

"He thought you'd be just like him," the girl's voice whispered.

"Well he was right in a way. You reminded him of who he was before he gave up. He couldn't stand it, you were a slap in the face to him. Then we found out about your *gift*. You got something he desperately wanted. *Why did it have to be him?*" Her voice had picked up, the next words out of her she put on a mocking tone. "Translation, *but I changed because dad said this is how real men act, only real men get picked*, boohoo."

James turned his head back, his right eye opened, the left still struggled. His doubts about who or what this was were wavering. This girl was so much like the Debbie he knew so many years ago. The same girl who always made him laugh by making fun of their cruel dad, distracting him temporarily. The doubts about her being here one way or another tried to come back. If it was really her, why was she talking to him like this? Didn't she hate him for what happened to her? Blame him at least? He wanted it to be her even if it was a possibility he was only seeing her because he was slowly dying from his injuries.

She smiled weakly at him as if she had heard what he was thinking. "He tried to bring you down to his level, but he couldn't. One punch to a grown man and he changes his whole outlook on life. Two years of abuse on a two to four year old, and he clings onto

who he is, even though he knows that it would stop if he didn't. Who was the weak one in this story? And you know what, I think he always knew the answer to that, he knew it was why you were picked and he wasn't.

"That's why. He ruined his own marriage before you were even on his mind, not you. He alienated his daughter, his actions were what hurt me. He was the one who raised his fist at a child time and time again. Don't make excuses for that coward."

Their eyes met, hers filled with determination and what looked to him like pride. "This is what he wanted, Jay. He wanted you to give up like he did, so he could say *I told you so*. Please don't give him that satisfaction. Don't let him win." She looked away, James assumed toward Ray. "Don't let *him* win. He's not a Chosen, you are. Show him why."

Echoed footsteps approached. The voice he heard started out the same and a little blurry, then it became clear. "... give up? You know, I wonder if I can keep it when you're dead? Your wife's pretty cute, in a deadly bitch kind of way. Wonder if she'll fancy me like this."

He was standing to his right, his fist clenched and ready to be used. James looked back to his left with his only good eye. The image of his sister had vanished, but her words hadn't. The fist flew towards his head. James rolled away quickly before he could hit. The fist went straight through the ground, sparks flew hinting that he hit something he shouldn't. Large pieces of metal was torn, still attached at the base of his fist. Ray grunted as he tried to pull it out without shocking himself further. Doing so he dragged some of the metal shards with him, scattering them at his feet.

The pain was forcing its way back as James dragged himself to his feet. It was only going to get worse if he didn't. Ray meanwhile straightened up as well, cradling his bloodied hand. He forced a smirk through the pain, it wasn't very convincing as instead it looked like he was about to cry.

"It's okay. I welcome more fun," he grumbled through gritted teeth. Then he lunged forward to attack again, swinging his left hand at him instead, seemingly opting to give his painful one a rest. James dodged him by pulling back slightly. He tried to hit him with the right after all, James ducked this time. Ray expected it and swung his leg out instead. To his annoyance his victim expected his response and rolled under his leg out of harm's way.

He swung around, grunting in frustration as James stood back up next to the new hole to face him.

"Stop being a little wuss, and fight like a man for once," Ray snarled.

To his surprise James smiled with derision. "If that's what you want, dad."

"What? Are you brain damaged?" Ray sniggered.

James shrugged, he stomped his good foot onto one of the largest bits of metal on the ground. It flew up for him to catch. "Yeah a bit."

Ray laughed at him again, he lunged forward, fully expecting him to swing it at him like the last time. Instead James lowered it and flung it around the back of his legs mid jog. He lost his balance and fell backwards onto the ground. Ray immediately rolled to his side to get up, more embarrassed than hurt from the attack. When he was sitting up

right, James then decided to swing it at his face like he expected before, as hard as he possibly could.

Not only was it enough to knock him back to the ground, the uneven surface of the metal sliced his face from his ear down to his mouth. The pain from it, and the sudden loss of blood stunned him into not getting up right away.

"Since we're sharing, now you do," James said. He frowned as he noticed the other man started to shake, his eyes were wide while his hand covered his new wound. "Really? Being the Slayer's not so fun now, is it?" he snapped.

He was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of warmth covering his entire body. The pain began to ease, his assumed broken ankle was able to handle his weight better, his head felt clearer. The most telling thing was the piece of metal in his hand felt so much lighter. Now he understood Ray's change in demeanour.

"Hey, I'm sorry," Ray stuttered. "Got a little crazy, drunk on power. You're obviously too used to it for that to happen. Kudos."

James stepped closer, clutching the metal tighter, his good eye narrowing. Ray stumbled back, bracing himself for the worst.

"No please! Don't hurt me. The spell, it made me someone I'm not. I swear," Ray continued to plead.

James stared for a while longer. Watching the idiot squirm was more than enough payback for him. He already pledged he'd never use his strength to hurt anyone ever again. Getting a taste of his own medicine was a little too late. His hands loosened so the metal dropped to the floor.

"You know where the brig is. You've got an hour," he said.

Ray nodded rapidly. "Yes, okay. Thank you."

James turned to walk, or rather limp away. Ray didn't wait for very long, he got up as soon as his back was turned. He also grabbed the metal while doing so. His smile was back as he pushed it forward, plunging the long and sharp piece of metal into James' back right when he was looking behind him.

There was no pain, only a burning sensation pooling around his centre. He looked down as the rest of his body grew cold, he could hear his heart thumping and nothing else. The metal had gone straight through him, the tip was as long as his palm, covered in his blood.

He was wondering how he could possibly have that much left when he dropped to the floor.

"Hmm, simple. Should have done that first," Ray chuckled. His eye had followed his fall, he hadn't noticed that a figure had been hidden behind James' shadow. Now that he was down, she was in full view. He did a double take. In his point of view she was only the woman from the wedding, pointing something at him. He only realised it was a phaser when it fired toward him. His body hit the ground seconds later.

James had no idea what happened. He heard Ray make a comment, then a phaser shot. His vision was narrow, all that he could see from his position was the grey of the walls.

What little was left of his energy had all but gone, so he couldn't manage turning his head to witness anything.

He thought he heard somebody running toward him. His eye blinked, turning everything black for a moment. When it opened the grey had gone. All he could see was a friendly face, fraught with worry, mouthing something he couldn't make out. Her face grew closer. A faint feeling of someone's arm just above his shoulders was the last sensation he noticed before his eyes shut one more time.

Voyager:

Kathryn resorted to tuning the voices and sounds out so she could quietly fume in peace. If she didn't it was very likely that everyone and thing in Sickbay would be insulted, or in some cases broken. One particular patient lying nearby being tended to by a couple of blue shirts wouldn't be that great a loss. The source of most of her anger was right there, the rest was reserved for the hologram who just had to help him.

That wasn't true. The true reason for this entire mess wasn't the lackey or the hologram programmed to do no harm. It was a woman she had unfinished business with.

It was then she realised the Doctor's voice was being directed at her. He was looking at her at least. "... Just in time, or we wouldn't have been able to get him here."

Kathryn saved her worst skunk eye for situations and stupid comments such as that. The Doctor had to look away. "Yes, the timing of those barriers finally going down was perfect. Right when the murderous overcompensating asshole here finishes the job."

"In regards to the transporters working," he said nervously.

"Just in time would have been when this all started in Ten Forward," Kathryn said as she stared at the primary biobed. The Doctor wasn't the only one busy there. It made her a little nervous that he brought Nikki and Naomi in to treat even the minor wounds. He meanwhile was focusing on the patient's head, his hands were both holding medical tools that were new to her. A tray sat nearby with many more waiting for him. "It's obvious that the barriers we kept hitting were what was blocking outgoing transport. She didn't want anyone getting off the ship."

The Doctor agreed, he showed that with a small nod. "Perhaps a change of heart, or a *persuasion* from Jessie got the culprit to lower them."

"I should've killed her when I had the chance," Kathryn muttered, her eye casting back to the other patient.

"No," the Doctor blurted out with dismay.

Kathryn knew that was coming, she grunted. "Some people just don't deserve to live, Doctor. I'm sorry."

"Is that why your phaser was on kill?" the Doctor dared to ask.

