

## Episode 5.28

### Untitled

The entire table was left speechless. The pair who had caused it stood by the table, their faces masked with an awkward air. They decided to wait for the rest of the room's occupants to recover and say anything.

After what felt like hours somebody burst out laughing. It wasn't because they were amused, it sounded like a cover to stop the person from getting angry. The rest of the table turned their attention toward her. Some were annoyed, while others were confused. One just looked disgusted.

"I knew there was a conspiracy. You all laughed at me!" Annika's laughter turned into a bitter shout. "I knew it. Who's laughing now?"

"Still us, at you. Nothing's changed there," Lena said.

Annika scowled in her direction. The hatred in her yellow tinted eyes was bubbling. Before she could say anything back, Jessie decided to verbalise her disgust. "Did you steal that thing from my psycho mum's wardrobe?"

Strangely the comment soothed Annika enough to giggle, then stroke her frilly pink catsuit from arm to thigh. "Like it? Too bad. You couldn't pull it off with those tiny bubs."

Jessie's eyebrow just raised while most of the table shifted their chairs so they were further away from her. "You do look like a sickly white bonbon that's been chewed and spat back into its ugly wrapper. You're right, only you could pull that look off."

Kathryn cleared her throat, hoping it would change the subject, as well as stop her from laughing. "Yes, you were right all along. We engineered the trip to the Delta Quadrant, instigated the Species 8472 war, got assimilated by the Torg, just so we could bring you into our fantasy world and dress you up, nice and tight. You're our dolly."

"I love that song," Neelix laughed.

Lena's face turned a little red. "We're never living this down." James sniggered quietly to himself.

"Anyway," Chakotay said, also clearing his throat. "I think I know what you're all thinking."

"What's a bonbon?" Harry asked.

Chakotay sighed in frustration. Kathryn left him to it so she could walk around the table, making eye contact with everyone as she passed them. "What did we know about the Softmicron before any of this happened? They looked relatively harmless, yet had access to technology we couldn't imagine. Glorified Holodecks falling out of the sky, forcing people to play and win or die." Her next target was Annika, so she averted her eye to avoid her. "A whole planet being turned into a playground for one little girl. They even infiltrated our own ship, posing as cutesy holograms before we knew they existed."

The last one made Chakotay a little uncomfortable, which he tried to hide. A lot of the table didn't look happy to be reminded of that incident either.

"They could change their shape to suit their agenda, yet they'd make their holograms do all the dirty work. Said holograms could mutate or glitch into vampire creatures, then escape from the Games and breed more of their kind. We knew they had some sort of network linking the games together, guarded by these things," Kathryn continued.

B'Elanna nodded, "the game sprites, which according to Daniel *used to* live there."

"And that it was a digital domain, which makes sense," Tom said.

Chakotay scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Yes I imagine it's simple reducing you down to binary ones and zeroes, mostly zeroes, when a game is lost." Tom didn't look amused, he narrowed his eyes at the former commander. "But in reality, he was talking gibberish and probably on purpose too, like the watcher he is. The whole lot of them have kept a lot of things close to their belts. They're the ones who insisted on keeping the Softmicron, the Games and especially the Slayers a closely guarded secret. You do remember the whole evil manipulation saga."

"It's likely because of their ignorance. They do like to pretend they know everything," Craig said.

"Wesley did seem really miffed when there was evidence of vampires existing before the games," Lena said with a smile.

Kathryn nodded quickly, eager to get back on topic. "It sounds like we knew quite a lot actually," Tom pointed out before she could. Kathryn sighed impatiently.

James noticed it in the corner of his eye, he glanced at her briefly. "Not really. How many of these things help us now? We know the Soft hated us and the reasons why..."

"You," Annika huffed. Her bottom lip was sticking out and her arms folded to make a bigger show of it.

Lena copied off her and exaggerated her huff. "Aaaw, still mad that no big bad even knows you exist, Anny? *Boo hoo, I'm treated like the rest of the Voyager crew, how mean.* News flash, nobody cares." Annika followed that with a higher pitched *hmph*, which Lena parodied as well by sticking her nose up in the air and turning her head to the left.

"Yes well," Kathryn chuckled. "The Soft hate us for a number of reasons. Having the Slayers is one, true enough." Annika stuck her tongue out at Lena with a *told you* so look on her face to follow it with. She expected Lena to copy as before but she just laughed instead. "But we also had Damien turning a group of them into his slaves. The Equinox farming them for power."

"Ironic," Harry commented. A lot of the room agreed.

Tom turned to him, "yeah but they put those spies on our ship long before either of those things happened, and before they could've known we had any Slayers."

"That's not true. James was in the team when we *recruited* them," B'Elanna reminded him. She briefly glanced toward James, "no offense." He shook his head to tell her not to worry.

"And they knew about him enough to send cubes to his home country," Harry said. "The same planet may be seen as stretching a coincidence excuse, but all cubes landing on one tiny island on a large world mostly filled with water. They knew and they were trying to aim directly for him."

Kathryn wasn't deterred, she expected someone to bring that up anyway. "For all we know that's what they do for every generation of Slayers. You misunderstand. They had a special interest in us. Why? One ship and one idiot doesn't represent a whole species." She began to pace around the table again. "They saw us as a bigger threat and so they responded. Every time we've fought back, they've upped their game quite literally. We defeat one game, they raise the difficulty, they create new ones and make up new rules. We defeat their spheres and they change the design, make them bigger. We defeat their vampire leaders, they make something far more deadly."

The Doctor sighed as he felt more uncomfortable with every passing second. "I hope you're not suggesting this Game Sphere and those experiments are our fault."

Kathryn gave him a confident smile. "Of course not. It's just another Soft tantrum we have to spank into submission."

Chakotay smirked at her, his eyes beamed with pride. "They hate us because we know how to hurt them."

"Exactly. Remember what they told us when they first introduced themselves?" Kathryn said in Lena and then James' direction. They looked at one another, hoping the other would remember. Lena shrugged, James frowned. "The first Game Sphere," the Captain attempted to remind them.

"Oh we know," Lena said quickly, her face began to scrunch a little with disgust.

James smiled awkwardly, "we worked so hard to forget it, that's all."

Kathryn wasn't surprised, just disappointed that their reaction broke her momentum.

Harry thought about it, then clicked his fingers when one particular memory came to mind. "We're evil, blah blah, better than the Borg. Rule the galaxy. Kill all rivals."

Tom faked a gasp, "I knew it, Damien's their leader. Mystery solved. Let's kill him."

"I wish," Chakotay groaned.

Kathryn perked up, she aimed a proud grin toward Harry. "That's it." A lot of the room stared hopefully at her, making her head shake. "Not the kill Damien part," she said disappointing everyone that wasn't Annika. "But that does help prove my point. Damien hates it when we best him. It bruises the ego."

"In order to be the big cheese of this universe, they need to eliminate the competition. The Borg were first. If 8472 succeeded with their plan two years ago, they probably would have targeted them," Chakotay said.

Kathryn briefly glanced at him, "they were probably little more than a distraction for us while the sphere was covering Earth."

Tom was puzzled by all of this. "In the Softmicron's eyes we're equal in power to the Borg?"

"Equal in how much of a threat we are to them," Chakotay replied.

"I can't see the Borg losing a Game, or letting it play out at all. They'd probably try to assimilate it," Jessie said. She smiled as she worked something out, "then the Soft would have an equal rival. I see."

"It was only a matter of time before they'd attack us again with something bigger and badder. I needed to know how and a way to stop them for good, or we'd be forever playing with them. About their technology, about who they are as a species, their fantastical connections," Kathryn said.

"Wait," Lena cut in, her eyes darted between her two parents. Worry was starting to make her colour drain. "You didn't?"

Kathryn's face fell, which confirmed things for Lena but not for everyone else. They weren't sure what she was accusing her of. Kathryn still nodded, "the Borg only knew them as a species number, they were long defeated. Species 8472 were always their allies. Only one powerful race managed to avoid being targeted, which was always odd to me."

The same realisation hit James, his eyes widened in horror. "You wanted to know what the Tolg knew that kept the Softmicron in check. Only you would do something so stupid."

Kathryn wasn't offended, she felt complimented by the remark even if it wasn't how he intended. At least most of the room were on the same page now, they were just as horrified. Tom was shaking his head rapidly.

"We all thought... Chakotay," he stuttered, getting Chakotay's attention. The Commander turned his head toward him. "You let her do this? You?"

"That wasn't the intention, no," he answered.

Lena leapt out of her seat, her eyes flashed with rage. "If you tell me that mum wasn't really dead and you two waltzed into the Tolg, volunteered for assimilation, then I'm never talking to either of you again." The accusation left the ex command team speechless.

The memory of finding Kathryn lying still in her bed, covered in her own dry blood made James wither internally. To everyone else he just closed his eyes, lightly grimacing. "No, she was dead. I think what they're saying is that Chakotay took advantage of a horrible situation. They wanted to know what the Tolg did, mum was dead, they had nothing to lose."

"I don't think so. What was that trying to turn me evil all about?" Jessie asked irritably.

Lena slowly lowered herself back into the chair. "You're still a liar. You told me that mum ending up in the Tolg was a mistake. Now you're saying it was all part of the plan. Which is it?"

"You did?" B'Elanna questioned Chakotay. "Everyone else thought it was intentional she was there, but you meant to free her and failed."

Harry rubbed his temples, all the while groaning. Tom looked at him with sympathy, "I know bud, just think it's almost over." Harry nodded.

"There had to be secrecy. There was far too much at stake," Kathryn said.

"Do you remember when he went into a hissy fit at us keeping some of that vision a secret?" James asked in Tom's direction.

Tom brightened up at the reminder. A small smirk formed on his lips, while Chakotay rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath. "Oh yeah, so it wasn't us he was mad at. Guilty conscience perhaps? Or maybe I'm giving you too much credit, Mr Hypocrite," Tom said.

"Do you really think that Chakotay listened to my plan and went along with it?" Kathryn said in bemusement. She had to laugh at the thought.

"So did Janeway deadwalk her way to the Tolg on her own, posing as Chakotay, just well enough to fool Damien? Then Chakotay dashed to her rescue, getting assimilated in the process," Craig said as sarcastically as he could so they knew it.

"To answer Jessie's question, I was trying to avoid doing what Kathryn asked of me," Chakotay said. "I'm not proud of what I did. It just ended up how she wanted anyway. I couldn't tell anyone the truth. I thought it was easier to not deny the accusations."

The resulting silence was uncomfortable. Annika broke it off by huffing loudly. "You tricked my Damy-wamy into this, how..."

Tom interrupted while Kathryn pulled a disgusted face, "that's a point. Does he know?"

"No. He just thinks he does," Chakotay muttered.

"Somebody please tell me that her and Damien aren't a thing," Kathryn said.

Everyone shook their heads, Annika was the only one nodding. Harry thought to answer, "a one sided, funny and very gross thing."

Kathryn accidentally made eye contact with the drone, only then noticing her different eye colour. It only confused her more than anything else. "Any scene will do, I suppose."

"Oooh, ooh. I volunteer for a landing attack party," Annika said eagerly while sticking her hand up into the air.

Jessie looked disappointed, "I hoped she'd say suicide mission."

"We all did," Tom sighed. He forced a smile Annika's way, "I'll keep you in mind." He shuddered when she give him an air kiss in response.

Lena sat back in her chair, her arms tightly folded. "I hope after all the lies and punches to the face, that you have a plan of attack," she said, her voice cold and bitter.

Chakotay's eyes dropped to the floor, while Kathryn looked forlorn. It was more than an answer to Lena and not a good one, she shot up out of her chair. "Lena," Kathryn tried to calm her as she charged toward the nearest door. Craig hurried to his feet to follow her.

Tom meanwhile was starting to panic, he glanced around at everyone. "Wait, you don't?"

"What's the big deal? The Softmicron don't stand a chance now that we know why they hate us. Who needs a plan? They're as good as dead," James said.

Kathryn groaned into one of her hands. "James please, that's not helping."

"No, no, it's fine," Tom said, calming himself down. "We know what the rifts are and where they lead. He and Lena weren't here when you shared that info. That's why they're being a bit touchy."

"No, it's the plan to have our mother assimilated by the zombie Borg's just to get information that we already knew," James snapped.

Chakotay scowled in his direction. "Oh, so what are the rifts, since you figured it out before any of us."

"They're tears in the sphere probably caused by power being cut off from destroyed towers," James answered irritably. He was showing some guilt in his eyes, he tried to push it aside. "That's what I was told anyway. I wasn't here so..."

"No, no you weren't. You were only galavanting around, playing at being the big hero, causing the damn thing to happen," Harry said.

Jessie glared at him, which he was prepared for. "Until that happened we thought destroying the towers would end the game, as it had in a previous sphere. No planets were taken over, no one was hurt..."

"The fact that nobody died doesn't absolve him. His actions angered the Soft, people have died elsewhere. The anomaly could have easily taken over a habited planet, recreating Erayas," Harry said quickly to avoid being interrupted. He dared to look in James' direction. "I'm sorry, but you have a lot of blood on your hands. We can't forget that. It's a bit rich giving Captain Janeway grief for what she did when you're no better."

"Ouch," Tom whispered to himself.

"Until your mother dies and her will says *please get the Tolg to assimilate me*, you can keep your worthless opinion and attempt to hurt me to yourself," James bit back.

Chakotay coughed forcefully to get them to stop. Harry didn't know what to say in response anyway, he just shifted in his chair uncomfortably.

"It didn't end up how I wanted," Kathryn said toward Chakotay. Their eyes briefly met, he was the one that looked away with shame. She then focused on James again. "I hoped to do this without you or Lena being aware of it until I returned. You weren't supposed to be the one to find me, it wasn't planned to take so long. We also had an extraction plan ready."

James couldn't look at her after that, he just kept shaking his head. Jessie watched him for a short while, then thought to ask for him. "So, basically it was oops I'm dead, time for trip to the Tolg to hang with them for an hour. Run away and then do some good old resurrecting. Give our kids the scoop and go home. All in time for supper, huh? You're right, that's better."

Kathryn wasn't impressed with her. "It's not clean no, or ridiculous like you described it, but yes it is better than what happened. The sarcasm isn't necessary or helpful. I'm

sorry that it went this sour, I really am. I sure as hell wasn't going to sit back and do nothing while the Softmicron continued to be a threat to us."

Tom clapped once, his face was a bizarre mix of fearful and eager. "Okay, now that we've cleared the air, we need to prepare a battle plan. What's our target?"

"You suggested going back to the anomaly," B'Elanna answered him.

"Right, and why?" Tom said as if he were hinting for something. The air was still tense, nobody was willing to play along. The eager part of his expression faded away. He sighed deeply. "Maybe we should have a break, cool off. Don't come back until you're ready to be civil and helpful," his voice sounded forceful, confident despite his face.

Nobody argued. The room emptied slowly, leaving only Tom and the former Captain and Commander stewing in the awkward atmosphere left behind.

*A large serene world covered in primarily water grew larger. Its only natural satellite cast a crescent shape over the horizon. The fleet of fourteen ships would arrive in orbit very soon. For now they were treated to the view of their home sparkling in the star's gaze.*

*Then, a flash in the distance. The white light briefly stunned anyone watching. It was still there, slowly fading away again when the crew quickly began to check their sensors. Several people on many of the ships saw an object emerge from the light, getting bigger as it approached. Battle stations were at the ready, shields were up as whatever it was approached their planet.*

*The ships picked up their speed together as it breached the atmosphere. It was coming in fast, it glowed orange and yet continued to drop. A lot of the fleet's captains believed it wasn't an attack, but someone in dire need of help. Four broke away to pursue the object before it collided into the ground, causing far too much damage than they'd like.*

*As they approached they could see it plainly as a vessel, unlike their own. Nobody recognised its hull, colours or design. The entry had left its hull scorched, but it was the least of their worries, it looked like it had been damaged long before their fall from orbit. They wouldn't reach it in time to save it, fortunately though they predicted it would crash away from civilisation. Unfortunately for the strangers, it was heading for the hills. Still they hurried on, hoping for a miracle.*

*The rest of the fleet split up once more, so one half could investigate the strange white light still brightening their system. Their sensors picked up nothing as if it weren't even there. Nobody was eager to have this strange anomaly sitting right next to their world. Neither were there any volunteers to investigate it. Nevertheless the order came through from Command, and two ships were volunteered to go in first.*

*The last thing any of them saw was a black abyss, before their bodies hit the floor in almost perfect unison.*

*On the surface, the alien ship lay in pieces in the crevice of a wooded hilltop, smoke billowing out of it. The four ships landed at a distance as safe landing spots were not that easy to find. Its crews cautiously approached the down ship, armed, just in case. The light they saw could be seen in the sky even in the daylight, fraying many's nerves.*

*None of them expected any survivors. The ship was obliterated. They were shocked when tiny figures emerged from the wreckage. The leader of the rescue team ventured forward to greet them. The strange aliens looked around, unsure of what he was saying, a few made a couple of gestures. Many members of the rescue team were wondering how they survived the crash with barely any injuries, when their minds all started to pound.*

*All of the aliens were staring toward them, the pain grew. A voice, unified by many hammered into all of their heads. "Do not be alarmed. Your language is unfamiliar to us. We must do this if we are to communicate with you."*

*Thankfully the pain was easing off. The leader of the team accepted the explanation until proven otherwise. "Your craft took heavy damage. Do you have any injured?"*

*The throbbing pain faded back as the voice spoke, "nothing of consequence. Might we ask, where are we and what is this strange sphere?"*

*Many looked to the sky toward the white. Imaginations were stirred as to what it was and where these strange little aliens were from.*

*"This is planet Mikran. It's our home," the leader replied. The answer confused them. Pain increased further until the aliens' faces softened. It was gone completely.*

*"I see," one of the aliens spoke aloud. "It's like ours, only soft, fragile. The shape is intriguing."*

*Considering the state of their ship thanks to its rather rough landing, the remark amused a few of the rescue team members.*

*"Where are you from so that planets are so uncommon that you've never seen one?" the leader asked.*

*The aliens all responded differently, the most common one was unnerved. "We've done it. We've escaped. We need to begin our excavation mission," the lead alien said to them.*

*Just when the rescue team thought it couldn't get any stranger, the aliens' bodies began to distort and change shape. They gaped in shock as the visitors were no longer there, instead they were looking at mirror images of themselves.*

Kathryn Janeway stared at the stars streaming by as her mind once again tried to sort through the mess of information it had stored up. The sound of a door opening seemed louder as it intruded on an important point. Determined to finish it, she didn't pay any attention to the new arrival until the thought train was back on track.

Like with all her other thoughts, it branched off into numerous problems and other relevant topics. It was a good place to stop, at least until she dealt with whoever had decided to bother her now. Once she turned around she wished she hadn't, or at least made him wait far longer.

"Oh, it's you," Kathryn groaned in disgust.

The self titled villain repressed a satisfied and rude smile as he lifted the item in his hands so she could see it. A small horizontal and flat surface, on it a cup that she wouldn't have even served to her more annoying guests, and a silver pot with steam pouring out the top. The best word to describe it was an insult. "For you, Captain," he said to top it all off.

Kathryn didn't humour him with the slightest twinge in her face. "How kind," she said in a neutral tone.

Damien was obviously put off by her lack of reaction. Still he kept poking for one. "Well I figured you must be dying for a cup. I know I'd feel like the walking undead without my first shot of the morning."

"Thank you," Kathryn said to his annoyance. "Put it next to the box on the table."

His eyes directed to what she was talking about. Right at the head of the table sat a silver storage container with a lid on. Damien warily approached it to place the tray down where she asked. That was when she smiled politely.

"Since you've given me something, I don't feel bad for getting you a little gift," Kathryn said.

Damien kept one eye on the box, which he was now fully suspicious of instead of half. He tried not to show it and play along. "That's not necessary."

"Oh it is. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here," Kathryn said sincerely. Or at least she sounded so. Damien didn't believe her. She gestured to the container. "Please."

"I suppose you'll want me to open it later when I'm alone," Damien said.

Kathryn laughed as if he said something stupid. "Ohno, anytime you want."

Damien sneered at her, which she countered with a polite smile. His eyes settled on the box, begging for him to open. His curiosity was piqued, he knew he could use it against her later whatever it was. So he leaned forward to take the lid away. What was inside he never expected.

Filled to the brim were dozens of stuffed toy rabbits, all different in styles and colours. He reached for one while wondering what her point was in doing this. As he lifted it up the head of the toy fell away, leaving him with only the body. His hands both went in to check the others, all of them had the same problem. He knew Kathryn was laughing at him so he turned his head in her direction, surprised again to find her still with a neutral expression.

"Is this some kind of threat you're making here, Janeway?" Damien snarled at her.

"No," Kathryn shrugged lightly.

"Oh, so I won't find a..." Damien said while he tried to reach the bottom through the toy carnage. When he couldn't find anything else the rest of his sentence didn't make it out. He only had more questions. "If this is some sort of payback joke, you could've put a bomb in it."

Kathryn resisted an eye roll. "I wouldn't even risk damaging a bathroom stall just to kill you. Don't flatter yourself."

Damien huffed, slamming the lid down so he didn't have to see anymore of the rabbit graveyard. "So it's just an insult you're trying to get across. Don't play with fire, you might get..."

"Talked to death, I know," Kathryn groaned again. "Oh by the way, if you really can't take what you dish out, I'd recommend avoiding using your replicator for a while."

"Why, what did you do to it?" Damien asked.

**Meanwhile:**

For some odd reason Damien's personal replicator in his quarters had a large and outdated item attached to it. It was mostly luminous yellow in colour with sparkly lettering all over the lumpy parts. With two leg and arm shapes poking out of it, if someone walked in they would assume it was a person. Without a head it just looked like somebody had tried to replicate a mannequin and got stuck pulling it out.

Then it moved, a giggling voice echoed out of it. "Oh there's a crumb too." What sounded like a tongue licking a plate followed it. "Hmm, it's bitter."

The object moved backward, revealing that it did in actual fact have a head. A head covered in messy and long blonde hair, and a mouth covered in a green sloppy liquid.

"He likes some odd yoghurts," she giggled, despite the need to gag a few times. Her chest heaved involuntarily. "Tangy with bits in it. Just like him," she cooed.

She was about to stick her head back in when she suddenly fell to the floor, her whole body shook with tremors.

**Conference Room:**

"Let's just say a certain unpopular ingredient was re-directed so a certain someone wouldn't find it," Kathryn said.

Damien's skin ached from the sudden loss of blood. "You put that Leola snot in my replicator? I wondered why I couldn't remember eating my breakfast this morning."

Kathryn had to laugh at the thought. "Probably for the best."

The scowl she got in return made her laugh harder. "Pretty dangerous to be toying with your trump card, Wrongway."

"Clever," Kathryn said. Her laughter faded and her face returned to neutrality. "Maybe you'll think twice about trying to recruit *Failed Very Dumb Asshats* the Third on my ship."

Damien was immediately confused, then offended. "I wouldn't recruit anyone from the garbage pool you call a crew."

"Hmm, that Leola root toast must have really chewed at your memory. Poor thing," Kathryn said with fake sympathy.

"Oh don't worry. My memory is perfect. Why would I want a doomed ship trapped in an enemy's playground? All I care about is getting out of it. After this, I promise you, you won't ever need to worry about me again," Damien said with a devious tone.

Kathryn's attention drifted to the window, angering him. "Who else would bring the warlocks to tears of laughter by asking them to join them?" She shrugged, "it doesn't matter. They're not getting out anyway, ever." She looked back at Damien with a frown. "I'm sorry, I was thinking of a more threatening issue. You were saying?"

Damien rolled his eyes, he looked ready to throw up at any moment. "I think if you bothered to ask the warlocks' guard, he'd tell you the person responsible was wearing heels, and knowing her, a chestless catsuit." He felt even sicker at the thought. "I wouldn't be seen dead in any of that get up."

"The fact that you are technically dead is worrying." Kathryn's face turned a bit serious, she looked concerned. "You think Annika was responsible? Why would she want to recruit a bunch of Slayer hating warlocks?"

Damien sniggered despite his lingering nausea. "You don't want to know, but I do. Look up *Annika's Vampire Derriere is Fantastic Associates*. Thank me later."

Kathryn stared blankly without blinking for a while. "AVDFA, it's not even FVDA backwards."

"Only brainless idiots who think they're special decide the acronym first, then thesaurus their way into a meaning, so a mistake like that is expected. We're lucky she didn't call herself Voyager Seven," Damien said.

"Hmm, I really should tell Neelix to cancel that rabbit stew I told him to do then," Kathryn said.

"Exactly... wait, what?" Damien's eyes widened.

Kathryn shrugged with indifference. "What does it matter, no one will eat it anyway. I'll just give him some shredded catsuit to go in it and I'm back on track." She smiled at him, "so glad that's sorted."

Damien's jaw and fists clenched. "You poisoned my replicator, gave me a box of torn rabbits, and told that rat to make stew out of a worshiped animal, just because some idiot made the resident nut jobs laugh?"

"Yes. You really should see the Doctor. Effects of Leola Root can linger in the system unnoticed for weeks," Kathryn said with fake concern. She picked up the tray to take it with her out of the room. "Thanks for the coffee by the way, it was very thoughtful."

Damien grumbled a few obscenities under his breath until even after she was gone.

### **Deck Thirteen:**

"I thought I'd find you here," a voice brought James out of his head, and back to reality. He looked over his shoulder, surprised to see it was Tom walking toward him. "Re-living the good old days?"

James returned to his previous position, smiling lightly all the while. "Oh yeah. Those days when I was a social pariah because of some rifts and terrorist demons. That was awesome."

Tom laughed despite what he said. "Yeah, it's weird. For a while we managed to put it out of our minds, hide the trauma as it were." His eyes hovered in the direction James was looking. The scars still lingered along its walls. Everytime Tom visited this particular

deck, he no longer felt he was on Voyager. It seemed like it was a few degrees colder. The thought of somebody watching his every move always entered his mind. He briefly wondered if people like James or Lena felt the same, or if it were magnified. "Maybe it wanted us to forget about it. All those years and nothing."

"Deck Thirteen isn't sentient you know. It could have easily infected any other deck," James said.

Tom stared at him curiously, his arms folded. "Ah, and what exactly is it?"

James gave him a bemused stare back. "Now you ask? It's only been eleven years." Tom reacted with an impatient throat clear. "Fine, it's probably more like ten."

"I know it's easier to open up anomalies on it. But why? I mean I get that weird one you took a two week holl in..." Tom said.

"For the last time," James grumbled, his eyes half rolled. "If you think demon central is a holiday hotspot, please promise me you'll let B'Elanna decide your future family holidays."

"Focus James, plan holidays later," Tom said a little seriously, which instantly made James think he wasn't listening to him. "It was like a parallel Voyager, where demons had taken over it. During the Softmicron attack, the demons apparently varied. They weren't the same ones." His face contorted while he thought it through. "Maybe they just recruited new guys since. It has been ten years, as you say."

James had paced slightly while he had been talking, leaving Tom behind. Once he was done, he panicked at the thought of being abandoned. It took only a few seconds for the Lieutenant to spot him again. He hurried over, breathing heavily. "Don't do that. If something happens..."

"Then history suggests it'll be me that gets it. Calm down," James said.

"Oh yeah," Tom sounded a little too relieved at being reminded. "Still, too many nasties have come from this very deck. Now that I think about it, the demon Voyager doesn't explain why it was this deck, only this ship as a whole."

James nodded. "Yeah. The barrier between us is just weaker here. It being number thirteen's just a coincidence."

"Hmm. I do remember when Voyager was originally split into at least two, that our Kes slipped through a similar weakening on a lower deck. I wonder if that was Thirteen too," Tom mused aloud.

"I don't remember," James said mid frown.

Tom did as well, then the light bulb switched on. "Ah, ha, coma!"

James' eyes widened, his eyebrows shot up to go with them. "Ah ha, coma? Is that the mystery solved? Clue me in genius."

"Hmph no," Tom grunted. "Way to rain on my parade."

"Sorry, that must have been hard for you to figure out," James said as his face went back to normal.

"Oh come on, you know what I'm talking about. Surely someone told you..." Tom said, only then noticing the sarcasm. He laughed mockingly. "Mock all you want, it should be something we should look into. It could be vital."

He expected further ridicule, but James didn't give him any. He seemed to be thinking about what he said. "The Softmicron knew about the weakness to exploit it. They'll know about the forcefield system though."

"If they do, they know more than I do," Tom muttered to himself. James still heard and understood him, he raised his eyebrow again. "I get the whole power draining part, it turns the tables on those old anomalies you closed ten years ago. I assume they're the same kind considering what happened to a poor trainee getting thrown into one."

James stared forlorn towards the ground. "I didn't know."

Tom shook his head, he was about to pat him on the shoulder, something he'd normally do to comfort another man. He wasn't sure if it was ever safe with James though. It hovered and eventually pulled back. "I never got how the forcefield itself worked. We could walk through, but anything from the anomaly couldn't."

"I looked at it once. I think what B'Elanna did was completely invert the polarity, and..." James said, trailing off after noticing Tom's blank stare. "She stole the energy to make it do the opposite. Instead of the anomaly being deadly to humanoids, she mirrored it so the forcefield was deadly to them. Pretty clever."

"That's my girl," Tom laughed nervously to cover his still confused feeling. "Can we use it?"

This time James was confused. "Did I miss another meeting where you came up with a plan?" He got a sigh in response. "Yes, if the Softmicron attack us the same way. I doubt they will if they know we can stop it. You heard Janeway, they're more likely to create a new version and use that instead."

"She's no longer mum, huh?" Tom said sympathetically.

James chose to ignore that for the moment. "They had to enter the game to open the anomalies. That's telling. This is their turf, so you'd think they could do anything. It could be useful to keep that in mind."

Tom gasped, his eyes briefly widened. "Didn't you say in that last sphere they started to cheat, basically reprogrammed it so they had a higher chance of winning."

"Yep," James answered hesitantly, his gaze appeared to be elsewhere.

"Hmm," Tom thought about what he said. "Do you wonder if this rift and anomaly business is one of their cheats."

James glanced back at him. For a reason that Tom couldn't understand, he was showing the tell tale signs of a smile trying to escape. "No I don't. They weren't losing. The Soft inside the anomaly apparently couldn't leave on their own either."

"Okay, that's good because we've still caused it, yey?" Tom said in monotone. Another thought came to him which he had to voice immediately. "The bigger they come, the harder they fall."

"Don't encourage me," James said with a smirk.

Tom scowled back at him. "Haha, at least I'm taller than the majority of women."

"Ohno, you hit me straight in the *don't cares*. Just when I was getting better," James said.

Tom didn't take him seriously, he sniggered. They both did in the end. "You know, I prefer the more mellow you."

"Don't ruin it," James said, this time Tom knew he meant it.

"Right," he said. "What I meant was that you make one change to a small program and it'll transform into something new really quickly. A large one you'd be hard pressed to see anything. Then you add more until you do. Next thing you know, it starts to break. Bam, you've got Chaotica in a feedback loop yelling at a giant spider in a Janeway wig, while the secretary bounces off open cell doors."

James stared at him as if he sprung another head that looked like Annika's. It took a while before he was able to blink, when he did the eyes were watering. "What?"

Tom had flushed red all over. "Oh, I was kinda hoping it was you messing with my programs again. Must have just been the Arachnia mods and new villain episodes then." James looked away, still with the same expression on his face. It made Tom's blushing even worse. "It's still a good example, so um... yeah. Too many edits to the Game Sphere may have contributed to its failure, and viola! Anomaly," he stammered.

"Ookay?" James said slowly. "Are you saying they cheated too much or that the Game was just too big to cope?"

"Both, either, and or..." Tom replied.

"I get it," James cut in quickly. "The towers being obliterated wouldn't have helped either."

"It seems the rifts were already there when that happened. It was the anomaly," Tom sounded worried.

"We know what the rifts are and that the Games Matrix is on the other side. The anomaly is still a question mark," James said, worrying the Lieutenant further.

Wesley chuckled obnoxiously while leaning back in his chair. "That's a silly question, isn't it?"

Chakotay narrowed his eyes further. Daniel's uncomfortable shiftiness caught his eye, his head turned to see him try to relax against the wall he stood in front of.

"How is it a silly question?" Chakotay asked.

"I assume you'll want to know what Game Cubes are next," Wesley said.

Chakotay closed the gap between them by about half and abruptly. It startled the older watcher enough so that he nearly slipped off the chair. "I know the basics. It's where the Games are formed before they enter normal space. The moron here assumed it was a digital network.."

Wesley recovered in time to laugh. Daniel joined in with the current scowling the Commander was doing. "Oh lord no. It's been theorised that it's a gateway between realities, a subspace corridor that the Softmicron hijacked, and even just a hallucination from the shock of being carried across huge distances so fast. But never a digital network. I couldn't even begin to go over the flaws there," Wesley chuckled.

Chakotay thankfully saw the funny side, only slightly. "Yes it does sound more like a Season One style idea than Four."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "You weren't even around when I talked about it. You're getting the stupid summary mate."

"Oh, I'm not your mate," Chakotay grunted in his direction, a dangerous glint in his eye. It made Daniel uncomfortable once more. "You're the watchers, you should be the ones in the know. What else are you good for besides screwing over Slayers, and we've got equally stupid witches and warlocks to do that."

Wesley winced at the final sentence. "Oh, now where would you get a stupid idea like that? Now, the Games Matrix, what an interesting question."

Chakotay stared suspiciously, "oh, so now that I've mentioned the witches with *Slayer killing* on their list of hobbies, my question is no longer silly. That's what's interesting."

"It's Wesley. Being shady is his only cup of tea," Daniel muttered.

"I assume that's a watcher trait," Chakotay bit back.

Daniel groaned, his patience clearly wearing thin. "I looked past the whole trying to kill me thing, I'm sure you can get over me bringing your daughter back. If you haven't gotten the message yet, I'm *really* sorry."

Chakotay cast him a withering glare, it didn't land quite as well as he imagined as Daniel had his own. He had no comeback other than that. Daniel was right, he had brought Lena back to him, but his methods were what drove him to attack all those months ago. No matter how much he hated her, Daniel still killed Ylara to do it, and three lives on the Leda were extinguished. He hadn't come here for that, there was something far more urgent to discuss. "The Games Matrix. Everything you know about it. It's not just us that will suffer if you miss anything, you're here with us after all."

"Hmm, a compelling argument," Wesley said. It sounded sarcastic to Chakotay, he wasn't sure if the bookish watcher was truly capable of it though. He brushed it aside and waited for him to go on. "Mr Lavine here was the closest thing we had to an expert. Unfortunately as you know, his memory has not yet returned and probably never will."

"Thankfully," Daniel grunted.

"Surely he wasn't the only one who knew practically anything. He must have told someone," Chakotay said impatiently.

Wesley reacted nervously. "Oh, I'm not saying I don't know anything. Just that I don't know as much."

"Anything will do," Chakotay said.

"Well we've all ventured into it at some point. Can't win all the games, can we?" Wesley said in a chirpy fashion. The tone and words annoyed both of the men in the room with him. He carried on, "you recall what happens when a Game appears on a planet?"

Chakotay walked over to the nearest object to lean on, which ended up being a bookcase. "The clouds change colour, there's a warning."

Wesley nodded. "Yes, correct. Ever notice how there's never anything above these clouds? The Game must come from somewhere, but where?"

"Can we do this without the questions?" Daniel said rudely.

Wesley wasn't put off. "When the Game has to break out of the Games Matrix, it needs a door. The colour you're witnessing is the atmosphere churning from interference. Subspace interference to be exact."

Chakotay raised his hand to signal him to stop for the time being. "Wait, I recall Kathryn mentioning that Damien invented something to detect cubes. A subspace thing."

"Ah, we could do with a man like that on our side," Wesley's mood picked up. Chakotay and Daniel exchanged disgusted looks, Chakotay followed it with a shudder. "The warning itself is pretty interesting. The Softmicron are cruel in the way they work. They could easily have no warning and have the cubes destroy anything it lands on, no game, just death. Instead they give you a few minutes to scramble from where you think it will land, and then..."

Daniel grunted. "They're literally playing with us, because they can. It's obvious to everyone."

"Yes I agree. It also has nothing to do with what I asked," Chakotay said.

Wesley huffed, annoyed at being interrupted again. "The current theory is a little more complicated than that. Your Manchester is a good example. One cube landed, destroying the city. Another landed, won with nobody around to play it, which left behind an army." He paused to see if the two would cut in again. They didn't, they just pondered what he said. "The Games Matrix is the subspace the Games come from. It can reach almost anywhere, is near infinite and is crawling with their creations and Softmicron themselves."

"So the only way out...?" Chakotay questioned.

"Is in another Game," Wesley answered. "That's where we come in. Daniel and I are attuned to the network once we're inside. Call it a sixth sense. We know the destinations of nearby Games, their play style."

"Why?" Chakotay asked, frowning.

The question took Wesley aback. Daniel was surprised as well, his made him smirk to himself. "Why what?"

"Why do watchers have that ability?" Chakotay asked with interest.

Wesley wasn't sure how to answer that. "Well, that's... not important."

"Not sure Wes, or just don't want to share?" Daniel asked.

"You wanted to know about the Games Matrix. May I finish that first?" Wesley said, making Daniel nod as if he said something else. Chakotay gestured for him to go on. "I hope you're not planning on going into it, Mr Chakotay. I'm sure you must know how dangerous it is inside. There's no guarantee it can take you where you want before you're found by the habitants."

"Just weighing our options," Chakotay said plainly.

Wesley started to stutter nervously, "I'd cross that one out. It isn't getting into it that's the problem, it's everything else. Humanoids are not supposed to be there. If the beasts don't kill you, the exposure will."

"So the signal we generate if a Game is lost..." Chakotay said.

Wesley cut in quickly. "If you're inside a Game when it returns to subspace, well I don't have to spell it out do I? Game is won, it lets you out. Lose and it locks you in, dooming you to be pulverised on Games Matrix entry. Its only use is to shield everything that isn't rooted to the ground from that. Nothing more, if that's what you're hinting at."

Chakotay shook his head with a nonchalant look on his face. "No. This exposure bit is new to me. As you've said, we've been in it multiple times."

"I can't stress this enough; the Games Matrix isn't for humanoid life. Every watcher is told to teach Slayers to escape into the next Game, regardless of its destination and type, for that reason," Wesley said.

"So, your abilities are basically useless then. Hmm," Chakotay said.

"Not at all. It serves its purpose. Mr Lavine for example wouldn't have learned as much as he did if he didn't have them," Wesley said.

Daniel chuckled, "it helps get you around, doesn't it?" Wesley's face paled slightly. "So exposure huh? Something I should know? I'm assuming memory loss is one of them."

"Don't be ridiculous, the memory issue was a conk on the head," Wesley said. Chakotay noticed his forehead starting to sweat. "It's hard to say. I have heard it can be especially draining if you're inside for too long. Fortunately there aren't many cases. They either find a cube or..."

"Get ripped apart by demons, vamps and blood thirsty Game holograms. Yep," Daniel cut in casually.

"Interesting. I don't remember anything other than an attack on our hiding place," Chakotay mumbled to himself. "And we were a little picky about where we were going so..."

Wesley quickly dabbed his brow with his wrist. "The network is the hub of the games, manipulated by the Softmicron. If you end up in an empty corridor or vacant space you've struck it lucky."

"How? There's nowhere to hide in that scenario," Daniel asked.

"No, but it means there should be no one around. Rooms, full buildings, objects, ships are all signs that something is living there, or worse," Wesley said. The pair stared at him intently. "A potential Game in the making. Either way, you don't want to stick around. Although I still protest against any plan that involves that ghastly place."

### **The Mess Hall:**

An overwhelming stench had encouraged the occupants to evacuate. One had warned the poor girl making the big mistake of going in while they were. Everyone else dashed around her. As the crowd disappeared down the corridor, she heard a few murmurs about cleaning up the Enterprise's Mess Hall. She pinched her nose so she could enter, get her order from the replicator and run out again. Even still the smell managed to sneak through the cracks. Her hunger was long gone.

Neelix scampered over to her cradling a bowl in his hands. "Oh Kiara, you're just in time. I've made my super popular stew. You can be first to taste it."

The first detail she noticed was the vicious bubbles still fizzing on the surface. She could just make out the sickly green and white underneath it. What looked like green bread had been dipped into it, attached to the rim of the bowl. It took everything she had not to throw up her last few meals.

"Oh my god. Why do you hate us so?" she stammered, just before gagging.

Neelix was puzzled. "I don't. Why would you think that? Oh, should I make more?"

"No!" Kiara shouted in a panic. "How can you be this oblivious? Nobody eats your food and lives. I really doubt that your stew was popular with anyone but maybe the Doctor."

"It seemed to be a much needed comfort food in times of great stress," Neelix huffed. "In fact I remember James running off with the whole pan so no one else could have it."

Kiara instantly thought he was twisting the situation around and her uncle was actually throwing it out an airlock, or burning it. Neelix's food would probably be useful as a weapon at the right time. She shook the thought off. "I'm sure that everyone was gutted, and they showed that by cheering and clapping at him."

"Ohno, there was a riot," Neelix said. "They chased him. You don't pick a fight with him unless you're really passionate about something."

"Hmm, maybe they just wanted to see what he'd do to it," Kiara said quietly, confusing him further. "Nah, if this really happened I would've heard about it. Yeah right, when Annika flies."

"She can jump quite far," Neelix said helpfully.

"I would have said pigs would fly, but you'd probably find a way to cook a flying pig," Kiara said with disgust. "What horrible disaster did you cook this one in?"

Neelix pondered that for a moment. "Oh I remember. I had to use my backup stove as the main one didn't have power, which gave the stew a slow cook texture to it. That's why it doesn't seem as good. Thank you." He ran back to the kitchen leaving Kiara staring blankly.

"Didn't have power?" she asked, keeping her distance.

"Yes, that anomaly," Neelix replied over the top of some pots and pans clattering.

