

## Episode 2.12

### Fifth Fantasy

*In amongst the crowded market, the girl wondered if she belonged anywhere. No one noticed her, yet all eyes seemed to be drawn. Such simple things were bartered for, argued over, a joy to receive. All things she was used to but never fulfilled her empty shell. Most would do anything to be in her shoes, yet she threw them aside and began her new life barefoot. A life of adventure, wonder, everyday joy. It was all she wished for.*

"Daddy?" a little girl's voice piped up.

Ragha smiled down at the tiny girl on his lap. Her curious eyes and fingers pressed against the book, her thumb pointed at the word wished. "Which?" she squeaked.

"Almost sweetheart," Ragha said, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Wisssh," he whispered.

A few tries and she got it right, though with the extra shhh like he did. "What it mean?"

"What is it you want most in this universe?" Ragha asked her.

The girl scrunched her face, "someone to play with, you at work."

Ragha hid his guilt at hearing that with a gentle smile. "That is a wish, it's more powerful than want."

"I get her. She lonely," the girl said while fiddling with the corner of the page. "Like us."

Ragha looked around the tiny house they called home, filled with toys all over, his research. Such a cold place when they found it, now it felt like home. "Some day, when I find proof of them, we'll wish for nothing."

"Sounds boring," the girl said.

Ragha chuckled, "you're probably right, Talia. We have each other, that's enough."

"So," the girl said, her face brightened, "you won't go out tonight with the twitchy man?"

"I'm afraid so, I have a promise to keep," Ragha replied. "First though I'll tuck you in." Gathering her up and closing the book, he got up to walk over to the only bed.

"Tell me the doggy one again," Talia said once she was snug.

"Of course," Ragha said with a smile. His finger was already a bookmark for that part of the book, even though he could probably recite it from memory.

*Once upon a time a young princess woke up in the tallest tower in the shimmering palace, with only her pretend pooch by her side. When she peered out into the grey skies, there was nought but ocean, glistening and tame. She searched all over for her mother, the queen, but found her not.*

*At first the girl enjoyed her solitary. The pantry became a climbing frame. The kitchen a booby trapped treasure trove with yummy rewards. The whole palace her playground.*

*Until one day she'd grown tired, hungry. She spoke to her pooch about the burning hole in her heart. To her surprise it answered in her mother's voice, "you are never alone, my sweet. As long as you always carry me by your side."*

Ragha checked his daughter starting to doze off. He never once had to finish the story, he had no idea how it ended. He continued, hoping this would be the night he'd at least reach a new page.

*Every room felt like new again. The girl's spirits were back, holding the mummy she never had with her all the way. Until one day the pantry became a pond. A little waterfall gushed from the highest window.*

"Hmm, getting a little grim here," Ragha mumbled as he turned the page.

*She could not reach the stairs and knew not to swim. The pooch came to her, panting, its eyes sparkling. The princess rode the beast to safety. Now a living animal, the princess was thrilled. She did not notice the sinking palace.*

Ragha was about to turn the page again, but he noticed Talia fast asleep. "Probably for the best. Who writes these things?"

A light tap on the door got him up, leaving the book by her bedside. He opened it to greet whoever was there. "Dr Silvers. You're a bit early."

The man on the other side seemed excited. "Remember the dig site in Newsmith? They found something."

Ragha's face brightened, "is it a cube site?"

"Better," Silvers replied. "The ruins it brought with it."

The dig site took many minutes to climb down to the bottom. Ragha could see the glistening and yet rusty metal waiting for him below. He arrived first to the rectangular metal container, its pieces scattered from it, and yet the larger part looked intact.

"Curious," he said, opening his computer.

"I know. Something's in there, but we can't open it," Silvers said.

Ragha's computer scanned the interior, but all he could see was blackness. "How do you figure?"

"Bio sign. It's in there, we only just caught it," Silvers replied.

"One of them, you think?" Ragha said. Staring at the box no bigger than his budget fridge that he couldn't stand a bottle in, he shook his head. "Can't be."

"Why not?" Silvers said gleefully. "If anyone knows how to open it, it'd be you."

"I'll do my best," Ragha said.

With some of the usual studies and computer scans, he noticed wiring amongst the rubble around it. A jigsaw piece that would likely fit. He picked it up, scanned it to make sure. It clasped to the top-middle effortlessly. The box hummed, light glowed through the cracks they didn't even know were there before.

"Hold on, I'll get the camera," Silvers said, rushing off to the rest of his team.

Ragha peered into the box as it opened on its own. A blinding light overwhelmed him. He could see or feel nothing more but the white for a while, then the grey mist formed a face in front of him. A woman's face he knew too well that he wish he hadn't. It was the last thing he saw before he passed out.

In everyone else's perspective the box gave out no light, and Ragha was nowhere to be found. Silvers looked, the box showed no signs of life. Only a crystal lay inside of it.

"We're still looking but um," Silvers said to the small girl, cuddling her soft toy dog. "But we have no idea what happened."

A woman stood nearby with a frown, "what is that you're carrying?"

Silvers glanced at the crystal in his palm. "The biosign we found. It makes no sense." It hummed at the girl's proximity. She gazed at it, entranced by its sparkles. "This is my word, we'll find your daddy. You keep this safe." He gave it to Talia. She brought it close to her chest, it brightened.

Talia tucked herself into bed and waited. Her dad would never miss her bedtime story. He'd be back soon.

Hours passed, nothing.

In gentle tears she whispered, "I wish my daddy was here."

Her toy felt like it moved, she looked to find it growing. Its eyes blinked, gazing softly at her. "I'm what you wish," it said in her father's voice.

"Daddy?" Talia cried and cuddled it.

The book Ragha had left on the bedside turned a page on its own.

Hidden within a darkened vast forest on the other side of the planet, the Liger vessel F9 sat beside a small, relatively new village. Many people were mulling around the older red and blue vessel, scanning, repairing and observing. Perched up on one of the warp drives, B'Elanna and Lilly argued over a silver patch job the size of a penny.

Harry stood the many feet below them wondering what was taking so long, while his team repaired a crack in the hull. He didn't notice Lilly's brother Dave and a tall woman dressed in a smart, one piece suit.

"If that thing falls off again, I'm suing," Harry mused to himself, his eyes glued to the drive. Dave cleared his throat, startling the life out of him. "You, god, why!?" Harry grumbled under his breath. He eyed the two with a puzzled, curious expression. "Captain Dave not Jim Johnstone. What do we owe the heart failure?"

Dave winced and looked to one side briefly, "yeah sure." He gestured to the woman beside him, "this is Governor Alora, she runs the shipyard and organises all the diplomacy between the Ligers and Sonanji. Governor this is Harry Kim, and I'm sorry."

The woman smiled in response. "I've met stranger, Captain."

Harry didn't look that surprised "um yeah. You're here to see Lilly." He focused on the warp drive above his head, "Lilly!"

Neither of the women on the warp drive heard him over their own voices. Lilly impatiently tapped her hand against the silver modification, the noise of that infuriated B'Elanna further. "No one's going to notice a speck of grey," B'Elanna grumbled before looking down, "can someone please send someone up who isn't a high schooler."

"It's not the colour that's the issue. I designed this ship, I should know," Lilly snapped back.

B'Elanna tried not to laugh, which helped calm her temper for a moment. "That explains so much."

Harry tried again since the argument had gotten quieter, this time they heard and peered over the edge. Lilly spotted her brother and rolled her eyes. "Great. What now?" she mumbled while scooting onto a small raised platform next to the drive. It lowered her down to the ground.