"You saw what he did, what he was capable of. I wasn't taking any chances," Kathryn explained even though she knew it was a lie. At least partly. "He doesn't deserve your empathy, or anyone's mercy. Some people will see those traits as weaknesses, and use them to stab you in the back."

The Doctor couldn't help but wince at her choice of words, knowing the patient before him suffered a very literal version of it. She must have known that. It was the final wound he sustained. It was possible she found him after it was delivered. Not after those words, unless she was assuming what happened before the fatal blow. It didn't matter. Her anger was justified and reasonable. It was her bitterness that left him puzzled.

"The wound to the stomach has been sealed, he's responding to the blood transfusions. My two volunteers are working now on healing the broken bones," he said. An icy stare was directed, which he quickly guessed why. "Naomi and Nikki should be almost done with the abrasions. I meanwhile have reduced the swelling from his facial injuries, they're all but gone. There's still significant brain trauma but I'm confident that I can heal the majority of it, it's just..."

"The chip," Kathryn's said uncomfortably, her eyes shifted away.

The Doctor's right hand swapped one tool for the tricorder without even looking at either of them, his thumb pushed it open so he could use it. "I didn't detect any activity when I resuscitated him, the damage wasn't related to it. I am concerned about the wound to the temple bone, it may have aggravated the original injury caused by the hypodermic needle. I'll check now to put you at ease."

Kathryn's arms folded tightly, she couldn't seem to focus her attention on anything, eyes darted all over. "That won't be necessary."

"It will only take a moment," the Doctor said with a friendly smile. The small separate part of the tricorder was picked up while another tool was still in his hand, with only two fingers. A quick scan over one darkened scratch on the right temple of James' head, changed his demeanour instantly. He slowly looked up towards Kathryn with a tense expression on his face.

Kathryn stared back with barely a one herself. "I told you it wasn't necessary."

"Captain..." the Doctor stammered. He didn't get a chance to finish, he was distracted by movement coming from the biobed. He glanced over just in time to see his patient's eyes groggily opening. "It's all right now. You're in Sickbay."

As they all expected, James tried to sit up. The Doctor placed a hand on his shoulder to hint to lie back down. Nikki decided to chime in as well with an arm touch, Naomi raised her eyebrow at her for it. Nikki responded with an innocently mimed *what*.

"Jessie?" James mumbled as he looked around. "Is she okay?"

"Yes," the Doctor replied, earning himself another scowl from Kathryn. Fortunately James couldn't see that and so he lay back down. Noticing that Nikki still had a hand on his arm, the Doctor gently tapped it to get her to move it. "You should be fine, but we still have a lot of work to do. No running off."

James nodded, he looked disappointed about it though. "No problem, Doc."

"Ok, I'll be right back, excuse me," the Doctor said. He headed over to Kathryn with the open tricorder still running the same scan in his hand. "I do what I have to, to keep him here."

"Oh how very Hippocratic oath of you," Kathryn hissed at him.

"You asked for a search party to look for her so she can be treated. All I'll do by telling him that is encourage him to join it," the Doctor whispered.

Kathryn sighed, her frustration temporarily floated out with her imagined breath. Her gaze settled on James as his head leaned to the left, a worried look on his face. "I'm sure he won't find it odd that she's not here with him when she's *okay*."

"I would imagine he'd find it odder that the chip symptoms are no longer bothering him. Let's not concern ourselves with *trivial* things," the Doctor said back with a little bite.

He was relieved that she didn't stare him into oblivion for that remark. Instead she merely frowned, her eyes downcast. "You're right. The only way this could've ended was if Jessie intervened."

"Changing the subject, all right, do you have a point other than that?" the Doctor said.

That one sparked a pair of narrowed eyes. "Rachel is missing too." The Doctor stared at her, patiently waiting for the point still. "It's odd for the bride not to show up at her wedding, especially if she organised a little surprise for her daughter to kick it off."

"You don't know if she had anything to do with it," the Doctor said.

Kathryn stared at nothing with contempt, her nose slightly turned up. "I said if, even though I know there's no if about it. She never walked in to find the only guests left were either bleeding or trying to stop said bleeding. She couldn't have missed the violence happening not far away outside."

The Doctor nodded, his face brightening with realisation. It didn't last, he was confused and slightly mortified instead. "You're not suggesting..."

"No, but a girl can hope," Kathryn said as her eye cast back to her injured son. From where she stood he seemed to be more sad than worried. She turned back to the Doctor. "We have to tell him."

"Everything?" the Doctor questioned with his eyebrow raised.

"As you said, he'd probably notice mine. However yours probably just made him feel worse," Kathryn replied.

"It's okay," they both heard James say from the biobed. They slowly glanced over. The Doctor cringed, instantly worried about how much he heard. Kathryn just realised somewhere along the line the pair of them had stopped whispering, she wondered whose fault it was. "I didn't expect her to be here just for me. I only hope she's all right."

The Doctor and Kathryn shared an equally concerned look. Kathryn ended hers with a one of uncertainty.

The heavy book landed on the floor with a loud thud. Three more lay in a half hazard pile right next to it. With her hand trembling Jessie reached into the book case to grab another one. There were still two more other than that. Just looking at them were making her angry. Instead of pulling them out one at a time, her arm reached around the back of them so she could push them straight onto the floor. Two fell open on top of

the others, while one dropped onto her toes. She let out a frustrated cry as she moved her now sore foot to get it away from her, then she kicked it with her other. Its weight didn't let it stray too far.

It didn't matter. She reached for a small contraption on a different shelf. One little nudge opened it, another sparked a tiny flame. Seeing it made her shudder, she hesitated as her eyes drifted down to the books on the floor. Her fury flooded back, snuffing out the hesitation. Before it had a chance to come back she tossed it onto one of the open books. The flame quickly spread across the page.

The nearby door opened, the brief gust of air that accompanied it spread it further down onto another book that was closer to her. Jessie flinched and double backed a few steps to get away from it, only then noticed the figure at the door hurry inside.

"No, don't," she stuttered as he stepped forward to stamp out the flames. "James, why? No good comes from these things!"

Satisfied the fire was out, James stepped back onto the carpet. He was about to walk around the books when Jessie knelt down to pick up the fire starter, with her sleeve covering her hand. It still was too hot so she had to drop it.

"Please don't do this Jess. You may need the books someday," he said desperately.

Jessie's eyes shot wide open, her mouth as well, all out of disbelief. Her head shook. "Did someone wipe your memory while they were treating you?"

James focused on her left arm. It had improved, all that was left was a large bruise where the wounds had been. She was still covered in her own blood though, which unnerved him far more. "I see no one's treated you."

"Who cares?" Jessie grunted. Her covered hand reached for the device again. James knelt down as well to reach it. Before their hands could collide, she recoiled. Her hand then moved to pick up the book that had been alight for a few seconds, gesturing it toward him. "You know what this is? It's more than just a book full of *neat* spells."

"Jessie..." James said gently to hopefully calm her down.

It just made her flare up further. "Don't you remember? It was the one with that little spell used to steal the strength and other abilities from a Slayer. Good thing I forgot that Wesley still had his copy, huh, since you're here." Angry tears were in her eyes.

"It's just one spell that was misused. There's no need..." James tried again.

Jessie shook her head. Quickly she flicked through the pages of the same book, stopping at some random page. A quick scan of it made her purse her lips in frustration. Then she swung it around so the contents were in James' sight. "What do you know. History of Evil, and a nice little spell that lures a darkened soul into an inanimate object. That's kinda familiar. Hmm, the page is curled slightly, must have been a riveting chapter."

His face lost its recently reacquired colour again. She merely brought the book back to flick through the pages, stopping at random again. "Oh, here's the one I used on you inside Death Corridor. Looks like Rachel made a few recent notes to the page. It's just random Latin dribble to me." She skipped to another page, her eyebrow raised. "For a book that belonged to the watchers, it really goes down the Slayers are bad route. Is this what Ligod was yapping about when he said power comes from evil. Load of crap."

"We... it doesn't mean we need to burn it. Destroy one sure, but we can hide the other. There maybe other copies so we may need it again," James argued.

Jessie stared at him, looking far too mad to be really puzzled. "You seem awfully eager to keep a witches handbook that paints you as the devil. I don't get it."

James returned her stare, his though was really confused. "No, I don't either. You said it belonged to the watchers."