Suddenly it all made sense. "Oh. Your fantasy is for everyone to worship your cooking. I wonder how many people were confined to Sickbay in comas after that day."

"I'm sorry, what?" Neelix asked when he was finished rummaging.

"If they're apart of the illusion then maybe no one was. I hope," Kiara mumbled. Then she realised Neelix was staring at her, befuddled by her comments. "Come on, everyone knows. The anomaly didn't just drain the power. It used tricks to keep people in it or in your case to possibly kill the crew."

"Oh that I know. Nothing happened to me, how strange," Neelix said.

Kiara rolled her eyes even though she expected that. "Everyone thinks the rifts were the result of a glitch. The anomaly though sounds intentional. Don't you think?"

"It sure sounds like it. Those Soft are nothing but cruel after all," Neelix answered.

"Yeah, they're more about people destroying themselves than doing it directly. Win the game or die, ignore the fantasy and escape the anomaly. Destroy the towers to free your planet but possibly kill others," Kiara said. "I doubt the others have forgotten that."

"Oh they haven't. The rifts and anomaly don't appear to be linked in my opinion. Though maybe the Soft don't like people seeing their mistakes and covered them up," Neelix said.

Kiara didn't feel so sure. Her attention drifted toward the window. "Why didn't they do something when we were in it then? We're their biggest threat and yet they let us escape with little fight. When mum and James took the Katane back in for the Enterprise, and then the Enterprise twice after, they didn't try to stop them."

Neelix looked annoyed, "ooh that overrated hunk of junk and its *pretty* Mess Hall with its fancy sound proof room. It wouldn't surprise me if it was evil."

Kiara turned back toward him, with a half amused and confused expression. "That's not what I meant."

"I'm glad I could help," Neelix said through gritted teeth. He shuffled back into the kitchen muttering about being replaced.

"What the anomaly did, it was kinda familiar. I wonder why," Kiara said.

There was another clatter from the kitchen. This one though made Neelix whine like it was the end of the universe. "Ohno, it's going to spill all over the bench!" Another clatter was followed by a relieved sigh. "Oh, it's still there in place. I love this stuff."

Kiara turned her nose up in disgust. "You're the only one." She tried to get back to what she was thinking about. "Maybe it was just because it drained our power, like the towers and Sphere does. Doesn't matter." The smell from the kitchen was starting to feel toxic. Typically right then it hit her. "The Sphere does. It drains and it tricks." She was starting to feel a bit woozy so she decided to continue a few decks away.

"And done. My masterpiece!" Neelix announced proudly. He attempted to serve the new slop into a bowl but the ladle only hit a solid mass, it couldn't scoop. "Hmm, needs some more milk."

Meanwhile in the supposedly evil Mess Hall of the equally evil Enterprise, Lena sat at a table barely touching her food in front of her. She failed to notice a few of the Voyager evacuees rushing in. The volunteers trying to move the furniture and carpet from the wedding did though and they weren't impressed. Even more so when the new arrivals proceeded to dismantle the pile of tables and steal the chairs. Then they attacked the replicator.

A figure already in the room approached Lena's table, which she didn't notice right away.

"Hmm, seems like I missed a bit of action," the familiar and annoying voice sneered.

Lena groaned, her eyes shut tightly. "Oh god, I must have ended up in hell."

Damien plopped himself down in the opposite chair. "Wrong ship and hall, Leany."

"What do you want?" Lena asked irritably.

"Straight to the point, I like that," Damien said in a smarmy way. "We have a shared enemy, you and I. An enemy that would be most annoyed if they saw us together."

"Forget them, I'm annoyed," Lena said.

The villain waved the comment away from him, he had a look of pity on his face. On Damien it was patronising. "I see I've overwhelmed your tiny meat-head mind. You see..."

Lena reached around to kick the back of his leg underneath the table. It had the desired effect, he fell face first toward the table. Unfortunately he laughed before he could land and picked himself back up.

"Will that help?" she asked in a fake sweet voice.

"You know, I can never tell the difference between you and your body snatcher," Damien sniggered.

Lena pulled a disgusted face and moved her chair back a bit. "Oh, James told me about your weird interest in Ylara. I hope that's not why, though you always were a bit twisted. And not in a big bad evil way, just an itch on the bottom of your foot annoyance."

Damien scoffed a little too forcefully to be genuine. "Don't flatter yourself. No one is good enough for me."

"Oh I dunno," Lena said, smiling. "There's one *girl* on this ship who is so perfect for you. I can't say who as I don't want to encourage the grossness. Only that she's crazy, we never know what she's up to, and makes me want to barf on sight. Though to be fair, you don't make me sick, just very violent. Close enough though, right?"

Damien shuddered horribly. He pointed a finger at her afterwards, "I came to you in mutual disdain."

"And I gave it, what's the problem?" Lena asked innocently.

"Boobs of Nine, that's the problem," Damien snarled in response.

Lena giggled behind her hand. "Yeah, I suppose that was a bit harsh, even for you. No one deserves Annika."

"Which brings me to why I came to you," Damien muttered through near gritted teeth. "The silly doll thinks that we're an item, despite my undying hatred and disgust for her. I can't say I blame her for being infatuated, but..." He ignored Lena's roll of the eyes. "How can I put this so you understand? Oh, imagine that you're killing a bunch of vampires. You're half way done when that Craig runs in, pinches your butt and runs away with your jacket so he can sniff it."

Lena stared at him blankly. "Craig?"

"What, you got somebody else obsessed with you?" Damien grunted. He continued on, "then imagine coming home after a long hard day, and finding him sitting in the tub waiting for you with a rose stem in his mouth."

"Eew," Lena groaned, her face scrunched in disgust.

Damien nodded furiously, "yes, you see. Then turn Craig into Annika."

Lena actually screamed at the thought, startling everyone in the room. Damien though seemed genuinely sorry for making her do that. "Not only is it traumatising, it's bad for my villain image, you see," Damien said.

Lena noticed she was shaking a bit after her outburst. She tried to take deep breaths to settle it down. "That's the most vile thing you've ever done," she whispered.

"Hmm, possibly," Damien mumbled, feeling a bit torn about the guilt he was feeling. At least he thought that's what it was.

"Definitely. So what does all of that nightmare fuel, brain bleach inducing horror got to do with me?" Lena questioned.

Damien tried to smirk after all of that. "Like your slow brother, Barbs thought that I liked Ylara. Only, the stupid bimbo didn't even know you were dead. It was quite funny when the Ylara name popped up, she thought I was cheating on her with two girls."

It was starting to make sense now. The strange hand written notes, the following her around. Annika saw her as a rival. Lena groaned at the realisation. History was repeating itself. "She thinks I'm stealing her spotlight again. Why didn't you just say that?"

"Funny you should say it that way. I had a rather interesting meeting with her and your fellow fools the other day. We both know she's no stranger to betrayal and side switching. Whatever gives her the most exposure really," Damien said. They both shuddered at one of the words they both took literally. "Basically, she tossed Chuckles and I to the wolves. Since it was Tom and Harry, more like puppies, but still."

Lena didn't look as surprised as he expected, or hoped. She even seemed bored to him. "And?"

"And she still lurks around like a bumpy and badly dressed shadow. She's trying to catch me in the act, fish for more incriminating evidence. Which brings me back to you, the so called slayer of vampires," Damien answered.

"Why should I do it for you? If she's really just snooping, why is she bothering me?" Lena said bewilderedly. "If you are up to something, then it's you I should be killing."

Damien chuckled darkly, "oh, if only you knew."

"Convincing," Lena muttered.

"I know you've always despised her, and she you," Damien said quietly. "Before you she was the super special Borgflake. Oh her childhood was wasted, poor thing. Then you came along with your being related to Janeway, the Kiara mix up and paradoxes, stealing all of her thunder. The gloss had faded, nobody cared."

Lena was unimpressed by his mini speech and she made it obvious in her face. "Her thunder wore out long before I arrived. She was nothing but a gimmick that out stayed her welcome. That's why she turned into a nut bag. It kept her around, kept her noticed. In fanfiction, no one can see your inflated boobs. What choice did she have? How that's my fault is..."

"Because you were always her replacement," Damien sniggered.

The Janeway glare was out in full force. "Our only commonality was the Borg, and I wasn't even assimilated properly, or there that long."

"Doesn't change the fact that she was your inspiration," Damien teased.

Lena took a deep sigh as if she were trying to calm herself. It didn't work as the next thing she did was kick at his chair, sending him flying hard into the ground. "Fight your own battles," she said, standing up to leave. "I'm done."

Damien quickly scrambled back onto his feet. "All right, okay, fine." She stalled for the moment to see what other ridiculous things he was going to say. "Even I find comparing you people to that awful screen waster low. So I'll tell you what, how 'bout we put this behind us."

"No," Lena butted in harshly.

"I can't get rid of her on my own, and you won't know how to get her off your back without me," Damien said.

"She's only a vampire, they no longer scare me. How hard can it be?" Lena scoffed.

"I wouldn't call her a vampire. A stab to the heart will be shrugged off, though you're likely to hit the silicon anyway," Damien answered, laughing a little. "Holy water, garlic, she'll probably dab it behind her ears as perfume."

"As usual I haven't got a clue what you're blabbering about," Lena said, her anger threatened to bubble over.

Damien nodded, he expected that. "There is a big gap in IQ points, I apologise. My research told me there are only two ways to kill her type. One I can't do, and one I could do but I won't."

Lena's eyebrow raised, "feed her yoghurts? Throw rabbits at her?"

Damien gasped in horror. "Ohno, something equally heinous. The one I can't do, that's where you come in. The sparkle monster is currently pretending to be on the good side, at least until she's uncovered a few things. She'll switch with a little prodding."

"Does it matter when we kill her?" Lena said while stifling a yawn.

"Who said we were going to kill her? We want to destroy her," Damien sniggered, then he burst into his usual evil laughter.

Lena rolled her eyes and waited for him to finish. It took a while, so she spoke over the top of him. "No, I just want to kill her." That shut him up, only for him to groan afterwards.

Craig's eyes darted to whoever was talking, or rather shouting at the time. He couldn't get a word in so all he could do was wait.

"No, you can't do that," Wesley protested.

"It's like you said, the Games come through doors leading to the Matrix. So why not?" Chakotay argued.

Daniel tried to butt in, "it's your funeral."

He was ignored yet again, this time by Wesley. "Spheres are completely different. The cubes are the weapons, fired and then returned to the Softmicron. The Spheres are nothing more than a plug."

"Yes, and what exactly is this plug plugged into?" Chakotay asked confidently.

Daniel muttered something under his breath while he fished around in his pocket. Seconds later he was pulling out a lighter and a cigarette. "Dunno why I bother," he mumbled once the latter was in between his lips.

"That isn't known. We believe it could be powering anything from the cubes to the Matrix itself. All of which share the same subspace signature you're saying these rifts have," Wesley countered back.

"Are you seriously suggesting that if we fly through one of these rifts..." Chakotay started to ask.

Daniel flicked the lighter cap open while muttering, "goodbye Voyager."

"That we could end up in the latest game of not-Pokémon matches?" Chakotay finished.

"No, that's ludicrous," Wesley snapped. "It would be as if you walked into a cube itself. You'd be vaporised."

"Aren't you forgetting the anomaly in the way?" Craig tried to remind them.

"Yes, that's the biggest problem," Daniel commented, which brought Craig's constant glance around's to a stop.

Chakotay nodded, "see, now you know how you've sounded for the last ten minutes."

Wesley sighed impatiently. "Even if the rifts lead to the Games Matrix, how would you get there? Both that we've detected have been absorbed by the anomaly."

"Hey, I just..." Craig complained.

Daniel sniggered in response. "Priceless." As soon as he attempted to light the cigarette, the computer started bleeping harshly at him.

*"Warning, fire detected Deck Nine, section four. Evacuate the area. Two minutes until oxygen deprivation system is active," it barked.*

"Oh god, I forgot to disable that," Daniel growled, he switched the lighter back off and put it back in his pocket.

At least it got Chakotay and Wesley to stop arguing for the time being. They stared at Daniel like he was an idiot, then they spotted Craig had joined them.

"So erm, you couldn't have this little catfight in a different office?" he asked.

Wesley hurried over to him a little too eagerly. "You'll do. I need to know if the final reports for our Slayer trainees are finished."

"I'll do?" Craig said, not bothering to hide his offense. "It's been two months since the last training session. It has nothing to do with Security either."

"Oh, so you won't do," Daniel smirked.

"Well I can sum it up if you want," Craig said. "Rude, stupid, shouldn't be a Slayer, can't remember, can't remember, secretly a demon."

Wesley wasn't amused. "Fantastic," Chakotay said not seriously.

"No, there was no one like that," Daniel remarked.

"You still have yet to answer my question, Mr Chakotay," Wesley complained.

Chakotay looked to Daniel and Craig for help briefly. "What question?"

"How do you plan to go through the anomaly?" Wesley repeated himself.

"I don't have a plan. I'm just gathering information," Chakotay snapped.

Daniel walked up to him, still with an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth. "Let me. I've seen Voyager's destruction, and it happens in an area a lot like the Games Matrix. Perhaps investigate something else."

"Voyager itself is represented in the Matrix? That's unprecedented," Wesley said, slightly dismayed.

Everyone focused on him, each with their own puzzled expressions. "I think my universal translator is broken," Daniel muttered.

The look the older watcher gave him was tired and irritated. "You've guided the Enterprise through a few cubes, post memory loss. You must know what I'm talking about." Daniel's smirk told him otherwise. "When you enter a game, do you have your vessel handy? No. Why would you have access to it in the Games Matrix?"

"Ah. So what you're saying is that it is odd that Daniel saw Voyager in it," Chakotay said with interest. "Finally, something useful."

Craig turned to the Commander and then Wesley, his brow furrowed. "How is that unprecedented? It's happened before." This time it was him everyone stared at, their expressions made him feel like he admitted undying love for Annika. "Chakotay, you do remember right?"

"If it happened on the Enterprise when it was solo, how the hell would I remember if I wasn't there?" Chakotay snapped.

The tone and words annoyed Craig greatly. "I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about when Damien tried to get rid of both Enterprise *and* Voyager by trapping them in the Games Matrix." Chakotay stared blankly at him, then he started to laugh at the absurdity of the statement. "We were trying to save a planet from a Softmicron invasion. You remember surely, it was when Damien brainwashed all of them."

Chakotay stopped laughing, disturbed by what he just told him. His eyes darted around. "Yes, I definitely remember that. I don't remember a trip to the Matrix though."

Daniel and Wesley watched them both curiously, Wesley though didn't look surprised like Daniel was. Craig meanwhile couldn't believe what he was hearing. "How can you forget that?"

"You tell me. We didn't enter any games. The point was to stop them coming," Chakotay said. Saying that aloud helped something click in his mind. "Damien, he said he had a way to close the door allowing them in."

Craig nodded. "Yeah and instead he opened a new one right next to the ships. You seriously don't remember? That's... that's..."

"Weird," Daniel finished for him. Craig only mouthed the word *yep*.

"Come to think of it, I'm not even sure how we resolved that," Chakotay said.

Daniel scoffed, "you probably didn't."

"Don't be absurd," Wesley snapped at him. "You don't just abandon a problem like that."

"Right, and we did. Damien sent all his Softmicron in as fodder, his ship was destroyed, Annika turned on him. He had nothing left," Craig said. He stuttered and then exhaled sharply as he looked back at the former Commander, "you seriously don't remember the Games Matrix? How you hid, what games you returned in, if the ships were with you or not?"

Chakotay was now very worried. At first he thought Craig was mistaken or joking around with him. He seemed deadly serious though. Then he noticed Wesley's almost smug expression, and that sealed the deal for him. Without warning he grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him closer. "Is there anything else you like to tell me about this *exposure*?"

"I... I don't know what you mean," the older watcher stammered.

"Ohno Daniel, your memory loss had nothing to do with Games Matrix exposure, it was just a conk on the head," Chakotay mocked him by using his posh accent. "Excuse me while I act shifty!"

"At the very least it contributed to it," Craig said. "So I heard."

"I was telling the truth. I swear. Mr Lavine wouldn't be affected, his body is used to it," Wesley stuttered.

Chakotay shook him roughly, making him yelp. "Why is that?"

"Well you said I spent a lot of time in it," Daniel said.

"No," Wesley said. "Normal people wouldn't survive long enough to get used to it."

Craig approached as well while Chakotay stared the watcher into trembling violently. "What do you mean by that?" Craig asked.

"Like I told these two..." Wesley stuttered. He tried to smile politely at the man holding him. "Fine gentlemen. Watchers are attuned to the network. It wouldn't make sense if we were affected like everyone else."

"Does the Slayers have the same immunity then?" Chakotay asked. Wesley shook his head timidly, squeaking in fear. Chakotay reluctantly let him go. "Again I ask, why?"

"Please, I don't know," Wesley answered.

Daniel groaned, eyes half rolled. "He's lying."

"No!" Wesley cried.

"No? Why didn't you mention that little tidbit earlier then?" Daniel questioned smugly.

Chakotay copied his expression, "yes, why?"

"It didn't seem necessary. Believe me. There's still a lot we don't know about the network, or our abilities. We're just born with them. There's nothing insidious about it. It's just how it is," Wesley said.

Craig sighed, "so, do you know why he doesn't remember the visit to the Games Matrix?"

Wesley seemed relieved at his gentler tone than the other two men. The topic though he wanted changing. "The question you should be asking is did your vessels materialise inside it, as it arrived there by unusual means."

"Yeah, that is a good question," Daniel said.

"I wasn't there, was I!" Wesley snapped in frustration.

"Theorise from what you know," Craig said.

"Well, the Game is what removes technology and weapons a majority of the time. Ships every time. If they didn't go through one, it is possible," Wesley said reluctantly. "I wonder if the same signal was used to protect their entry."

Daniel shrugged and protruded his arms while doing it, "there you go. If Voyager goes into those rifts it's gonna be torn apart. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"You never saw the Enterprise though," Craig said thoughtfully.

"No, which means either it doesn't go in or it does and it isn't destroyed," Chakotay said.

Wesley shook his head, "the vision probably didn't need to show the Enterprise being destroyed too to get the point across. Don't go in the Games Matrix."

"Other than destroying all of the towers, how else are we going to get out?" Craig questioned.

"That's true. We'd still be leaving behind hundreds of worlds, with billions of people at stake. Could we live with ourselves? I doubt it," Chakotay thought aloud.

Daniel glanced briefly at a dismayed Wesley. "You... you can't stop them. All you can do is survive," Wesley said.

"They really seem to believe we can or we wouldn't be high on their hit list," Craig said.

Chakotay agreed. He noticed the two watchers disagreeing, one more frantically than the other. "Yes. We're missing something. Something only we can do, but what?"

### **The Conference Room:**

Slowly Lena peeled the lid from the box, only slightly so she could peer inside. All she managed to see was what looked like a plastic eye staring back at her. It was enough to slide the lid back on.

Oblivious to her daughter's antics, Kathryn sat at the table deep in thought. In front of her was the same tray that Damien blatantly gave her out of spite.

"I don't want to fight," the Captain said finally.

Lena hovered around the box, unsure whether or not to sit. "You could've told me."

"You're absolutely right," Kathryn tiredly sighed. Her arm pushed the tray further away, the other rested on the table. "I hope you understand that I felt powerless, I only wanted to protect you and James."

"Just us?" Lena said sadly.

"When it all comes down to it, everyone will be expecting you both to be on the front lines, one way or another. So much pressure, expectations. I saw how badly that affected James ten years ago. I didn't want to see him like he's been recently and I didn't want the same to happen to you," Kathryn explained softly. "It's not how it should be."

Lena decided on sitting down, only on the table for the time being. "I wish I had known before..." she hesitated, grimacing slightly. Kathryn knew what she meant anyway, it made her dead heart ache. "It was what you were trying to avoid."

"It was a rash, excessive and impulsive plan that wasn't guaranteed to work. I don't blame your father for trying to avoid it, you shouldn't either," Kathryn said. Lena turned her head away, it was all she could do to keep her emotions bottled up for now. "I wish I could take it back, but I cannot. All I can do is apologise and hope that the information I gathered will help you."

"I just want to forget it," Lena blurted out, turning her head back. "The Tolg thing I mean."

Kathryn smiled warmly. "I understand."

"I'm not sure if I do," Lena said, cringing afterward. "I'm not still talking about the Tolg thing, god, my head's all muddled."

"Have either of you read the file I gave you?" Kathryn asked, her tone wary.

Lena shook her head. Her imagination ran wild everytime she thought about it. "Not yet. Should I?"

Kathryn felt a pang of guilt for bringing it up. "No. Maybe it will help you understand my actions, or it could tear us further apart. It isn't needed in the here and now."

One more thing to worry about, more ways for her to imagine the contents. One thing was certain, Lena didn't want that answer. She tried to recall what she had wanted to bring up before the data file distracted her. Several words flew through her mind, one in particular reminded her of something else. A feeling she had everytime the rest of the crew talked about the situation. "I'm supposed to be this linchpin, the cog in the paradox, and I don't even know what's going on half the time. I don't think Ylara knew either."

"Explaining a situation isn't the same as living it," Kathryn said.

"I get these faint images, kinda like remembering a dream. During them I feel lost and out of place. I see Kevin telling me to run. Dad yelling at me. Damien's sneery face that I just want to punch over and over..." Lena's soft manner turned into an angry grumble by the time Damien was mentioned. Kathryn tried to resist laughing at the transition. Lena cleared her throat nervously, "sorry."

She was not having that. "Why, it's the least he deserves," Kathryn said frankly.

"Yeah," Lena said while nodding. "I feel like I can't contribute as I wasn't here during the war, or during that first tower heist, when we entered the sphere. Ylara didn't make sense of many of the things happening around her, so the memories about them aren't forefront enough. Does that make any sense? I... dunno how to explain it."

"It's all right. No one expects you to instantly understand. Most, if not all of the crew are still struggling," Kathryn smiled. "I think you understand far more than a majority of them, despite missing a few events. Give yourself a break. If you happen to repeat something that someone has said while you were away, no one's going to hold that against you."

Lena found herself standing again, slouched against the nearby chair. "The biggest one that bugged me, was how we got here in the first place."

Kathryn's face stiffened. "How do you mean?"

Multiple ways to answer that were experimented with in her head. Lena walked back and forth while doing so. "This Dead Corridor thing we flew through. What was it? Every Game Sphere we've encountered, or Cube as well, we couldn't just fly into it. Is the Corridor like the anomaly, because from what I remember faintly from Ylara, it sure seemed like it. If it is, what are they? Gateways, the walls, what? Can we just fly out if we keep going through it?"

"I've never heard of Dead Corridor, but from what you're saying, it was what Voyager flew through upon entering," Kathryn said, a little frustrated that she was the one lost now. She still smiled though, "you're not the only one who's missed things."

"So your Tolg friends didn't know about it. How did you guys get in then?" Lena asked.

"It was like you say, like going through a wall. We could see it from the outside unlike that anomaly, so perhaps they're not related," Kathryn replied.

Lena sighed impatiently. "Speaking of hitting a wall."

Kathryn laughed very briefly. "Well you know what they say, or I say anyway."

"No," Lena said, frowning. "I can get through the wall if I wanted, I suppose."

"Close," Kathryn laughed for a while longer this time. Lena let slip a smile because of it. "It's not that much different than a normal sphere. It's easy to get into it, but you won't get out until you defeat it. Or break it." There was a twinkle in her eye after saying the last sentence. Lena spotted it even from the other side of the table.

"Trying to defeat it already broke the sphere," she said. "Crashed games don't end well for the ones stuck in it. I've never heard of a Sphere breaking though."

"It worked well last time," Kathryn said, confusing her daughter further. She looked apologetic afterward. "I suppose Ylara wouldn't understand a Game Sphere on Earth and it glitching to oblivion."

Lena's blank stare was making her eyes water. She tried to shake it away. "You got that from dad?" Kathryn nodded. "How did it break?"

"Time travel shenanigans. You know, the usual," Kathryn answered.

"Great," Lena groaned, partly disappointed. "That gives us another choice. Win, escape or cheat. I didn't like escape that much."

"No, me neither. Winning could be almost as bad. That thing will consume everything if we try," Kathryn said.

Lena was annoyed since after all that, she was right back to her original thought; the anomaly. At least unlike the Corridor she had experienced it for herself. She could be just as confused as everyone else who had been there. Though out of everyone she spent the most time inside it. She saw what kind of damage it could do to a planet trapped within. It was a horrifying, desolate hell that she didn't want happening to anyone else. A place where your only choices are to stay and watch your planet die around you in crippling darkness and ice cold. Or take your chances in a ship only to die when your life support systems drained. The only mercy you'd get there would be if you were still hallucinating while you suffocated to death.

It brought a cold chill to her skin everytime she thought about it, but it was worth it this time. She remembered something that happened, which was glossed over when she watched her old friend's hollow body try to murder her and then die before her eyes. "They don't know."

Kathryn was puzzled by her random comment. "Who doesn't know what?"

"The Softmicron," Lena started to answer, her eyes and body language picked up. "The anomaly, it took them by surprise too."

"How could you know that?" Kathryn questioned.

"Two of them. One was only interested in escaping, she hid amongst refugees. The other, probably wanted to bring more aboard. I'm not sure," Lena tried to explain. "They couldn't get away on their own. Why would they stay on a dying planet with very little people left, when they went to so much trouble to create an army. Why hadn't they taken them somewhere safer?"

Kathryn smiled, "they couldn't. They'll have known that if it was their creation and prepared their ships for it."

"Which means it wasn't something they did intentionally," Lena said.

"One question remains, are they aware of it now?" Kathryn mused.

Lena walked back to the nearest chair so she could lean on it, her lips started to curl. "No, the question is, can we use it against them?"

"Oh so now we're catching up," Tom's voice teased barely a second after the door opened.

Kathryn and Lena followed his voice, just catching him strolling in with James not far behind. Kathryn had a look of derision she only ever saved for Tom. "Of course you figured all of that out days ago, you were just waiting for us," she said.

"Mock if you must..." Tom said.

"Oh, no take backs," James said as he continued passed him.

The women in the room laughed quietly as poor Tom stammered a bit. "But er... I was the one that suggested we return to the anomaly."

"Did you figure something out from what I told you about the tears?" Kathryn asked.

"Yes, it's a way out," Tom replied almost like he was winging it. Determined not to be ridiculed further he tried to put on a stern facade. "It's the only lead we have left. The way in was closed long ago. Towers are out. The underground structure on that one planet was destroyed. The anomaly is the only unknown thing left we haven't fully explored."

Kathryn gave him a look of approval. He naturally assumed it was another attempt to make fun of him. James and Lena did too, so they waited to see or hear it. "I agree," she said disappointing them.

"I do too. I don't like it," James said.

Lena giggled, while Tom looked offended. "It's okay, because I was thinking that it was odd that the only Soft activity we saw in there, were two desperate individuals trying to get on the Enterprise," she explained.

"That's true. We went in there so many times, you'd think they would have tried to kill us," James said. "It's not like they didn't know we were there."

"Surely they would have a ship that could travel through it safely," Tom said thoughtfully. When everyone stared at him he started to feel insecure once again. "We've seen them fly into the game in a blazing ball of light, travel huge distances through some energy thing, open portals to some demon dimension with a phaser beam."

"What was the second one?" James blurted out.

Tom wasn't put off, "What do you mean what was the second one? How can you forget there being a future you and friends, the tale of Voyager and Enterprise's fiery deaths at the hands of the Soft. Which makes me think they can probably just nab any ship they want if they've infiltrated a planet. Do they have their own ships for that matter?"

"You're talking about the portal we used to get to the Softmicron homeworld?" Kathryn said toward James.

"I remember Lilly comparing it to a control centre or base of operations for the games. I'd go with that," Lena reminded her.

"Yeah, what was it that allowed them and then us to travel such a huge distance to it?" James asked.

Tom winced, "I hope you're not going somewhere with this. Been there, done that. We let the future guys take care of it, the only one left who'd know how that was done was Lilly. She's not here."

Lena pulled a face of uncertainty. "I always assumed it was the Games Matrix to be honest." Everyone looked at her this time. "What?"

James smiled at her, "yeah, that thought crossed my mind too."

"Oh yeah right. We went to all that trouble of programming in a game we could use, ending up in us being split up, when we could have just avoided that all together and hitchhiked through the portal," Tom sniggered.

It seemed so long ago that Kathryn gave him the approving glance. "With little to no chance of finding a game to the Alpha Quadrant? Yes that would have been a better plan."

"If we're right, then it's possible to fly through the Games Matrix with a ship, as long as you don't go in via a cube," Lena said directly to James.

He was about to reply but Tom beat him to it, "and I'm made fun of for suggesting the exact same thing?"

"It's not the exact same thing," James said.

"Sounded like it to me," Tom muttered.

"How? I just said it was possible. I'm not interested in merely escaping," Lena said, a little offended by the accusation.

Tom stammered nervously, "I doubt any of us are. I don't want to leave all these planets to die anymore than you do."

"Good!" Lena snapped, her eyes sharpened and widened.

Kathryn cleared her throat in an attempt to clear the air. "Unless somebody saw the future James, I believe it was, enter the commands to open a door, a mere escape isn't happening. The fleet will not survive in the anomaly long enough to reach the two rifts."

"If we could get back to the Softmicron's control slash home world, we may be able to change the sphere's programming, end it," Tom thought aloud. He turned to James. "Future you did leave you his memories, right? Do you remember how to open the portal?"

James laughed bitterly, "you think I'd remember something like that? Seeing Voyager blow up and then the Enterprise, with Jessie and Lena still on board, that's the memories that stick."

"Oh I get that, I just mean," Tom said hesitantly, his body fidgeted slightly from it. He quickly thought of a better way to explain it without getting his head bitten off again. "If we can trigger that chip of yours, it may spark the memory of it."

Kathryn sighed uncomfortably, "luckily it doesn't work like that."

"Luckily?" Tom frowned.

"Yeah that's an odd word," James said awkwardly.

"There is no more chip," Kathryn said, shocking both Lena and Tom. James just seemed confused at the news. "Fortunately the Tolg are experts at removing degraded implants from the deceased, otherwise their drones won't last very long."

James' eyebrow raised, "well the Doc did say not to worry about it, so he wasn't technically lying."

Tom was torn between being disappointed that they couldn't use it, and relieved that James wasn't going to keep lashing out at things that weren't there. Or drop dead suddenly. He laughed without really thinking about it, he had no idea why he was doing it. "I didn't want to go back to that Softmicron infested galaxy anyway."

"I doubt we'd be able to use the same portal. I remember it depending on being in a certain area," James said.

"The odds of stumbling on the Soft's doorstep are astronomical. We need another way," Kathryn said.

"The game's already broken. We know the bugs are focused around their transport system, possibly triggered by losing their connection to a few planets. Why?" Tom murmured.

Kathryn grew annoyed but only at herself. "What it's always been about with the Softmicron." All eyes were on her. "Power."

### **Engineering:**

"I wouldn't worry about it. No one's going to be able to pull that stunt off again," B'Elanna assured the person hovering nearby while she studied her station.

Jessie wasn't convinced though. "I don't fancy having to deal with more prejudice warlocks when we're fighting the Softmicron."

B'Elanna held back a long drawn out sigh for the time being. "No one's getting in the system but me, and I'm not a witch. The only thing that will activate it will be an actual portal, okay?"

"Right. If only we could find a way to keep it up at all times," Jessie said.

"We could but it wouldn't work the same way. The energy it drains from opening portals allows the shield to form a defence against the demons that come out of it," B'Elanna said.

"So I heard," Jessie nodded. "How did you come up with it so quickly?"

B'Elanna chuckled as she turned her back on the station to lean on it. "I was inspired." Jessie's face said *by what* without opening her mouth. "You remember the virus that would allow demons to take over people?"

"Like I'd forget," Jessie said in distaste.

"The same signal which we used to banish the Deck Thirteen demons ten years ago, worked on them. So naturally that got me thinking; they must be from the same plane of existence. The portals the Softmicron were opening onboard acted the same way, so..." B'Elanna explained, her voice picking up speed the further she got.

"They're from the same place too," Jessie said.

"Exactly. I know that we were supposed to have a shield anyway, as James heard it mentioned in his vision," B'Elanna's voice continued to pick up speed. "Then I remembered the spells you used to block demons or vampires, but everyone else wouldn't even know it was there."

Jessie started to wish she hadn't asked. "I get it, thanks."

B'Elanna wasn't pleased about being cut off before she could get to the good part. She had to share it. "That led me to the shield modulation that kept out the Equinox's lab rats. We used the same thing to hold off the Softmicron's portal attack."

Jessie was about to repeat her previous sentence when she realised the implications of what the engineer was saying. The look on her face told B'Elanna that. "Ransom also had a shield that would trap one of the aliens within our dimension, realm, whatever you want to call it."

"You understand what this means, don't you?" B'Elanna asked.

"The Equinox used both the aliens and the Soft for fuel. We already knew they were similar..." Jessie answered.

"Similar, as in they're both nucleogenic lifeforms with identical anti-matter properties, or Ransom wouldn't have been able to use them," B'Elanna replied.

Jessie had turned an interesting shade of white by that point. "That's one hell of an inspiration."

"The aliens had the ability to cross over into our space, and that they could be blocked in or out. That was the key," B'Elanna said.

"Wow. I never would have thought of all that. Makes me wonder why they bothered to kidnap me," Jessie said.

B'Elanna took a deep breath now that her voice had returned to normal speed. "I doubt they have foresight, Jessie. You had a history of doing things like this, that may have been enough. Or it could have been your connections. Damien worked with demons from the same realm, though they hated him more than us."

"Wait, you're not suggesting that..." Jessie stuttered. "That the Softmicron came from the same..." B'Elanna's grim nod confirmed her suspicions. "And their interest in Voyager becomes a little clearer."

**Sickbay:**

"There's the Ruva refugees," Harry reminded the hologram standing next to him. He stared, his lips twisted, eyebrow raised. "You got this."

"Yes. But are we really going to be taking them with us?" the Doctor asked, worried about the answer.

Harry thought about it. He didn't know why it never occurred to him before. "You know what, that's a good point. If we can end the game, this area of space won't be together anymore."

"I guess it doesn't matter. If the need arises to use this again, I doubt they'll notice any inaccuracies in the crew manifest," the Doctor sighed. With that settled, he continued

tapping on the station with Harry staring blankly over his shoulder. The EMH assumed he was watching what he was doing.

Harry though was lost in his head, worrying about what was going to happen. One person was the focus of it all. His thoughts started to scare the hell out of him.

As soon as the Doctor finished his work he turned on his heel to face the former Ensign, noticing immediately his almost blank stare straight ahead of him. His eyes on the other matter were glistening, threatening to weep at any minute. "Mr Kim?"

"The Krralef. They're from the Delta Quadrant. They need to be in a Delta Quadrant area of space or they'll be lost when the game ends, just like we were," Harry said. "We can't stick together when all of this goes down."

The Doctor knew Harry well enough to know that he wasn't talking about the ship travelling with them. He was talking about its captain. "You're worried that you may have to say goodbye to Tira soon."

Harry's chin stooped a little lower, "there's no may about it. We're from opposite side of the galaxy. If we're together, one of us will never see our home again."

"Then why are you wasting your time with me?" the Doctor snapped, throwing Harry so far off he would have rolled off the ship. "I didn't need your help with this. Go, spend time with her. You'll regret it if you don't."

"Doc. I can't just do nothing. What's going on now is far more important than us," Harry said stubbornly.

Despite his earlier outburst the Doctor smiled kindly and clasped his right shoulder. "What good is survival if we're not truly living? Go, that's an order."

Harry smiled back gratefully. He knew he was right. At the same time though it didn't feel right. With all they knew, he still couldn't think of a way to fix this situation. He felt helpless and he knew he was already taking it out on other people. Harry had been doing that on and off after he lost his ship. Those three people he let down. That wasn't who he was, he didn't like that guy. The old him wouldn't rest until he solved a puzzle, which he thought was ironic as he wasn't keen on actual puzzles. He had to focus on the Game Sphere and how to fight it. Then he realised that he'd been doing that for a while and he was no closer than he was when he knew very little about it. Perhaps the Doctor was right in more ways than one. Some time away could refresh his mind.

"Maybe, we can work on a few ideas together," he finally said.

The Doctor's eyebrow wiggled, a smirk spread across his face. "Yes, ideas."

Harry laughed at him, ignoring the blushing in his cheeks. "Gutter ball Doc, try again."

"I'm always right," the Doctor said proudly. He used both hands to try and turn Harry toward the door, he ended up stumbling forward to the Doctor's amusement. "Go, I wanted to practice my latest opera program anyway."

That did it. "Yes Doc," Harry panicked. He hurried out, leaving the Doctor smiling smugly. Once he was gone he frowned, a little insulted that the idea of him singing drove him out in the end.

Not much had been done to the poor Delta Flyer after its return. Its hull covered in scorch marks and dents, its usual white-ish grey was closer to black. The only thing fixed seemed to be the front window, it no longer was cracked. It looked good as new, unlike everything else.

A figure was shuffling around inside it. What little light the shuttle had reflected the shadows onto the nose. The new arrival hurried forward, keeping a tight hold of his only weapon, to rush in through the back entrance. He hadn't left it open so there was definitely somebody inside.

Slowly he crept towards the steps leading up to the cockpit. Both of the doors usually in the way had been pried apart by force. At least he could keep the element of surprise going this way. If he had to use the handheld devices to open them one by one, the intruder would most definitely notice him first. He raised the object in his hand up, ready to strike as he walked through them.

He could see the figure tapping brazenly at the only flickering station, the one to the left, closest to the helm controls. Their back was to him. Now was his chance. The object was above his head, ready to strike when they swung around in the chair. They were not shocked to see him. Instead her arms were folded tightly under her chest, a scowl sitting on her face, her lips pursed to make a point.

Swinging the tool kit wasn't going to do much good. Damien was tempted to still do it anyway.

"Didn't take you long to snag the Flyer, huh sweetcheeks," Annika scolded.

"Oh enough. You've already proved that you're only keeping watch of me to rat me out to the people who also hate you," Damien grumbled, still hovering the tool kit above his head.

Annika giggled darkly, "why would I do that, my love? Got something to hide?"

"No, my hatred of you is out for everyone to see," Damien answered.

Her eyes were piercing his very soul. It felt like it was threatening to jump ship, as if he was dying again. He briefly wondered if the spell was still active now that he returned *home*. He hoped not, Annika was the closest. The thought of taking over her body repulsed him more than his brief stint in Justin Timberlake's.

"I know you've been working on something. They think it's a cloak, but I know better," Annika said.

Damien burst into mild laughter. "Oh, they do, do they? That's their fault. They know I've already completed it."

Annika's face fell, she looked nervous. "Oh. Well, you're still up to something."

"If you must know. It's either the Enterprise or the Flyer," Damien said, confusing her. That gave him the incentive to go on, "I can't take the ship with a target painted on, can I? At least this one I can chuck a coat of black paint on."

Annika gasped in horror, she pointed at him angrily. "How monstrous! A fine vessel like this should be painted golden like my beautiful hair. Shining amongst the stars. I won't let you."

"Yes, I'll steal it and then I'll..." Damien trailed off once he realised what she actually said, not what he imagined she would. "You think my evil plan was to not cloak it but make it bright pissy yellow?"

"No," Annika replied innocently. "Golden, like my wonderful locks." Damien stared blankly at her until she brought back her really bad angry face. "You're lying anyway. Scheming with Chakotay, sneaking around, altering this shuttle, keeping secrets."

"So what if I was?" Damien muttered.

Annika leaned forward while scrunching her eyes closer together. "I'll find out what it is. I'm super smart remember?"

"Then you'd know you didn't answer my question, you vapid airhead," Damien groaned.

"Voyager's my home, my family. You hurt them, you hurt me," Annika said.

Damien sighed wistfully, "if only that were true, that'd be such a huge incentive."

"What?" Annika snapped. Her yellow eyes sharpened, they appeared darker. Damien assumed it was the very poor light.

"Please. You hate them. They know it, you know it. Nobody's fooled by this love struck crazy act," Damien said.

Annika smiled, purring seductively. Her hand reached for his leg, "who said I was faking the love part?"

Damien shuddered and backed away before she found her target. "The first chance you got you'd betray them. If Lena hadn't done it first, you would have abandoned Voyager to go to the Borg Queen. Voyager was taken over and you joined the other side. Lets not forget the best one, after enduring one last tantrum, you showed up on my ship."

A swoon took over the vampiric drone, her eyelashes fluttered. "You're right, you and I go so far back. It's romantic, no?"

"No!" Damien snapped. He had to get back on topic or he'd end up being molested in no time. "My point is no matter who or what it is, you'll sell Voyager out in a heartbeat."

"But I'm dead, I have no heartbeat," Annika protested.

Damien ignored that and sneered at her. "Which means you've already done it. Right?"

"No, I haven't done anything yet," Annika cried out. She didn't notice her mistake and so attempted once more to keep her facade up. "If your cloak's already done, why are you fiddling around here? Huh? It's something bad, I know it!"

"Maybe I'm testing it," Damien replied casually. "Want to watch?"

Annika considered that for a moment. "No."

"Good. I couldn't stomach another test involving you," Damien said followed by a sigh. He walked around her to use another station.

Annika stared after him, hoping to see what he was up to. She waited for him to redirect power from her station to his, then she climbed out of her seat to get a better look. He made no effort to cover his work.

"A cloak won't help you win the Game Sphere, Damy," she snarled. "It's useless."

"You'd know about uselessness," Damien mumbled while he worked.

"Exactly... er I mean, I know because I was always useful and helped every day," Annika covered.

"Nice save IQ of Nine," Damien smirked.

Annika mouthed what he called her, she didn't understand it. "That's why I know you're working on something else."

Damien rolled his eyes, then turned his head away from her sight so he could smirk. "I told you I was."

"But..." Annika was even more confused. Her eyes drifted up to think about it. While she did, Damien changed what system he was working on, all the while watching her in the corner of his eye. He didn't have time to finish it so he moved back. The ex-drone was none of the wiser. "You're working on something evil, I will stop you."