Harry was about to question further when Lilly joined them, he remained quiet for the moment. "Alora, is there a problem?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so. It's a matter of discretion and of some urgency," Alora answered.

Lilly glanced at Harry briefly then back at Alora, her face falling into a grimace. "Please tell me this isn't about Damie... no, Emma would be here too."

"It's about your Uncle, Minister Ragha Nystral," Alora said. The colour in Lilly's face drained, she eyed her brother who seemed to her like he was biting his tongue with daggers in his eyes. "He requested asylum here when we first settled, we granted it..."

"Behind our backs," Dave added on bitterly.

Alora wavered a moment, "yes, he wished to live out of the way of the rest of us, alone with his daughter." Lilly pointed widened, shocked eyes at her. "He claimed he wanted nothing to do with politics, to not cause anymore harm."

"Daughter?" Lilly stammered. She looked at Dave, he assumed accusingly.

"What, I didn't know either," he grumbled back. "Apparently he married a local."

Lilly shook her head, "if you were trying to keep him a secret, why tell us now?"

"He's gone missing. From what the Sonanji have told me, he was researching an old ruins site when it happened. His partner claims he just vanished," Alora said.

Dave scoffed, "he's probably passed out drunk in a ditch outside, have they tried there?"

"Dave," Lilly hissed scornfully. He only smirked in response. "Do you think we have something to do with it?"

"I assure you, that's not why I've come here," Alora said with a friendly smile. "We can't rule anything out. Ragha's disappearance could be related to the allegations against him, or there could be Six Faction spies who are up to some unfinished business."

Lilly glanced at her brother, he raised both eyebrows briefly and shrugged. "In that case, we might as well help look for him."

"We will?" Dave didn't sound shocked, only amused.

Alora though did, she shook her head. "No. You should stay with your ship until your friends join us, then we'll work something else out. It's for your own safety." She ignored Lilly's huffy exhale and glare. "If you'll excuse me."

Lilly waited for her to be out of earshot. "You heard the lady. When will the F9 be flight worthy?"

Dave chuckled, "yeah I knew you'd say that. We don't know where Ragha lived or where this site is though."

"Didn't she say he had a daughter, we can scan for human lifesigns," Harry suggested.

"It's a place to start. Dave..." Lilly smiled

"Yeah yeah your highness," Dave teased as he walked away towards their ship's airlock.

Meanwhile on the highest deck, three crewmembers got permission to enter the cramped meeting room. One stepped forward to sit down, very nervous as they were within arm's reach of Emma sitting opposite them. When the two who escorted her left, they looked to the third person in the room with their backs on everyone, peering out the window.

Emma gave the new arrival a friendly smile. It did the opposite. "Name please?"

The woman tensed even further. "Retriva, Kim. We've met before, remember?"

"No need to get twisty," Emma said, "everyone needs to go through the security review."

"Why?" Kim asked. A small, innocent sounding squeak came from the so far silent member of the room. She eyed him as he turned away from the window with a puzzled look in his eyes. What confused her though was the infant nestled in his arm. Her nose involuntarily shrivelled up, tensing further.

"You know, a watched chief engineer never finishes," Emma said wistfully.

James glanced down at her, "what?"

Emma sighed impatiently, "you've been eyeballing the window for ages." She pointed a look at the baby he was holding, "I assumed that's why?"

"No, it's..." James said with a frown. He shook his head and went to sit down next to her, "it's nothing."

Kim glanced between them. "I'm sorry but, why is a Human and his crotch spawn in this security review?"

Emma snorted a bit before giggling, James meanwhile didn't look that impressed. "Oh it's so much worse than that," Emma chuckled.

"You told her this was a security review?" James asked her, to which she quickly tried to shush him. He rolled his eyes in response. "Janeway wants to tie up any loose ends with this minister who apparently killed her nicer self and went on the run."

"Oh," Kim's face lit up in realisation. Emma meanwhile pouted and mumbled *no fun*. "He kept insisting that he was falsely accused, that Phoebe set him up. Innocent people though don't leg it to the enemy ship the first chance they get. Dunno if he even made it out the nebula."

James and Emma exchanged glances, his was suspicious while she looked merely bored. He sighed and returned his attention to Kim. "Seventh Voyager never found the F9, not until the Z5 lead them there," he said.

Kim shrugged and her lips curled. "Then he didn't make it, he snuffed it in the nebula. Too bad, no one will boohoo over him."

"Except Lilly," Emma said with a hardened stare.

"Well..." Kim's resolve wavered and she started to fidget, "you know, I'm really very busy, and allergic to kids. We can chat later when I'm not either."

Emma smirked briefly, "normally I'd be with ya, but this one's not bad." James frowned, his eyes drifted to one side. "Which is weird considering how annoyingly loud his dad is," she smiled wistfully, "and cute." Kim's eyes widened as she glanced between them. James didn't react at all, while Emma looked confused before her face shrivelled up in disgust. "Ugh no not him, he's just some weirdo B'Elanna dumped her kid on while she fixes the ship. Yuck."

"I see. Speaking of which, the D deck's air filter smells like *someone* left a corpse in there..." Kim said, gesturing back at the door.

"Yeah sure," Emma said with a grimace. Kim got up in a hurry to scamper out the door. Emma laughed to herself, "as if, the air filter's way too small to chuck anything in."

Harry burst through the door. He wheezed a few times before speaking up, "change of plans. Lilly and I need you on the bridge."

James looked very uneasy, he turned towards Emma with a grimace, "can you..." He then noticed she had already gone and he sighed in relief. "Okay." He crouched down a little to place Duncan on the chair he'd been using. "Okay now, you just stay here," he said. Duncan laughed cutely as if he were playing with him.

"Do you really think he'll do as you say? Tom can't even control him," Harry said as James walked away from the kid and over to him. To Harry's surprise Duncan sat where he was told to with a face that butter wouldn't melt. "Bloody hell, how did you do that?"

"I don't know," James replied with a shrug. He headed out leaving Harry spluttering.

### *Captains Log Stardate 69476.9...*

Danny snickered quietly to herself at her station, only the person who replaced Harry at Opps noticed.

*After a few days of security checks and misunderstandings, the Sonanji have agreed to let Voyager into their system. We will rendezvous with the Delta Fleet at the planet they are currently using as a shipyard. I hope their repair of the F9 is on its last legs by now, the crew do not feel welcome here.*

"Misunderstandings? During our first contact you referred to them as the Sonagi," Chakotay managed to say with a straight face.

Kathryn made him wait for her to finish slowly sipping on her coffee. "That's how I read it. So sensitive."

"Or you could've said you were sorry for your mistake and we wouldn't have wasted two days getting the space version of a pat down," Tom chuckled.

"I'm sure when they met you we would've been stuck at customs anyway," Kathryn muttered icily.

Tom's smirk managed to remain fixed. "So sensitive."

Kathryn growled behind gritted teeth.

Most of the bridge was thankful the rest of the journey, the whole five minutes of it, was done in silence. When the planet was in visual range, Kathryn asked to see it. An eerie, smooth looking purple planet with no clouds. As they closed in the entire planet appeared to be churning like an ocean.

"Well what can I say, other than oh pretty," Kathryn said irritably.

Tuvok's eyebrow flickered. "That is not the planet."

Kathryn walked over to the helm just to give Tom a slap, then walk back. "You're slipping, Ensign."

Tom whined and looked up, then around. "It's not me, and please stop with calling me Ensign."

"Why, I always demote you when you piss me off, toilet licker," Kathryn snarled.

Tom's eyes shifted nervously, "does that mean I'm still technically a Lieutenant?"

"I..." Kathryn said with hesitation. Tom chuckled as he slapped a pip on his collar. "No!"