"Apart from one of these, they probably did for quite a long time," Jessie mumbled and then sighed. She looked away to avoid eye contact with him. "You heard it right? How my mum felt about you, what she believed. You knew she wanted you dead before she said anything. That chip did something useful for once."

"Exactly, what *she* believed in. It doesn't mean you should destroy all of the books. It has nothing to do with who you are," James said.

Jessie's anger and despair clashed, leaving her in tears and making her bitterly laugh at once. "It wasn't just mum. My whole family. They all believed in this stupid handbook saying Slayers are evil, tools of some kind. Demons that need to be destroyed. Mum's..." she gestured to the book, "is different to Wesley's. There's notes written by different people. Moron after moron adding their new twisted ideas on how to snuff a life they didn't understand."

James' face painted a picture of complete disbelief. He was starting to feel like how she probably did; angry, confused, devastated. He refused to believe it was true, he found himself shaking his head without realising, his eyes widening. "No, it's not right..."

"The watchers probably knew of the threat and managed to steal these books. I think Wesley said two centuries ago, only he worded it differently. All but one of course," Jessie said, her voice trembling too.

"Jessie..." James could only mumble.

"We're supposed to be enemies." Jessie bit her lip as she was almost laughing at how stupid it was, despite how painful it felt. "Dannielle and I versus you and Lena."

"No," James shook his head. "You don't believe in any of this."

Jessie's eyes fell to the damaged book. Her fingers began a slow crawl down one of the pages, tearing it. Her body shuddered in revulsion, the temptation to throw it away was too strong. Before she could James reached out to gently take it from her. "I've been thinking about that. My behaviour when I was evil. It always came down to a fight between you and me. That first time, Lena and..." she struggled to finish.

"You can't count something you did when you weren't yourself," James pointed out.

"A bit rich, coming from you," Jessie said, flipping her eyebrow. She climbed to her feet and began to pace in a small area in front of the books. "I hated Zare."

"You were jealous, that's all," James said uncomfortably.

Jessie rolled her eyes, they lingered for a moment. "Because she was a Slayer. Yeah I told myself it was something huge she had in common with you, but..." She looked

disgusted with herself, "I was even intimidated by Lena at one time. She was what, sixteen, seventeen years old. What was I worried about?"

James hesitated before asking his next question. He waited for her to be facing him. "What about me?" It stopped her in her tracks, eyes glistening.

A heavy feeling pressed against Jessie's chest, she breathed in deeply and out to try to settle it. It didn't, she tensed and folded her arms. "You know, I understand now. I was standing there, defending you like I always did. There was no doubt in my mind that everything flying out of that woman's mouth was rubbish. The moment I'm alone I think about Zare, turning evil, completely ignoring everything else. I think I'm as bad as her. I'm seeing my family's crimes as my own."

James stood back up so he could go over to her. Her head shaking made him think he shouldn't, keeping him back for now.

"This was you two days ago, wasn't it?" she asked him.

He surprised her with an amused smile. "Yours didn't even last two hours, let alone two days. So no."

Jessie smiled back a little weakly. "It still doesn't change the fact that my family's done some terrible things to yours and your *kind*. I hate to use the word but it's the only one that seemed to fit."

"That's not your..." James said.

Jessie raised her hand, signaling him to stop. "I can't ignore what Nathan did to your sister, even if it wasn't technically him. We can't just forget that my family has murdered others like you."

"You don't know that for certain," James said.

"I do," Jessie's response horrified him. He could tell by her face she was sickened by it as well. "I don't know what to do. Duncan and Amy, they're a part of a family that would kill them if they weren't. What she did to you was a favour to me, to spare me from my so called duty. I don't know if I can be with you knowing that things between us could've been so much different."

Her words hit him hard and not in the way she probably expected. It was said differently, the reasons behind it were as well, but the meaning was eerily the same. He'd struggled with these same insecurities and fears most of his life. The last few weeks as just a mere chapter in his long self hating book. James wondered how often Jessie had tried to convince him otherwise, and more importantly how. The thought lit a spark within.

"I've spent far too much of my time thinking about that you deserved better than me. That I should have stepped back, did the *right thing*. Are we even right for each other, should we be best friends only. That I was selfish and weak. You name it, I've thought it," he said with a casual head shake and shoulder shrug near the end. "Today, I'm more convinced that I was more wrong than I've ever been."

He expected her to look confused, however it only showed in her eyes. Her facial expression was a one of shock. "How?"

"You and I, we've both escaped. I was only born to continue the Taylor's legacy of misogyny, toxic masculinity, violence and fear. My father wanted me to be tough and unfeeling, with no fears. To pick a woman who wouldn't stand up for herself, that would feed me, clean the house, rub my shoulders, massage my feet, probably dress and bathe me. Basically be my second mummy." Jessie was momentarily amused by the thought. "Then he wanted me to teach my son to be just as useless. To be a man in his eyes you had to be lazy and completely unable to function without a woman to do it all. If I didn't, I was a coward, a brat that deserved what was coming. All because the Taylors wanted the so called glory of a Slayer in their family."

Jessie shook her head. "He was pathetic. They all were."

James showed he agreed with a nod. "He cheated on Susy because she wouldn't cater to him. All he cared about was creating Peter Taylor Junior, instead he got me. I refused to be anything like him and still, despite being a timid and apparently girly little kid, I was picked over any of them. His hatred and jealousy pushed me away, made me fear him. I had no respect for the man, so why would I follow his traditions? Why would I tell my son about them? Peter Taylor's last remaining legacy doesn't even use his name. His grandson uses the name of another man, erasing him.

"Duncan will never grow up in fear, or doubt that his father even likes him. He'll always know that his dad loves him and will support him no matter what he wants to do. He won't treat women as objects, a means to carry on something as meaningless as a surname. He won't be demeaned for crying, or any kind of emotion for that matter. I'll continue to encourage him to remain true to who he is, as that's the most important lesson that I can give him."

Jessie smiled with a few tears in her eyes. "I understand what you're trying to say, but all it proves is you're a better father than yours, and duh."

"I'm not done," James smiled back. "You and Dannielle were born and once again, tradition is all that mattered to the family. Oh they're twins and girls, so that automatically means they'll be witches. I imagine Rachel taught Dannielle to hate just like she was. She meanwhile gave you away hoping that you'll inherit it or figure it out on your own. You could have easily ended up anywhere, but you end up at the same school as a Slayer. Even though all of the boys you met so far were cruel, you trusted him enough to befriend him. You couldn't have known what he was, at least until that one day he tries to hold your hand."

"I remember. I wish I didn't sometimes," Jessie mumbled.

James looked at her, puzzled. "Why? You knew at that moment I was different, possibly dangerous to you. Instead of running away or shutting me out, you still wanted to be my friend. You ran after me to show me that you weren't afraid, that you trusted me. You still don't get how much that meant. So many kids before you at nurseries, parks would go out of their way to avoid the freak kid who broke the toys and crushed everything he touched. That's okay you know, I can't blame them. But you, you not only gave me a chance, you tried to help me. You even saved my life multiple times. We grew closer, we fell for each other.

"Neither us really had a family left. Together, we made our own. A fresh start."

The tension she was feeling slipped away, her face and eyes softened. Jessie wasn't sure what to say just yet, her head was filled with so many things. All she managed was repeating his last sentence.

"When Duncan was a baby, I promised him that he'd never know the pain I went through. That he'd never be afraid of me and I'd never hurt him. He was not going to be a Taylor," James continued. "You meanwhile not only defied your family and their beliefs by being with me, Duncan's birth killed off any chance of an Annet ever harming a Slayer again."

Jessie's resulting smile was brief, she was just left bemused. "You say that like I knew all along."

"I dunno, you not knowing makes it so much better in my eyes," James said. "Together, you and I have cast away those old traditions to start our very own. No *Taylor* child will ever live in fear of abuse, no more Slayers will be killed over a misunderstanding. I really think this is the way it was supposed to be."

"So do I," Jessie said honestly. She took a few steps forward so they were a little closer. "To think I almost destroyed those books."

"What do you mean?" James questioned.

She smiled and her eyebrow raised. "Well apparently I was more adept at healing and shield spells, until a certain someone gave me a boost. Imagine how much more you can do with a full powered witch on your side. As it should be."

James moved forward this time, mostly closing the gap between them. "Using your magic to aid Slayers, being the proud mother of two of them. I can't think of a bigger middle finger to the Annets than that."