"There, time for my extremely evil scheme, test one," Damien cackled. He looked up at the nervous Annika nearby, "one step closer to freedom. Voyager will have to save itself from now on."

Annika's jaw dropped. "No, stop!"

Damien's finger edged slowly toward one panel, clearly on purpose for dramatic effect. Annika dove for him to grab his hand, and in her eyes save the day. Since he was going so slow it was easy. When she swung her head to the right to confront him on his evil deeds she found him sniggering at her, not disappointed or upset. "Huh?" Then she noticed the countdown on the station where he was about to press. The command was *abort?*

"Hey, what's that for..." Annika asked as a transporter beam took over her body.

Damien burst into fits of laughter once she was gone. "This I gotta see." He hurried out of the shuttle, and straight for the shuttle bay exit.

### **The Bridge:**

Everyone there stared at the viewscreen, squinting their eyes at it.

"Somebody get to Opps, I can't see what that is," Danny said.

Kiara stepped out of the turbolift next to opps. She noticed what everyone was doing and did the same. "Hey, there's a body floating in space!" she instantly panicked.

Everyone did the same. Faye rushed over from Tactical to Opps. She wasn't the only one, several crewmembers at the back station did the same thing.

The first person to get there told the screen to zoom in. The second tried to get a lock on them.

"Wait!" Danny cried out. "It's just Annika."

Sure enough the object floating around was wearing a pink catsuit, and had blonde hair trailing behind her. She was desperately trying to get back to the ship, or so they thought with her swimming motions. Obviously it wasn't working that well for her.

"Maybe we should move," Faye said with an evil glint in her eye.

"No, if we bump into her she'll only climb back in," Danny said sadly.

"I was thinking more of the lines of warping away," Faye sniggered.

Kiara had to laugh. It wasn't the first time this happened to Annika and it wouldn't be the last. "We could get popcorn and watch," she suggested.

"Yes! Oh, music," Danny laughed. She reached for another part of the helm. Just then most of the bridge had ran forward to join her for a better view of Annika's plight. They all expected upbeat party music, instead they got a goofy tune.

"Benny Hill Theme, really?" Faye said.

Danny shrugged, "it seemed fitting."

"Who's getting the popcorn?" one crewmember asked.

Kiara ran back in from the Ready Room with a huge bucket. She walked around in front of the helm, crouching down so everyone could still see, so she could put it on the console. Everyone then started grabbing handfuls and stuffing their faces with them.

"Previously on Fifth Voyager; everything happened. And now the conclusion," Tom joked, prompting glares and blank looks his way. "I'm funny. You just don't want to admit it."

Lena stared at him blankly. "Oh don't worry, we're laughing inside."

She wasn't the only one who wasn't amused. The new arrival gritted his teeth, insulted by the joke and interruption. "Is that your contribution to this, Paris? The enemy will succumb to bad fourth wall jokes. Everyone let's scrap everything else, he's got it in hand," Chakotay muttered.

"That... wouldn't surprise me actually," James said.

Kathryn looked at him, her lips curling. "Who knew Tom would be the hero we don't deserve."

Tom liked the thought of that even though it was obvious they were making fun of him. He cleared his throat. "All right, Chakotay. We can fly into the Games Matrix. Then what?"

Kiara strolled casually into the Conference Room, picking popcorn out of her teeth with her tongue. She stopped when everyone looked at her. "Annika's outside," she explained.

The rush to the window happened so quickly all Kiara saw was a brief blur. There were groans of disappointment when they couldn't see anything.

"You don't mean she's outside the room, right?" Tom stuttered.

"No, the ship," Kiara replied. Lena sniggered even though she was disappointed she missed it. "I er... have a theory about the anomaly. It's probably dumb but..."

Kathryn approached her, smiling kindly. "No it won't be. You're not Tom."

"Oh come on. We're nearing the end and you still won't give me any respect," Tom complained.

Kiara smiled with relief. "That's true. Okay then." Tom huffed and started to pace around the room, muttering under his breath. "I think the anomaly is the Game Sphere, just unfiltered, pure."

"I'm not sure I understand," Chakotay said.

"Well, the old Game Spheres used to give one person whatever they wanted. That person would have to be convinced to end the game. Meanwhile like all the other spheres, it drains the energy from the planet," Kiara said.

The silence convinced her that she was talking rubbish and her cheeks burned bright red. Everyone had focused on her as she had been talking, they missed Annika drift sideways into view. She crawled frantically at the shields near the window, mouthing something. Of course since she was in space they couldn't hear anything so had no idea it was happening.

"I'm sorry, I just..." Kiara stammered.

Lena interrupted, "no, you're right." Kiara's other features brightened up, instantly relieved that she wasn't making a fool of herself. "The sphere would bring up obstacles for anyone trying to escape or end it too. Or it would convince the *hallucinatee* to want something that could stop them. It's just doing it to everyone and draining things faster."

"Wouldn't that mean it would go away if no one's around to sustain it?" Tom questioned.

"Why would it? The sphere's got another energy source after all," Kathryn replied.

"It also explains why Lena and I weren't affected," James said.

Kiara nodded furiously, "yes, Game Spheres could only be defeated by Chosens. I wonder if Zare was."

"Hang on. The planet. That was just drained," Chakotay argued.

The rest of the room thought about it. Annika tried again to get their attention, this time she thought flirting would work. The first thing she tried was wiggling her chest. The second, a hair flip made her body fling back away from the ship. She tried to scream as she floated slowly towards the Enterprise in the distance.

"They weren't a threat, nor could they escape," Tom said. "What was the point?"

Kathryn nodded in full agreement. "Excellent point." She double checked to see if it was Tom that really said it. "What can we do with this? There must be something."

The doors opened once more. B'Elanna hurried inside. They almost shut behind her, Jessie triggered them to re-open. The two were in the middle of a conversation as they entered.

"We don't even have a plan. It may not be of any use," Jessie argued.

"It may help create a plan though," B'Elanna argued back.

Everyone waited patiently for them to explain what they were talking about, or to include them in it.

That didn't happen. "I'm telling you, it'll only help if we're taking a trip down demon lane. We need to use the game frequencies," Jessie snapped.

B'Elanna swung around to counter. "The frequency only protects us from game endings. It won't help in the mean time."

"Ahem!" Tom coughed intentionally. The two women abruptly turned their heads his way, both with equally terrifying glares. He wilted down a few inches.

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the games themselves," Jessie said.

"Maybe we should ignore them for now," Lena suggested to the others. Tom nodded while whimpering. "It doesn't take long for all hell to break loose, does it?"

The intercom intruded. *"Bridge to Paris. The portal shield system is activating, it's detected an opening in the shuttle bay."*

Tom's eyes widened in a blind panic, "the Flyer!"

B'Elanna stared in deadpan, her eyes slowly rolled their way toward him.

*"That's odd. It's closed already. The system had very little power to draw from, so no shield came online."*

Chakotay exhaled, shoulders slumped. "That'll be Damien."

"What?" most of the room stuttered.

"Don't worry, the only way he can use it to betray us will vaporise him. No harm," Chakotay said.

Kathryn walked across the room to stand directly in front of him, her eyes met his. "What is he doing and why are you only telling us of it now?"

"To be honest, I wasn't sure it would help us. It was just something of a side project, and I only thought it an hour or so ago," Chakotay replied calmly despite her stares. Everyone else were focusing on him, he had to explain himself. "I asked him to re-build one of his old weapons. The subspace opener."

Kathryn's brow furrowed, "you mean detector?"

Chakotay shook his head. "No, but I imagine it was inspired by that. He claimed it was built to erase the Games Matrix link to a particular planet, so it wouldn't receive anymore Cubes. Only it was used to open a door instead."

"That would eliminate the need to go in the anomaly," Craig said.

"Hopefully. We should wait for the results," Chakotay nodded.

B'Elanna wasn't impressed or happy about it for that matter. "He tried to open one of those things on Voyager?"

"Not completely. We both agreed that he would cancel it once it was halfway. Remember, you can't just go in there without protection. With the Flyer being damaged, he had no way of surviving a full scale opening," Chakotay said. He seemed disappointed to everyone. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that to him."

Jessie rolled her eyes, "Damien unfortunately is not stupid."

"Sometimes I forget," Chakotay admitted.

Tom clapped his hands to get everyone to stop and pay attention to him. It worked, for the most part. The unfortunate side effect though was the majority were left bemused by his methods. "Guys, this is all well and good but we don't want to just escape the game. Remember? We have to find a way to stop it."

Kathryn agreed, however she was curious about what B'Elanna and Jessie were talking about so she turned to them. "What about game frequencies?"

Jessie chimed in before B'Elanna could, "I suggested we should upgrade the anti-portal shield system using the information we've gotten from games."

"That's not what you said at all," B'Elanna hissed back in protest. "You were blabbing about that end of game frequency."

Jessie raged back once more, "no, you heard frequency and assumed that was what I meant. So I said the wrong word." She looked briefly to one side at nearby people, "I meant signatures."

"The shield doesn't work like that," B'Elanna said.

"Well make it work like that," Jessie said a little too casually for B'Elanna's liking. Smoke rose from her.

Kathryn's interest was piqued. "What would using the game information do exactly?"

The other door hissed, another crewmember entered the so called meeting.

"Exactly. We're already in a sphere, there's no cubes and you can't stop that from landing on your head. Try draining either of them and we'll overload," B'Elanna ranted irritably.

Jessie ignored her. "I thought it would turn the tables on something like the anomaly draining our power. Protect us at least from its effects by using its own system against it."

"Which is exactly how the shield works, right?" Tom said. He knew immediately he was in deep trouble for saying that. He crept away and averted his eyes before B'Elanna could glare him to death, or worse.

"Weren't you listening? We don't need that anymore, and that wasn't what you said. It was just gibberish," B'Elanna snapped.

"Actually," the new arrival said a little too gleefully. Everyone groaned in response. Damien sneered back. "You do."

Chakotay quickly approached him, flummoxed by his report. "What does that mean? We got the report of a portal opening."

"Not the kind you want Chuckie," Damien said. He scanned the room, wondering how he would explain without confusing everyone. "Your little shield stole all of its juice for one. Secondly, it couldn't get a lock on the Games Matrix. As far as it was concerned, there was already a nice little connection to abuse right here on Voyager."

"The other Voyager," B'Elanna grumbled.

Damien winked at her, "bingo." B'Elanna made a mental note to kill him later. Everyone else were surprised she didn't do it right then. "If you want to get into the Games Matrix, you're going to need a stronger connection to it to tap into."

"The rifts. So what now?" Craig complained. "Will Jessie's idea work, B'Elanna?"

"No, no, no!" Tom's temper had ran out. He started to pace around, it usually helped calm him down. "Listen to me. It isn't just about us. Countless worlds and ships all share one enemy. That's the Softmicron and their Game Sphere of death. It plays with everyone and everything, turning the worst of us against each other. It's what they want. Our deaths are meaningless to them. Our suffering is their entertainment. I don't know about you, but I'm done with playing their games. Stop appeasing them."

He stood at the head of the table, blocking most of the view of the window for everyone. The amused faces he ignored for now. "We won't run, we fight. Their game will end by our hands. They will pay with their arrogance and their blood. Turn your attention, not to escape, but to the Game Sphere. Focus your efforts, on the Softmicron."

A few members of the room were laughing by the time he was done. Tom groaned, angry that they'd ruin his speech like that. Unknown to him they weren't laughing at his words. Annika had somehow managed to get back to Voyager. Since Tom was in the way, a few any could see of her were her arms flapping about making it look like he had sprouted extra ones. B'Elanna helpfully pointed behind him so he could see that for himself.

Despite her situation she waved like she was on the other side of a regular window, not in the vacuum of space. A couple of the Conference Room's inhabitants made out her miming, "help me." Then she gestured to her chest, winking suggestively. Her mood soured when she noticed Damien, she gasped and started pointing at him. The outburst pushed her away again. Nobody needed to understand lip reading to know her next word was, "noooooooooo."

"Oh, so you were laughing at her," Tom said, relieved.

James killed that pretty quickly, "no, I was laughing at your *original* speech too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tom protested a little too hard.

Damien sniggered as he glanced toward James, "you noticed that too huh? Too bad we can't shoot him." James smirked back.

"Putting the *inspired* speech to the side for now, Tom does have a point. We don't know how to end the sphere," Kathryn said. "Surely someone has something they can contribute. The Soft know we can hurt them, but how. What makes us so different to everyone else?"

Craig cast his eye toward Lena, which she noticed in the corner of her eye. "The timelines and the paradox. Without that, we'd still be in the Delta Quadrant blissfully unaware." Lena swung her head toward him, eyes widening. "We'd never have known about the Tolg to learn what we have. Since we'd never return home, we wouldn't have another ship, we'd be alone. More importantly, we'd never know about the Soft."

"Craig," Lena said as she recalled saying something very similar to him.

He smiled at her with affection, and pride. She had no idea why, it made her a little uncomfortable too. "The answer's there, out of our window," he said pointing toward the Enterprise, but thankfully not in Annika's direction. "It's here standing with us," he said toward Lena, and then turned his attention to Kathryn. "It's in our minds. What we need to beat them."

Damien felt a bit nauseous just considering adding to this conversation. As he about to speak, he repressed a gag. "I can't speak for the first, but the second phase; influenced by a mother's impulsiveness and ignorance, ends in the path of a Game she underestimated."

"Oh not again," Tom said while Kathryn reacted with a deadly scowl.

"The third likely begins with child abandonment and is destroyed by *who cares*," Damien continued with distaste.

Kathryn was about to pounce when Chakotay gently placed a hand on her shoulder. She eyed him without moving her head. "The third dimension, ends with the destruction of the Slayer line and then Voyager itself," he said.

Damien rolled his eyes, "on the fourth, the other overpowered special one is born, heralding a life of monotony and uselessness to the Voyager crew."

"Do you even have a point!?" B'Elanna snapped at him.

Something made Damien burst into laughter. It could have been his story telling, B'Elanna's reaction, or merely the thought of bad times for Voyager. He tried to contain it to finish what he was saying, "the welp is right. This isn't just about the oh so Chosen ones. In two timelines, at this particular date or year, the universe already have at least one of you. Yet they reset anyway."

Understanding washed over Lena, and it annoyed her that it was Damien, even though he did steal Craig's thunder to do it. "It's always been Voyager. Voyager's the key." There was a huge sense of relief. Her shoulders felt so much lighter. She stared at her brother to see if he had reacted the same. He was already watching her, a small smile on his face. Upon eye contact he nodded.

"The ship with a door closes the final link," Kathryn repeated herself from a past meeting.

"Still doesn't say how, does it," Tom had to comment.

"I think it does. Our door is on Deck Thirteen. The final link, could it be the Games Matrix itself?" James said.

Their earlier conversation popped straight back into B'Elanna's mind, and then Jessie's. B'Elanna's thoughts started to race. "It's more than that. It's their only means to get to our reality from wherever they came from."

The sentence struck Jessie a few times in the face, momentarily stunning her. The rest of the room had time to discuss what had been said so far quietly amongst themselves. James noticed her discomfort and walked over to her. Her eyes met his, she desperately tried to verbalise the realisation that she had come to. "Except us."

"What do you mean?" James questioned her within a whisper.

"With the Matrix gone, the only way that they can come through..." Jessie stuttered.

James was hit too, his face froze. "Is here." Jessie nodded while her throat throbbed with the anxiety overwhelming every part of her being.

### **The Ready Room:**

Tom's worried pacing became erratic, he ended up nearly bumping into the crowd that had gathered in it. The second he did it, they stepped out of the way just in case. Doing so caught his attention to one of them.

"Craig," Tom said to him.

"Going alphabetically are we?" Chakotay teased him.

"We'd get through this a lot quicker if you didn't make comments about everything," Tom snapped at him.

Craig nodded, "you could say the same about you and the series."

Tom wasn't about to argue with that. "We need someone at Tactical but we also need as many fighters as we can get. Where do you recommend I put you?"

"Since Jessie and Lena are the other Tactical options, I'd say Tactical," Craig replied.

"It's possible you may still need to fight, to defend the bridge. We have no idea what they'll throw at us," Chakotay pointed out.

Tom stared at him as if he'd kicked him in the shin. Chakotay had no idea why, so he just shrugged. "Are you suggesting we should substitute Jessie to Tactical, just in case a mad Soft or vampire runs in to take over the Bridge?"

Craig cleared his throat to raise his hand, "I think I can manage that. Jess would be more useful as a physical attacker."

"You're forgetting that a month ago she had a baby. It's not something you bounce back from in a few weeks," B'Elanna reminded the three men.

"Did you hear what she did to her mother? No problem for Jessie," Tom said.

Chakotay sighed, "isn't it a bit pointless to be planning where everyone is, when we don't actually know what will happen?"

Tom scowled at him. "I'll tell you what, Chakotay. Let's discuss leadership roles." Chakotay rolled his eyes in response. "Janeway can take over Enterprise."

"Hey," Harry piped up.

"Second in command can go to Harry or B'Elanna," Tom said carefully. He wasn't surprised that both of them weren't too happy with the idea. "And you, you can Captain a shuttle with your super secret keeping, plot twist creating power. The Flyer's already damaged, it's yours."

Chakotay had to groan, "I thought we explained this already."

"He has a point, Tom. What if our final plan involves ship combat only?" B'Elanna said.

"Then we'll still have the right person at the right station. I'm just suggesting that we be ready for both. It's not up for debate," Tom explained. He passed a wary glance toward Chakotay. "Except for you, but I'm honestly not sure if we should trust you."

"We can trust the Captain, at least," Harry said, not sounding fully sure himself.

"We don't know where we'll end up," Kathryn addressed the room. She turned, her arm gestured to a zoomed out view of the galaxy undisturbed by the Sphere. "Could be the Delta Quadrant, Beta..." Then she pointed away from it, zooming the view out to a different galaxy. "Or beyond. There's no telling what will happen, whether we'll survive."

Ersa felt the need to interrupt, "are you giving us a chance to..."

"No, no chance," Kathryn said stubbornly. "Your worlds, your space is right here in the Game. Return to them. When it's over you'll still be there, home and relatively safe and sound."

The room erupted into many raised voices. Tira spoke the loudest, desperate to be heard by the captain. "They've attacked us. We can help you fight them. Best of all, most of us want to."

Kathryn didn't expect much, if any resistance. It took her by surprise. "We will be far from home regardless of what we do. No area so far matches the Alpha Quadrant. We can afford to take the risk, you cannot."

Ersa was another who wasn't convinced. "Our home is gone. I know a lot of my crew want to avenge that. Whatever you have planned, we're going too."

His newly elected first officer agreed with him. "All we're asking for is a choice here. Helping you is the least we can do after everything that's happened."

"I know how you feel..." Kathryn said in a low voice.

Trainee Shar stomped forward, her eyes burning. "Do you? We've only just met. Who are you to be making these decisions for all of us?"

Tom jumped to Kathryn's defence, "she's the Captain. This is her ship." Shar huffed in distaste.

Kathryn wasn't sure if she should thank him for that or not. "No Tom. Voyager is ours. You're her captain now." He looked at her gratefully. "I stranded it and a crew of over a hundred and fifty in the Delta Quadrant, because of something *I* believed in. My crew are all in together on this one and we're lost anyway. You may want to fight the Game and the Softmicron, but some of your crew may just want to get back home. You can't make the same mistake I made."

"Seems like you're doing the same thing again. It's just the opposite side of the decision," Tira said.

"Yes," Shar agreed. "I've been with Voyager since the beginning of this hell hole. I want to see this through. I won't be chucked aside. This is what I've been training for, right?" she said the last part towards her remaining team mates.

Kathryn quickly scanned the whole room, starting with the small group of alien trainees that Wesley had recruited. From what she heard only one trainee would be left if they left Voyager. What with one Human member dead and the other in the brig. It did seem a bit wasteful and insulting to teach them for exactly this, then send them home after one mission. At least one she knew about. Her eye then settled on Maraina, the leader of the refugees that Voyager had rescued fairly recently from their own fleet. Their world was still under Softmicron control, she knew that much. She had kept quiet, so Kathryn was unable to figure her out. From her posture, her strong face, she felt to Kathryn like a woman of kind determination who had been through hell and back.

Tira, the captain of a lone Krralef ship. The species who felt they were in debt to Voyager, twice. Who a mass majority believed were on the brink of their apocalyptic prophecy. The last she saw them they were fighting back quite well against the shapeshifters. It was no surprise that she'd want to fight for both her world and to pay back Voyager. Then there was her relationship with Harry.

So far she knew that she had a fight on her hands. The final two her gaze fell on, there was no way she'd be able to convince them. She understood their reaction perfectly. Yana and Ersa, representing the Katane and Erayas' survivors respectively. If what happened to Erayas happened to Earth, Kathryn wouldn't just do as she was told and wait around Federation space for the Game to end. She'd fight.

"Some of us don't want a way out. We want this to end just as much as you," Tira said passionately.

Despite her feelings on the matter, Kathryn had to convince these people. At least some of them. "Our plan won't be improved by more ships. We only need two. Ending the Game will not solve all of our problems. The Softmicron will still be in the same places. They'll be furious, they'll be vengeful. Some of you know that all too well." Maraina glanced to the floor, her shoulders weighed down. "That's where you can make a difference."

The speech had seemingly convinced the majority. A few were slightly unnerved as well.

"Without the towers and the Game itself, we can drive them out," Maraina said, looking up with some optimism in her eyes.

Yana only had to think about it for a brief moment before she saw a flaw. "The experimental beasts though. They will still remain on worlds with older towers."

"They are still people physically, with the same weaknesses. They can be taken down by conventional means. Phaser blasts set to kill will stun for example," Kathryn said.

Tom shook his head afterwards. Sending these people into further danger was not what he really had in mind. "I'm not going to ask you to do anything like this. We just don't want to drag you with us into the unknown."

"I'm sure most of my crew will want to force the Softmicron from our home. Others may want to fight alongside you, while some may simply want to return," Tira said. "You may have a point about one thing. We can't decide for our people. We should discuss with them what they want."

"I certainly agree with that. My crew are civilians. They're not soldiers," Maraina said. "Where to go though, is difficult."

"Me too. How long have we got?" Ersal questioned.

"We leave tomorrow, it will take ten days to arrive." Kathryn then turned back to the astrometric data behind her. She keyed in a few commands on the station to bring up their incomplete and very distorted map of the Game Sphere. A few points were highlighted, a line each emerged from Voyager's location to them. Kathryn pointed at an area near the ominous blue cloud. "The Katane could stay with us until we enter."

Her arm gestured towards two close together but very distant locations to Voyager. "Shar and Jach would have to leave tomorrow, as well as Sonla and Onlan." She heard a grunt from the very vocal Shar. Her attitude so far had been annoying to say the least, however her spirit was admirable so she chose to give her a pass.

Another destination lay roughly in the middle. "Captain Tira. Four days and we'll be too far out of range for you to return in time," Kathryn said. Finally she turned to another area of space close by. "Maraina, your space is on route too. We'll have to take a detour to avoid occupied Ruvan ships. There's a habited moon on that course seven days in which my ship have offered to ferry you to, or another place of your choosing."

"Yes, I know it. We have a small colony there," Maraina said.

"It'll take more than ten days to get back to our planet from here," Jach spoke up timidly.

Onlan had a bemused stare on his face. "So it wasn't just me being an idiot. It didn't look right."

"No, but you should be in an area close to your world. If Li'Chin and Wesley's navigation records are to be believed," Tom said.

Shar folded her arms, "how are we supposed to get there? Walk?"

Kathryn had to laugh, if only briefly. Shar didn't take offense at it, she discreetly did the same. "I'm still working that part out. My crew are cross referencing Wesley's records and what we stole from the Tolg ship, to see if we can drop you off somewhere after Maraina's stop. It's difficult to know where the Beta Quadrant ends and the Delta begins. We don't even know if Ruva is in either quadrant."

"We're closer to those two worlds," Tira brought up reluctantly. "We'd have to leave earlier than you suggested. If they're willing to go home, then any of my crew who do as well can do it."

Kathryn shared a concerned stare with Tom. He nodded after half a minute. "We'll leave it up to you. However before you discuss it with your people, you have to understand the risks of staying with Voyager and Enterprise," Tom said.

"We could end up anywhere in the universe if we survive at all. I don't think anyone missed that," Shar said.

"Don't get too comfortable. The plan may not work and we could die in its failure," Kathryn said as gently as she could. "The less with us the better. If we fail, it's up to you."

A cold feeling took over Tom, forcing him to shudder a few times. He tried to make himself feel better by forcing a smile onto his face. "But no pressure, right?"

"Tom," Kathryn warned him.

Tom laughed brightly. "There's no real use in being so grim and emo about it, is there. One way or another tomorrow we're setting a course for the hornets glitched nest. No turning back, no second chances. Fear is catching, so I choose not to be the lighter of it and fan its flames."

"Dear lord," Kathryn groaned to herself. She hinted to everyone that they should go. They didn't need any encouragement, off they went, gradually leaving Tom on his own.

"This time the Softmicron will know fear. We will burn but so will they," Tom continued. He pulled a face, unhappy with his final line. "Burn in fear with us. No, we shouldn't be burning. Damn it, let me start again." Thankfully by that time he noticed he was on his own. He sighed sadly, "no one has any respect for showmanship."

Everyone on the Bridge watched Kathryn as she stepped from the turbolift and made her way to the command centre. She gave a nod to Chakotay already starting there.

"Where's Tom?" he asked.

"Probably with his head stuck in the fiction library, trying to find a more suitable speech he can steal," Kathryn replied with a smile. Chakotay did the same.

"Or the actual library. I never saw the point in it. Though Ian and I..." Danny started to giggle.

Kathryn quickly raised her voice to at the very least drown her out. "We're ready. Signal the fleet. Set a course for the anomaly, maximum warp."

Danny pouted, "fine, spoil sport."

Leading the way, Voyager moved forward, its warp nacelles raised up. It shot ahead into the far distance in a blinding light. The Enterprise and their three allies jumped to warp in near perfect synch.

*"Oops, a bit premature, wasn't I?" Danny's voice laughed rudely.*

*"Paris to the Bridge, now," Kathryn's groaned.*

*Lieutenant Commander Paris' Log Stardate 58931.4: Day one on our journey to the infamous blue, black cloud of hallucinations. Preparations for the upcoming battle is going slowly.*

A team of four Security officers hurried down a corridor carrying rifles. When they reached the end of the corridor before it split into two, they chose one side and threw their backs against it, hiding them from whatever was in the adjacent corridor. One gestured to the other side; one, two. On three they leapt forward to point their weapons, two one way and the other two the other. The pair on the right were surprised to find somebody they didn't expect there.

"Oooh, well hello big boys," Annika purred.

Since one of the pair pointing the rifles was actually a woman, she didn't look impressed at all. Her teammate dropped his rifle and ran off screaming the way he came. That of course startled the other pair. They soon followed him. Half way down they ran by Craig as he was about to ask what was happening. Since he didn't get a chance he just sighed despondently.

He finally understood when Annika stepped around the corner with her hands on her hips. She directed a wink that looked so forceful and cheap he took it as a threat.

*Crewmembers are in the middle of being re-assigned to make up for the skeletal crew of the Enterprise.*

As he walked around and tried to settle in, the Doctor realised he didn't like the Enterprise's cold and barren primary Sickbay. He considered closing shop and moving it to the one on the lower decks, since it appeared so much like home. He realised at that

thought that he was already getting home sick. A laugh chased that away for the moment. He had to make sure everything here was in working order.

Footsteps approached. With a smile the Doctor swung around to greet the hopefully not serious patient. "Please state the nature of..." his voice trailed off. The patient standing before him wasn't somebody he expected to see here. He wasn't alone. Standing behind him were two armed Security officers. "The medical emergency," said still with the same smile on his face.

*For now repair teams are its crew. Over the months we haven't had much time to spruce the ship back to its former glory. Modifications to the shields have caused a few issues. Integrating the Game loss frequency with the mods cancel each other out. While the damaged systems still on Enterprise are sparking power outages in random places.*

"That should..." B'Elanna mumbled, shoulder deep inside an engineering console. The only light source came from a couple of flashlights, one lying on the floor, and another being held.

Damien stood nearby, judging her every move. "Hardly. As per usual, I'm the only smart one here." His finger tip barely brushed the panel above where B'Elanna was working, when blue energy from it tried to get to his flashlight through him.

The lights sprung back to life. B'Elanna pulled out of the station with an accomplished smile on her face. "One down, one thousand to go," she joked to herself.

A whimper beside her got the engineer's attention. She looked up to see Damien twitching, still in the same position he was earlier. Only his hair stood up on end, and smoke rose from him. His flashlight had also gone out.

"You really should get another one that'll last sixteen more decks," B'Elanna smirked.

He muttered a few stuttered swearwords in between tremors.

*B'Elanna believes that replacing a few of the damaged conduits with spare bio-neural gel packs may help speed things along. The shortages are getting in the way of the clean up and repairs over there, so if it takes too long we may have to concentrate on modifying and testing Voyager first. Once Enterprise is in better condition, there should be less problems.*

Turbolift doors opened, Harry hurried out of them before they finished. He immediately almost ran into Triah busy sweeping the floor with a broom. He kept his bemused stare on her as he walked around. She grunted irritably while continuing to sweep the same spot.

Apart from Bryan at the helm, the stations were empty. Everyone else was focused on repairs. A group of four gathered around the back stations, already a good way through repairing the outer shell of them. Other crewmembers were dotted around doing minor repairs.

Even though they all knew what they were preparing for, the crew's morale seemed reasonably good. The four member team had a good banter going on while they worked. The rest would chat as they crossed paths.

Harry decided he should help out. He noticed the crewman making modifications to Opps had been in the same spot the longest, so he rushed over to help them. He barely had

time to say one word when one noise took over the entire bridge. Harry knew exactly what it was, he heard it before. A glance over his shoulder confirmed it.

Triah had magically brought a vacuum out of thin air, and had already pushed it around the back of the bridge. A big and wide smile on her face, it looked like she was humming, not that anyone could hear it.

Harry and the crewmen laughed between themselves, before opting for talking via typing words from opps onto the viewscreen.

*I'm hoping the Enterprise will be ready for battle when we arrive or we may have to delay entry. I'm remaining optimistic. Ten days is more than enough time to prepare for a battle such as this.*

A red piercing light grazed by the Voyager's shields, detonating in its path instead. The forward shields fluctuated momentarily.

"One day I'll learn not to tempt fate," Tom muttered to himself as a tremor made him stumble into his seat.

"You say stupid things. Be proud of who you are," Jessie said, her hands had a tight grip on her station. "Somebody should be."

Tom ignored the probably millionth jab from her for the time being. "Where's it coming from and don't say a ship."

"I don't know, I don't recognise their design," Faye answered.

"Hail them again," Tom ordered.

Silence followed by light rumbles as the enemy continued firing. Faye eventually shook her head, "no answer."

A quiet, "hmm," came from Chakotay in his old chair. Tom focused on him. "Just in case I ran a bio scan. I've got a match."

"Two days travel and we're already running into the Softmicron, this is..." Tom grumbled.

"No," Chakotay interrupted him. His eyes drifted up to meet the Lieutenant's. "They're Sarazian."

"Who?" Jessie asked.

Tom had to think about it as he didn't know either. The name was familiar to him, it wasn't recent he knew that much. He began to list all the races that they encountered from recent to not so. Chakotay didn't wait for him though, "Shar and Jach's species."

Tom leapt from his chair to face Opps. "Hail them again, tell them to scan us like we have." Faye meekly nodded. "Get one of them to come to the bridge, quickly," he whispered to Chakotay. The Commander tapped his commbadge to do just that.

"They're scanning," Faye said.

A brief ten seconds that felt like an hour silence later, and Jessie piped up, "they're powering their weapons down."

Faye sighed in relief, "they're hailing."

Tom glanced at them both, "best not let our guard down again. On screen." He turned to face the viewscreen just as it activated. As Chakotay said, the alien on the screen had similar features to the Security trainees Jach and Shar. The eery yellow eyes were the first detail that struck him. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Paris of the Starship Voyager."

The alien wasn't too pleased to hear that, they kept a growing temper in check with a firm scowl. "Parseei'an Lomelak of the Trabor. The markings NCC-74656 and Voyager were spotted on a vessel that attacked one of our colonies."

Jessie winced, "uhoh."

"Four of our people were recruited by another vessel of yours. We've scanned two. Care to explain yourselves," the alien continued.

"It's a long story I'm afraid. I'm not sure you'll even believe it," Tom said honestly.

Lomelak wasn't impressed with Tom's non-answer. "I'm listening."

The sound of the turbolift arriving on their deck gave Tom some brief relief. He hoped the first one to arrive was the much calmer and reasonable Jach. He didn't dare have a look to find out.

"Maybe he can tell you," Chakotay said, giving it away.

It was Jach that arrived on the Bridge first. Upon seeing the man on the screen he quickened his pace to join the two commanders. "Commandant Parseei'an, sir."

"You know him?" Chakotay questioned.

"By reputation only. What's happening here?" Jach stuttered.

"It seems like the Flyer and your current boss paid one of your planets a visit," Tom answered reluctantly.

Jach's jaw dropped, "that's..." He glanced at Chakotay instead. He nodded. "Ohno, does that mean...?"

"It means your friends opened fire on your own people. Fortunate for them, there were no casualties. Which is why I'm still waiting for an explanation," Lomelak said. "Once I have that we demand the safe return of the two captives, then you will be paid back in kind."

Chakotay coolly stepped forward while maintaining eye contact with him. "Look around you. We aren't alone. It's five ships versus yours. We don't want to fight you but we are on an important mission that will help you as well. We can't let anyone get in the way of that."

"Help us? Like you helped destroy our power network," Lomelak hissed.

"Sir, if I may," Jach stuttered nervously. He cleared his throat, hoping it would level his voice a little. "You know why the governors allowed the others and I to leave with these people, right? You know of the Games and the Slayers. We've had a long relationship with the Watchers coven for centuries."

"Coven," Jessie whispered with worry.

"Their people were chosen this time around. That wouldn't happen if they were as evil as you think," Jach argued. Lomelak studied him carefully, it gave Jach a little time to think his next words through. "I assume the power network you mentioned was relatively new."

"Yes, one was still under construction. Why is that important?" Lomelak said.

"Better yet, why were there no casualties?" Jach questioned. As he spoke another turbolift arrived so he didn't hear it. "Why would a vessel like this send one tiny ship to destroy a building, but intentionally not hurt anyone? Did the destruction of the network have any repercussions at all?"

Shar hurriedly arrived at his side, her lips quivering and her eyes wide. "What is this? How, why are you here?"

Lomelak's own lips curled at the sight of her and her reaction to him. "Shar Tinah, I assume."

She was further taken aback, "what?"

"Your reputation is colourful to say the least," Lomelak said to her. He focused back on Jach, a curious glint in his eye. "You raise some interesting points. Is it Jach or Binene?"

"Jach sir," Jach answered timidly.

"Our sensors didn't detect any lifeforms aboard your small vessel, Commander Paris," Lomelak said. "Coupled with what Master Jach has spoken of, it is clear that there was more going on than a mere attack."

Shar's face scrunched up. "Attack? Small vessel. Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

"One of our colonies has been or was taken over by the Soft," Jach whispered to her.

The colour in her face drained. "No."

"The Soft... micron?" Lomelak said in shock. "The shapeshifters the watchers spoke of. How are they connected to this?"

Tom sighed a little out of relief, mostly out of exhaustion. "Well, that makes it a slightly less long story I suppose. Maybe since we've cleared the air you'd like to come aboard."

"I would," Lomelak nodded. He then disappeared from the screen.

Tom turned to the two alien trainees. The look of horror still painted on Shar's face gave him a brush of sympathy for her. "Would you both want to be in this meeting?" he asked gently.

"Yes," Jach replied while Shar only nodded lightly.

Chakotay walked towards Tactical, "Jessie." She seemed out of it until he said her name. "Maybe James would like to explain his actions to his, I need another word other than victims."

Jessie spotted Shar trembling and speechless. It was obvious to her that the young woman's home was on a colony, and she was imagining the worst. "I'll talk to him," she answered.

The uncomfortable silence had gone on too long. Shar hadn't said a word to him, or looked at him directly at all during the meeting yesterday or since. James expected something from the trainee that hated him. Scorn and anger, an insult, blame. If she thought he did anything wrong she'd call him on it aggressively.

Now the student stood by his office window, staring into space. He hadn't asked her to see him, nor was there any training scheduled. It was clear she had something to say to him, but so far had chosen to keep him in suspense.

When she finally said something her voice was strained. "My mother and sister live on Dizhien. It occurs to me that you probably didn't even care to learn the name of the colony. Just like you didn't care to tell me you were there. Or what happened."

"You're right, I didn't. I didn't wonder about who was living there or what their names were. I just wanted to get rid of those towers," James said, his own voice grew more and more hoarse with every word. He saw her shoulders flinch. "I didn't know it was your home. If I did..."

"It isn't," Shar snapped. "I ran away long ago. I hated it. A small planet, still being terraformed, one tiny city, too many people packed into equally tiny houses. I wanted to go home, so I did."

James had felt terribly guilty when Lomelak asked him about the attack, and he could not put a planet to a name. All he could think about was if his interference caused anything like what he had seen, after he left it. Why else would this race pursue Voyager for answers or retribution. It stung a lot more knowing that his two trainees could have easily been from there. Shar was difficult enough to work with as it was.

Now that she had described it, he remembered vividly which one they were all talking about. Thinking about it, he realised how easy of a target it would have been for the Softmicron. The towers were placed in such remote places on the guise of boosting power and even speeding up the terraforming, that the eventual damage to the environment wouldn't be noticed by the colony until it was too late. If they did, they'd assume it was a natural occurrence or a product of their interference on the new world.

Thankfully though there was no way he could imagine the Soft would blame the civilians for the destruction. Only ships could reach them and only the two building crew ships were around. It wouldn't surprise him if they were 100% manned by Softmicron operatives.

They had no realistic way of punishing the colony, no reason to either, they wouldn't lose out on much power from such a tiny planet and colony. Still, from what he witnessed on the last few worlds he visited, there was a high chance that they'd still do something. It occurred to him then they probably did it to hide what they were doing, while at the same time, point an accusing finger at Voyager. At him. To discourage him from attempting to destroy anymore.

Shar faced him, her face riddled with concern lines. "Lomelak tells me the colony was fine when he left. That the possible cause of the tower project was a newly elected governor assigned to oversee colony growth. I can't stop thinking and worrying about it though." Her eyes flashed as they focused on him. "Because of what you did on other worlds, there have been riots, civil wars, villages being burned to the ground. Fortunately for you the ones who are unaware of the danger the towers bring are left alone, which should be the case with Dizhien."

His throat throbbed, he tried to swallow what felt like a lump away, it only made it worse. All the while maintaining a normal and slightly neutral expression. "I won't make excuses and I won't hide from what I've done. At the time I was naive to think what I was doing was saving them. I can't say sorry, it's such an empty gesture."

Shar took a step forward, cheek bones flaring. "Do you want to know why they were building a second tower on the northern equator?"

James' expression slipped slightly, showing his confusion to her. "What?"

"I'll take that as a yes," Shar said icily. "The colony had suffered blackouts every day until finally the power went out for good. The governor claimed that the first tower had failed, but they knew what went wrong and that they'd build a new one."

James wasn't sure what to say to that. He had no idea what her point was, especially when until they attacked Voyager, Lomelak had no idea what the towers truly were.

"Until both towers were destroyed, the colony had to rely on emergency power. And guess what?" Shar said.

"That was going down quicker than they thought," James replied.

Shar nodded, "hundreds died huddled around fires that wouldn't stay alight due to diminishing oxygen. Hundreds more were starving to death. So many people would go to sleep and never wake up."

The thought of it made his body shudder in revulsion and anger. James could feel the guilt sliding back in. "It's not enough, but I am sorry."

Shar stomped closer to him, her hand raised in the air as if to slap him. For some reason she didn't do it. "What the hell are you sorry for?" she shouted at him.

"I wish I could do some..." James stuttered, partly out of anger at himself. Then he realised what she said and it confused the hell out of him. "What? Why wouldn't I be?"

She couldn't believe him, her head shook with her jaw hanging open. "You're an idiot. I suppose something must be sacrificed in Slayers brains so they can be stronger than everyone else." James wasn't about to disagree with that anytime soon, at least in his case anyway. "Because of what you did, my mother and sister may have survived. At

the very least thousands are not dead from starvation, hypothermia or worse. I don't know how you can be sorry about that."

"You, I thought because of what you said earlier about village razing and riots that..." James said uncomfortably and still a little confused.

Shar's face seemed to relax a little, she smirked at him. "I've never liked you. I've not made that a secret. You've done some questionable things in the past, but when push comes to the shove, you make the tough decisions and sometimes it works out. When it doesn't, well I've seen the toll it takes on you and I realise that it can't be easy living with that. It was a little hard for me to come here knowing that I'd have to be nice to you."

James laughed lightly in response. "Yeah, I can imagine. It wasn't necessary though. It's your right to hate me, and your reasons are the same as mine."

"Thanks," Shar struggled to say. She sighed afterwards. "Better. Now, I want to give these little creeps a piece of my fist. At the same time I want to make sure my family are alive, and if necessary defend my people from the Soft. I... It's possible they don't need me back home, that the Soft ran away when the towers were gone, and I'll miss my chance of payback with Voyager. I'm not sure what to do."

"Lomelak knows the truth, he knows about them. From what I scanned there were no experiments, the towers were mostly empty," James said.

Shar scoffed irritably, "that reminds me, what's up with triggering an evacuation alarm everytime you blasted one? They don't deserve any mercy and you're not a merciful type."

James turned away as he thought about how to answer that. "This may be hard for you to believe but, I don't actually get any joy out of killing anyone."

"Even monsters like the Softmicron?" Shar said in shock.