Chakotay cleared his throat. "Perhaps we can get some details, Mr Tuvok. It's not Euthia?"

Tuvok nodded, "Euthia has been swallowed by an anomaly generating a vast amount of energy. I'm running it through our database now."

"A whole planet," Kathryn said in shock. "Lifesigns?"

Opps checked his console. "Three point two million, Captain. That's including a scattering of Liger Human civilians."

"Hail them," Kathryn ordered.

"Yes ma'am," Opps spluttered as he worked. His console beeped negatively at him. "Nothing seems to be getting through."

"Contact the border police. Let them know, ask," Chakotay ordered.

"Captain, Commander," Tuvok announced, sounding alarmed for once. "This anomaly's an almost exact match for a phenomenon we've encountered before. A Game Cube."

Tom's eyes bugged out, and he wasn't alone in that. "They make them that big, Jesus."

"And that shape? Wait, does that mean when it ends..." Kathryn questioned.

"It's possible," Tuvok replied. "If it functions as a cube does, it's a possibility it'll wipe out all life on that planet."

Kathryn smacked her commbadge a little too hard. "Morgan and Tani to the bridge, sharpish."

Chakotay looked at her in alarm, "we can't be too late. There's got to be something we can do."

"Didn't we land underneath it the last time, I doubt it," Tom mumbled through the lump in his throat. "My god."

The turbolift opened for Morgan and Tani as they hurried onto the bridge. When they saw the purple planet on the screen they recoiled, Morgan stopped cold.

"Any ideas?" Chakotay questioned.

"That's a Game Sphere, ohno," Tani stuttered.

"Please tell me that the shape isn't the only difference," Kathryn said.

"I... I'm not sure you'll like those differences mum," Morgan said. People looked at her curiously. "Spheres transform an entire planet into one person's fantasy. There's no game, just manipulation."

Tom brightened up slightly, "so it doesn't end, end? It won't kill everyone when it leaves?"

"No, well yeah sorta," Tani hesitantly replied. "Same story. Everyone dies, and the failsafe has never worked in these."

"The only good difference is we have a lot more time to combat it, if it's new anyway," Morgan said.

Kathryn's attention was piqued. "We still can? Aren't we too late?"

"It's hard to know by looking at it," Tani warned.

Morgan nodded, "sure. We can still beam to the surface, even fly into it like a normal planet. You just can't get out."

"Great, we'll send a team. You and I will lead, gather..." Kathryn said whilst moving off towards the turbolift.

"Mum," Morgan fearfully interrupted. Kathryn was taken back enough to stop and look at her. "Spheres are rarely won. I only know of one, and it was so long ago."

"But they can be. Any idea how?" Kathryn asked.

Morgan glanced at Tani, she looked unsure back. "Only a special sort of Slayer can win them. You need more than brute strength to win these things. They need to be able to see through the illusions, and if convincing the user isn't possible, the only ones with any chance of defeating them."

"The user, as in the random person who's picked to create the fantasy world?" Tom said.

Morgan sighed, "one person's fantasy could be to rule the planet as a tyrant. You try getting them to give that up."

"Or Morgan in unlimited food paradise," Tani quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

Morgan glared at her accusingly, "hey, I'd not need convincing to give that up. Or anything."

"Uh huh," Tani chuckled. "And if they resist, they can wish for anything to defend themselves, like say super strength that'd make Chosen Slayers blush."

"I take it the games never pick someone with a conscience, huh," Danny commented.

"Makes sense to target psycho and sociopaths," Tani agreed.

"Hey, I'm neither so," Morgan complained.

Kathryn cleared her throat very impatiently. "We can't give up. We have people down there. Millions of lives are at risk."

Morgan started to stutter, "I never said that. I just think we should be careful. Send a small team down to the others, help them. They won't know what's happening, not until it gets whacked out crazy anyway."

"Fine. Take your pick," Kathryn said. "But I'm still going."

"No mum," Morgan protested. "There's a huge chance that you won't get back to Voyager."

"Die you mean. So it's okay to send you then?" Kathryn snapped.

Morgan nodded anxiously. "Well yeah. I may not be a Chosen but a regular one is better than none at all. Plus I know some stuff."

"Alright, alright, but make sure whoever you pick knows the risks, and can back out," Kathryn grumbled.

"Great, Tan?" Morgan said. Tani mouthed duh. She looked around, thinking. Tuvok and Chakotay meanwhile approached her. Seeing her father tensed her shoulders. "I dunno."

"I'm not asking," Chakotay said with a smile.

The F9 hovered high around the western edge of the woods, its engines growling and sputtering. It began to gently lower down, landing in a field near some alien farmhouses. Soon the airlock opened, letting a team consisting of Harry, James, Jessie and Craig to exit the ship.

Harry scanned in the direction of where the ship was facing, nose deep in the tricorder. "I don't get it, there's nothing, nothing there."

Jessie and Craig looked all around them, occasionally checking their own tricorders. James' eye went straight for a large stone castle in the distance, partially obscured by the gaze of the star and some low hanging clouds. He shook his head and looked down to check the tricorder. Jessie joined him by his side, gazing in the same direction.

"What's that?" she asked, getting everyone's attention.

Harry followed her gaze, he made a little scoff sound. "Disney Land obviously. Now can we be serious here."

Craig squinted as the star tried to blind him, he raised his hand so he could see it a little better. He noticed one of the thin towers shimmer, it looked like it grew a little. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed them.

"It wasn't there before," James said. He got a chorus of what's from the other two guys in the team. "I'm sure..." A familiar squeak by his feet distracted him and the others, they looked down to find Duncan crawling clumsily toward him and Jessie. Once he noticed he was caught he plopped himself into a sitting position and smiled innocently up at them.

"Neither was he," Craig said plainly.

Jessie discreetly laughed behind her hand while James stood, almost gormlessly staring at the boy. "What, how?"

"I told you, didn't I," Harry stammered hysterically. "B'Elanna's going to batter the both of us."

Jessie crouched down to pick up the little boy. "He's just like his father, he can't stay still for a second," she said, briefly looking James' way.

"That may be true but..." Harry stuttered. His face paled, then he hurried over to her, hinting for her to hand him over. "It's not good, I'll take him back."

As soon as Duncan was handed over he started to sob, as well as kick. A few of them left Harry grumbling incoherently with a tear or two in his eye as he returned to the ship.

Talia curled up in the now large beast's thick fur, watching the awayteam on a screen in front of her. She pressed her palm against the picture with a sad murmur.

"Daddy, I want a mummy," Talia said.

"If that is what you wish," was the beast's answer.

Jessie, James and Craig continued forward towards the castle, slowly without Harry for the time being. They noticed storm clouds brewing unnaturally quickly ahead of them, the wind picked up, trying to push them back.

Amongst the swirling leaves and grass, the beast emerged from seemingly nowhere. It stared through its striking, cracked mask which had misshapen from its transformation from a small toy dog into the huge creature it had turned into.

"What the hell is that?" Craig stuttered.

The beast pointed its head towards Jessie. "You, come with me."

He fired a golden beam from his mouth at the away team. They all dived out of the way to escape the blast, a cloud of smoke surrounded everybody. The beast approached Jessie, his eyes turned red. He picked up Jessie without any resistance from her, tossing her onto his back.

The smoke cleared in time for James and Craig to see the beast run back the way he came. James ran after him, even when the beast began to fade into the nothing it appeared from.

Craig bolted forward as well, as fast as he could in order to catch up with James. The beast was long gone and the sky had cleared by the time James slowed to a stop. Craig caught up but kept out of arm's reach of him.