Jessie's smile grew, brightening her face, her eyes sparkled. "Well witchcraft's teachable. If they aren't naturally inclined, I could teach our other girls if they're interested. Though from what I understand, Duncan and Amy can learn a few things as well."

"So there is bigger, I never doubted you," James smirked at her.

Jessie raised her good arm so she could hold him at last, he responded by doing the same. They were so close when Jessie froze, she remembered something. "Oh, sorry. There's still one more important thing we need to figure out." He stared quizzically at her, until she looked down towards the floor, at one book in particular. "It's too dangerous to keep it. We must get rid."

"You're worried Rachel will get it back again," James said.

Jessie shifted uncomfortably, her face tried to hide it. "It isn't just her. If you only want to destroy one, it has to be hers." James hesitated for a moment, then he nodded.

The Enterprise:

Everywhere she looked there was devastation. Personal items were smashed, broken in half and scratched depending on what they were. No furniture was spared, everything had been toppled over and damaged in some way. Piles of what used to be clothes lay crumpled all over the floor. Each piece from what Kathryn could see had been cut or torn to bits. Flecks of a little blood were dotted on some of them, telling her that whoever did it was bleeding at the time. A particularly bright pile of ex-clothes appeared to have been stood on, the perpetrator's feet ground them so much it left behind permanent prints.

The most satisfying image for her though was the broken shell of a woman sitting on the floor, trying desperately to dry her eyes and scowl at her. Her face covered in scratches,

nose broken and a nasty looking bruise covering her eye socket. The painfully pink dress she had picked for her wedding covered in blood, that unfortunately Kathryn knew wasn't her own.

"Get out," the woman spat at her.

Kathryn smiled darkly at her. "I don't think so. It's just you and me this time, and I've got some karma to dish out." Rachel opened her mouth to speak. "Oh, but it looks like someone's beaten me to it."

"There's nothing you can do to me. You and your brat's done enough," Rachel said with venom.

"That's odd, I thought this was Jessie's handiwork," Kathryn teased her. Rachel turned her head away, grunting in disgust. "Well it wasn't my James. He was too busy being the punch bag for your hired loon."

"I think you mean goon," Rachel muttered.

Kathryn chuckled, "no, I didn't." She walked forward to the other woman's frustration. "We have a problem. I don't fully understand why we have one, it still needs a solution nevertheless."

"You and your son, drop dead," Rachel spat back.

"No, we tried that," Kathryn just laughed while continuing her approach. "I mean it worked out for me, in a way, but I imagine James is getting a bit bored of it. It sort of loses its edge after a dozen or two times. Then there's the flaw that your action affects everyone else like your daughter, the grandchildren, his sisters, me, and I dunno, the billions upon billions of people stuck in this Game Sphere to name a few."

Rachel rolled her eyes even though with her bruised eye it hurt. Kathryn crouched down in front of her.

"As an ex member of the Tolg collective, I'm a bit of a sucker for efficiency and a little logic. So it seems to me like the simplest and most likely to succeed solution is to deal with the sole complainer," Kathryn said. She leaned in slightly to make sure Rachel understood her point, and to get a close up of the deadly fire in her eyes. When Rachel tried to turn her head away Kathryn grabbed it, her fingers drilled into her jaw. "Don't you agree?"

"Keep proving me right," Rachel tried to sound threatening, but with her lips mostly pushed together it just sounded funny.

Kathryn merely smiled. "You won't come near my family again. Jessie included."

"Your family has already stolen everything from me. Your threats are meaningless," Rachel said.

"Who said I was threatening you? Threats would imply that I was giving you a choice; do as I say or else. I don't recall doing that," Kathryn said maliciously. Rachel attempted to pull back, Kathryn helped her out by shoving her and releasing her grip. "I'm not going to be around for much longer. I've got to make sure you never try a stunt like this again. I'm sure the Tolg would be eager for my replacement. Everyone wins."

"You wouldn't!?" Rachel snapped at her.

Kathryn's smile was gone, in its place was a tightened look of contempt and anger. "No. I wouldn't give the Tolg someone with your power and spell know how." Rachel was a little relieved, her shoulders started to relax. Kathryn's hand swung out to grab her by the throat, instantly she felt her skin being attacked by thousands of tiny needles coming from every pore. "But I'm not a part of the Tolg anymore, am I?" she smiled darkly.

"No. I won't go near them," Rachel begged. "I can't."

Kathryn's eyebrow raised, she lessened her grip slightly so the needles would stop. "What do you mean you can't?"

"I couldn't hurt your freak children even if I wanted to. Jessica saw to that," Rachel muttered. Kathryn wasn't sure what that meant, she didn't budge so the other woman would know that without her saying anything. "I told you, you took everything! You took my daughter and then she took everything I am. I'm powerless."

Kathryn started to laugh. If she understood what Rachel was saying, she finally found something that tasted almost as good as coffee. If she was right, what Jessie had done was far more personal and effective than anything she could do. Killing her would ruin it. However something about the theory didn't add up, which put her laughter off for the moment. "How come she didn't kill you doing it?"

Tears grew in Rachel's eyes, making it so much sweeter. "She didn't take it all. Just enough so I could live with it. You can only learn such cruelty."

"Seems like she learned from the best. You should be proud," Kathryn sneered at her as she stood back up. "I know I am." Rachel's eyes widened and her skin turned pale. Kathryn turned away with her expression carved into her mind, it gave her a good laugh as she walked out to leave the woman wallow in her self inflicted misery.

Lena stared at the object in her hand as if someone had given it to her as a birthday present, and she wasn't very good at faking. She moved it around a little to see it from different angles, looking for anything that would give her a hint. It was then she noticed Jessie was busy putting similar items onto the top most shelf of a bookcase so high, she had to stand on a chair to reach. It only confused her further.

"I don't get it," Lena said, giving up.

James seemed to understand and looked like he had as well. "Jessie thought it would be fitting for one of us to destroy it."

"That's a bit risky. What if there's another loon with a copy?" Lena said.

"We have two. Wesley's and Rachel's. The watchers should have the rest," James replied. That didn't convince Lena, she was even more concerned. "That's why we're keeping Wesley's," he said, gesturing to Jessie and the bookcase with his spare hand.

"It's not just me that's a bit iffy over the fact that watchers have books devoted to weakening and controlling Slayers. Right?" Lena wondered aloud.

James tried to hide his own concern, Lena saw right through it and stared at the book in her hands like it was a bomb. "It's possible that the watchers took them from the witches that believed the same as Rachel and Matteo. It's also possible the watchers of the day were trying to cure us, or protect us from these spells. I mean why else are there cures in the same book?"

"So, destroying them huh? Sounds like fun," Lena said uneasily. She dared to have a brief flick through, quickly noting the burned passages. "Oh, that's why."

"I should have told you sooner," James admitted, getting her attention back. "I didn't have the whole story. I just heard, felt that Rachel had plans to kill me after the wedding. I didn't know what to do, so everything was a stall until I did."

Lena stared at him with an expression that made him think she was confused. "We're supposed to be partners, a team. I suppose you weren't yourself, so I'll let you off this one time."

James smiled weakly, he was tempted to apologise and leave it as that. He couldn't though. "I knew Rachel's reason had to do with me being a Slayer. I didn't want to risk losing another sister because of that. It was my problem, my fault and this time I felt I alone should deal with it. I didn't want anyone else involved, especially you. It won't happen again."

"James, the only thing Rachel and the Nathan demon situations have in common is that you'll blame yourself for anything," Lena said in a quieter voice. She hesitated. "So it's true. You know what the demon did, its intentions?"

James nodded grimly. "Like Rachel, he... it shared them with me. The difference is Rachel didn't intend to."

Lena couldn't help but cringe, "Jessie was right. I wish she wasn't. It still doesn't make this situation so similar you'd send me away."

"I know that now. I'm sorry," James said. He tried to bring his smile back, it looked pained though. "It wasn't just you anyway."

Lena scowled mockingly, "I think I noticed. I had to ask Craig to do the gross stuff, I couldn't do it. I'll stick with the one kid, that's enough."

James glanced down at the bundle nestled in his right arm, she had fidgeted as soon as she was mentioned. He figured her ears must have been burning. "You asked Craig? He always used to go out of his way to avoid changing Kiara in the old days."