"Even them. Sometimes it was unavoidable. Sometimes if there were obviously experiments inside, I had to," James answered, his voice filled with regret and pain. He cleared his throat, determined to get back on topic. "I don't think your colony is in that much trouble, if at all. However the one that ordered the towers will still be alive somewhere. I remember one of the ships flying away on that first one. If it's revenge you want..."

"It isn't just my colony. Binene and L'Era, who I came here with. Janet and Leesa, even bloody Li'Chin. The resistance. The things I've seen, I can't forgive them for that," Shar grumbled.

James showed he understood with a nod. "Just remember, if you stay there's little chance you'll see home again. If we somehow make it to ours, it'll be three decades before you could return."

"This is what I came out here to do. No use running now," Shar said and smiled now that her mind was clear.

### **The Bridge:**

Everyone's eyes were on the viewscreen as the Sarazian ship changed course. Due to both of their speeds, they were gone instantly.

Tom relaxed back in his chair, sighing with regret. "And so our numbers begin to dwindle."

"I hope that Lomelak will be able to convince some people about the towers and the Softmicron," Jessie said.

"Me too. We can't afford to get a battering so close to the big finish," Tom said.

James entered out of the turbolift closest to Tactical. He stopped there beside Jessie as Tom glanced over his shoulder expectantly. "Sonla and Onlan. Lomelak offered to ship them home, it isn't far from their world."

"Can't say I blame them," Faye commented.

"Me neither, their development's been little to none," Tom tried to lighten the mood. No one was biting, he attempted to laugh it off. "Two out of four ain't bad. At least Stewart won't be on his tod standing next to the big *boys*."

James smiled dangerously at him, "I'm so glad you didn't italicise the big part of that sentence."

"Yeah well, I'm feeling generous today," Tom chuckled. Jessie and James shared similar amused looks to his relief. "Okay, so five more days until the biggie, I have a feeling they're going to be eventful."

"Jinxing doesn't work that way Tom," Chakotay said. Tom shushed him.

*Lieutenant Kim's Personal Log Stardate 58938.3: Today's the final day that the Krralef can remain with us if they want to return home in time. I must admit, that I'm feeling especially torn about the whole thing. I can't bear the thought of saying goodbye to Tira, however I cannot ask her to stay. I know how difficult it is to be so far from home, with no hope of ever seeing it again. I don't want her to go through what I did.*

*"Good thing it's not really up to you, is it," a woman's voice said from afar.*

*"Tira? Oh hang on."*

*After some rushed footsteps and rustling around, the log ended.*

Harry hurried over from the desk to the Ready Room door, where Tira stood smiling at him. "Does that mean you've decided what to do?" he asked her.

"We had a bit of a tussle about it over the last few days. It came to blows, arm wrestling. It wasn't pretty," she answered playfully. "The majority of the crew felt they could be more useful fending off the Softmicron at home, while the rest wanted to fight them with Voyager. We were told that you only needed two ships so... we came to an agreement."

Harry's eyes lit up for a few seconds, his face fell immediately. "Tira, you must understand what you're doing. Seventy thousand lightyears from home isn't a laughing matter, it's not easy. It can get so lonely when you're so isolated from your own species."

"I won't be. Twelve of my crew have requested to stay behind as well. Most of all, I'll have you," Tira said.

"Will your ship be okay without you?" Harry asked.

Tira clutched both of his hands gently. "I think Shilar can handle a week long trip home. You can't talk me out of it."

"Who?" Harry stuttered.

"My second in command. She used to be my tactical officer. You met her," Tira laughed.

Harry imagined a few years, maybe a decade down the line when Tira had probably tired of him. Resentment building until neither of them could take no more. He saw her staring out of a window, whether it was on Earth or another starship, dreaming of a home she'll never get back to. Just like he used to a few years ago. He didn't want her to regret this for, very likely, the rest of her life. Harry also didn't want to be part of the reason.

"This is my decision. I want to end this, like you do. I want to be a part of it," Tira said softly. There was a twinkle in her eye, daring him to argue against her. "I know you'd do the same in my position."

"Eerm, I'm not so sure about that. I miss my mom's cooking far too much," Harry teased her.

Tira's smile brightened, the laugh he loved so much filled the room. Her raised eyebrow and mischievous glint hinted to him that what he said was serious, laughing at how pathetic he was. Years ago he would've been partly. The crew made fun of his near obsession with getting home. Nowadays he could live almost anywhere with Tira by his side.

"Are you doing a cheesy and or soppy narrative in your head again?" Tira asked, killing the mood.

Harry stared dumbfounded at the woman. He'd only known her a few months yet she could read him like a book. He sighed, Tom had warned him.

Lena hovered outside the door for a few more minutes, steeling herself before walking inside. She berated herself for her curiosity. Why had she read it? There was no one to really talk to about it. The final sentences were all too clear.

*"If you have to, only who you trust the most. Who you feel haven't..."*

She couldn't bring herself to think about the rest of it. For now, the sole other recipient of the data file was her choice. She wondered if he had read it yet. What if he hadn't? Lena wished she was still ignorant to its contents, so why force the same burden on him?

The door opened without any movement from her. Somebody on the other side had triggered it. As she had placed herself as close as possible to it, he almost walked straight into her.

She found an almost mirror image of her own worry staring back at her. He tried to hide it within the same second. It was too late, she'd seen it.

"Lena? What's wrong?" her brother asked.

She tried to answer, the words would not come out. Her head instead shook meekly.

"You've read mum's file?" James whispered.

So he had read it. Lena should have known he wouldn't wait like Kathryn had suggested. The question was how long had he known its contents? "It doesn't end, does it?" her voice finally worked, although it was weaker and higher in pitch.

Any attempt to hide similar feelings crumbled away from James' face. There weren't any words that either of them could say to fix it. The pressure, the uncertainty was overwhelmingly suffocating the pair of them. Afraid of what was to come. For the moment, all they could do was hold each other until they could bury it away once more.

*Kathryn Janeway's Personal Log Stardate 58940.5: Day five of our journey and tensions are definitely becoming more and more noticeable. To make sure we're ready for whatever's ahead for my crew, every member are scheduled to report for at least one self defence training session. However it's not helping with the dwindling morale.*

Three crewmembers in their regular clothes hurried down the corridor, each with a hand hovering over the phaser in their pockets. They joined Craig standing around the edge of a corner. With his fingers he gestured for them to carefully go around him and secure the adjacent corridor. Two of them understood and did so. The third didn't react right away. When they did, they abruptly moved forward and tripped over their own feet. They managed not to fall, but the phaser fell to the floor with a bang. He snatched it back as quickly as he could so he could join the other students.

Craig stared after him, reminded of how he used to be when he first started this job. As if on cue the third crewmember jumped back, startled. Craig quickly reached for his own weapon, only to see another crewmember walking the opposite direction with a wide eyed expression on her face.

*Voyager's been through many more battles than I can count. This one feels different somehow. There's a sense of finality. As I look around, I know I'm not alone in this.*

Carefully wrapped up so it was nice and safe, Neelix carried his precious bundle down the corridor. On the way he passed a few people carrying supplies going the opposite way. He maneuvered out of their path as their cargo was heavier.

As he turned the corner he spotted two more crewmembers coming his way. For some reason he couldn't understand, they parted, forcing him to walk in the middle of the corridor. He was almost by them when one of them swatted the container out of the Talaxian's hands. The contents flew all over the floor.

"Ohno, my babies!" he cried. The two crewmembers kept walking despite that, unknown to him they were sighing in relief. Neelix grew angry with them for not stopping to help, "what have you got to say for yourself!"

The girl who did the deed stopped to look over her shoulder. "Hurray." Then she brazenly walked away.

Neelix began to sob. There was no way he could rescue them. Now he would have to save the last of his Leola Root for the final couple of days. The future was definitely feeling bleak now.

*As of yesterday we are a fleet of four. Two days time another will leave us, bringing us ever closer to the way we began this journey. On our own. However we will be stronger for it. There is no alternative. We will win. The Softmicron will regret what they've done.*

"Let's try it again," B'Elanna said, irritated and exhausted.

The rest of Engineering feared for their heads. If it didn't work again they had collectively decided to run. Everyone for themselves.

She and the ones in the same work station area, worked in unison. B'Elanna turned to a metal canister sitting on her control panel. She stared at it intently while her fingers tapped the console. The others were done, she kept going. Everyone held their breath.

A fizzle, then a constant hum. There was a shared exhale amongst the Engineering staff. A blue shield sprang up around the canister. The relief was so great, a few broke out into applause.

"Let's not break out the champagne just yet," B'Elanna smiled. "How's the energy readings?"

"Steady at one million," Ian beside her replied.

B'Elanna said the words the whole room were dreading, even more than another failure. "We need the test subject." Then she stepped her commbadge.

It didn't take long since that moment for it to arrive. A shrill voice pierced through the door, getting closer and closer. One woman attempted to flee for the other exit, her neighbour clutched her arm. Two others squeezed each other's hands.

"Hellooooooo?" the voice was just outside. Seconds later the doors parted. Everyone froze, hoping that the thing reacted on movement. It sauntered into engine room. Covered neck to toe in a blinding white with flowery patterns dotted all over. Hair wrapped in a loose ponytail swishing from side to side, reminding one car enthusiast of window wipers in a heavy rain.

A sad, almost childlike sigh came from it, "hmm?" Head turned to inspect the room. "I was told someone found a suit. Red with bows, and a flattering bum."

B'Elanna got the shudder out of the way before replying. "It's here," gesturing to the canister. "I think someone intended it to be for you, but left it by accident."

The test subject whooped and giggled as she ran over to it. "Ooh a pressie!" Her hand tried to grab it, only to be deflected by the blue shield which hissed at her for doing it. "Ow!" A few fingers ended up in her mouth. The nearby people heard her sucking on them. "I suppose my outfit's particularly fluffy today, must be static."

B'Elanna faked a smile and nodded. "Really?" It was obvious to anyone unfortunate enough to be too close. This latest catsuit looked very fuzzy and somehow snuggier than her usual outfits. If she were alive, B'Elanna imagined she'd be suffocating in it.

Then she tried again carefully this time. The shield buzzed and spat back at her. "Ouchy," she cried. That didn't stop her trying again, only for the same to happen. "Ooph, who's a naughty box?"

B'Elanna leaned closer to her neighbour, "turn it up to 1.2 million." Ian sniggered before obeying.

"Ohhh!" Annika whined, this time using both of her hands. Her eyes narrowed. Her next attempt seemed to be giving it a bear hug, her chest hit the shield first. Some engineering staff swore they saw them deflate a little on contact. "I want the pretty bows. What kind of wrapping paper is this?"

"I don't know what you mean," B'Elanna said innocently. Annika bought it and tried once more, only poking her finger. "I think we can safely say the test was successful."

"What now?" Ian asked.

"I don't know about you, but I'm tempted to *test* this in random places around the Enterprise," B'Elanna smiled deviously.

Nobody thought this was a bad idea. Annika might have objected if she wasn't in the middle of gearing up to run at the canister. A few crewmembers thought it would be a good idea to move out of range of any fallback damage for this one. Fortunately they did, as her vampire super speed made her slam into the shield so forcefully it threw her to the other side of Engineering.

B'Elanna sighed happily, "I love my job sometimes."

Scattered around her lay different types of sharp, metal weapons. The bed nearby left unkempt. Clothes were abandoned wherever she had changed.

Lena clipped a leather belt with multiple sheathes and pockets around her hips. Then began the task of choosing which weapons would go in it. Another similar belt lay on the drawers nearby, still empty.

No matter which way she arranged it, she wasn't happy. Swapping two knives proved harder than she thought. One refused to sit still without her hand on it. As soon as it fell to the ground she felt her patience snap. The belt was flung over her head and slammed into the floor. The loud clatter it made dwarfed the sound of the door chime.

Whoever rang it tried once more. Lena heard it that time. "Go away."

"Lena?" she heard Craig's voice from the other side.

Lena tried to calm herself down by breathing in and out deeply, before she could answer. "Yeah."

The doors parted, allowing Craig to enter cautiously. He looked around at the mess, then at her. "Should I ask?"

"No," Lena quickly replied. Her eyes squeezed closed for a moment, her face grimaced. "I don't know what I need. I don't know what I'm doing. What's coming after. Just one thing I know, and I hate it."

"The plan, yeah?" Craig said, his voice low. "I'm not keen either. But we need to sever the link."

"Not that," Lena murmured. "I can't talk about it."

Craig shuffled his feet on the spot, his head dipped a little. "Is it about what I said during the meeting a few days ago?"

Her eyes opened, briefly they met with his. "I don't even know how... No, it doesn't matter because it's not you."

It was a small relief that he wasn't the one that upset her. Craig was still very worried about her. He watched her pick up the belt on the drawers.

"I think you are right about one thing at least," she said quietly.

"What's that?" Craig asked.

"Could be just me hoping for a pass or something but... The last thing I remember from my timeline, was Voyager being destroyed by an advanced Borg ship. I alone survived," Lena said quietly. "It's why I thought the whole paradox was about James and not me. He couldn't die again."

Craig nodded, "yeah with the Frenit fight and the revival. There was a lot of focus on him too."

"Don't get me wrong. I didn't want it to be him," Lena said. She saw Craig mouth the words *I know*. It wasn't enough. "I already know how it feels. All of that pressure, the guilt over a whole dimension just erased, forgotten about because of you." She absent mindedly fiddled with the belt as she pulled it over her head, resting on her right shoulder. "Now, I wish it was just me."

Craig froze in horror. He watched her attempt to arm herself again, getting frustrated with every weapon. He stepped forward, determined to change her mind. "Why would you ever think that? You hated the thought of being the sole reason everything was changed. You just said you didn't wish it on your brother either. What's so bad about neither of you being counted on, alone, to save anything? Now it's shared equally between us all." His face turned a sickly white. "Is that why? You'd prefer to suffer the burden alone?"

"I can't, it doesn't matter," Lena muttered.

"Why, because you can't do anything about it? It doesn't change the fact that you feel this way," Craig said.

"I don't!" Lena snapped at him. "You have no idea. The Game isn't over when it's over, Craig. Destroying the sphere is just the beginning, and the end as well."

Craig hid his confusion well. The worry from before blocked it from spreading. "No matter what happens, I'll be there by your side. Behind you. Wherever you need me, if at all."

Lena laughed humourlessly. "Of course I need you. Why wouldn't I?"

"Well in my really crap defence, I'm not the same guy you befriended. He wasn't even the same one that joined Voyager. Come to think of it, he's probably nothing like your timeline's one either," Craig said.

"Didn't we agree to forget that, so it was less awkward?" Lena winced.

"Yeah. Still, it's important. Some people do drift apart when they get older and change. For better or worse. True some still fit despite all that. Us; I'm not that pleased with who I am now. I was warned that you wouldn't be either. I feel they're right," Craig explained painfully.

His words struck a chord, not the one he expected. She wasn't sad or doubtful, he saw her features brighten a little. "My brother did tell me how drastically different you were. I don't see it though. Maybe your bad boy phase wore off months ago."

Craig stared, blinking rapidly. "Bad boy?"

"Oooh yeah. You got the Security crew all in a tizzy. James was old news. Now they had to watch out for grouchy pants. He'll snap at you good," Lena said, eventually slipping into giggles.

Craig normally would have found it impossible to resist her infectious smile and laughter, and joined in with it. His shame over his past actions and attitude held him back. It had the unfortunate side effect of killing off her recently good spirits. Her face soon matched his stoic expression.

"Grumpy Craig, girl chaser Craig, love struck, shy kid. I have no idea which one of them, if any, are me. Until I work it out, whichever one you need I'll be," Craig said.

"Stupid," Lena said to his shock, her head shaking. "Those things don't define you on their own. The Craig I trust and care about is brave and thoughtful. He's a worrywart who needs to focus on himself for once. Be who you want to be, not what you think I do."

Craig struggled to swallow the lump newly formed in his throat. It throbbed in protest. "What if I'm useless to you? You just gotta look at James and Jessie to know how it should work. Anything he can't do, she picks up the slack. She supports him, keeps him in line or at least tries to. That's what you need. Someone who's got your back who genuinely cares for you."

Lena bit her bottom lip while her widening eyes drifted from one side to another. She looked puzzled to him, until her chin started quivering and lips curled only slightly. "Are you, are you saying I should marry Jessie?" Her giggles were back, one of her hands raised to press against her mouth in an attempt to stop it. Craig could feel his cheeks turning red. "I don't think James would ever forgive me, and the creep factor is huge. I doubt he'd share either, sometimes when he steals from my plate, I steal his plate."

"No, god no," Craig protested. She was still giggling, it was starting to effect him enough to bring a smile to his face. "You and him are different, so you'd need somebody

different to balance..." Her giggles turned into full on laughter. There was no holding back now, he was laughing with her. "Maybe we can start with finding you a friend who can explain things better. That'd be great."

"Oh, so no wedding. I'm so confused," Lena sniggered.

"Me too," Craig sighed, shoulders slumping.

Lena walked over, trying her best to calm her laughter down. She stopped directly in front of him. Her eyes sparkled, the smile left behind made his heart flutter for a moment. He knew his cheeks were still red from earlier, he didn't want her to get the wrong idea. "I think I get it," she said. Craig thought he may have been dreaming all this, or at least the second half of the conversation. Why else would she be so close to him. He was still thinking that when she leaned in even closer. His eyes widened as her lips met his only for a few seconds.

He took a step back, his voice stuttered, "the couple part isn't a requirement. You don't have to do that."

"I know," Lena said, still with the smile on her face.

Now he was definitely sure he was dreaming. It happened again, but longer than before. Her head turned away when it was over, and rested on his shoulder.

Voyager and the Enterprise continued their journey with the stars streaming by them. Two more ships still remained with them, following closely behind. Those being the Katane and the silver ship the ex-Tolg's had obtained. It wasn't to last. The smaller of the two ally vessels slowed down. Within barely a second they were gone.

Kathryn watched on the viewscreen, feeling like she had left a part of herself behind. She hadn't forgotten anything. There was plenty of time to say her goodbyes to her former comrades. The refugees they had offered to ferry home boarded safely yesterday. She advised her crew of what was going to happen, making very sure that they knew to avoid being re-assimilated if the Game ended.

*When, not if,* she told herself inwardly.

Kathryn realised then what was really troubling her. Seeing her temporary home leave without her was a reminder there was no going back. There was still many things she had to do here, on Voyager itself before the mission. So much unfinished business to take care of. Only two full days remaining. It was difficult to know where to start.

A walk around her ship would help re-organise her mind and figure that out. The Captain felt that she would never have that chance again.

Eleven years, and Tom only found himself wondering now why the lights had to dim whenever it was Red Alert. It took him stumbling to find his chair in the darkness, only to find the arm rest instead to do it. With a triggered old coccyx injury, Tom decided it was better to stand anyway. Every time the ship shook, he felt the pain vibrate through him.

Faye shook her head, "they still won't listen. All I keep getting is *justice for* such and such." The bridge trembled once more. "It could be planet Suchensus, I'm not sure."

"They're targeting the nacelles, the shield strength in that area is struggling to cope," Jessie reported.

"Re-routing power," B'Elanna said from the Engineering station.

Tom hurried forward despite what he was feeling. "Danny, neither of our ships are in our trail, right?"

She looked up at him curiously. "No."

"Shift our speed to warp nine point five, then to whatever number you feel like it. Just keep it random," Tom ordered. He tried to turn back to the command centre, the next hit brought him there faster. "Two ships at warp, going at the same speed. We might as well be standing still. If we keep changing our speed..."

B'Elanna smiled smugly at him. "They can't keep a constant lock, they'll have to constantly re-target."

"Don't give them time to match us, Danny," Tom said. The Engineering station was his next destination. "B'Elanna, I think it's the perfect time for our test."

"The emitters are only in place on Voyager," B'Elanna reminded him, hoping it would change his mind.

Tom's smile told her that wasn't going to happen. "That's all we need for now. Trust me."

B'Elanna wasn't sure what he had in mind. Still, she trusted him and nodded. "One minute, I need to double check if every one is responding."

"It's all I need," Tom grinned confidently. He had forgotten about the pain until he turned to rush away. The urgency kept it brief so he continued to ignore it. He headed for Tactical to stand beside Jessie. "Get ready to return the favour," he told her.

"I'd love to but..." Jessie said.

"I'm ready," B'Elanna reported.

"Now!" Tom's hand slammed on the Tactical station, luckily not any of the controls, only the edge. "Danny, prepare to drop our speed by point five warp."

"What?" Danny was dismayed. She did it anyway and hoped for the best.

The gap between Voyager and the rest of the fleet remained steady, with Voyager lingering in the back. Its hull then shimmered and warped, seconds later it disappeared completely.

An alien ship shot by, changing their line of fire to the other two vessels. None of the attempts got anywhere close, all of them detonated too soon before they could reach

their target. Behind them three orange blasts of energy appeared from seemingly out of nowhere. Each one slammed into the back. Phaser blasts followed relentlessly until their shields began to fluctuate. Their engine lights flickered. They slowed to an almost stop, unaware of what happened to them.

Voyager reappeared as soon as they were long gone. They picked up speed to shorten the gap between them and their fleet.

"That was..." Jessie stuttered.

Tom's grin was getting a little obnoxious now. "Genius. I know."

"What we did to the Katane, only with a fancy cloak," Jessie said, wiping the smile off his face.

B'Elanna caught a laugh in her throat. Tom stared at her, his eyes screaming traitor. "You just want the credit Jess. They were following our every move. We needed to *disappear*," she said.

Tom was more than relieved that her reaction wasn't directed at him, like he thought. She gave him a wink and a mock glare to hint that he owed her one for doubting her.

"Sure, encourage him further. I don't have to live with him," Jessie commented playfully.

B'Elanna nodded and was about to respond when the Bridge shook again. All eyes were instantly on their stations, desperately scanning for the reason. Tom was stuck with looking at Jessie's.

"Impossible," B'Elanna whispered.

"What?" Tom's eyes were wide.

*"Engineering to Bridge. The port nacelle is venting plasma. We're trying to seal it off."*

Tom's head and shoulders darted around, "what? They didn't get through our shields, right?"

"Right," Jessie replied nervously.

B'Elanna leapt out of her chair, all the while tapping on her panel. "Nope, this isn't happening on my watch." There was no time to argue with her, she disappeared in a transporter beam.

"The Enterprise is reducing speed to join us," Faye said. Her station bleeped at her. "They're hailing."

"On screen, quickly," Tom stammered.

The viewscreen's image changed from a rear shot of the Enterprise to its Bridge. On it, Harry looked on with panic.

"Tom, we've detected..." he said.

"I know!" Tom's own panic was growing. "If anyone can fix it, it's B'Elanna." It didn't help that the commlink to Engineering was still open. Everyone could hear the frantic voices and the sound of hissing.

The commlink beep repeated itself, it was quieter than it normally was. Harry tapped his commbadge. "Bridge here."

Ian's muffled voice was just heard over the viewscreen, *"I thought I could help from here and I spotted something."*

B'Elanna's voice overlapped, *"why won't this thing seal? It should. We can't afford to shut down the core until we fix it."*

*"The type of leak, the location. It's an exact match to the one on the Enterprise,"* Ian's voice said.

"What?" Faye stuttered. "You have a leak too?"

Danny resisted a snigger. Jessie still noticed her cover her mouth with her hand. "How is that rude?"

*"No, not now. I meant..."* Ian's voice said quickly.

Alarms started ringing out from Engineering, the voices turned deathly silent. That was until B'Elanna started growling. The Bridge crew heard her slam her hand several times onto something metal. *"No. Prepare to eject. Bridge..."*

Tom's face drained, he felt faint. "Please don't tell me."

Faye was feeling the same, and a little sick. "Confirmed. Warp core breach in progress. Ten minutes."

*"Well, at least this one is slower,"* Ian's voice said.

Harry's already wide eyes threatened to go even further. "What do you mean this one?" He realised while he was saying it. "You mean Enterprise's leak before we lost it?"

Tom shook his head frantically. "No time. Jess lower the shields." He tapped his commbadge. "All hands, this is the *Captain*. Evacuate the ship. Everyone head to the nearest transporter room. Repeat..."

"Ian are you sure?" Harry was meanwhile asking.

*"Not fully. The Enterprise's was odd. The core wasn't hit. The nacelles are designed to withstand a leak like that. It shouldn't have happened. It didn't,"* Ian's voice said.

Tom groaned in frustration, and a little in panic. "Harry, you need to lower your shields. We're beaming over. We'd both better drop out of warp. Faye, contact the Katane."

Faye nodded, the viewscreen switched off after a few taps. Harry was about to protest when it did.

*"Tom, I'm not giving up. We'll get this core out if we have to push it out by hand. We need Voyager, remember?"* B'Elanna's voice snapped.

"There's no harm in evacuating the majority," Tom said. He looked at Jessie. She reluctantly nodded.

### **The Enterprise:**

On their viewscreen, Voyager was trailing behind with what looked like smoke billowing from one of its nacelles. The image gave the entire crew a sense of dread.

"We're almost in transporter range," Bryan noted with a lump in his throat.

Harry grimly nodded. Something about this was terribly wrong. Ian's warnings weren't helping. A part of him felt like he was in denial, and this could be it. He couldn't stand to watch, but he couldn't keep his eyes off the viewscreen.

"Steady," was all he could muster.

"Craig, prepare to lower the shields. We gotta make this quick, just in case someone tries to take advantage," Chakotay ordered for him.

### **Voyager**

#### **Deck Nine:**

The Red Alert signal echoed down the corridors, encouraging the people already hurrying through them to pick up speed.

A turbolift opened. James stepped out with a large shoulder bag, the handle of a sword clearly poking out of it. He frowned at everyone rushing around. Then he spotted a few crewmembers standing by one of the port windows, chatting in rapid bursts of panic. He had to see what the fuss was all about, so he walked over.

A quick look out the window and everything seemed perfectly normal to him. Stars streaming by, the red hint of the warp nacelle several feet below them and much further ahead. The two noticed him, he recognised that look of disbelief they both had. Like something crazy was happening.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Eeery huh?" one crewmember said, their eyes glued to the window.

"We were so close. I wonder if it was them," the other said.

James had more questions than answers after hearing that. He looked outside to check again. The two crewmembers were reacting to something. Still he couldn't see it. He had felt the battle. It was why he left his inspection of Deck Thirteen early. Apart that, he was none of the wiser.

The first one inhaled sharply, realising the same thing. "They're trying to stop us. Without Voyager..."

"Excuse me," James interrupted as politely as he could despite the situation. It still was abrupt enough to startle them back into looking at him. "What's apparently so eery? What's outside?"

The pair stared, astonished by the questions. It seemed more than obvious to them. The first to speak pointed outside. James wasn't going to look again until he knew what he was supposed to be seeing. He hoped the second crewmember would tell him.

"Just look, can't you see..." they started to answer.

He didn't hear the rest. Following a flash, Voyager hurtled out of warp so harshly he felt the forces pull him backward. It stayed there, alone and adrift with no signs of damage. Moments later the Enterprise appeared from directly ahead of it. Its smooth exit from warp, a huge contrast compared to Voyager's dramatic one. The larger ship approached so they were closely nose to nose.

"Lower the shields," Harry ordered. Craig nodded an acknowledgement before doing it.

Chakotay hovered over Opps closely, directing Triah. "Co-ordinate with the transporter rooms. We need to bring 'em in quickly," he told her.

The Tactical station screamed, the Red Alert signal woke up to join in. The ship trembled viciously. Consoles and panels all around them exploded, there was no time or earlier warning for the people manning them to duck and cover. Fire quickly overwhelmed the back of the bridge.

"What's going on?" Harry roared over the noise.

"Three ships surrounded us. They came out of nowhere!" Craig shouted. Before Harry or Chakotay could tell him to, he shakily said, "shield emitters are damaged. I can't... They're targeting the warp core."

"How did they know?" Chakotay mumbled to himself.

The three tiny ships flew around the two starships fast, brutally firing without pause toward their engines. They targeted Voyager with the most fury. One hit to the port nacelle sent the starship into a spin as it erupted into flames.

There was little time to do anything. Something inside the starship trembled, ripping it into pieces in seconds.

*"... the plasma's leaking. It's hard to miss."* The voice was muffled, it was enough to kill off the image before the Enterprise did the same thing. James was back in the corridor, still with the two crewmembers by the window. He hadn't left. Nothing had changed. What he saw still remained fresh in his mind, far more than any bad nightmare. The pair stared at him, wondering why he was trembling out of nowhere.

"Maybe we should get to a safer place," the other said. They gestured for him to come with them.

"No. There's no plasma... I don't understand it," James stuttered, his eye went to the window. The stars still streamed by, the ship from what he could see was fine. "We can't stop." He ran back to a wall panel. It took him little under a minute to get access to the transporter controls, leaving the two crewmembers baffled by his reaction.

### **The Enterprise:**

Craig hovered his finger around the shield controls, uneasy at the prospect of why he was doing it. His commbadge chirped, snapping him out of his thoughts.

*"Craig?"* Lena's voice rang out of it, it sounded panicked. He tapped it quickly. *"Don't lower the shields. Don't let them stop the ship. It's a trap."*

"What is?" Craig questioned. He trusted her judgement, his fingers moved to the sensors to see what she was talking about. He couldn't even detect the attacking ship anymore. It was long gone.

Chakotay walked over to him, his eyebrow raised quizzically. "Lena? What are you talking about?"

*"We have to keep going,"* Lena's voice said.

"We can't. Voyager's in trouble. We need to evacuate the crew, and that's a lot safer when we're not at warp nine," Harry stuttered.

*"If we stop, that'll be for nothing,"* Lena's voice answered.

Chakotay turned his head toward the viewscreen. The image of Voyager following them, leaving behind a trail continued to unsettle him. His daughter's warning did so even more. "A trap," he whispered as he watched. The longer he looked at it, the nagging feeling that something was wrong with the picture grew. He noticed Harry doing the same. They exchanged a mutual glance.

"Keep us on course," Harry said.

### **Voyager:**

Engineering was pandemonium when James entered, but not for any reason he could see. He overheard words like overload and leak. B'Elanna and a few others hovered around the foot of the core, all armed with various tools. She barked orders while swinging herself underneath the barrier to get back to the stations.

"Why won't this thing seal? It should." A brief look over her shoulder and she exhaled roughly, almost growling. Her hands flew over the station, tapping furiously. "We can't afford to shut down the core until we fix it."

James walked towards the warp core, narrowly dodging a crewmember who didn't notice him until the last second. He knew very little about the core, but even he knew that a breach or a leak would look more chaotic than this. To him, the core hummed as it normally did during a warp flight.

A collective gasp stopped the constant stream of voices. James looked over his shoulder to see why. B'Elanna rushed forward towards the core, horror all over her face. She wasn't the only one, everyone else he could see were the same.

"No," she whispered. Then she swung around to bark orders again. "Prepare to eject."

The image of Voyager harshly leaving warp re-entered James' head. He looked again to the supposedly leaking or breaching core, purring gently away. There wasn't any time. He allowed a quick brief glance down at the panel in front of him. It looked normal. He only had a few seconds before B'Elanna would give the computer her authorisation codes to eject the core. He saw what could happen if she did it. He didn't get why this was happening, he didn't have the luxury of time to think about it. He had to listen to his instincts, which were screaming at him to stop her.

"Bridge..." B'Elanna thought to warn into her commbadge first.

James worked quickly. His first port of call was to get into the security override system. A few seconds was all it took to completely change her codes. It would give him time at least.

The warning Tom gave out repeated over the comm system. *"All hands, this is the Captain. Evacuate the ship. Everyone head to the nearest transporter room."*

**Enterprise Bridge:**

The new arrival stared at the screen in silence, her face slowly crumpling up.

"So, if we both dropped out of warp... Craig, are there any ships?" Harry asked.

"No, I checked," Craig replied.

Lena snapped out of her daze to turn away from the screen, then toward Tactical. "Can I?" He nodded when she was already on route to him.

"Voyager's not going to last much longer," Triah warned them.

Harry swallowed hard and nodded. "Understood." He found himself staring at the supposedly doomed starship on the screen.

Lena reached Tactical, her eyes quickly scanned it. Craig pointed at one particular part, which her eyes followed. Chakotay watched them both intently.

"Do you know who attacked us?" he asked.

"No, I didn't recognise them," Lena mumbled in response, briefly glancing up to look at him. "There," she said, pointing at the sensors. Craig was puzzled to say the least. There was nothing there. She didn't look annoyed or surprised by his confusion, instead she looked relieved. "The breach, it's an illusion."

"What?" Harry blurted out.

Lena shook her head, "don't ask me how, but Voyager's core is functioning fine from where I'm standing. There are three ships following us on a parallel path. There's no plasma leak."

Harry swung around to hurry over to Opps. "Is it possible we reached the anomaly already?"

"No, not a chance," Triah replied.

Chakotay groaned, annoyed at himself for not figuring it out sooner. "Typical Softpraton tricks. They're the ones following us, they won't attack until we lower our own shields for them. This is just their MO."

"We need to warn Voyager," Harry said.

"They'll be fine. It's us we need to be worried about," Chakotay said ominously. "Triah, tell Voyager to activate the enhanced shields."

"We don't know if that will work," Lena said.

Chakotay smiled confidently, "only one way to find out."

"Will we need to warn them? You got the vision, James should have too, right?" Craig asked Lena quietly. She nodded, still she looked worried doing it.

### **Voyager's Bridge:**

"What do you mean the helm won't respond?" Tom stuttered as he rushed over to Danny's side.

Danny bit her lip. She didn't bite her tongue though, "well, I mean that I'm having roast potatoes with my tea tonight, and some Yorkshire puds. What do you think I mean?"

Tom sighed irritably, he reached over to try as well. Every command he entered the computer beeped negatively at him, and gave him an error telling him his access was denied.

Faye cleared her throat nervously. "Um, we're getting a message from Enterprise." Tom merely grunted in response. "They're telling us to activate the enhanced shields. What's that?"

"The enhanced..." Tom mumbled. His eyes lit up. "B'Elanna's portal system inspired shield. I hope she's done, 'cos... Jessie."

"On it," Jessie said with a nod.

"Am I missing something? How will that help with a core breach?" Faye asked.

Danny shrugged, "I dunno, all I know is that Ian thought it was similar."

"To the core breach that didn't destroy the Enterprise," Tom said while watching Jessie work as fast as she could. The positive beeps gave him hope she was getting somewhere.

"If there's something there, it'll take a moment to gather enough energy to..." Jessie explained. She didn't have time to finish, a smile spread across her face. "It's online and stable."

*"Engineering to Bridge. Um, two things,"* B'Elanna's irritated voice said. Tom chuckled quietly. *"One, the warp core's magically fixed itself. Two, where's that spell book that takes James' power away? I'm going to kill him. Scratch that, I don't need it."*

Tom's laughter was momentarily stopped, "James? Um..." He continued to laugh.

Jessie joined in, but not because of B'Elanna's remark, the joke was too soon for her. It was Danny's earlier problem. "That explains the helm."

*"Yes it does, doesn't it. I couldn't even replicate any tools, I didn't have authorisation!"* B'Elanna's voice trembled with anger.

*"You're welcome,"* was James' casual reply.

Tom had to breathe in through his nose to stop himself from laughing further. B'Elanna would kill him next if he didn't. "You could have told us."

*"I would, but I didn't know what was happening. I still don't,"* James' voice said.

"Enterprise worked it out. They told us to activate the thingymabob shield," Danny said, giggling at one of the words.

"At least your new shield works. That should cheer you up," Tom said.

*"Mmmhmm, sure,"* B'Elanna's voice mumbled.

Jessie frowned, "uh... it's no longer drawing power. It's got enough to last a few hours luckily. Oh, that's odd."

"What isn't?" Tom said, shrugging over-dramatically.

"Three ships were following. They've changed course away from us," Jessie replied.

They all heard a sigh over the comm. *"That'll be the ships who did this. All I know is they took advantage of us stopping and evacuating,"* James' voice said.

"Okay. I think I'm going to need to pop by Sickbay for headache relief," Tom groaned. He rubbed his forehead for extra effect, "and home for a change of underwear." Everyone had a shared hope that he wasn't serious. Since it was Tom, it was hard to tell.

"A what bubble?" Kiara asked.

Harry gestured to the wall panel screen showing a star chart. The icons representing the three ships were surrounded by a large blue oval. Three other icons were following their course and speed exactly. "Think of it as a concentrated zone of the sphere. Its power is amplified."

"Like the anomaly," Lena said.

Harry nodded. "Exactly, but intentional."

Kathryn watched the screen intently, a grim expression on her face. "They know we're up to something. They wouldn't attack so boldly if they didn't. Too risky."

"I'm thinking they saw us and thought it would be funny," James said.

"Now that's optimism I can get behind," Tom commented lightly.

B'Elanna shook her head at the both of them, smirking slightly. "Whatever the reason is, they gave us a reason to test the shield in the field. It works. If I can get it working on the Enterprise, our journey into the anomaly tomorrow should be a little easier."

"Tomorrow," Harry said with a feeling of foreboding. Everyone felt it as well, it left a chill in the air.

Tom turned his attention to the side of the table James and Lena were sitting at. "So it seems that we still have a great need for you both. It isn't only Voyager that we need to win this."

The pair glanced at one another, sharing similar expressions of reality slapping them hard in the face. Even still, they didn't look surprised, only dejected. Lena tried to recover by straightening her back and lifting her chin back up.

"There goes my plans for a trip to the Holodeck when the battle starts," James said, forcing a smile.

Kathryn watched them both carefully. Her shoulders tensed, the rest of her body frozen in place like something strong was holding her there. She knew why, there was nothing more she could do and yet the guilt still weighed her down.

She failed to notice Chakotay's passing glance of concern for her. He looked around at everyone, it helped him come to a decision. So he stood to address them all. "1800 hours tonight. Mess Hall. Every one of you will be there. No one's going to talk about the mission, the Game Sphere, our enemy. Whatever you're doing, you'll drop it and forget about it for a few hours." By this time everyone stared back, most of them with their jaws agape. "We're going to have a few drinks, eat a good meal..."

Neelix was the only one who perked up at this. Chakotay threw him a glare, "a good meal Neelix. The kitchen is closed, permanently." The Talaxian looked horrified at the thought. It picked everyone else's spirits up though. There was always a silver lining. "And we'll talk, reminisce, catch up. Nobody will talk about tomorrow. That's an order."

Kathryn smiled warmly at him. It definitely seemed like a great idea to her. The rest of the Conference Room echoed how she felt about it, it broke the tension into such little pieces there wasn't anything left to be seen.

Tom raised his hand, "if this extends to the entire crew, it's going to be a problem. The Mess Hall is far too small. It kinda beats the point if we use both Mess Halls and the Enterprise's Ten Forward."

"What do you propose?" Chakotay asked.

Tom laughed like he said something dumb. "Oh Chakotay, it's like you don't know me. You're making me paranoid again that you've been a Softmicron spy all this time."

"Holodeck," Chakotay said with realisation. He began to laugh himself until he thought about Tom's other sentence. "Wait, you thought what?"

A few members of the room talked amongst themselves, making the Commander extra nervous and a little offended. "If I was a spy, wouldn't I act like I used to?" he muttered.

"He's got a point. Any good spy wouldn't alienate everyone by being a selfish prat. Unless he was pretending to be Damien," Jessie said.

Chakotay stared at her blankly for a while. She smiled back sweetly in return. "Thank you Jessie."

"Oh anytime," Jessie said.

Tom rose from his seat quickly, clapping his hands once before he straightened up. "Okay then it's settled. 1800 hours in Holodeck One. Leave the preparations to me."

"I may be a little late. I don't think I'll be finished with the shield modifications to the Enterprise before..." B'Elanna said, trailing off when Tom pointed a puppy dog stare at her. "Oh god," she groaned in partial disgust.

"Well, at least we know Miral didn't get that from him," Harry teased.

B'Elanna had to laugh, "oh I don't know. She's gotten the idea from him at least. Look, if you want me there, I'm going to need a few extra hands. The Enterprise is a much bigger ship, more ground to cover. The fact that it didn't have the initial system or its own Deck Thirteen has slowed me down."

"Yes it does. We call it the bottomless fight pit. Two men enter, one man falls forever," Craig sniggered.

Chakotay groaned, "that's it, I'm dismissing myself. Anyone else?" He got up to leave. A lot of the room also filed out, leaving few behind.

Tom thought about the topic a little too seriously. "You know, I was its commander for years, I've never found this pit."

"Probably because there is no Deck Twenty Nine, no giant Jeffries Tube slide. I'm starting to think it's a myth," Harry said.

"Well the guy who discovered it was a bit dense. He probably couldn't count and the pit he was talking about was just how hungry he was," Tom said. Harry frowned. "Only Riker saw it."

Harry nodded, "oh. Bottomless pit. Good one."

"What have I done?" Craig whispered.

He hurried out as well, leaving the two men to discuss it not entirely alone. A third person still remained. Kathryn had been sitting quietly, tuning out the pair's conversation. Eventually she glided out of her chair to walk to the Bridge. With most of the stations unmanned and the usual people not around, it was quiet. Only the sounds of the consoles being occasionally pressed, the hum of the engines and an odd few footsteps from a crewman walking from one back station to another.

The calm before the storm, she thought. A bitter laugh radiated out of her as she then mumbled to herself, "try to be more cliché Kathryn." Once she reached the centre, her body turned on the spot, taking in her surroundings. Voyager, her ship, her home. She had missed it far more than she expected. It seemed only right that they had been reunited before this pivotal battle. It would be a crime if she missed all the fun. A small smile grew from her previously straight lips.

There was no doubt in her mind as she approached her old chair. Her hand caressed the arm rest while she slowly pivoted around to sit. The other hand glided along the other rest, she sank back as far as it would allow. The back of her head pressed into the cushion and she allowed her eyes to close. For those few seconds she felt like the last few years hadn't happened. That she never left and they were still exploring the Delta Quadrant, trying to find a way home. It seemed laughable that those days were the calmer, simpler ones.