The beast came back into the room where Talia was. He gently put Jessie onto the bed next to Talia.

"I brought you what you wished for," he said.

Talia looked at Jessie, she was unconscious. "Mummy?" Talia said quietly. Jessie woke up and she looked at Talia. "Mummy, it's me Talia, don't you remember?" Talia asked.

Jessie picked Talia up and she put her on her knee. Talia hugged her. "I'm so glad you're back," Talia said and she started crying. "Thank you, daddy," she whispered.

She didn't see it, the beast smiled behind its mask.

### **The F9:**

A tense and confused atmosphere had filled the bridge, with almost everyone there talking over the other. Only James was quiet, off to the side studying one of the consoles.

"Hang on, hang on," B'Elanna tried to talk louder than the rest. Something clicked in her to turn that into a shout, "one at a time!" It worked, most of the room looked at her. "Me first. If this is some fantasy game for some random schmuck, how come there's no differences so far except giant masked dogs running around kidnapping women?"

Chakotay raised his hands up, almost as a surrender pose. "Apparently these things always start subtle. Right?" He glanced towards his worried daughter standing next to him.

"Huh?" she said, glancing in his direction. "Oh, yeah uh huh. Only the user is affected at first. What happens after depends on the user, and what they want."

Harry shuddered, "so someone out there really wanted a pet? I'm so glad I missed it."

"What would they want with Jessie though?" Craig asked. "Is there a way of finding out who this user is?"

Tani shrugged, "maybe she wanted some fashion tips, and it'll bring her back later."

Morgan side eyed her with a raised eyebrow. She got a smile in return. "The Game wouldn't pick the user if they weren't someone who'd cause potential damage. I doubt it's good."

"Isn't it bad enough that the sphere kills everyone at the end?" B'Elanna muttered. She hesitated. "Wait, how does these things end?"

Morgan's demeanour fell further. "We don't know. All we do know is all that's left after a sphere attack is a dried shell of a planet."

Lilly, Dave, Emma and Alora stepped out from a door at the back, each with their own grim expression. They joined the others at the front of the bridge.

"We think we have a good idea who is the player, or user of this sphere thing," Lilly said.

"Oh? How?" Tani asked.

Lilly sighed despondently. "We were looking for my Uncle and his daughter when the second team ran into that creature. Their house has vanished, and a castle is sitting in its place."

"There's also supposed to be a lost Game Cube site right here where the F9 landed," Dave said.

Lilly cleared her throat, "which is where Uncle disappeared from."

Harry span around to look out the window, only seeing the green fields and some trees in the distance. "So?" he said on turning back.

Morgan ground her teeth for a few seconds. "So, Games tend to tear up what they land on, usually leaving a crater in its wake." Harry had another look, this time with wider eyes. "So, it's either your Uncle or your Niece."

Lilly nervously bit her lip. "I don't know what happened to him, but my niece, we found her lifesigns in the castle. She's not alone."

James turned his head in their direction. "Jessie."

"Yeah," Lilly said with a nod. "The thing that took her, we can't detect that. It must be part of the game."

Craig's face scrunched up. "What, so why would Lilly's niece ask her pet to kidnap Jessie?"

"I don't know, I don't know her," Lilly stammered in response.

Alora walked up to where James was, eyeing the screen. Once she reached him she gestured for the keyboard. "May I?"

James shrugged and pushed his chair back, giving her room to use the console. She brought up a list of names. Selecting one brought up a password prompt. After that was entered a personnel file came up with Talia's face on the left of it.

"Talia Nystral, age five," Alora read from the screen.

Most of the bridge winced, none more so than Morgan. "A kid?" she stuttered. "There's no way we can talk a five year old out of a fantasy world where she can get anything she wants."

"Is that really the only way?" Harry asked, his voice higher.

"That or defeat her," Tani reluctantly replied.

B'Elanna walked up to her, blinking more than usual and furiously. "Defeat her how? She's five years old. I hope you're not suggesting a fight here."

Tani cringed at her dangerous tone. "As far as we know, yes that's the only way."

"I don't believe this," B'Elanna grunted.

Chakotay quickly held out his hands again, softening his voice, "we still haven't ruled out talking to her. She's a child and she probably won't understand what's happening. Carefully worded, we could resolve this."

Tuvok nodded. "However..." he stalled when Chakotay winced, "however, we must prepare for the possibility that words won't be enough. We need to plan for both strategies."

"Oh well, I guess we know who's beating up the five year old," B'Elanna spat.

"That is a crude way of misunderstanding me, Lieutenant," Tuvok said. "If I understand correctly, this anomaly cannot function without its chosen host giving orders. We do not need to harm the child to subdue her."

"But it makes this whole *we need a super duper Slayer to win* thing a little less important," Harry said.

Morgan rolled her eyes. "You really think a kid who's getting held back by a bunch of strange adults, isn't going to wish for absolutely anything to get out of it?" Harry looked away. "An adult might ask for extra strength to fight them off, when a kid will ask for a big monster to come and eat the bad guys, or be squished by a piano, or..."

"I get the point," Harry mumbled.

James walked over to join them, looking a little puzzled. "It still doesn't make sense that the dog kidnapped her though." Tani made a little annoyed grunt, rolling her eyes. He scoffed in her direction, "yeah yeah, I'm one track minded but it's still a good question. If you can make anything or anyone you want, why would you need a real person you've never met?"

"Yeah that is a little strange," Morgan said.

A lot of the consoles on the bridge started ringing, the klaxon sounded. Lilly, Dave and Emma hurried to a station nearby to see what the problem was.

"Um, can anyone fly this ship?" Lilly stuttered. Emma stuck her hand up. Lilly didn't see her do it but knew she was, "no Emma, I said fly."

James hurried over to the far front of the bridge, "is it anything like the Z5?"

Lilly squeaked uneasily, "a little. Doesn't matter, take us up."

Harry ran across to the station Emma was using. "Why, what's happening..."

The ship juddered, knocking it slightly to the left. The hull groaned right before what sounded like crashing waves jostled the F9 into tipping its nose down towards the ground. The engines roared to life, lifting it up and out of whatever danger it was in.

B'Elanna and Morgan looked out the closest window. They were shocked to see the green fields they had landed in had turned into a overflowing lake about to flood the nearby forest.

Lilly hurried over to the helm, eyes fixed on the front screen. "Turn us about, towards the castle."

For a minute or two anyone watching saw nothing but tree tops, until the castle came into view. They gaped at the water pouring from every window and balcony. It sparkled under the sun, an almost purplish pink glimmer.

Harry tried to breathe a sigh of relief. "Glad we got out of that in time."

"You're not kidding," Emma commented while pointing at a readout on her screen. Harry's skin paled at the data he was reading.

Lilly stared across a touch impatiently, "what?"

"See for yourself," Harry said, pressing the enhance options at the far right of screen. The viewscreen zoomed in the castle. The strange sparkling water slowed, starting to solidify before their eyes.

"We're not getting in there that easily," Tani remarked.

Morgan tensed, her teeth ground. "We have to try, get us closer." Chakotay looked at her with a really expression. Lilly though wasn't too pleased, especially when James listened to her regardless.

Dave's console beeped twice. "We're being hailed. It's coming from the castle."

"This should be good," Lilly commented, gesturing to change the channel.

The screen switched over to show Talia sitting within the beast's fur, her face red with anger and tears. "Go away. Me and my mummy and daddy just wanna be alone. Leave us alone!"

"Wait, Tal..." Lilly tried to say but the screen turned back to the view of the castle.

James frowned, "I thought her dad was missing."