"Really?" Lena said, resisting the urge to giggle, at least for the time being. "He was gone a while, so maybe he conjured up a hologram to do it."

James laughed at the thought, inspiring Lena to let her own come out. "What do you mean conjured? He probably already had one ready."

"Good point," Lena nodded. "Oh, before I go and find a chain-saw or something..." she said, gesturing to the book. "I feel like you should know something. Your kids are thinking up their own names for her. I'd give her one before any stick."

"Oh," James said, looking worried again.

Lena turned to leave, opening the door nearby. She stopped in the frame and looked over her shoulder, "oh. Don't, I mean really do not name her after mum."

James' eyebrow shot up, he almost smirked at her but kept it back. "Um, not that I was thinking about it but why not?"

"Well speaking from personal experience, having a shared name with your mum, or in this case grandma, is a bit awkward," Lena said.

"Too late," James mumbled as he immediately thought of Duncan and Sasha's middle names.

"Yeah see," Lena said. "Also, mum thinks Kathryn Kenco has a nice ring to it. Don't humour her."

"There goes any plans to call her Coffee, darn," James pretended to sound disappointed.

Lena grinned, "Lena to the rescue, once again. Seriously though, good luck." She continued on her way, the doors shut behind her.

Jessie walked away from the bookcase. James turned around then, he was surprised to see the spell books already on the top shelf, it left him a little ashamed. She leaned forward to pick up the chair. "It's okay, I'll put it back," he said rushing over. It was more than too late, she had already picked it up by the back with her good arm.

"It's not heavy," she huffed once she put it back in the right place by the dining table. "You're the one that should be taking it easy anyway. How far through treatment were you when you escaped Sickbay?"

"I didn't. He let me..." James said, but he couldn't finish. He knew he wasn't fooling her. "About ninety percent."

"Hmm, a new record," Jessie sounded impressed. Her left arm still ached, probably to remind her that she was just as bad as he was, in fact worse. She noticed James was looking at it with concern planted on his face. "Remember when I said that I'm supposed to be good at healing? Yeah right."

James walked up to her, concern had turned to curiosity. "What did you do? A chant or..."

"Nothing, I kept a hold of it to stop the bleeding. I never really noticed until mum..." Jessie replied, then sighed. "It was probably the adrenaline. Surely if I was naturally good at this, I wouldn't have a dying habit. I could at least help you out sometimes, like that idiot accused me of."

"Maybe..." James started to speak but his head started swimming, sparked by what she said. He quickly tried to collect his thoughts so he could talk again, before Jessie would wonder if he was slipping away again. "I think you have. I can think of twice where I've stupidly gotten myself killed, then I've come back, and the Doc's had no explanation for it."

Jessie frowned, her own head was buzzing now. She didn't know what to say though.

"I dunno, it's a theory. I know that sometimes whenever you touched an injury, it didn't hurt as much," James said.

"Don't get all corny on me," Jessie smirked at him.

James had to laugh at that, "sorry, it's a Janeway trait."

"Yeah yeah, excuses," Jessie pretended to scold. She smiled afterwards, "it's a nice theory and all, but we have no way to know for sure."

"Your arm is better without a regenerator, we know that for sure," James pointed out.

"It would explain some things. Like why those warlocks wanted to kill me as well," Jessie said thoughtfully. "Is being a *traitor* enough? Healing the enemy would be seen as worse."

There was movement in his right arm, so James looked down to see their daughter was awake and stretching. "You know what, who cares about why they did it," he said, unable to break his gaze from the little girl. Jessie wondered why he said that, she stared at him puzzled. "They thought they were on the side of good. Well, I know there's a grey area in life, but in my opinion, if you're willing to murder a pregnant woman just because you don't agree with her, you're dirt. No, dirt is useful. You're human waste."

"Yeah, that's true. No matter what I did, our daughter here is innocent. They lost all credibility by threatening her too," Jessie agreed.

A few squeaks later, the infant looked up at her dad. She cooed happily and tried to reach for him. "She always looks so happy, doesn't she?" he said.

Jessie leaned forward just so she could get a better look. "You're not wrong. She's beautiful."

"She... she reminds me of her," James said hesitantly, his voice wavered slightly. Jessie turned her head to look at him sympathetically. "Debbie, she... she sacrificed herself, she died to save me. I can't keep running. It's not fair to her. She deserves to be remembered, not hidden away because I'm too weak to deal."

"Are you sure?" Jessie asked delicately.

James nodded. He looked down at the tiny girl lying in his arm. She watched him intently, her blue eyes sparkled, an open mouthed smile on her face. It would have been impossible for him not to smile back at her. "I'm sure."

"Now the big decision; first or second name?" Jessie said.

James turned his head back to give her a look of bemusement. "We don't even have a second choice yet. Did Jodie give you any ideas?"

"No," Jessie sighed in disappointment. She then pulled a face as the names her sister came up with reappeared in her head. "Rosie, Beatrice, Mildred. I wish I had saved my suggestion for her son until after that."

"Has she picked?" James asked. He got only a nod for an answer. "Was it yours?"

Jessie smiled at him, "it was. Michael Robert Harris." James was taken aback. Her smile faded. "I shouldn't have done it, right? It's..."

"It was a great idea Jess," James said, calming her fears instantly. "As long as Jodie knows he's named after his lost cousin."

"Of course," Jessie said wistfully. "I already checked with Lena to see if it was okay I suggest either name. She and *Robbie* were close in her timeline."

"Let me guess, she told you off, saying that he was our kid not hers and it was stupid to ask her permission. But she looked grateful anyway," James said.

Jessie had to laugh, he got it mostly spot on. "Yeah. Sad thing is, she knew him and we didn't. It felt appropriate to me." She wish she hadn't thought or said that, it brought all of those terrible feelings back. To fight it away she armed herself with a forced smile and focused on the two in front of her. "I was thinking through names of people we know, family. Any I came up with didn't really suit her. I can't explain it better than that."

"It's okay. We don't always have to name our children after someone," James said.

"Oh that's good, cause I have a few names I liked. If we use Debbie, that narrows the pool down to a couple," Jessie said. She winced, inhaling through her teeth when a thought came to her. "A couple plus what you have."

James laughed a little. Jessie felt a little relieved to see him do that, it was a huge improvement after what he'd been like before. That quickly went away when she recognised that the laugh he used was when he thought she was being silly, and so she was a little annoyed.

"I've picked one already. This name's yours, remember?" he said.

"Oh," Jessie sighed in relief. "Okay then. First; Alisha."

In the corner of James' eye he could see the baby's left arm reach up to touch him, all while making squeaks. He and Jessie looked down at her, which settled her down. Her hand had reached its target though, she seemed happy enough to rest it against him.

"Do you need to hear the second choice?" Jessie asked mid melt from the cuteness.

"She may have just wanted attention," James answered with a smile. He glanced back at her. "I do like it though."

"Me too. It's a little like Alison, which I thought didn't go with Debbie. We still need to decide which is first and second though," Jessie teased.

"Alisha Debbie, Debbie Alisha," James thought aloud to see which they preferred. Jessie didn't say anything, he figured she mustn't have been sure. Saying the second one though made him a little anxious. The image of using the name to call her or just talk to her, then getting upset at the thought of his sister, appeared in his head. His daughter didn't deserve that. She wouldn't know or understand, and would likely misinterpret it as being about her. He didn't want that for her. He felt awful as he really wanted to honour Debbie and finally take that long overdue first step. At least as a second name he could still do that. He wondered if Jessie would agree or see it as another attempt to run away.

"Alisha first," Jessie said, smiling sweetly. Her saying that brought him out of his head for the moment. "You're on your way forward, but we should be careful not to go too fast. I think a middle name tribute to her is just as meaningful, and far less triggering. I'm sure Debbie would agree, don't you?"

James considered the last question for a moment. He knew his big sister went out of her way to avoid her real name; Debra. She rarely went by Debbie in fact, she much preferred the much shorter Debs. In the end though what cemented the decision was what he really thought his big sister would be thinking about all of this.

It's about time, said with that room brightening smile of hers.

"She'd be happy I thought of her at all," James answered Jessie finally. "Alisha Debbie it is."

Jessie gave him a bright smile. It was a one that told him everything would be okay.