It brought back memories of their return to the Alpha Quadrant, where she really thought their problems would be over. They were only just the beginning of another,

harsher journey. It would be easy to wish they never took that shortcut, but Kathryn was glad they did. Their hardships would pay off in the end. The menace that plagued their universe needed taking down a peg or two. It had to be them and their enemy knew it.

"Tomorrow," she whispered.

One last look around. She wanted to take a deep, lingering breath to take it all in. Attempting to do so reminded her of the sacrifice she made to get this far. The word rang in her head over and over. Q's haunting words of warning to her came back to her.

*"If I told you what to do, you'll wonder why it effects the timeline, and then I'd have to explain what will be the result. You will not want to make such sacrifice."*

*"Sacrifice? You should know I'd sacrifice myself if it meant saving lives."*

*"I know, your fate would never bother you."*

Kathryn thought she knew what he meant by that, even if she couldn't recall when he told her. With the knowledge of previous timelines in her mind, it seemed obvious that he didn't say it to her, but another Kathryn Janeway that no longer existed. Remembering more of his words and *her* own, allowed dread to rise in her chest.

*What if I'm wrong?*

The rest of her crew seemed united on the idea that the timeline was altered so Voyager would make it here, to take on the Softmicron. Was it necessary to put her two children through so many rewrites of death and trauma to do this? A simple change in direction, a poke here and there would have done the trick. Lena and James' interference saved both ships from allowing themselves to be destroyed by trickery. It couldn't have been done with only one of them. They needed to be Chosen to see through it. The answer was unfortunately yes, it was necessary.

Tom's innocent at the time statement about still needing them. Kathryn assumed that giving them that burden was the sacrifice Q had been talking about, so she had kept that thought to herself at the time.

*What if I'm wrong?*

The feeling of dread had risen so far it threatened to choke her. She knew that without the Chosen abilities James wouldn't have survived. Lena herself wouldn't exist at all. All of that pressure on them was horrible, but they were alive and well because of it. It was more of a requirement than a sacrifice. So what was Q actually hinting at?

*I was wrong.* The dark foreboding feeling rose further, smothering her. It pulled her down as her body sank deeper into the chair. The Bridge never felt more empty.

Evening soon rolled around. The crew filed into the Holodeck, all of them relieved at the change of pace. Grateful for the distraction. It was decided to have a few crewmembers to take turns keeping watch of each of the Bridges, for very short shifts. After the attack the previous day, nobody wanted to take any chances.

The program itself seemed simple for something that was created by Tom. He had created a pleasantly warm nighttime environment, by the beach at B'Elanna's suggestion. Bars and cafe's filled the promenade.

Everyone had showed up wearing casual attire. Anyone in uniform Tom would approach and advice them to go home to change. Uniforms would remind them of where they were, and the point was to forget that for a few hours.

It seemed to be working well. The Holodeck was buzzing with laughter and chatter. Tables were full. The children ran around in the large playground.

On the empty beach, one crewmember walked alone, gazing wistfully at the crowds. Her face glided slowly over her shoulder, to watch the foot prints she left behind in her wake. All the while softly humming to herself.

"The stars glow black on the upcoming fight. Not a trial to be seen. A crew in isolation, and everyone's being mean," Annika's voice trembled, holding back tears.

Her head tilted up to watch the gentle waves brushing the sand near her feet. "My hatred's flowing like the blood that helped me die." She huffed, her whispering turned into a light and sad singing voice, "couldn't compete with her, heaven knows I tried."

The anger bottled up had began to slip from her. Shoulders rose in defiance. "Don't let them win. Don't let them take. Be the only one they will ever need. Reveal, don't cry, don't change or grow. Soon they will know!"

So she ran, undeterred by the bad combination of sand and stick thin heels. "I don't care, what they think of me! Let their hate rage on." She stopped abruptly, striking a fierce pose to no one in particular, "I'm better than her anyway."

Her singing to herself had gotten the attention from a few stragglers walking on the promenade. One in particular watched whilst leaning on the wall with an amused interest.

Not realising this, Annika continued her stride down the beach. "It's funny how some copycat, makes everyone feel small. That the stories that once were mine, don't change much at all," she continued to sing.

The moonlight peeped its way out of the clouds, reflecting off her sparkly skin. Her eyes fell on her arm, mesmerised by how it looked. It gave her a boost of confidence. "It's time to see what I will do." She pulled her hands to her chest, balling one of them into a fist. "To test their cruelty and show mine. No time travel, no familial ties. Just me."

She span around on her heel, her arms flailing about. Her singing voice turned itself up a notch to an almost shout. "Shut it up, no one cares! So you're strong and so quirky. No one cares, shut it up! You'd never see me cry."

The girl watching her laughed pitifully, knowing full well that the burst into song was about her. "That's because you need reprogramming," Lena said quietly.

"Here I stand, against you all. Let bitterness rage on," was sang as the ex-drone stomped her foot. Clouds of sands flew up and covered her head to toe. She didn't expect it, that was clear to anyone watching. As if she knew she had an audience, she patted her catsuit to clear it away, disguising it as some bad sultry dance routine.

Lena couldn't resist joining in the song now, it was almost as if she were daring her to anyway. "Your machine routine failed to keep people awake."

The glare that was received was laughable. It should have put her off, yet Annika carried on singing anyway. "Your chosen one trope is tired. My contributions are all mine."

"Oh they are, are they, I thought those things were really fake," Lena laughed while she sang back.

Annika swung around, flipping her hair. "No one knows who you are, while I'm Seven of Nine!" she boasted, hand pressed to her chest.

Lena struggled to keep a straight face. "At least I have a character arc and flaws, you wish you had."

"I cried..." Annika began to sing back.

"You malfunctioned," Lena ad-libbed over her.

Annika growled, and yet she still sang, "I loved."

Lena pushed her body up to sit on the wall separating them. Her legs flew over the side. "You malfunctioned."

"I developed," Annika pretended to ignore her and carried on singing.

"Reset and done again," Lena added on with a cheeky smile. She jumped down.

"I stole your father," Annika hissed.

Lena shuddered before answering, "hold me back."

Annika slowly crept over to her. The nearby street lamp gave her golden eyes a reddish tint. "I'm never going back. Your jibes are in the past."

"I can say them again if you want," Lena smiled.

The pair stood within metres of each other, stepping forward with each line they sang. "Shut it up!" Annika screeched.

"Let it go," Lena immediately followed with.

Annika sang over her aggressively, "while I'll rise as the true heroine."

Lena casually shrugged. "You were nothing more than eye candy."

"No one cares!" Annika sang louder than ever, determined to drown her out.

"You're right there," Lena smirked. They could no longer take steps forward without bumping into each other. Annika glared as fiercely and intimidatingly as she could. Apart from her change of eye colour from yellow to red, Lena continued to find it funny.

"That helpful girl will ruin..." Annika sang, gesturing to the promenade.

Before she could finish, Lena cut in. "...You won't star, in anything again."

"Let the hypocrisy rage on," Annika changed her singing style to a low grumble and growl.

Lena smiled darkly, a playful but deadly glint appeared in her eyes, "your whines are funny to me anyway." Before Annika could counter with anything, Lena swung around over dramatically, mimicking Annika's earlier pose when she thought she was alone. Then to add further insult she squeaked a *hmmph* and stomped off.

By the time it was over there was a huge crowd hanging around the same wall Lena jumped down from. One of the audience sniggered to himself, his head shook in disbelief. "So much for being done with the Disney crap." He cackled and walked away.

A few bars away Tom sat down at an occupied table, armed with a relieved smile. He wrapped an arm around the back of his neighbour's chair, "so glad you made it."

B'Elanna tried to relax into it. "I still have a few emitters to install. The shield itself can't be tested until we go in, so..."

"Shh, no ship talk. Don't make me throw you out," Tom teased.

On the opposite side of the table, Harry gently nudged Tira's arm with his elbow. "This should be good." She responded with a smile.

B'Elanna faked a scowl, it seemed real enough to everyone. "You'll be the first casualty if you try."

Tom fought back with one of his own. "That's an order, Lieutenant."

"Oh really? So does that mean you're taking the lead after all?" B'Elanna asked, allowing her scowl to pass naturally.

The question made Harry a little uncomfortable, Tom passed him a friendly nod. "One of us has to lead the way. I'm not handing over the baton on the final lap after running the entire race. No way."

B'Elanna also looked toward Harry as he tried to get settled in his chair again. "The Enterprise was never mine anyway," he said regrettably. "She's not the Leda."

"So..." B'Elanna said, her gaze wandered toward the playground nearby.

A few adults kept a close eye on all the children. One of them crouched down next to two of the girls. The eldest's face lit up when she spotted her. "Grandma Janeway."

"What are you two playing?" Kathryn asked softly.

"Hide and seek," Sasha replied while her little sister stared at the Captain warily, her eyes wide. "Duncan's too good at it."

Kathryn laughed behind her hand. "I see. Maybe I can play the next round."

Sasha nodded eagerly. Amy still stared, her bottom lip stuck out slightly. "Are you mean like other grandma?" she asked innocently.

"Only to mean grandmas," Kathryn answered with a twinkle in her eye.

"And coffee stealers," Jessie added as she walked over. "You still haven't found him?" she asked her daughters.

Amy spotted the top of a head peek over a bar, right as Neelix tried badly to stealth his way behind it. She ran towards them. Neelix barely got around the end of it when he stumbled backwards to the floor. Anyone else who saw him assumed he was drunk. Not put off, Amy ran around him and jumped behind the bar. Kathryn and Jessie heard a disappointed groan from a boy they knew all too well.

"Oh come on. They have sausage rolls back here," Duncan complained as he and Amy stepped back into sight. She shrugged, snatched the roll out of his hand, tagged him and ran off. He was about to chase after her, but decided instead to go back. He walked back out with a box half his size, stuffing his face with the contents. Since it was so large, he didn't notice he was walking right by his dad on route back. He whined as it was lifted out of his hands.

"Really?" James said, eyebrow raising. Duncan nodded, then brazenly held his hand out while smiling sweetly. "At least it isn't coffee," James sighed while handing his son one mere sausage roll.

Duncan mumbled, "worth a shot." He ran off to join his sisters.

"A Janeway has to be addicted to something I suppose," Craig commented from behind. He stopped a few feet away from him, his body tensed for no reason James could see. "Um, I need to tell you something," Craig said nervously.

James wondered what he wanted to say that would make him nervous of him, especially now. He mentally slapped himself, it was obvious. He had to laugh. "It's okay. Lena told me."

Craig didn't feel any better. He was tempted to side step further away. "She did? Oh god why."

"Oh god, why not?" James tried not to laugh. "Craig, you're not going to screw this up again. You'll be safe, I assure you."

"Oh I'm very re-assured," Craig rushed out in one breath.

"It's not up to me who Lena picks. I had no right to be a bitch about it all the time. It won't happen again," James said.

Craig was unsure about how to respond, he started to stammer. "I always thought it was because I was too; accusing you and her..."

"We're friends, aren't we?" James asked, throwing him off even further.

"I... wasn't sure. I think so, that's why I thought I should tell you," Craig said as firmly as he could, his voice still shook though.

James smirked at him, "then do me a favour, stop being scared of me."

Craig tried to laugh his nerves away. It improved his mood somewhat. "I can do that."

"Good, it gets old and fast," James said.

"Just like you," Lena said from behind them. They looked over their shoulders, James kept a straight face this time. "Couldn't resist."

"Do you really want to pick now to go back to old jokes, Lena?" James asked, his eyes gesturing towards Craig.

Craig broke out into quiet laughter at the pair as they bickered. The longer it went on the more uneasy he felt. There was something about it that was off.

Lena glowered at him back, it wasn't convincing in the slightest. "Aren't we getting a little old for this? Oh wait no, that's just you."

"So you're still sixteen going on twelve? Not surprising," James said.

"Better than a thirty plus man going *haha you kissed a boy, giggle*," Lena bit back, though she didn't sound angry or amused. To Craig she sounded nothing.

James briefly responded with a laugh that sounded like he was faking it to make fun of her. "How was the sing off contest?" he asked plainly.

"Haven't had as much fun in years," Lena admitted. Her face turned to a mild scowl. "Making fun of Annika is immature now? So, you're old and boring. Okay, good to know."

Craig hadn't paid attention to any of their words since Lena's thirty plus comment. Without any context, their voices didn't feel spirited at all. There was no energy behind their taunts toward each other. Their expressions seemed almost lazily forced. If Craig didn't know any better, he'd think he was witnessing two bad actors bouncing lines off each other. The reasons for it, Craig thought about them quietly to himself.

Kathryn waited for her grandchildren to begin another round of their game. Amy ran off first, her head darted around to find a hiding place. She was drawn over by another child gesturing to her. Kathryn didn't recognise this younger girl with much redder hair than herself. The Klingon ridges on her forehead and the devilish smile on her face reminded her immediately of B'Elanna and Tom. The two girls seemed friendly enough, the red head pointed somewhere and lead her away holding Amy's hand. Kathryn's smile turned into a smirk at the thought of a child of Tom's being friends with any of James and Jessie's children. She didn't see that one coming.

Duncan stopped counting, then gave Sasha a disgruntled groan. "I hate Amy's turns. She'll probably be hiding on another ship." His sister laughed, mouthing *yep*. The pair ran off in separate directions. Now that they were out of earshot, Kathryn could finally talk.

"At least I can rest easy knowing you'll always be looking out for my son," she said.

Jessie flinched at the abruptness of her words, "of course I will. There was never any question."

"I know," Kathryn nodded. She smiled warmly. "It couldn't have been easy for you though. Your own mother."

"Rachel's not my mother," Jessie said frankly. "As far as I'm concerned, my family comes first and I'll do whatever is necessary. That's all."

"You should know that I consider you as part of mine, despite our rocky start," Kathryn said.

Jessie's earlier worries were getting bigger. She watched the Captain carefully. "Shouldn't you be doing this with your actual children?"

Kathryn's face fell, "what do you mean?"

"I think you know exactly what I mean," Jessie said firmly but she avoided doing so in a harsh tone.

"Jessie you misunderstand," Kathryn said quickly. "Tomorrow anything can happen..."

"Exactly. I appreciate the gesture, but I'm not who you should be talking to," Jessie said.

Kathryn shook her head stubbornly. "We're going to win. This isn't the end. I only wanted to thank you for what you did."

"Why? I'd do almost anything for James. It would be like thanking me for going clothes shopping," Jessie said.

Kathryn chuckled to herself. "Almost? I suppose you're right. If you'll excuse me." Her arm raised to gently pat the other woman on the shoulder as she walked away. The gesture made Jessie feel even more uncomfortable than she did before.

She wasn't the only one feeling that way. Craig noticed Kathryn slowly approach them, his head turned to make sure. It was then in the blurriest corner of his eye he noticed Lena's hand sneak over to clasp her brother's. He only had a bad feeling, paranoia from the way they were talking earlier, but now Craig knew something was bothering the pair of them. It wasn't the fear and uncertainty of the battle tomorrow. She was walking toward them.

Craig looked to Lena for any hint that he should stay. Even before her answer he was side stepping away. He already felt like he was intruding on something, that it wasn't any of his business. She gave him a subtle nod, he almost missed it. It was enough for him. Craig did the same back as he turned to leave. Kathryn gave him a friendly smile and a similar pat on the back as she passed. Something was doing somersaults in his stomach, it made him feel sick.

When he reached where Jessie stood he knew he was trembling in very plain sight. The look she gave him, she didn't mean to but it made him feel worse. He had been hoping he was overreacting to what he had seen. Jessie's worried expression meant that she noticed the same thing. He slowly turned to stand directly beside her. At that moment Kathryn wrapped one arm each around her two children. She said something neither Jessie or Craig could make out. Whatever it was made Lena hold her back and bury her face in her shoulder. James moved around so he could put his arms around both.

It would have convinced Jessie and Craig further, if they didn't see more incidents like this amongst the crew as the night went on. Everyone was nervous about tomorrow.

Friends and couples, even mere colleagues were exchanging hugs ranging from very brief to almost suffocating.

Glasses clinked together so many times, toasting to something.

B'Elanna took a break from the double date to check on her children in the playground. It was perfect timing as Tom and Harry had turned into a solo one, unfortunately leaving meant that Tira would feel like a third wheel for a while. Miral she spotted first. There was no need to go over to her, she thought. She was happy enough on the swing, being pushed by her best friend that she was convinced she lost only a few weeks ago. Her laughter could be heard from where she stood.

"Higher!" Miral would yell every now and then. B'Elanna noticed Amy cringe each time. Reluctantly instead of just one, she started pushing the swing seat with two fingers.

Chakotay made his way through the crowds, stopping to talk to anybody who were alone or confronted him. Most of the time he had a gentle smile on his face, when he didn't, it struggled to keep from breaking.

As he entered one cafe he overheard a familiar voice talking in an amused tone, "place your bets. Who will die, who will be maimed? Will the Enterprise be floating in the anomaly again? What..." Chakotay grabbed him by the collar and dragged him forward. The two crewmembers previously enjoying a meal sighed in relief.

"Tell me, do we have any need for you anymore?" Chakotay hissed.

"Obviously," Damien sneered while waving the PADD. Chakotay groaned, nobody would be callous enough to be taking bets like this. At least he hoped so.

The Doctor walked by as discreetly as he could to avoid a trip back to Sickbay. It was only Damien after all. The most he expected to treat were hangovers. He didn't want to have to think about what he may be doing tomorrow. For now he was only interested in finding out where the karaoke bar was, as he had heard singing when he entered the Holodeck. His shoulders slumped when he couldn't find such a thing, unaware that the only singing was Annika's beach performance.

He spotted Neelix sitting on a karaoke like stage in one bar. The Doctor's first thought was there'd be a stampede any minute. Thankfully all Neelix did with the microphone he had found was talk into it. Some crewmembers had gathered around to listen to him, so far there was no hint he'd start singing. As he got closer he heard him mention the start of their journey through the Delta Quadrant. The people who were listening were primarily crewmembers who had joined after Voyager's return. The Doctor's interest was piqued, he walked the rest of the way to join them.

Kathryn clutched onto Kiara's shoulders as the young girl squeezed her back. She planted a kiss on her granddaughter's forehead. She was surprised when Yasmin hugged her from behind so abruptly. A smile appeared on her face, her spare hand moved to clutch one of her arms.

Neelix's stories peaked with ones revolving around the bizarre first encounters with Damien and his band of idiots, which got the audience laughing at the ridiculousness of it. The ones he followed them with were about Lena's arrival on Voyager and her discovery about Kiara, or the demon attacks from Deck Thirteen. Some were entertained by them, but the mood was significantly lower. Neelix tried to rescue it with a tale about Annika's rise to insanity. It was a little too late by then.

It had gotten so quiet compared to how it was at the beginning. Too many people sat in silence, fretting about later.

What started out as a carefree get together, felt like it had turned into a funeral.

Sensing that, Tom changed the program to start a firework display. Crowds gathered on the beach to watch, some opted to stay in the cafe's and bars and watch from there with their food and drink. Bryan noticed his little sister jumping up and down near him, trying desperately to see around people's legs. He knelt down to pick her up and put her straight on his shoulders. Her face brightened up before she saw any of the fireworks go off.

Tom held his youngest son in his arms, pleased that the idea had helped a little. He found himself hoping that it wouldn't be his last good command decision.

Lying straight ahead of them was a field of darkness. Nothing seemed to be in their path. The three starships slowed their momentum to an almost stop. A blue shimmer surrounded the two Starfleet vessels, forming a diamond bubble around them. The final ship slowed to a standstill.

Tom watched the nothing on the viewscreen, trying desperately to ignore the butterflies the size of the ship doing evasive maneuvers in his stomach. He took in a deep breath, then glanced around at every person on the Bridge.

"Normal shields a hundred percent, the system is online. We're ready," Craig reported from Tactical.

"Three way channel between the ships are open," Faye said.

Tom nodded. "Paris to Katane." He forced a cheeky smile on his face and lightened his voice, "it's not too late to join in the fun."

The crew heard a few people chuckling over the comm. "*We must have missed our invitation,*" Ersas voice responded lightly.

Harry laughed as well to hide his nervousness. "I wouldn't worry, Tom's being sarcastic." Tom stared at him, bemused. "It'll be pretty dull if everything's gone right. I'm planning on taking a pre-rift nap."

"Oh Harry. That's a rookie jinx move," Tom commented.

*"It's been quite an... interesting ride, Mr Paris,"* Ersas voice said. *"On behalf of the majority of my crew, I thank you for all you've done for the Eryan people. The rest..."*

*"Are deeply sorry for our first encounter,"* Yana's interrupted. There was a good pause between the two, so the Bridge crew knew Ersas expected her to.

"Losing your home isn't easy," Harry said.

"Yes and we don't blame you for the actions of your previous commander," Tom added on.

*"We all wish you well. Good luck,"* Ersas voice said.

Harry smiled, hoping it would help him feel better about any of this. "Same to you. Safe journey."

"*You as well.*" There was a tiny bleep indicating their side of the commlink had ended.

"All right. Helm, take us in," Tom said before his throat closed up.

Voyager and the Enterprise picked up speed, toward the vast black ahead of them. The Katane remained where they were. They watched as the two ships were swallowed by the beast.

The lights dimmed, a gentle amber softly lit up the corridor on and off. A blue shadow fell onto the two people standing by the window. They had watched as Voyager entered. A blue fog gradually took over the black, drowning out all of the stars. This blue mist seemed to be moving with them, churning at their touch.

It seemed a brighter colour to Lena than the last time they were here. Her shoulders slowly raised, her body tightened as she drew in a large breath. She didn't notice she had done it until there was the need to exhale.

In the distance they could make out the faintest hint of a nebula, only spotting it as its purple interior swirled away from its own shell.

The ship mildly vibrated beneath their feet, at the same time the view began to shimmer.

"The shield," James said.

Lena hoped he was right. In here, anything could happen.

"The new shield system is drawing power," B'Elanna reported. Her relief was all over her voice. "It should be working."

Chakotay slowly approached her, "why is the ship shaking?"

B'Elanna wasn't worried. She passed him a smile to prove it. "The anomaly is a lot stronger than that brief spot we entered two days ago. What you're feeling is the inertia from the shields resisting its effects."

"I guess we won't know it's working for certain until we make some decent progress without incident," Kathryn said. Her lips curled slightly, "although we could be confusing it by wanting to stay inside."

"That's true. Nothing really happened the last time until we tried to leave," B'Elanna said.

Chakotay found himself staring toward the viewscreen. The sight of a very faint spherical object in the distance, or so he hoped, put him on edge. He gritted his teeth together.

"How long until we reach the rift?" Kathryn questioned.

"Ten minutes," was the nervous answer.

Kathryn made her way over to Tactical. "We have to be prepared for the possibility that the rifts are destroyed or closed when the anomaly consumes the area of space. Get the subspace..." she directed her next words to Chakotay, "detec-opener ready."

Chakotay almost let slip a grin. "We're not going with Damienator? Colour me shocked."

"If we open up our own door, we may trigger another anomaly expansion," B'Elanna reminded them both.

Kathryn nodded, it didn't spoil her mood. "If it does, it won't be for long. We'll destroy that bridge when we come to it."

Lena slowly glanced to her left, her hand firmly gripped the strap across her shoulder. "Final sweep. Which side do you want?" she asked.

"I was thinking one of us could check the Enterprise. B'Elanna seemed really worried about their shield," James replied.

"Hmm. Do we have the time?" Lena said warily. She made a few light groans while she thought about it.

"No, probably not. Lets hope the shield does work," James said. He gazed outside for a few seconds. "You can have whatever side you want."

Lena shook her head while smirking, "great *thanks*. You can have the lower decks, and back of Deck Eight. Deck Thirteen's more your territory than mine."

James sighed, it did nothing to calm his nerves. Lena watched him closely, feeling the exact same way. He gave her a smile anyway, "see you on the other side."

Lena rivaled his smile with a confident glint in her eyes. "Please, this'll be a piece of cake."

"Well you are good at that," James said.

"Duh," Lena laughed, it wore off pretty quick. All that was left was a fear that she wouldn't see him again. James' smile remained as he leaned forward to give her a hug. She hung onto him tightly. It couldn't last, they had to part. They soon went their separate ways.

Tom squinted his eyes, desperate to see anything. All he could see was the blue mist that they had been subjected to for a long twenty minutes.

"It's there all right. Sensors are picking up the sub space readings," Faye said.

Harry appeared by Tom's side, staring curiously at the viewscreen. He thought he imagined it, an extremely faint cut in the darker shades of blue. "If it's there, is it big enough for us to go through?"

"Now you ask," Craig commented.

"It might be a tight squeeze for the Enterprise," Faye answered anxiously.

*"Should we try using the subspace opener to stretch it a little?"* Chakotay's voice asked.

*"It's possible. As it hasn't been tested since Damien used it, I'd advise avoiding it unless it's necessary,"* B'Elanna's voice replied.

Tom walked over to the helm to take a look for himself. He scoffed, then smirked confidently "I could fit her through that with my eyes closed." He instantly regretted it as soon as Danny started sniggering rudely. "Shield strength?" he asked Tactical.

"Regular shields a hundred percent. Anomaly defence seems stable, power levels are high," Craig replied.

*"Same here. No reports of anything weird. We're good to go."*

Tom glanced backwards at Harry, he nodded. "Red alert. Weapons at ready. Take us in," Harry ordered.

"Here we go," Tom said in a long drawn out breath.

The Enterprise moved forward first toward a slightly darker patch. Its blue shell shuddered as its saucer section faded away, from tip to stern. The entire ship was nowhere to be seen in a matter of seconds.

Voyager followed its exact path. The mixture of blues reflecting on its hull brightened while its shields battled to protect them. Rays of red tried to break through, the two colours clashed, casting smaller spots of purple.

Everyone's eyes were on the viewscreen. The path ahead of them, a twisted corridor of blood red and sky blue. It didn't even look real.

"We shouldn't be here," Daniel said, echoing most of the Bridge's thoughts at what they were witnessing.

Kathryn rose from the chair, her face tightened. It took some persuading to avert her eyes from the screen, and redirect them to Tactical. "Do it."

The rest of the Bridge breathed in nervously. The order only took a mere panel press to fulfill, it took a few seconds for the hesitant shaking hand to comply.

Tom tightly shut his eyes for only a moment. Until he heard the tell tale beeps he could pretend they were somewhere else, that nothing was happening.

"That's it," Craig tried to say but the lump in his throat tried to stop him.

Harry didn't notice he was pacing from one side of the Bridge to the other. He stopped when he realised people were staring at him. One he turned his attention to. "Do you sense anything yet?"

A very nervous Wesley shook his head. "It's quiet. It's never quiet."

"Didn't you say that was a good thing?" Craig reminded him bluntly.

Wesley trembled. "Even in an unused space, I can still sense a Game or two being prepared. This... it's empty."

"Relax," Tom said, waving his hand the one time. "We entered through a little hole in their huge Game Sphere. Of course there's no cubes in waiting."

"They'll know we're here!" Wesley barked out of fear. "They always know. If they can quickly find a few intruders, they'll find two starships. Especially ones they not only know about, but have two Chosens aboard, and one link they can exploit. So why is there nothing here?"

Harry stared at the screen. He couldn't do it for long, the bright colours quickly began to make his eyes water. "Probably the same reason why they haven't noticed or fixed the glitch in their..."

"Incoming!" Craig shouted over him. Everyone's attention darted toward him. "Three ships on our stern. They're targeting weapons."

Tom ran over to his side so he could see for himself. He instantly recognised the energy signatures coming from the three dots on the sensors. "Evasive maneuvers, pattern..."

"There's no room for a starship to do maneuvers in here," Wesley stammered.

Tom ignored him, "Kim two one. Hold on everyone."

Harry had time to dive into his chair as the starship rolled onto its starboard side. The tiny three ships following them fired a white shot each. They flew by, one grazed the shields before all three detonated far in front of them. The red of the corridor ahead shuddered from the blast, dust of the same shade showered into their path.

"What's tha..." Harry barely had time to ask.

Wesley ran down to the helm, his eyes wide in a panic. "Level us off quick!" No one argued as the sight of the powdered red grew closer. The ship quickly tried to level off. The tip of the port nacelle brushed through the dust. The shields surrounding it sprang up to its defence, it still didn't stop the inside of the ship shuddering so much everyone had to cling on. Wesley had nothing to hold onto, he slammed into the ground.

"Shields in the port stern section down by twenty percent," Craig reported. Tom turned his head to give him an order. "Re-routing to compensate."

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked through his panicked panting. He noticed Wesley struggling to get up, so he rushed over to help him, putting off Faye thinking about it. "Are you all right?"

Wesley couldn't stop shaking but he was relieved that someone came to his aid. "We must be careful. Hitting anything from the corridor at this speed, it would be like running straight into a cube." His words instantly made the helm nervous.

Tom sensed it even with a back on him. "I'll take over then." He hurried forward to take their place. "Computer, activate manual..."

"No," most of the Bridge groaned.

"Fine," Tom huffed.

Craig wasn't one of the people objecting, he watched the sensors carefully. The three unknown ships changed formation to a triangle around one of the Starfleet vessels. He was about to report it when four more appeared behind them. "They've brought re-enforcements. Original three have moved to surround... um, they're scanning..."

"Which ship are they doing this to?" Tom asked.

"Voyager," Craig replied.

"They're not scanning," Tom interrupted ominously.

Lena stumbled forward as the ship rocked at her feet. The Red Alert lights and siren were cut off, quickly replaced by the Intruder Alert signal. Instantly she froze, her body began to shake. Steeling her nerves she continued on toward a wall panel. A few taps brought up a schematic of Voyager. In the lower decks a small light flashed. "Thirteen," she whispered. As she did another appeared in the saucer. Seeing that made her run as fast as she could.

"Where?" Kathryn demanded while hovering behind Opps.

B'Elanna's fingers flew across the console, bringing up the exact image Lena had been looking at. "Deck Thirteen section two. Deck Five section one. They're spreading much more quickly than the previous attacks."

Kathryn firmly ground her teeth together. "If they were going to do this anyway, why fire...?"

"They did the same to the Leda. There was no reason then either," Chakotay replied.

"Those four ships are gunning for the Enterprise, charging the same weapons. The first three are focusing those beams on Voyager," Tactical reported.

Chakotay bit his lip before replying to that, "the Leda was just in the way. That's reason enough I suppose."

Kathryn's eyes rolled up to glare at the viewscreen showing some of the attacking ships. They were no bigger than shuttlecrafts and far less menacing looking. It felt far more insulting to her. "We need to hold them off. Target..."

"More are coming," Tactical cut in, panicked. "I'm detecting a dozen."

"More to pick at," Kathryn said flippantly while turning on her heel. She stood back in the centre of the Bridge. "Phaser beam, full yield. Pick 'em off one by one."

Chakotay walked over to Opps, "keep an eye on Thirteen and Five." B'Elanna nodded. "Do you know if anyone's checked in yet?"

A piercing blue greeted James on arrival, he had to squint his eyes a little to bear it. It filled the whole corridor ahead, which had begun to smell like scorched metal. Once his eyes adjusted he noticed the right edge of this light burning its way through the wall.

His right hand reached for a weapon hanging at his back from a sheath, the other tapped his commbadge twice before going for another weapon attached to his leg. All he could do now was wait.

He didn't have to wait very long. Shadows began to emerge from the centre.

"We got confirmation on Deck Thirteen," Faye said. The ship trembled right after her last word, her hands gripped the station. "Two out of the new twelve are on the portal squad. The other ten..."

"Yeah you don't have to tell me," Harry said as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "Return fire."

Craig groaned out of frustration. "They fire and run, they even dart around while directing that portal beam. It's difficult to get a lock. That last hit reduced the stern shields by forty percent. Re-routing won't always be an option."

"Well I'm sorry, but it's not exactly spacious in here. We don't have a lot of dodging options," Tom grunted. He slammed his hand on the console, "that's it, don't care what you think. Computer, manual steering. Transfer all helm controls to it." As soon as the manual control systems emerged he grabbed them tightly, one hand pulled back. The action slowed the ship down so abruptly the attacking ships flew off without them and disappeared out of sight.

*"What the hell are you doing?"* Kathryn's voice shouted at him.

He still winced despite her not being there with him. His hand returned the control to its previous position. "Just buying time, I know what I'm doing."

Kathryn rolled her eyes. She looked at the nervous wreck at her helm, sweating buckets after that little stunt. A small pat on the shoulder re-assured them. Daniel was her next target, standing in a daze at the back of the Bridge. "Voyager may be fine with two or maybe three portals, but the Enterprise can't sustain this constant barrage..."

Daniel didn't respond immediately, irritating her further.

"One hit disabled the Leda. It's amazing we've lasted this long," Chakotay commented.

Kathryn slammed her hand down next to the watcher to get his attention. When it didn't even make him blink her anger fizzled away, a curious look appeared on her face. "Have you found one?"

"I'd take a left. Keep going and you'll end up back in the Jarsha galaxy," he murmured, barely moving his lips.

"A left? I haven't seen anything other than straight ahead," Chakotay said.

Daniel blinked five times rapidly, he shook his head afterward. "We entered via a Game Sphere power link. We're almost in the main hub, so to speak."

Kathryn looked over her shoulder to check if she needed to tell the helm, they briefly glanced back to show she didn't. "Keep looking, okay."

"It's impossible. I'd take what you can get," Daniel said.

"There will be one. I'm sure," Kathryn said confidently. Still her eyes showed her concern. "We just need to hold them off until we do. Keep firing, any change on Decks Five and Thirteen I want to know immediately."

An arm swung at her head. Lena ducked while swinging a sword out in front of her. It sliced straight through one of her attackers. Three more swarmed around, none of them were willing to wait their turn. She quickly straightened back up with only seconds to figure out what to do. One of the creatures lunged forward to tackle her, he had to be first so she aimed a kick to keep him back. Another tried to claw at her at the same time, her sword holding hand swerved up to deflect it. The claws and metal clashed together. Her kick managed to knock the first attacker back a little. She had no time to stop the one in the middle throwing a punch at her face.

The blow knocked her back, she quickly tried to regain her balance. The claws creature took full advantage and swiped its claws upward. Her weapon flew out of her grip, straining the muscles in her hand as it escaped. She heard it clatter far behind her. The two remaining monsters were far too close for her liking without it. There was no way she could turn her back on them to retrieve it. Her mind raced, trying to think of a way to get some space.

While one reached to grab her Lena instinctively threw herself backwards. The room span once, her palms pressed against the ground, pushing her back onto her feet. Her right reached around for the weapon at her back before she landed. All in a space of a few seconds she had gained some ground, while re-arming herself in the process. The new weapon pointed at the closest of her two enemies. She pulled the mechanism back, then let go, freeing the sharp object loaded into it. The pointed edge struck into its ribbed forehead. It let out a curdled growl as it fell to the floor.

The other was still gunning for her. Its claws bared, ready to strike again. She crouched down and dropped to roll away before it could reach her. Her sword lay in arms reach, her spare left quickly grabbed the handle. The creature jumped towards her new position, she pushed the sword forward at the last second. She felt it vibrate as it ran itself through, stopping just before reaching the handle.

There was little time to shake or push it off, not even anytime to toss it aside. The third beast, the one she originally kicked away threw itself at her again, hoping this time since she was distracted it would work. It did, they both slammed hard into the ground.

The light was blinding him, even from the side. James could feel heat coming from it, reminding him of the portal he voluntarily ran into ten years before. He knew he must be close to it, or more accurately it was closer to him. The fumes from the burning walls left him feeling light headed, his eyes began to water. Once more he ducked his head to behind his arm, all while backing away from incoming blows, to take in another deep breathe and hold it.

While his back was on it, another figure leapt out of the bright portal, straight for him. He didn't see it, but he heard it coming. With foes all around him, stepping out of its way wasn't an option. Ducking would leave him vulnerable, easy prey for the others. He waited until the very last second to grab the creature before it could hit him, as it was still airborne it was much easier to fling it straight over his head and shoulders. It was intended to be slammed into the floor in front of him, instead it crashed into one of his front attackers. They both fell into an irritable heap.

Another was still rushing forward, not put off by the last two attacks. Two more on his opposite side. James noticed the new arrival on the ground had brought a nice looking axe with him. He barely had time to snatch it before the one now behind him grabbed him, one arm around his neck, the other holding back his right arm and pulled him backwards. Its small claws scratched at his throat. The pair ahead laughed as they converged on him. James swung his feet up while the demon still had a strong grip on him, slamming the two attackers in the chest.

The one still holding him dug in his claws deep before he could recover. He involuntarily exhaled the last breath he tried to keep going for a while, immediately breathing in the toxic fumes from the burning metal. As he brought his feet back to the safety of the ground, James knew he had to get out of there, at least for a moment. The two on the ground were struggling but they were getting up. Now was the time. He pushed backwards until they both slammed into the wall, hard. It shattered on impact, stunning the demon holding him. Its hold on him loosened.

James was free to swing around and plunge his new axe towards its neck. With a loud thud it dropped to the floor in two pieces. James pulled a face as he stepped over the bigger piece, and in through the new hole in the wall. For the time being the oxygen in this room wasn't compromised, so he took in another deep breath. There wasn't time for anything else, in the corner of his eye one of the two lying in a heap had managed to stand back up. It took one look at him, his face showed it didn't think he was worth the trouble. His latest kill still lay by his feet. He couldn't let this demon escape from him. His leg swung back, then forward at full speed to send the body flying in its direction.

"Oh come on," it complained, making James realise it was the same demon he tossed the last one at. Even if it wasn't intentional that first time, it still made him snigger to himself as it smashed straight into it, knocking him down once more.

From where he stood the light seemed to brighten. The edge of it had began to overlap the edge of the hole. The smile faded from his face. He knew what this meant. It wasn't just his imagination, it was getting bigger. He hurried out through the hole, almost bumping into the last demon in the process. It got a punch to the face for its lack of trouble. James was more concerned about the portal nearby, he squinted his eyes to look at it. He almost missed it, a faint sight of a forcefield flickering weakly.

"The portal shield, it's overloading. There's too much..." B'Elanna reported, her console flickered off and on to illustrate her point. "The amount of power these portals are generating, it's too great."

Kathryn growled impatiently. Her eyes locked on the viewscreen and at two of the ships flying by their own. "Concentrate on one single beam ship. Watch them, look for a pattern. Then fire in the direction they're going."

She expected a confirmation of her order, anything but she got nothing. When Kathryn looked over her shoulder Chakotay ran to the empty Tactical station.

"What? Where is..." Kathryn stuttered. The Commander shook his head, he was as baffled as she was.

The turbolift doors opened, allowing the lone person inside it to dart out into the corridor. Her commbadge chirped as she ran down with a heavy book under her arm.

*"Jessie. What are you doing?"*

Jessie ignored it, only stopping to check one of the ship maps on the wall panels. Her finger traced the deck she was on until about half way through the ship. It tapped while her head turned to one side. A brief rumble almost threw her off balance, then she jogged off in that direction.

The next time she stopped she dropped to her knees. The book pulled out from under her arm was placed onto the floor in front of her, then opened. It didn't take her long to find the page she was after, the corner of it folded over so she could find it easily.

*"Jessie! There's nothing on Deck Eight. What the hell are you doing?"*

Jessie tapped her commbadge once to open her side of the channel, then again to cut it off. Once that was done she began to read the book aloud.

The knife plunged into its chest, pinning the creature to the ground. It squirmed, the blow wasn't fatal. Lena saw a heavy arm hurtling toward her, she threw herself down to one side, forcing her into a roll that left her on her back. She had to get up. There were still two more. Before she could one appeared in her line of sight, raising its foot over her stomach. Quickly she aimed the long range weapon at it and fired, the sharp object pierced through its foot and grazed its knee. It cried out as it stumbled backwards.

Lena clambered to one side, away from it, all the while sitting up. Once she did she rushed to her feet. Then a light flickered in the corner of her eye, only it wasn't coming from the portal or the struggling shield. It was coming from the opposite direction. She had little time to wonder what it was when it grew into a wave rushing toward her.

A low rumble in the distance, right behind him. James looked over his shoulder slowly, his eyes kept darting back to the portal just in case. The same glimmer of light got him to focus only on that. He slowly walked toward it, passing a couple of groaning injured demons on the ground. Its growth didn't put him off in the slightest, his eyes sparkled with it as it rushed toward him. The white brushed over and around him gently, like a warm summer breeze. He heard cries of anguish come from the monsters that were still alive, and he knew exactly why.

Still he turned back to see for himself. The wave overwhelmed them, their bodies burned from its touch. It left nothing behind as it flew through the weak forcefield. The portal seemed a lot dimmer from the attack.

James smiled anyway. His eyes drifted above to an unseen deck, "that's my girl."

Jaws had dropped, eyes were wide in astonishment. Tom tried to vocalise it the best he could. "The shield did what?"

Faye was speechless. All she could manage were um's and and ah's. Wesley had decided to hover around her station, he stared at it curiously. What he saw interested him greatly. "That's a protection spell. Very powerful. No demon's getting through that."

"Jessie?" Harry wondered aloud.

Tom found himself sighing despite feeling breathless from the shock. It left him winded. "Will it effect the link to the demon realm or whatever the hell we're calling it?"

"Think of it as a secured door. It's still there, but you're not getting in unless you've already got permission," Wesley said.

"If we can just get rid of our pursuers, we won't have much to worry about," Tom said, typically as the ship trembled. He expected it so he didn't react. "You are keeping an eye out, right Wes?"

"Of course. But as I told your Captain, the chances of finding a suitable one are slim to none," Wesley answered.

Tom silently agreed with him. He turned towards Tactical, hinting for a status report. Thankfully Craig knew what he was after, so answered him, "Enterprise's regular shield strength is at eighteen percent. They haven't touched Voyager's. There's still two attacking ships left. One more hit and..."

"We can't wait," Tom cut in. He made eye contact with Harry to see if he agreed. He swallowed a painful lump in his throat before nodding. "Anything in our galaxy, Wes."