"He is. Was," Alora said. "Are there any other lifesigns?"

"No, just the same two," Emma replied.

James studied what he could see of the castle, finally resting on an extension made of glass, like a greenhouse on the second floor, floating in the purple ice crystal that had formed at its base.

"We should go in, that way," he said.

Craig stared accusingly in his direction, "you crazy, how are we going to get in there when they're watching us?"

"If we do nothing the Game won't leave and we'll die anyway," Morgan said.

"How will we die? We can't die in a Game," Tani asked.

"This is no ordinary Game. The Sphere will be blocking out the light from the star. If this planet has replicators they will run out of power eventually," Morgan replied.

B'Elanna exhaled sharply, shoulders falling. "So that is how it ends then."

"Well I'm going to that mansion to get Jessie back, I'll go on my own if I have to," James said.

"You're not going on your own anyway. I'm coming with, Jessie's my friend, plus we all came here to fight this game anyway," Morgan said.

"You're not leaving me behind," Craig said.

"We'll stay behind just in case something happens to you. If something does, at least we'll be backup," Tani added.

Morgan narrowed her eyes mostly in jest at her former friend. "Oh thanks for that confidence."

"I concur. Our priority must be to convince the girl to end her fantasies. Failing that, another team may have to consider a way to incapacitate her in a way that will not harm her," Tuvok said.

Harry stuck out his bottom lip as he thought about it, "maybe we can distract her with some candy."

Morgan rolled her eyes. "Ok fine. Split into two. James and I will go in first, scope the place, and try to find a way to the girl, we might be able to find something in the castle that might be a power source, or..."

"One second there Morgan," Chakotay said. "You said it yourself, these games are meant to be solely *played* by a special rare kind of Slayer."

"Yeah, but we're kinda short on them right now," Morgan said irritably.

Chakotay smiled as if Kathryn had demeaned him. "I realise that, but we do have you and James. It seems a bit foolhardy to have you both in one team, leaving the other with little defence."

"His logic is undeniable," Tuvok sounded impressed.

"I'd say thanks, but you made it sound like a miracle," Chakotay muttered.

Craig tried not to laugh, "are you seriously expecting one of them to hang back and wait. Morgan won't, and him...?" He snorted quietly.

"We're not talking about a second team. We're talking about backup. I'm going, James is going. It'll be tough, we're not Chosens, so we need each other," Morgan said.

Craig nodded, then winced. He was left pouting and grumbling to himself.

Chakotay rolled his eyes, "oh for god's sake." Morgan was about to complain when she overheard her dad thinking about giving Craig a smack or two.

"Good, we done talking about this now?" James said, getting up from the helm.

Lilly's eyes widened, she quickly checked to see if Emma was still at her other station. She was and smiled innocently back at her. "Can you um, put it on auto hover and lock it? Before we go." Lilly asked.

Many looked at her in surprise. "We?" Morgan said.

It took quite a while for the team to get used to walking on the smooth, slippery path to the castle. There had been many tumbles and swearwords the whole way there.

They finally reached the glass greenhouse. A couple of taps around the double doors allowed them to open it, and go inside. They were each struck by the smell of sugar and chocolate. They had no idea why until Morgan accidentally brushed by one of the weird looking brown plants with her arm, leaving a smudge on her sleeve.

"Is that?" Lilly wondered, daring to touch it.

"Hey," Morgan complained, pulling her arm back a little late.

Lilly sniffed her finger. "Yeah, these aren't plants."

Tuvok scanned the foliage around him as they walked towards the main building. "No sign of any poisons, but I'd advice against consuming it."

Craig quickly wiped his mouth with his arm. "Good plan," he said with his mouthful.

Meanwhile many, many floors above them, Talia watched them while sitting in Jessie's lap. The beast had curled up on the floor beside the bed, licking its paws like a cat.

"I don't understand, mummy. Why are those people trying to get into our house?" Talia asked.

Jessie seemed to come out of a trance. "James?" she gasped, almost mad.

Talia stared up at her curiously. "Mummy, what's wrong?"

"Wha..." Jessie glanced around, eyes wide, body tense. She saw the girl on her lap, then noticed the beast on the floor turning its own head to look up at her. "Um er, nothing... sweetheart."

Talia smile and cuddled into her.

The team reached an entrance hall walled on both sides by doors, the one ahead of them covered in the same purple crystal that had flooded the fields.

"How the hell are we going to get past that?" Craig asked.

Morgan walked over to it, she pushed it, it cracked. A few seconds later it sealed the crack. Morgan stepped back, and she turned to look at James. "Little help," she said.

James walked over to her to do the same. They pushed the door even after it cracked, breaking it open. The rest of the team hurried through, then them, before it sealed itself again.

Talia gasped in awe. She ran over to touch the screen. Flicking her finger allowed her to replay the break in. It drew the beast's attention, his head darted up just as the door opened.

"Wow," Talia giggled while both Jessie and the beast watched on uncomfortably, both for different reasons.

"Should I remove them?" the beast asked.

Talia squeaked as she shook her head. "No. They're the slay people from the book, remember daddy?" The beast's ear curled. "I want to do that too."

"You wish to be a Slayer?" the beast asked. Jessie noticed by his tone he seemed pleased by the thought.

Talia squealed in delight. She ran over to hug the beast's large head. "Oh please daddy, I want to be strong. I'll protect our house."

"If that is your wish, then it is done," the beast said.

The air around Talia sparkled, she laughed like she was being tickled. When it was over she sighed, a little disappointed. "But, they're too big. How can I chase them away?"

The beast stood to give her a nuzzle back, for a moment she got lost in his mane. "Remember? You will wish for nothing, my sweet. As long as you always have me by your side."

"I will, you promise?" Talia asked as she pulled back. The beast nodded. With that she spirited away, out of both their sight.

Jessie hesitated before looking across at the beast, their eyes met briefly, then he vanished as well.

The team had arrived in a massive room that took up three floors. The staircase leading all the way up branched out in multiple places, leading to different levels and doors. To them it looked like a maze.

James, then Morgan started to go up the staircase first, only for their way to be blocked by the appearance of the beast.

"You," James grumbled. He picked up speed, Morgan tried to pull him back. It at the least kept him still. "What have you done with her?"

The beast eyed the pair before him with scrutiny, then down at the other three members of the group. He eventually returned his attention to the two in front of him. Only then a figure climbed down from his back, a woman with long red hair. She stroked the beast as she walked to stand in front of him.

"Are you the Slayers?" she asked.

Lilly looked on in shock, she stepped forward slowly.

"First, who are you?" Morgan asked back. Her eyes pointed to the beast particularly.

"I am Talia. This is Inti," the woman answered.

"Talia?" Lilly stuttered in a hushed voice.

James yanked his arm free. He went up two more steps, putting both the beast and the woman on full guard. "You kidnapped someone. We want her back, now."

"My daddy would never do such a thing!" the woman snapped, stomping her foot. Only Morgan noticed that she'd cracked the crystal doing so.

"Your daddy?" Craig said, shocked.

James brushed that off, "I want to know where she is!" Morgan gently placed her hand on his shoulder to try and calm him down.

"If you want her back you'll have to go somewhere else, she's not here," the woman said.

"We saw that thing take Jessie away though," Craig said as she looked at the beast.

"My dad is not a thing!" the woman yelled.

"I am this girl's father, as long as that is what she wishes," the beast said.

Lilly grumbled under her breath, "her father. No you're not. Her father is Ragha."

"Did you also wish to be older?" Morgan asked. All she got was a firm nod from the woman. "Why?"

"And why kidnap someone?" James icily said.