Tom stared in wonder at the sea of stars around him. At first it was disorienting. He watched his feet as they stepped onto nothing, yet he could still feel solid ground and walk in a straight line. No matter how long he walked, the tiny lights ahead of him never changed, never grew. He was the small one after all. Roles reversed, that star would never see him. That was when he started to feel a little trapped. It was so realistic he had to remind himself that he could retrace his steps and be back on Voyager in seconds.

The sound of a door opening helped him out. He looked over his shoulder to see the Holodeck arch leading to the corridors. The two new arrivals were also very impressed and taken aback by their surroundings. One of them had to shake his head so he could focus and approach.

"This is much better than Astrometrics," he said. "Harry said to go on without him and Craig. There's a bit of a disaster that needs to be cleaned up."

Tom clasped his son's shoulder, he gave him an odd look in return. "Sorry Bry, that little turn around made the cosmos spin."

"Gee, thanks dad," Bryan said, though he smirked to show he really wasn't bothered.

Another voice speaking up reminded Tom that he hadn't come into this program alone. "If you're dizzy now, I really should make some chairs," B'Elanna teased. Tom turned to her and was quickly mesmerised. She had chosen to stand in front of a beautiful nebula about half her size, at least in his view. Seeing the Holodeck control console beneath her fingers killed the illusion just as quickly.

"No, no, I want to see this," he said.

B'Elanna shrugged, "all right." She briefly glanced down at the console before she entered commands. Just an arm's length away from Tom, a sphere the size of a basketball rematerialised. Filled with blues, greens and whites, it rotated slowly. Tom resisted the urge to touch it, it was amazing enough to stare at it. Two much smaller spheres appeared close to it, one appeared to be moving, circling slowly around the sphere. The other remained stationary. "Don't get too attached. This is Erayas," B'Elanna had to kill the mood.

It did just that. Everyone in the Holodeck's mood lowered greatly.

"Captain Janeway provided me with the co-ordinates for the rift, and we already have the one we discovered," B'Elanna said as she worked.

Considering how large the simulated Erayas was compared to them, Tom worried that to see it, that meant one of them was pretty damn close to the doomed planet. It made him sick. As his hand pressed to his stomach, the image of Erayas started to move away and shrink.

The peaceful black began to tear open right next to the Doctor. Startled he stepped backward. As he waved his hand in front of it he realised how tiny it was. In this perspective it would fit in the palm of his hand.

Tom, Neelix and Bryan found themselves looking back at Erayas, which was now a dot the size of a marble.

"It's still so close," Neelix said sadly.

Thankfully the planet zoomed away again, the tear in space did too until both of them were out of sight. The group were once again standing in the middle of nothing but distant stars. At least until another tear appeared in the centre of them.

Danny was the closest. She stepped forward to stand in its place, then looked in the direction the previous one was. She wasn't sure whether it was good that it was no longer visible from this distance.

"I don't like the next part, but," B'Elanna said. One tap took them back to the first tear. It flickered blue and red, even still it looked relatively harmless. That was until the event horizon started to darken.

"Computer freeze," Tom ordered quickly. He hurried over to it, passing a shared curious look at the Doctor who was once again standing next to it. Then he walked around to get a better look at it. "This isn't right."

"It's the best I can do with the data from Janeway's ship," B'Elanna said. "It's a combination of our Astrometrics data, their visual scans and telemetry data."

"Why?" Danny asked in Tom's direction.

He and the Doctor could see it. The others couldn't from where they stood.

"The second one. The anomaly completely overwhelmed it from a distance," Faye said.

"That was when there already was an anomaly to grow from," Danny countered.

Tom shook his head. He gestured to B'Elanna. She had a good idea what he was talking about if it wasn't what had already been said. Another few taps to the console rotated the entire starfield until the rest of the group were in the Doctor and Tom's position, and vice versa.

It took everyone a different amount of time to really see anything. When they did, there was a sense of dread amongst them. It was subtle, easy to miss if they weren't looking for anything. A trail, blackened and darker than the space around it, leading from the tear to the planet of Erayas. What was more shocking to them was that it wasn't the only one. There were dozens. The longer they looked, the more they could see going in all manner of directions.

"Oh god," Faye stuttered.

"Rewind it back," Tom said.

B'Elanna nodded. The event horizon returned to normal as he walked around to join the others.

"How is this not right? It seems disturbingly right looking to me," Neelix questioned.

"As Faye said, the wave took over the second one, likely following one of these paths," Tom said.

"It makes sense that the anomaly originated here from these rips in space. I don't see the problem," the Doctor said.

Tom glanced towards Erayas, then back at the tear. "But why did it start here? Erayas wasn't liberated. Shoytin's fleet managed to hold the Enterprise off until the event occurred. Right?"

"Right," Triah answered.

"The second rift and the trails make sense. It appeared near a world that lost its towers, the trails are very likely going to other worlds that are occupied, connecting them. The first tear though, there's no reason for it to be there," B'Elanna said.

"There," the Doctor said as he pointed towards one of the trails. Everyone weren't sure why he was doing it. "This one was not here in the later scan."

"Where does it lead?" Danny asked, fearing the worst.

"Way ahead of you," B'Elanna said. The line that the Doctor was still pointing at was highlighted in a light purple colour. The first tear zoomed away, leaving only the line and the stars. Finally something else appeared, the purple lead straight into another sphere.

Tom cringed as he recognised it. They were there long enough. "Shurouva."

"If I correlate the image with the data we already have," B'Elanna mumbled as she worked.

The planet and purple line whizzed down and slightly to the right. It settled on another planet which Danny and Triah also recognised. A red line appeared between it and the tear.

"That's confirmed our theory then," the Doctor commented.

Tom passed him his version of a stern glance. "That's true, but remember everyone, the Softmicron are responsible for this whole mess." He looked around at everyone as he said it, not moving on to the next until he got a nod or anything that showed they understood. Only the Doctor wasn't certain. Tom gave him a smile. "I'm the Captain, I'll take full responsibility for our part in it."

"Tom," B'Elanna said as a warning not to. He brushed her off with a confident smile. She let out a sigh before continuing on with the topic at hand. "What's important is figuring

out the source of this opening to the Games Matrix. And whether or not we can use it to our advantage."

"Or to avoid it happening again," Danny said.

Everyone was relieved when the next movement of the star field was only a quick zoom out. They could see everything highlighted so far from a distance, as well as extra details such as other planets they visited and icons representing certain events. Most of the group focused on the purple and red lines, and what they were connected to, hoping for any kind of pattern.

They barely had time to study it when the area around Erayas and the first tear were taken over by a blue colour spilling over a vast amount of space. The sight of it was unsettling, everyone knew what it was capable of and how many were dead because of it. What was left of the two lines still remained, pointing at their worlds, but were no longer pointing at anything else.

"I thought it would be easier to see if I used the interior colour of the anomaly," B'Elanna explained.

Nobody heard the Holodeck doors open, they were too busy staring at the chart to look for clues. The planet they knew as Shurouva was so far away from the trouble, it made little sense to any of them that it was linked to the disaster. The second planet was closer, still nowhere near enough to effect it either. There was no equal distances, no things in common other than the towers, no patterns in their trails. Nothing that anyone could see.

The tears themselves were close to each other, only one though sat near a planet that had been marked as liberated. The other sat too comfortably to where Erayas once was. One more world was marked quite a bit further away, surrounded by multiple event images. Most of the group were focusing their attention there.

"The tears appeared in this location. Why? What's so special about this area of space?" Tom wondered.

"They're both close to the world the Softmicron were guarding," Harry's voice suggested.

B'Elanna turned her head to watch as he and Craig walked in. "That's true. Though we did disable the underground tower-like facility after the anomaly was formed," she said.

"I wonder where in the galaxy they swiped that planet from," the Doctor mused.

Craig chimed in, "Erayas too. Anyone asked them? All we know is that it wasn't supposed to be anywhere near where Janeway's ship was."

"I can narrow it down at least, using their records. Give me a minute," B'Elanna said.

"What was so important while we wait?" Tom asked the new arrivals.

Harry was too busy admiring the view, so Craig answered him, "oh just a mini disaster zone on Deck Ten. Holes in walls, floors, blood everywhere."

"Ohno," Triah stammered. Most of the room groaned. "I just cleaned that deck." As they expected she ran out.

"That was..." Craig tried to stop her but it was more than too late. "Deck Nine."

Tom pulled a worried face in response to what he had said before her outburst. "Wasn't the big wedding in Ten Forward?"