"As you wish," Wesley said.

Kathryn swung around at the sound of the turbolift opening. She still wasn't sure whether to be angry or not as Jessie stepped out of it first. James followed immediately afterward. For the time being she settled on angry. "Maybe you could have told us you were going to do that."

Jessie shrugged as she replaced Chakotay at Tactical. "I didn't know if it would work. Sorry."

"Even with your anti-demon shield, we can't keep this up," Chakotay said reluctantly. His eyes lingered on the other side of the Bridge, briefly catching Kathryn's. "Daniel?"

Daniel kept a transfixed stare toward the viewscreen. He barely reacted to the ship tremor, then rumble quietly beneath their feet.

"Report," Kathryn ordered.

Jessie scanned her console as James walked over to join her. "One of the attacking ships has joined the portal squad. They're targeting Deck Thirteen."

"They badly want that door open. Even still, they're not getting in," James said.

"Not as long as Jess is alive anyway," B'Elanna reminded everyone.

Kathryn felt a smirk tugging on her lips. "Good. One less ship for us to worry about." Chakotay arrived by her side, watching her carefully, which she noticed in the corner of her eye. "Keep targeting that final attacking ship. We'll ride this corridor until it shows us the way out."

Daniel's eyebrows twitched. It brought him partially out of his daze. "I think... I think I found one."

"You think?" Chakotay said.

"It looks like one but..." Daniel mumbled, his voice hoarse. "We won't only have a few ships to worry about if we head for it."

Kathryn made her way over to him, a frown on her face. "What do you see?"

"The destination, it's hazy. There's a vast concentration of Softmicron in the vicinity, it's clouding my sight," Wesley said.

Tom sighed, "if we time it right." Wesley's eyes widened in horror toward him. Tom brushed it off, "which way, and how long?"

"Uh... second left, up two. Only five minutes. You can't be serious," Wesley stammered his answer.

"This is what we're looking for. The Softmicron party just makes it all the more irresistible," Kathryn smiled.

Daniel found it hard to argue with that. He rushed over to the helm to relay the directions.

Kathryn slowly made her way back to the centre of the Bridge, all the while glancing around at everyone. She saved her final one for James, who seemed a little conflicted with it. Jessie had sensed it without even looking, she placed her hand on top of his closest one. Kathryn smiled and nodded at them both before turning her back on them.

"This is it. Everyone to their positions. It's time to take on the final boss," she said.

"Not your best pun, but it will do," Chakotay teased her. A few people behind them scurried from their stations. Daniel passed them on route to the back of the Bridge.

Kathryn laughed discreetly so only Chakotay could see or hear it. "I thought *game over* was far cheesier." Chakotay laughed as well.

Harry paced by a very nervous Wesley. As he did he tried to stop the Lieutenant, barely having the time to open his mouth and inhale. He grumbled as he kept going down toward the front of the Bridge.

"Status?" Harry said.

Craig bit his lip briefly before answering. "Four remaining, maybe... No they're firing again."

Tom's nerves were beginning to make him feel sick. Staring at the viewscreen wasn't helping. He guided the ship a little to the right, a low rumble told him that it grazed the shields.

"Returning fire," Craig said. Faye looked over her shoulder, watching and waiting for him to give her a sign. He gave her a nod and she began to tap furiously.

"That's odd," Faye said. "I can't establish a lock on the one on Deck Five. The signal's there but..."

Craig's head darted in her direction.

The shield struggled to keep back the expanding light, it flickered and in places started to spark. A commbadge lay discarded nearby, voices poured out of it. Its owner hid around the corner, leaning against the wall with her eyes firmly closed. Her face soaked with tears still falling.

Footsteps quickly approached, drowned out by the noise of the energy smashing against the forcefield. She only noticed when they were within a few metres of her. Eyes flew open in a panic. "No..." she barely had time to mumble before somebody crouched down to put one arm under hers. "No! I'm not..." She pulled her arm away.

"Lena. You can't stay," James desperately tried to plead with her.

The same stubborn glance that her mother always used when doing something no one agreed with, was directed at him. Tears rolled down her cheek. "Watch me."

James stared down at her, unsure what to do. The computer shouted a warning at them both. As far as he was concerned now, there was only one option. He lurched forward and wrapped his arms around her, all the while ordering, "now!"

"No, no!" she sobbed as they were taken over by a transporter beam.

Kathryn reached the Captain's chair and slowly settled herself down into it. Her arms spread onto the rest. A contented smile formed on her face.

*"Warning,"* the computer bellowed. *"Self destruct in ten, nine..."*

On the eight she reached over to take Chakotay's hand. He smiled warmly at her.

The five her right hand discreetly entered a command on the armrest panel.

As the computer said three he disappeared in a shimmer, leaving her behind.

*"One."*

Tom wanted to look away, but his head and eyes were locked in place. One second the ship he loved so much flew behind them, surrounded by the five remaining enemy ships. The next a light overwhelmed it. A wave of white spread, slamming into the corridors. Their home for eleven years, all that was left of it was shards of metal and a grey haze.

The entire bridge was silent apart from a few consoles bleeping timidly. It wasn't to last. The ship shuddered, forcing everyone to hold on.

"What..." Harry said, still stunned from what he witnessed.

"I... I don't know. It's not us. It's outside," Craig stuttered.

Tom hadn't managed to tear his eyes away so he saw it before anyone else. The blue's and red's were fading, the corridor looked like it was widening. He swore at one point he could see black in between the two colours. "It worked. The Games Matrix, it's failing."

Lena tried to push her brother away. He however held onto her tightly, so all they did was sway slightly. The fight in her had faded away. Her tears wouldn't stop, she shook so much her body ached. It was getting difficult to breathe in between sobs, making her gasp and wheeze. Instead of trying to push him away, she fell into his shoulder.

"Mum," he heard her whimper. What happened didn't hit him until then, and when it did, it felt like a punch to the gut. Tears quickly welled up in his eyes as well. The idea that

they'd never see Kathryn Janeway ever again. Hear her withering insults toward Tom, obsess over coffee. That she'd never do something as impulsive to solve a problem, like she had just done, ever again. It left him feeling cold, whilst at the same time he was proud. This was how Kathryn Janeway wanted to go out. Not used as some revenge attack against him while she slept. She would have wanted to go down with her ship to save everyone. To save them.

He attempted to look down at his little sister, her face buried in his shoulder. The tears were blurring his vision. He hoped that she'd see it the same way.

Showers of reds and blues fell into their path. The starship twisted to one side to avoid it. Shields flickered up as the edge of the saucer had little time to escape it, and brushed straight through. The walls closely surrounding them began to flash a blinding purple, the subtle motion of the two previous colours gently flowing alongside one another froze in place. Cracks travelled along beside the ship, as if they were following it.

The path ahead widened, the unknown black swallowed the vibrant red and blue streams still streaming on a set path. They continued on, straight toward a purple speck lying within the corridor floor. As they approached, it grew and took shape. Straight edged, with four corners. The walls above it twisted, it appeared to be falling, showering the object with an imposing cloud of powdered debris.

As the object itself began to glow a deadly red, the starship dropped down almost vertically before it would reach it, into a still blue and red corridor. What lay ahead of them now dwarfed them, it blocked their path completely. So enormous it was it looked apart of the corridor, a tall and sturdy purple cube. Sitting beneath it a cloud of lavender vapour, churning against the ground.

Behind them the walls continued to brighten and freeze, the cracks ran toward them and the object.

"Well?" Harry said nervously.

Wesley shook his head, he turned to Daniel to see if they were on the same page. They seemingly weren't as Daniel pressed a bulky cigarette to his lips, immediately lighting it somehow without a lighter or setting the alarms off. He noticed the other watcher looking at him. "Nope. The damage must be obscuring everything. I can't see where it goes at all."

"It's the same one we sensed. That much is certain," Wesley said irritably.

Tom took in a deep breath. "No choice. We're going in." He glanced over his shoulder. "Take the portal shield system off-line, Craig. B'Elanna give me full engine power."

B'Elanna gave him a wry smile as she obeyed. Craig however had sweat rolling from his forehead at just the thought of doing it.

"May I remind you Mr Paris, there's still a chance that flying directly into a Game Cube whilst in the Matrix will end the exact same way as..." Wesley stuttered.

Daniel blew smoke in his face, Wesley prepared to cough but he quickly realised it wasn't real. "May I remind you that the shield will trap us in that Game, which will get squished when it tries to come back here as *here* will be history."

"Hmph. I knew this was a terrible plan," Wesley huffed.

The cube on the viewscreen had taken over the whole thing. "Shield is off-line," Craig reported as the ship tremors increased in strength and number. Anyone standing hurried for the nearest object to hold onto, stumbling on route.

Tom pushed the manual control lever forward as far as it could go. His left hand hovered over another control until just the right moment. "Deploying landing struts."

There was little room left to turn away, no time to run. The cracks were almost on them, breaking shards of purple, leaving behind nothing but black. The cube itself began to move slowly downwards. There was nothing left of the blue and red streams, they had all frozen into the pale purple weakening itself into oblivion.

The Enterprise dove into the lavender waters, hidden from the carnage around them.

Something was different about this game compared to any of the ones they'd been in.

A see through hologram span around in his comfortable chair to face them, with a big showman's grin on his face, bowing to an applauding audience that they could not see. They were his audience, no one were clapping, and sat in a vast array of seats surrounding the huge circular glass podium he was inside.

It was difficult to narrow it down to just one something. Nobody was sure if this area was an over the top upgrade to the waiting room, or a part of the game itself. If it were the latter, it was a completely new type and there was nothing around but the hologram to tell them how to play it.

"Welcome, welcome to Zero Hour. The game that challenges your wits, your integrity, and best of all your winning smile," the hologram laughed. The invisible members of the audience laughed with him.

"Oh crap," B'Elanna groaned.

The hologram climbed out of his chair to pace the stage. "For you do not win Zero Hour with strength and violence alone. No. What's a kill if it isn't done in style? No one wants to see a player cower in the dark. I know I don't." He faked a yawn so patronising most of the crew rolled their eyes in disgust.

"For those of you who are new to the show, the rules are very simple. There are two..." he pointed to the crew, then behind him at what looked like an empty mirror image of where they were. "Sides. Each must send at least twenty volunteers, only twenty will be ultimately chosen by our esteemed AI, to join the hunt. Every volunteer will begin with a random, unknown to them number of starting points. One side must win over the other in order to score more."

His hand gestured to beside him, a screen twice the size of him appeared out of nowhere. On it showed a young woman running, screaming in fear. In the bottom corner the number 6 sat in a square. The image panned to the left to show a group of ten people fighting viciously, then back at the girl. "Boring," he pouted. "Minus two points." The number 6 faded away, with -2 and +1 hovering around it, it was soon replaced by 5. "Oh, someone thought the screams of terror were funny," he chuckled, his finger raised to say one.

Tom shuddered at the coldness of all of this. He looked at the two people sitting on both sides of him. He was thankful one of them was someone he knew well. "Is this a hunt slash death match, or a sick popularity contest at school?"

"Worse, it feels like a mesh of both," Harry said shakily.

"What happens when you reach zero, you ask," the hologram's voice boomed over-dramatically. He wiggled his eyebrows as if it were a big joke. On cue the screen changed to show the same girl walk in the woods carefully, her head jumping around at the slightest noise. Her square now had the number 0 in the middle. She didn't see it coming and neither did the audience. A net flew up from the ground, wrapping itself tightly around her as it flung up into the tree line. Her screams became painful when it quickly grew clear that it was no ordinary net, designed to capture people. It tightened its grip on her until she could no longer draw breath.

Any member of the audience sitting near a child quickly tried to distract them from it before that happened. Some of the kids already were covering their eyes as soon as the screaming started.

The hologram belly laughed at the image. "Oh, ouch!" So many members of the crew were sickened by him now. "If you're boring, we don't want you in our game. Simple as that. It's very important that you keep your opponents audience interest. That's what keeps you alive, and will give you the chance to snag the sole crown. How to win it? I'm glad you asked. Zero Hour is so simple, a child could win it and that I could see happening. Two sides go in, one side comes out. If you're on the losing side, don't worry, you can always switch. That's a sure guaranteed way of getting the opposing audience to like you."

Everyone nearby him turned their heads toward Damien who had found this amusing until then. He rolled his eyes and muttered, "really? Only an idiot would join the Game Sprites and or Softmicron's side, it's instant death if they win."

Meanwhile Annika smiled deviously to herself. The people who had originally been forced into neighbouring seats had already moved to another one, so nobody noticed.

The hologram clapped a few times, grinning like a mad game show host. "Enough talk. It's time to begin the game!" Tiny pieces of the glass dome opened up on the bottom floor level. "If you are interested in joining, step up to the plate. If we do not get twenty, our fabulous AI will select suitable characters on its own. Anymore than that, we will go into the much loved assessment round where you must prove yourself worthy," he said the last sentence in a cheeky tone. "You have ten minutes."

Tom briefly looked around at the taken seats. People were already beginning to rise from their seats to make their way down. He had to be quick, so he climbed up onto his chair. "Wait!" he shouted to get their attention. From what he could see in the vast crowd, it worked, they stopped. "We must have no more than twenty. We can't risk our *experts* being kicked out by the likely biased AI because we have too many volunteers." He swore he heard a tiny giggle come from the audience.

"Experts?" Harry whispered.

"I didn't want to announce we have S word people to the game, duh," Tom crouched down to whisper back. He rose once more to address everyone. Then he noticed a small screen appearing over the new door to the dome. A number one appeared on it. "What... what does that mean?"

Harry glanced in the same direction to see what he was talking about. "One what?"

They heard a voice from the lower level chairs. "Someone's gone through already." A lot of the crew tried to see who it was, as they must be visible through the glass. Strangely they could see no one other than the hologram.

Tom groaned into his hand. "Okay, so the door keeps count. Hang on." He hurried over to the aisle so he could rush down to the entrance, Harry was right behind him. A few members of the crew already arrived there and stood waiting. "Did anyone see?"

"No, whoever it was must have been close to it and ran while you were talking," James said.

"Great," Harry sighed. He spotted Lena standing behind him with her head down, arms wrapped tightly around her chest. Her face red and blotchy from crying. His chest ached for her as he had a good idea why she was like that. "This isn't a run of a mill Death Match. It's a sick TV show that may find her grief boring, or worse, entertaining."

James glanced over his shoulder toward his sister. She made no gesture to show that she heard that. He turned back, shaking his head. "It's not up to us tho..."

"I'm going," Lena mumbled. "I want to do something, not sit around and watch."

"We can't stop you, but it's likely this game will try to take advantage of you, especially if it finds out who you are," Tom warned.

Lena didn't feel up to saying anything, she merely walked towards the entrance to the dome. James rushed after her to stand in her way for the time being. "Lena, I'm sorry I had to do that."

"Don't," Lena said, shaking her head. "You did the right thing. I was just being a stupid, weak kid, I could have got us both killed."

"You hoped mum would notice and she'd stop the self destruct," James said softly. He reached for her shoulder, she shrugged it away. "You didn't want your mother to die. That's not stupid."

Lena side stepped sharply to get around him, he followed her. She growled, frustrated more at herself than him. "No, it's selfish! If she were here and the game ended, the Tolg would be able to reconnect to her. She'd be a prisoner in her own body again. Disconnecting her before then was far more likely to kill her, she'd been dead too long. She went out on her own terms. It's what she wanted!" her words turned into hysterical shrieks by the time she was done. Tears were streaming down her face. She felt arms wrap around her, which she expected, what she didn't was that they belonged to two different people. None of them seemed to belong to her brother, she could see him standing in the same spot, struggling to keep his emotions in check as well.

She looked around to see who they belonged to. The person on her left, with his arm across her shoulders, bringing her in closer, had his cheek pressed against hers so closely she could see a blurry tattoo on the far edge of her sight. It could only be her father finally coming through for her. On her right, with a hand across her back, standing far enough away so she could see his face clearly. Her best friend, the one always on her side, ready to support her whatever happened. The tears forming in her eyes now seemed warmer as they freely fell to her cheek. The sight of not only them and her brother, but of other people who'd gathered around them, smiling kindly at her, or

simply nodding in understanding. A few were crying light tears too. She wasn't alone, not even close. It gave her a warm feeling in her chest.

Tom was one of the ones trying to wipe away a few stray tears. He had a smile on his face as well, determined and a little cocky. "We'll win this game and go home. What better way is there to honour Captain Janeway? Badass crazy woman until the very end. And Voyager, the best damn ship there ever was."

James smiled similarly as Jessie found him to stand by his side, her arm wrapped around his back. "I'm all for it. How many have we got then?" he said.

Harry breathed in to recover from that. He didn't bother to dry his cheek like a few others. "Whoever's going, raise your hand." He looked around as members of the group standing around put up their hands. He quickly counted them. "Twenty two. That's three of you that'll have to bow out."

Lena pulled away reluctantly from her dad's hold on her, she smiled gratefully at him. "James and I are definite. We should go through regardless."

"Good point," James nodded.

"Be careful, I can't lose you again," Chakotay said to his daughter.

Lena finally smiled with some confidence, "dad please. If they want entertaining while I kill them, they're gonna get it."

Chakotay laughed, his eyes beaming with pride. "I had no doubt about that."

James glanced around, his eyes focused primarily on the ground. Jessie reached up to place a hand across his face, stopping him from looking in one direction at least. "The nursery staff and a few volunteers are watching them. My only worry is that Alisha and Michael only have the nappies they're currently wearing."

Tom overheard, his eyes flickering wider. "We must hurry." He got a few smirks and eyebrow raises as a result, making him a bit blustery. "Ten minutes is almost up."

"It seems like the people outside the game have a part as well. At least I hope so. Knowing the Softmicron the only audience that can score points for the other team will be theirs," B'Elanna said.

"Then maybe one of us should stay behind to co-ordinate the votes. It may help keep the more dangerous opponents out of play," Harry suggested.

Lena made her way to the entrance to the dome, someone followed. She looked over her shoulder expecting it to be James. When she realised it wasn't, her journey temporarily halted to stare at her follower quizzically. Craig smiled sheepishly. "I can fight, I can be not boring," he said.

"Better get in line," Lena said, gesturing to Tom and the rest gathered around him. Her eyebrow twitched up, the tiniest hint of a smirk tugged her lips. "You'd better deliver mind."

Craig's smile slipped into a grin for only a second. "It's been a while since I've done both, I'll be a bit rusty."

"I take it you're going in as well in that case," James said, not asked. Jessie still faked a scowl in response.

"Well I was thinking that if we start to slip up on the points front, we can make out a bit," Jessie said. Her eye drifted over in Tom's direction. He had overheard that as well, this time he tried his best not to give it away. His lips trembled as he tried to resist making a comment. "Points double whammy, I say." She groaned as she could hear Danny's far away laughter, right on cue.

"I don't mind leading the voting team if you want to go in," Harry said. "It's what Tom wants to do. Fighting wise he'd be awful, but as entertainment he's the best we have next to Damien and Annika. Right Tom?"

"I dunno, Damien and Annika as the double of the whammy would lose points," Tom mumbled. He noticed Harry, Chakotay and B'Elanna staring at him, equally confused as the other. "What?"

"Well I'm sold. Harry stays behind, Tom you're with us," Chakotay smirked.

Tom looked on, a little worried about what he'd missed. "I'm not sure if I want to join the make out team..." He flushed red and started stammering. Everyone in earshot started sniggering. Jessie snorted into laughter. "I meant the game team. God damn Jessie, stop distracting me. One conversation at a time."

"Why, it's not realistic then," Jessie teased.

Harry inhaled through his nose deeply to stop himself from laughing, it only worked during it. "I'll take two of our volunteers, that should simplify this," he said mid snigger.

One member of the original volunteers stepped forward. "I'll do it. Despite James' best efforts, I'm not fighting material. Here I might be useful instead of the usual hindrance," Jach said timidly.

"I wouldn't say best. I've never been good at teaching," James said. He lowered his voice for the next part, "you need patience for that." Jessie shook her head, smiling slightly. "Don't think of yourself as a hindrance, I never did. It takes a lot of guts to go on after what you went through, especially when you think you're not suited for something. Being hard on yourself gets you nowhere, believe me."

Jach looked on with surprise, but he was grateful for it. He gave him a firm nod. Shar, who had been standing beside him before he moved, seemed bemused by the whole thing. "Oh sure, I'm your best student that didn't turn into a demon. Give 'ol Jach the compliment," she said in jest.

"You're very good at annoying me," James said.

Shar faked a gasp, and put a hand by her chest. "Oh really, thanks boss."

James shrugged, trying badly not to smirk back at her, "they're not all winners."

Before she could reach the entrance hurried footsteps approached, then a tug on her arm. Lena barely had time to turn around, whoever it was threw her arms around her. Only then she knew who. The hug was brief, a relieved smile faced her. "I wasn't sure if you made it. Voyager..." Kiara smiled.

Lena felt her heart sink, she tried to hide it with a smile of her own. "I'm all right. Are you?"

The young girl stared at her intently, curious about something. Lena realised it would be obvious she had been crying, it wasn't like she had time to recover from it. "I loved Voyager too, Lena. I know it was our home but it was only a ship. Please don't be so upset," Kiara said softly.

She didn't know, why would she, Lena thought. Now wasn't the time or place to break the news. "It's nothing a little bit of violence won't cure."

"Don't have too much fun without me," Kiara playfully said.

Lena caught sight of James standing ready at the entrance, waiting for her. She turned back toward it, keeping a smile on her face for Kiara's sake until she could no longer see it. Straight faced she reached the glass dome. The pair stepped inside together. As soon as they did the number three appeared above the door.

"All right, that should be seventeen," Chakotay announced.

Tom cleared his throat as a hint, Chakotay waved his palm out to allow him to continue. "Quickly, but one at a time," he told the group. Most branched off to follow James and Lena. Tom didn't look so sure as he watched them. B'Elanna stopped mid way with a curious worry directed at him. "Did I really just swap a Slayer trainee for Neelix?"

She laughed, Neelix wasn't far behind her so he overheard. He huffed, "hey. A Game that rewards entertainment and team work is the kind I shine in." He stomped off, bringing the door number to eighteen.

They all heard the hologram whoop over his microphone, a signal they quickly learned meant they had little time left. "Ten seconds."

"Let's do it," Tom said with confidence. He stepped inside the dome first, B'Elanna was right behind him.

The countdown ended, the doors slammed shut and sealed, re-creating the illusion that there were never any doors at all. The remaining crew glanced around, trying to get a peek inside the dome. Despite twenty of their people being inside it still looked empty. Harry sighed to steady his nerves, all the while stepping up the aisle to get a higher position. Then he realised something else was odd about the dome entrance. The number wasn't what he expected.

"Twenty one," he read aloud. A lump formed in his throat. His head darted toward Tira, she frowned in a similar direction. "We sent in nineteen, we already knew we had one eager volunteer go in first. When did, how did that twenty first one happen?"

Tira placed a hand on his shoulder, noticing immediately how stiff it was. "We'll do a role call. See who's missing."

Harry blinked furiously, "I'd love to, but there's hundreds of us."

"I didn't mean everybody. Just a role call of people who'd sneak in," Tira smiled.

"We don't know if there's time..." Harry stuttered.

"Well well, we have some eager players today," the hologram shouted down the microphone. "I'm afraid one of you will have to be eliminated," he said, breaking into a put on sad voice.

As the invisible audience cheered and even hooted, the majority of the crew voiced their protest. The volume of the angry talking, the shouts of disgust, gave Harry the boost he needed. He kept on going up to the top row, so everyone could see him. His hands slammed together as hard as he could, at one point he was convinced he'd broken a bone or two doing it. "Everyone, settle down! There's nothing we can do now but help our people win this game. I'm going to need everybody here." It worked for the most part, a lot of the crew stopped and looked up to listen to him.

The hologram kept talking, which cut him off temporarily. "We're not interested in a dud. Prove your worth to the AI and you shall be spared." His chillingly unsympathetic laugh echoed around the now quiet audience area.

"Here's how we're going to do this. Engineering staff, convene here!" Harry shouted while pointing to his far right, in an opposite aisle. "Security, the centre seats. Bridge staff with me. You get the idea. Your team leader should be whoever's in charge when a senior staff member isn't around. Your task is to see who you have, who's missing. If you have any, report to me."

"If you have no position on the ship, like I do, meet down near the entrance," Tira added on. She nodded at Harry, then made her way down.

Harry sighed, his voice now sore from raising his voice higher than normal. It was worth it though. He felt like this Game was created for the sole purpose of being cruel. The last thing he wanted was the Softmicron getting one last jab at their expense.

Even though they had walked into the dome together, Lena found herself alone in a small grey room. Ahead of her a large blank screen floating in the air. It sparked to life before she could really do anything. The hologram from earlier sat in the centre of the screen, directly facing her, his face painted with disdain and superiority.

"One must go. Convince us that it shouldn't be you," he said.

"One? How can there be too many?" Lena muttered to herself.

The hologram sat back, his leg lifted to rest his calf on top of his other knee. "All must answer one question carefully or face elimination. If you pass, you will be scanned before entry."

"God, crap like this is why you have nowhere to go after this game," Lena grumbled.

He chuckled quietly while bringing out a card from his inside jacket pocket. Lena thought for a moment that he was staring directly at her, toying with the idea of eliminating her out of spite for her comment. Everyone else who had entered the dome was seeing the exact same thing and in an identical room.

"Here at Zero Hour we celebrate fun and excitement..." he said.

"Could've fooled me," James commented, groaning a little.

The hologram continued as if he hadn't said anything, "over physical prowess. So tell me, in one word what is your biggest skill or asset."

"Wit," Tom answered without hesitation. He only did hesitate after he said it and his body was covered in a blue light shining from the ceiling, he cringed inwardly. "Damn it, imagination. Just one word and you screw that up."

"Revenge," Chakotay answered during a tense stare down with the hologram.

"Evil," Damien cackled.

The next player thought about it carefully. There was so many answers she could use and only one chance. It came to her in a flash, "boobs." The blue light shone on her, setting off the glitter in her outfit, the hologram's face twitched in disgust.

"Punching," B'Elanna smiled a little too nicely.

Jessie rolled her eyes while sighing. She ended up flipping her middle finger at the screen. It was more than enough to convince the hologram. She was in the middle of mouthing a swearword when she was enveloped by the light.

"Morale," Neelix replied quickly.

Lena struggled to think of a one word answer that wouldn't give away her identity. There was a nagging feeling it knew anyway. One came to her that would only pique their suspicions if they had any, and if not would seem defiant enough to get the AI's interest. "Winning."

James had similar trouble. Only one word came to mind and he didn't like it at all. He knew it would tempt them into picking him, regardless of what he was. With a reluctant sigh he decided to say it, using a voice of indifference, "killing."

The hologram folded his arms across his chest while leaning forward, peering into the screen. The volunteers who had been lit up were whisked away by a transporter. The few who had not yet been scanned were left to wonder if they were the one left behind.

Lena grunted irritably, "yes, drag it out for drama. We both know who you've picked, so just..." The light finally shone on her, rendering her speechless. She transported away.

Neelix sighed in relief as the same happened to him.

Damien raised his eyebrows a few times, flashing his eyes and smirked. He shrugged, mouthing *duh* as he was quickly scanned and spirited away as well.

A few unknown crewmembers gasped in shock as they were picked too.

The last one remaining had no idea that he was, he only had a feeling as it had taken so long for anything to happen. The hologram inhaled through his nose, licking his lips. His body slumped back into the chair while keeping eye contact. "That was a tough one. Two of you, one slot. Rules are rules."

There was no surprise on James' face, he only rolled his eyes. "Right, you always play by them don't you."

"Zero Hour is all about the fun, and we must pick who will entertain our viewers more," the hologram continued. "Maybe next time bring a breakdown or two, a dead parent you give a crap about..."

James gave him a cold, hard stare that normally would leave the victim in a shivering mess or running for their lives. It was the same one his mother prided herself on using. He approached the screen while the hologram sneered at him.

"Good thing I never did like following rules," he muttered. Instead of being tempted to destroy the screen, he stepped around behind it, crudely ripping the panel off the back, exposing the wiring.

Still the hologram kept talking, "you know, something that will make us laugh about until you croak. May as well get it over with here instead."

"Mmm-hmm." A few wires were pulled out, swapped around. His fingers rapidly tapped a few panels that were hidden underneath.

A click, followed by hissing to his left got his attention. Like the dome, the plain wall had a hidden door. This one was a tiny little flap hanging lazily from the wall, behind it a vent spewing what looked like smoke into the room. The faintest tint of gas slipped into his mouth as he took in a deep breath he planned to hold for a while. His throat tingled first before beginning to burn. He couldn't inhale anymore of whatever it was, he kept one arm pressed against his face while he worked.

His only spare hand hurried into a pocket, bringing out a small device concealed in his palm. The cloud lingered near his feet as he pressed the device into the circuitry. It instantly sparked, the hum of power inside the screen grew until the glass cracked. The hologram seemed none of the wiser as his image vanished from it.

Even though his throat felt like it was on fire, and the room was beginning to move on its own, James smiled at his work. A confident glint appeared in his eye. Satisfied, he tapped the panels a few more times, then tore the device from the computer.

The game wasn't at all what they expected, especially with the example they were shown before volunteering. Instead of trees and fields, some of the players were spread out in a huge lab environment, dark and abandoned. High tables filled with equipment lined the way in front of them. One length of the room completely made of glass, not that they could see the other side of it from where they were.

They were blocked by an invisible barrier, like glass but sturdier. One of the unknown crewmembers had gotten over their surprise at not being killed in the question session. They grinned at the person nearest to them. "Now's my chance to prove myself. From now on people will remember the name..." They were cut off by a transporter taking them away. They reappeared in the middle of the chairs outside the dome. Everyone nearby stared at him, flummoxed about what happened. So was he for a moment, until he groaned in disappointment. "Dang it. So close."

"So close to what, being cannon fodder?" another crewmember asked him.

He stared at them blankly for a while. Then he laughed nervously, "so, what's happening here?"

Another pointed toward the glass dome. No longer an empty shell, now a dollhouse view of a tall, imposing building. Their people spread out in different rooms, unmoving, seemingly waiting for the countdown placed on screens dotted around the sky above the building. There were many people inside as well they didn't recognise, each of them anxious to go. All different shapes and sizes.

Inside the original room, the members of the group that witnessed the beam out, looked around for their missing teammate. They were more than surprised when a figure rematerialised in a blue glow in his place. He shook his head, a finger pressed to his lips to hint to keep quiet.

"Let the Zero Hour begin," a voice boomed over them, followed immediately by a buzzer. The barriers lifted into the ceiling, freeing the players from their cages. Not many were eager to take advantage. Without anything to get in the way, the reality of where they were hit them.

Remaining crouched down, James stepped forward to the next bench, using it as cover while inspecting the room they were in. There only seemed to be one way out of it that he could see. One door that could lead to almost anywhere or thing. First things first, a weapon. His hand reached up slowly to the top of the table, searching for anything he could grab. Once he did, it was brought even slower back down to him. He was a little disappointed to see it was merely a see through flask. That wasn't going to earn him many points. He decided to go for the door and find a more interesting weapon elsewhere.

He had barely moved an inch when he spotted the two other people in the lab with him hadn't moved since the buzzer. One woman he didn't recognise frozen in terror behind a large cabinet, staring in the direction of the glass wall. The other he knew well enough, muttering to himself in between teeth chattering. James knew he couldn't leave them. They'd be easy targets, boring in the eyes of the Game's AI. "Hey," he whispered to them. "Just pretend we're in the Holodeck, stay close to me. You'll be fine."

The man's eyes flickered up to him. "What was I thinking? I'm not interesting enough to survive."

"Really?" James' eyebrow shot up. He double checked to see if this was the same trainee that would sing *training montage songs* while the group did circuit training. The last word James would use to describe Stewart was dull. He edged forward to gently clasp his arm. "What was the name of that undercover game you invented, Mission Not Probable?"

"Duck and Cover," Stewart answered, his shaking had stopped. The smallest of smiles appeared on his face. "Not probable was your name for it. Why?"

"We're not in a Game Cube. We're doing another infiltration exercise. They were always your forte," James answered.

Stewart didn't seem so sure. "You always told me to stop dancing around like a prat on sugar."

"I was a tad grouchy back then. Go nuts," James said.

"Psst," a voice hissed at him from behind. James turned to see another familiar face peering out from the edge of the table he had started at. Now that he had his attention, he pointed behind James, so he looked. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, apart from

the woman had begun to backwards crawl in his direction with her gaze fixed ahead. Her action helped him realise something truly was odd about the view ahead. Her hiding place, the cabinet no longer stood next to the wall of windows. The room stretched a lot further than it, with the object sitting in the near centre.

A light scrape across the ground echoed around the lab, James' eyes darted to where he thought the source of it came from. Shadows darted behind the opposite end of the bench to his other teammate. He crept a little closer to it. Now he could hear very light breathing, it didn't sound Human. It reminded him more of a cat's purrs. James assumed it was a gift for him, for his earlier cheat to the system.

For a short time there was nothing, not a sound or any movement. It leapt up onto the bench; claws the length of a hand scraped the surface as it landed. Crouching on only its hind legs, it almost looked humanoid with its hairless skin and long flowing hair behind it. Everything else they could make out about it were feline. Teeth long and sharp. Golden eyes glowing in the dark. Its size gave it more of a lion appearance than a pet cat.

James only noticed it had a tail pointed sharply at the ceiling and fur on its back sticking up on end when it leapt right for him. He panicked, and grabbed the closest object to swing it at the beast. It squeaked as the blow sent it flying backwards into the glass. It smashed on impact, sending the animal tumbling down to unknown depths.

"You want to hope that this thing can't land on its feet," he heard Craig say after a laugh.

"Oh god, yeah," James said, allowing himself to finally shudder the fear off of him. It didn't work. The creature would haunt his nightmares for a while. For now it settled for its image appearing in a holographic window floating outside, with the words Defeated written underneath it.

Stewart's head darted around before doing a dramatic roll to Craig's position. All he achieved was bumping into him, leaving his legs splayed in the air. "Ow. I'm outta practice," he groaned.

"No, you got it," Craig sighed mid wince, rubbing his now sore arm.

Meanwhile the unknown woman felt better enough to discreetly hurry for the exit. She tried to turn the handle, pull it, and then push at the door itself. Nothing could open it. The others stared at her with worry. "We're trapped."

"Good thing you're here," Craig commented, he looked sorry about it.

James shook his head, he kept his head down to go towards the door. He expected one tug would pull the door open, but he had the same trouble as the woman. It left the others with a sense of dread. A light scuttling sound didn't help matters. "Two sides go in, one side comes out," James mumbled.

Craig realised the same thing, he shivered at the sound increasing. "Four of us, four of them."

Ear piercing shrieks forced another room to cover their ears. Not that it would help in the slightest. Another noise would chime in to cause them further pain.

"Come here cutey!" Annika laughed.

A couple of blurs ran by their hiding place. One a simple brown, the second left a trail of glitter behind in its wake.

Tom winced at the giggles and begs for mercy he heard next. A lot of clattering put an end to that, it had the unfortunate side effect of bringing the screaming back.

"Let me pet you, don't be scared of the mean little girl!" Kiara's jaw dropped, she turned to somebody beside her. He shrugged haplessly. "Just a little devil spawn, no need to run. Wait up! Oh, I want to squeeze that fur... brrrr ooooh, how soft it must be!" Annika's voice broke the sound barrier.

They heard glass shattering. In unison the three hiders turned their head towards the window. As they expected there was a new hole and shards of glass falling to the floor. Just when they thought it was over, Annika appeared in front of it, stroking something in her hands. They were thankful her back was to them.

"Wait! You forgot this!" Annika shouted at the hole while waving the fluffy object in the air. Tom dared to take a peep at what it was, he almost threw up. It looked to him like a rabbit's ear. Sure enough the picture that appeared in the sky was of a furry humanoid with tall ears. Kiara had to turn her back away as Annika brought the object to her face and rubbed against it, all while blood dripped from one end.

"Oh god," the unknown man mumbled, repressing a gag. "Is it me, or is she getting worse?"

Tom shrugged with his arms outstretched, defeat all over his face. "It's Annika, it's hard to say."

"Why did you let her in?" Kiara hissed.

Tom's eyes flew open as he stared at her back. "I didn't. She was probably the one who entered first."

"If there were really four people in with us, three now, they're not going to want to reveal themselves with her around," Kiara said.

"Shhh!" Tom panicked when he turned back, noticing Annika was no longer by the window. He mouthed, "go now," while pointing at the door. The trio shuffled slowly toward it. The unknown reached it first. He tried desperately to open it. Like Craig and James' room it refused to budge. The longer it didn't the more desperate he felt and the noisier his attempts got.

"Stop. There must be something..." Kiara tried to intervene.

The man heard footsteps approach, so naturally he continued his panic spree. His latest attempt pulled the handle from the door itself. Kiara and Tom stared in dismay. "It's okay, it's okay," he stuttered.

"What did you do?" Tom asked slowly. He was tempted to ask it again as the unknown tossed the handle away from him, until he heard it hit something. Whatever it was, it growled at the insult. "Really, is this revenge of the red shirts?"

"My shirt's gold," the unknown squeaked, pointing at his collar to prove it.

Kiara divided her attention between the two, getting angrier by the second. She gave them each a slap at the same time before crawling away quickly to hide behind the bench again

His forehead poured with sweat, Tom dabbed it to at least stop it from getting in his eyes. "Okay, to win the game you need to be entertaining, not super strong. So, what..." He slowly turned his head to see what the unknown had angered.

Kiara rolled her eyes, "that's to not get killed by stupid traps. You still need to kill things."

"I know," Tom lied, laughing nervously. Once he finished his head turn it snapped back to where it was, his eyes bugging out. All he saw was a huge shadow standing directly behind them both, that was enough detail for him. "So, Annika's not going to *oh my god so cute* chase this one out the window, is she?"

"She's crazy, she might," the unknown said hopefully.

"Eeew," they heard Annika groan from afar, dashing their hopes. "I can't stroke that, it's far too spiky and gross."

Tom didn't think his eyes could go wider, yet they did. "Spiky?" he mimed.

Kiara dared to peek over the top of the counter to see it for herself. The figure standing so closely to the pair didn't even look like it was alive. It looked more like a human shaped hairball, only instead of hair it was primarily made of thorns. Sticky liquid dripped from what she assumed was its mouth. One drop landed on Tom's shoulder, his eye looked down at it without moving his head. It took all the restraint he had not to freak out at the glob of goo starting to burn a hole in his uniform.

"First time I'm agreeing with Annika. Eeew," Kiara whispered. A few objects on the bench caught her eye. A flask half filled with clear liquid, what looked like a tap sat nearby. She grabbed the flask to set it up next to the tap. Only the tap wasn't facing downward, it pointed sideways, so she had to tilt the glass. She had to make sure it wouldn't hear her so the tap had to be slightly turned. Instead of water coming from it, a blue light flickered out, setting the contents alight. She almost dropped it in her shock. Realising that it would be far more useful than throwing water at it, she kept a hold of it. The heat rapidly rising forced her to be quick about it. She raised and threw it as hard as she could, then squeezed her eyes shut in case it missed.

The creature reached what was must have been its arm to grab Tom. The flask flew over and slammed into it, setting its entire body ablaze. Tom and the unknown clambered away in a panic.

"Holy cra..." Tom squeaked. The door next to them clicked. He ignored it for now and looked over at Kiara. She wasn't anywhere in sight, he thought she must have quickly hid in case another monster saw her, or worse, Annika.

"The door, it's open," the unknown said, noticing the exit creak as it glided open.

Tom nodded. "Kiara," he whispered, hoping she'd hear him and no one else would. The two men grew a little worried when they got no answer, audio or visual. They crawled over to where they last saw her while the previous beast turned pile of ashes smouldered away. She wasn't hiding there either. They glanced at one another. The

image of Lena beating him to a pulp entered Tom's mind, that scared him more than the spiky drool beast. "Kiara," he tried again.

Little did he know Kiara wanted to respond, but her mouth was blocked by a tight hand pressing against it. Another arm wrapped around her middle to keep her from running. The owner of the arms steadily walked over to the now open door, cackling to herself quietly.

The door provided an escape from the claustrophobic, choking environment of the lab. Once they were through it they all felt extremely vulnerable. The door only led to a wide and bare circular room, ten times the size of the Bridge. Jessie glanced upward at the extremely high arched ceiling, multiple floors of pathways and doors lined the walls. The only way to reach them seemed to be one staircase in the dead centre of this room. It had trap written all over it, Jessie saw it more as a target practice range.

Lena kept close to the wall, scanning the rest of their level. She noted nine similar doors to the one they left. Three were open wide. Two more would have seemed closed if it weren't for the subtle cracks between them and their frame. The rest remained firmly shut.

"I thought this was a Death Match with a X Factor Twist, not a Donkey Kong race," Daniel muttered in distaste. He clutched his arm as it hung lazily by his side.

Lena glanced around at her party. Daniel with only one useable arm, and the unknown crewmember who had apparently decided to earn points by doing some audio commentary on the fights so far. At least she hoped for his sake that was what he was doing. Nevertheless, they were in dire need of a weapon or two. Lena didn't fancy dragging a bench or a cabinet around. A beaker or test tube was of no use to her.

"We're not the first ones out. Until we're armed, we should stay out of sight," Jessie said as if she read her mind.

"I don't see anywhere else to go," Lena said, taking one last look around. Her eye fell on the still firmly sealed doors. She noticed a head shake in the far corner of her eye.

"If I understand the rules, we'd be wasting our time," Daniel said behind her.

Jessie frowned at him, while Lena kept her attention in the same place. "If the other rooms are set up like ours, other teams may not be so fortunate. We should help them."

"All we'll achieve is a few laugh pity points, and that's the best case scenario," Daniel said. "Think about it. That door unlocked itself once it decided we were done. We will not be..."