Talia flinched with a tear forming in her eye. The beast stepped forward and around to her side. "If you are here for Talia's mother, you have wasted your time."

"What?" James snapped.

Morgan glanced at him briefly, frowning in confusion. "You think Jessie's your mum, why?"

"Enough!" Inti roared. Bright light emanated from him, taking over the entire room. Morgan and James had shielded their eyes, but the other three were dazzled enough to knock them to the floor.

When the light faded not only had Inti and Talia vanished, the room had as well. In its place a lush meadow under a starry clear sky.

Talia's voice echoed across the breeze, "fancy playing hide and seek? Whoever finds me first gets to pick the next game."

"A game?" Craig uneasily said.

Morgan groaned, "who'd have thought?"

James couldn't help but smirk, "we may as well play along for now."

Inti returned to Jessie, catching her trying to find an exit to the doorless bedroom he'd brought her to. He circled around, eyeing up his prey, she felt.

"There is nowhere for you to go," Inti said.

"That's realistic. We got in here fine, so we must be able to get out of here fine," Jessie said.

"You are staying here for as long as Talia wishes you to be here," Inti said.

Jessie moved onto another part of the wall to feel it up, all while keeping an eye on him in the corner of her vision. "Why couldn't you just summon her actual mother?"

"It was much *easier* to summon you," Inti replied.

"Summoned," Jessie muttered under her breath. "And you're her father? And don't say if that's what she wishes."

Inti chuckled. "All this poor child has wanted is a family. A mother, a sibling. A life I intend to give her."

He looked across at the bed. Jessie had no idea why until a small figure materialised on top of it. She recognised him immediately.

"Duncan?" she stammered.

The new arrival looked around the best he could, squeaking in confusion. He started to whimper until he noticed Jessie. Even though he looked happy to see her, she grew angry.

"Why, why would you bring him into this?" she snapped while hurrying over to him.

Inti watched her carefully. "They brought me here to provide for Talia. I don't create people from nothing. You and the child are a family she envied, she got it. There's no point in resisting."

Jessie scowled in his direction. "Who's they?"

"The creators of the Games, the reason I exist," Inti answered.

### **The F9:**

Dave was chatting with Emma, while Chakotay, Harry and Tani discussed plans around the comm console, when angry shouting leaked in from one of the rear rooms.

"What now?" Emma groaned.

B'Elanna ran through one of the doors, her eyes wide and frantic. She went to Dave and Emma first since they were closest. "Have you seen Duncan crawling around anywhere?"

Dave wasn't sure how to answer. Emma unintentionally came to his rescue, "no, he's not exactly quiet."

Chakotay hurriedly approached them looking concerned. "What's the matter?"

"He's gone. He likes to crawl around. Oh god," B'Elanna stuttered. She shoed the other two away slightly so she could use the same station they were at. "Lifesign scan, where's the lifesigns scan!?"

"B'Elanna," Chakotay softly said. She responded with a dangerous glare almost nose to nose with him. "It's a big, ish ship. He'll be around."

Harry checked his own station while Tani sat around looking disinterested. His face fell when he finished. "Um..." B'Elanna heard him and was at his side in record time, he jumped at her proximity. "There's another human lifestain in the castle. Full human, no Klingons, it's not him. Okay?"

B'Elanna nodded slowly. Harry thought he'd calmed her down, only for a second. The next he was down on the floor, and she had taken his seat.

"Why?" he moaned.

"Torres to Stuart," B'Elanna hissed directly at the computer, her breath clouded the screen.

*"Yeah, we're not getting anywhere yet."*

"Is Duncan with you?" B'Elanna asked. She only got silence for a moment. That was enough of an answer for her. "I'm going in there."

Chakotay gently grasped her arm, hinting to stop. "Maybe that wasn't such a good..." he whispered.

B'Elanna dragged her arm away. "I'm going. I can do it alone."

*"What's going on, why would Duncan be with us?"* James's voice asked.

B'Elanna growled and smacked the console, making it sputter a few beeps. Dave winced, imagining his sister's response to her poor ship getting battered. "We're already stuck in here. What harm is going in there?" she snarled.

Harry climbed up using the station looking a little woozy. "Will there be puzzles?"

"What?" B'Elanna frowned.

Tani glanced from one side to another. "Uh, yes?"

Harry nodded as he stood. "Do I like them, I can't remember."

"That'll do," B'Elanna said, grabbing his arm to drag him off. "Tani, you know these things, you too."

Tani didn't have time to argue, she was already going down the stairs to leave the bridge. "I... but..." she whimpered in Chakotay's direction.

"Oooh play time," Emma giggled. She ran after the other two as well. Dave groaned into his hand, once again imagining Lilly killing him.

"You know the Games, they may need you," Chakotay said.

Tani whined. She kept doing so as she left the bridge.

Craig peeked into some bushes, only to get pricked in the thumb. During his attempt to pull his hand away he was pricked five more times. He heard Talia giggling.

"You're the only one who hasn't found me," her voice said. "You're the loser."

"That's not very nice," Craig mumbled in between sucking one of his finger tips.

Talia's voice sighed. "I'm bored of this. Penalty box for you."

"What?" Craig stuttered as he was transported away into a tiny room with no windows or doors. "Oh that's not cool."

Meanwhile James, Morgan, Lilly and Tuvok were back in the room with all the stairs. Only this time all of the doors were gone, they were trapped as well.

Talia appeared in the middle of the first rise of stairs. "Okeydoke, you," she said, pointing at Morgan. "You were first. What game should we play next?"

"How about the one where we stop asking for things, go back to normal and..." Morgan replied.

"Boring!" Talia shouted her down.

Morgan bit her tongue for the moment. The rest of her team looked around a bit.

"Where's Craig?" James asked. Lilly and Tuvok both shook their heads.

"He lost. The next one to lose joins him," Talia giggled. She clapped her hands, "oh I know what game. Race you!" She ran up the stairs.

Before anyone could follow, water suddenly flooded down from the ceiling and walls. So fast it filled the room in seconds. The group struggled to hold their breath, until they all realised that they could breathe.

"What?" Lilly said, then covered her mouth. She moved it away just as quickly, "we can talk too?"

Tuvok's eyebrows raised, "fascinating. We should pursue her."

"Right," Morgan said with a nod. She turned to James, which she found with both his eyes and mouth tightly shut. She assumed he hadn't noticed the ability to breathe yet, she gave his arm a tap. He shook his head, gesturing his hand towards the stairs. "What? You can talk."

Tuvok attempted to walk forward, proving difficult like he really was in water. He looked up and noticed Talia swimming up to the other floors. He followed her with Lilly close behind.

"James?" Morgan stuttered, she gave him another go.

"Just go. I'll catch up," she heard him murmur through his barely opening lips.

Morgan looked confused, "okay. Explain later?" She tried to follow the others by walking at first, halfway up the stairs she gave up and started to swim up instead.

**F9:**  
Chakotay and Dave were finally joined by a few nameless crewmembers, each one manning a station so neither of them had to.

"Try again," Chakotay demanded.

Dave made a little disgruntled sigh-moan, "no, no. You don't get it. If Lilly sees one scratch on this precious ship of hers, she'll skin me alive."

Chakotay understood that all too well, then he remembered Lilly was Dave's sister, so he pitied the man even more. He gave his shoulder a pat. "I'll be gentle. Just tell me where it is."

Dave groaned. "I'm telling her it was you." He lead him down the stairs and out the bridge.

As soon as they were gone several tiny figures rematerialised in the middle of the bridge. It took a while for the F9 crew to notice due to their size. When they did though, they couldn't help but melt at the cuteness.