"It was yeah," Craig replied.

Danny was tempted to run out too. She settled for approaching Craig and Harry. "Are Jess and the kids okay?" she asked. The Doctor looked over with interest.

"Lifesign scan showed her on Voyager. Lena and I were keeping an eye on the kids when I was contacted about this," Craig answered.

"Oh good," the Doctor said in relief. "I should stop by."

Irritated, Tom's attention darted around at everyone involved in the conversation. "Wait. Do you know something I don't?" he said, settling on the Doctor.

"Yes," he replied. Tom waited for him to go on. "I assumed you meant generally." The Lieutenant drummed his fingers on his folded arm with a disgruntled look building. "I assumed Mr Kim and Anderson informed you. I was very busy after all."

"What?" Tom snapped.

Harry finally returned to reality, the first place he focused on was the source of the last noise he heard. "What? Oh, yes there was a big fight on Deck Ten. Witnesses say it was one of the warlocks from the power cut incident. Seems like he escaped and tried again."

"Tried again? You mean James and Jess?" Tom said.

"Both yeah, more James though," Craig replied. "Since he was sick and injured, I guess the warlock thought it was the best time."

"What about Miss Rachel?" the Doctor asked.

Naturally Tom got annoyed again. He tossed his hands up in the air, "guys, you're only giving me a bad summary of the story here."

"What's throwing you off here? James and Jessie hating warlock crashes Rachel's wedding, big fight, equals big mess and Sickbay visits," Harry said. The Doctor cleared his throat to hint something. "Okay, should be Sickbay visits. Does it matter?"

"Rachel never got to the wedding. She's in her quarters," Craig answered the Doctor. "Warlock was shot dead. James, the less said the better, so I'll leave it as dead. Jessie was injured at the beginning, a few people saw it, but she ran off when it all kicked off."

"That doesn't sound like her," Tom was surprised. "To be honest the warlock part's a bit weird too. James dying isn't that shocking anymore, unless it's permanent." He looked worried. "It's not, right?"

The Doctor stared at him judgementally. "Nobody's permanently dead, no."

"The warlock was more than co-operative when I talked to him. Mentioning Janeway hasn't had coffee in two years worked wonders. Jessie wasn't the target, James was.

Jess just *provoked* him," Craig said, rolling his eyes at the last part. A few members of the group laughed quietly at the threat in the middle.

"Did you tell the idiot that we've got enough going on without him and his *look how tough I am* tantrum?" B'Elanna asked irritably.

Craig laughed awkwardly, "oh you have no idea how accurate that is, so yeah something like that."

"Well?" Tom questioned further.

"That's when he started pointing fingers elsewhere. Just following orders apparently," Craig answered. "He did say he had a score to settle, so he had some motivation."

"A score? How sad. I bet James wouldn't look at him twice in the corridor," Danny commented.

Neelix found the remark funny for no reason anyone could make out. "That's one silly thing to be mad about."

Craig held back the urge to laugh at him. "Uh yeah. He used to work in Security on the Enterprise. I checked, he started when James was the Chief temporarily. You know before everything went to hell, basically."

"Oh," a few of the group said in realisation.

"No *oh*. What did he do as his boss that pissed him off enough to kill him?" Tom asked. He groaned, "if anyone says the Softmicron invasion, I'm taking the rest of the day off to have my own tantrum."

"It was the Soft..." Harry and a few others started to say.

Craig quickly cut in, "he failed the Security training assessment, and so was re-assigned to a team that were only allowed to patrol the bowels of the ship. At least, that's all there was in his file."

Tom stared at him blankly, he then turned to Harry. "Never mind, there is something more ridiculous."

Harry chuckled, "well to be fair, the warlocks were recruited by a man mad about the Softmicron attacks. It could be a bit of both."

"And apparently he has a new boss. You know, would it be completely unethical to dump the five of them on an occupied planet?" Tom asked. B'Elanna shook her head, Craig and Danny as well. The Doctor nodded. "Four against one. Okay, Craig you find out who this new idiot is and we'll get right on it. The planet we were at earlier's still in one piece right?"

"I don't want to encourage a death sentence here, but the Captain already has an idea who," the Doctor said uneasily. Everyone stared at him curiously. "She claims Rachel threatened to kill James, so..."

Tom's eyes flew open. "Rachel, the same Rachel that's Jessie's biological mother? Oh boy. Is she just a mad mother in law or is she in the blame everything on the Slayers boat as the others?"

"Now that you mention it, Lena did say she gave her the *heebies* and wasn't only rude to James, but her as well," Craig answered uneasily.

"Well great, at least we can stop this one before she turns herself evil and kills innocents. I'd rather deal with one disaster at a time," Tom said.

Craig didn't feel any better. Anyone watching him noticed he shuddered, then tensed.

"What?" Harry asked him.

"Rachel, she was the last to see Zare alive," Craig stuttered, stunning everyone into silence for a while.

Danny broke it with a loud gulp of air. Her skin looked a lot paler than normal. "Sandi."

Tom laughed a little too hard for it to be real, it sounded forced. "Oh come on. You guys are pulling my leg. Nice one, now can we get back to work?" All eyes were on him, eventually making him fade his laughter out. The pained expression on his face made it seem like his laughter was genuine.

She couldn't move. Every inch of her body seemed heavier somehow. As she struggled to open her heavy eye lids, a vague memory of her energy being washed away abruptly shot into her mind. She recalled running, then the alarming sensation of falling.

There was someone sharing the room with her. They stood nearby as if they were waiting for her to wake. Unable to even lift her head, she could not see anything but a blur of white and purple, vaguely shaped. She didn't need to see their face to know who they were.

"You killed them. Didn't you?" the familiar sound of her daughter's voice echoed and distorted.

Rachel had a good idea who they were. There was no reason she could imagine that her daughter would think of anyone else. What was the sense in hiding it now? "Yes."

"Okay it's not funny, so stop it," Tom snapped at everyone. "Zare was killed by the experiments while trying to defend the awayteam and Enterprise crew."

"I was trapped in that hell hole for so long, I lost track. Her arrival got the beasts attention. They're drawn to their own, deadly alone but unstoppable and ruthless in packs," Rachel breathed, her words slow and drawn out.

"So you weakened and killed her after she saved you I suppose," her daughter's voice said bitterly. "How courageous of you."

"She knew it was her fault that..." Rachel began.

"Zare was merely a woman of my age, a person with her own flaws and strengths. Her brother died in her arms and she felt it like anyone would. Betrayed by ones who were supposed to guide and protect her, a whole timeline rewired to weaken her for

apparently not being good enough, and yet she still fought selflessly," her daughter said. Rachel could feel the hatred coursing through her, and she knew it wasn't directed at who it should be. It was her. "And you waited until she saved your skin to murder her."

The figure beside her moved down to crouch next to her. Just a little lower and she'd see her face.

"Which brings us to..." she continued.

"Sandi. She was murdered by the Softmicron so they could take the Enterprise again," Tom stammered.

Rachel was far too tired to get annoyed with her. Still, she couldn't let that fly. "Half of the crew dead. The Enterprise left in tatters, our crew starving. That freak was sending us on an oblivion course back to Erayas."

"As soon as you did, the Soft saw the Enterprise had nothing to fear onboard anymore. They captured the crew and left them to die on one of their own planets. I suppose that didn't factor into your conspiracy theory," her daughter bit back. "Two planets will survive until the end of the Game Sphere thanks to Sandi. That girl survived being lost in the galaxy and beyond, travelled the Games Matrix, twice even and you go and violate her, kill her because you don't agree with her. You seemed awfully sure destroying the towers was the right course of action when you supplied your magic to aid the missions. So not only a cowardly murderer, you're a two faced hypocrite too."

"Unlike her, I cared about my crewmates. That's why," Rachel mumbled. "When it went too far, I did what I had to."

She heard a grunt come from beside her. "Well, so did I." The figure pulled away.

Tom was pacing back and forth, hands gesturing in the air with every word. "There's no conspiracy here, no twist, just a coincidence. Okay!"

"Okay," Harry lied, hoping it would stop him.

"It's just one family mess, nothing to do with us," Tom did finally stop, his voice drained.

Rachel tried to reach for her, her arm didn't listen. "Jessica, Jessie. I still love you. That won't change."