"Why are there ten doors?" Lena cut in curiously. The pair stopped their argument to first focus on her. The unknown used his finger to count the doors while spinning on the spot. Jessie and Daniel both looked around, Jessie's face scrunched up after she counted a sixth. "There's four of us, so it should be five."

Daniel chuckled to himself, "ok I apologise, it wasn't what I thought. It's a classic pick a room booby trap. I'll bet five of these doors are the way forward, we just don't know which."

"Um," the unknown crewmember piped up. He waited for at least one of the group to face him. He only got the girls, Daniel kept darting his eye between doors, trying to figure out which one to pick. "If there's four of us and four of them, where's the other two?" the unknown asked, pointing behind him at the prison they escaped.

The crew felt helpless as the drama played out on the four screens hovering around the dome. Each one showing different things. Harry kept his bottom lip firmly between his teeth while watching one showing a slow motion replay of one of their people running away from a six legged monster. He could hear the other audience screaming with laughter at something, he assumed it was the same thing he was watching. Numbers, mostly minus ones flew across the monitor. The unfortunate crewmember was left with a measly one once he found somewhere to hide.

"I knew it," Harry grumbled. "There's no way for us to vote. That privilege is for the Game only."

Wesley nodded, gritting his teeth. "The Softmicron no longer follow their own rules. That was the only good trait they had. Now they simply do not care. It's disgraceful."

Each of the screens had their images zoom away into a little box, replaced by an image of the hologram sitting in his chair. "Oh how time flies when you're having fun. The first hour is up. Let's tally them up shall we. But first, the loser highlights," he cackled.

"I was wondering about the hour part of the name. I guess we'll find out," Harry said in a disgusted voice.

The image of the hologram slid to the left, dividing the monitor in two. An image of the cat creature appeared first, with a tiny window below its face replaying its death. The poor rabbit creature that preferred to die than be hugged by Annika was next. Most of the crew couldn't help but avert their eyes at the moment it had its ear pulled off while it ran. The ones who didn't saw Annika briefly stop to sniff it. Bemused and disgusted stares were exchanged.

The third face to appear seemed Human enough, which got a lot of people worried that it was one of their own. The replay of its death scene showed her pounce on top of Daniel, slamming him to the ground. His attempt to hit her was countered with her grabbing his arm, then forcing it to lie flat on the floor, twisting it unnaturally out of place. Lena appeared behind her, leaning forward to grab the throat. She was so roughly pulled backwards her neck snapped back. Everyone watching who hadn't seen it cringed. The ones who had, looked away in time.

The hologram belly laughed once more. "That's gotta hurt! I guess all eyes are on our killing machines, just what will they do next to achieve victory? Will the Enterprisers continue to destroy everything in their path, or will the Game Makers pinch the victory right from under them? Stay tuned folks."

"I guess we're not Voyagers anymore," Harry overheard Foster whisper sadly behind him. The harmless comment not meant for him to hear left his chest feeling empty.

"Now, the top scoreboard," the hologram announced, his hand gestured to his left. That side of the screen showed an empty grid, room for sixteen names. As he'd read a name, a large mug shot of the person would float up from the bottom to take up the hologram's side of the window. A number would fade in and hover near their face. Once done their

picture and number would slide off screen. Their name and rank would immediately appear in the grid, starting from the bottom.

So far none of the so called people were familiar to the crew, which they expected. What they could see so far they didn't like the look of.

"Coming in fourth we have our deadly flower, a firecracker in the dark," the hologram sniggered. Finally a familiar face appeared. With her eyes slightly narrowed staring straight ahead, and a very slight frown, Kiara looked intimidating for once. Harry wondered if they had to take a picture like that before they went in, or if they were holographic imprints the Game made. "Kiara. Fourteen points. The audience loved her imagination," the hologram's voice said, she then took her place in the table.

"Next in third place we have another tie. It's expected this early in the game," the announcer said. A lot of people noticed his demeanour changed drastically. He seemed disappointed, a little angry. "We may as well give these ladies points just for showing up, it was inevitable." Two images, one overlapping him and the other temporarily blocking the scoreboard. They had identical expressions on their faces as Kiara's picture. A few shuddered as these two girls didn't need the Game to make them look intimidating.

"Jessie, fifteen points," the announcer said neutrally, though his eyebrow twitched. His tone darkened, he spoke quicker to get it out of the way, "Lena fifteen."

Tira glanced at Harry, smirking as he shuddered once more, mainly at Lena's picture. "She's a chip off the old block," he commented. "I think we can guess first and second easily."

"There's room for three there, somebody's tied," Tira noticed once Jessie and Lena's pictures disappeared, and their names filled the grid. As she said, three slots remained open.

"Maybe we'll find out who our second mystery player is. I doubt they're buried in the lower ranks," Harry said. "Our role call didn't really help us too well."

"Second place we have the vicious beauty. Brains and quite the temper," the hologram cackled. B'Elanna's picture flew in, most of her staff jumped at her mug shot. It reminded them all of when they made a mistake on one of her bad days. "B'Elanna. Sixteen points."

Harry was more than intrigued by now, puzzled and growing very worried. "That leaves James. Who the hell is left other than Lena that can tie with him?"

Wesley watched with interest. "Hmm, you don't happen to have any violent types you may have missed in your registration? Brig occupants perhaps?"

"Oh crap," Harry groaned into his hand. "No, I know James has changed but no, nobody in our brig can really match his killing talent."

"So that's a no on checking prisoners, right?" Tira said, wincing slightly.

"In tied first place," the hologram sighed impatiently. "We have our villain of the piece. Without his swift killings, we'd be laughing as well as booing, as he lay at the bottom of the table. Every story must have one." James' picture appeared next in front of the

table, confirming to Harry that the players didn't stop to take mug shots as he didn't qualify in the first place. "James, twenty points."

The hologram's face and body language brightened, for some reason he was pleased with whoever was in this tie breaker. Harry worried that this meant he was wrong and that the person who tied was one from the other side, and that could only mean at least one of their crew had been killed already. He hadn't seen it, surely the Game intent on hurting them would have given them a good shot of it and many slow motion replays? The other possibility was that this AI player was so entertaining they had managed to tie with an expert he'd seen kill two in a space of ten minutes.

"Also with twenty points for half the kills. She oozes personality and charm. Everyone was smiling at her presence and grace," the hologram grinned. The next picture sliding next to James' scared the crap out of everyone, a lot of people screamed.

Harry was shocked to see her picture, but not surprised the Game inhabitants loved her so. "Annika," he said, unable to take his burning eyes off the mug shot of Annika trying too hard to look intimidating. Her lips pouting, her eyes more narrowed than anyone elses. Maybe she was the only one who volunteered to do the picture. No, he thought, she'd be blowing a kiss or waving at an imaginary Damien.

"I'm sure, you're all eagerly waiting for the underdogs," the hologram smirked. The grid refreshed, empty once more. "It's easily my favourite part of the hour. So exciting!"

Judging by how many rows were in the first table, and how many were there now, seven had been killed so far. Harry remembered seeing three in the recaps section. "We only got the interesting deaths, I see." Tira nodded. They hoped the ones who they didn't see were not theirs, but as Harry thought before, they would have had those deaths shoved in their faces so they wouldn't miss it.

"Now, as you know when you reach zero your time is immediately up. Apart from that, where's the incentive, hmm? Where's the passion?" he paused for a reaction. "Exactly, forty people are a lot to go through. Nobody wants to watch the ones struggling to keep their starting points. Where's the fun in that?"

Harry's face drained in colour. He wasn't the only one, almost everyone watching felt the same way.

"Ohno, they wouldn't?" Tira stammered.

Wesley's head dropped, "after all I've seen, yes they would, merely for their sheer amusement."

The audience cheering left everyone feeling cold. The hologram stood to face the table, it gradually filled up with names and points from top to bottom. Once the last name appeared a negative buzzer sounded, their block highlighted in red. "Ohhhh! One point. Maybe you shouldn't have ran around so much. Though I'm sure Lielna, or *aaah six legged monster*, is grateful for her extra points!" he howled in laughter.

The screens all changed to show the interior of one of the labs.

"No," Harry whispered.

The cabinet rumbled, Chakotay pressed his entire weight against the door. Neelix rummaged through the equipment on the benches, collecting things in the fold of his arm. Shar stumbled a few steps backwards behind him, which he missed, but Chakotay got a good view of.

"Hey, that was my fire axe!" she grumbled. Then she charged back the way she came, and out of Chakotay's line of sight once more.

"Sometime this week, Neelix. Funnily enough a creature with six limbs is quite strong," Chakotay grunted.

"I don't see why you think this will help. Now isn't the time," Neelix said, grabbing a beaker with liquid in. "I don't even know what this is."

"Perfect, put it in," Chakotay said in between being jerked forward by another cabinet tremor.

Neelix looked on in horror. Several seconds later he snapped out of it to shake his head. "Remind me to never let you in my kitchen." He chucked the contents into a larger beaker.

"You have no kitchen anymore," Chakotay said bitterly. He felt a tiny bit better for a short time, "silver linings to everything."

"Mean," Neelix whimpered. The next thing he grabbed looked like a purple piece of chalk. Chakotay nodded rapidly, so he tossed it in as well. The next a syringe.

"Anything in it?" Chakotay asked as Shar passed by in the background again. She muttered something unintelligible. He ignored it for now.

"No, empty," Neelix replied. A head shake forced him to throw it aside. He then decided to rummage through the items in his arm. "What about these little spiky things?" he asked shaking a little tub.

Chakotay had no idea what it was, only that it sounded like a pepper mill. "Neelix, let me put it this way. If you can eat or drink it, it goes in, like all the rest of your meals." He got a blank stare in return, the cabinet occupier slammed into the door a few times, harder than normal. "If you want to put it in, put it in, just do it while you're cooking it!"

"Okay, okay," Neelix huffed. The rest of the objects fell to the floor while he maneuvered himself to one of the taps. The beaker sat next to it. At the last second he chucked the contents of the tub in. Chakotay briefly had time to consider ducking and covering at this point, but he knew he'd never make it. Neelix proved him right as soon as he touched the tap, the contents of the beaker started hissing and bubbling. Green smoke billowed out of it.

"Hurry!" Chakotay shouted.

Neelix used his sleeve to cover his hand to grab the beaker again. He ran over to Chakotay's position. The Commander quickly opened the cabinet door a touch. Neelix attempted to toss it through the gap. Chakotay knew what was going to happen before it did, so he merely groaned as it bounced against the door by his leg and rolled across the floor. Miraculously the contents remained inside. Neelix seemed impressed with himself for some reason. Chakotay tapped the container with his heel to nudge it in the cabinet, all the while holding his breath before the green cloud completely swallowed him.

Once inside he closed the door again. Inhumane shrieks rang out.

Oblivious or not caring about it, Shar walked by once more with the syringe Neelix had tossed aside.

The cabinet rumbled a few more times, each one weaker than the last until it fell silent. Chakotay sighed in relief.

"Phew," another voice sighed. Neelix and Chakotay watched a figure climb out from behind a six foot tall and wide computer screen filled with blackboard writing. "Good job guys."

"You know, you really should be careful. The game penalises boring and fearful players who don't do anything," Chakotay said warily to him.

Another scream echoed around the room, strangely the three men ignored it as if it were nothing. Instead of Shar, a werewolf looking creature ran into Chakotay's view, cradling its eye with something sticking out of it. Moments later Shar followed it out, a red fire axe in hand. Neelix looked over his shoulder just in time to see her swing it at the creature.

"Well erm, I don't think Shar has anything to worry about," Neelix said.

Chakotay nodded, "mmm-hmm. Maybe you should kick the corpse, tell a joke, come up with a plan. Anything."

"Oh, I was thinking up a motivating speech. Maybe..." the crewmember said.

"No," Chakotay and Shar both groaned.

Neelix smiled sympathetically at the man. "I'd like to hear it, perhaps later. Why don't you and I try to get the door open again?"

"Oh, maybe we can use these," the crewmember said eagerly, raising a few tiny looking nails. "You dropped them in that last dash. I was quite the lock picker in my youth."

"How pointless," Shar muttered.

"I agree, but if it's a talent that keeps you alive. Go for it," Chakotay tried to sound encouraging.

The unknown smiled and ran over to the only door, nails at the ready. Neelix followed him. Before they reached the door a red light shone into the lab.

"We should hurry," Neelix stuttered fearfully.

The unknown nodded. With one nail in between his finger and thumb, he crouched down and reached for the handle. A small light sparked from the tip on contact. His body flung backwards, hitting the floor with such a thud it made the floor shudder.

Neelix stood shaking, his eyes and mouth agape, while Chakotay and Shar ran over to the downed man. Shar quickly knelt down next to him despite the smoke rising from his frozen body. "No!" Chakotay shouted to stop her, so her hand hesitated. "He's gone, you would be too if you touched him."

"What... what, how?" Neelix whimpered. To add further insult the door had slid open slightly from the blast. As he looked at it he realised something, horrifying him further. It wasn't locked. They could have all walked out of it without dying. Or anyone could have grabbed the handle to open it and suffered the same.

The red light fizzled away to nothing, leaving them in the dark once more.

*"One loser down. Thanks for not playing Zero Hour,"* the hologram's voice taunted them from unseen speakers.

Chakotay firmly clenched his teeth, his face trembled. His anger ready to spill out in any moment. He knew if let it, the Game would likely reward him for entertaining them. He didn't want to give them that satisfaction. Kathryn's version of his angry warrior story repeated in his mind. The smile she gave him after he originally told her it. It gave him the strength he needed to push the fury aside. It was no use to him or his two remaining companions.

There was no way he would let her down again.

"Let's go. We have a game to win," Chakotay said.

B'Elanna tugged at the handle one more time, sighing impatiently when it still wouldn't budge. The unknown crewmember with her inhaled sharply through her teeth.

"It probably won't open until we've filled a requirement," she said, earning a frustrated glare. The woman laughed quietly to herself, "it is a game. Maybe we gotta fight a boss who drops the key."

"Remind me again, friendly fire earns points right?" B'Elanna said.

The woman seemed oddly calm considering, she looked back at the volatile engineer with a sheepish smile. "Still won't open the door. There's two of us, makes sense there'd be two enemies."

A few benches away someone cackled mutely to not be heard. "I count three," Damien whispered. He kept his back against the bench, watching a shadow fidget around the back wall. A tiny piece of chalk rolled in his hand.

His eye drifted to the right, halting the steps of an approaching figure covered in intimidating scales. Teeth baring, what he assumed was drool dripping from two chin length fangs. His spare hand clenched into a fist, leaving only one finger which he pointed at the fourth and furthest away table right next to him. The creature sharply looked, missing the shadow on the back wall disappear within the blackboard style screen's. It reconsidered going for him again. It didn't hurry, preferring to build some tension for its victim.

Damien wasn't worried though. A smile spread across his lips as his fingers wrapped around the chalk in his hands. He swung his arm in the direction he had been pointing, letting go of the item so it'd go flying. It clattered on the other side of the bench. The creature and him heard a startled gasp and some shuffling around. The beast leapt up onto the table, wasting no time on the new victim that would be more afraid of him than his last choice. Damien tried not to laugh too much in case he was heard when it pounced for whoever was there, a man yelped immediately.

B'Elanna and the woman ran over to at least the third bench, they used it as cover to see what was happening. Damien discreetly slipped around it to remain hidden from them. The most they could see ahead were shadows flailing about. Grunts from both the creature and its victim gave them a good idea what was happening. B'Elanna edged forward, raising her weapon. The woman held out her hand to stop her.

"What, he needs help," she hissed.

"That's a weapon you can only use once," the woman smirked.

B'Elanna glanced down at the metal tray she held. Flat when she first picked it up, now with an interesting face imprint imbedded in the middle. "It'll flat out," she muttered while pressing on both sides of it firmly. When it didn't she shrugged and carried on anyway.

The fourth table shuddered, they heard a loud bang. The grunts ceased, only the sound of snarling remained. The woman checked to the window to see if a Defeated screen would appear. It didn't. Her hand was just reaching for anything on the bench she could use as a weapon, when a painful hiss emanated from ahead. It didn't sound like the same man to her. Armed with a small tablet computer she joined B'Elanna behind the fourth table, ready to pounce.

B'Elanna moved first, catching sight of the scaled beast bleeding from an exposed piece of skin. It stumbled back from that blow or another, growling furiously. B'Elanna noticed the humanoid figure slumped with his back to the table. The woman gestured to her new weapon with a smile, B'Elanna groaned at her own damaged one. "Fine." She tossed the tray, aiming it for the monster's face, then dropped down beside the man to try to lift him up. Unfortunately during that she missed it land square in its eyes, she did hear it whimper from the blow.

The unknown woman quickly ran out to cover their escape, as it stumbled around temporarily blinded. Now that she was closer to it, she realised that the little computer would feel like a tap if she used it on the scaled monster, if it would notice it at all. The screen caught her eye, a smile crept onto her face. She aimed for that instead, hurtling the device at that. It smashed, sending glass and sparks flying. She ran away before it had a chance to burst into flames. The monster didn't realise it was standing too close or what was happening until its back had already been engulfed.

"I hope that was the requirement, or I've just killed us all," she quipped as smoke drifted toward them.

B'Elanna smirked as the woman clutched onto the man's other side, supporting him further. "On the bright side, you'll have a great score for those final seconds."

"True," the woman chuckled once they reached the door. To their relief it was open by a tiny margin. B'Elanna reached out to yank it open. The three hurried outside. Once they were, B'Elanna lowered the man to the ground so she could close it again.

They weren't alone. Chakotay spotted them stumble out from the other side of the vast hall. Keeping to the circular walls, he hurried over to join them. Neelix and Shar followed his lead.

"B'Elanna. Are you all right?" the Commander asked quietly to avoid anything else from hearing.

B'Elanna swung around at the sound of his voice. Relief washed over her. "Of course. You?" she answered, glancing at the other two.

"Of course. Seems you had worse luck than us," Neelix said in surprise, gesturing to the man.

"I suppose," B'Elanna said reluctantly.

Chakotay nodded, "who did you lose?" B'Elanna frowned at his question.

The woman with her's hand raised to check the pulse of the man they rescued, his head still hung down. Only then she realised he wasn't in uniform like them, but in casual clothing. It wouldn't be so unusual if it were not for the hooded jacket he had up, covering his face. As soon as she touched him he bolted to one side, scrambling away muttering, "don't."

All eyes flew to him. He quickly turned his head away and pushed to his feet. Shar's eyes flickered, she lurched forward. He ran away to the nearest wide open door before she could do anything.

"Somebody should..." she said.

"Agreed," Chakotay nodded. He pointed at her and B'Elanna. "Go, bring him back. We'll wait here." They ran while he was still talking, following the man through one of many doors.

"I wouldn't suggest only waiting," the woman said. "We need to be..."

Chakotay groaned, "entertaining, I know. But how?" Neelix sighed, getting his attention and for some reason, a dark smile. Neelix didn't notice. "We should follow them, perhaps we'll find something on the way."

"Um, okay," the woman said, raising her eyebrow at his odd expression.

Chakotay lead the pair along to the door the long way, against the wall. "What should we call you? I'd like you to survive longer than our fourth."

The woman was confused, but for now she covered it with a playful smile. "Ensign Heere, but that's my father. I prefer Aimee, or Aimes for short."

Both Chakotay and Neelix looked behind them at her, their eyebrows raised. "Aim here?" Chakotay stuttered.

The woman laughed, "you senior staff people are so gullible. I bet you believed *Kanon* too, no one's called Phoder. No, my name's Marlene. Appreciate the thought."

"I like her," Chakotay whispered with a smirk to Neelix. He meanwhile looked a little dismayed at the possibility of getting so many people's names wrong for eleven years.

The trio entered through the same door B'Elanna and Shar ran through. It slammed shut behind them, they heard it click immediately. "Well we wanted to be interesting," Neelix said nervously.

It felt to Craig like the walls were closing in on them. It had been twenty minutes since they last passed a window. The last door they had found led immediately to another wall, even that was so long ago. At some points the ground seemed to slope upwards, although it didn't look like it did. Every corner turned looked darker than the last, no end in sight.

"This has to be some kind of sick joke," he said, glancing behind him at the rest of his party. "I hope they're having a good laugh at our expense, otherwise we'll be in the minuses if we're not already."

"Not me," Stewart whistled. On the next corner he stopped to hide behind it, humming a low tune, his head darting to one side and then the other. The unknown behind him was forced to stop. She grunted, giving him a shove which sent him flying into a heap. "Ow. That's the spirit."

She shrugged, "I didn't do it for the points. That was a gift for me."

While he passed, James crouched down to lift Stewart back onto his feet. Craig groaned in frustration at yet another bend, so soon after the previous one. The others heard a thud come from him a mere second later. James hurried by the other two to his side to find him rubbing his head. "What?"

Craig put his hand up only so far, barely above his head. The fingertips pressed against the ceiling. As they slid further ahead, it was clear to both of them the ceiling sloped gradually downward. If he didn't hit it, they wouldn't have noticed.

"It is getting narrower. I thought it was just my claustrophobia kicking in," James said as he carefully took a few light steps ahead of Craig. He raised his own hand ahead of him to touch the ceiling. One more step and his head would scrape it as well.

Neither of them could see the end of this current segment of the path. Light struggled to reach them for a while. "This has got to be the end. Any longer and..." Craig said.

James cut him off by slamming a hole into the ceiling ahead of him, showering the path with powdered debris and small pieces of metal. All three members of the team jumped out of their skin. They barely had time to recover before he did it again, expanding the first hole.

"One sec," James said, oblivious to their shock. He reached into the new path above, pulling himself up out of their sight.

Craig watched hopefully. "Well? What do you see?"

"You're not going to like it," James' voice echoed down. It sounded a little muffled as well to Craig.

"Another shrinking corridor?" he guessed.

They were already left a little on edge from the hole punching. A heavy clatter directly above them, followed by thunderous footsteps that shook the ceiling, startled them so much their hearts were trying to leap out of their chests. Craig thought he should back

away from the hole, but the noise seemed to him like the activity was above Stewart and the unknown. He hurried forward instead, forgetting about the low ceiling.

The loud thumps followed him along, so his second head bump felt like it was for nothing. Slowly he crept backwards back to his team. He had no sooner done that when the low ceiling ahead collapsed. The roar of metal tearing flew passed them, assaulting their ear drums. Then silence. As the cloud settled a large figure raised upward, slowly turning its attention to them. It was difficult to make out exactly what it was, its skin covered in powdered grey, red oozing from a few cuts, its face swollen. All the trio knew was that it was large and was coming for them in an eery silence.

Craig shakily crouched down to pick up the largest piece of the earlier debris, keeping a close eye on the approaching beast. The silence turned into a low pitched hum. His left arm stretched out beside him, hinting to the other two to stay behind him, while his right hand tightened around the metal.

He saw the thing smile as it licked its lips. Craig raised the new weapon, ready to strike. His body trembled more with every step it took. It towered over him by a foot, easily. If it had been here before, it would have had to crawl to get to them. At the very least it would have smacked more than its head against the ceiling. The thought irritated him a little. Not enough to wipe away the realisation that he'd never be able to hurt this creature. He had no idea what happened to James other than it got him out of the way to get here. If it had done that and judging by its imposing size, it would probably only have to flick its finger to kill them. Running away would definitely lose them what little points they had. He hesitated for a flicker of a second. One option still had a survival chance, that was the one.

"Go," he whispered, briefly turning his head behind him.

The pair seemed to hesitate as well. They backed away, not keen on the idea of turning their back on the monster. A blur from above pounced on it, knocked it clean to the ground. The floor groaned and shook on impact. The new arrival straightened up, raising a thin and sharp object about as long as he was tall. It plunged deep into its throat, twisting it once the beast was pinned. It meekly struggled for a few seconds before succumbing. All of this, still with no sound.

All three were more than relieved when the new arrival turned around, they could see his familiar face, now sporting a bleeding slash on his cheek. He took one step forward, the second brought him to his knees. Craig was the first to run to him. He heard a low mumble over the top of the hum. He used his free hand to rub his ear, regretting it immediately as it ached in protest. Sound and air rushed into it. Then he could hear a voice, "...okay?" was all he got in the end.

"Are *you* okay?" Craig asked, crouching down beside him.

James looked at him as he leaned back, pushing his legs out so he was sitting instead. "It was a shrinking corridor, to answer your first question."

Craig tried not to laugh, the state of him and the image of the beast in the background helped with that. "And my second."

"Yeah, ankle's just sprained. We should keep moving," James replied, pointing up at the hole. "There's light up there."

"Light at the end of the tunnel? Comforting," Stewart commented.

"I wouldn't call it a tunnel, now," James said. He tried to get back to his feet, as soon as he put any weight on the left one he fell back down. "Great," he grunted, "I'm no use like this."

Anger flushed through Craig as he tried once more. His hand flew out to his shoulder, "no use? You're injured. You're a Human not a fricking weapon. Sit down for five bloody seconds and it may settle down!" The anger faded, he had no idea what came over him. The others didn't either. Stewart and the unknown widened their eyes as they stared at one another. James seemed more bemused than anything else. "I'm sorry."

"Why? You're right," James said with a half smile. He rested his back against the wall, all while bringing his left leg back. "Five bloody seconds."

Craig's head fell, his cheeks burned from shame more than embarrassment. "Did you know it was up there when you opened a *door*?"

"No, for a big guy he was pretty light footed," James replied, smirking slightly. His hand lightly touched the ankle giving him trouble, he winced a little at the touch. "At first."

"Oh," Craig mumbled as he had a feeling James' *at first* remark had a double meaning. He grew even more uncomfortable when James looked like he was going to try getting up again. "You weren't picked, were you?" That stopped him for the time being. "Another guy was here, he disappeared and you took his place."

"Tom was right about the Game excluding Slayers. Apparently Lena was more interesting," James said.

Craig nodded, "yeah." He didn't notice he was doing it, he only did when he saw James' eyebrow raising. Eyes widening he forced himself to stop it. "Oh god, dodgy ankle won't stop me getting a beating."

"I'd be more worried if you thought I was more interesting than the girl you like," James lightly laughed at his response. Still Craig looked very nervous, he cleared his throat and turned his head away. The laughter faded quickly, it left James with a sense of sinking dread. "Mum's gone, Lena was showing it more than me. Of course the Game picked her."

A growing lump in Craig's throat tried to stop him from replying. He soldiered through it regardless, leaving his voice a little rough. "Lena's tougher than the Softmicron give her credit for. Us too."

"Speak for yourself. I've always known Lena was the better one out of us two," James smiled while his hand lightly wrapped around his ankle.

"If the Soft think that her being upset is an opportunity to mess with her, then they're going to find out the opposite is true the hard way," Craig said with pride. He grew a little worried when he spotted James' hand sliding back and forth around his ankle. He thought the worst, he shuddered at the image. "Oh don't do that."

"What?" James asked.

"You don't know what's wrong with it, don't mess with it," Craig muttered. Despite his words, James didn't change what he was doing. "How did you get in then?"

Thankfully that stopped him for the moment. "Remember when Lena said that Chosens develop an ability to control the Games?" James said.

"Yeah?" Craig's eyebrow raised with interest.

James couldn't help but laugh, "I cheated."

The trio were all tempted to ask how when he brought out a familiar device in the palm of his hand. One adjustment brought the Doctor shimmering into the field. He smiled smugly. "Please state the nature of the..." Their environment caught his eye, he sighed and glanced toward James. "We can't take you anywhere, can we?"

"What the...?" Stewart stuttered.

Craig nodded, "yeah. How?"

"The Games tend to block out any technology or weapons that can be of use. A hologram with medical expertise for example," James replied.

The Doctor nodded, only then noticing his predicament. He knelt down to inspect his ankle. "Yes, it is rather rude of them to think of me as mere technology. It's to be expected, I suppose," he mumbled.

"But the emitter? That's got to count too," Craig questioned.

"It was a minor risk. Either it would appear or it wouldn't. I suppose the Game had no idea what it was," the Doctor said.

"As long as it wasn't a weapon, I guess," James said.

The Doctor smiled over confidently, "oh I don't know about that. Now, hold still."

Craig grimaced and looked away, just in case. He spotted the unknown sighing, worried about something. "They score you on your actions. Minus points for running away, doing nothing. Get points for killing and with flair."

Stewart wasn't sure why she was reminding them. Craig understood immediately, he groaned quietly. "How many points do you lose for sneaking in and cheating?"

"Oh," Stewart said when he understood. "He's killed three so far. Won't that be enough?"

"Hopefully," Craig sighed.

Back outside in the hall, four people stepped out of a door left ajar. One of which was scrunching up her nose, another waved the air in front of their face.

"Why would that six legged freak stab itself with pins? It doesn't make sense," Jessie asked through her disgust.

Lena stopped hand waving, "two seconds in that room and I was half tempted myself."

Their unknown crewmember coughed and spluttered. "I wish I hadn't chose the moment you opened the cabinet to breathe in."

"Yoo-hoo!" a familiar voice screeched from far above.

Everyone's heads jerked up to see where it came from. Six floors away they spotted a body dangling over the edge, they desperately kicked their feet against the metal barrier behind them. All that was stopping the person from falling appeared to be an arm wrapped around their shoulders, while the other leaned casually across the surface of the barrier. That hand was raised slightly to press against the dangler's mouth.

"Oh my god..." Jessie could barely get out, her throat closed up immediately after.

"What do you think? Shall I let it go?" a cackle echoed down to them.

Fists clenched so tightly her own nails pierced the skin, her eyes burned with intensity, Daniel worried that they'd turn red any second. Lena stomped forward, her cheek bones flexed from the fury about to erupt from her. "Do it, and I'll toss you from the top floor! Head first, then I may think of throwing the rest of you down you piece of sh..."

"Oh!" Annika faked a gasp, she shook her victim's head. "The perfect girl in quite a bind." The motion made her victim's eyes wider, they glistened from the tears building up. Even six floors up the group could hear her squeak in terror.

"This is between you and me you bimbo!" Lena shouted back in such anger the two men in the group moved a few steps away.

Jessie meanwhile looked to the stairs, then across that floor to find the quickest way up to where Annika was.

"At least I have a character arc that doesn't rely on getting knocked up, like all *interesting* female characters," Annika laughed.

"What?" Lena snapped.

Jessie's head snapped back up, her face a mix of disbelief and disgust. "Come down here and say that to our faces!" She muttered angrily, "I had more character development in Hunters than she ever had."

"Put her down, on your level. I'm warning you!" Lena growled.

Annika giggled. "Oh you want her around now? It's hard to keep up with your little malfunctions." She gasped, her hand moved from the victim's face to her own. "That is what we're calling retcons, isn't it? From one Mary Sue to another."

"Oh boy," Daniel stuttered.

"Let her go safely, and I'll make it a tad quicker!" Lena yelled.

"I stole your daughter," Annika sang and giggled. Her face quickly turned serious, she scowled down. "Who's gonna hold you back? No going back," she still sang, only far more maliciously than before.

Daniel carefully stepped back towards Lena, "she's only trying to get attention."

Annika laughed, "wrong Eye Candy."

"So I should ignore her and she'll go poof?" Lena turned her head to hiss at him.

Daniel winced, stepping back once more. "You getting mad is what she wants. She wants you on her level."

"Oh I'll go to her damn level," Lena grumbled angrily. She ran forward towards the stairs full speed.

"That's it. Come and get her," Annika cackled while dragging her hostage back over the rails. "Your death will be funny to me *anyway*," she whispered softly to herself.

The others had no choice but to follow Lena up the stairs. Daniel raced ahead until he was at the top of the first level. He looked over his shoulder, grumbling as Jessie and the unknown's pace wasn't to his liking. "Hurry, we have to stop her."

"Why? Kiara's in danger, and Annika..." Jessie said, her eyes rolled. "One of these days it'll stick."

The unknown started skipping steps to get up faster. "Oh, that I'd like to witness."

Daniel ignored him, "Annika's still on our side, technically. We don't know how the Game will score her for this."

Jessie reached the top of the stairs. "You heard the host; switching sides will curry favour with the opposing audience. Annika will be flying up the ranks if she hasn't topped it already."

"You're not helping," Daniel muttered. He ran off to the right without her. He'd stop Lena on his own.

Tom and the unknown stared at what lay before them, their will to live slowly fading away to mulch. They both felt they had it bad when they ran into a hallway filled with many doors. The first one lead them to an identical room to the one they started in. The second to a seemingly never ending flight of stairs into this basement from decision hell.

Everywhere they looked there were glass tubes, each with a platform moving up and back down randomly at different times to each other. Looking up gave the unknown an overwhelming feeling of vertigo. The ceiling so high they could barely see it. The glass tubes didn't remain straight all the way up, they twisted together, going off in different directions. Even when platforms rushed up they still couldn't see where they lead, as so many would be up in the air at the same time and they flew by so fast. Tom wondered if the number painted faintly on the glass doors leading to them were a clue to where they went.

"Shall we dip?" the unknown suggested to lighten the mood.

"Sure, maybe we should split up too," Tom said sarcastically.

They both heard a tap coming from the tube closest to them, just ahead. Tom assumed it was the platform arriving at their floor, so he brought his attention back down to

earth. He quickly determined he was wrong. It was clear, something else caused the sound. Movement in the right corner of his eye froze him on the spot. Only his eyes moved to get a better look. His first impression was a giant bat, folding its sharp wings onto its back. Muddy brown, webbed feet. Its head looked like the jaw had been stretched down, its mouth permanently open, locked in place. How deep it was, he figured it'd swallow him whole. His entire being shuddered.

It ran at them both, making him yelp. The unknown had been blissfully unaware until then, only looking when he heard him. Tom pushed him into a run. With the only objects in this basement being see through, there was nowhere to hide.

A platform landed in a nearby tube. Tom grabbed the unknown by the arm, "here!" They ran toward it, it shot away before they could reach the doors. The creature approached them from the other side of the tube. The glass making its form seem even more distorted. It ran straight at them, undeterred by the tube. Tom edged to one side, its course altered slightly. His first impression of a bat flooded back to him. An idea popped into his head. He quickly whispered it to his teammate. They hurried away together.

"This one?" the unknown said, pointing at a different tube while staring upwards. Hurried footsteps squelched behind them, louder and more rapidly. He didn't wait for an answer, he rushed to the closed door and swung around to watch it coming. A squeak escaped from him, its proximity to them both turned his legs to jelly.

Tom ran around behind the tube, stopping directly behind the unknown. He worried that his idea had doomed the crewman as the creature stood a few feet away. It leapt forward, gunning for him. The unknown threw himself to one side when it was almost on him. It kept going, aiming for Tom instead. He cringed, expecting it to smash straight through the glass and grab him. He backed away slowly. A blur from above got in the way.

The unknown looked over his shoulder to see the monster fly through the open door, into the tube. The platform dropped like a stone on top of it. It was too quick to look away in time. The end result left him gagging.

B'Elanna caught her breath. The room she and Shar found herself in looked far too alike it couldn't be a coincidence. It felt like she was trapped in the underground structure all over again. Lining every inch of the wall were pods protruding from the ground, all the way up to the ceiling. Each one with a clouded window head height. A round computer station sat in the centre, black and unresponsive.

"What the hell is this place?" Shar muttered anxiously.

"We should go. He's not here," B'Elanna said, stepping backwards to go back through the door. Instead she slammed into it. Swinging around she realised that it had shut on its own, or someone did it from the other side. She tried to pull it open, to no avail.

"Oh, are you looking for someone?" a familiar voice gloated.

Shar stepped forward, her head darting around looking for the source. "Show yourself creep."

B'Elanna turned back, her face stiffened in anger. "How did you get in here?"

"Like you did," the voice laughed. Movement from one of the pods caught both women's eye. Damien slinked out from behind it, leaning on it with a smug look on his face. "I walked in."

"I meant the Game," B'Elanna grumbled. She tried to compose herself. "Honestly. You pick now of all time to mess around. If we lose, you die."

Damien faked a shocked expression. "Really? How about this? Most of you die trying to win. The one or two left do win. I take the Enterprise as my trophy."

B'Elanna waltzed over so she could laugh in his face despite her anger. "You think whoever can win this Game will let you do that? Also only twenty of us are in here."

"Yes, and most of you are senior staff. What's left outside? Oh, Harry, the EMH. Be still my quaking boots," Damien sniggered.

Shar looked on in disgust, "you're wearing shoes."

"Boots sounds better," Damien said simply.

B'Elanna was so mad at him she shook horribly. "Before I smash your face in, why don't we make a list of possible snags in your plan. Two Slayers, a crazy vampire, one witch, Chakotay who I imagine would love an excuse to kill you..." Shar cleared her throat. "Shar apparently. And me, who you're trapped in the room with."

Damien smacked his lips together, shoulders raising with indifference. "Who do you think closed the door?" The two women scowled at him. "I'm not the one who's trapped in this room." He sidestepped back the way he came, knocking on the pod as he did. Before either could respond it opened, steam poured out obscuring their view of whatever was in there. All they could make out was the contents moving forward.

"I'll distract it, you get the door open," Shar said.

"That's not happening," B'Elanna snapped. They heard Damien yawning mockingly. She snatched the fire axe from Shar's hands, using it immediately to smash the handle from the door. It creaked open slightly to Damien's dismay. The pair hurried out of it, Shar stopped to give him a wave before she slammed it shut once more.

"Why didn't I think of that?" she asked, her hands hinting for the axe back.

B'Elanna ignored the gesture, she slipped the axe instead in through what was left of the handle on the other side. The blade pressed against the wall and the frame. "A few seconds of panic may make all the difference. Let's go." The engineer ran off. Shar sighed, disappointed at being empty handed once more, she soon followed.

Inside Damien remained hidden behind the pod, his face scrunched up in anger, lips mumbling but no sound coming from them. A renewed hatred building in his chest. Footsteps behind him kept him frozen on the spot. All he could do now was wait it out, one way or another.

Fifth floor. Lena reached the top of another set of stairs, swung herself around the corner, determined not to lose any speed doing so. All it got her was a near collision with a four armed beast ready to pounce.

"Out..." Lena snarled, swinging her fist into its chest. "Of my..." Another fist flew up into its chin. "Way!" With both hands she grabbed it by the shoulder and tossed it to her right, sending it flying over the railings. It had barely flew over it when she continued on her way.

Two floors down Jessie saw it flying passed her, flapping its many arms to break its fall. The two men with her didn't even flinch, she assumed they missed it. She peered over the railing to watch it slam onto the floor. Even that high up she heard its bones crunch.

It felt to Neelix like they were walking in the air. The corridor made completely out of glass wasn't as fun for the other two members of his team. Marlene had her head turned to the right, she was treated to a harmless night sky view, taking her out of the Death Match and the strange building. Chakotay kept his attention directly ahead at the exit only a few metres away. There had been no deviations in their path so far, he was certain B'Elanna and Shar would have gone down here too. Still, he remained on guard for anything in this corridor. It was made like this for a reason. He didn't need experience to tell him that.

"Hmm, maybe we should go down there. It looks far safer," Neelix commented.

Chakotay's curiosity got the better of him. He glanced briefly to the left and down. All he could see in that moment were baron walls and a few boxes. "Yes, I'm sure we'll be a big hit with the audience who already hate us if we hide..."

The doors ahead slammed open. A figure emerged from it, staring them down. Compared to everything else they encountered, this one looked Human. What gave it away as not were its penetrating black eyes.

"Great idea Neelix," Chakotay said. His arm swung out to the left, breaking the glass. The figure ran after them so fast, they turned into a blur. "Go, go..." Chakotay stuttered, pulling Marlene first towards the opening, then Neelix. The two didn't need convincing, they weren't put off by the fall waiting for them. It was either that or what was running for them. They leapt from the glass, each aiming for a container beneath them to break their fall slightly.

Chakotay was next to jump when the thing caught up, slamming its body into his, knocking them both to the floor. The glass beneath them cracked. He raised his arms, hoping it would deflect any of its incoming swipes and punches. His right one instead was swiped away during the onslaught, twisting it, leaving shooting pains from his wrist to his neck. It punched, scratched at him. What he managed to block felt insignificant compared to how many times he didn't. He struggled to move, its weight pinned him.

There was only thing left to do.

Everyone that were in the right angle to see the screen, watched in a stunned silence as Chakotay suffered two, sometimes three attacks after another. His left elbow edged out

of the way. Harry shook his head, worried that he was giving up. "Don't..." The Commander's elbow lifted then dropped into the already strained glass next to him. There was a collective gasp across the room as the glass gave away, the pair fell through it.

If that wasn't bad enough the image faded away, as well as others on the rest of the screens, to show the hologram sitting on the edge of his chair. "Phew, I dunno about you, but I wanted to see the end of that first," he said.

"We didn't," Foster commented.

The screen split into two. Harry shared an annoyed look with Tira, she bit her lip firmly. It wasn't just him, he thought. It hadn't felt like an hour since the last time it did this. He was starting to think the Game was only doing it to make sure the ones outside the Death Match suffered too. "It was quite the busy hour for our players. Let's take a look at our losers." Silence overwhelmed the crew, the first image to come up was one of their own. The man cruelly electrocuted just for having the lowest amount of points. Many looked away when they replayed it, while many simply bowed their heads afterwards as a mark of respect.

Harry chose to stare with quiet hatred at the host instead. He was helpless, it was the only way he felt he could hurt them. Further images followed, all of them AI mug shots, the replays of their deaths was little comfort after the first one. At least Lena's recent kill helped bring a smile to a few people's faces.

The tables replaced the so called losers side of the screen. "Now that we're in the meat of the competition, we start to see the real competitors rising into the higher ranks." A few noticed the grid was a lot shorter. "In joint tenth..." Two images flew onto the screen. Both of them surprised the audience. "The dark horses of the competition gave us a hilarious chase sequence and a shared kill, so rightfully deserved. Tom and Kristopher, nine points."

"If we knew the starting points everyone gets, we could work out how many points you get for kills," Tira said. She frowned, "though, I forgot about the entertainment element."

"What does it matter? We can't do anything with it, other than eliminating the surprise every hour," Harry said grimly.

Wesley turned to him with a strangely sympathetic look on his face. "They're only doing this segment to hurt us."