"Aaaw, can I keep one?" one asked.

"Oh goochie goo," another cooed over one of the new arrivals. Its eyes glowed a bright blue.

"Back off or I'll eat you," a cute squeaky voice said in all of their heads, its mouth didn't move.

The cooer just laughed, "oh my god, so precious."

The creature audibly grunted. Its voice transmitted into the crew's brains, "we are the Softmicron. You are not welcome here. Stay out of our business."

"Isn't that cute. It's trying to sound menacing, yet it looks and sounds cute," another crewmember sighed.

"Why does every alien species assume we're cute? We're the most dangerous species in the galaxy. We'll teach you," the voice said. All of the creatures glowed, and the five officers shimmered and then vanished.

B'Elanna lead the charge towards the greenhouse. Harry was the first to notice the broken glass and hole in the door. "This way," he said, leading them over.

Emma tripped over what she thought was a rock. Once she got her footing she turned around to look, only to find what she had tripped over was one of the little aliens. "Oh how cute!" she squealed as she rushed over to pick it up.

The others turned around to see what she was talking about. Then they noticed the many more of the same aliens lurking in front of Emma while she cuddled the small roundish creature with little arms and legs. They also could see the angry eyes starting to glow.

"Uh Emma, maybe that's not such a good idea," Harry stuttered.

The creatures squeaked angrily at them all. Emma huffed as she put the first one down. Its angry face made her coo over it even more. "Oh, you're so cutesy putesy, yesh you are."

"Do not mock us with your unintelligent babble, lesser creatures," the squeaky voice said through their minds.

B'Elanna grasped her forehead, "ugh, do you hear that too?" Harry's groan she assumed was a yes.

"We are the Softmicron. You have violated our territory, prepare to die," the voice said.

"How come it's always the cute ones who think they're evil?" Tani asked.

"We don't think we are, we are evil. We have murdered millions of people, destroyed thousands of homeworlds with our Game Cubes. The Borg and the Bioan are like little flies compared to us," the voice said.

"Bioan?" Harry said.

"Wow, you're cute, and smart. I definitely have to have one of you," Emma giggled.

Tani's jaw dropped almost to the floor. "Wait a minute. The shape, the voice. I know these guys. I've met one."

"You have?" B'Elanna questioned.

Tani closed her eyes. Her shadow extended only slightly to what looked like a bubble. It separated from her, becoming brighter and taking further shape. Tani opened her eyes just as it was finished its transformation, into one of the aliens. "Oopsie daisy."

B'Elanna tried to count to ten but only got to one. "You had one of these as one of your holograms, in our computers?"

"I got it from one of those power alters. It was so cute," Tani protested.

One of the creatures walked over to Tani's, which seemed to be half the size of the others. "This is one of our young! You will be destroyed!" the voice said.

The team watched as all of the creatures glowed and grew. The four of them looked up in horror at the scary looking dragon things instead of the cute creatures. They were about 12 foot tall, and they were all sorts of different colours.

"Do you think we should run?" Harry asked.

"No, I want to stare at these cute things longer," B'Elanna replied in a sarcastic manner.

Harry turned to look at her. "You still think they're cute?"

"Of course I bloody don't!" B'Elanna yelled and she ran off. Harry started to follow, but he noticed that Tani hadn't moved. He took a hold of her arm.

"No, we can't leave Toge here!" she cried.

"It's one of those things Tani, I'm sure it'll be fine. But we won't be if we stay here!" Harry yelled as he dragged Tani along with him.

"Guys!" Emma yelled. The other two caught up with her and B'Elanna. "There's our escape route," she said, pointing at one of the frozen waterfalls coming out of the fourth floor window. It was jagged in some places, enough to climb on but it looked slippy and unstable. They all agreed it was better than the dragons, they started to climb.

James wandered into a huge restaurant sized kitchen, only it wasn't a normal one. It looked like it been rigged up to catch rats the size of dogs, with cartoonish style traps everywhere he looked. He turned to leave before he triggered one, only some muffled groans got his attention.

"Craig?" he said.

He got an affirmative one muffled word as a reply. James followed it, carefully stepping over a noose lying on the floor, and ducking under a laser line at head level. The voice came from a cupboard. He checked it, as he expected that was booby trapped too with a bucket sitting on the tip of the door. He reached up to take it away, then pulled open the door.

Whoever was inside ran out of it as if he were trying to batter the door down. He crashed right into James instead and instead ended up back in the cupboard cradling his arm and crying.

"Didn't you hear me? Why did you do that?" James asked. Craig tried to glare at him through his tears, which made him laugh. "Okay you're welcome. Be more careful when you leave, okay."

Craig got up, rubbing his arm protectively. "Why are you bothering with me? I thought you'd be looking for Jess."

"I am," James said, raising his eyebrow. "But I also lost the race."

"The race?" Craig looked confused. James gestured his eyes at the cupboard, Craig followed his gaze. He looked annoyed afterwards, "you mean she didn't put you in the penalty box?"

"She did," James said casually, heading back the way he came, all while doing the same dodges he did to come in. Craig nervously tried to copy him. Once they were out James sighed a bit in relief. "Just be glad yours didn't have a dragon guard."

"A what?" Craig asked.

James said nothing more on the way, he lead the way back to the room with the staircase. He slipped behind a statue, dragging Craig with him. Then he pointed towards the stairs. Craig peered around. Seeing one of the dragons parked at the stairs made him gasp a little too loudly. James quickly put a hand over his mouth, to Craig it felt like a slap.

The dragon looked across. It began to shuffle over to where they were.

Craig mumbled something. James reluctantly moved his hand away. "You could've warned me. Better," he whispered.

James winced, "yeah, that occurred to me a little late."

They stepped back as it approached. Its speed increased as it noticed them. Its eyes widened as it got a better look at them.

Craig whimpered, closing his eyes, hoping it'd miss him. Instead the dragon screeched fearfully, then stomped off with its tail literally between its legs.

James chuckled very nervously. "Okay. What did you do?"

Craig opened one eye, then the other. "What the... hey, me? You're the one who scares people."

"I guess," James said with a shrug. They hurried up the stairs to the now visible doors.

### **Meanwhile:**

"Yikes, not more!" Tani screeched.

She, Harry and B'Elanna were approached by the previously screeching dragon. It snarled and puffed its chest.

"There's only one, what should we do," Harry said.

"I've got an idea," Tani said. B'Elanna and Harry turned to face her.

"What?" they both said questioningly.

"Run away!" Tani screamed and she did just that. B'Elanna and Harry quickly followed her.

Emma ran in holding what looked like a toy water gun. "Hey guys, I wonder if we can fill this up with something better." She then noticed the dragon, it noticed her. It flew off up into higher floors. "Aaaw," she pouted.

In the sealed bedroom, Talia had returned to her five year old form to watch Tuvok, Lilly and Morgan trying to figure their way out of a maze.

"Why are you doing this?" Jessie asked her. Talia looked back at her in surprise. Jessie faked a motherly smile, "darling."

"They're having fun," Talia said. She missed Morgan get annoyed and kick a wall down, then another to get to the end. Jessie tried not to smirk. "Whoever wins will get to be my best friend. We can play together forever with you, daddy and brother."

Jessie looked down at little Duncan snuggled up to her in her lap, somehow managing to sleep through the strangeness. "Talia. You must know this isn't real."

"So?" Talia said, her bottom lip trembled. She tried to smile, "don't you like it here too mummy?"

"I'm not..." Jessie started to blurt out. She breathed in deeply. "That's not the point. We're prisoners here. We need to leave."

"No we don't. I'm happy here," Talia said.