"Then always remember; this is what your victims felt like in their final moments. The helplessness, the fear, the betrayal," her daughter said, her voice started to tremble near the end. Not of sadness or fear, only anger. "Remember that I did this, and that I not only spared you, but I did it to protect the Slayers that I love. For the greater good."

The pain she felt was far greater than any strike her daughter had given her so far. Those three emotions she described overwhelmed her. A fourth overlapped, relief that one way or another, this would be over soon. "You spared me? It doesn't change anything."

"In fact it does. Thanks to you abandoning me, I learned something. Draining a witch's power doesn't necessarily kill her, if you leave a drop behind," her daughter said callously. More than that, it woke Rachel up. Panic filled every fibre of her being. "I didn't forget to thank you for that, did I? I'm sure this gift will make up for it."

Rachel tried to reach out one more time. By the time her hand finally did move she was alone with her hatred.

"It has everything to do with us," Craig said. He noticed most of the room were a little irritated that he said that, he didn't let that bother him. "If we're to win this game, we need everyone at their best. We can't be at each other's throats, arguing against each other. One person is hurt and we all feel it. None of us should be alone or we lose."

Harry smiled warmly, then he nodded eagerly. "We're a family."

Tom's outburst was ancient history, his usual chirpy smirk was leaking back onto his face. He noticed B'Elanna laughing behind her hand in the corner of his eye. "You guys are so cliché, I'd never say anything so cheesy," he teased.

The Doctor and Harry were the first to snigger at that obvious lie. B'Elanna was already laughing, it was just a bit more obvious now.

"We're nearly there, I can feel it," Tom said. His eye was brought back to the image of the anomaly and its surrounding planets. He stared at it for a while. "How long until we can return to the anomaly?"

"Maximum warp we'd be there in ten days," B'Elanna replied.

"Ten days," Tom repeated with a reluctant sigh. "Ten days to prepare for battle. No more, no less."

Neelix turned to his nearest companion and whispered, "did I miss the part where we created a plan?"

"We all did," Danny whispered back.

Hours later the same hologrid was filled with gym equipment, and one small table covered in plates. Lena studied it with fervour, until finally deciding on the cake at the back. With a slice in hand she wandered over to the only other occupant of the Holodeck, as he finished on a shoulder press machine.

"So when you said you needed to put on weight, you meant a lot right?" she commented before biting into the slice.

"You said it yourself. A skeleton's no good to anyone," James said.

Lena swallowed her food before replying. "True, but now that I think about it, you were always fatter than me. We're apparently equal in strength. Whether you're a beefcake or just cake, it doesn't matter."

James bit his lip to resist making a comment or laughing, at least until she finished her slice. She was just picking crumbs from her mouth when he got up to move on to the next machine. "Well now's your chance to beat me..."

"I always beat you," Lena smiled.

"Go ahead. There's plenty of cake," James said, laughing slightly as he stepped onto the treadmill.

Lena briefly glanced toward the table, then at him fake scowling. She rushed over to leap onto the neighbouring one. "Nah, I'll let you have one win. I'm nice like that. Here, you have no chance."

James' head dipped down to double check what machine he was on, and back again. "Lena, it's only a treadmill."

"Race you. First to two miles gets first dibs," Lena said.

James scoffed, "two miles? Those cake cravings must be a bitch."

"Fine four," Lena smiled.

"All right," James said. His finger went to tap in the settings he wanted.

Lena peeked at them so she could match them. As she did she looked a little nervous at the thought that came to her. "The data disk mum gave us. What do you think's in it?"

James momentarily felt it as well. Then he realised there was no point worrying about something they didn't know. It gave him the confidence he thought he lost long ago. "Whatever it is, you and I can handle it. One more hour?" He said as he looked around.

Lena smiled, her head then gestured to the table nearby. "We're going to need more food."

The guard moved away, activating the forcefield again as he returned to his console. He didn't know why the officer even bothered still. It was just a waste of food. It would sit there until he got lost in his thoughts, then it would be gone. He couldn't even starve the monster inside him, any chance he had to harm it was undone, so what was the point?

Nathan could hear the thing laughing at him in his mind. *Laugh all you want, you'll rot in here with me.*

It was then he realised he had a visitor standing by the forcefield. He didn't even hear the door open or the guard say anything to them. Nathan looked up to see who it was, only for his heart to leap up into his throat. If it was another cruel trick courtesy of the demon, at least he wasn't laughing anymore.

Conference Room:

The wall computer was the focus of everyone's attention. Harry stood next to it, drawing a few words onto the monitor with his finger. Digital text appeared as he moved onto another word. So far on the screen there were two lines of text which looked like a list.

"Oh, the shield thingy," Neelix suggested, forcing everyone to turn their heads and stare blankly. He looked embarrassed, "you know, the anti shield."

Harry shrugged casually, then turned back to the list. "Portal Defence Shield," he mumbled as he wrote it. Neelix shook his head, mouthing no. "Jessie's undead and demon shields?"

"No, the doodad," Neelix said, clicking his fingers. "For the Games you know. It protects you."

"Yes, shields do that," Jessie said in an amused tone.

Tom shook his head. Luckily he had a suggestion that made sense. "Damien's cloak. Could be useful."

Harry nodded and quickly wrote that down once he was done with *demon shield*. "I don't know how useful it will be but..." he said afterward. Everyone waited for him to finish writing his own suggestion so he'd move to one side and they could see it.

"Lifesigns trick? What was that?" Lena asked.

James briefly glanced at her, "we knew Voyager would be attacked by the Soft, so most of the crew evacuated to the Leda. To not draw the attack to the Leda or clue them in that we knew about the attack, we had to make it seem like we hadn't."

"You never know," Harry said with a shrug. "Anymore?"

"It may be a long shot but, what about the frequency we use to stop lost Games from killing the people inside it?" B'Elanna suggested. She noticed Neelix's head snapped toward her, "what?"

"That's your shield thingy?" James sniggered in his direction.

Neelix was more than offended, his cheeks puffed. "At least I thought of it first and I'm not really an expert."

"Okay," Harry said as he quickly jotted down *lost Game frequency*. "So we've got; the commbadge rigging game data from the old days."

"Is that what we're calling pocket monsters in a commbadge?" Tom joked. Everyone shushed him.

Harry continued, "the subspace detector Janeway mentioned. The forcefield that drains opening portals. Anti demonic and undead shields. Cloaking the ship. Fake lifesigns. Something to protect us if this game sphere decides we've lost or crashes."

"Which it's already doing," Kathryn added on. Most of the room turned their attention to the door, which she had just walked through. "Sorry I'm late. I had a few things to sort out first."

Tom couldn't help but share the joke in his head. Everyone groaned before he said it as his face was a big hint to what was coming. He pouted, "all right fine, you're no fun. Only the main stars get to do that, the supporting players just sit on the bench." He smirked afterwards to show he wasn't serious.

"If you want to be a *main star* no one's stopping you," James said with a smile.

Tom laughed nervously, "if I was gonna sub, it wouldn't be you. I'd rather be Neelix than take your place."

"Hey," Neelix complained.

Kathryn laughed quietly to herself. She tried to get back to her serious aura. "No one's on the bench for this, Tom. We're all essential to winning this game. Which brings me to the thing I was sorting out."

She stepped backwards so the door would open again. Footsteps approached, seemingly her cue to walk to one side. Moments later another body entered the meeting. He remained at the door while almost everyone gaped in shock at who it was.

James was one of the ones who wasn't surprised, he just laughed. "Oh, I didn't notice he was missing."

The newcomer to everyone's surprise chuckled instead of getting mad at that. "That's funny, I didn't miss you either," Chakotay said.

Kathryn elbowed him in the arm, she gave him another warning with her eyes. He smiled at her to show he was only joking around. She shook her head and turned to address the room. "There's something you should know before we go on," she said.

"Ohno," Tom complained, his complications headache started to throb.

Ignoring him Kathryn turned to the former Commander, she gave him a nod so he stepped forward. "We knew very little about the Softmicron, about their technology, their intentions, especially toward us. The attack on Earth was only the beginning, a test if you will. We needed to learn more if we were ever going to fight whatever they have planned."

Lena didn't like the sound of this, she fidgeted in her chair. "Dad, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying what I should have told you a month ago," Chakotay said, briefly glancing toward Kathryn. "Now we know."

THE END