Tira nodded, "he's right. I've only see one loss so far, whereas they've lost many. We're winning."

During their conversation the ninth place face appeared on the screen. A lot of the crew were unnerved by its appearance. "Eleven points," the host announced.

"Yes, sure. We have two traitors. Lena's daughter, who I'm sure we denied entry to this thing, has been kidnapped. Our other Slayer looks like he's broken an ankle. Yay team," Harry grumbled.

"We were told we could help out here, it was a lie. You can't beat yourself up over it," Tira whispered to him. She clutched his hand tightly. He looked at her, his eyes

glistening. "We've already defeated them. They're just trying at one last chance to break us. Don't let them."

"In joint eighth, well probably not for long, we have our glass breaking high flyer," the host chuckled darkly. Chakotay's picture appeared over the top of the scoreboard beside him. "Hanging there with him, not literally..." Too many people rolled their eyes at his obvious attempts to aggravate the crew. "Is the one you love to hate. We have no idea what he'll do next and that's why we love him." The next mug shot to appear left a bad taste in everyone's mouths. "Damien and Chakotay, twelve points."

Wesley stared at the screen intently, a frown formed on his face. "He survived. Apart from getting in the top ten without kills, what is the endgame here? There's no point."

"Oh there's a point which he's already shared, probably two. He won't get killed for having little or zero points. As usual Damien will do what he has to, to save his own skin. To hell with anyone else," Harry said. The seventh place mug shot appeared. Its striking green eyes, the leathery red skin and its horned head. He remembered it as being quite high up the last time. It was one to keep an eye on, he thought. Then it came to him, "has anyone seen this guy at all?"

"Now that you mention it, no. How do these things earn points when they don't do anything?" Tira asked.

"They probably just earn points for being alive. The Game so far seems heavily skewed in their favour, which we know from the lack of voting influence," Jach replied. Harry and Tira turned to him, expecting more from him. "I'm actually surprised they give James and Lena any points at all."

Wesley agreed, "yes, the points system hasn't been consistently shown throughout the Game. I would bet that they both don't earn as much as anyone else, so they hide it. While anyone hurting them would be greatly rewarded for doing so."

"Explains Annika in the last hour. Should we expect James' latest kill in here too?" Harry said, forcing a laugh out of himself.

Their conversation made them miss the announcement of sixth place all together. The host muttered the fifth place's score with very little interest in his voice. "Still fifteen points. Maybe we should *minus one* the both of them for being so boring, hmm?"

None of them knew who he was talking about. There were a few claps in the audience, someone blew a raspberry at the host for some reason. Harry thought about who had fifteen points last time. "Jessie and Lena," he said, checking the board to see if he was right. "Couldn't be Lena," he said before spotting only Jessie's name sitting in fifth place. Kiara sat just below her. Hers made sense he thought, being used as a taunt to lure Lena, her fear at being kidnapped. He was more surprised she didn't have extra points just because of that, than less for doing nothing.

"Fourth are a pair of eccentric souls we can't help but root for. Presented as underdogs, almost fodder in the beginning," the host smirked. Shar's picture appeared next to him, the previously unknown girl Marlene faded in next to her. "Shar and Marlene, sixteen points."

Harry felt a little better seeing them there. He wasn't the only one. Three more placements to go, four empty slots remaining. He knew from what he'd seen since the last rankings who they'd be. It was the lower scores he was more concerned about.

While he was thinking he partially missed B'Elanna's demotion from second to third place. What he didn't expect was her score only growing by one point since the last time. She deserved more, he thought. "Seventeen? What the..."

"Indeed," Wesley said, not surprised in the slightest. "Helping someone else out, not being the one to kill the scaled demon. I imagine the point was only for her attempt to lock Mr Damien in that pod room."

"Ridiculous, meanwhile the AI are gaining points for not doing a damn thing," Tira grumbled in distaste.

"Skewed in their favour," Jach repeated nervously.

The host grinned directly at his audience, shuffling to the edge of his seat once more. "I can't be the only one who's waiting for the endgame to this." The invisible audience's cheers and claps roared, their approval spurred him on further. "In second we have the rivalry of the century. Two women vying for the title of true heroine."

"I can't believe they're buying this. Lena doesn't give a rat's ass about being the star of anything. Nobody on our side cares about..." Harry groaned. A lot of the crew's voices picked up, excited chatter echoed around. "Okay, I suppose Annika getting a pummeling is what we all want to see."

Lena's picture appeared first. Everyone squinted so the impact of the second picture wouldn't be as bad. Annika's flew in to sit beside her. "Lena and Annika, twenty five points."

"First James, no zero hour deaths. Get on with it," Harry muttered.

Tira chuckled to herself, "if only."

The host sighed as if he heard him. His spirit fallen, like it was painful to read out the next part. "In first. We can't wait to be rid of him. We were so close too. The cheater, the real monster of the game. He's so good at killing we hope he'll kill himself next." As everyone already knew to expect, James' mug shot appeared to temporarily cover the image of the host.

"Yeah you're not biased at all," Danny grumbled as she sat with his children. Three of them clapped anyway despite the rude words from the host. The youngest made another attempt to reach for his picture. Danny smiled as Duncan waited for his dad's picture to turn back to the host before flipping his finger toward it.

"Twenty six points," the host grumbled.

"What a load of crap!" Duncan spat. "Dad's kicked so much more ass, that's not fair."

Jodie, who was sitting closely behind them with a baby in one arm, leaned forward to put a hand on his shoulder. She hoped he'd settle down. "Hey, he's still at the top. Your mum's in the top five. They're fine. That's what matters."

Duncan sat back, folding his arms tightly. "They're cheating. It's not fine."

Harry stared in disbelief as well. He looked to the others with him for an explanation. "One more kill equals one point?"

"He cheated his way in. It makes sense," Tira said softly. "Doesn't matter."

"It's not him I'm angry about," Harry snapped. He emphasised his point by gesturing to the screen when it refreshed. "We've seen AI fly up the board despite never seeing them. How do we know that our people aren't being penalised for little things like getting lost or walking around, so they stay low in the board? We've already lost one to this low score rule. We may lose another."

The host grinned as he swung his chair around to the rankings, the grid quickly filled up. His eyes lit up once it was done. "Oh, please scoreboard, you're too good to me," he cackled. Harry's blood ran cold, that couldn't be good. "Last place we have a tie," the host said, answering his question before he could ask.

The screens flickered as they changed to show something else. Wherever it was, was dark and cramped. Wesley recognised it immediately, "the narrowing corridors."

"Two birds one stone comes to mind," the host grinned as the camera focused on the people making their way through the location. One of the figures shimmered out of existence, the object he had on his arm gently placed into another's pocket. The remaining team of four continued climbing through the Jeffries tube like corridors, getting closer to the light in the distance. "Maybe we'll get lucky folks. Cheaters always get what they deserve."

Harry's face was whiter than a sheet by the time he finished talking. He shakily looked at the others, they were frozen, faces similar to him. The feeling of helplessness washed over him once more. If only he could warn them. He knew he couldn't. The feeling he had before that they were definitely not okay, that they could have victory snatched away from them, wasn't mere paranoia. It was about to become very real.

James lead the way down the cramped corridors. The team reduced to hands and knees now. The light they were heading for he could clearly see was coming from a wider area, a small room at least. He picked up the pace to get to it and check if it was safe, dragging his spear-like weapon with him. Once he reached the end he carefully swung his legs forward to lower them to the ground. His ankle tried to give in once more, pain shot up his leg, it wobbled, weakened from the damage. Still he stood defiantly to take a look around.

The light he had seen as far back as the fight with the large beast came from a hatch above him. It had been left partly open. The only other way out of this room was the same narrow tubes on the parallel side.

Stewart joined him, extra eager to get out of the cramped tunnels. Craig sat at the edge, waiting for him to move out the way. The unknown girl lingered right behind him, huffing impatiently.

James reached for the hatch, it was far too high for him to do so. He had to jump, which he knew would aggravate his injury. They had to get out of there, they would be sitting ducks if something attacked them. He was about to jump when Stewart appeared at his side with his hands reached out, at the ready for something. James wasn't sure what he was hinting at. "I'll help you up," he explained.

"Okay," James said uneasily. He raised his good foot, using Stewart's hands as leverage he pushed up to swipe the hatch aside. Poor Stewart groaned, his shoulders trembled in

those few seconds. He couldn't hold him, hands slipped and James was forced to drop down onto his feet anyway. Guilt and a little fear slapped Stewart in the face as the sudden weight to his ankle brought James back to his knees.

"I'm sorry," Stewart stuttered.

"It's okay, I'm fine," James mumbled. Stewart and Craig were by his side, offering to help him up. The unknown hurriedly climbed out of the tunnels now that she could. He took both of the offered hands to get back to his feet, albeit a little shakily.

"I thought you had lost weight," Craig said in jest to lighten the tension.

It seemed to work for James at least, he laughed a little, but Stewart was drowning in his own forehead sweat. "Too many cakes stolen from Lena. I need to check to see if it's clear. Wait until I tell you."

"I'll go with you this time," Craig said stubbornly.

James shook his head, "no." Craig's face fell. "I need someone to make sure it's safe here while I'm gone."

"Oh," Craig seemed relieved at the explanation. He smirked afterward, "you're just trying to make me feel useful."

"Don't be stupid, I wouldn't do that," James smirked at him. Red light flooded the passage, setting everyone on edge. James felt the floor lightly tremble, he looked up to the hatch which shone as it did before. "Up, now."

The closest to him, Stewart, he grabbed by the waist, lifting him up through the hole. The man yelped the entire time, caught completely off guard. He scrambled onto the next floor as soon as he could reach.

Craig moved back before he was next, he gestured for the woman first. She reluctantly hurried over, uneasy at being picked before someone else. James didn't give her time to change her mind, he did the same thing to her as he did for Stewart. Before her feet left the ground, all three felt the ground's temperature rapidly rising. Stewart reached over the edge to help pull her up onto his level. They both lingered to do the same for Craig.

"What the hell's happ... does one of us have zero points?" Craig stammered once it was his turn. The temperature of the ground continued to rise, he could feel it scalding his feet. The room began to fill with smoke. James barely had time to place a hand on him when flames roared up beside them, they both stumbled to one side to get away from it. It seemed to follow them, blocking any escape on their level.

"Hurry!" Stewart and the unknown shouted at them, one of their hands hovered over the edge, the other across their mouths.

"Get back!" James shouted back, smoke filled his lungs as he did, sending him into a coughing fit. The pair reluctantly listened, disappearing out of sight. He looked at Craig, his eyes watering, struggling as well to breathe. "Sorry, this'll probably hurt."

Craig tried to get his breath back just to say, "what?"

James grabbed him by his sides, instead of lifting him, he threw him through the hole. Stewart and the unknown were scrambling back against a far away wall when they saw

him emerge. His body rolled harshly across the floor, then slammed into the wall. He slumped face first onto the ground. The pair hurried over to his side as the black smoke billowed out from the hole. His eyes closed, but still breathing raggedly. They each took a side, lifting him up by his arms. With only one door they had little choice at where to go, they ran for it.

Back on the previous level the flames had backed James into the wall. He had his back to them, his left arm slammed into the wall. The smoke already draining his energy, his attempts left only cracks. He kept trying, unaware that the cracks were at his feet as well. One last swing helped the floor gave way first, dragging him down. He had no idea how far he fell, landing pushed all of the air left in his lungs out, leaving him gasping. His hands pressed out in front of him, he pushed on them to lift his body up.

Little did he know he wasn't alone. Two figures approached him, both of them armed and smirking maliciously.

The black eyed, unfeeling killing machine screamed hysterically. She ran away so fast she may as well have vanished on the spot.

Chakotay and Marlene sniggered from behind one of the large containers. Neelix was left utterly confused at what just happened. He thought he was a goner. He knew it was terrible timing to do it, but he trusted Chakotay enough to listen anyway. Now he knew he was right he turned to face them. "See, what did I..." he noticed the pair laughing so much tears streamed from their eyes. "What?"

"Oh, I was just whipping some sandwiches up. Would you like one?" Chakotay mimicked his voice badly. Marlene laughed harder. "Oh that went better than I hoped."

Neelix stared at them blankly. "What's so funny about sandwiches? I panicked when I saw her, I wasn't really going to offer her one."

Marlene fell to her knees, trying desperately to stop. "Oh god, even people without souls fear Neelix's cooking." Another thought left her gasping for breath. "And he wasn't even cooking." Chakotay snorted into much louder hysterics.

Neelix huffed, folding his arms. "You know what. You're not getting anything."

At the other side of the large area they were in, the poor girl ran to the huge bay doors. She reached for the panel to open them when a figure lunged out from the shadows, aiming a sharp implement at her chest. She collapsed seconds later with a gaping wound near her heart. The attacker stood, trembling so much his hood fell to his shoulders. He ran from her in a blind panic.

Jessie had to stop at the top of the fifth level to catch her breath. Daniel was already at the base of the next array of stairs on the opposite side of the building. The unknown meanwhile started his jog along the walkway, until he spotted her. He stopped to wait for her.

She took in another deep breath while gesturing for him to go on. He shook his head. "Daniel will be with Lena soon, I'm not leaving anyone alone," he said.

"Don't, I'll just bore you down," she tried to say while taking a few steps forward.

The man chuckled, "it's okay, I'm already preparing my commentary for the big fight. I can't wait."

Jessie smiled, she wanted to see the long overdue Lena and Annika fight as much as anyone. Her only lung ached at her, but she wasn't missing this, so she continued on. The man hadn't noticed, he was too busy thinking of an opening slogan. A door next to him slammed open right in the side of his face. It hit him so hard he stumbled into the barrier. He would have been fine if that hadn't decided to lower into the ground.

Jessie ran forward to try and grab his arm, she just managed to catch his hand as his foot slipped off the edge. He fell, pulling her with him. She slammed hard into the ground, her hand kept a tight hold of his until she was hanging half over the edge herself. Still gravity tried to pull her further. The man stared up at her, his eyes wide with fear. He shook his head as he yanked his hand away. He fell the five steep floors to his death as Jessie looked on in horror.

With only her legs keeping her there, she felt her body slipping still. Her hands grabbed the vertical part of the floor to push her body backwards. Once she was safe she crawled to the side, away from any doors that may open as well. Then she climbed to her feet, all the while gasping for breath and trying to get the image of the man's body splayed on the ground.

*"One loser down. Thanks for not playing Zero Hour,"* the host's voice cackled all around her.

The voice filled her with rage, she clenched her jaw, eyes flashing. "Son of a... bitch!" she yelled the final word. Her exhaustion no longer a fact, her anger drowning it out. She ran for the stairs, hoping that she'd find something to beat on the way up.

After a much shorter corridor than the last, Craig and the rest of his team emerged on one of the walkways above the main hall. Stewart and the unknown woman looked relieved to be in a large open space, they hurried to the barriers to take it all in. Craig remained fixed to the spot. The pair's relief was broken by his shouting and wall kicking. He didn't care that it hurt or that shouting made his smoke charred throat worse. He had to vent.

"Craig?" Stewart approached him carefully.

Craig covered his face with a trembling hand. Tears threatened to fall. "I killed him. If I kept my mouth shut..."

"You don't know that he's dead," the unknown said.

Craig scoffed, turning his back on them. "Of course he is. He had more to live for, kids and a wife. What do I have? The girl I love who's going to hate me for leaving her brother behind."

Stewart placed a hand on his shoulder, which he immediately shrugged off. "That's not true. Everyone's equal in their right to live. Besides I think you're not giving him enough credit." Craig looked over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes. "If anyone can survive a near death experience it's James. God, he's a pro by now."

"Yes," the unknown nodded. "That's probably why he chose you over himself. Or maybe, he did it for your girl."

Craig turned completely, his watery eyes focused solely on her. "What?"

"Hmm, ok maybe not. Her brother, her boyfriend... right? Losing either would be bad. I dunno," she stuttered.

"I'm not..." Craig mumbled.

Stewart laughed awkwardly, "she's just going off what you said, dude. James's always doing stuff like this. You're not responsible for his stupid bravado acts." Craig's eye drifted away, lost in his thoughts. "Don't tell him I said that, kay?"

"We should..." Craig said quietly, "find something to kill, or what James did will be for nothing." The pair gave him a firm nod of approval. The three headed along the walkway.

James rolled out of the way of a sword slamming down, half of it impaled the ground. The other figure swung a metal beam into his stomach while the owner of the sword pulled its weapon back out. After the hit, the leathery red creature leaned over to grab him by the shoulders, dragging him up only to deliver a punch to the face.

The sword carrier raised it to one side, ready to swing it at his head. Someone behind grabbed its wrist before he got the chance, all while delivering a punch to the back.

James saw none of this as he kicked the other attacker away, forcing it stumbling backwards. He hurried to his feet as it launched itself right back at him, throwing punches. James struggled to dodge them in his weaker state, they flew so fast. He grabbed its right arm mid flight, his knee swung up to strike its ribs. It fell forward slightly, allowing him to reach for its throat with his other hand. It lifted into the air as he raised his hand, then he pushed it while throwing his arm back. His other hand let go at the same time. The creature flew over his head, its collision with the ground caused tremors.

He swung around to deal with the other attacker, only to find it grappling with someone else with its back on him. It was bigger than him or her, so he couldn't see who or what it was. Both of them seemed equal in strength to him. James' head turned to the red demon, which merely brushed itself off as if his attack was nothing. It extended his fingers, claws twice the length shot from its knuckles.

"Ookay," James could only say in response. It didn't move, its eyes daring him to make the first move. James smirked at it, he crouched down to pick up the metal beam it dropped. Its green eyes glowed, anticipating him to advance.

The swordsman backhanded his own attacker to the ground. In that moment James recognised him, his eyes flickered wide open. The man crawled backwards quickly so he had space to get up and evade, the swordsman kept its weapon trained on him, converging far too fast for him to do so. It lunged the sword back, ready to impale him.

James looked back to the clawed one, waiting patiently for him to break the gap. James shrugged meekly, then threw the beam but not towards it. It shot across the room, plunging straight through the swordsman's chest. The man on the ground wasn't

expecting it, he stared open mouthed as it collapsed to the floor with blood pooling underneath it.

It took the other creature by surprise too. He quickly recovered, charging forward to take advantage of James' change of focus and lack of weapon. In his peripheral vision he saw him coming anyway. It swiped at him, he ducked down to one side, then rolled away completely avoiding the other hand's claws. The maneuver re-ignited his fall injuries, they pulled him down everytime he tried to get back up. The aches he could handle, the sharp pain pushing into his right side left him gasping for breath once more.

He heard the creature snigger at him, footsteps approached. A glint of metal to his side caught James' eye. The sword he thought, he tried to reach for it. It was out of his reach. He tried to drag himself forward so he could, the creature slammed its foot down on his arm, pinning it to the floor. It crouched down, one arm pressed against his shoulder, knee dug into his back. It raised its right arm, ready to deliver a deadly slash.

It only saw the same glint of metal when it was too late. It blurred into its sight, plunging into its neck leaving him gagging on his own blood. James had no idea, still pinned to the floor he could only hear what was happening. The creature pushed its hand towards its attacker, as it couldn't see too well, its neck unable to move, it almost missed. Only one claw found its target, penetrating his side, bringing a painful yelp out of him.

The demon was the first to fall, it slumped to the left, leaving the bloody sword dripping over James' back. He was free to climb up onto his knees. He turned around just in time to see his rescuer begin his fall. He hurried over to catch him, clasping his shoulders with one arm, the other tried to cover his wound.

"You weren't supposed... to save me," he spluttered.

James shook his head, his eyes went even wider as he stared down at him. "What are you talking about?"

The man smiled weakly, laughing until the pain made him stop. "Idiot. I just wanted... to fulfill my promise. I still owe you."

"No you don't. I don't blame you," James said as firmly as possible. The man's eyes drifted closed for a while. James put further pressure on his wound, bringing him back with a gasp. "Hold on, just one..." He then moved it, reaching for one of his pockets.

"I saw her," the man said.

James' hand stalled, the item he was after lay flat in his palm. "You saw who?"

"She told me, my greatest weapon, against it... was me," he wheezed. The smile on his face was back, it looked almost smug. "It's stuck with me. It'll die with me."

"Nathan," James said, his jaw quivering. His eye fell to the object in his hand. His fingers tightly encircled it.

"Give Jessie my best. Look after her for me," the man said weakly. He chuckled painfully, "you hurt her, I'm haunting you."

James tried to blink the tears in his eyes away, he shook his head stubbornly. "No, you're not dying here." He didn't listen, his eyes shut, never to open again.

B'Elanna and Shar ran, the sound of violence up ahead encouraged them to pick up the pace. They were temporarily stalled by the broken patch of glass in their way. They carefully walked by it and continued to run.

They reached the hall to find Chakotay struggling with a creature on his back, trying to choke hold him to death. On its back was Neelix, whacking it over the head with his boot. Marlene lay on the ground nearby, face down. The two women weren't sure if she was dead, injured or just laughing at the fight nearby. The shaking shoulders told them it was likely the latter.

"Neelix," Chakotay croaked, rolling his eyes. "Not helping. Move."

"I got it Commander!" Neelix shouted just before it swiped him aside with a different arm. Chakotay was free to do what he planned; push himself backwards until he hit the door. It did the trick, the creature loosened its grip and fell to the floor when he stepped forward.

"Now," he ordered.

Marlene looked up, her face bright red, tears streaming down her face. "Oh right," she scrambled up to rush at it. He did the same thing. Neelix was too busy trying to put his boot back on. They managed to push it so far into one of the opening labs. B'Elanna and Shar understood what they were trying to do, they hurried forward to do the same thing before it recovered. It could do nothing but let the four people slam it into the window. It screeched as it fell endlessly into the digital abyss.

"That..." Chakotay breathed. "Would have worked much better without the shoes."

"Boots were better," Shar commented to B'Elanna, she smirked in response. Naturally the others didn't understand the reference.

"Next time Neelix is the bait," Marlene remarked.

Neelix joined them, limping. "That went well, didn't it?" They stared at him blankly.

Harry walked through the aisle, glancing occasionally at the screen behind him. There was an optimistic feeling in the air, he was unable to feel it himself. A lot of the crew watched the screens a little too eagerly, he knew why. After all he'd seen, he doubted he could enjoy it without feeling rotten.

When he reached the top he turned around, opting for watching for a short while before walking along to the other aisle. The camera lingered on a creature hanging limp over a barrier, with a nasty head wound. Its mug shot appeared beside it with the label Defeated. The view followed the back of Stewart running away from it. Something offscreen pushed it over the edge. The unknown girl ran into the shot after Stewart.

The neighbouring screen he could only see the edge of. He just made out Lena darting around, looking around desperately. The one on the opposite side he knew had images of the remaining opponents, as he had walked down that aisle ten minutes earlier. A

quick glance told him he was mistaken. What looked like the scoreboard was on it instead, names filled it. He couldn't make any of them out from where he was.

He found himself staring back at the screen directly ahead of him. He just missed Tom and Kristopher stumble out of one of the platforms, which lead to one of the walkways. They looked dizzy, that was as much information he got from the brief image. It changed back to Stewart and the girl running to the other side of the one they were on.

He was surprised by what he could see in the background. Craig had one of the opponents pinned to the wall, his left arm pressed against its neck. The screen focused on them as it pushed back, knocking him into the railing. He moved his arm around to grab its neck instead as it pushed down on him. He rolled his body a little, the right grabbed the railing at the same time. One shove forward, he let go, allowing gravity to take care of the rest.

His two teammates got to him in time to stop him from falling as well. They pulled him to safety.

Harry sighed in relief. He didn't realise how metaphorically on the edge of his seat he was. He made his way to the left to see if he could see the scoreboard. It looked very different. Shorter, with two columns instead of one. He noticed Craig's name near the bottom of the second one highlight blue. Another one at the top of the same one did the same but in a red. It flew off screen while Craig's rose to the top of his table, taking its place.

He recalled four were left when it still displayed the opponents only. He witnessed three in the last few minutes. One remained. "Obviously," he muttered. The Game wasn't over yet.

He studied the scoreboard to see if he could see where this final enemy stood against his friends. It faded away before he could find it, instead showing Annika standing with Kiara, still with her mouth covered. The drone tortured her with more of her singing, while rocking her side to side.

"Rock-a-bye Slayer's baby, on the top floor," she tried to sound sweet but instead sounded nasally. "When the mummy comes, the Q girl will cry." Kiara whined, trying to mumble something in protest. Annika shushed her like a baby. "The same as her mummy, Lena will fall." Kiara's eyes widened as they drifted over to her. "And timeline will reset, Annika the hero." The drone sighed happily, "what do you think?"

"I think it needs a lot of work," Lena grumbled from afar, now armed with a small metal pole and a knife.

Annika giggled cutely. "Well, we never bother with rhymes around here."

Lena took a few steps closer, not breaking her furious gaze on the ex-drone. "You've got what you wanted. I'm here. Let her go."

"But, she's part of the problem," Annika whined. Lena's right eye twitched, a small symptom of repressed anger. "She's how you're here. Same with that crybaby brother of yours. Hmm."

"If you deal with me, neither will be necessary. You've wanted this for years, Seven. So have I. Let's stop wasting time," Lena said.

Annika chuckled without moving her lips, it sounded so forcefully evil, tough to take seriously. "You're right. Your words are wasteful. Everything you are, you stand for, what you represent, it's..."

"Better," Lena spoke for her, taking a further step forward.

Annika's eyes narrowed. "Such fanfiction. You're nothing more than a pretentious fifteen year old nutcase's vision of me. A child's naive idea of a better character." Lena and Kiara rolled their own eyes in perfect unison. "News flash sweetheart; it didn't work. No one knows who you are. Anyone who does, know that all you are is just another Janeway and Chakotay shipper's fantasy child."

"Can you kill me sometime today?" Kiara's voice mumbled from under her hand.

"Special super hero, perfect in every way, except when she's the teenage drama queen. First choice to take command of the flagship of the Federation, please!" Annika continued ranting. Lena sighed impatiently, absent-mindedly chewing on her cheek. "It's time to set everything back to the way it was. No silly fights to the death, no time travelling, no paradoxes, no shapeshifters, no Slayers, witches and monsters..."

"Oh my," Kiara mumbled.

Annika shook her once more. "No Q hybrid babies and most of all, no Lena Morgan Janeway."

Lena's expression seemed blank. Her shoulders raised and lowered slowly as she loudly sighed, eyes flickering back and forth. Annika scowled at her, waiting for a snappy comeback she could use against her. Instead all the girl did was polish the knife against her trouser leg, then raise the same hand up to inspect her finger nail. She made a little curious hmm sound while her thumb flipped upwards to brush a bit of dried blood from it.

"You... you're the know it all, solution to everything, just like what you accused me of. You're..." Annika hissed at her.

Lena glanced at her in surprise. "I'm sorry, what? I think I dozed off for a sec."

Annika silently fumed, making her body shudder. Kiara felt it though, underneath the hand she smirked. "I said you're the Mary Sue, not me. Just a little brat..."

Lena yawned over the top of her, then pretended to look apologetic about it. "You're sorry too? Well okay, if you insist."

"You... you did..." Annika stuttered, her eyebrow twitching. The last straw was Lena passing the pole to her knife hand, so she could scratch an itch on her back, all while staring at the ceiling. "This was supposed to be my show! My ship, my crew. You all humiliated me!"

Lena passed the weapon back to her other hand. "You haven't seen a demon running around, have you, One of Two... whatever?" she asked with little interest.

"Bitch, I'll kill you!" Annika screeched. She roughly threw Kiara to the floor. Lena's attention flew to her, in those couple of seconds Annika sped toward her. Lena quickly swiped both weapons to put her off. The drone now vampire dove over her head with an

over the top somersault. A bemused look on her face as she followed every spin with her eyes. Before she landed, Lena swung her leg toward her, sending her flying to the floor.

"Oooph," Annika complained when she raised to her knees. Her hand pressed against her chest. "Landed right on my boobs."

Lena pulled a disgusted face, while Kiara struggled not to laugh. She dragged herself up to a sitting position. Someone behind her helped lift her up to her feet. She was about to turn to thank them when they threw her across the room, much further than Annika did. The landing forced her into an uncontrollable roll, only stopping when she slammed into the wall.

"Kiara!" Lena shouted after her in a panic. Annika took advantage, charging at her again. Lena had little time to retaliate. The force the drone used pushed them straight through the wall and partially into the next one. Annika's hand reached for her throat, digging her nails into her flesh. Lena responded by plunging the knife into her heart. Remembering Damien's earlier warning that it wouldn't be enough, she followed it up with a foot stamp and a swipe with the pole to the ribs.

Annika stumbled back from the onslaught, giving Lena a bit more room to breathe. She swung her knife holding fist at her, which Annika grabbed easily. She cackled as she swung that arm out toward the wall. Lena made sure to toss the pole at her head before she was flung through the same wall. She landed face down on the floor, her bones aching as much as the ground beneath her.

Kiara scrambled to get up. A pale white and greasy looking monster crept toward her, stroking its pointed teeth with its tongue. She looked around for anything she could use to defend herself, but there was nothing around her.

Lena pushed on her hands to lift herself up, she could see the thing clearly as Kiara slid across the wall. Lena reached her knees when Annika stomped up behind her, grabbing her by the shoulders, only to throw her to one side.

"Look what you did!" Annika snarled while her opponent was still rolling, then landing with her back to her. She pointed at the chest wound closely resembling a chip in a glitterball.

"Hang on," Lena muttered as casually as she could, rolling on to her back. Annika's anger grew, steam rose from her as the girl laughed at her instead.

"You think you're clever? This is my favourite suit," Annika growled. The laughter only got louder. She pointed at her face, which to Lena looked like a crack in an ugly porcelain doll. "This is my favourite face."

"Shocking," Lena sniggered.

While Annika had her tantrum, Lena stretched the arm with the knife away from her. She let go of it, then gave it a hard tap with her toe. It shot over, spinning towards where Kiara was trapped. It lightly tapped the wall on arrival, gliding next to her feet. Her hand reached for it as the creature lunged for her. All she had time to do while she was still stuck on the floor, was stab it in the foot. It screeched, hissed while it stumbled backwards. Kiara quickly scrambled forward to reclaim the knife, then crawled into a crouched run to make her escape.

Its head snapped to the right before giving chase. Despite her head start, it was much faster than her and caught up too quickly. They passed by an opening to a corridor, the creature about to grab her when another figure leapt out from the side. He jumped onto its back, his one good arm wrapped around its neck, pulling it away from her. Kiara didn't notice right away. When she did her eyes widened. "Daniel?"

"Don't worry kid, I've got it," Daniel smirked confidently at her. To prove it his foot slammed into the back of the creature's knee, bringing them both down to the ground.

Lena stood while Annika badly tried to fix her outfit to her liking. She almost gagged as the drone's solution seemed to be ripping the chest part away, showing off her cleavage. Annika sighed happily, "better."

"That's a matter of opinion. All sane ones disagree," Lena said, standing back up.

Annika slowly circled her, all while keeping eye contact. "You're only jealous."

"I'm confused. I thought we were doing this because *wah she stole my scenes*," Lena mocked her.

"So you admit it!" Annika shouted at her. "You stole everything from me. My family, my dignity, my man." Lena tried desperately not to laugh once more, biting her lip helped a little. "You're not even hot. Look at that hair, it's so boring and lifeless."

"Funny you should mention boring and lifeless," Lena smiled. She ran forward to attack, raising her fist.

Annika pitied her in a way. All muscle and no brains. This would be easy. She raised her own arm to deflect, the other pulled back ready. At the last second Lena ducked down, grabbing her by the waist. Annika had no idea what hit her, until the wall did. One fist flew into her cheek, spreading the open wound further. The other she moved her head to the side to dodge, Lena's hand went straight through the wall instead.

"You look like a plainer version of your mother," Annika spat at her.

Lena's other hand hung, frozen in the air mid punch. Mentioning her mother brought what she'd been keeping in the back of her mind, all back in a rush. It took everything she had not to break down in tears.

Annika knew this, she had a good smirk at her expense. She readied a punch of her own. The knife flew at her, piercing straight through her hand and into the wall, dragging her with it. Annika whimpered as she gently tried to pull away from it. She noticed Kiara standing not far away, her arm lowering to her side. The slightest hint of a smile on her face gave Annika the inspiration to put her second on her to do list.

The distraction gave Lena the time she needed to snap out of it. Her anger renewed. Annika was not a mere annoyance anymore, her recent actions and her condition confirmed to her what she needed to do. Play time was over. She snatched the knife back roughly, making the vampire screech in pain. Instead of blood trickling from an open wound, the knife had left a chiselled hole in her hand, sparkling under the light. The knife itself covered in glitter.

Before she had any time to recover from it, Lena swiped the knife at her face. Tufts of Annika's blonde hair fell to her shoulder, sliced in the second it took to deeply cut through her eyelid and across her eyebrow. Her head recoiled into the wall from the

attack, doing so she noticed her precious hair slipping from her shoulder to the floor. She screamed, seeming to Lena like she was more bothered about that than anything else.

Kiara figured that her mother didn't need anymore help, so she looked towards Daniel and the AI. The two struggled on the floor, each trying to pin the other. Daniel momentarily gained the upper hand, he balled his fist to punch it while his injured arm remained limp at his side. The beast noticed the vulnerability, shooting its own hand forward to grab his throat while he couldn't defend himself. He still managed to get the hit in, but it was weakened by the shock of the attack. It kicked upward, all while pushing him away.

"Oh god..." Kiara gasped as she heard the sound of bones cracking while his body tumbled aside.

Annika pushed her opponent away with all the strength she had. Lena stood her ground, only being forced to stumble back a couple steps. Annika's lop sided hair style was the least of her worries, what with her eye forced shut, the ripped catsuit and her chiselled cheek. Lena sniggered at her, she could see the fire burning in her opponent's one eye. "You look fantastic. I hear *five year old with scissors Barbie* is the new favourite toy with kids this year."

"Just... die," Annika growled in pure fury. She pounced, Lena knew she would. Once she was close enough, Lena grabbed her, using Annika's own momentum against her to toss her, head first, over her shoulder. The ex-drone landed right on her back. She rolled onto her arm, then she noticed the floor had a shiny look to it. Annika could see herself so clearly. Her hand shakily reached for the cheek wound, then the half circle around her eye.

Lena stared, unsure what she was doing. Her face turned into a light grimace as the undead woman began caressing her own reflection.

Kiara shivered as she looked over to where Daniel lay still. The demon turned its attention to her, it slowly climbed back up. It was injured from the fight, it approached her with a limp. She desperately tried to think of a way to prey on that. She couldn't run. There was no way she'd run out on Lena. She thought about ducking, rolling away, knowing that it wouldn't easily be able to follow her. Maybe tripping it over. She stepped backwards while thinking these options over. Everytime she pictured it going wrong.

"I'm..." Annika said softly. "I'm Seven of Nine."

"Okay," Lena muttered.

Kiara decided on the duck option. It made more sense to her, she wasn't a fighter like her mother. It was almost on her, so she threw herself to the floor, ready to roll away. Lena and James had made it look so easy. Hitting the ground hurt more than she expected, her roll didn't last long. She was left in a compromising position, lying on her side a few feet away. It turned around, sniggering at her.

"Hey," another voice snapped. Kiara frowned, it came from above and behind her. She looked up, so did the creature. Black hair tumbling to her shoulders, a fierce scowl on her face, a green glint in her eye Kiara recognised as trouble. The woman held something in her arms, something thick and heavy looking. Typical of Jessie to arm herself with something too big for her, she thought.

"Tertiary adjunct of Unimatrix Zero One," Annika mumbled. Lena rolled her eyes, leaning over her while she stared at herself. Annika smiled, "but you may call me Seven of Ni..." her words were cut off by Lena's arm wrapping around her neck. Her other hand pressed against her cheek. Lena pulled with all her strength. She heard something shatter, the resistance she felt snapped away. A cloud of glittery dust flew into her face as she stumbled back.

She sighed in relief, it was over. The body slumped to the ground, parts of it smashing on impact like it was made of glass.

Jessie swung the large object at the creature's face. The blow sent it crashing down, twitching in pain. Kiara watched her walk by, re-aiming it so the thinner side was in front. "Game over," she said, plunging it into the AI's chest.

"*Game Over*," the computerised voice echoed all around them.

The environment faded away, taken over by a bright light.

Anyone close to a window rushed to it, catching a glimpse of the gigantic purple cube rise up, leaving them behind. They watched as it brushed through the cloud free sky. Its texture fluctuated the further it flew. Its colour faded to a dull grey once it looked no bigger than the moon in the horizon. Some winced while others looked away as light pierced through it, enveloping the cube so they could no longer see it. Seconds later it was gone, leaving no trace behind.

Tom waited with baited breath. Even though it looked calm on the viewscreen, he didn't want to get his hopes up yet.

"No subspace readings. The Game had nowhere to go," B'Elanna reported. "It worked. It's gone."

Harry sensed that his friend wasn't eager to question further, he was curious though. "Where are we?"

Faye quickly checked, she wanted to know too. She checked twice, not believing it. "Alpha Quadrant. Federation Space."

"No way," Craig mumbled, his face blank.

Wesley shook his head, "the odds were ridiculous, but we still found it. My senses, they were clouded so I wasn't sure."

"Um... we didn't land on anyone, did we?" Harry stuttered.

"No. The planet's uninhabited," Faye answered.

Chakotay's head drifted in her direction, "the Games Matrix was failing. I doubt that the cube was working correctly when it picked a landing spot."

Tom looked at him, his face painted with uncertainty. He shook it off for now, there was plenty of time to think about it later. "Helm, take us up." Danny nodded, she immediately got to work. "How long back to Earth?"

"At maximum warp, fifteen days," Faye answered.

Harry and Tom glanced at one another, both sighing in relief. Chakotay stared ahead at the viewscreen, its image lowering as they all felt the ship gently lifted up from the ground.

*Lieutenant Commander Paris' Log Supplemental: I don't even know where to begin. Voyager's journey is over, the Softmicron's greatest weapon has been destroyed. The odds were against us, there were times we felt helpless, overwhelmed by a power greater than us. We have survived, we're almost home. Our struggle ends today. Fifteen days remain between insanity and calm.*

The Enterprise emerged from the surface, back into the normality of space. The nacelles flashed, it shot away into a blast of light.

*We've had longer journey's than this. We'll be fine.*

Lena stared glumly ahead of her, chin nestled in the palm of her hand. The computer screen sitting beside her on the sofa filled with text only. A small data chip inserted into its side. Something inside her nagged her to read it once more. Her head turned slowly toward it, her throat throbbed at the thought alone. Nevertheless her eyes fell onto it.

*Sometime long ago, in another life I made the decision that lead us here. I was told that I'd make a great sacrifice for the sake of the time space continuum. I agreed, likely knowing it was not my life alone that would be at stake. I couldn't have known what it would be. That much I do know for certain.*

They pulled his arms behind his back, restraining his hands together. Damien laughed as fiendishly as possible to unnerve the Security officers surrounding him. Craig shook his head, eyes rolled as he gestured for them to lead him away.

*Don't misunderstand. Both of you belong in this universe as much as anybody does. I know personally that I wouldn't have it any other way. If it were merely a choice of bringing you into this world, I'd do it all over again. My regret is the pressure, the weight I placed on your shoulders that day.*

*Know for the rest of your days how much I love you. How proud I am.*

Tom smiled awkwardly, his arm stretched to behind his back. The man standing ahead of him shook his head, a curl in his lips. He patted his other arm approvingly, all while holding his right hand for him to shake. Tom relaxed his shoulders, bringing his arm back down. He accepted the hand shake. The gesture extended to the man pulling him in for a brief hug, the hand on his arm reaching for his back.

"Well done, son," the man whispered to him. His gaze blank. Tom thought for a second that his father had finally changed, the stare told him otherwise. A part of him was relieved though. He couldn't handle anymore change. His father was proud of him, that was enough.

*I can only imagine how angry you must feel reading this. My hope is that you'll understand one day. That you'll forgive me.*

The skies ahead were a light grey. A warm breeze pushed the smaller clouds away, revealing patches of blue. The sun above tried its best to burn through them. Those brief moments brought out the vast fields of green lying ahead of him.

His hands rested on the old metal rail of the bridge. He remembered being so small he couldn't even look over it. The many days he and his sister would sit over the edge and gaze at the view for hours. The smile on her face he recalled so vividly it was almost like she was here beside him again.

Small footsteps scampered over to his side, he looked down to see his tiny daughter jumping onto her toes to get a better view, just like he used to. James smiled down at her, kneeling down to gather her up in his arms. In her own she held a few little flowers she had recently picked. Now that she could reach, she placed them on top of several bunches already lying on the rail. He gave her forehead a kiss.

Jessie stood by his side, smiling warmly at them both. Duncan and Sasha she kept close, a hand resting on their shoulder or back. Their newest family member cradled protectively in her big brother's arm.

They heard footsteps behind them, scraping hesitantly to a stop. James looked over his shoulder, his smile grew. "You made it," he said to the figure standing in the background.

He smiled hesitantly, one of his hands buried deep in his pockets, the other behind his back, shoulders tense. "My *cellmate's* got my back. It's cool," he ended up smirking as carefree as he used to.

Jessie looked over as well. Relief was all over her face, she stepped a little closer to him. He still seemed a little uneasy about their proximity, so she stopped at a safe distance. "How long have you got until the Doctor notices you're gone?" she asked.

Nathan smiled back at her, a playful glint appeared in his eye. "Longer than I need, or should have," he said, eyes drifting over to James. "I don't know if I'll ever look at this place the same way again."

James turned back as the wind blew through the trees. The sun peeked out from behind the clouds. A contented sigh drifted over from his far right. He looked over to see his two sisters sitting on the bridge, their legs dangling over the edge. Yasmin seemed very bored by it all, which he expected. The sigh came from Lena. She looked peaceful as she stared out into the valley, a small smile on her face.

*Your life begins a new day. Enjoy it. You're free now.*

**THE END**