Jessie shook her head. "No, no you're not. It won't last. It's fake, everything here is. Duncan and I aren't your brother and mother, you know that." She noticed tears building in the girl's eyes. "Your father, he isn't here. Inti, he's lying to keep you here."

Talia climbed off the bed. "Not true," she said quietly.

Talia and Jessie heard a banging noise coming from the wall. Jessie got off the bed and she headed over to the source. She and Talia heard some commotion coming from the other side of the wall. Then it started shaking. Jessie backed away from it.

Suddenly a hole was blasted through the wall. Once the cloud of dust cleared, whoever was on the other side came through.

"James?" Jessie said through a relieved smile.

James hurried over to her. Talia watched in shock, her lip trembled further when she noticed Craig hovering by the hole. "Are you two okay?" James asked.

Jessie stood up holding Duncan. "Yes, we all should get out of here."

Talia ran to hide behind the screen. "No, I'm not leaving!" She pointed at James, "you two cheated!"

Jessie handed Duncan over to James so she could go over to the girl alone. "It's okay," she said softly, holding her hand out. "We're here to help you and your daddy. That's why we came here."

Talia shook her head and she backed further away from everyone. "No, no!" she cried.

Inti appeared in a flash of light. He immediately turned to Talia. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Mummy's going to leave with those people," Talia replied. She continued to cry.

Crystal started shooting through the ground in between Jessie and James. The crystal grew to be up to eight foot tall, there was no way out. The noise woke Duncan up, he screamed fearfully and tightly grasped James as he was forced to take a step back.

Inti turned to him and Craig. "Leave this place, or I'll force you out," Inti said forcefully.

"Craig," James said without taking his eyes off the beast. Craig squeaked and shook his head. "Get Duncan, now."

Inti growled at him, but didn't get in the way of him side walking over towards Craig. He handed the terrified baby to him, Craig inhaled through his teeth when the poor boy tugged his hurt arm.

"Go," James said to him.

Inti laughed derisively at him. "Do not think you are a match for me."

"I'm not leaving," James said.

"Hmph, we'll see," Inti sneered. "Talia. Should I remove this bad man from our home?"

Both James and Jessie looked quickly over at Talia, whimpering and shaking. James ground his jaw as he turned back to the beast. "How can you do this to her, you're sick." He lunged for him.

Talia screamed, "no, don't hurt my daddy!" Jessie ran over to scoop her up but it was too late. Inti's eyes glowed and the room suddenly felt so much hotter.

Craig almost ran into Morgan. Thanks to Duncan she heard him coming and got out of the way before he bowled himself over again. "Morgan," he said in relief.

"Craig? How do you..." Morgan started to ask. Something crashed in the distance, so hard it shook the floor.

Tuvok and Lilly caught up to them, Tuvok already scanning to see what had happened. "An explosion up ahead." Craig turned very white. "It's blown down a wall, the fire's spread into the neighbouring room. Three lifesigns."

"It's James, and Jessie. That dog cat thing," Craig stuttered.

Morgan clenched both her fists by her side. "Sounds like a power source to smash to me," she grumbled before stomping off the way Craig came.

He panicked and spun around on the spot a few times, stopping only to silently beg the others.

"Hell no, that's my niece," Lilly grumbled. She ran off after Morgan.

"You are injured. Remain here and guard the child," Tuvok said, doing the same.

Craig whined even when his arm started to go numb.

Inti strode over to James as he struggled to get up from the ground. Flames scorched the room around them. Talia's cries in the next room were starting to get drowned out by the blaze.

"You are a fool to take me on. I am not some lackey of the Game, nor a trick your puny self can't see through," Inti snarled. "I *am* the Game. I do as she wishes it."

"Oh great," James muttered as he managed to get to his knees. "Here comes the exposition speech."

Inti growled. He only had to swipe his paw in front of him to push James back down. "I'm not the monster of this story. You made that little girl cry. You tried to take her and her family away. You should know your place."

Morgan arrived, only to skid to a halt to avoid running into the fire. She saw them both through brief gaps between the flames. She desperately looked around for a way by.

James got up a lot slower, peering through the smoke towards Inti. The beast faded away in between a blink, then again as he tried to focus. He assumed the smoke was thickening, blocking his view. He stood, this time with no interference.

Inti's attention though was directed at Morgan climbing up, getting ready to jump over the flames in her way. "Stop," he barked, freezing her mid jump right above the fire.

James was about to strike when he saw her as well. He hesitated a second, it cost him. The beast swung around to claw at his face.

"Daddy stop!" Talia screamed.

Inti stopped a mere inch from James, he ducked out the way anyway and turned to look around at the hole that was burning.

Jessie squeezed through it, holding Talia. Once they were through she put her down. The tear stricken little girl ran over to stand between the beast and James, sobbing so much she struggled to breathe.

"Daddy please. I don't want to hurt anyone," she eventually managed to say.

Inti flinched, he lowered his paw to the ground. Conflict flickered in his eyes. "If... that is what you wish."

"It is," Talia said.

Inti nodded. Morgan continued her jump as if nothing happened, she landed nearby, wobbled for a second and turned to face him. She saw Talia, putting her off.

"What the..." she stuttered. "You walk fast."

"It's okay," Jessie said. Morgan stared at her, confused and blinking furiously. "Tell him. You can tell him anything. Daddy loves you, right?"

Talia sniffed, nodding. "Daddy. I wish things were normal again. I want my daddy back. Please."

Inti closed his eyes, his mask began to slip and they could see a warm smile starting to leak out. "I do as you wish, my sweet."

The entire room started to tremble fiercely. One glance out of a window and they knew it wasn't just them.

### **Voyager:**

"Captain!" Tom shouted while almost leaping out of his seat.

Kathryn turned to the viewscreen. The purple around the planet was fading, melting away. In a matter of minutes she could see land, oceans, as well as the F9 lurking in lower orbit, rising up from above the clouds.

"What are you waiting for. Beam up our people," Kathryn sighed in relief.

The crewmember at opps got to work quickly.

### **The F9:**

In the stuffy meeting room, Lilly waited anxiously at the head of the table with Talia sitting beside her.

"So you're famwily?" Talia asked quietly.

Lilly closed her eyes and smiled. "Yeah," she replied. "We're cousins."

Talia's eyes teared up. This time though they were the happy kind. When the door opened she squealed in delight and jumped down from the seat.

"Talia!" Ragha cried as she ran up with her arms outstretched. He collapsed to his knees so he could embrace her.

Dave meanwhile walked in behind him with an awkward expression on his face.

Lilly swallowed a lump in her throat before going over to them as well. "Uncle Ragha," she said hoarsely.

Ragha looked up at her with a bittersweet smile. "Lil' Lilly," he said. Tears were in his eyes as well. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I believe you," Lilly said. Dave stared at her with a blank expression.

"I wouldn't," Ragha chuckled. He stood back up with his daughter in his arms.

Dave meekly rolled his shoulders, hoping to de-tense them. "You were saying about those little guys?"

"Ah yes," Ragha sighed. "I learned of a legend, creatures who could summon death arenas from the skies. These people, they lost so many cities to them, I knew I'd find answers here." He looked down at his tiny daughter's face cuddling into him. "All I did was hurt someone else precious to me. My studies aren't worth it."

"You think they targeted you because you were getting close?" Lilly asked.

"Perhaps," Ragha said. "Be careful. The Softmicron are the masters of deception. Wolves in sheep's clothing comes to mind. Let your guard down and they will destroy you."

"Never mind that," Lilly smiled, she reached over to give her new niece a stroke of her hair. The little girl smiled at her. "We got some catching up to do first."

**THE END**